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MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY: SCIENCE, IDEOLOGY, AND REASON

by

Matthew Johnson

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Political Science

Under the Supervision of Professor Jeff Spinner-Halev

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 1999

DISSERTATION TITLE

Michael Oakshott's Critique of Modernity: Science, Ideology, and Reason

BY

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MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY: SCIENCE, IDEOLOGY, AND REASON

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University of Nebraska, 1999

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Modernism, for Michael Oakeshott, is an intellectual movement that considers itself definitive of moral and political reasons for action. It is, in short, the "cult of man." The scientific approach to things political leads to that specifically modern institution, ideology, or a series of logically coherent propositions, dogmatically held, that claim to exhaust the subject matter of political and social life. In fact, Oakeshott claims that ideology is the primary mark of particularly contemporary social life.

Ideology, however, is merely a brief, incomplete, and misleading abbreviation and summary of a certain experience with modern life. For Oakeshott, it cannot be this; it is indeed merely what a cookbook is to the art of cooking. Politics is a complex maze of moral, economic, communitarian, and social difficulties that cannot be summarized in a pamphlet. Its nuances are too detailed for a brief blueprint to completely exhaust. At best, ideology is a useful tool to analyze the institutions and practices of an existing society, but cannot serve as a map for social reconstruction.

In its place, Oakeshott posits a classically idealist vision of social epistemology, but one that is consciously traditionalist in character. In his (1933) *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott maps out an alternative to ideology, which the remainder of his career

was dedicated to expanding and reexamining. There is no understanding of life as a whole. Reality can be viewed only in parts, and these parts are constructed through socially conditioned ideas called "modes." The world can be viewed under four specific modes: the scientific, historical, aesthetic, and practical. Each of these has developed an idiom of its own, and each contains criteria for truth solely internal to itself. These criteria, or the idea itself, is historical in character in that it is a developing tradition of a specific practice. The overarching argument, then, is that in arguing for an eccentric idea of modal epistemology, Oakeshott attempts to ground conservative and traditionalist theory in skeptical and idealist philosophy.

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A Brief Introduction and Overview

A suitable beginning to a project such as this is to give a very brief note on motivation and method. In conservative social theory there has been very little attempt to ground the appeal to tradition through rational principles in such a way as to have the conservative view be a major contender in political science and philosophy. What is too often the case is that conservatism becomes a romantic appeal to the past exhibiting, at best, an intellectual eccentricity, and, at worse, an authoritarian personality frightened at the legal and intellectual gains of the "progressive" movement.[1]

Michael Oakeshott becomes especially relevant to today's globalized politics of "human rights," or what is the ultimate in philosophical abstraction divorced from all contingency and forced upon politics. Conservatives often argue that radical innovation in politics is unworkable because the idea of "starting over" in a social context is practically impossible (since most conservatives claim that there is no possible action outside of a social and intellectual context), but this

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1 cf. Walter Scott and J. Fenimore Cooper as examples of this in conservative intellectual history.

practical impossibility is made blurry because of the theoretical edifices that have been erected towards this end. This, in highly simplistic terms, in the viewpoint of Edmund Burke, that is, metaphysics, or speculation, has no place in politics; for politics is the art of the possible, not the art of manifesting the wild dreams of our social engineers. Oakeshott was one of the first to see, along with personages such as W.H. Mallock, that conservatism needed an edifice of its own.

Michael Oakeshott was a conservative social theorist that was not content with airy and often unconvincing appeals to tradition and history. He certainly possessed the conservative intuition, namely, that there is a largely unbridgeable gulf between philosophical speculation by a handful of academic elites on the one had, and the practical, day-to-day life of the average citizen or what *those* people think is good and useful, on the other. The conservative worry has always been that this gulf is often bridged by totalitarianism and indoctrination; manipulative symbolism and propaganda. Hannah Arendt has written skillfully on this in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, where the thesis is precisely this, namely, that the bridging of this gap between theory and practice is the origin of totalitarianism

The Oakeshottian project can be characterized as, from a theory of first principles, to ground this conservative intuition in a way that was philosophically satisfying and logically coherent. In the sparse secondary literature on this seminal twentieth century political theorist, there is little attention devoted to these first

principles -- or metapolitics -- for if there was, Oakeshott would be seen as the traditionalist in the line of Burke that he was.

Traditionalism, as what should be used as synonymous with "conservative," is not, at least as an academic specialty, a mere appeal to tradition and an irrational hatred of "new-fangled" ideas, but a theory of the human mind, human motivation, and human education. On the other hand, it is true, with famous conservatives such as Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis and Russell Kirk, that tradition has an uncanny ability to lend itself to poetic imagery, and that the attachment to tradition is one of an essentially aesthetic preference. This, however, is merely the artistic and contemplative version of the school. Others, such as David Hume, Edmund Burke, W.H. Mallock and Oakeshott himself took the task to themselves to logically and philosophically ground the above aesthetic sensibilities. The philosophical ground, in this case, is in Oakeshott's theory of human experience which is the centerpiece of this study. Oakeshott's theory of human experience is the (at least negative) philosophical ground of conservative political and moral theory, and as a result needs to be taken very seriously in philosophy and political science departments. Currently, this is not the case.

The method of this work is very simple, perhaps too simple. Because the stated purpose of this project is the grounding of Oakeshott's political first principles within the "traditionalist" school of social theory (rather than the

tradition of, say, Adam Smith and those others specifically modern), this project has contented itself with only those works of Oakeshott that concern the very fundamentals of his political thought. The centerpiece of this, then, must be his (1933) *Experience and Its Modes*, as the only place where the philosophy of experience is explicated in coherent and detailed form. His more famous (1947) "Rationalism in Politics," or the fundamental critique of the method of modern social science and social practice, is another major offering on this subject. Timothy Fuller's edited volume on Oakeshott's political theory is utterly invaluable for a study such as this, but, on the other hand, specific works theorizing on the state, economics, etc., is not. A quick review of some of the previously unpublished manuscripts of Oakeshott's, recently published posthumously by Cambridge University Press (1993), shows them to be unfinished and often incomplete and sloppy, clearly not ready for publication when Oakeshott's precise style is considered. As a result, this project, for the most part, avoids these as possibly not representing what Oakeshott wanted to say had he lived to edit and publish them. The resulting project is hoped to be a tightly argued statement for the traditionalism of Oakeshott through a significant, but not exhaustive, portion of his works, and specifically those dealing with political science, history, morals, and philosophy at the level of first principles.

Thus, the argument made here concerns the proper grounding of

conservative/traditionalist first principles, and that these are philosophical contenders of the first order. It is hoped simply, that those whose patience and indulgence I appreciate, such as Dr. Jeff Spinner-Halev and Dr. Mark van Roojen, can work with such a project such as this one without seeking employment elsewhere.

An Introduction to the Fundamental Issues

In Oakeshott's Political Methodology: The Attack on Radicalism

Modernism, according to Oakeshott, rests on the idea that humanity can create for itself, from the ground up, moral and social reasons for action. This, further, needs to be done through a scientific or quasi-scientific approach to things political. This is arguably one of the modern world's central tenets, and is certainly a tenet of radical ideology, with which this chapter will deal. No longer, it is commonly held, do humans need to conform themselves to natural law, or the dictates of God, but, in fact, can decide for themselves what is its destiny and its moral self-understanding. Morality and political theory becomes a search for measurable proximate causality or the study of human motivation, the discovery of which becomes a "scientific" understanding of human motivation and social action. That this is a major part of what has come to be known as modernism is difficult to deny, and that modernism has shown itself pregnant with revolutionary potential.

Modernism, then, is the fundamental principle of the contemporary age and holds that mankind is essenceless, and is thus able to create and recreate itself according to any rational plan. Rationalism, in turn, is the general method of this social self-creation, and concerns an approach to the social world that seeks as its

end a totally self-contained view of morality and politics. This is to say that, often in radical politics, the "scientific" view of politics leads to an ideology that promises to grant salvation to a humanity long groaning under the yoke of tradition, religion, and fragmentation.

What this extended essay purports to do is to interpret Michael Oakeshott's work on rationalism and modernism, that is, to study Oakeshott's critical theory in this area. This essay attempts to summarize and interpret Oakeshott's most general arguments against this sort of modernist and radical thinking. The claim here is that Michael Oakeshott gives a coherent account of the anti-modernist position, and this account is the essence of his political theory generally considered. The more general purpose of this essay is to present Michael Oakeshott as fundamentally an anti-modernist as well as to show him as an accessible and attractive intellectual figure in the twentieth century academic movement against the assumptions of the modern world.

Towards a more precise idea of rationalism and modernism, one can say that, in the most general sense, modernism is the most general of the phenomena this essay shall deal with. Next comes rationalism proper, which is the general method of modernism. Third comes ideology which is the product of rationalist analysis, or the body of moral and political dogma that derives from political rationalism. What they all have in common is that they are the enthronement of

humanity and human reason as the ontological center of the universe (often, but not necessarily, referring to science in particular) in the sense that humanity can recreate nature, morals, and politics to suit its own ends and desires. This is revolution, the essence of modernism. This is the most fundamental underpinning of the modernist world view, according to Oakeshott, and the modern world, intellectually speaking, is largely unintelligible without understanding it. It must be made clear that these concepts are quite similar to each other, and form the interlocking pieces in the whole of modern social thought.

Michael Oakeshott, then, could be said to summarize rationalism and modernism by reducing them to their common elements: that human reason is the measure of all things, and that, in all cases, a certain technique or method is all that is necessary to understand and reconstruct social life. This is to say that modernism, insofar as it is dependent upon the above ideas, views social life as a series of material causes, and thus, to the extent this is the understanding, methodologically, inquiry into things social will proceed according to one method.

Of course, modern scientific techniques have gone beyond this, rejecting its earlier, Baconian claims to self-sufficiency, but such a view of the study of social life is still alive with Marxism, anarchism, Freudianism, classical economic theory, and rational choice and decision theory; more or less "radical" social science.

Furthermore, there are no shortage of people in government that believe society can be immeasurably improved by the implementation of various and sundry plans and schemes. In the contemporary era, however, such a self-sufficient view of ideology is still alive and well in radical political theory and ideology.

Oakeshott also makes the argument that when this idea of rationalist and scientific methodology is applied to politics, what occurs is a distortion of political life. The only thing that such a method can give is mere abbreviations about reality, not the whole of reality. Rationalism (in the broad sense) assumes that the results of this technique or method describe the subject matter fully in that the subject matter is exhausted, rather than providing a useful synopsis. This, in turn, leads to a political and social system highly distorted, with many non-quantitative elements left out (or qualitative elements eliminated because they do not follow from formal analysis), for the method itself does not and can not admit them. It cannot admit them because these other elements are not reducible to proximate causality; a causality that can be measured and expressed in mathematical phraseology, or at least a formal ordering of concepts that is quantitative in character. The language of measurable proximate causality must be expressible thus in order to be scientific. Thus, rationalism provides us with a highly incomplete and degenerate form of knowledge.

Modernism is the fundamental theory that humanity is dependent only upon

itself for moral, natural, and political knowledge, and that quantitative, formal, and analytic analysis is the only way (or the main way) to engage in this project. Rationalism is the idea that in applying a certain technique (often, but not always, scientific) to any subject matter whatsoever can uncover the essence of a thing, resulting in ideology, a series of propositions, dogmatically held, that claims to exhaust all relevant information about social life. This is revolutionary politics.

A note of clarification. By "science" it is meant that which both the natural and social sciences have in common, that is, the search for proximate causality and the formulation of formulae that express regularity. What both Oakeshott and this essay mean by "science" is that general analytic commonality intrinsic to modernism that clearly and unambiguously states that objects (whether persons or rocks) are more or less determined in their behavior and thus in order to understand anything in the world, one must understand its place in the universe of causality. More radical social science ideology finds these assumptions indispensable. Rationalism and modernism, according to Oakeshott, are revolutionary approaches to political science.

Generally considered, modernism contains in itself a meta-scientific bias which has a long and distinguished pedigree. Rene Descartes writes:

> But as regards all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced, I thought I could not do better than endeavor once for all to sweep them completely away, so that they might later on be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the

uniformity of a rational scheme (Descartes, 1955: 12).

Even as early as Descartes did rationalism contain revolutionary potential, revolutionary potential within the very fabric of the modern soul and scientific thinking in general. Further, concerning method:

> For it is very certain that unregulated inquiries and confused reflections of this kind only confound the natural light and blind our mental powers...Moreover by a method I mean certain and simple rules, such that, if a man observe them accurately, he shall never assume what is false as true, and will never spend his mental efforts to no purpose, but will always gradually increase his knowledge and so arrive at a true understanding of all that does not surpass his powers (Descartes, 1955: 49)

For Descartes, then, mankind is to become the new master of all creation. But note, however, that in all of this, what is being discussed is the necessary ideological backdrop to modern science, not with method proper. Further, John Locke writes in his *Treatise on Human Understanding:*

> Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy, of any of our ideas. In this* alone it consists. Where this perception is, there is knowledge; and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge (Locke, 1977: 267; emphasis in original).

And a bit further:

> But yet nothing, I think, can under that title [faith] shake or overrule plain knowledge, or rationally prevail with any man to admit it for true in a direct contradiction to the clear evidence of his own understanding. For since no evidence of our faculties, by which we receive such *revelations,* can exceed, if equal, the certainty of our intuitive knowledge, we can never receive for a truth anything that is directly contrary to our clear and distinct

knowledge...(Locke, 1977: 380; emphasis in original).

Here, Locke shows his rationalism in that the agreement of our ideas (the result of sense perception coupled with the mind's faculty of judgement), according to the empiricist methodology, provides knowledge, and no other sort is permissible. even in his politics is this sort of thinking evident, where the state of nature acts as a thought experiment to eliminate all that is not clear and distinct from consideration and build a political system, deductively, from *a priori* principles of human nature.

Kant, more radically, claims concerning morality:

> But if pure reason of itself can be practical and is actually so, as the consciousness of the moral law proves, then it is still only one and the same reason which, whether in a theoretical or a practical point of view, judges according to a priori principles...Thus, when pure speculative and pure practical reason are combined into one cognition, the latter has the *primacy,* provided, namely, that this combination is not *contingent* and arbitrary, but founded *a priori* on reason itself and therefore *necessary* (Kant, 1957: 357; emphasis in original).

This is no less a rationalist construct than the above (and is, in fact, archetypal), with its sole reliance on a method to arrive at knowledge. Radical social science claims, whether Marxist, Freudian, or Freidmanite capitalist, then, to get to the root of social motivation is the only way to properly diagnose a society, and then, to develop ideas for its reconstruction. Early modern social theory, shown above, also, claims the primacy of method in approaching things political,

and is proto-revolutionary in its formulation. The target, it seems, is then, or has become, ideology in its radical form, its revolutionary potential. In fact, it may be the case that Oakeshott uses the terms "ideology," "radical," and "revolutionary," synonymously.

Rationalism, in its more scientific, i.e. empirical[2], variants, contains many assumptions often ignored within the philosophy of the social sciences. The idea that reality -- or for our purposes, social reality -- functions according to fixed laws assumes the existence of a system. In other words, empirico-scientific experience is ultimately based upon non-scientific, i.e. non-verifiable, principles of the mind. Empirico-positivistic methodology begins with rudimentary connections between concepts[3], and then connections among connections and so on. The final goal is the understanding of the system as a whole: that reality is an interdependent whole operating according to material, regular, standardized, and knowable causes. Such

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[2]One other things needs briefly to be made clear. Scientific methodology and empiricism are not identical, but often they are colloquially placed together. Empiricism in an approach to knowledge that stresses sense perception. In and of itself however, that is not helpful and tells us very little. The scientific method, on the other hand, assumes a mathematical, *a priori* structure of reality that sense perception is supposed to "verify." In other words, sense perception needs something to "fit" into, to make sense out of the myriad perceptions an individual can experience during the course of an inquiry

[3]
The term "concept," rather than "object," is used here because (as will be discussed later), science does not concern itself with objects *per se*, but with concepts that can be manifest within objects

causes are formalizable into postulates and verified through repetition as "laws." In the *Leviathan* Hobbes claimed that the very definition of science is the knowledge of all connections in a system comprising a certain subject matter. Finding such connections, according to Hobbes, is even the definition of reason (Hobbes, 1985: 49). This is also the case for radical social science, whether it be psychoanalysis, economism, Marxism, or comprehensive social planning of any kind.

A well known modern rationalist and radical social theorist of the rational choice school, Gary Becker, claims that all human knowledge can be reduced to economics: "Indeed, I have come to the position that the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior..."(Becker, 1976: 112). Even to the point of analyzing good health (114), and marriage (115) as functions of relative economic utility. It is based on something called the "economic approach," which Becker defines as "The combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences, used relentlessly..."(Becker, 1976: 110).

What these all have in common, despite their accidental differences, is that:

a) humanity is the author of knowledge through reason;

b) our knowledge depends on no tradition, revelation, history, or natural law, and

c) there is a method that leads to certain and necessary knowledge about the world and all other forms of understanding must be eliminated as irrational. This is the core of rationalism and modernism and the backdrop to revolutionary politics of all stripes.

This is the enthronement of humanity as the center of the universe and creator of his own destiny. As Francis Bacon wrote: "[it] appears to be, that Man, if we look to final causes, may be regarded as the center of the world: inasmuch that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be all astray, without aim or purpose" (Bacon, 1970: 849). There are no Forms, tradition, or natural law to which man must conform himself, but human beings can know, of their own intellect, the nature and structure of things.

These things turn out to be the nature and structure of the mind, given the necessary *a priori* conditions that must be met for empirical knowledge to make sense. Humanity gives purpose to nature rather than understanding what is intrinsically there. Nature, as Oakeshott will argue becomes humanized in that nature must conform itself to the human intellect. Morality and politics in this case are no different but are at the mercy of human logic.

Michael Oakeshott's version of this idea can be called "formalism" (Oakeshott, 1947: 9). Formalism is the idea that every kind of subject matter can

be reduced to a basic set of abstract principles which in fact *are* the subject matter, its "essence," or that which makes it intelligible. This is simply another way to state rationalism, or the primacy of method over substance. Here, of course, we have "rationalism" and "formalism" as basically synonymous. It is a series of principles that can be stated, written, or memorized to completely exhaust one particular subject or area of inquiry, e.g. social life, or morality. These principles are the result of a scientific of quasi-scientific inquiry and can be said to comprise the entirety of the subject at hand whether it be natural science, political theory, or cooking. Rationalism in politics, for Oakeshott, then, is the idea that political problems can be studied and solved by the use of the proper method or technique, and "it is only our ignorance of the universal causes of activity which stands between us and a society incomparably better ordered, more just, and more prosperous than any human society that has yet existed" (Oakeshott, 1947: 101).[4]

The principle of revolutionary social science for Oakeshott is the understanding of the structure of human motivation. It could not be otherwise, for if the phrase "social science" is to have any meaning, it must be that the methods, generally considered, of the natural sciences are transposed upon the subject matter of social life. If this is true, then, what social science studies is the structure of

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[4] This needs to be understood here as a sarcastic summary of the modern mind.

causation among social phenomena. This is "social science" in its pure form, or in its revolutionary form. Regardless of the gradual abandonment of this radical claim on the part of social science as of late, it is still the necessary backdrop to revolutionary ideology.

Frederick Hayek claims that there is an important distinction, however, between the natural and social sciences, despite their commonalities. He believes it significant that the objects of the social sciences are "opinions," which is different than objects as objects, or "objective" entities. The significance lies in that fact that the "facts" of the social scientist are subjective opinions, what are to be studied as such, regardless of their truth or falsity (Hayek, 1955: 28). The problem with the social sciences imitating the methods of the physical sciences is that we can study the opinions of other citizens only because out mental structures are the same, in that our frames of reference are the same. In other words, Hayek writes: "A medicine or a cosmetic, e.g. for the purposes of social study, are not what cures an ailment or improves a persons looks, but what people think will have that effect" (Hayek, 1955: 30). Things are not defined as "what they are" but in the social sciences, "what they are" in part a function of subjective factors. The rationalist, of course, ignores this.

Rationalism, as a political technique, can best be understood using Oakeshott's distinction between "technical knowledge" and "concrete' or "practical

knowledge:"

> The first sort of knowledge I will call technical knowledge. In many activities technical knowledge is formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and as we say, put into practice. Its chief characteristic is that it is susceptible to precise formulation. The second sort of knowledge I will call practical, because it exists only in use, it is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated into rules (Oakeshott, 1947: 12).

Oakeshott claims that in political and moral theory, that true knowledge is to be found as the latter type. It is not that the rule based knowledge is useless, but merely that it cannot be said to exhaust an entire field of study[5]. Practical knowledge is the understanding of the development of a certain craft or field that derives from habits of experience. Oakeshott sounds very much like Wittgenstein here, as the latter says: "We got to know the *nature* of calculating by learning to calculate" (Wittgenstein, 1969: 45). In other words, one learns not by the memorization of rules, but by practical contact, or practice. It is the distinction between "book learning" and "learning from experience." "Forget this transcendent certainty..." Wittgenstein writes in regard to learning; learning is experience, and we make our judgements accordingly (Wittgenstein, 1969: 47). Learning from experience is often referred to as "virtue," or the progressive

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5 Oakeshott claims clearly that rationalism can be further understood by contrasting it with "rational inquiry." Rationalism is the "superstition" of the scientific method. It becomes a faith in the uses and scope of science in politics and within the entire realm of experience which humanity is capable (Oakeshott, 1946: 99).

development of a disposition that permits of a wise choosing of means toward certain ends, and an internal development of a skill that resists quantification given the distinction between the two forms of learning.

Rule based knowledge, on the other hand, has one approaching a field of study by reading a book containing rules and procedures about performing certain tasks. One memorizes such rules are applies them mechanically. One is developmental and the result of a certain evolution and contained within the activity itself while the other is abstract, method based, and can be applied to any activity whatever.[6] Harwell Wells (1994) "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," finds Michael Polanyi (1946) useful in situating Oakeshott, in that both opposed planning and used similar arguments. Rule based knowledge has a use in "guiding" practice (137), and thus has a use in and of itself. In no way, however, is it implied in Oakeshott's "Rationalism in Politics" that the formulation of rules, as in Wittgenstein, is not parasitic on the practice itself. All rule based knowledge derives directly, and is parasitic upon, practice. This is the critique of revolutionary ideology, in that it takes rule based knowledge as *sui generis*.

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[6] It may be applied to any subject whatever for all knowledge is the understanding of universal causality.

"Rationalism in Politics" then, as a work in political theory, argues against subsuming the subject matter of politics under a method as if the knowledge of all subjects is essentially the same, as Marx would in reference to historical materialism, or Freud would with the tripartite nature of the psyche. Knowledge for the rationalist is the study of causality. The assumption of the rationalist, as theorists like Becker or Marx claim, in short, is that every pertinent social problem can be understood and solved by applying a certain method which formalizes and quantifies the variables involved: "[the rationalist] has no sense of the cumulation of experience, only the readiness of experience when it has been converted into a formula" (Oakeshott, 1947: 6). Of course, the perineal problem, the identification of which is central to Oakeshott's critique of modern radicalism, with this is that rationalist and scientific methodology permits only those things that admit of quantification. This is the crux of radical social sciences and their difficulty. All that does not fit into the categories of the scientific practitioner will either be discarded or "made" to fit. To "operationalize" a variable is to do precisely this: to distort a political variable in such a way that anything that is not quantifiable is inadmissable and shaved from relevance. This very procedure creates a distorted picture of social life.

In simple terms, Oakeshott's critique is that science, in general and in its pure form, (one of the main modes of rationalist inquiry, in fact, many radicals

believed themselves to be scientists, Compte, Marx, Freud, etc.) can only express formal and mathematical entities and its method can only admit these. Thus its conclusions (at least in their formal properties) are *a priori* given, that is, the rationalist (that is, science as revolutionary) believes the world to be a series of regularizable and measurable causes because it is only this that the rationalist mind can express.

More generally, the modernist mind rests on the fact, as the Deists claimed, that the universe works according to fixed laws. Rationalism in politics is merely an extension of this fundamental modern principle alluded to earlier. If human beings are studied empirically and scientifically[7], the motives (causes) of their behavior will become manifest. Once this is understood, a bureaucracy could then encourage the stimulation of these motives, thus bringing about the desired social results. Thomas Hobbes, another of the great rationalists writes:

> ...science is the knowledge of consequences and dependence of one fact upon another, by which out of that we can presently do we know how to do something else when we will, or the like another time; because when we see how anything comes about, upon what causes and by what manner, when the like causes come into our power we see how to make it produce like

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The definition of rationalism used here, and discussed in the beginning of this part, of course is not so simple. Empirical science fits quite well, but so does a more *a priori* sort of social science. "Rational choice" theory, it should be remembered, is not based on scientific observation of social behaviors, but rather is an *a priori* assumption. Both sorts of approaches, however accidentally distinct, fit under the idea of rationalist, modernist, and, in general terms, "scientific."

effects (Hobbes, 1985: 49).

This is the platform radicalism, the apogee of rationalist thinking about political matters which still unifies the revolutionary potential in the social sciences.[8] It is about the knowledge of, and thus control over, human behavior expressed in the language of universal causality. This is the main thrust behind "Rationalism in Politics" in that it attacks the over reliance on method within the social sciences. It cannot be read outside of an understanding of the problems inherent within scientific experience in particular. It must be made clear, however, that pure science is not the only example here of rationalism (but is likely the most prevalent). All "reductionist" methods of social inquiry can be considered rationalistic to the extent they are revolutionary ideologies. To the extent social science is behavioralist, it is not analytically distinct (except in Hayek's terms) mode of knowledge from that of the physical sciences in that they both claim the idea of unification of phenomena through the conceptual study of causation.

Oakeshott commentator W.H. Greenleaf agrees with this analysis. In his work on Oakeshott's "Rationalism," he agrees with the joining of the physical and

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Of this there can be no doubt. First, because the very phrase "social science" commits one to the understanding of all social phenomena as the result of certain "social forces:" economic, psychological, or bureaucratic. Second, all the major reductionist paradigms in contemporary social science explicitly make such assumptions clear, e.g. Marxism, Rational Choice, Freudianism, Weberianism, Behavioralism, etc.

social sciences in Oakeshott's general critique. He writes: "Economics as a science, for instance, conceives its material not in terms of man or ethics, desire, happiness, and the like, but of quantitative concepts such as supply, demand, cost, price, utility, and so on" (Greenleaf, 1966: 77). Note, of course, the disagreement with Hayek, who does believe there is a radical distinction between the methods of the social and physical sciences, which changes their fundamental character.

Oakeshott claims, quoting Francis Bacon, that rationalism can be taught only to a mind that has been "purged" or all "prejudices" and "preconceptions" (Oakeshott, 1947: 20). This has been the myth of the sciences since Bacon's time: that the researcher is observing a given phenomenon with a completely open mind. An "open mind" is defined as the idea that the mind has no structure of its own, that is, its structure is dictated by its object. This is the primary and most important of the scientific epistemological axioms.

Such a purge of preconceptions (necessary for any revolutionary movement to succeed), however, can never include the idea of nature as a system. If empirical research is to begin, the idea that it fits into a broader whole must be presupposed. Without the Cartesian postulate of a system, the researcher will be left with a series of random facts and connections among phenomena that have no intrinsic relation to one another. There must be a system presupposed or else there could be

no "building" of knowledge[9]. There can exist no progressively complex levels of understanding unless the facts and connections the researcher uncovers can fit into a framework where the lower and more rudimentary can combine to create higher, more sophisticated, and more complex truths. The sciences make little sense without this metaphysical postulate which turns science into a form of idealism, in that objects are viewed under its aegis.

The rationalist, then, sees relevance in political life as identical with the scientific study of it, which means that the realities of social life must be amenable to formalization and quantification. Reason, as Oakeshott claims, becomes appropriated by the methodology itself and becomes identical with it. Revolutionary ideology usurps the title of "reasonable." The "rational" study of politics, then, becomes the same as the "scientific" study of it. The scientific study of politics becomes the formalization of political life. In political life, the product of this mentality becomes ideology. Here Robert Grant (1990: 54-5) agrees. It is the "invasion" of science into the realm of practice (of which politics is a part) that crystallizes into ideology. It is the overreliance on political "technique," over political practice. There is a blurry line indeed between the study of politics and its practice. To live in a "liberal" society is to have internalized some liberal

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This is the *a priori* idea, inherent within all science, of phenomenal stability and regularity.

postulates and axioms about human behavior. To the extent such postulates derive from rationalist analysis, such analysis introduces a distortion into the life of the individual that has internalized them. It is easy to see how societies based around various ideologies develop different practices and expectations among individual citizens who may know nothing of the formal postulates of "socialism" or "liberalism."

It can be argued that the Oakeshottian idea of ideology is the drive to formalize all of social reality under formal axioms and postulates, and taking these propositions as self-contained imperatives, not, as Oakeshott claims they are, merely abridgements of a more complex experience, or experience whose totality cannot be exhausted by formal concepts. Oakeshott defines political ideology as the development of axiomatic and demonstrative political speech. It must be kept in mind that the very word "ideology" is the product of modern, revolutionary politics and is the engine of revolution. The drive to formalize all social relationships is the essence of ideology. Political activity of an ideological kind, then, is the drive to eliminate all non-formal elements in social relations as "irrational" and is also the form of revolution. In Oakeshott's recent essay "Political Discourse" he writes:

> The design of demonstrative political discourse is to be able to prove the 'correctness' or the 'incorrectness' of a proposal to respond to a political situation in a certain manner. This may be done only if contingency is removed from the situation, because so long as it remains in the situation it

must reappear in the response...But these conditions, although they elicit demonstrative argument, make it impossible for the argument to address itself to any concrete political situation whatever (Oakeshott, 1991: 83).

Modernism is identified with rationalism (as a parent to a child), and rationalism, with its demand for logical rigidity and clarity, descends into ideology. Thus, the sort of social science Oakeshott is aiming is specifically of a revolutionary kind, and revolutionary politics here refers to the idea that rationalism can formalize all of social life, leaving no contingent facts, that is, no facts that cannot be absorbed into the ideology. This is different from the "social sciences" in general.

This is the result, as Oakeshott would put it, of attempting to make politics philosophical by subsuming political data under a preconceived philosophy. Politics becomes an "example" of a certain philosophy, an illumination of a particular philosophical system, and not philosophical in its own right (Oakeshott, 1946: 123). This is to say that politics is forced into a preconceived philosophical mode which is the fuel behind "operationalizing" political "variables." Such fuel is the very genesis and lifeblood of revolutionary politics.

Revolutionary ideology, regardless of its source, offers a rigorous way in which political life can be quantified and formalized. Further, such formalizations, insofar as they are scientific, are also demonstrative insofar as it can become a part of a broader, coherent system. Oakeshott makes this one of the hallmarks of

rationalist thinking. Rationalist political science seeks to replace the qualitative aspect of political theory with quantitative and formal theory:

> Science, intent on the discovery of a world which should be, above all else, a common, communicable, impersonal world, fixes its attention upon a world of quantitative concepts (Oakeshott, 1933: 181).

The purpose of such inquiry in social theory is to reach a level of certainty, rigor, and communicability that the natural sciences claim for themselves. Quantification, however, is a defective and incomplete mode of experience. Scientific experience is a weak form of idealism in that it is mediate knowledge, it is a form of reality itself not complete because it deals only with what can be brought under the heading of quantity. It is mediate knowledge in that the *a priori* structure of the mind (speaking of the world as a system or the world as mathematics) is imposed upon objects rendering them "concepts" rather than discrete observables.

> ...scientific experience is distinguished from all other experience merely on account of the character of the ideas with which it begins. From the beginning the world of scientific experience lies before the scientist in outline...The world within which he is to move is to be a world common and communicable experience, a world of quantitative concepts (Oakeshott, 1933: 182).

Scientific verifiability, it should be noted, is itself merely mediate

knowledge, that is, a form of idealism.[10] The positivist notion of verifiability exists only because formalization is the idea under which discrete observables are put. Observables are placed under formal categories. It is the categories alone that serve to make "meaningful"[11] statements. The argument, then, is something like this:

1. Science approaches "nature" with certain *a priori* ideas such as the systemic nature of objects, their relations and their mathematical expressibility. Without these assumptions, scientific empiricism makes little sense.

2. Such expressibility represents accurately the way "things" are.

3. The objects are "operationalized" to conform to mathematical models.

4. What is verified, then, are not relations about objects but relations among concepts.

Science is the communicable and verifiable relationship between abstract concepts (mass, force, velocity, heat, etc.), not between observable entities themselves:

> The primary generalizations of science are analytic generalizations, derived from the analysis of the *structural* concepts of the world of scientific knowledge, and they express the relations between these concepts which are inherent in the concepts themselves...But, since these concepts do not, in

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[10] Idealism here is identical with mediate knowledge, i.e. the imposition of an *a priori* mental grid upon objects, thereby changing the object's essential character.

[11] "Meaningful" in the positivist vocabulary.

> any sense, refer to the world of practice, tot he world given in sensation, the invariability of these generalizations which express their necessary relations cannot be taken to imply that any event or occurrence will invariably take place. The concepts do not refer to events; and the generalizations are not in respect of events (Oakeshott, 1933: 182-3, my italics).

What Oakeshott is saying here is that since the concepts are *a priori* going to be expressed in mathematical and formal (regularized and standardized) terms, they already express certainty, but this is by virtue of the concept, not the object. Scientific "regularity" is one of conceptual analysis rather than anything observable in nature.

Oakeshott also claims that the "problem solving" issues in scientific research (to use Kuhnian jargon), or more specifically, the formulation of hypotheses, derives from the same abstract relation. Scientific problems are precisely those which are based on hypotheses, and such hypotheses are based upon abstract categories (Oakeshott, 1933: 184). Thus the "progress" of scientific research is based on questions that an already distorted mode of knowledge provides, that is, a mode of analyzing the world based almost entirely upon mathematics.

Such categories, in the scientific lexicon, are what is meant by the word "nature." Nature, for the scientific mode of experience, is the discernable set of relationships between concepts that express quantity: "Nature, then, is a world of

ideas; it is a world of 'impersonal' ideas and consequently it is a world of quantitative ideas...Whatever is not quantitatively conceivable cannot belong to nature" (Oakeshott, 1933: 190). Only at this point can real scientific research begin, for it is only here that hypotheses can be formulated. This is exactly what is meant by "rationalism" as used in this essay: the use of abstract methods and techniques in order to subjugate all social relations to a particular ideology. This is also what is meant by "revolutionary." If all things can be understood by discovering and observing measurable proximate causes, the objects understood are merely a bundle of attributes, i.e. they are without an individual essence, they are merely effects, existing not of their own accord and things could quite possibly be otherwise. They are merely the result of a series of knowable and regular causes that the scientist is supposed to discover. If this is true, then they are amenable to be understood by one method only as social scientists such as Gary Becker advocate. The dominance of science in the modern world is the result of the rejection of individual essences by contemporary metaphysics. These are the tools of modern ideology as applied to the social sciences.

The mind of the ideologue -- again, just a more specific product of the rationalist methodology -- seeks to create a coherent picture of the social world that is self-contained and universal in scope (Oakeshott, 1947: 16). This is the idea

that the "Rights of Man" are universally binding, moral axioms and imperatives, rather than the products of the development of western European social consciousness, as responding to particular political problems over time and summarizing that experience into a document called the "Rights of Man" (Oakeshott, 1951: 53). It is precisely the abstraction from context that gives such ideologies their radical character. The rationalist mode of social theorizing is to dissolve all social relations so as to reconstruct them according to a "rational" plan. The attempt at such a project is the formal structure of revolutionary activity. The rationalist methodology of politics, according to Oakeshott, leads to the ideological way of thinking because: "Instead of an independently premeditated scheme of ends to be pursued, [ideology] is a system of ideas abstracted from the manner in which people have been accustomed to go about the business of attending to the arrangements of their societies" (Oakeshott, 1951: 51). To the extent that radicalism treats individuals as scientists treat natural objects, such methods cannot help but be revolutionary in scope for individuals are stripped of all qualitative relations and are reduced to a series of qualitative relations, e.g. formal economics, rational choice, producers of surplus labor, etc.

Furthermore, it is not the case that a mere unreflective traditionalism is the answer either: this is an extreme and degenerate form of political behavior (Oakeshott, 1951: 47). The rationalist mode, that of the ideologue, exists on the

other side of the spectrum, and can be called a "reflective idealism," or the self-conscious pursuit of moral goals as immediately and universally binding as imperatives. What Oakeshott advocates is what he calls truly "conservative," a sort of reflective traditionalism. This, however, is a long and detailed discussion in itself and will be dealt with at another time. In brief, what is advocated in place of the rationalist ideology is a self-conscious traditionalism, or a tradition-bound politics fully aware of itself as such.

We can say that modernism is based on the application of a method to any subject matter, bringing us certain and communicable results. The use of such a technique, and the belief that the technique can be used to understand any subject whatever, Oakeshott calls rationalism. Rationalism leads to a divorcing of knowledge from experience, as it takes a subject matter and distills it into a handful of postulates and axioms forming a coherent whole. Such an abridgement comes to be taken as the whole of experience. This in turn leads to fanaticism and myopia, i.e. ideology, as the coherent whole is taken out of its broader context and given a life of its own. This, in brief, is the foundation of Oakeshott's critical theory.

The General Character of Conservative Experience

In order to understand Michael Oakeshott's general and fundamental approach to things moral and political, a rudimentary understanding of what he calls "experience" is absolutely vital. This study shall deal with political science and moral philosophy as seen through precisely this lens, this understanding of the phenomenon of "experience." This understanding shall be the thread by which this work is held together, and is, so this essay contends, in fact the thread that holds the work of Michael Oakeshott together. Furthermore, it is vital also for a complete understanding of contemporary conservative theory in general. In addition, this work shall argue (among other things) that this view of experience and its application to a general theory of political and moral experience in particular makes Oakeshott's work one of a political bent of the traditionalist kind, though this is certainly not universally believed.[12] Both Franco (1990) and Coats (1989), for example, place Oakeshott within the classical Liberal tradition, largely based on the idea that the "civil association" of Oakeshott applies no general understanding of the "good" to be achieved. But this essay, among others, will show this popular view to be false, regardless of the correctness of their

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12 See, for example, Wendell John Coats' "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist."

observations about the state, or "civil association." They leave out ingredients to Oakeshott's thought that are vital, but often little understood.

The idea of experience in Oakeshott's view is necessary to understand his more detailed theory of political first principles. At the very least, this essay shall fill an intellectual void by explaining, in some detail, the conservative "metapolitic," or the conservative/traditionalist approach to things political.[13] Thus it is a work of philosophy. A theory of the state, of the economy, specific moral rules and precepts, etc., are beyond the scope of this elongated essay.

The very first thing the student must understand is the concept of philosophical idealism. In Oakeshott's case, it revolves around the dictum that there is no experience without judgement; that there is no experience *per se*, but only experience as filtered through an *a priori* grid of ideas that gets imposed upon the subject matter, or more accurately, the object, at hand. This is an utterly essential idea. Stephen A Gerencser claims that in the early Oakeshott, there is a "meta-mode," i.e. one immediate, called philosophy, but that Oakeshott later

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Generally, the literature on conservative political theory is a theory of virtue, or historical figures, or an explication of a specifically historical series of issues. See, Russell Kirk's (1953) *The Conservative Mind* or *Roots of the American Order* (1974) or Bruce Frohenen's (1993) *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism.*

abandoned it (Gerencser, 1995: 730). This view is false and, at least, overstated, but this will be seen later in the essay. In general, one can quite correctly claim that there is no experience outside of some form of ideal mediation.

There exists no direct apprehension of the object by the senses, but "objects" are things conditioned by the mind. The result is that any experience whatsoever is necessarily conditioned by these prior ideas, beliefs, and images. Harwell Wells writes: "Of course Oakeshott did not claim that natural science or history should be discarded -- it is not the mode's existence which is problematic, but its claim to be completely satisfactory" (Wells, 1994: 131). As a result, there is no branch of knowledge -- not science, not mathematics -- that can claim to be knowledge or experience as a whole, but any branch of knowledge must first be made aware of and admit their necessarily partial, incomplete and contingent nature. Thus any body of knowledge is a series of concepts or ideas that are a mixture of *a priori* ideas and the raw data of experience; that is, a mixture of concepts and objects.[14] Neither of these can exist in isolation, by themselves they are unintelligible abstractions; they are nonentities. A concept without an object is a mere formal property, an object without a corresponding concept is purely

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The term "object"can be used here in two ways: the "thing in itself," or the "raw data" of experience that the mind fashions into something intelligible; or the intelligible thing itself.

abstract, something utterly unintelligible.

> However simple it be, in experience there is always something not entirely indeterminate, and whatever has passed beyond the condition of sheer indeterminacy has passed, also, beyond the condition of isolation, singularity, and unrelatedness. To be conscious of something is, in some degree, to recognize it; and recognition involves at once in judgement, in inference, in reflection, in thought. Consciousness, moreover, requires a subject which stands above mere momentary states of sensation; it requires, at least, a body of related experiences in some degree organized and harmonious (Oakeshott, 1933: 14).

It will be seen later on, that these "related experiences", in turn, also are not the genesis of understanding. That is, concepts and objects are not related in a dialectical (in the sense that they are opposites), but a reciprocal (in the sense that they are complementary), fashion. Oakeshott is no empiricist in the modern sense of the term, though he is in the Burkian sense of the term.[15] This is to say that there is no blank slate of a mind that acts as a "stage" where objects of experience pass. There is no absolute beginning to experience in our historical imagination (that is, the crystallization of past experience into ideas that lead us to recognize, conceptualize, and idealize the object in sensation), but what is clear is that there is no such things as "singularity," or "indeterminateness" that is a knowable object.

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This will become clearer later. Suffice for now to say that the Burkian consciousness is historical; concepts condition their objects in ways that have developed over time. Thus, things political are viewed in the light of their history and development. This, in short, is the metaphysic of tradition.

By "absolute beginning" it is meant that there is no point -- at least no point open to philosophers to discover -- at which a mind begins with an "object," and then learns over time what its function or possible uses are. Our understanding can only reach a point in history when there was already concepts in the human mind (collectively speaking) that made even the most rudimentary social and economic life possible. This is the limit to human understanding insofar as a philosophical anthropology is concerned.

> The self in sensation (thus conceived), this abstract, indeterminate momentary self, without memory and incapable of reflection, is, also, a contradiction. A self, replete with opinion, prejudice, habit, knowledge is implied in every actual experience; and to exclude this self from any experience whatever is an absolute impossibility (Oakeshott, 1933: 14).

It is clear that Oakeshott rejects the possibility, so common in modern thinking, of a "universal doubt," "state of nature," or a "veil of ignorance" of whatever kind. Epistemology, in Oakeshott's case radically social, must start with this present life and its experiences. Philosophy is a discipline that necessarily imposes itself upon an already existing society with its habits and various modes of behavior. Philosophy is necessarily, then, a social phenomenon. There was, to put it simply, action and reasons for action before there was any theory to categorize it. Data[16], and theory are reciprocal abstractions. And it is to this that

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16 Defined here as already existing social practices and languages. Specifically, the

epistemology must associate itself and make coherent. This is to say that the conservative philosopher understands that there is no philosophy outside of a tradition of thought, and that specifically a tradition of thought has its roots in a social order.

> This so-called necessity of finding a beginning for thought outside the region of judgement is no necessity at all: and further, what is given in 'immediate experience', this manifold and nonsensical, because it could never actually be in experience, offers nothing which could even be mistaken for an intelligible starting place for thought (Oakeshott, 1933: 18).

Now, if there is no knowledge possible about a certain "manifold," or experience in itself, but instead consists in a certain arrangement of ideas by which the manifold is made coherent, then what is truth? Oakeshott is, unsurprisingly, a coherentist.[17] Truth for Oakeshott is to be found in the coherence of a given world of ideas, or concepts:

> Now experience, as we have seen, is always a world or system of ideas. What is given is not particular ideas, nor a collection nor a series of ideas, but more of a world; a system which is more systematic; a whole which is more unified and more complete. In experience, moreover, what is pursued is the coherence of a given world of ideas. And the criterion of experience is the coherence of the world of experiences. It follows, then, that truth can concern only a world of ideas; it is conceivable only as the totality of experience. (Oakeshott, 1933: 48).

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idea of a social practice will be more fully defined later.

[17] Coherentism is often not something looked to positively by conservatism.

Truth, it would seem, is a social reality in the sense that ideas are a creation, or a crystallization, of the social world in which one lives. The conservative mindset within the unlikely framework of skeptical idealism, is that experience makes sense only within a world of ideas, a structure, one which is socially created, by which one can come to make judgements about what is experienced in general.[18] If the world of ideas is socially created -- for this is the only place where they can derive according to Oakeshott -- and it is these ideas by which we can experience anything, then true experience can only be arrived at through socially extant behaviors.[19] Wells writes that Oakeshott "subsumed an individual's thought into his participation in practices and forms of life, claiming that practices were the truly important element (Wells, 1994: 135). Further, the job of the philosopher is to clarify and make coherent the world of ideas within any given mode of

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18 This structure has no basis save the ideas themselves. Thus, some in the conservative camp would not be unjustified in accusing Oakeshott of a radical historical empiricist rather than a conservative as usually considered.

19 This statement is essential for understanding conservatism. Concepts are not merely things that the human "active intellect" creates for itself (though this may occur), but also involves the process of socialization, where new generations are made accustomed to the concepts of the previous. Indeed this must be so, for thought would be impossible without such an introduction of the basic conceptual scheme of a society.

experience. Gerencser, however, disagrees, claiming that the early Oakeshott's philosopher might experience the "whole" of reality (Gerencser, 1995: 728-729). Gerencser, anxious to find Oakeshott inconsistent, fails to see that Oakeshott explicitly denies that the whole of experience is possible in *Experience and its Modes:*

> Absolute, beyond conception and outside the world of experience, it is the world of experience as a coherent unity, for that alone *is* absolute. And every idea, in proportion as it is individual and complete, in proportion as it approaches the condition of being a world itself, approaches the condition of absoluteness (Oakeshott, 1933: 47).

If the absolute, or the whole of experience, is "beyond conception," then the philosopher cannot study it. As a result, the other alternative is left, namely, that the philosopher's job is to clarify the concepts practitioner's use within the modes themselves.

Regardless of this debate, Oakeshott is an empiricist of sorts, but an empiricist in the Burkian rather than the Lockian or Humeian sense. Our store of judgements is a social capital, and we draw upon it in any given instance to make sense out of the world. This specifically conservative vision will be dealt with in more detail later, and in fact will be an application of the idea upon which this study is based, namely, that breaking out of the socially created set of ideas by which we make our judgements is impossible. And that "rationalism," the idea that

the human mind can formalize all social relationships to a set of abstract principles, and that these principles are to be the guiding light of our social "reformation", is a means (doomed to fail) by which haughty intellectuals attempt to reject the necessarily contingent nature of social theory. This the claim here is that this vision of epistemology and experience is essentially a conservative metapolitic, and this needs to be understood before conservatism can be understood, academically considered.

Beyond experience and truth, there is a third step, the nature of reality. Oakeshott writes:

> Reality is a coherent world of ideas, and it is real because it is coherent. This world is not a world of mere ideas, because the world of experience is not such a world. In experience, that is, there is always a reference beyond what is merely true to what is real, because what is merely true -- a coherent world of mere ideas -- is, in the end, neither complete or absolute, but an abstraction. Reality is a coherent world of concrete ideas, that is of things. Consequently, it is one, a single system, and it is real only as a whole. (Oakeshott, 1933: 58).

The first time reader should be a bit baffled by the above quote, and it rightly deserves some explaining. Generally speaking, in Oakeshott writings, there are three or four modes of experience (or means by which coherence is attempted), and all involve the creation of coherence out of the manifold of experience

abstractly considered.[20] The practical, scientific, aesthetic, and occasionally, the historical. Each is an incomplete mode of experience in that it takes the whole of reality under a certain aspect, or principle, and it is by this principle that objects are arranged and made coherent. Practical experience, for example, takes the world under the idea of desire or aversion, good or bad, attraction or repulsion. These are all closely related concepts. They are attempts to make the work of ideas (that is, objects under the concept of desire, etc.) coherent through human action in the world. Scientific experience is a set of ideas or images so-called because they are taken under the concept of quantity, and is marked by a scrupulous attempt at objectivity.[21] Ideas, as Greenleaf (1966: 33) claims, are distinct from images in that the latter are the subject of aesthetics, while the former are the domain of truth claims. Aesthetic or poetic experience are images taken under the heading of "delight" or "contemplation" and have no purpose besides that. And historical experience is a study of the past that is independent of the above modes of experience, it is a study of the past devoid of practical interest, a study of what happened, not what should have happened or might have happened. Now these

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Grant claims there are only three modes of experience, but clearly Oakeshott includes a lengthy section on history in his 1933 work (Grant, 1990: 38).

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Objectivity is often defined by Oakeshott as the separation of a world of "fact" from the world of "desire."

ideas will be made clearer as the study progresses, but for our purposes, these modes of experience, taken in isolation, are capable of giving us a sort of "truth" in that they all seek coherence in their world of ideas. Philosophy, it might be said, discusses their coherence, i.e. their "truth." However, "reality" as Oakeshott uses the term (and at its highest expression) is the whole of these modes of experience taken together, providing the whole of the world under all possible or actual modes of experience. This is why the social system for Oakeshott is a conversation (with the university being this in *minutiae*) where all the modes of experience and "truth"are brought together in dialogue. This is the only way we can catch a glimpse of "reality" as Oakeshott understands it, and in this, Gerencser agrees (1995: 730). However, in a less sweeping form, "reality," can be considered the "being of a truth," or, whatever is true, is real. But truth, in its ultimate sense, can only be so as a part of a greater whole.

To summarize thus far. Oakeshott provides us with a scheme of experience that has three specific moments. First, the nature of experience is not a simple and crude relation between sensation and object. Experience is a threefold process taking in sensation, the object, and a concept by which the object is made intelligible. The concept (or the idea under which the observables are brought) is something that is historically conditioned; something which has developed over

time as part of a specific socially useful "practice" such as scientific inquiry. In other words, there is no conceivable way one can think or act "scientifically" is one is not already operating within, or aware of, an already existing tradition or paradigm of scientific activity; there would simply be no way to tell whether a hypothesis was "scientific" or not, or the answer, for that matter. Wells (1994: 142) exaggerates Oakeshott's traditionalism in this respect (but seemingly in no other) by claiming that traditions of behavior "cannot be externally altered or evaluated..." This, however is false, as will be dealt with later.

It is this sort of historical conditioning that separates Oakeshott from Kant and brings him closer to an English translation of Hegel. Secondly, the character of experience more specifically is to make the world coherent, that is, the understand the world as reflecting the bias[22] of the concept, such as "quantity" in scientific experience. The coherence of the world under this idea or concept is "truth," and something is "true" to the extent it is coherent. Third, the experience that humans understand, the modes of thinking and acting under the concepts of practical, historical, aesthetic, and scientific, taken together, make what in the most general

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Of course, this use of the word "bias" is not meant pejoratively, but rather as a signal that any experience in particular is necessarily incomplete. This, in turn, does not imply that biased experience does not have its uses, in fact, as will be seen later, each mode of experience has its social use.

sense can be called "reality," or the world considered in its totality.[23] This, in brief is Oakeshott's general character of experience. Its political connotations are conservative and traditionalist (especially since these concepts are historically conditioned, and thus non-Kantian, and form what is defined as a "tradition") and is thus the crux of my argument that Oakeshott is a Burkian conservative (for lack of a better description), rather than a classical liberal, as some have characterized him.

We can view this in another way. Our usual metaphysical ideas such as "fact," "individuals," "universals," and "absolute," take on a different meaning in Oakeshott's idealistic system. We shall deal with each in turn. Firstly, what a "fact" is can only be determined as a part of a system of ideas; facts are the result, not the basis, of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 42). Thus what we take to be "fact" is itself a historically conditioned creation of the mind making coherent a world of ideas (again, ideas here are objects taken under the concept of "quality" or "desire" etc.), and such a fact can only be such within a certain tradition of activity:

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23 There is a *telos* here that Oakeshott leaves unstated throughout his work. It does seem, however, to be an unattainable telos, and thus we must be contented with approximating this "reality" through the rough mode of conversation. This seems to be Gerencser's (1995) position.

"Science, for example, has its facts, and the way in which they are related, connected and explained is a theory. This view, however, involves a rigid distinction between fact and theory and a belief that facts are and remain independent of the theory which is said to connect them, and for these reasons I take to be false" (Oakeshott, 1933: 42-3). Thus one can not make sense of facts unless one takes into account the history and development of theory, which in our contemporary jargon is called a "paradigm." This is why "truth" is a part of a larger whole, since there are no "facts" apart from theory.

Secondly, "individual" ideas are, again, only such as part of broader whole. Oakeshott is clear to differentiate "particularity" and "individuality" (Oakeshott, 1933: 44). An "individual" idea is one that can stand of its own accord: "For, whenever an idea points beyond itself, however distinct it may appear, it has demonstrated its own lack of individuality, and is powerless to resist inclusion in what is more individual than itself' (Oakeshott, 1933: 44). An individual, then, is that which is seen in its full character, something that is complete in itself, this can only be ascertained within an entire realm of experience, the whole. Thus, by this logic, the "real," is what is individual, the "truth" of a certain inquiry less so. An individual is an object taken in its totality, that is, in its complete relatedness to the universe of causality. We know things as complete individual only as part of the whole of experience, in the sense that the character of an individual thing is

defined by how it relates to others as part of a coherent world of ideas.[24] Thus, our knowledge is always contingent, for humanity is not at a point where "reality"in its entirety is accessible, and perhaps never will be. Thus, terms such as "fact" are radically contingent.

Third, "universals" and "individuals" are not separate or separable concepts. Since an "individual" is something that has its full character explicated as being part of the totality of experience, the "universal" is that which explicates its character, namely, the system of ideas, or, more accurately, the whole of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 46) . Thus their inseparability. Either one taken alone is merely an abstract entity. An individual without the concept is an isolated nonentity which is unintelligible to the human mind, which must bring individuals under concepts or system in order to understand them. A universal is merely a label for the system, and is as unintelligible as the term "quantity" when there is nothing to quantify.

Lastly, the "absolute" means, in Oakeshott's understanding is "that which is absolved or emancipated from the necessity of finding its significance in relations to what is outside itself. It means that which is self-complete, whole, individual,

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In our case, we know of no "individuals," merely contingent "ideas" can be arranged in a more or less coherent way.

and removed from change"(Oakeshott, 1933: 47). This is another word for "individual" and represents the very same concept. The nature of experience generally considered, that of coherence, continually drives us to the absolute, for what is sought is absolute individuality and absolute universality, i.e. objects under the system of the whole of experience. This, however, is something that no concept can ascertain (Oakeshott, 1933: 47), for no idea, in itself, is removed from the bias and particularity of experience in general. Thus Gerencser is wrong in another way given his assertion that Oakeshott considers the "whole" of experience something philosophers deal with in that Oakeshott may more reasonably be said to consider the real "individual" to be merely a sort of analytic foundation rather than something real or actual or attainable.

What is significant about this discussion is that epistemology in no way is removed from social life in that all of our concepts of experience -- desire, quantity, contemplation, etc. -- derive from a tradition of activity which modifies and perfects these concepts over time. The very definition of these ideas derive from their historical character. What is "scientific" is something that has a place within a historical paradigm of scientific research, and all else is relegated to "pseudo-science." As a result, all experience is essentially a conservative act, for it all takes place within a traditional and thus historically conditioned set of concepts. Thus no universal doubt or other rationalistic starting place for knowledge is

possible, for without the idea or concept, experience is an unintelligible manifold of sensation without any organizing principle.

Conservatism and the Social Sciences

For those who are intimately acquainted with the pantheon of contemporary conservative social theory, Michael Oakeshott, while still remaining in that tradition, can be seen as an eccentric and idiosyncratic part of it, in that he obviously feared basing political activity upon the transcendent. It is quite clear, however, that Oakeshott has much to offer in terms of a positive fundamental social theory of a traditionalist kind.

By "fundamental" it is meant that what is to be studied here is the mindset that informs theory on political affairs, rather than actual normative political theorizing on specific matters. This essay will solely deal, then, with the conservative mindset and intellectual posture, rather than with specific political theories, doctrines or moral precepts. The question concerns the fundamental concepts the conservative assumes when approaching political ideas; the framework for theorizing, as it were, rather than the specific theorizing itself. The broader purpose here is also that the critical side of Oakeshott's work comes together with the more positive theorizing to give the student a clear and coherent picture of the foundations of contemporary conservative social thinking. As a result, this section will concentrate on a handful of Oakeshott's work of a specifically foundational kind, revolving around, first, the earlier works

Experience and its Modes (1933), "Rational Conduct (1950)", "On Being Conservative" (1956), and the modifications and clarifications of his much later *On Human Conduct* (1974).

The basis of "Rationalism in Politics" was that the critical side of Oakeshott's thought deemed it impossible that political societies should be self-consciously ordered to any goal in particular, for, if it was to be formulated, it would be an incomplete and distorted picture of our collective life, this is to say that no method could be employed to formulate such a rule of life. This is to say that as rationalism can distill a tradition, it cannot replace one. As Modernism and Rationalism have created impressive intellectual monuments in recent centuries, Oakeshott maintains that the resulting series of axioms are incomplete at best. The reason for this, as seen in his "On Being Conservative" was that there can be no meaningful (or more accurately, complete) political propositions extractable from abstracting from socially extant behaviors, the result is this:

> ...the observation of our current manner of living combined with the belief...that governing is a specific and limited activity, namely the provision and custody of general rules of conduct, which are understood, not as plans for imposing substantive activities, but as instruments enabling people to pursue the actions of their own choice with the minimum frustration, and therefore something which it is appropriate to be conservative about (Oakeshott, 1956: 424).

Human beings are to pursue goals as human beings within a certain mode of

activity, and not as parts as a larger whole.[25] There is, so to speak, a "prepolitical" condition where individuals make choices, upon which the state imposes itself as an "..umpire whose business it is to administer the rules of the game, or the chairman who governs the debate according to known rules but does not himself participate in it" (Oakeshott, 1956: 427). Prepolitical is the condition of human beings before the state, their desires, morals, and goals. The point is that the state merely regulates this, rather than creates it anew. This is not a state of nature theory, but its antitype, namely, fully functioning, moral beings predate the state that the state must understand if it is to function morally.

The other view of politics, known as the rationalist view, seeks substantive goals for political organization, e.g. "equality," "diversity," the "Rights of Man." The governing principle is to bring about these substantive goals, and to eliminate that which does not facilitate their realization. Thus, Oakeshott sets up a choice, the rationalist or the traditionalist view of governing and social organization. The prepolitical, or contingent, condition is eliminated in the face of an all encompassing idea:

> ...they tell us that they have seen in a dream the glorious, collisionless manner of living proper to mankind, and this dream they understand as their warrant for seeking to remove the diversities and occasions of conflict which distinguish our current manner of living...And such people appropriately understand the office of government to be the imposition

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[25] As in Marxism's "masses."

upon its subjects of the condition of human circumstances of their dream. To govern is to turn a private dream into a public and compulsory manner of living (Oakeshott, 1956: 426).

What Oakeshott is claiming is that the foundational divide in political thinking is between those who view the art of governing as the solver of problems inherent in our (preexisting) manner of living, and those, on the other hand, who seek to impose a uniform manner of living upon a society with a normatively substantial aim.[26] A government, or an ethical theory, for that matter, is not the genesis of moral behavior, but is utterly dependent upon it. The point is that people could and did behave morally before ethics became a professional discipline and government became a rationalized, bureaucratic apparatus.

Government, then, as the conservative in this matter understands it, does not begin with the vision of another, different, and better world, but with the observation of the self-government practiced even my men of passion in the conduct of their enterprises: it begins in the informal adjustments of interests to one another which are designed to release those who are apt to collide from the mutual frustration of a collision...To govern, then, as the conservative understands it, it to provide a *vinculum juris* for those manners of conduct, which, in the circumstances, are least likely to result in a frustrating collision of interests; to provide redress and means of compensation for those who suffer from others behaving in a contrary manner; sometimes to provide punishment for those who pursue their own interests regardless of the rules; and, of course, to provide a sufficient force to maintain the authority of an arbiter of this kind. Thus, governing is

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Here, of course, the average Thomist or Platonist would disagree. This idea becomes more clear if it is viewed through Oakeshott's larger project, namely, debunking the enlightenment "Cult of Man."

recognized as 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 (Oakeshott, 1956: 428:9).

It is precisely this sort of idea that this essay seeks to address: what mind set brings this view of government about? This view of politics is common enough, but this section seeks to elucidate a political metatheory, or a discovery of first principles within the very nature of experience itself as Oakeshott sees it. In Oakeshott's case, it is to be found within the realm of "practical experience," which by its very nature, is transformative of the social nature around us.[27] The state, in brief, is a "civil" rather than an "enterprise" association. This is simply to say that the state regulates individuals as formed from what preceded it. The state is not creative of anything, but merely regulates what has always existed within a certain social tradition.

The transformative nature of "practical experience" -- as opposed to other modes of experience such as scientific experience or historical experience -- includes a dichotomy between the "is" and the "ought." That there is a historical condition on the one hand, and a principle that seeks to eliminate the incoherences

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We can briefly define "practical experience" as the organization of preexisting matter in order to make in commensurate with a certain principle, and that certain principle is "desire," or "aversion," or "approval," etc.

inherent within the inherited condition, on the other. The key to understanding Oakeshott's political metatheory is discovering the nature of the "ought," or the principle as such, and relating it specifically to political activity. In his *Experience and Its Modes*, the metatheory of conservative politics is set down. In his article, "Rational Conduct," these ideas are specifically related to social activity.

Practical experience, at its most basic level, seeks to make coherent a given world of ideas under the heading, or concept, of "desire" or "aversion," "good" or "bad." Practically speaking, "to make coherent" is to alter a given world of ideas in accord with a certain judgement of value or principle (Oakeshott, 1933: 262). However, Oakeshott points out that difficulties arise when one writes of the "ought" as such and the "is" as such. The question of reducing an "ought" to an "is" is a misleading one for Oakeshott, it is a misunderstanding of the situation the agent faces.

The "ought" and the "is" for Oakeshott, do not inhabit radically separate worlds. The very thesis of *Experience and Its Modes* is that any sort of experience, taken in isolation, is radically defective in that each is a mode of a decrepit idealism. Put simply, each mode of experience takes the whole of experience under a different idea: science as quantity, or practical activity as coherence under a certain sort of personal value, etc, and alternatives are unintelligible under it. Each mode of experience is an abstraction, but it is common (but unfortunate) that each

mode sees itself as the whole of experience, as is often the case with the scientific mode, which usually sees itself as synonymous with "knowledge" proper.

A particular practical mode of activity cannot encompass but a relatively small portion of experience in general because there is no such thing as an "is." A given "here and now," or the "raw material" that practical activity works upon, is itself a conditioned "given." It is rather the result of previous activity. This is to say that humans look at the given reality under a previous idea. Thus, there is no taking of a "brute given" and transforming it into a coherent reality in accord with a moral idea: "Thus, the world of value, is, from the standpoint of practice, a presupposition. Nevertheless, there is no ultimate priority, much less separation. 'What ought to be' is not a world entirely independent of 'what is here and now'; the facts of one are of the same kind as the facts of the other" (Oakeshott, 1933: 289). Greenleaf makes a similar point: "...the 'what ought to be' postulated in respect of practical experience is necessarily governed by the need to conform to the basic concepts of that mode of experience" (Greenleaf, 1966: 19). There is no "is" in a system of cognitive idealism, but simply objects that appear as such because they are conditioned by an "ought" of some type.

In scientific experience, there is supposed to be a brute "given" on the one hand, and an empty mind, on the other. Here, the dichotomy makes sense if the sciences can be taken at their word. But even here Oakeshott rejects science's

claim to pure empiricism, and shows nature itself to be a conditioned state of affairs. Thus all "givens" are conditioned ideas -- ideas conditioned by prior practical activity. Wells explains this further, in that a mode of experience (the so-called "is") is necessarily connected not just to a way of thought, but to a way of life: "...a "mode" involves not just abstract methods, but concrete activities in which human beings engage" (Wells, 1994: 131-132). This should be taken to mean that a mode concerns a way of life with its expectations, skills, and demands (Wells, 1994: 132). Thus an "is," in the normal sense of a "given," cannot exist in Oakeshott's world. Put more clearly, if knowledge is bringing objects within a certain mode (indeed, they are unintelligible outside of them), and these modes are activities which are historically conditioned, then all thought is necessarily of previous "oughts." The pursuit of this coherence if ideas (for that is a mode's ultimate purpose) is ceaseless, according to Greenleaf's commentary

> The attempt to resolve the discrepancy between the world of values and 'what is' is never finally accomplished. Like Hobbesian man's perpetual and restless desire of power after power, this pursuit 'ceaseth only in death.' The horizon of expectations continually recedes; and no sooner is the compatibility achieved at one point than a new discord springs up somewhere else, demanding a further resolution (Greenleaf, 1966: 20).

This idealistic thesis of the *Experience and Its Modes* brings us quite close to understanding the fundamentals of conservative social criticism in this: If it is true that every mode of experience is a relationship of ideas, or that experience is

taken under an idea (such as quantity or approval), then the world appears, from any standpoint, as an idea, i.e. the world appears as already conditioned under a certain principle. There is no direct apprehension of reality, i.e. the world of experience taken as a whole, but experience is necessarily and always mediated, as it has been pointed out. This mediation, however, is a conscious creation, a recreation of a preexisting idea. What this has to do with being the foundation to a conservative metapolitics is found in Oakeshott's (1948) article, "The Tower of Babel."

> A prosaic tradition of thought has accustomed us to the assumption that moral activity, when analyzed, will be found to consist in the translation of an idea of what ought to be into a practical reality, the transformation of an ideal into concrete existence. And we are accustomed even, to think of poetry in these terms; first, a 'hearts desire' (an idea) and then its expression, its translation into words. Nevertheless, I think this view is mistaken; it is the superimposition upon are and moral activity generally of an inappropriate didactic form. A poem is not the translation into words of a state of mind. What the poet says and what he wants to say are not two things, the one succeeding and embodying the other, they are the same thing; he does not know what he wants to say before he has said it (Oakeshott, 1948: 479).

This is simply to say that there is not an abstract entity -- the thought, or the ideal -- and the reality, or the manifestation. This is one of the main arguments in Oakeshott's 1933 book as concerns practical activity. Practical activity is not *sui generis*, it is the desire to make coherent a given reality by a conditioned judgement of value; conditioned by the current organization of reality. One is then dealing with two "oughts" or two differing principles of coherence, and practical

theorizing is to settle the resulting clash. The rationalist idea of practical activity, according to Oakeshott, is that there is merely a "brute given" in sense experience which is to be changed according to a given moral idea, or value, abstract, and based upon qualitative experience, the classic dichotomy between ought and is. Thus, here, moral activity is self-generating, and thus the theory is considered different from the manifestation.

Oakeshott describes, in general terms, a governing principle that does not impose ends upon its citizens as self-contained rational constructs. Though this section does not seek to go into detail concerning the nature of such practical and mundane political considerations, it seeks instead to provide the underpinnings of such a thesis. The nature of practice (or in our case, specifically political practice) is transformative. The "stuff" of practice is the modification -- necessarily -- of what has already been transformed, i.e. brought under an idea. As a result, rationalist political theories, those that seek to recreate human beings in accordance with a rational plan of some type, is not ultimately plausible. Wells defines a practice thus: "For our purposes a practice or form of life is the set of heuristics, skills, and attitudes that underlie well-defined human activities such a cooking, chess, or politics" (Wells, 1994: 133). More generally, Grant (1990) defines practice more broadly, namely, anything that can be brought under the

heading of "will" (Grant, 46): "Practice, like history, deals in designated particulars, and thus differs from science, which deals in generalizations; but it differs from both science and history in being actuated, not by disinterestedness, but by its opposite, will" (Grant: 1990: 45).[28]

The very nature of political activity derives from the givens of this stage in our collective life. But this stage in our collective life is conditioned by the practical activity of what has come before -- the raw material of political practice is our political practices and their resultant ideas of the past. Moral theory cannot dispense with this situation. The questions asked, the problems dealt with, and the ultimate solutions derive from the "givens" of any society, and is, as we have seen, the historical contingency of our concepts. There can be no valid conclusion that seeks the overthrow of all contingency. Simply put, there is no possible method -- given the argument of the "Rationalism" -- that will give us the "stuff" of human life *per se*, but rather one that is contingent.

Rationalist moral theory seeks to give something it does not have -- a freedom from (historical) contingency, or an absolute value apart from and above historical circumstances. It simply does not follow that a contingent set of questions and moral problems can lead to a categorical set of answers. This is the general philosophical impetus of "Practical Experience." Thus, the rationalist

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[28] We will see Oakeshott's own definition later.

program of dissolving all contingent social relations is given its most basic refutation, given that the presuppositions of revolutionary politics are that its conclusions are *not* contingent, but absolute facts of human existence, e.g. that humanity is determined by economic conditions, or that the world is inexorably leading to world government as the evolutionary embodiment of human potential, etc. Alasdair MacIntyre makes a similar point in regard to moral theorizing in general in his (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

> What the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind to and what we now need to recover is, so I shall argue, a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of the same tradition (MacIntyre; 1988: 7).

It comes down to the distinction between understanding political theory as a relatively local response to contingent political situations versus political theory as a series of propositions embodying moral absolutes about human behavior and motivation. It is this difficulty that underlies F.A. Hayek's thesis in his (1955) *The Counterrevolution of Science*. For Hayek, the issue is one of practicality, while for Oakeshott, the problem is based on a more intellectual error. Hayek's central argument is that the problems with modern social science is that whatever does not fall under its control is somehow "irrational." He writes:

> In aiming at a result which must be based, not on a single body of

> integrated knowledge or of connected reasoning which the designer possesses, but on the separate knowledge of many people, the task of social organization differs fundamentally from that of organizing given material resources. The fact that no single mind can know more than a fraction of what is known to all individual minds sets limits to the extent to which conscious direction can improve upon the results of unconscious social processes....But that something which not only does not rely on deliberate control for its working, but which has not even been deliberately designed, should bring about desirable results, which we might not be able to bring out otherwise, is a conclusion the natural scientist seems to find difficult to accept (Hayek, 1955: 99-100).

Given the above account of social theorizing, Oakeshott's "Rational Conduct" provides a specific approach to link this foundation with political practice. Further, it will also provide some insight into the other conservative foundational idea, namely, the idea of the prepolitical state of humanity and its claims upon any imposition of formalized authority.

Rational conduct is defined by Oakeshott thus: "Its aim world be, first, to establish a proposition, to determine the means to be employed to achieve that (and no other) end, and thirdly, to act" (Oakeshott, 1950: 108). This is the classical rationalist construct of human action. Oakeshott writes that "my view is that this is not a satisfactory notion of rational conduct because it is not a satisfactory account of any sort of conduct" (Oakeshott, 1950: 109). This is so because the rationalist assumes the existence of a human mind which is separate from any particular activity in which it engages. Oakeshott identifies the mind, explicitly, with that which it does (Oakeshott, 1950: 109). In other words, there is no faculty of human

beings that can be abstracted from present conduct and aimed at "rational" problem solving of whatever type. The mind, rationality, rational conduct, etc., are identical to the activities which are deemed so "because there is in fact no way of determining an end for activity in advance of the activity itself" (Oakeshott, 1950: 111). What is "rational" is an abstraction from already existing activities.[29] This is to say that theorizing about rationality is nothing more than abbreviating already extant rational activities, i.e. doing some concrete thing well or poorly, and is inseparable from such concrete activities. As such, it cannot be the spring for action *per se*. Oakeshott writes that a practitioner, observing conduct in a particular field...

> would rapidly reach two conclusions. First, he would observe that, in pursuing his particular project, his actions were being determined not solely by his premeditated end, but by what may be called the traditions of the activity to which his project belonged...And through his participation in this concrete activity...may on some occasions appear to take the form of the application of a rule or the pursuit of a purpose, he would see at once that this rule or this purpose derived from the activity and not vice versa, and that the activity itself could never as a whole be reduced to the pursuit of an end or the application of a rule determined in advance of the activity (Oakeshott, 1950: 119).

Rationality then, is not something that can be taken of itself and applied to

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Thus, here, the bureaucratic mentality is rejected in that there is no ultimate separation between a practice, and the end of a practice. The Weberian idea of a bureaucracy is a cluster of means-finding actors receiving an "end" from outside. Cf. MacIntyre's (1981) *After Virtue.*

different areas of human conduct. Rationality is an accident or residual of human conduct, an idea that arises from the various practices that exist within a human society and creates a general set of symbols that abbreviate these practices such as the extreme case of the philosophical discipline of logic. A practice is defined by Oakeshott in his *On Human Conduct* 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" (Oakeshott, 1974: 55). Rationality is a residual category that arises from preexisting modes of behavior, or practices, within a society. Humans did not begin their social life with symbolic logic, previous to any socially significant action whatever. Such symbolisms are dependent and parasitic upon social practices and rational behaviors embedded in those practices. Ideas about abstract rationality merely catagorize already rational behavior.

In part, it seems that "Rational Conduct" was written against the stock rationalist argument, viz., that rationalism in politics is necessary because, as a society, we must rank and make sense out of the myriad problems and issues we collectively face, that is, a principle that allows us to weigh and measure social problems would have to derive from without, one that derives from outside the pantheon of social problems and issues. Thus, some a priori method is necessary,

one that can encompass all of social life[30]. Oakeshott claims:

> ...the questions which he known to belong to a sort of activity are not known to be such in advance of the activity of trying to answer them: in pursuing these questions and not others, he is not obeying a rule or following a principle which comes from outside the activity, he is pursuing an activity which, in general, he knows how to pursue. It is the activity itself which defines the question as well as the manner in which they are answered (Oakeshott, 1950: 122).

This is simply to say that any principles we use in judging an activity derive from the activity itself, and in no way represent a system of belief deriving from outside, or above, these activities. Thus, to pronounce a practice "rational" or "irrational" one must first understand the activity about which the judgement is being made. Such a judgement can only derive from a desirable quality within the activity (Oakeshott, 1950: 122). It is, as Oakeshott claims, a judgement necessarily based upon a "faithfulness to the knowledge we have of how to conduct the specific activity we are engaged in" (Oakeshott, 1950: 122). The error here is about the nature of thinking about rationality. Like the mind, reason, moral precepts, or scientific hypotheses are *products* of society and its practices, in the sense of abbreviations, not the governing principles of societies and practices. Contradictions in existing practices (leading to contradictory views of politics) are to ironed out through the work of the philosopher and the (true) social scientist.

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[30] cf. D.D. Raphael's "Professor Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics.*"

The Oakeshottian idea of social change is precisely that, the realization of a contradiction within a set of practices, but, as Wells would put it, "...there is no way to make an *external* appeal for changing a practice..." (Wells, 1994: 140).

The rationalist notion here which is being challenged is that human activity begins with preexisting concepts, that the collective life of human beings is given direction by the self-conscious application of certain rules and procedures deriving from concepts. Collective life "starts" here, so to speak. Oakeshott maintains the classical conservative position that societies develop social practices to deal with collective problems the society faces. There is no absolute beginning to such practices. Out of these activities derive our ideas about (among other things) rationality or irrationality, or that the study of rationality is nothing more than an abstraction from already existing modes of behavior. Oakeshott's claim here, to use a scientific example, is that there can be no scientific rationality outside of an already existing tradition of scientific activity: "A man who is not already a scientist cannot even formulate a scientific problem; what he will formulate is a problem which a connoisseur will at once recognize *not* to be a 'scientific' problem because it is incapable of being considered in a 'scientific' manner" (Oakeshott, 1950: 120).

Allowing this to get slightly more detailed, what an individual does in society is not to consciously adopt sets of rules to follow, but by "...acquiri[ng]

habits of conduct, not by constructing a way of living upon rules or precepts learned by heart and subsequently practiced, but by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner: we acquire habits of conduct in the same way as we acquire our native language" (Oakeshott 1948: 468). This is a practical application of what is meant by not having a premeditated end for (political) activity. Again, and in a way peculiarly germaine to this discussion:

> Moral ideals are not, in the first place, the products of reflective thought, the verbal expressions of unrealized ideas, which are then translated (with varying degrees of accuracy) into human behavior; they are the products of human behavior, of human practical activity, to which reflective thought gives subsequent, partial and abstract expression in words. What is good, or right, or what is considered to be reasonable behavior may exist in advance of the situation, but only in the generalized form of the possibilities of behavior determined by art and not by nature...
>
> This view of the matter does not, of course, deprive moral ideals of their power as critics of human habits, it does not denigrate the activity of reflective thought in giving this verbal expression to the principles of behavior; there is no doubt whatever that a morality in which reflection has no part of defective (Oakeshott, 1948: 479-480).

If, in fact, there are no universal judgements about rationality or any other topic, only partial judgments given the tradition of behavior at issue, then moral life is the product of slowly absorbing the different practices of a society and their criteria for correct and incorrect, and, importantly, their interactions within the larger whole. Interestingly, Wittgenstein makes similar points in his (1969) *On Certainty*:

> All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place

already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life. (Wittgenstein, 1969: 105).

And again,

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end -- but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (Wittgenstein, 1969: 204).

This means simply that every belief is a part of system of activity, manifested by a certain use of language, which reminds one very much of Oakeshott's system. This idea culminates in Oakeshott's thought in the "mixed system" of social life,

> In a mixture in which the first of these extremes [moral habit] is dominant, the moral life may be expected to be immune from a confusion between behavior and the pursuit of an idea. Action will retain its primacy, and, whatever it is called for, will spring from habit of behavior...The confidence in action, which belongs to the well-nurtured customary moral life, will remain unshaken. And the coherence of the moral life will not wait upon the abstract unity which the reflective relation of values can give it. But, in addition, this mixed form of the moral life may be supposed to enjoy the advantages that spring from a reflective morality -- the power to criticize, to reform and to explain itself, and the power to propagate itself beyond the range of the custom of a society. It will enjoy also the appropriate intellectual confidence in its moral standards and purposes. And it will enjoy all this without the danger of moral criticism usurping the place of a habit of moral behavior, or moral speculation bringing disintegration to moral life (Oakeshott, 1948: 477).

Clearly here, then, one can see the culmination of the conservative

metapolitical foundation with the Wittgensteinian idea that all judgement takes place within an already existing system of thought. The unity of Oakeshott's thought is evident. Human beings are born into already existing societies and gradually develop moral sensibilities from current practices, an idea echoed in Wittgenstein. The nuances and complexities of such practices make nothing but a attenuated description of them possible in that a language describing such conduct will be an abridgement of the practice and not the practice *per se*, but will be the means by which a practice literally articulates itself to the outside world. This is a question that other Oakeshott scholars have yet to grasp. Sociality is the "metamode" of experience; modality writ large. Judgement, then, must derive from inside the practice, for it is here alone where our general terms of "good" and "bad," or "rational" or "irrational" apply. But both an explanation of a practice and a judgement about it will be attenuated and abbreviated, for any of these understandings will be a linguistic cluster describing only the major points involved. Thus any explanation cannot ever take into account anything but the technical aspects of a phenomenon.

Experience and Its Modes shows the conditioned nature of moral judgements in that they derive from previous moral judgements, or, more accurately, the "is" that is to be transformed. The essential idea here is that the prepolitical nature of activity is the origin of judgement. The nature of the

judgement, the concept, does not come first, but rather the practice, and within that practice is the context where judgements necessarily belong. "Concept" here is not a substantial thing, but another way of expressing an abbreviated explanation of any conduct whatever. This is the conservative metapolitic as explicated in the more fundamental writings of Michael Oakeshott.

Now, this picture should be clear as far as it goes. But the later (1974) *On Human Conduct* creates a more coherent and detailed version. There is something different from a particular practice (i.e. that with a substantive end), but a moral practice, something that is "not a prudential art concerned with the success of the enterprise of agents; it is not instrumental to the achievement of any substantive purpose or to the satisfaction of any substantive want" (Oakeshott, 1974: 60). This is morality and can be tentatively considered as a sort of practice that arises from the interplay and necessary contact amongst practices already existing in a society. A practice in "Rational Conduct" is the origin of judgements about rationality, but is also related to moral development: "Every such vernacular of moral converse is a historic achievement of human beings. Each is continuously accumulating residue of conditional relationships learned in an experience of experience between operative agents" (Oakeshott, 1974: 63). Furthermore, "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" (Oakeshott, 1974: 64). The practices spoken of in "Rational Conduct," then, are related to moral practice. A moral practice, however, is not confined to the demands of any particular practice, but seem to be concerned with practices in relation to one another, or at least those things that are agreed upon in the pursuit of any given satisfaction. This metamode is necessary for even the most loosely organized society to exist.

Morality is a language -- that is, a mode of communication created by practitioners (speakers) in a given idiom of practice[31] -- that has arisen in the course of interactions with others for common purposes, but is not itself bound by such purposes.[32] Here is where the idea of moral criticism enters into Oakeshott's political theory. Oakeshott goes on to link this understanding to the concept of rationalism:

> Moral rules are abridgements...Moral rules specify performances in terms of obligations to subscribe to injunctions. What a moral practice intimates as, in general, proper to be said or done, a moral rule makes more explicit in declaring what it is *right* to do...
>
> Where the relationships of a moral practice are articulated in rules

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[31] This idea is further explained in the last chapter.

[32] But an idiom in relation to others, that is, one derived from the interactions of other idioms.

they lose some of their characteristic expansiveness. The 'play' between agents in [sic] diminished; loyalty becomes legality, *obsequium* supersedes *fides*. And this strictness is magnified where rules become duties...

Rules, duties, and the like (moral principles and dogmas) are, then, passages of stringency in moral practice. But they should not be thought of as strands of some exceptionally tough material woven into the otherwise flimsy fabric of moral association, constituents not only of notable strength but also of independent authority; conservators of the integrity of a moral practice. Rather, they are to be recognized as densities obtruded by the tensions of a spoken language of moral intercourse, nodal points at which a practice turns upon itself in a vortiginous movement and becomes steadier in ceasing to be adventurous. They may help to keep a practice in shape, but they do not give it is shape. (Oakeshott, 1974: 66-8).

Such rules, however, concern individuals and groups performing acts in concert in order to reach certain goals. The substantial ends of action are the most fundamental, but the means by which such goals are reached (in respect of the goals) must be regulated:

...I have suggested that moral conduct is to be recognized as agents seeking satisfactions in the responses of one another and acknowledging, in this reciprocal intercourse, the authority of a language which articulates considerations, rules, duties, etc., to be subscribed to in choosing and pursuing these satisfactions. 'Good' conduct here is choosing and doing in adequate subscription to these considerations. (Oakeshott, 1974: 74).

Morality, then, is something that is meant to give form to relationships that are slightly more than merely contractual or transactional. Moral rules are not formulated with a eye to consequences (for then they would be identical with practices), but are conditions that consequences can be brought about, i.e. they concern means. Means themselves, however, are connected to practices and in fact

are practices as the substantial end of a practice is clarified in the actual functioning of the practice itself. Morality for Oakeshott seems to be a society's rough attempt to standardize practices in some respects of social significance so that proper consequences can be brought about in a way that all practitioners can depend and that can regularize intercourse and mutual interaction in the pursuit of collective goals. It is the "umpire" governing principle alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. Morality is a language in that practitioners interact and thus an intensive mode of interaction is necessary. Such a language intimates not a general good or an end beyond which are no others, but simply an understanding with fellow practitioners that they serve a general purpose, and their conduct should proceed around the purposes of their particular practice. Nothing else, it seems, can be taken out of the interactions of practitioners with one another.

This is a controversial position in Oakeshott scholarship. Oakeshott scholars like Franco (1990) and Gerencser (1995) have struggled with the idea of the existence of a "metamode" in Oakeshott's thought, a mode that transcends individual modal practices. *Rational Conduct* posits such a mode as "morality." The problem with Franco or Gerencser's analysis is that they make an excessively strict differentiation between modes as separate idioms of practice unintelligible to any outsider on the one hand, but see communication amongst the individual modes on the other, as clearly seen in Oakeshott's articles such as "The Voice of

Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind."

The error these two well-known commentator's make is not taking modal practices under distinct guises. In other words, the solution to this important problem in Oakeshott's thought is simply that, in *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott is discussing individual modalities in themselves, searching out their inner character. While in some of the later works, Oakeshott takes these modes and discusses them in their social context. The modes have not changed, but the context has. Both Franco and Gerencser take this shift to be a fundamental one, and it is not.

Thus, this essay has come full circle, the notion of a governing body that serves no further purpose than the "umpiring" of individuals pursuing "satisfactions." The only proposition, it seems, that can consistently be taken out of Oakeshott's moral work is that practitioners develop self-understandings that facilitate interaction with other practitioners. Such understandings are independent of the common goals of practitioners (i.e. they are efficacious regardless of particular ends), but can be used only to regularize (it seems) relations among practitioners. The "Civil Condition" is the language of authority -- or actually, its instrument -- by which practitioners relate themselves to different practitioners in different practices, and thus relate their efforts to one another. This is the gateway

to Oakeshott's substantive, positive political theory, which is beyond the scope of this essay, and this project overall. The essential unity of Oakeshott's work on this mater, however, it is hoped has been made clear in its minimalism and its center around the mistake to consider a set of principles, of whatever kind, to constitute a "thing" in itself, independent of the circumstances by which it was formulated. These principles allow us to catch a glimpse of Oakeshott's moral philosophy more fully. There are few places where Oakeshott's expounds a full concept of morality, but one important place is his well-known "The Tower of Babel" (1948). Moral theorizing comes from two particular ideal mindsets, mindsets which should already be clear to the reader: the rationalistic and the traditional. The latter sort Oakeshott refers to as "the habit of affections," and contrasts to a habit of thought:

> The current situations of a normal life are met, not be consciously applying to ourselves a rule of behavior, nor by conduct recognized as the expression of a moral ideal, but by acting in accordance with a certain habit of behavior. The moral life in this form does not spring from the consciousness of possible alternative ways of behaving and a choice, determined by an opinion, a rule or an ideal, from among these alternatives; conduct is as nearly as possible without reflection (Oakeshott, 1948: 467-8)

This is the pure form of traditional behavior, one of a completely habitual way of acting, completely conditioned by the contingencies of the present society and its values. The other ideal type of moral theorizing is "the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals,"

> This is a form of the moral life in which a special value is attributed

> to self-consciousness, individual or social; not only is the rule or the ideal the product of reflective thought, but the application of the rule or ideal to the situation is also a reflective activity (Oakeshott, 1948: 473).

We may also call this "moral idealism." Keep in mind that these two modes of thought in ethics are ideal types, and not actual social or moral realities. However, every moral theory gives a certain preponderance to one or the other in the resulting mixture. Oakeshott's argument, then, concerns which moral mindset should predominately inform a moral theory.

Within the tradition of moral idealism (if it can be called a "tradition"), three ingredients are necessary for the ideal to be a realistic alternative to traditional moral theory. First, rules must be formulated. Second, they must be defended according to some logical or rational design, and third and most important, they must be applied to contingent situations. This is the problem for idealistic or rationalistic moral philosophy, that the rules themselves do not give guidance insofar as particular applications are concerned (Oakeshott, 1948: 473). Application of ideal moral rules require interpretation, and such interpretation is not found within the rules themselves. Moral idealism or rationalism, similar to the scientific version of this mindset, has its uses, and its uses are to abbreviate a certain tradition to better understand it in the first place, and elicit criticism in the second. However, it is not a realistic mode of action, in itself, at all.

It is true that moral ideals and moral rules may become so familiar that they

take on the character of an habitual or traditional way of *thinking* about behavior. It is true that long familiarity with our ideals may have enabled us to express them more concretely in a system of specific rights and duties, handy in application...But these qualifications carry us only part of the way: they may remove the necessity for *ad hoc* reflection on the rules and ideals themselves, but they leave us still with the problem of interpreting the situation and the task of translating the ideal, the right or the duty into behavior (Oakeshott, 1948: 473-4).

The main issue then is the matter of the distinction between rules, thought, and behavior. Formulating rules, regardless of the sophistication involved, has nothing to do with behavior, for behavior is always concerned with something determinate and contingent, while abstract and rationalistic moral theorizing is about moral absolutes, radically apart from contingency and determinacy. Thus, something more is necessary than moral rules for moral action.

Oakeshott clearly states the ideal nature of these two approaches. In fact, moral theorizing usually deals with a mixture of these. The arguments against moral idealism, however, still apply when a system is mixed, but the rationalistic and speculative element is dominant.

....a morality whose form is a mixture in which the second [the idealistic] of our extremes is dominant will, I think, suffer from a permanent tension between its component parts. Taking charge, the morality of the self-conscious pursuit of ideals will have a disintegrating effect upon habit of behavior. When action is called for, speculation or criticism will supervene. Behavior itself will tend to become problematical, seeking its self-confidence in the coherence of an ideology (Oakeshott, 1948: 478).

In other words, action becomes difficult when each moral problem or

situation requires the application of a moral ideal deriving from an ideology. Radicalism in politics seeks the dissolution of all determinate relationships and to replace them with those based on a certain rational idea, thus, there is no time (except possibly in leisure) when the actor in question can dispense with the ideology. Life becomes the approximated application of ideal moral precepts to nearly all determinate situations whatever. The actor must always wonder of the moral efficacy of actions deriving from self-conscious thinking about ethics in fact exists, as the world is necessarily filtered through a series of moral precepts. Thus, Oakeshott mentions the "self-confidence" of action based on the presupposed rightness of a moral or political ideology. For even if an idealistic system leads the actor to irrational acts, he may still console himself that the actions were done in the name of "justice."

The other alternative, the mixture where the "habit of affections" is dominant, the situation for Oakeshott is quite different:

> ...this mixed form of the moral life may be supposed to enjoy the advantages that spring from reflective morality -- the power to criticize, to reform and to explain itself, and the power to propagate itself beyond the range of the custom of a society. It will enjoy also the appropriate intellectual confidence in its moral standards and purposes. And it will enjoy all this without the danger of moral criticism usurping the place of a habit of moral behavior, or of moral speculation bringing disintegration to moral life. (Oakeshott, 1948: 475).

The argument here reflects the arguments made at the beginning of this article.

Moral idealism, as a common place to find political rationalism, suffers from the same defect as any "ideological" mode of political thinking:

> Moral ideals are not, in the first place, the products of reflective thought, the verbal expressions of unrealized ideas, which are then translated (with varying degrees of accuracy) into human behavior; they are the products of human behavior, of human practical activity, to which reflective thought gives, subsequent, partial and abstract expression in words. What is good, or right, or what is considered to be reasonable behavior may exist in advance of the situation, but only in the generalized form of the possibilities of behavior determined by art and not by nature (Oakeshott, 1948: 479-80)

This is merely a specific application of the principle discussed above. The problem with rationalism in general is that it claims that a subject matter (in this case, morals) can be reduced to a few principles, and that these principles *are* the subject matter, rather then their being an incomplete abbreviation of our moral and social life. From this view of moral theorizing moral idealism springs. It is easy, then, to understand the Marxist who claims all social reality is epiphenomenal of class relations or the feminist who claims that all social reality is conditioned by the relations between the sexes. Moral rationalism or moral idealism is, as we have discussed, the mistaking the theory for the reality, or mistaking the cookbook for the art of cooking. And it includes the demand that the new theory of politics, or the series of propositions arranged in a coherent manner, be the genesis of political and moral behavior.

Oakeshott tries to give more concreteness to this critique by making clearer

the distinction between precept and behavior:

> Sometimes the tension appears on the surface, and on these occasions we are aware that something is wrong. A man who fails to practice what he preaches does not greatly disturb us; we know that preaching is in terms of moral ideals and that no man can practice them perfectly...But when a man preaches 'social justice' (or indeed any other moral ideal whatsoever) and at the same time is obviously without a habit of ordinary decent behavior (a habit that belongs to our morality but has fortunately never been idealized) the tension I speak of makes its appearance. (Oakeshott, 1948: 482).

This sort of moral theorizing may lead to what Oakeshott calls pejoratively "moral ideologies," or the generalized enforcement of moral codes. This becomes nearly a necessity because the original habits of action have atrophied under the weight of moral speculation. With the decay of habit and the problems of moral idealism in relating to moral action, an enforcement mechanism supervenes:

> The truth is that a morality of this form, regardless of the quality of the ideals, breeds nothing but distraction and moral instability. Perhaps it is a partial appreciation of this which has led some societies to given an artificial stability to their moral ideals. A few of these ideals are selected, those few are turned into an authoritative canon which is then made a guide to legislation or even a ground for the violent persecution of eccentricity. A moral ideology is established and maintained because this appears the only means of winning the necessary moral stability for the society. But in fact it is no remedy; it merely covers up for the corruption of consciousness, the moral distraction inherent in morality as the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals. (Oakeshott, 1948: 481-2).

In an attempt to tie traditional ethics with Oakeshott's theory of human rationality, allow a quote from Oakeshott's "Rational Conduct" (1950):

> Human activity then, is always an activity with a pattern; not a

> superimposed pattern, but a pattern inherent in the activity itself. Elements of a pattern occasionally stand out with a relatively firm outline; and we call these elements, customs, traditions, institutions, laws, etc. They are not, properly speaking, *expressions* of the coherence of activity, or expressions of approval or disapproval, or of our knowledge of how to behave -- they *are* the coherence, they are the substance of our knowledge of how to behave. We do not first decide that certain behavior is right or desirable and then express approval of disapproval of it in an institution; our knowledge of how to behave well is, at this point, the institution. (Oakeshott, 1950: 125-6).

This joins Oakeshott's fundamental epistemology and his traditionalism in ethics and politics. The foundation of the Oakeshottian conservative metapolitic is the existence of a tradition of behavior, governed by its academic study, which becomes its "ideal." The product of its academic study is a series of propositions that are not mistaken for morals, but becomes merely a useful tool to analyze, criticize, and understand a particular moral tradition. The abbreviation of the tradition becomes the engine for moral progress and moral criticism. Moral philosophy, then, becomes an exercise in understanding the tradition of one's society, and applying that to make coherent the socially realized habit of behavior.

> The notion that a knowledge of how to behave can be permanently replaced by something else just as good, and the notion that the patient must be allowed (or even encouraged) to die in order that he may start life again on new and firmer foundations, will be entertained only by those who are wholly ignorant of the nature of moral activity. The remedy usually favored in these cases is a transfusion of a specially rich mixture of ideals, principles, rules, and purposes. And there are two conditions in which this remedy may have the desired result: first, if the ideals, principles, etc., are themselves drawn from the ailing moral tradition, or (shall we say) from the same blood-group as the patient; and secondly, if the patient can assimilate

> the transfusion and transform it in his own arteries from knowledge of propositions about good behavior into a knowledge about how to behave (Oakeshott, 1950: 128).

This is as close as we can get to a definitive statement about the formal properties of morality in Oakeshott's work. It derives from the use of rationalistic technique to distill a moral tradition to its component parts, and using this product to make coherent a habit of behavior within the tradition.

Rationalism, Ideology, and Language

Thus far, we have dealt with two sides of the very same coin in Oakeshott's fundamental views on politics. The first was a detailed exposition what is taken to be Oakeshott's diagnosis of the modern world: the desire to schematize and formalize the universe (however conceived) so that humans can make sense of it, and, importantly, change it if they so desire, i.e. to humanize it. The second chapter dealt with the mirror image of this, viz., the lack of any morally significant and substantial meaning to be derived from the propositions of rationalist inquiry. This is taken to be the utterly foundational nature of the Oakeshottian political universe, without an understanding of which Oakeshott is unintelligible. A set of propositions about any phenomenon is by definition incomplete and often misleading, in the same sense that reading a recipe gives complete and misleading information about cooking and that interpreting romantic poetry is different from being in love. Here, however, I shall deal with an interesting and neglected part of Oakeshott's metapolitics, namely the issue of language, and its relation to rationalist inquiry and its subsequent product, ideology.

This essay will argue that language is an important -- if not vital -- ingredient for making sense out of Oakeshott's political theory: in brief, that

rationalism attempts to give something to language that it does not have, i.e. universal moral significance, that rationalism and its resultant ideologies derive in part because of an error in defining what a language is, politically speaking, and what words connote in such contexts. This chapter shall deal with the latter period in Oakeshott's work, namely *Rational Conduct* (1974), "Talking Politics" (1975), and "Political Discourse" (1991), in an attempt to show and interpret Oakeshott's connection of language and rationalism, and show this to be a major part of any understanding of political ideology on the one hand, and show it to be an important ingredient in Oakeshott's fundamental political theory on the other. Other texts I shall consult on this topic is Joyce Little's Essay on language and morality in her (1995) *The Church and the Culture War*, and, on the opposite side of the political spectrum, Herbert Marcuse's (1964) *One Dimensional Man.*[33] Another largely ignored work in this field is another conservative offering on the abuses of language, Richard Weaver's (1953) *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. It is my belief that the connection between ideology, rationalism, and language is ignored by contemporary conservative theory and it is hoped the discussion can be restarted here.

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33 I believe that choosing such works at these provide and diverse and philosophically interesting starting point for a discussion on the moral significance of language.

Rational Conduct begins its investigation into the nature of social action by referring to -- in good idealist tradition -- an individual's "reflective consciousness" (Oakeshott, 1974: 37) which refers to "the agent's own understanding of his situation." Action stems from this understanding (Oakeshott, 1974: 39). The ends of action, as has been obliquely dealt with previously, are inherent in the "act" (for lack of a better word) of understanding: "What is chosen is not an end or a means of achieving a wished-for end; what is chosen is an action with this specific meaning" (Oakeshott, 1974: 40). Scientific practice, for example, is inseparable from a certain paradigm, body of assumptions, or body of literature that makes this kind of practice intelligible. What is being argued against is the mythical understanding of science (or any practice) that posits a problem found, methods chosen, and a solution found, all in the abstract. The specification of a problem needs a body of scientific literature to make a problem a problem. In other words, there needs to be an extant set of criteria in choosing relevant problems (real problems versus pseudo-problems) and its means to solution. There is no abstract intellect which weighs courses of action, not an abstract will as an "engine" to manifest this deliberative capacity, there is no abstraction in any respect, but merely understandings that can become active: "...he is 'free' because his response to his situation, like his situation itself, is the outcome of an intelligent engagement. Indeed what is called 'the will' is nothing but intelligence in

doing..."(Oakeshott, 1974: 39). Words such as "the intellect" or "cost-benefit analysis" are merely abbreviations of actions embedded within a certain kind of activity. "Intellect" is a function of human problem solving, and not the reverse. If it was the reverse, it would leave us with an abstract "intellect" with nothing to be intellectual about.

Given the previous chapter, this understanding of the individual in activity should not be surprising. Further, it is a rejection of rationalism in that it postulates faculties (such as "the will", or "the intellect") not as *sui generis*, but as products of a bundle of understandings and engagements over time that get such abbreviations called words for labels. This notion of the will, made quite popular with Hegel and then with the British idealists in general, is not complete in itself. Just as there is no abstract "intellect" to which we can attribute things, there is no abstract individuals in abstract "situations."[34] Oakeshott's definition of a human action "is a wished-for response from other agents who, because they are similarly engaged, cannot be depended upon to respond in the wished-for manner" (Oakeshott, 1974: 44).

Humanity is a group of active individuals in a situation within which they are not content. A non-rationalist analysis here demands no analytic distinctions

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[34] This is a the error of the social sciences.

between "individuals," "groups," "intellects," "will," etc. But, its seems, understandings of concrete situations and probable futures that leave open different concrete courses of action (Oakeshott, 1974: 44). Such acts, as we have seen, are based on a certain linguistic cluster upon which we base our judgements, otherwise immortalized in philosophy as "language games." Oakeshott, however, reduces this idea further: "conduct *inter homines*, understood as an agent disclosing himself in an action and thus seeking a wished-for response from another or from others, identifies action as emotive utterance..."(Oakeshott, 1974: 46). That is to say, that humanity, practically speaking, can be reduced to language in a very Wittgensteinian sense. This is not a lapse into rationalist analysis, because the only way such a view of the human condition mane any sense is by positing practices that have a universe of discourse. The necessary abstraction for argument's sake should not mask language's necessary practice-specific structure and meaning, thus rendering an individual bound to such practices and the actions that words signify. Such words are part of a human's self-understanding, and thus the most fundamental theory of humanity *inter homines* is embedded in a universe of practices defined by language, and the language, in turn, has developed because of a specific practice. This is the political significance of language, fundamentally considered. If we accept the fundamental embeddedness of human consciousness, i.e. its practice/action specific nature, then human action is reducible to the

language practice has engendered. Again, a practitioner of science cannot be considered in and of himself, but only as a representative of a certain paradigm, else we would not be able to make any sense out of the problems he finds interesting, the goals of his research, or even the technical phraseology.

"Talking Politics" (1975) and "Political Discourse" (1991) gives us a beginning of a theory of rationalist political inquiry related to the misuses of language. Oakeshott's theory of political language is related to both his "Rationalism in Politics" and his views on an ethic of practices.[35] Putting the argument in the briefest form possible: practices, socially speaking, form a universe of discourse. When language from one is incorporated into another, political arguments become, at best, vague. Oakeshott writes: "Novel projects are labeled with familiar names that belong to a wholly different universe of discourse, and ancient enormities are revived in modern forms and given false names in an effort to make them acceptable" (Oakeshott, 1975: 440).

Richard Weaver's (1953) *The Ethics of Rhetoric* deals precisely with these issues. Once terms are separated from their ultimate origin -- practices in

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Practices here refers to functioning traditions of behavior within certain modes of activity such as science, practical life, aesthetics, or history.

Oakeshott, absolute Platonic Forms in Weaver -- they become merely tools of convenience for ideology. In other words, revolutionaries can distort the nature of reality by distorting language.

> Yet if one has to select the one term which in our day carries the greatest rebuke, one will not go far wrong in naming 'progress.' This seems to be the ultimate generator of force flowing down through many links of ancillary terms. If one can 'mane it stick,' it will validate almost anything (Weaver, 1953: 212).

Oakeshott would take this to mean, substantively, that language is conditional, highly mediated and also mediating, and utterly constitutive of discrete functions in society. There is no device where language can be disengaged from practice and given unconditional standing, in any respect, for even if the unconditional were conceivable, no language could convey its meaning, for our universes of discourse concern merely the contingent and thus this is all language can reflect. The idea of "progress" (among other terms) in Weaver are the result of this disengagement. Weaver writes concerning the word "fact:" "Today when the average citizen says 'It is a fact' or says that he 'knows the facts in the case,' he means that he has the kind of knowledge to which all other knowledges must defer" (Weaver, 1953: 215). In other words, this use of the word "fact" reflects the domination of scientific inquiry in our time.

Governing, is not a separate practice in that it postdates actual practices, but

since the foundation of the modern state, a body has developed that coordinates other functions in some way. Morality, as such, is a function of language and deals with relations of practitioners to one another and relations of practices to one another. Moral language, however, has no purpose and is, in other words, connected to no practice (Oakeshott, 1975: 454). The language of morality is parasitic on the language of practice, and thus there are no universal moral utterances possible. Thus it is not surprising, with a moral epistemology that states that moral absolutes are impossible because practices are conditional, would claim, for example, that there is no referent in contemporary "rights" language:

> These 'rights' are in fact the totally unspecifiable obverse of civil obligations -- the right to 'privacy,' to a fair trial, or the newly announced 'basic right to reproduce' -- that become determinate and lose their deceptive appearance of being unconditionals only when they are specified in a collection of exactly described obligations. The language of rights is the language of pretended unconditionals and misdescribes the terms of civil association. (Oakeshott, 1975: 456).

The deceptiveness Oakeshott is writing of concerns the ability of words to appear categorical. A "right" for example, may be a highly contingent demand for protection against certain abuses of a certain government at a certain time. This "right," as a piece of political vocabulary, may take the form of a moral demand, an imperative. This imperative characteristic of rights language does in no way detract from the contingent circumstance of the right in question. In other words,

rights language can not depart from the contingent situation, given that Oakeshott postulates that the logical jump from contingent to categorical is impossible, but that is precisely the kind of jump "rights" language tries to make.

Rights language, it should already appear evident, is just as much bound up with practices as everything else in social life, and thus rights language can not, without distortion, be taken out of that context:

> And who knows whether the famous phrase 'of the people' is an objective genitive or merely a vague anticipation of the more explicit phrases that follow it? Then there is the perversion that occurs when any of thee expressions is abridged into a slogan: relatives transformed into absolutes, 'free speech' and laissez-faire (which emerged as pleas for release from specific inhibiting conditions) turned into empty unconditional claims. We look for a thought and find only a worn-out, sapless incantation. For, in achieving the status of a battlecry, a political expression surrenders its place in a living language of political discourse and becomes a piece of bric-a-brac...(Oakeshott, 1975: 440).

The argument here is quite clear. Once a word or phrase is taken out of its universe of discourse, or a specific practice, two things happen: a) it takes on a pseudo-transcendent character; and b) it becomes meaningless, an axiom without any identifiable referent. It is from this misunderstanding of political language that the rationalist project receives its *prima facie* plausibility. Weaver considers the word "modern:" "Where progress is real, there is a natural presumption that the latest will be the best. Hence it is generally thought that to describe anything as "modern" is to credit it with all the improvements which have been made up until

now" (Weaver, 1953: 217). Weaver goes on to explain that the imperative nature of such utterances gives modernism and rationalism its ideological enforcement mechanism.

Professor Joyce Little has written about the relationship between abstract language and revolutionary politics in her *The Church and the Culture War* (1995), and it is hoped that this offering will clarify any misperceptions in Oakeshott's argument, and shall tie Oakeshott's theory of language to the attack on revolutionary politics. She quotes Rodger Scruton: "If you want to control the world, first control language; such has been the unspoken maxim of revolutionary politics in our century" (Scruton, 1987: 5; quoted in Little, 1995: 46). As much as she claims abstract language is necessary to facilitate communication (Little, 1995: 48), it has an inherent problem with is appealing to revolutionary and liberal politics: "Abstraction therefore tends to eliminate from our thinking the limits, the boundaries that confront us in everyday experience" (Little, 1995: 47). Little goes on to claim that it is the scientific method that has facilitated the abstractness of language with its ideological overtones:

> Abstracted or removed from his old direct relationship with the natural order, man has also abstracted himself from his own human nature which is to say, from his own flesh. And just as he has come to see the whole order of nature, all of its powers, its forces, as rationally understandable and subject to technological control, so also he has come to

see his own body, his own physical existence, in much the same light -- as rationally understandable and technologically controllable...

This modern detachment of man from his body is most apparent in the abstract language that today in matters of sex and death replaces the direct, concrete expressions of earlier ages. Lust is free love, adultery is open marriage, homosexuality is a lifestyle, masturbation is safe sex, pregnancy is a disease, abortion is termination of that disease, procreation is reproduction, birth prevention is birth control, natural mothers are surrogate mothers, unborn children are embryos, embryos are property, murder is mercy killing, mercy killing is assisted suicide, and suicide is death with dignity (Little, 1995: 55-6).

The removal of words from concrete situations, it seems here, allows individuals to remove from consideration any inherent relationship of set of obligations within a certain practice, however considered. Concrete materiality contains limits inherently. In order to transcend those limits, the mind must abstract and disengage itself from materiality itself: "The most alarming feature of such language is that, by abstracting from the concrete, the specific, the materially embodied, we also abstract from the limits within which we must live our lives" (Little, 1995: 57).

The importance of Little's essay to this inquiry is that rationalist expression in social science: e.g. "Economic conditions," "erotic instincts" (as in Freud), " the will to power," etc. serve to attack practices and institutions as arbitrary.[36] Such

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This is just to say that, for example, if one accepts the Marxist postulate that political and moral institutions are merely the result of the interplay of economic forces in the form of class conflict, then the institution has no substantial existence

abstract phrasing seems to show that there are no determinate social relationships whatever, and the practices that institutions are encapsulations of are arbitrary and oppressive constructs.[37] Abstract language allows humanity to free themselves from any particular natural order, or even any particular set of practices, and the inherent relationships found therein. The scientific mind, a subset of the rationalist mind, has used concepts to demystify nature. Oakeshott has defined nature, scientifically speaking, as a universe of concepts that have only an indirect reference to actual observables. Once nature is schematized in this way, it becomes something to manipulate at will, not something by which one is bound. The medieval understanding of *jus naturale* is put on its head. Abstraction in language makes it possible to rename creation, thus connection it to the conceptualization of creation Oakeshott discusses in *Experience and Its Modes*.

One of the best known apologists for morally significant universals in contemporary philosophy is Herbert Marcuse, who, in his well-known *One Dimensional Man* (1964) makes a case for universal, substantial moral utterances.

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except to embody certain prejudices.

37 An institution based solely on "masculine egotism" or some other such common academic phrase has no determinate purpose then to perpetuate this state of affairs. Oakeshott is arguing that institutions cannot be reduced to such cliches and phrases for the reasons his "Rationalism in Politics" makes clear.

Marcuse makes a case against viewing politics and ethics as Oakeshott does -- as essentially languages -- is that current language use is necessarily mutilated by its ahistoricity. This is merely to say that words express concepts, but to say that concepts are contentless because only discrete practice and experience are possible (and are not conceptual in a substantial sense) is to say that current experience is necessarily the whole of experience:

> But this radical acceptance of the empirical violates the empirical, for in it speaks the mutilated, "abstract" individuals who experiences (and expresses) only that which is *given* to him (given in the literal sense), who has only the facts and not the factors, whose behavior is one-dimensional and manipulated. By virtue of the factual repression, the experienced world is the result of a restricted experience, and the positivist cleaning of the mind brings the mind in line with the restricted experience (Marcuse, 1964: 182).

Oakeshott assumes, according to this argument, that practice -- from which substantial language derives -- is and has been free of any distorting tendencies. At least, Oakeshottian language philosophy would prevent any inquiry into it, for, if the practice in some way had become restrictive or restricting, the language would come to reflect that, and thus, the language of practice would become the language of repression, and this repression would have no other source of moral criticism. Repression would be self-perpetuating, and it is this view that Marcuse makes the thesis of his philosophy of language in order to answer the Positivist and Humeian.

To be sure, Marcuse is responding to a particularly modernistic and

scientific positivist philosophy, which are, of course, rationalist constructs, but the critique of moral language is the same to the followers of Oakeshott of and of Hume. Positivism claims meaningful propositions are those with an objective referent (validated through scientific technique), Oakeshottian conservatism makes such referents that which are constitutive of particular practices and social functions. Either way, Marcuse's criticism is aimed at either function of reference, to wit, language brought to empiricism prevent criticism. They create a world and a logic of their own, against which it is difficult to launch an attack from the outside, for the universe of discourse is defined internally (Marcuse, 1964: 182).

The basic thrust of Marcuse's argument is that, on the one hand, there is a historical discontinuity between universal and particular, and, on the other, the universal is self-subsistent in an imperfect sense. This is to say that the discontinuity is a historical reality and not necessarily an epistemological one. On the one hand there is such a thing as "beauty" and on the other specific examples of beauty. One is not collapsible into another, for we might well ask what the verbal signifier of the specific examples itself derived from, that is, led language users to throw that series of qualities under the heading of "beauty." This is merely to ask what the referent is of any class of observables that is meaningfully communicated by words like "beauty." There must be, so the argument goes, some *a priori*, conceptual commonality that leads to the development of such verbal

symbols. If the referent is what observables have in common (that, at this point in history, beauty is a collection of characteristics that make up beautiful things), but still, together, do not exactly equal what is meant by the abstract "beauty," then there exists a tendency to eliminate the abstract as an epiphenomenon of the observables and to some extent, A.J. Ayer, Hume, and Oakeshott do this.

For Marcuse, however, the universal is self-subsistent in that it represents the potential still left in the universal that humanity has yet to grasp and this "grasping" is precisely what the historical process is about. It allows further foundational refinement in the concept. "Beauty", for Marcuse, is of necessity stunted in a world obsessed with a specific form of scientific rationality. It is not that beauty is an epiphenomenon, but rather capitalism's insistence on efficiency and utility that forbids beauty to become anything more than "poetic" language. It is in this way that Marcuse posits universals as historically conditioned:

> Now there is a large class of concepts -- we dare say, the philosophically relevant concepts -- where the quantitative relation between the universal and the particular assumes a qualitative aspect, where the abstract universal seems to designate potentialities in a concrete, historical sense. However "man," "nature," "justice," "beauty" or "freedom" may be defined, they synthesize experiential contents into ideas which transcend their particular realizations as something that is to be surpassed, overcome. Thus the concept of beauty comprehends all the beauty not *yet* realized; the concept of freedom all the liberty not *yet* attained...
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> Such universals thus appear as conceptual instruments for understanding the particular conditions of things in the light of their potentialities. They are historical and superhistorical; they conceptualize the stuff of which the experienced world consists, and they conceptualize it

with a view of its possibilities, in the light of their actual limitation, suppression, and denial (Marcuse, 1964: 213-15, emphasis in original).

The idea is that the very act of conceptualizing a certain set of observables suggests something beyond itself. Conceptualization suggests a purity not found in the messy and imperfect observables and thus provides a means by which what exists can be brought under an idea, i.e. moral criticism.

Thus, Oakeshott's theory of language (not the mention the positivist's) unnecessarily closes of the universe of discourse to potentialities by denying the very engine of potential, the currently abstract universal.[38] Thus, Marcuse argues, a system of language as Oakeshott or the positivists conceive it conveniently protects itself against fundamental challenge, for the universe of discourse is created and defined by the dominant universe itself.

Marcuse, it must be remembered, is writing specifically against positivist science. His critique applies to Oakeshott's view of language as well, in that both Oakeshott and the positivists rule out certain uses of language, namely, the communication of universal, abstract truths about morality. Positivism rejects this

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"Abstract universal" here means that gap between the concept and that which is conceptualized. The gap that allows some philosophers (such as Hobbes or Hume) to collapse the concept into language.

because such universalisms are unverifiable by the techniques of contemporary science, while Oakeshott rejects them because in a system of practices (pre-philosophical social activity), there is no basis for universalism -- language is necessarily bound up with specifics, and specifics related to practices.[39] A "concept" is a product of already socially extant action which serves to highlight a general view of its character. Concepts are products of activity, and do not "point" to anything of moral significance because of this. However, Marcuse's Hegelian thesis needs to be dealt with if one is to consistently defend Oakeshott's metapolitical theory.

Oakeshott would be of one mind with Marcuse on the issue of language against the positivists. Positivism represents a rationalism, and an idealism dealt with in *Experience and its Modes*. Positivism, as well as its broader "scientific" big brother, seeks to completely remake the order of nature by way of quantitative variables which provide a universe of discourse for science which lends itself to mathematical verification and high levels of communicability. This new reality of quantity brings with it a vocabulary to express that new reality. That this vocabulary is highly resistant to criticism by its *a priori* rejection of all qualitative concepts as "metaphysical' or "emotive" is something Oakeshott would accept and

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[39] Weaver disagrees, regardless of the present uses of his analysis.

point to as one of the unfortunate consequences of rationalism. However, as we have seen, Marcuse's criticism does not end here. There is a positive side to it, and that side attempts to affirm the existence of a substantial universal, that is, the objective existence of morally significant universal ideas that are independent of and prior to discrete observables. This essay shall conclude by briefly defending Oakeshott's position on universals against Marcuse.

Marcuse, first, needs to show that ideas of "beauty" or "rationality" -- in a way that is accessible to humanity -- predated practices which manifest these concepts. The argument fails because Marcuse posits, whether or not he realizes it -- an abstract rationality that is then grasped (in some imperfect way) and applied to the business of societies and practices. Oakeshott would admit of the growing body of literature that seeks to codify certain practices (such as cookbooks), and that this is useful and necessary, but that does not amount to saying that the content of such codification (cookbooks) is being brought into line more and more with the reality of "excellent" cooking. Excellent cooking, or robust social science, is not something which precedes the practice itself, but is its product. To cook, or to write on a scientific theory currently in vogue, is to act in a certain mode, or tradition, of behavior. There is no "concept" of cooking or scientific research, but these phrases *are* the tradition or activity considered in abbreviated form, and predicated such as "good" or "robust" are a certain way of exemplifying such a

tradition, but in no way is it separate from that practice itself. The "concept" for Oakeshott is that abbreviation of a certain tradition which allows the philosopher to analyze and take apart a certain mode of behavior with the end of discovering its inconsistencies and incoherences. The concept refers to nothing more than that, a *post hoc* summary of something already existent, and, given that something cannot give what it itself does not have, cannot point to anything further.

What Marcuse and other rationalist idealists claim is that the concept exists before the object, and thus the object must continually conform itself to the concept, that concept becoming more detailed throughout history. Oakeshott, of course, claims that the object came first, and the human mind came to conceptualize them. Over time, with the hubris of professional philosophy, such conceptualizations came to be seen as something other, or something above, the observables themselves. This is Marcuse's fundamental error. Weaver, writing several years before Marcuse, claims that concepts are falsely given the mere impression of the absoluteness Marcuse and other rationalist idealists ascribe to them.

> It is most important to realize, therefore, that under the stress of feeling or preoccupation, quite secondary terms can be moved up to the position of ultimate terms, where they will remain until reflection is allowed to resume sway. There are many signs to show that the term 'aggressor' is now undergoing such manipulation. Despite the fact that almost no term is more difficult to correlate with objective phenomena, it is being rapidly promoted to ultimate 'bad' term. The likelihood is that 'aggressor' will soon

become a depository for all the resentments and fears which naturally arise in a people. As such, it will function as did 'infidel' in the mediaeval period and as 'reactionary' has functioned in the recent past (Weaver, 1953: 231).

The general point against Marcuse is that such universals as denoted by certain terms are given meaning due to ideological and/or emotional imperatives, not because the universal has anything to offer substantively. The universal develops because theory develops, not because history is moving to its appointed end. Terms change usages and meanings not because history is unfolding its latent wisdom, but merely because demands change, conveniences change.

The purpose of this chapter was to show the problem of language in positing these universals. There is a point of origin for universal ideas, and it is necessarily after the functioning of social practices and functions. As described in the essay "Rationalism in Politics," concepts as Marcuse is using the word is something that abbreviates a series of nuanced practices and skills within a society, something that can be codified and used to critique present practices, but with the understanding that the practice itself cannot produce universal truths:

Freedom, like a recipe for game pie, is not a bright idea; it is not a 'human right' to be deduced from some speculative concept of human nature. the freedom which we enjoy is nothing more than arrangements, procedures of a certain kind: the freedom of an Englishman is not something exemplified in the procedure of *habeas corpus*, it *is*, at that point, the availability of that procedure. And the freedom which we wish to enjoy is not Fan 'ideal' which we premeditate independently of our political experience, it is what is already intimated in that experience (Oakeshott, 1951: 54).

Oakeshott deals with criticism in Marcuse's vein by making a comparison between speech and grammar. Grammar is the universal, absolute truth in speechmaking, while speech, say good speech, is the specific manifestation of this universal. Bad speech is a deviance from this universal and is called "bad" for this reason.

> We acquire habits of conduct, not by constructing a way of living upon rules or precepts learned by heart and subsequently practiced, but by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner: we acquire habits of conduct in the same way as we acquire our native language. There is no point in a child's life at which he can be said to begin to learn the language which is habitually spoken in his hearing; and there is no point in his life in which he can be said to begin to learn habits of behavior from the people constantly about him. No doubt, in both cases, what is learnt (or some of it) can be formulated in rules are precepts; but in neither case do we, in this kind of education, learn by learning rules and precepts (Oakeshott, 1948: 468-9).

What is occurring is that language is codified into rules of grammar which come to serve as the authority for "good" speech. The codification -- the universal -- has added nothing to what was already there, merely convenience. Further refinements of grammar, regardless of how erudite or useful, never contain anything not already intimated in languages. Thus, all along, grammar is an abridgement of already existing speech and is dependent upon it, and not the other way around equally, as Marcuse would have it. No more than rules of grammar

influenced the way humanity learned to communicate by mutually understood words.

The uses of language is important to Oakeshott theory of rationalism and political ideology. It is useful and interesting that a contemporary conservative theologian uses Oakeshottian ideas to trace radical and liberal movements and their influence over how we act, but it was also necessary to bring in an articulate dissenting voice and show its flaws. Thus we have Oakeshott's fundamental metapolitical theory. Practices predate rules for those practices. Rules merely abbreviate those preexisting practices and provide convenient codification (so to this extent practices can be reduced to languages, but only as a mode of expression). It is the error of mistaking those abbreviations for the reality (as Marcuse does by calling the codifications subsistent "universals") that mark the rationalist mode of inquiry. Such an inquiry gutters out in the development of ideology, which is the product of rationalist inquiry codifying political reality and claiming that this has moral imperative force. The use of words such as "right" or "just" or "rational" give the mistaken impression that they have referents of their own accord, and not in accord with the practices of which they are a part, and so misuse of language contributes to the plausibility of moral universalism. According to Michael Oakeshott, it is this series of misunderstandings that mark

the period of time in which we live.

The Conversation of Mankind

This elongated essay thus far has, among other things, shown "communities of practice" to be the foundation of Michael Oakeshott's moral and social theory, his epistemology, and is the very lens by which we view the world. Such communities are morally significant and substantial because they produce their own languages, which reflect both the mode itself and its ability to extend itself through space and time. Such languages are precisely what makes rationalist political and moral systems fail. A "system" of politics is merely an abbreviation of the languages of any number of social roles in a society which have no discernable beginning in time. The concept of a language and a practice is that they operate in some sort of a reciprocal fashion, without there ever being a well-defined point of origin that the historian can discover.

"Morality," it seems, for Oakeshott, is the language of inter-role dialogue throughout time, and "governing," we have suggested, is the more or less formal arrangement of the practices. The argument here is that social life, or the meeting place for languages of practice, is ultimately an aesthetic experience, something quite distinct from the specifically moral or scientific.

In Oakeshott's well known essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation

of Mankind" (1959), we have a definitive statement of a sort of political and social foundationalism. This foundation seems to be the fact that human life, collectively speaking, is a conversation (Oakeshott, 1959: 491). Such a conversation has been interpreted metaphorically by Oakeshott scholars, and this essay has no reason to disagree. Gerencser writes, for example: "The relationship that I have in mind is the one that Oakeshott made famous with the metaphor of conversation. It allows for a relationship between theory and practice that is contingent..." (Gerencser, 1995: 725). Robert Grant, again, has made reference to the conversation similarly: "I have more than once adverted to Oakeshott's move away from the Whole of *Experience and Its Modes* towards a more pluralistic conception of the world as 'conversation' (Grant, 1990: 65). Of course, this mistaken interpretation of the modes has been dealt with earlier.

Each "mode of experience," connected to a certain practice by its very nature, has a voice (its language, its universe of discourse), a voice in no way detached from the "body" of knowledge upon which it is based. In fact, it is utterly dependent upon it and partially definitive of it. A voice evolves and develops as the role in question develops. The voice knows only the practice upon which it sustains itself, and the practice imperfectly codified by the language.

> Each voice is the reflection of a human activity, begun without premonition of where it would lead, but acquiring for itself in the course of engagement a specific character and a manner of speaking of its own: and

within each mode of utterance further modulation is discernable (Oakeshott, 1959: 491)

Oakeshott's "Conversation" essay is an essay in the theory of aesthetics, a theory that claims, or so it would seem, that the conversation exists for no exterior purpose to itself, for no predetermined end (or perhaps for no end at all, ultimately speaking), but whose beauty is the very act of conversing itself: "All utterance should be relevant: but relevance in conversation is determined by the course of the conversation itself, it owes nothing to an external standard" (Oakeshott, 1959: 494). At first glance, it would seem this essay to be an inopportune place to discuss aesthetics, but at something other than a cursory look, aesthetics comes across as utterly central, ultimately, to Oakeshott's moral and political theory. His "Conversation" essay is absolutely vital in understanding Oakeshott's thought, for here some of the loose ends of his morality of practice, the relationship of practices to social life, are tied up. Oakeshott writes further about the aesthetic elements in this conversation:

> As I understand it, the excellence of this conversation (as of others) springs from a tension between seriousness and playfulness. Each voice represents a serious engagement (though it is serious not merely in respect of its being pursued for the conclusions it promises); and without this seriousness the conversation would lack impetus. But in participation in the conversation each voice learns to be playful, learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognize itself as a voice among voices (Oakeshott, 1959: 493).

It is not as if each mode of utterance is wholly sealed off from any other. A language representing a distinct mode of experience is not wholly unintelligible to other modes, at least in a social capacity, while still being dependent upon the mode that gave the language life. Oakeshott writes:

> Each voice is at once a manner of speaking, each is wholly conversable. But the defect to which some of the voices are liable is a loosening (even detachment) of what is said from the manner of its utterance, and when this takes place the voice appears as a body of conclusions reached (dogmata), and thus, becoming eristic, loses its conversability (Oakeshott, 1959: 492).

The problem for this conversation, then, is one of the voices taking itself to be the voice of all the others, or a voice, as we have been discussing, which takes its vocabulary to be definitive of abstracted concepts. As we discussed in *Experience and its Modes*, each mode of experience is degenerate in that it only captures a certain part of reality. Oakeshott accuses science and practical activity of being just that voice in the post- modern world,

> In recent centuries the conversation, both in public and within ourselves, has become boring because it has been engrossed by two voices, the voice of practical activity an the voice of 'science': to know and to contrive are our preeminent occupations (Oakeshott, 1959: 493).

Here, Oakeshott uses "practical activity" not in the more conventional sense of "moral" but in the sense of transformative broadly speaking. The idea, in short, of humanity seeking its own self interest in the social sphere, or, more generally,

making the world commensurate with a specific idea or principle. What Oakeshott is claiming in this article is that not only do we lose by the loss of aesthetics, our entire suitable moral foundation loses for it is ultimately an aesthetic affair.

As we have already discussed, Oakeshott has the philosophical tendency to identify the function with its form[40], or, more accurately, to deny the existence of a substantial form, and collapse the function into what normally passes for a "form." There is no "mind," for example (cf. chapters 2 and 3), which is separate or separable from the functions of a mind. "Mind" is an attenuated way to describe an abstraction from specific problem-solving activity. There, further, is no language apart from a practice which has created it. There is also no "self" separable from the activities the self engages in:

> The self appears as activity. It is not a 'thing' or a 'substance' capable of being active; it is activity. And this activity is primordial; there is nothing antecedent to it...Further, on every occasion this activity is a specific mode of activity; to be active but with no activity in particular, to be skillful but with no particular skill, is as impossible to the self as not to be active at all (Oakeshott, 1959: 496).

Oakeshott's idealism leads him to consider humanity as moving and

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40 The "form" is just the abbreviation that rationalist analysis takes for a "substantial concept."

operating within a realm of images.[41] This is the more technical definition of a "practice": the reciprocal creation and creator of language with imagery. Images and language correspond to certain states of affairs that a practice generates, and that a practice sets up as "preconceived." This is the "conceptual universe" that a voice within which conversation moves. "Concepts," of course, for Oakeshott have no substantial meaning, but are mere abridgements of the images, or more accurately, ideas, of a practice. This is to say that the world appears in accordance with specific concepts tied to a practice. Thus, to a scientist, the world is pure quality and expressible in its entirety using quantitative concepts only. To a businessman, the world appears as an arena to be exploited for profit, etc. This is what is meant by the use of the world "image," or "idea," and the phrase "operating within a world of images."

Differing ideas make up the universe of each different voice, each different mode of experience. For the "practical" self, for example, Oakeshott writes: "...every image is the reflection of a desiring self engaged in constructing its world and in continuing to reconstruct it in such a manner as to afford it pleasure" (Oakeshott, 1959: 499). Ideas derive from activity and become a part of that

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41 By images it is meant simply the world as viewed under a concept such as "desire" or "quantity."

activity's vocabulary. The vocabulary, connecting with such ideas, has for its nexus, then, the ideas of "pleasure" and "pain" for what is generally known as "practical activity." The ethical self has for its linguistic nexus "approval" or "disapproval," while the scientific has for its "fact" and "not fact." Thus the practical has no idea of the subjectivity of others (for the most part), but views them merely as things to satisfy desire. The ethical, or the more "advanced" sort of practice, recognizes the subjectivity in others, while, third, the scientific is concerned with things utterly transcendent of subjectivity, or pure objectivity. The general roles and practices in a society look like this:

1) Practical activity: the world as viewed from the point of view of the will, or the desiring self. Its images and vocabulary derive from viewing things as satisfying a certain desire. This is connected, though not identical to, approval/disapproval which is the domain of morality. Practical activity consists of these two moments. Either way, the world is to be made coherent by human action in the world in accordance with an idea.

2) Scientific activity: the world as viewed from the point of view of the quantitative. "Nature" becomes a series of interrelated and logically congruent ideas or, to be more accurate, quantitative concepts.

3) Aesthetic activity: a valueless, purposeless imagining; mind without a practical or scientific end; mind "for itself."

The place of the poetic (or aesthetic), as we have stated, is central to understanding the moral foundations of Oakeshott's thought. The conversation of mankind, this intersubjective dialogue between differing but conversant idealisms is part of the "poetic" element of humanity. Oakeshott uses the term "poetic" interchangeably with the "aesthetic" and "contemplative." This mode of experience is one with no end or purpose outside of itself. It is a mode where contemplating images is done for its own sake; not to engender ideas of "approval" or "disapproval", "fact" or "not-fact" (Oakeshott, 1959:513). It is a mode of imagining when the other modes have lost their authority, or become boring, or when their rewards are not as promised:

> In general, it would seem that any occasion which interrupts the affirmative flow of practical activity, any lessening of the urgency of desire, any softening of the willfulness of ambitions, or anything that blunts the edge of moral appraisal offers an invitation to contemplative activity to make its appearance (Oakeshott, 1959: 515).

This should be taken not that aesthetics is a mere pastime or an escape, but, in our current conversation, it takes on this character, due to its perceived inferiority to the monotone voices of science and practical action. What makes this

perception more believable is the radically different character of aesthetic experience from both practical and scientific. There is (as we have already discussed) a relation between the "is" (of science)[42] and the "ought" (of practice) much to the chagrin of scientific practice. There is, however, no relation between those and the aesthetic mode of experience. The practical has a certain conclusion to which it is headed, as has the scientific. It is true that there is no conclusion that can exist apart from an already functioning world of practice, but there is a certain (probably tentative) end point at any specific time in a practice's development. No such point exists for the aesthetic. There are no truth claims made for it, no conclusions, not even any appraisal (Oakeshott, 1959: 520-21). Oakeshott's argument, quite counterintuitive for those interested in the field of aesthetics, is that aesthetic characters transcend a "fact/not-fact" distinction (Oakeshott, 1959: 519), one can not appraise an action of someone who has never been in the world, desiring and making as normal humanity does (Oakeshott, 1959:519). It makes little sense, according to Oakeshott, for one to say: "Moe, Larry, and Curly are clumsy men." This is because there never has existed three men named Moe, Larry, and Curly in the characters portrayed by Moses Horowitz, Larry Fineberg,

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42 A science not realizing its conceptual subjectivity, its forceful "operationalization" of nature.

and Jerome Horowitz.

Oakeshott is claiming that the practical/scientific and the poetic are incommensurable. Questions within a practice are completely contingent upon a practice already functioning. There is no such thing as a question with no previous experience before it. Therefore, factual statements (those of science) when approaching the field of aesthetics, make no sense. Oakeshott waxes polemical here:

> Let us suppose that the activity in poetry is not 'contemplating', but is some other version of practical or scientific activity. It would then be relevant to ask certain questions about an image recognized to be a poetic image: we might consider whether it was 'fact' or 'not fact' and what sort of 'fact' or 'not fact' it was. We might ask, in respect of Donatello's David: Was David (whoever he was) of these proportions? Was he accustomed to wearing a hat of this sort, or did he wear it only on occasions when he was posing for the sculptor? (Oakeshott, 1959: 519).

Here, of course, the questions are misconceived. A set of questions brought up in the idiom of science or practice can not be translated into that of aesthetics. The language of inquiry does not work that way. There is no mode of inquiry that can consider itself universal for there is no universal language.

Let us now, since we have defined in more detail the practices whose moral significance we have been dealing with so far in this essay, the main point of this section, the ultimately aesthetic idea of the conversation Oakeshott claims our social life in fact is.

The idea of social life, our collective life being ultimately an aesthetic experience may be a bit striking for conservatives,[43] Oakeshott scholars, and political philosophers generally. But Oakeshott himself makes it quite clear. In the very openings of the "Voice of Poetry" essay:

> Yet it may be supposed that the diverse idioms of utterance which make up our current human intercourse have some meeting place and compose a manifold of some sort. And, as I understand it, the image of this meeting place is not an inquiry or an argument, but a conversation.
>
> In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no 'truth' to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought...Of course, a conversation may have passages of argument and a speaker is not forbidden to be demonstrative; but reasoning is neither sovereign nor alone, and the conversation itself does not compose an argument. (Oakeshott, 1959: 489).

Given that language, conceptual thinking, rationality, or even morality are utterly dependent upon specific practices, one which is preexistent and evolutionary, the specific functions in a society at any given time can not help but be what they are, for our very rationality derives from them. Here, the idea of the human conversation (the very idea of social life in general) fits the concept of the

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[43] Although it is unclear whether this view of social life is not, in fact, part of the conservative tradition. Burke had a profound interest in aesthetics, as did Aristotle. The idea of a tradition evolving through mutual interaction, slowly changing over time, is utterly central to conservative and traditionalist social theory.

poetic or aesthetic outlined above. The conversation, taken in itself, has no intrinsic purpose. Any sort of "end" to be discovered is to be found in the course of the actual activity of conversing, in the sense that tradition provides the conservative with a guide to behavior, goals, and appropriateness. Though this end (as we have discussed in another context) is purely contextual and thus tentative, and in no way can be considered "ultimate," for this "ultimate" must have a base outside of the conversation. The conversation simply *is*, in the same sense Donatello's David is. No other statements can be made about it, in either the idiom of fact/not-fact, nor approval/disapproval, nor desire/aversion. This eliminates other statements entirely, except those proper to the idiom of aesthetics.

The broader point to be understood here is that Oakeshott is refuting all forms of moral foundationalism in the normal sense of that phrase. There is no state of nature to provide us with a convenient starting point for social intercourse; a starting point which would furnish us with an "end" or purpose for our collective life. No end (as we have seen) is able to be found previous, or outside, our conversation regardless, as an end can not be found (end as in "ultimate" ends) in any mode of activity. Ends are not things which are independent of activity, but are a product of activity. They are the product of tradition.

Activities that make up the conversation (most generally divided into scientific, aesthetic, and practical) have no ultimate beginning. They are simply

things that are part of the human condition; ideas used to make the world intelligible and communicable. They have (and this is no coincidence for the Oakeshott scholar) the same beginning in time as do languages. This "beginning" is wholly indeterminate and necessarily tied to the fact that humans work to survive and are in need of working together by necessity.[44] And, of course, if this is so, there can be no ultimate ends in any mode of activity (but merely proximate ones). The conversation itself (or the meeting place of these idioms) that much more so, has no intrinsic purpose. The conversation is an unavoidable product of there being more than one human being on the planet at a time.

Again, this conversation of Oakeshott's is a metaphor. It is a metaphor, it might be reasonable to say, crystallizing our drive for wholeness in a world where knowledge can only be contingent and partial; it is an approach to wholeness. This conversation, in addition, might be taken to refer to the gradual development of a society, its social and productive capital, and the mutual interaction of the various modes of practice that make it up. It is a conception of a society as a whole, in all of its difference; or a society viewing itself as a whole.

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[44] This idea is common enough in political theory -- human beings cannot survive alone; some sort of a division of labor is necessary.

The idea of "friendship" is a relatively common idea in political thought, to be found most well developed in Aristotle and Cicero. Another tack on our understanding on Oakeshott's metapolitics can be found in this idea as well. Oakeshott claims quite consistently that there is a reciprocal relationship between practices and the languages created thereby. However, it is not the case that languages are utterly unintelligible to one another, or else social life would be impossible. Idioms do in fact overlap, and this overlap is not well enough developed in Oakeshott's writings. Friendship is the most morally significant example of this overlap. It, further, is another example of how our social life, at its most general level, is ultimately an aesthetic and poetic experience:

> Friends and lovers are not concerned with what can be made out of each other, but only with the enjoyment of one another. A friend is not somebody one trusts to behave in a certain manner, who has certain useful qualities, who holds acceptable opinions; he is somebody who evokes interest, delight, unreasoning loyalty, and who (almost) engages contemplative imagination. The relation of friends is dramatic, not utilitarian. (Oakeshott, 1959: 537).

Friends also, probably above all, converse. Here, Oakeshott implies that the conversation of humanity is aesthetic. Friendship, in the classical (public) and not in the modern (private) sense, is a means by which the significant distinctions of specific practices can be partially bridged to create a very general idea of a society; the root and foundation of the social conversation. Friendship is the basis of social

formation and the formation of general languages of discourse less formally referred to as morality, or a morality in the minimalist sense characteristic of Oakeshott that merely grants the society a basic peace so as to function.

This places Oakeshott squarely within the classical traditionalist camp in social theory. Enemies and competitors do not converse, they argue (at best). This is not an aesthetic experience. Social actors with their idioms, converse as citizens, and there is a "citizen" in Oakeshott, a "public man," as it were, that is distinct from the man embedded in a universe of discourse established by a specific practice. Furthermore, if Oakeshott's characterization is correct, there is also no approval/disapproval to be found amongst friends in the sense of approval/disapproval placing conditions on the friendship. For any conditionality would have to be based on some practical ground.

Oakeshott characterizes morality (as the other half of "practical activity") as the maintenance of a certain balance among desiring selves (Oakeshott, 1959: 502). We have also seen that as the basis of what Oakeshott describes as the role of government in this conversation. However, Oakeshott does not separate this from the entire idea of "desiring selves." Though it seems that the conversation can be characterized as an idiom of this type, it does not fit with Oakeshott's idea of conversation as has been described earlier. Though discussions about fact/not-fact, or approval/disapproval may arise in the collective conversation, this is not its

essence, its defining quality, that which makes it what it is. Further, the idea of the conversation is a product of the interaction of idioms, it is the public side to the private world of practice. Oakeshott makes no claim to it being an idiom of its own. It would make some sense to say that the arrangement of the component parts of civil life is a "moral" idea in that it seeks a balance between competing interests within a society.

Of course, here again "governing" is not a mode of activity essentially distinct from the modes outlined above. Its language is one of practice. However, this idea of the an "arrangement" does not seem to exhaust Oakeshott's concept of collective life. Governing can be seen as the product of the conversation, or a mere formalization of it, or maybe even wholly independent of it, but what can not be argued is that they are reducible. The conversation is something that precedes the idea of a formal arrangement in the same sense that human activity precedes any notion of the intellect or will.

Thus, it is quite reasonable to claim morality as a component part of the conversation, but not its ultimate expression:

> And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance. I say 'in the end', because, of course, the immediate field of moral activity is the world of practical enterprise, and intellectual achievement appears, in the first place, within each of the various universes of discourse; but good behavior is what it is with us because practical enterprise is recognized not as an isolated activity but as a partner in a conversation, and the final measure of intellectual achievement

is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet (Oakeshott, 1959: 491).

Morality serves to balance interests in the interest of "good behavior." Oakeshott writes that it is education whose primary purpose is to engender good "conversational" skills within its beneficiaries (Oakeshott, 1959: 490). Morality is then a junior partner in conversation, an enabler and facilitator at best. Thus, the conversation of mankind must be of a different quality. That quality is quite clearly aesthetic.

At this point the whole thing may seem a truism. After all, an anti-theory of morality such as Oakeshott's leaves little else for the conversation to be. There is no premeditated end to any endeavor, least of all to man as man or man as social animal, though friendship does supply, in weak outline, the idea of man as public figure and "citizen." In fact, the conversation of mankind is such that there is no end even contingently speaking. It is both the ultimate and the primary expression of our collective life. Some of its problems include, as Oakeshott points out, the domination of the conversation by science and (non-moral) practicality. This is the purpose of the section in general, that is, a vindication of the aesthetic as another intrinsic part to any constructive conversation. Also, of course, is the decay of civilized manners.

A certain view of education, however, is necessary to make civilized behavior the norm for this conversation. A view of education that has in mind the efficacy of one's place in this conversation. Now, there are a few things that Oakeshott has written on education, but this essay shall concentrate on the essay that deals with both politics specifically and political studies at the university level, "The Study of Politics in a University" (1962).

The conversation mentioned above is an aesthetic experience, but it is also one conditioned by the history and culture of a certain people at a certain time. Thus, the education necessary to bring one profitably into the conversation is one that makes the student conversant in one's particular culture and political history, among other things. Education, then, is an initiation into the stock of ideas that make up a particular civilization. This civilization can be said to be comprised of things collectively called a "capital" which one can draw upon, or an inheritance

> If, then, we recognize education as an initiation into a civilization, we may regard it as beginning to learn our way about a material, emotional, moral, and intellectual inheritance, and as learning to recognize the varieties of human utterance and to participate in the conversation they compose. And if we consider education as a process in which we discover and begin to cultivate ourselves, we may regard it as learning to recognize ourselves in the mirror of this civilization (Oakeshott, 1962: 188).

Now, this education can be considered in two ways, an initiation into something Oakeshott calls "texts" and something he calls "language." An

education in "texts" is one nearer to "vocational" education, or in other words, learning certain skills, things that have been done before, written down, and are to be learned by others. A "language" seems nearer to what we call an "academic" education, one where there is no specific product (such as someone learning to be a doctor of medicine), but one who learns a specific manner of thought, or a specific approach to a certain subject matter. A certain critical process which allows the pupil to eventually create his own "texts." This is the education befitting a scholar:[45]

> Now, what is being studied in a 'vocational' education is a 'literature' or a 'text' and not a 'language.' What is being acquired is a knowledge of what has been authoritatively said and not a familiarity with the manner of thinking which has generated what has been said...to put it briefly, a university education is unlike either a school or a 'vocational' education because it is an education in 'languages' rather than 'literatures,' and because it is concerned with the use and management of explanatory languages (or modes of thought) and not prescriptive languages (Oakeshott, 1962: 192-193).

Thus, it might be that a profitable contribution to the civilizational conversation is one who is throughly familiar with "languages," languages which make up the thought process of those who have contributed to the civilizational capital in the past, and in learning such a language, one can earn an interest on the

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The distinction between "scholar" and "intellectual" is one common among traditionalists. Russell Kirk, for example, in his *The Conservative Mind*, suggests that the intellectual is interested in ideology, or in transforming the world radically according to a wildly exaggerated faith in his intellect. He is interested in the study of "texts." A scholar is one that, using Oakeshottian language, is interested in the modes of thought befitting being a member of a certain civilization.

capital taken out of the society and reinvest it. This is how a civilization intellectually grows. A university, insofar as it is a place where differing "languages" are engaged in, learned, and debated, is the microcosm of the civilization, or, is it possible the very place where the conversation is supposed to be at its height; at its most useful:

> First, a university is an association of persons, locally situated, engaged in caring for and attending to the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization. It is concerned not merely to keep an intellectual inheritance intact, but to be continuously recovering what has been lost, restoring what has been neglected, collecting together what has been dissipated, repairing what has been corrupted, reconsidering, reshaping, reorganizing, making more intelligible, reissuing and reinvesting...the essence is that it is a co-operative enterprise, in which different minds, critical of one another, are engaged; and that it concerns not merely that part of our intellectual capital which has been accumulated in the last fifty or a hundred years, and not merely those items which have some immediate practical contemporary relevance (Oakeshott, 1962: 194)

A university is essentially supposed to be a conservative place. It is the guardian of the intellectual civilization that originally gave it sustenance.[46] It is a place where the conversation is at its highest; it is the place where the greatest interest is supposed to be collected (Oakeshott, 1964: 194). It concerns those who are involved in the conversation professionally, rather than those who are involved

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[46] Again, a theme of concern for Russell Kirk, who suggests in his series of essays called *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* that American universities have become enamored with material success and business degrees precisely because this understanding has been lost.

incidentally.[47]

> Secondly, in a university this intellectual capital appears not as an accumulated result, an authoritative doctrine, a reliable collection of information, or a current condition of knowledge, but as a variety of modes of thinking or directions of intellectual activity, each speaking with a voice, or in a 'language' of its own, and related to one another conversationally -- that is, not as assertion or denial, but as oblique recognition and accommodation (Oakeshott, 1964: 195).

Oakeshott believes that there are two specific ways to approach the university educational experience (Oakeshott, 1964: 198). First, the more "classical" mode of teaching, where major texts (in the conventional sense) in a certain field are studied, not so much for the authoritative doctrines, but for the mode of thought. One reads Plato's *Republic*, not so much to advocate such ideas as public policy, for almost nobody would, but rather as a means to ask questions, and to introduce the student of political philosophy to the questions that compose the discipline. One reads Plato not to absorb substantial doctrine, but to become immersed into a mode of inquiry, one specifically related to politics or philosophy.

The second approach one may choose to term "methodological" (for lack of a better word), and is concerned with immersion of the student into a mode of thinking, purely considered. Graduate studies in American politics, for example,

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And it is far from clear that, in Oakeshott's view, there can be any interest earned by those who are "incidentally" a part of the conversation.

may serve as an instance of this, but more likely, this mode concerns the hard sciences, where what is stressed is an inculcation of a certain method. The focus is not upon, for example, American politics as taught to introductory level students (it is not "civics"), but almost purely upon approaching the study of American politics, in a word, methods of study; methods of contributing to the discipline. Oakeshott favors the immersion into the classical approach.

It does not seem difficult to relate this to the study of politics proper. There is the unfortunate "vocational" approach to political topics, one suited to the administrator of the bureaucrat:

> In this unsophisticated literature the properties of political and administrative devices such as federalism, second chambers, committees of inquiry, pubic corporations, taxes on capital, sumptuary laws, concentrations of power, etc., are dispassionately examined...And at a somewhat lower level, there are handbooks designed for the guidance and instruction of the inferior ranks of administrators...A little book on *How to Restore Old Cottages* may be flanked on the bookstalls by *How to Restore Old Monarchies*; an article on 'A face lift for the kitchen: new and exciting materials' in a *Do It Yourself* magazine will be followed by others on 'Dos and Don'ts in making a Revolution', 'How to Win an Election' and 'What you should know about Public Corporations.' (Oakeshott, 1964: 202-3).

This is politics as a "vocation," in the pejorative sense of the phrase, the politics of the vulgar, and certainly not the politics of the university. It seems that Oakeshott finds no specific place for "politics" in a university at all, for he finds is difficult to discuss "politics" separate from something called "civics" or "current

events." That it is not a language separate to itself. It is, however, parasitic upon the languages of history and philosophy speaking in terms of approaching the discipline. In speaking the language of "politics," if we wish to avoid the "current events" or "civics" approach to the discipline, then we end up thinking and speaking in the manner relevant to history or philosophy. "Politics" is not a "subject" to be studied but a group of "texts" to be understood in the above "classical" or "great books" sense (Oakeshott, 1964: 214). Oakeshott explains further:

> And when in the writings of Plato or Hobbes or Rousseau or Hegel or Mill what is being looked for is the political disposition of these writers, when expressions like 'natural law','general will','freedom','the rule of law','justice', or 'sovereignty', which, philosophically speaking, are explanatory concepts, whose explanatory value might have been explored, are turned (as the politician turns everything he touches) into prescriptive concepts, and when what is reflected upon is merely about their injunctive force, all chance is lost of learning something about the philosophical mode of thought. When, in this manner, a philosophical argument is turned into a so-called 'political theory' and is thought appropriate to give it a political label, calling it 'democratic','conservative','progressive', or 'reactionary', a 'vocational' education in politics may be seen to have reimposed itself...(Oakeshott, 1964: 215).

In other words, concepts are learned not for what they represent to specific authors, but rather for what they are pregnant with; what can be done with them. The reason is that such an education has for its end (and, in fact, is the very process itself) the profitable insertion of the student into the general civilizational

conversation. The "vocational" aspect of politics does not do here because the teaching of substantial doctrine, or "texts," without an understanding of the "language" of politics will lead to a conversation of incommensurable dogma and the reliance upon "authority." For Oakeshott, this is the politics of the party manager or the petty bureaucrat. The idea of contributing to the conversation is just that, an original contribution, not the quotation of a certain "authority" or the touting of a certain "line." The "language" of politics is the ability to think philosophically and construct philosophical arguments; to understand the structure and formal properties of a philosophical argument.

Oakeshott offers two points to consider when one is thinking about teaching politics at a university:

> First, in a School of 'Politics' we should never use the language of politics; we should use only the explanatory 'languages' of academic study. Of course, the words which compose our vocabulary of politics may be uttered, but only to inquire into their use and meaning, in order to take them to pieces and write them out in the long hand of historical or philosophical explanation. They should never be given the appearance of being themselves explanatory words and expressions. And we should recognize that this so-called 'political theory' is itself a form of political activity, and therefore not itself to be taught, but to be explained, historically or philosophically.
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> And secondly, since in a university we should regard ourselves as supervising, not the study of 'texts' understood as organizations of information, but the study of the use of explanatory 'languages' in connection with the appropriate 'texts', these 'texts' should be chosen with care and for the relevant (pedagogic) reasons (Oakeshott, 1964: 216).

A bit of clarification is necessary here. By "explanatory" in this context it is meant the teaching of substantial political doctrines. By "philosophical explanation" it seems to mean the understanding of philosophical concepts in and of themselves, not so much as they come to construct a coherent political "theory." In other words, what needs to be studied are concepts that have been used in the past by historians and political philosophers with an eye to utilizing them in the future in communicating with other educated people intelligently. What is advocated then, literally, is an initiation into the language of political philosophy and history, a conversational familiarity with concepts related to these fields and specifically not the understanding of "doctrines."

It may also be disturbing to professional political scientists to have "politics" *per se* read out of the academy.[48] As far as this goes it is true. It very well may be that for the "average" citizen, "politics" concerns the barroom argument or the picket line. Oakeshott would have no quarrel with this view. Basically, "politics" is the maintenance of the political structure of a society, or

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In fairness to Oakeshott it must be made clear that if "politics" is the study of the public structure of a society, then there are many other disciplines that can be called "political," such as history, economics, and philosophy. Insofar as these others contribute to our public life, or our conversation, they are "political," in the broad sense. Thus there is little in Oakeshott's view that allows politics a sphere of its own.

rather an understanding of current events. This is not a subject for university study. Campaign consulting, management of bureaucratic offices, media spin doctoring are skills, "vocations," but not academic subjects. Such skills are not a major part of the civilizational conversation, but often are the very subject of the conversation when it turns to politics. In order to speak of such skills, the speaker must have a command of the more abstract, "academic" vocabulary that is discussed in the university community. What remains unclear are the participants in the conversation. Does the vocational have a place other than being the conceptual janitors of political life? Or is it only those who understand the concepts of philosophy and history able to profitably and meaningfully contribute to the conversation?

To begin answering this question Oakeshott's most polemical work must be consulted, the infamous (1961) "The Masses in Representative Democracy." This essay strongly suggests that the "average" or "mass" man is intellectually and morally unfit to meaningfully partake in the conversation of mankind, at least in a political capacity. The invective thrown up against the "mass man" clearly marks Oakeshott as a conservative of the school of Edmund Burke or Russell Kirk, and clearly shows that the conversation is a delicate balance of theoretical concepts (at least when it comes to politics) that cannot be upset by the masses. For Oakeshott, the masses are defined as the group (quite numerous, a majority, in fact) who reject

the idea of being an individual, they are the "anti-individuals":

> Nevertheless, the 'anti-individual' had feelings rather than thoughts, impulses rather than opinions, inabilities rather than passions, and was only dimly aware of his power...And further, it was appropriate that the morality of the 'anti-individual' should be radically equalitarian: how should the 'mass-man', whose sole distinction was his resemblance to his fellows and whose salvation lay in the recognition of others as merely replicas of himself, approve of any divergence from an exact uniformity? All must be equal and anonymous units in a 'community'. And, in the generation of this morality, the character of this 'unit' was tirelessly explored. He was understood as a 'man' *per se*, as a 'comrade', as a 'citizen'. But the most acute diagnosis, that of Proudhon, recognized him as a 'debtor'; for in this notion what was asserted was not only the absence of distinction between the units who composed the 'community' (all alike 'debtors'), but also a debt owed, not to 'others' but to the 'community' itself; at birth he enters into an inheritance which he had no part in accumulating, and whatever the magnitude of his subsequent contribution, it never equals what he has enjoyed, he dies necessarily insolvent (Oakeshott, 1961: 375-377).

These are harsh words, words that characterize the mass man as a parasite upon a tradition (as Ortega world say) he only understands in glimpses. For the mass man, he is incapable of contributing to the conversation for he does not think for himself, he needs "leaders" to think for him; his impulses are transformed into "demands" by the skillful leader or party cadre (Oakeshott, 1961: 373). He is a puppet, a mouthpiece, for a party or a political leader of some equalitarian or vulgarly "populist" type, he is exactly what Hannah Arendt discussed in the beginning pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. His happiness as a "citizen" consists in living off the political and cultural inheritance of his forefathers without

understanding them, or even able to contribute to their inheritance. Whatever contribution there is is necessarily less then he has received. He is a parasite in that he consumes far more than he contributes. Oakeshott makes clear in "The Study of Politics in a University" that the academic's withdrawal from the capital of a civilization leads to accumulation of unconsumed interest. The very idea of this study (as quoted earlier) is to improve the stock of ideas which one has been bequeathed. The mass main singularly fails to do this.

> He is specified primarily by a moral, not an intellectual, inadequacy. He wants 'salvation': and in the end will be satisfied only with release from the burden of having to make choices for himself. He is dangerous, not on account of his opinions or desires, for he has none; but on account of his submissiveness. His disposition is to endow government with power and authority such as it has never before enjoyed; he is utterly unable to distinguish a 'ruler' from a 'leader.' (Oakeshott, 1961: 381).

Thus, the conversation is for the few, those who know how to utilize the language of philosophy and history to construct new contributions and improvements to the civilizational conversation through improving the civilizational capital.

Oakeshott on the Study of History

Although not entirely germaine to the forgoing essay, it may be helpful to discuss a specific application of the problems and criticisms within modernity that have been dealt with so far. Here, specifically, the topic is the issue of historicism, or the problems within the study of history. It is justifiable because it is another mode of experience that Oakeshott spends not a little time on, and can serve as a means to clarify what has already been discussed. To discuss the study of history seems necessary because of the theoretical influence of historicism and its connection (often) with radicalism, and that, according to Oakeshott, it is utterly essential to the study of politics, as is philosophy. The only major work on Oakeshott's view of history is William Dray's (1968) "Michael Oakeshott's Theory of History."

Political philosophy, at least since Vico, Hegel and Compte, has been very interested in the study of history, and, specifically, its study as relating to the inevitability of political forms and mindsets. Historicism generally refers to the idea that political forms, as currently existing or as imagined, are somehow a part of the flow of the historical process based upon regular and knowable causes that are universal in scope, culminating in an "Age of Enlightenment" where the shackles of antiquity are thrown off as the New Age of Man dawns. These are

some of the poetic images common to historicism, and quite well known to the student of political history and political philosophy.

These common images are poetic for a few reasons. Eric Voegelin's (1952) *The New Science of Politics: An Introductory Essay* attributes the modern adoption of historicism to the reemergence of a modified form of what he calls "gnosticism," the quasi-religious idea that a certain select few (the philosophers) have come to an understanding of where history is leading, and thus, the very definition of human enlightenment and happiness. In other words, the quest for salvation is taken from the transcendent realm and placed within the immanent realm. Salvation, for the neo-gnostic, is to be had by political action and political organization. Historicism for Voegelin, then, is a substitute for religion: its certainty, faith, and promise of better things to come. One major difference here is that for this new religion, "heaven" becomes "imminetized", that is, it becomes something attainable for human beings on earth, at the present moment or the near future, often being brought about through human political activity. Voegelin claims that in no small part, modernity can be understood through this lens, that humanity has taken deity onto himself, and thus seeks salvation through its own efforts, often through philosophy.

This compelling sort of criticism is not alien to Oakeshott. In his typical skeptical style, Oakeshott, in his (1958) "The Activity of Being an Historian,"

begins to examine the process of historical inquiry, seemingly in the Vogeleinite vein. Voegelin could be interpreted as saying is that the gnostic mentality is something what Russell Kirk meant by the "intellectual" mentality, namely, someone who does not understand the scope and limits to human reason and rational inquiry. Oakeshott begins his examination by making the obvious point that historians ask questions. But questions about what? About anything and everything? Or is it more likely that the historian, or those inquiring into historical events and processes, begin with a comprehensive view of what is important or useful, which, of course, is not verifiable by historical inquiry. What is interesting or informative or useful in history is not something that historical analysis can offer, it is rather an *a priori* construct. This leaves us, within the current milieu of historical thought, with a series of arbitrary ahistorical frameworks by which to study history (Oakeshott, 1958: 156). Any mode of studying history must be a paradigm, or else there is no criterion by which one can claim a question is relevant or not, important or trivial. This paradigm, however, is independently decided upon without the aid of historical analysis proper, for this paradigm is often the condition for historical analysis.

There are, unsurprisingly, three ways of viewing the past. There is the scientific method, which Oakeshott rejects as untenable. The study of history is not

amenable to the law-like generalizations[49] made manifest by the scientific technique. Dray explains that Oakeshott's problem with a "scientific" reading of history is that the historical individual ceases to be an individual and becomes merely a scientific generalization, a "cause," and thus "to deprive them of their specifically historical character" (Dray, 1968: 22). Oakeshott writes similarly:

> First, the concern of 'the scientist' with necessary and sufficient conditions will be reflected in the idiom in which he speaks about the past. And a model of the kind of statement he will be disposed to make is to be found in this sentence from Valery: 'all the revolutions of the nineteenth century had as their necessary and sufficient condition the centralized constitutions of power, thanks to which...a minimum of strength and duration of effort can deliver an entire nation at a single stroke to whoever undertakes the adventure.' In short, if we give a stricter meaning to the word 'science', what appears to be merely statements in which the past remains unassimilated to the present, but also statements in which events are understood to exemplify general laws. And secondly, if we speak still more strictly, there can in fact be no 'scientific' attitude towards the past, for the world as it appears in scientific theory is a timeless world, a world, not of actual events, but of hypothetical situations. (Oakeshott, 1958: 163-4).

The second mode is the "practical" past , or a reading of the past from some ulterior motive, and this is the most common conception of historical analysis. The past is studied as having some immediate and practical connection to our present life and present situation. One "reads backwards" from our present situation in

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[49] Of course, the idea that history acts according to law like structures and generalizations is also an *a priori* construct that is decided upon previous to any historical inquiry.

order to understand it, or justify it (Oakeshott, 1958: 162). The moral philosopher views history as embodying a moral structure or a certain development of a moral idea. The economist views history as changes in the mode of exchange and its embodying institutions, often based upon the collective decisions of "economic man." This is the problem with this version of history, that the inquirer begins with an *a priori* set of assumptions about what is useful about history, and is the very same problem (though for different reasons) with the "scientific" method of reading history. This bias necessarily throws a pall over the researcher's findings. Dray claims that in the practical case, the "historian" is merely *using* history for his own purposes, and is thus what is used is not "history."

The third is the "contemplative" past, or the past of the "historical novelist." The past is not of verifiable events or things, but "a storehouse of mere images" (Oakeshott: 1958: 164). This is the mode of the romantic, convinced that there was some "golden age" in a "lost past" that needs to be found and reinvigorated. All three of these modes of reading history are essentially about the present. Even the general criticism of history that is begins with a comprehensive view of itself has this flaw. History is about the present: in science, it concerns the use of the scientific method, under its current paradigm,[50] imposed on the historical subject

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One could argue, for example, that Marx read history through the deterministic lens so popular in scientific circles at the time, or the more current rational choice

matter; for the practical theorist it has to do with one's present condition most obviously; and for the historical novelist it becomes a mere poetic arrangement of historical images rather than events. Thus, history, as it currently stands, is suspect.

There is a mode of viewing the past that Oakeshott views as satisfactory, and this is what we would call, oddly enough, a uniquely "historical" mode of reading history. It is to have no relation to present events, and is certainly not "practical" in the way just described: "What is being sought here is neither a justification, not a criticism, nor an explanation of a subsequent or present condition of things" (Oakeshott, 1958: 169). One, it seems, can condemn Stalin's mass-starvation of Ukraine in the 1930s, or Pol Pot' s mass slaughter in Cambodia in the 1970s, but not as a way of reading the past (for this would not be the past, but a present event, or a current moral judgement), but rather as a matter of viewing our present condition and current moral structure. To condemn these men and their political ideologies is the domain of the practical theorist, not the historian. This view, however, is logically distinct from the historical reading of the past, and is thus not in the domain of the historian. For the legitimate historian then:

Nothing is approved, there being no desired condition of things in relation

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theorists, who so happen to live in a society where financial motives are quite common one's for action.

> to which approval can operate; and nothing is denounced. The past is without moral, the political or social structure which the practical man transfers to *his* present to *his* past. The Pope's intervention did not change the course of events, it *was* the course of events, and consequently his action was not an 'intervention.' X did not die too soon, he died when he did. (Oakeshott, 1958: 169).

The moralist, on the other hand, may in fact look at history, but not as an historian: "In short, he treats the past as he treats the present, and the statements he is disposed to make about past actions and persons are of the same kind as those he is disposed to make about a contemporary situation in which he is involved" (Oakeshott, 1958: 169). Thus we have added another mode of experience, the historical, in addition to the practical, scientific, and the contemplative or aesthetic. The historical attitude is the understanding of the past for its own sake (Oakeshott, 1958: 170), without reference to the present situation, i.e. without reference to any specific "project" one has in mind that will influence historical "events."[51] Dray writes that the true "historical" means of reading history can be summarized:

> Between the two attitudes [science and practicality] there is this fundamental similarity: like the (so-called) scientific past, the historical must be 'the past for its own sake', and hence not practical. But history, according to Oakeshott, does not render its past intelligible through appeal to generalizations or laws. There is, of course, a familiar sense in which history is properly called a science. But this entails only its demanding

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51 Of course, these would not be events at all, but rather data in theory building. The theory would come first, and historical data would be used to "prove" the contentions involved.

accuracy, excluding prejudice and arguing critically from evidence (Dray, 1968: 24).

However, to make the above more intelligible, and to more closely relate it to the criticisms elucidated in the body of this work, we must go to the main source for Oakeshott's philosophical outlook, *Experience and its Modes* (1933). Here, the above criticism is explained more fully. One of the main issues is discussing the problems of historicism[52], or, the view of history the considers propositions made about a historical "series" to have substantial normative content, is the idea that, as alluded to earlier, the moralist viewing history is in fact reading his present onto historical events.

> History, like every other form of experience, must make its material as well as determine its method, for the two are inseparable. If, then, we conceive history as a 'series', we are nevertheless obliged to admit that in this so-called historical series the terms are not merely successive, they offer criticism of one another. They do not stand isolated and self-evident, but are guaranteed by the series as a whole. What comes later in the series is part of the ground upon which the historian establishes what comes earlier, and *vice versa*. In short, it is impossible to exclude criticism from history, and where there is criticism there is judgement (Oakeshott, 1933: 90-1).

Here, it is shown (in, admittedly, not the best prose) that the "series" is

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52 A certain defense of an intellectual historicism has already been discussed, with Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man.* An attack on historicism, from a very different point of view, can be found in Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism.*

something which is imposed upon history, and that, importantly, the concept of this historical series and its principle, i.e. the focus of this series such as economics or religion[53], must precede the actual historical analysis, and is an *a priori* condition for historical analysis to take place. It is difficult to show that the views on historical study changed from 1933 to 1958, for in the later essay Oakeshott claims that there is a mode of historical study that is essentially historical. What is left out of the 1958 essay is the question of choosing the questions involved. If there is to be no "project" to inform an historical inquiry, then is the historian safe in leaving anything out? What level of historical minutiae are we left with on this view? It seems that Oakeshott is describing another "ideal type" of experience that does not actually exist, but must be kept in mind for the mode of experience to progress properly. It seems unlikely that Oakeshott ever abandoned his most famous dictum "all experience involves judgement" in the case of history, but is rather, in the 1958 essay, describing the ideal mode of historical experience. Historical inquiry then, must contain something of the present, or else any motivation to study history is lost. It is something different to view historical study as a mode of justification for your particular project, e.g. Marx or Compte, where history is nothing but present attitudes.

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One can find a version of historicism that views religious ideas as the driving force if history in Hillare Belloc's *The Crisis of Civilization.*

To make this clearer, Oakeshott writes in *Experience and its Modes*:

> An event independent of experience, 'objective' in the sense of being untouched by thought or judgement, would be unknowable; it would be neither fact nor true nor false, but a nonentity. And, insofar as history is a world of facts (which will scarcely be denied), it is a world of ideas, and a world which is true or false according to the degree of its coherence. (Oakeshott, 1933: 93).

Oakeshott, then, seems to verify the above idea. In no place in Oakeshott's writings has he ever denied the coherentist theory of truth, and thus the 1958 essay needs to be read with this in mind: that it is not telling of a mode of historical experience at all, but an ideal theory of historical study which is unattainable. However, Oakeshott writes near the end of the 1958 essay that: "The task of the historian is, thus, to create by a process of translation: to understand past conduct and happening in a manner in which they were never understood at the time; to translate action and event from their practical idiom into an historical idiom" (Oakeshott, 1958: 180). This should seem a bit confusing. On the one hand it allows for the activity of judgement Oakeshott insists upon in the 1933 book by adding something that was not "understood at the time," but on the other, this may mean that it is taken out of the realm of practice (as the actors themselves understood it) and into the realm of history (as the historian of the present day understands it). Oakeshott uses the word "create" to describe the procedures of historical inquiry, which seems to also fit with the idea of historical "judgement"

being a necessity. But what is created is the translation, the translation to a mode of practice at the time of the occurrence to a mode of historical understanding presently.

It may be possible to combine these two ideas. Oakeshott has written that in the mode of scientific experience, testable hypotheses derive from an already existing tradition of scientific activity, or else there would be no way to tell whether a research question was in fact "scientific" or not. The case of the historian should, then, be no different, in that what is an historical question or research idea is something that derives from the discipline of history itself. Thus, the question of what is to be included in historical research is already answered. The answer to the specific question should be divorced as far as possible from practical concerns. The difficulty with this is that the tradition of historical inquiry may be tainted with moral concerns in itself, and this becomes a problematic guide for understanding what the historical "mode of experience" is, unless one is content to say that the tradition of historical analysis is problematic because it has been used in the service of inappropriate practical concerns, and thus the discipline of history, coming out of those errors, shows itself as something distinct from practical judgement, and the judgment involved must be one of "translation" of practical life to historical life.

Dray seems to hit upon another plausible solution, however one at which

many historians would wince. In history, the fully explicated individual is the whole. This is more or less the conclusion of *Experience and Its Modes*, which leaves the historian with a daunting task. If the only "real" individual is the "all," then we have the answer to our original question: there is no level of minutiae that needs to be left uncovered. The individual is made real through his immersion within the entire stream of history, in all its detail. Dray claims that there can be no historical individuation within this scheme (Dray, 1968: 29). The point is that history is supposed to eliminate the gaps between individuals and events, or more accurately, individuals and their environments. All things have a cause[54], and thus the only real individual is the whole.

Regardless of the attempt to save Oakeshott's view of history, he writes in the 1933 work:

> What is given in history, what is original from the standpoint of logic, is a system of postulates. But secondly, the mind of the historian, even when it is free from mere prejudice and preconception about the course of events (even where it is free from the most crippling of all assumptions in history, that the past is like the present), contains not only a system of postulates, but also a general view of the course of events, an hypothesis, governed by these postulates. No historian ever began with a blank consciousness, an isolated idea or a genuinely universal doubt, for none of these is a possible state of mind. He begins always with a system of postulates (largely unexamined) which define the limits of his thought, and with a specific

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54 This is an unwarranted assumption in Oakeshott's thought, for history offers no justification for this metaphysical claim.

> view of the course of events, a view consonant with his postulates. And whenever the historian imagines himself actually to *begin* with the collection of materials, he is suffering from an illusion which not only hinders him from achieving a true view of the character of history itself, but may also hinder him from the achievement of his own explicit end (Oakeshott, 1933: 97).

It seems that one's "explicit end" here is the understanding of a certain question (and its answer) in historical research. It may be the case that practical concerns (to a greater or lesser degree) are to be found in historical writing, but that the problem is at least alleviated by the knowledge of that condition, and thus all historical work is considered tentative and incomplete, necessarily containing some of the historian's biases within it. Unlike the gnostic theorist such as Marx or Compte, where historical analysis is not tentative but certain, not deriving from a certain bias but an absolute understanding of, morally speaking, where humanity is progressing, history for Oakeshott is another voice in the conversation, to be checked and corrected by the others.

Thus we have the two major views of history, the practical and the historical, with the latter being simply that one is aware of the biases inherent in historical judgement (by definition, if it is judgement), and thus one should be careful about drawing normative conclusions (or, more accurately, should not draw normative conclusions at all), as well as viewing one's findings as deriving from scientific "laws" of human behavior, given the tentative and judgmental nature of

historical truth). Furthermore, Oakeshott writes that truth in history is the coherence of a given world of historical ideas, but not a "present world of ideas" in correspondence with a "what was" (Oakeshott, 1933: 113). The truth of each historical fact "depends upon the truth of facts to which it belongs, and the truth of the world of facts lies in the coherence of the facts which compose it" (Oakeshott 1933, 113). The question the historian must ask himself is: does the world of ideas become coherent when I arrange them in this way? Do they contribute to that whole which is the "real" individual?(Oakeshott 1933, 114). These are the criteria of truth in historical analysis. The individual ideas are brought to the historian through the discipline itself. However, one must still look to the principle of coherence (for all coherent sets of ideas are joined together by some principle), and this principle may be (to the least extent possible) from our present life.

By way of conclusion, the problem brought up here within Oakeshott's most important works on history is a difficult one, and it remains to be seen in further study whether Oakeshott's ideas on the subject are themselves "coherent." This essay has posited that Oakeshott's idea on historical analysis are capable of being made coherent and workable, and, in fact, reflect some of the wisdom more abstractly considered in other parts of this study. It is the tentative nature of human knowledge that permits us to reject such things as "scientism," "historicism," and

"ideology."

The Place of Michael Oakeshott in Conservative and Traditionalist Political Philosophy

It is always difficult to predict what the future will bring for an idea, theory, or intellectual movement. Movements come and go, some with lasting effect, and others show themselves as yet another academic fad. However, it is hoped that this set of essays brought out what will be lasting and influential in Oakeshott's general social theory in the future. It is hoped further that this study has been held together by the thread that has been taken to hold the entire Oakeshottian corpus together, the fundamental nature of experience as a social and historical[55] and not essentially an individual phenomenon. What these brief concluding notes will do is attempt to bring out a few outstanding features of Oakeshott's approach to political philosophy in hopes of predicting what his lasting influence will be, and, more importantly, give reasons why Oakeshott should be more widely read than he currently is in academic departments of philosophy and political science.

The first element in Oakeshott's philosophy that should attract attention is

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[55] That is, as extending through space and time.

his commitment to a epistemological anti-foundationalism. It is been the case in the past, with the possible exception of Hume, that conservatism has been partly defined by just the opposite, namely the interest, often through natural law theory or something approaching it, to ground political arrangements and experience in some concept of the eternal or transcendent. This is one respect where Oakeshott deviates from what normally passes for traditionalism, but certainly is not enough to read him out of the school. What natural law theory is, at its root, is not a detailed theory of political systems or ethics, but rather an attempt to ground certain human needs and wants within a concept of human nature, one which is inviolable and unchangeable.

Although one unspoken tenet of Oakeshott's social theory is that humanity is social, for experience in general is social, there is no attempt, in fact, there is a repudiation of the attempt, to ground such an understanding in "nature," however defined. Rather it is that humanity simply needs this sociality and this sociality is determined by the specific nature of the practices involved and the conversation they engender, and nothing more of ethical significance. There is no meaningful way, in Oakeshott's epistemology, to view "nature" as an objective phenomenon in the way natural law theorists do, for any attempt to view "nature" this way is necessarily conditioned by the prism of the paradigm, or the extant tradition of our behavior. The social conversation is intersubjective, not objective, such as natural

law theory claims.[56] Thus one can make meaningful statements about "concepts," such as "objects taken under the heading of quantity" (i.e. science), not "objects." There are no objects in the sense taken by crude realists.

It is experience itself, not an appeal to "nature," that is what should keep human reason within its limits; and keep intellectuals from mistaking their speculative musings for the total enlightenment of mankind. The split here in conservatism or traditionalism is that for the Thomist or neo-Platonist, there is a "positive" view of politics, and it is a philosophy grounded in an objective grasp of equally objective natural law principles. In Oakeshott's version, the current order is no more natural than any other, but what is militated against is the attempt to transcend the current order through immutable principles of social life, for the nature of experience will not allow this. The first is the antithesis of skepticism, the idea that through revelation or nature, objective moral laws can be found (as in Weaver), and the other claims that no such laws, from any political quarter, are able to be formulated (as in Hume).

Second, Oakeshott is Aristotelian in the view of political things, common enough among conservatives, that our theoretical purposes come to a point of

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Natural Law theory would claim that the very need for sociality is the beginning of a grounding of morals and political institutions. Oakeshott, on the other hand, would be likely to dismiss such a need, even if he agreed with it in principle, as being morally neutral and ethically insignificant.

approximation, and can move no further. There is no "science" of things political or moral, taken in the sense of mathematical expressions manifesting a regular (or regularized) "reality."[57] One rough spot in defining exactly what Oakeshott believed about moral and political philosophy is the tension between practices, rationalism, and language. The later Oakeshott, specifically in *On Human Conduct* (1974), spends a great deal of time on a philosophy of language and of reducing certain practices to their respective linguistic uses, at least for social purposes. This seems to run contrary to Oakeshott's understanding that no formal procedure can ever exhaust a subject matter, let alone have the subject matter be utterly reducible to language. It is quite possible, however, that this is a pseudo-problem. A language is defined by a practice, but this relation is essentially reciprocal. A language is the embodiment of a practice, and words come into existence and receive a more or less regular meaning because humanity has learned to do certain things to solve certain problems and those things have become crystallized into a "practice" or "craft." Thus, any knowledge of a practice outside of sheer intuition (and Oakeshott does not trivialize this) must be embodied in a language. This is something very different from claiming that a technique can uncover the meaning

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57 The most radical version of this is Spinoza, especially in the *Ethics*, and the *Politico-Theological Treatise.*

and purpose of our social or ethical life. It would be tantamount to the claim that someone who understands statistical methodology only (that is, abstractly) can be said to be a "political scientist." Or someone who knew only a formal definition of structural-functionalism only could be said to be a "comparativist."[58] This "propositional" sort of knowledge is not often useful knowledge at all.

What Oakeshott is claiming (without, unfortunately not relieving some of the tension), is that in order to be a practitioner of whatever kind one must communicate in the idiom that has evolved along with the craft. The definition of a practitioner in Oakeshott's view is one who has mastered the use and arrangement of concepts appropriate to the practice and their corresponding language. It must be understood that this does not correspond to a mere use of jargon, but that the jargon provides an incomplete starting place for appropriate behavior within a practice, but it is a starting place, nevertheless.

Along with this, thirdly, one of the most important contributions Oakeshott makes to political theory is the attack on ideology. The implicit assumption of any ideologue is that the entirety of social life, and often of life in general, however considered, is reducible to a handful of propositions about human motivation or

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58 Oakeshott would undoubtedly claim that this is the problem with the over stressing of method within political science.

human needs. Both Marxism and Rational Choice theory, just to give two out of many examples, exemplify the extreme form of this kind of thinking. Marx cannot be said to claim anything other than the entirety of life, from science, to literature, to morals, to the level of militarism within a society, can be explained fully and completely by an analysis of the arrangement of economic and productive power within a society. The rational choice theorist, more generally, can explain the very same order within a society by a simple means-end model that is logically coherent and consistent based on the single proposition that individuals choose means to ends that are the easiest and quickest within certain institutional parameters, spelled out beforehand. Oakeshott's criticism (as Hayek's), as spelled out in "Rationalism in Politics," is merely that the level of intimacy one must have with human beings in their concrete circumstances to actually spell out the motivations of social and moral actors is so nuanced that these views of mankind can be considered nothing better than over generalizations of social life coming from theorists who have no concept of the limitations of their rational powers, or, more accurately, no concept of the limitations to the concepts of social science and their predicative power. One distinction between Oakeshott's and Hayek's criticism of this general approach is that Hayek views it as a matter of incredibly excessive variability, that as yet no model has been able to adapt itself to, and it is highly unlikely that social science can meet the challenge. For Oakeshott, it is not a

matter of technique, but his social epistemology states necessarily that a scientific approach to human affairs in incomplete (regardless of its other benefits) for it can only accept the formal property of "quantity." Thus, the scientific method, as used in the social sciences, is of its very nature not up to the task of explaining all sources of human motivation.

To state this more systematically, the use of any technique (positivism, dialectics, feminist critique, genealogy, etc.) by definition accepts certain aspects of life as germaine and other things as irrelevant. Thus any method of approaching our collective life must of necessity be incomplete and in no way can be considered exhaustive of human motivation. This is to say that any of the above methods must settle what is relevant to its inquiry prior to the inquiry itself, which essentially means that the method concerns means, while the ends are premeditated independently. Thus, no method can justify itself in terms of ends, but of means only. Faith becomes the watchword of the ideologue (for all ideologies are based ultimately on the faith that their important variables are exactly what is needed to analyze a society at its roots), in that the assumptions of any method are not justifiable by the method itself, but rather derives from a subrational faith in the outcome.

Fourthly, Oakeshott has been invaluable to the conservative movement in particular for his rational explication of tradition as the most reasonable guiding

light for our collective existence, but, further, a social traditionalism not devoid of criticism or modification. Tradition for Oakeshott is -- to put it simply -- a habitual way of behaving. This habit (or these habits) can be abbreviated into theories of our own society, a collection of thought and observations about the way we collectively behave. Now, any one of these theories is incomplete and contains, surely, generalizations that are not applicable in every case, simply because there are no assumptionless methods. Thus, though they cannot be used to remake a society or offer "fundamental criticism," they are useful for working out incoherences within the system in which we have become accustomed to acting. Such criticisms then become the "engine" for social change and for modifying our behaviors to accompany new social realities in the same way a particular hypothesis in science, coming nowhere but from an existing paradigm of scientific activity, becomes the "engine" of scientific research. Thus, the role of the philosopher or political scientist is to view these abbreviations and seek any incoherences within them. The purely coherent system of historical, scientific, aesthetic, and moral/practical knowledge may not be possible in Oakeshott (and it was as impossible for the 1933 Oakeshott as it was for the 1990 version), but it still remains the ideal of his political epistemology.

It was briefly mentioned that there is a pure and reflective empiricism that Oakeshott takes to be the two forms of traditionalism, the "pure" being sheer habit,

while the reflective being the use of rational methods to, in a limited way, work out the "kinks" in any social system. The "reflective" nature of this sort of social empiricism is that one can theorize about current circumstances and reflect upon them. This then becomes the engine for legitimate social change. Further, it needs to be radically divorced from the "libertarian" strand within the conservative tradition with is little more than a contemporary version of the earlier form of political rationalism founded by Hobbes and Locke.[59] Oakeshott considered himself an enemy of Hayek, and for no other reason than that the great economist replaced one form of rationalism (the planned society), for another (the Lockian, rational individual). For Oakeshott, the only way out of this trap was to posit a governing principle that, generally speaking, was to equalize the influence over all practices within the society, not permitting one to absorb or vitiate the social usefulness of the other (cf. "The Political Economy of Freedom" (1949)). The result being that the established practices within a society were to evolve along their natural and normal course. This is as far away from planning a society as one can get without falling into the opposite and paradoxical trap of "planning" one's way out of the planned society through the deification of the economic rationality

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59 Most traditionalists, Russell Kirk being the most prominent, reject libertarianism's claim to conservatism at all, and find it merely a "classical liberalism," one inextricably bound up with the Enlightenment.

of "economic man."

Lastly, the idea of equality should be discussed and summarized. This is an issue not as yet dealt with in the sparse academic literature on Oakeshott. As has already been discussed, the idea of a radical equality concerning the individual practices within a society has been made clear. Each practice (historical, scientific, moral/practical, and aesthetic) has its set of social goods which it provides, and as a result, none of them should have a preponderance of power over the others. In fact, the essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," dealt with at length in this study, is precisely an attack on the domination of (basically) "business" and "science" within Occidental societies. It is even clearer, however, that Oakeshott considers only a handful to be able to actively participate within our social conversation. Though Oakeshott believes in the equality of social practices, he does not believe in the equal ability of all members of the society to equally participate. His ideal practitioners are those who do not run from the opportunity to be an individual; for it is those people who need "ideologies" and "leaders" to save them from the pain of day-to-day decisionmaking.

These, it is believed within the confines of this study, should be the more significant and lasting areas of Oakeshott's general political theory and philosophy. It has been argued that Oakeshott is a traditionalist and conservative, and this stance is fully understood only by the understanding of what Oakeshott

takes to be exhaustive of experience in general.

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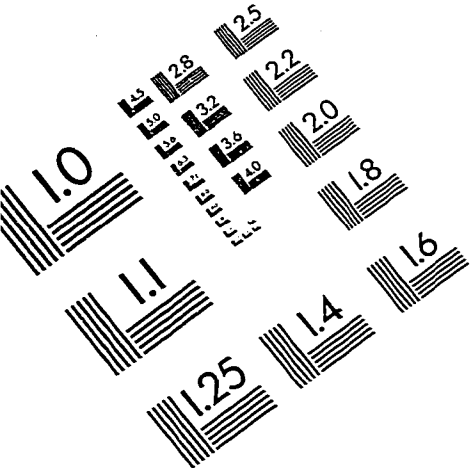

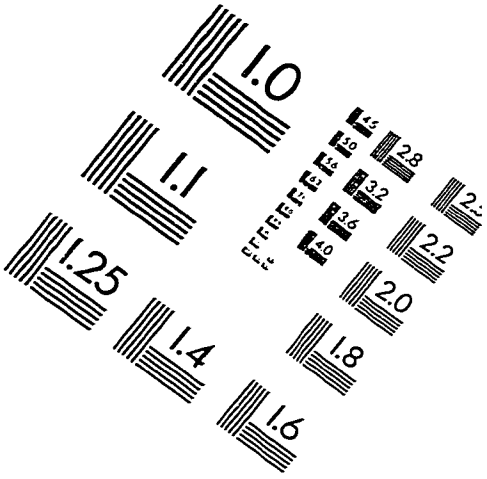

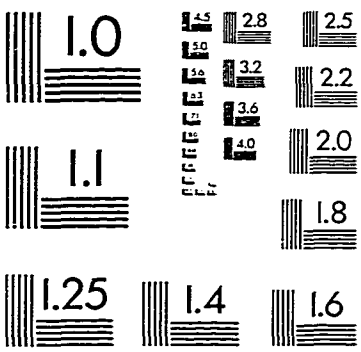

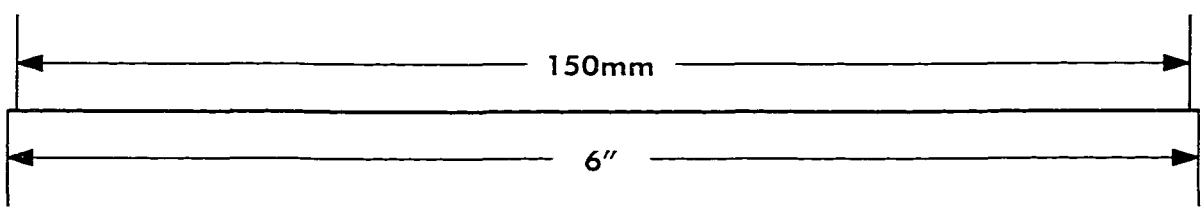

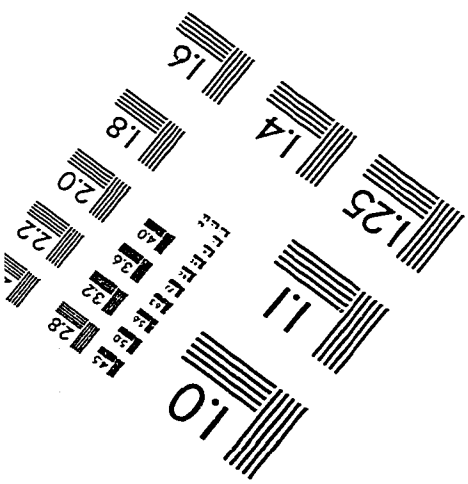

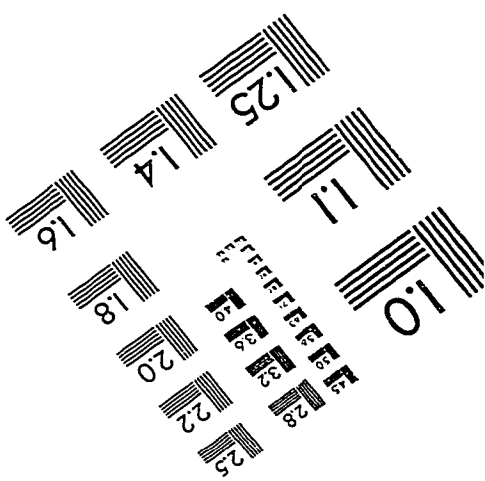

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