

Sympathetic Dissent: Michael Oakeshott's Contribution to Conservative Philosophy

Eno Trimçev, Leuphana Universität Lüneburg (trimcev@leuphana.de)

Introduction

In our everyday understanding, being conservative means something like being averse to change. Politically, conservatism is habitually associated with a committed and affirmative attitude towards an existing political order, or a restorative or reactionary attitude when that order has broken down. However, in this paper, I aim to work out a specific figuration of conservative thought which challenges this everyday notion of conservatism, and which I call “sympathetic dissent”. I intend to show that this figuration is characterized not by affirmation, but by dissent; and change is at the core of it. Moreover, I claim that this particular kind of dissenting thought can make a genuine contribution to challenges facing contemporary political theory. To this purpose, let me first introduce the broader understanding of “conservatism” that informs this paper. The notion can be best pointed out by its relation to the terms “liberalism,” “liberal order” and “liberal theory.” By way of an introduction, let me thus offer the following three conceptual remarks. They are historical rather than analytical,¹ since my aim is to begin from and think about the self-understandings contained in these articulations.

By the term ‘liberalism’ I understand something more than an ideological passion or a constellation of ideas. The designation liberalism lends intelligibility to the variety of modern efforts—philosophical, political or otherwise—to articulate the individual and her liberty, flourishing or autonomy as the beginning and end of political order. As a consequence, it includes a plurality of articulations and it is riven with ambiguities that this historical definition is not meant to dispel. Rather, the term liberalism is adopted because it arises out of the intellectual and political debates in the nineteenth century when the movement became conscious of its ideological competitors.²

¹ Martin Beckstein, “What does it take to be a true Conservative?,” *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought* (2014), 4.

² As a political designation the term is said to have been first used at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

However, the designation is misread if it is taken to denote an alternative among many. The ideological alternatives which made it aware of its own character had shallower lines of historical transmission and played to a narrower political base. By comparison to liberalism, they proved symbolically closed.³ Liberalism, on the other hand, has shown itself to be more than any of its particular articulations indicated; an open-ended complex of symbols rather than a rigid construct. It is recognizable in a dizzying variety of discourses, political movements, symbolic articulations and ideological encrustations whose lines of transmission often lead to historical dead ends, crisscross or merge into each other, but which together make up its patrimony, resources and moral life. The variety of articulations may be befuddlingly broad but they all understand themselves to be advancing the well-being of the individual person. Today liberalism provides the only publicly authoritative moral language available with hardly any intellectual formulation seemingly possible outside the liberal framework.

The term ‘liberal order’ complements this expansive definition. If liberalism denotes the disparate public articulations of our world, the term order points to the simultaneous coherence of that world. The term thus suggests that the variety of contingent and institutionalized practices, experiences, modes of expression, symbols, movements and actors of our world can neither be reduced to a singular part of it nor can it be taken as wholly devoid of intelligibility as an articulated whole. But, of course order is not a label that we can simply place on our socio-political and moral reality; it rather emerges out of our active attempts to understand it. Among the most representative attempts at understanding our order are those theoretical works that constitute liberal theory. The term ‘liberal theory’ then designates those philosophical schools—from Locke through Mill all the way to the political, egalitarian, and pragmatic articulations that characterize it today—that have attempted to rationally illumine the conditions, nature and ends of the liberal order. Liberal theory is a part of the liberal order just like other movements and actors. It does however provide intellectual access to the reasons and measures that hold together these disparate parts.

³ I take the term ‘symbol’ from Eric Voegelin in Fred Lawrence, ed., *The Beginning and the Beyond: Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences* (Scholar's Press, Chico, California, 1984), 97 and Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 5, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: 1987), 17-18. Cf. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). 74-5.

This account of liberal theory recalls the “multi-voiced creature”⁴ which Michael Oakeshott defined as a tradition. Its beliefs, he writes,

are not self-consistent; they often pull in different directions, they compete with one another and cannot all be satisfied with one another, and therefore they cannot properly be thought of as a norm or as a self-consistent set of norms or “principles” capable of delivering to us an unequivocal message about what we should do.⁵

Finally, in this paper the term ‘conservatism’ is neither meant to include those varieties of political movements and attitudes that have understood themselves to be conservative, nor the intellectuals that have provided them with justifications. Rather, it is meant to designate those thinkers that have made a direct contribution to political philosophizing and have been designated as conservative, not always unanimously so, and not always according to their wishes.⁶ They can nevertheless be grouped together because after efforts to render the liberal order intellectually transparent, they have found its resources inadequate and its direction of change regressive in light of its own measure. Their substantive thinking through the liberal order often brings to light earlier, pre-liberal philosophical or religious intellectual traditions or resources. I suggest that within this field, we can distinguish two types of conservative political thought. On the one hand, thinkers like Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and, more idiosyncratically, Hannah Arendt have either explicitly called for a return to classical political philosophy or sought in their personal encounters with it to bring to bear intellectual resources that stand outside of the liberal order to rethink, re-orient or re-symbolize our participation in order. Jacques Maritain and Alasdair MacIntyre, to mention but two, have done the same regarding the Thomist tradition. Mircea Eliade has even provided a critique of contemporary liberal movements by way of interpretation of archaic sources. Among these thinkers, the recovery of the past may have clear political implications—*i.e.*, demanding more robust civic virtue. According to these theorists, the liberal order is unsalvageable within its own terms. Philosophy thus serves as an escape from (dis)order. I will call this group unsympathetic dissenters.

⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael,” *Political Studies* 13 (1965: 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ This parceling out of conservatives into actors, intellectuals and philosophers is justified, as we will see, by the differentiation between theory and practice in the works of the latter.

On the other hand, among recognizably conservative thinkers, there exists also a very well-known, more liberal thread with which I am directly concerned today. Its representative thinker in this paper is Michael Oakeshott, but Alexis de Tocqueville or contemporaries like Stanley Rosen also belong in this camp.⁷ These thinkers share the diagnosis of the inadequacy and forebodings on the direction of change of the liberal order as well as the use of pre-liberal resources⁸ in their thinking of our order. Yet, differently from other conservative thinkers they neither turn away from our order, nor furnish a vocabulary that is explicitly non- or i-liberal. They are both historically conscious of the effective reasons why the pre-liberal traditions were left behind and philosophically astute to know that a flight from order is impossible for there is no outside-place from which order can be understood. Instead, of culminating in an imaginary supersession of the liberal order into something before or beyond liberalism, their thoughtful movement through the order seeks to enlarge its existing resonances. They seek to liberalize an order that they consider to be moving towards illiberality. As conservatives, they take up pre-liberal sources—those sources that mark the moment of emergence of the liberal order. This allows to recover and revive the originary impulses of liberal thinking, impulses that have been covered over in historical development. This is the liberal pole of their thinking. The paper argues that this line of thinking furnishes a representative example of how our understanding of the order we live in can be

⁷ Stanley Rosen may be considered conservative only in the sense that he maintains a traditional understanding of philosophy and argues for a modified kind of Platonism. But, if we were to accept that faulty reasoning and do him this disfavor, we have to immediately qualify him as a conservative who subscribes to a sympathetic dissent of the contemporary philosophical schools. “No one who loves philosophy,” says Rosen, “will waste a moment in wishing history to move backward, any more than he will contribute to the destruction of the present by vain wishes for the future.” And, differently than some unsympathetic dissenters of the contemporary order, Rosen claims that we cannot even seek a way out of contemporary existential and philosophical problems by recovering past thought. To look for a solution to the problem of modern nihilism in a past episode would be “to surrender to the very forces which have produced modern nihilism.” Rosen, *Nihilism*, xvii, 137. Rosen’s specific purpose in *Ancients and Moderns* is to defend, through his version of Platonism, a particular version of Enlightenment modernity (a “modified or moderate enlightenment”) against a group of “conservatives” who defend antiquity against modernity.

⁸ Tocqueville’s continuous movement between the aristocratic and democratic as worldviews and as his own innermost temperamental poles is well-known. It is in the tension between the two that he gains his unique critical distance from the changing dynamic of the liberal order without abandoning that order. Oakeshott too brings to light resources that are not strictly-speaking within liberalism in at least two separate planes: the historical and the philosophical. On the historical plane, the recovery of *societas* carried out in *On Human Conduct* connects liberalism’s initial impetus and historical beginnings with the best resources of what went on before it in medieval and classical life. On the philosophical plane, the analysis of experience in *Experience and its Modes* opens up access to modes of thinking that stand outside of the liberal theoretical tradition. Cf. Oakeshott’s idealist analysis with Thomas Hobbes mechanistic account of freedom as the absence of external impediments in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 170).

enlarged by pointing to what that order is capable of becoming. It is the *sympathetic* nature of their dissent that helps us understand better the order we live in. Accordingly, I will call this group sympathetic dissenters.

As used here, the term conservatism refers strictly to conservative theorizing rather than to practical conservative discourse. The differentiation hinges upon the strict difference between theory and practice in conservative thought; a differentiation which classifies practical thinking under the latter. While I will develop this differentiation in the main body of the paper, here it suffices to differentiate our subject from practical conservatism including, of course, practical thought that is dedicated to practically conservative action. Putting it bluntly, from this perspective thinkers like Leo Strauss and Michael Oakeshott do not belong to the same camp as Edmund Burke or Russell Kirk. When thought is an extension *in abstracto* of one's practical concerns that answers to the practical question "What is to be done?" we are dealing with a kind of activity other than theorizing. Hence, no amount of gathering of conservative principles⁹ such as risk aversion or assertions that conservatives do not have an ideology will do the work. There is no direct line between conservative thought as conceptualized here and the practical conservatism that we encounter in our politics.¹⁰

The paper proceeds in three steps. In the next section, I spell out the dissent that is formative of conservative philosophy. Conservative thinkers dissent from the perceived immanence of liberal thought. They commit themselves to supersede the question of liberalism as a historical order and raise the question of human order as such. On this basis, the following section elaborates the sympathy displayed in sympathetic dissent on the example of Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott does not supersede liberalism as such, but enlarges it towards more liberality. The differentiation of

⁹ Such as in Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection: the Religious and Secular Traditions of Conservative Thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 16-7.

¹⁰ The absence of a direct line does not mean that the refracted light of theorizing is not present in practice. We observe that the increasing realization that the problems of order are largely impervious to (immanent) programmatic solutions has increased the ranks of practical dissenters from the left and the right seeking to alter the relationships constituting our order. They range from Žižek to Sandel and from Occupy Wall Street to the Tea Party. In the United States alone, the movement from liberal to conservative has accompanied each stage of the consolidation of the post-New Deal state by the Lyndon Johnson administration: neo-conservatives, communitarians, libertarians and, lastly, Tea Party activists. The insights into order by the conservative thinkers I am concerned here have had their role to play in the history of contemporary practical dissents.

theorizing and doing runs like a red thread through both sections. In my concluding remarks, I highlight the political implications of this relationship and indicate more clearly the conservative nature of sympathetic dissent.

I. *The Conservative Dissent*

The dissent of conservative thinkers from liberal theory occurs at two levels. On a first level, conservative theorists hold that the organizing concepts of liberal theory—such as the state of nature or the harm principle to name but two—are incapable of doing justice to the full nature of politics. Over time, conservatives hold, this has facilitated the hollowing out of common sense, the rise of value-free terminology and the concomitant flattening out of politics into “who gets what, when, where and how”, leading MacIntyre to call liberal politics a “civil war carried out by other means.”¹¹ This level of the conservative critique is well-known and are of only indirect concern here. On a second level, conservative thinkers criticize not the particular concepts, but the general movement of liberal thinking—a movement that is broadly directed towards the concrete institutional arrangements as well as practical problems of our order. According to conservative thinkers, the broad directedness of the liberal tradition of political thought towards the immanent order misunderstands the nature of theorizing. This misunderstanding has a theoretical and a practical drawback. Firstly, by failing to properly differentiate between theorizing and practice, conservatives hold that liberal thought commits theorizing to a call it cannot answer: either attempt a demonstrable foundation of the immanent order or, when that justificatory enterprise inevitably fails, to abstain from justifications of order altogether.¹² In either case, philosophy culminates in

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 253. Conservatives are not alone in this dissent; they share a common ground with the tradition of the democratic left which emphasizes the democratic, rather than the liberal aspects of our order. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000). Indicative of the common ground shared by the two is Hannah Arendt who, of course, partakes of both traditions fitting uneasily in each.

¹² By way of example, cf. the great arc of liberal theorizing that begins with Rawls’ confident justification of liberal principles in *A Theory of Justice*, flattens out into the elegant constructions of Alan Gewirth and Robert Nozick that serve as rationalizations of (their kinds of) liberalism by liberals for liberals, elegantly declines into Dworkin’s retreat into principles internal to the tradition, painfully sputters into a halt with the recognition that the tradition itself has reached its end in John Gray, and fractures into the abandonment of efforts at justification altogether in favor of historical contingency in Richard Rorty. I call this arc of thought immanent because, all throughout, it eschews any reference to what it derisively calls metaphysics, and attempts to serve as a justification for really-existing liberalism. But, this move from philosophy to history can be seen in the move from the earlier to the later Rawls as well. The earlier achievement of justice as fairness is replaced with a “political conception” that legitimizes liberalism by way

history. This shortchanges philosophy. Secondly, the failure to differentiate between theorizing and practice kicks the support from underneath our order. It undermines the belief that liberal democracy represents the best regime since no such truth claims seem possible. The culmination of philosophy in history shortchanges history too.

As a result of their differentiation of theorizing from doing, conservative thinkers, on the other hand, cannot help but raise the question of human order as such. However, the answer to that question is theoretical; it supersedes and remains untranslatable into practice. As long as the question of human order as such has not been raised, the conservative dissent remains confined to questioning the capacity of liberalism to deliver on its promises. With this question, the nature of those promises comes under fire. Since mainstream liberal theory refutes by a strategy of privatization¹³ the desirability or even possibility of the quest for truth, conservative thought here takes its own differentiated physiognomy and bears its own fruits. The more sharply the question is raised, the clearer the nature of the dissent from order.

The question of human order is justified by conservatives in the exact opposite to others' view of the very same question: in conservative thought it serves as an attempt to revive an understanding of philosophizing as a quest for truth rather than a set of doctrines. The farther away the question keeps from the problem of the best arrangements to *represent* the human condition, the more productive its potentialities are. It is by raising this question that the doubled nature of his own movement becomes transparent to the thinker. As the articulation of the eternal, unresolved because unsolvable, human problem, the question entices the thinker to think beyond the concepts and assumptions of the immanent order that initially seem to delimit and define him. But, as that articulation provides no substantive answer from an immanent perspective, the thinker must remain faithful to his participatory perspective and remain grounded in the 'intimations' of the

of history, as the order that has enabled particular societies to live with difference. This move from philosophy to history, has brought perceptive liberal critics to conclude that the tradition is now bankrupt and that the role of the liberal thinker ought to be—indeed, must be—that of a “political Pyrrhonist” as John Gray has put it, working to salvage what can be saved from liberal skepticism. Whether a self-confident egalitarian, a cautious historicist, or a mournful Pyrrhonist, the direction of that thought is ever-immanent towards the arrangements of our order.

¹³ Paul Kelly, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 3.

existing order. In other words, as there is no other order to juxtapose to the existing one, the existing order must be rearticulated anew, this time theoretically rather than practically.

Insofar as liberal and conservative thought both attempt to understand human beings, they share the characteristic of a vision of a fundamental situation free of historical contingencies which distract from thinking about human order. The difference is that liberal thought *begins* from such a situation, whether in the state of nature of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau or in the Original Position of Rawls and *arrives* at the immanent order as it should be. Conservative thinkers, on the other hand, take the opposite direction.

Contrary then to much of practical conservatism, conservative theorizing thus also dissents from the liberal rise of history at the expense of philosophy. That claim, may seem strange since, after all, conservatives of all kinds decry the deep and pervasive role of theory in our political practices and have continuously hankered back to traditional—and hence conventional or historical—wisdom.¹⁴ For conservative thinkers too, history plays a crucial role in the realm of doing. But since conservative thought moves to supersede the immanent to inquire about order as such, it also must part with history.¹⁵ Whatever the sources of thinking *qua* theoretical activity—and for most, but not all of these thinkers, these sources arise from practical activity—once philosophy begins to generate its own concerns, it becomes an enterprise that parts ways with practical activity.¹⁶

In terms of the differentiation between conservative thinkers introduced in the previous section, their dissent induces unsympathetic dissenters to completely leave the symbolical universe of liberalism. They cannot fully explore the potential of their dissent from the liberal order.

¹⁴ For representative examples, see respectively Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new and expanded ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991) and Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

¹⁵ Two representative examples are Oakeshott and Strauss. For Oakeshott's treatment of "the practical past" see *Experience and its Modes* and "The Activity of being an Historian," *Rationalism in Politics*, 151-83. For Strauss, see his powerful repudiation of Burke in *Natural Right and History* and his critique of historicism elsewhere.

¹⁶ For a sample, cf., *On Human Conduct*, 24-5; Hannah Arendt, "Thinking," *The Life of the Mind*, vol., 1 (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978), esp., 102-4; "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research*. Vol. 38. No. 3 (Autumn 1971): 417-446; Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959).

On the other hand, there is also a strand of conservative thinking that displays the movement of thought described above within the liberal order. I have called this second figuration sympathetic dissent. In the following section, I elaborate the sympathetic character of the dissenting movement in the work of Michael Oakeshott.

II. *The Conservative Sympathy*

In this section, I look at the thinking of Michael Oakeshott in order to, firstly, illustrate the movement of thought in conservative theorizing. It follows from this movement that the conservative dissent, if it is not to contradict its own insights, ought to be sympathetic to the liberal order. I illustrate this sympathy, in a second step, by bringing to the fore Michael Oakeshott's distinctively sympathetic dissent. If the dissent of conservative thinkers hinges on the movement of their thought vis-à-vis the order in which they live, Oakeshott's thinking achieves the greatest degree of transparency in both displaying and explaining the nature of that movement. I flash this out by examining Oakeshott's first and least well-known book, *Experience and its Modes*. There are two reasons for focusing on the 'early' Oakeshott. First, there he sets out the entire trajectory of the movement of thought that I have sketched above. Much of his later work may be read as précising the distinctions drawn in this first work and developing further particular aspects—such as on the nature of practice and politics—already contained in it. Secondly, by thinking through this movement, Oakeshott is able to simultaneously differentiate theorizing from doing and bring attention to the equivalence in the structure of both as superseding the already given. This equivalence hinges on Oakeshott's notion of experience whose nature both theorizing and doing share. Thus, the philosophical movement of superseding the given is not the exclusive characteristic of theorizing, but the characteristic of human experience as such. This equivalential structure undermines the initial gulf between philosopher and everyman that opens by way of the distinction of theorizing from doing; a recognition that is absent in many, but not all conservatives. I will then draw out the political significance of this attitude in the concluding section.

The decisive term that runs through Oakeshott's thinking is experience. The constituents of experience—sensations, feelings, intuitions, reflections and acts—remain for Oakeshott “abstractions” until they come together “in the most complete interdependence” in the “single

whole”¹⁷ that is experience. To be sure, this whole is a “world”; its constituents are not all of a kind, but of all kinds, each affected by their place in the whole.¹⁸ The point is, however, that the dichotomies, which run through alternative schools of thought—such as those between immediate experience and interpretation, subject and object, action and thought, immanent and transcendent—are revealed to be inadequate. Nothing can be sensed in a way that is isolated and unrelated to previous experiences; no self is a subject free of “opinion, prejudice, habit, knowledge”¹⁹; no act exists free of thinking, and; no thinking exists in any meaningful sense free of that which it is about.²⁰ By themselves, the terms constituents of experience are “isolated, simple, exclusive, and wholly unrelated; transient, inexpressible, unsharable and impossible of repetition.”²¹ The moment that they are recognized, they point beyond themselves to the experiential movement, in and through which they do their work.

Human beings move in the world by experiencing it. Their observable or apparent movements are constituents of human experience and, like all other constituents, taken by themselves they are only abstractions. Therefore, they cannot to be mistaken for the experience itself.²² From the moment *a* movement is recognized, it enters the experiential structure of the recognizer for “to be conscious of something is, in some degree, to recognize it; and recognition involves us at once in judgment, in inference, in reflection, in thought.”²³ Hence, the ‘things’ that seem to stand outside of ourselves—*e.g.*, the chair I am about to get up from—become thought-artefacts the moment they are recognized. As such, they are judged, evaluated, compared and related to other constituents within experience. Oakeshott says they are never given out there, but they are always “achieved in experience.”²⁴

¹⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 9.

¹⁸ Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park, Penn.,,: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001) 21.

¹⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience*, 14.

²⁰ “[a] pure or mere idea is, of course, an abstraction, and a world of mere ideas is an abstract world, and consequently this view of experience cannot stand by itself.” *Ibid.*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

Hence, experience is thought. But the thought that is experience is not completely structureless. It has a broad directionality beyond the givens, or that which is ‘achieved’ in experience. While human beings exist within a coherent world of ideas, this coherence is experienced as incomplete, partial or deficient and, therefore, unsatisfactory. Experienced incoherence is the malady of the world; its measure is “absolute coherence.”²⁵ Human beings are thus spurred on beyond the given—or, immanent—to reconcile its facts “into a closer unity.”²⁶ This broad directionality of the human movement is not to be understood as a “look *away from* a given world to another world, but always *at* a given world to discover the unity it implies.”²⁷ The givens of the world are constantly “superseded” but the world as such is never ‘transcended.’ In Oakeshott, the trajectory of the experiential movement points neither to progress, nor to its final resolution in any immanent sense: “[i]n experience [...] there is not a uniform process in which that which comes later is necessarily nearer the end than that which came earlier.”²⁸ The arc of the movement is progressive in an ideal sense.

At the cost of reiteration, there is nothing outside of thought for there is nothing outside of experience. If we insist in going back to the beginning, to that first unmediated sensation, assertion of autonomy, or pure feeling, we will find only a “complex situation” in which the things sensed, the subjectivity asserted, or the feelings expressed hang together into a “One and not a Many”²⁹ in thought or judgment. If we insist in going beyond thought to the things thought is about—to the ‘reality out there’—we will find that those things only *seem* to be outside of thought; when pressed, no matter how objective their seemingly-independent existence, they reveal themselves to be thought-things. Nothing exists before or beyond thought.

But if we only exist experientially, and experience is continuously superseding immanent reality, reality is not left behind by the superseding movement. That is because, as we have seen, reality does not exist outside of experience; it is, therefore, equivalent to it. Reality, or the order in which

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

²⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁹ Ibid., 20.

we live, is continuously moving beyond itself towards its own “coordination and completion.”³⁰ The dialectical supersession of the immanent³¹ is relentless; it admits of no arrest despite the different levels of achievement, modes and degrees of satisfaction that it implies.³² To be in the world, is to *change* that world towards what it ought to be.

We see the principle of change most clearly in practical experience.³³ Practice is a beginning insofar as it “is the most familiar of all our worlds of experience” within which “[u]nless we make some conscious effort to step outside”³⁴ we will pass our lives. Practically, we recognize things in the world as they relate to our own viewpoints, desires and goals in the world; we recognize the “what is” in terms of “what ought to be.” As a mode of experience, practice is a self-consistent perspective on the whole of experience. It does not, of course, stand outside of thought, but within a particular mode of experience which Oakeshott calls “practical experience.” Practical experience is, of course, thoughtful, but within it “it belongs to the character of thought to be for the sake of action.”³⁵ Practical life is “the production and the prevention of change” understood “not merely [as] a programme for action, but action itself.” The practical world is “the totality of such actions, together with all that they imply.” In it “the alteration of existence is undertaken.”³⁶ The present or the past are thus never constitutive of reality as such; and those conservative movements that presume it to be so, whether implicitly or explicitly, are as deluded as those of their political adversaries who engage in programmatic action to realize “a mere idea in the external world.”³⁷ That neither preservatory conservatism nor programmatic progressivism will do however, does

³⁰ *Experience and its Modes*, 259. That is not say, however, that when we put out to sea, as Oakeshott later memorably put it, we do not recognize our previous understanding as a “prison” from which we have “[escaped].” *On Human Conduct*, 9. The use of spatial metaphors here maybe unfortunate, but the essential point ought not to be obscured: man’s experience of the world admits of gradations or attunements, not spatial hierarchies.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37. It may be instructive to compare the “idealist” structure of experience in Oakeshott’s *Experience and its Modes* with the “pragmatist” model presented by William James in the “Conclusions” of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 1902). The similarities are such that they put into doubt the effectiveness of the pragmatist attack on idealist thought.

³² *Ibid.*, 81.

³³ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

not at all imply a preference either for the disorganized fluidity of practice, or for a refusal to engage; on the contrary,

what is repugnant is not that a man's life should be a perfectly consistent whole, but that it should be an incoherent collection of isolated desires, hopes, fears and achievements [...] it is contradictory of practical experience itself to select incoherence as a satisfactory state of a man's world of practical experience.³⁸

Practical movements, including conservative ones, must be committed to change if they are to be in coherence with the world to which they are committed.³⁹ In fact, the very defect of practice arises in it being 'conservative' in the conventional meaning of the term. Again Oakeshott,

The essential abstractness of the world of practical experience may, I think, be shown to arise, neither from the present incompleteness of our practical experience, nor from its apparent lack of organization, but from the terms in which the attempt in practice to achieve what is ultimately satisfactory in experience is conceived and executed. Practice is the reconciliation, in detail and in practical fact, of 'what is here and now' and 'what ought to be'; it is this and all that it presupposes and involves. It is not the reconciliation in principle of the discrepancy between what is valuable and what is practical fact, but the reconciliation of each instance of this discrepancy as it arises. And such an integration can never be finally achieved [...] We have at each moment in practical experience a partially integrated world of experience...⁴⁰

Experience is satisfied by nothing less than its full and complete coherence with the world.⁴¹

It is indeed hard to overstate the role of change or movement in Oakeshott's thinking. In his idealist language, experience *is* change; but a change that has its own intelligible structure. The given in experience is nowhere to be found *as such*, there to be accepted or rejected by the experiencer. On the contrary, it "is given always in order to be transformed."⁴² Experience *is* an on-going, relentless, reaching out beyond that which is such as that "which is" is always already implicated in that which "ought to be." As Oakeshott puts it in a way that should have preempted many misunderstandings of his work:

The condition of the given world of ideas is never such that it may merely be acquiesced in. And consequently our attitude in experience towards what is given is always positive and always critical. From the given as such, we turn to what is to be achieved; from the unstable and defective, we turn to what is complete and can maintain itself.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., 302.

³⁹ Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 332-3.

⁴⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience*, 303.

⁴¹ In his later work, Oakeshott drops the idea that human being seeks total coherence in experience. Given the times in which it was made, this move may have been practically astute but it is made at the cost of clarity on the structure of experience.

⁴² Ibid., 29.

⁴³ Ibid.

Human beings always press the given towards that which is better; the choice is simply between “pressing forward towards the perfectly coherent world of concrete ideas or [...] turning aside from the main current in order to construct and explore a restricted world of abstract ideas”⁴⁴ as Oakeshott calls each of the modes of experience. The supersession of the given does not exist as such beyond the given for “what is achieved is contained seminally or implicitly in what is given.”⁴⁵

In Oakeshott’s account, the trajectory of experience points human beings beyond the world. Activity, he tells us, “involves a discrepancy between ‘what is’ and what we desire shall be; [...] [a]nd this is true not only when practice takes the form of explicit change, but also when it appears to be confined to the maintenance of ‘what is.’”⁴⁶ Therefore, “[t]o maintain is always to change.” Change is the unchanging constant of human life, spurred on by a transcendental dissatisfaction with that which is. It points beyond the immanent towards its own possibilities.

In Oakeshott’s view then, human freedom presupposes an order beyond itself—an order that it finds as it moves to find it. The experiential movement beyond the given is not devoid of the assistance of that which draws it in. Human beings are not “free” to build their own construct; to dwell in *their* household. They do not blindly push forward, because that which they are in search of already draws them towards itself. The call of that which is not immanent and absolute cannot be eliminated from a human life.

For Oakeshott, the aim of the experiential movement is truth. This is no longer important to understand the structure of experience but it is important to understand the justification of the movement; that human beings do not merely push but they are simultaneously pulled beyond the immanent. Unsurprisingly, Oakeshott’s understanding of truth is existential rather than positivistic. If human being moves in a world of ideas as “a whole of interlocking meanings which establish and interpret one another”⁴⁷, she considers an idea to be true when she judges positively

⁴⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 45.

its appropriateness of fit in the world. Whatever the modality through which human being achieves her reality, her experience is true insofar as it is coherent. Truth is experience experienced as satisfactory; the world of ideas made coherent.⁴⁸ Truth is the *realissimum* within experience towards which experience supersedes its givens. It does not, however, ‘stand’ at the end of the movement beckoning it forth; rather, it is all-pervasive. To claim its unknowability is to assert that which we know nothing about and, hence, incoherent. There is, of course, no ‘final coherence’ waiting for human being to cease her quest for that would mean to opt out of experience. Truth is not a goal; it is “the perpetual re-establishment of coherence”⁴⁹ without which human beings cannot do. But the popular stress on the unattainability of the whole and complete truth comes from the categorial mistake of considering truth as divorced from experience. On the contrary, precisely because “truth ... is inseparable from experience”⁵⁰ man already lives in and towards truth. Rather than mistakenly stressing its impossibility, two things follow from Oakeshott: first, the quest to cohere one’s experience is an essential, ineliminable feature of the human way of being in the world, and; second, if coherence is the standard of experience, the idea of the whole truth or complete coherence cannot be jettisoned from the human vocabulary simply because of its implicit character. Absolute coherence is the indispensable standard of all understanding—of all movement in the world, --however partial or fleeting its character; there cannot, for example, be a study of exploitation without some real sense of the non-exploitative standard. Oakeshott thus supersedes the endless debates between non-, anti- and foundationalism and moves us towards a productive, positive relationship with truth.

Since truth shares the structure of the complex as a whole, being simultaneously pervasively present *in* and an aim *of* the experiential movement, the truth found in a mode of experience is simultaneously true and woefully untrue when it “is asserted absolutely and unconditionally.”⁵¹ Truth is that which is (hence human beings live in truth) in relation to that which ought to be (hence

⁴⁸ Ibid., 48. The later Oakeshott abandons this drive to totality but, it seems to me, the earlier Oakeshott is more consistent, if less fashionable, on the matter. The fact that he later drew the contrast “less sharply” serves only to obscure the meaning of the argument in later works. But cf. Nardin, 35, 48.

⁴⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 11.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

human beings seek truth) in their dialectical articulation. Human being as a philosopher, politician, poet or scientist indeed lives in and knows truth; but the (true) articulation cannot be true *as such* because the practical articulation of the truth of the whole turns it immediately into a given which, by definition, is in dissonance with the moving experience of the whole. If his assertion is to retain its validity it must be appropriately symbolized to accommodate its contingent nature. Thus, not all articulations are equally true (subjective); they can be more or less appropriate to the task at hand which is to cohere the world of ideas. If truth is the movement of supersession in which we exist, truth exhibits simultaneously the most “concrete” and “universal” components of experience; it is *the* “concrete universal”⁵² which recognizes no authority beyond its own standard of coherent movement. It is in its indirect light that we measure all that we do.

Much has been made of Oakeshott’s privileging of philosophy vis-à-vis other modalities of experience. Terry Nardin, for example, notes that

philosophical thinking creates an ever-widening chasm between philosophical and nonphilosophical ideas. In undertaking to think philosophically, one is slowly but inexorably separated from those who choose not to question the assumptions on which their own thinking and activity rests.⁵³

This follows quite straightforwardly from the view of philosophy as the activity that examines the postulates inherent in human experience and its varied modalities. Each philosophical movement thus must part ways with others in a radical manner: “because even philosophers must make assumptions if they are to question other assumptions, the authentic philosopher is separated from any school of philosophy that rests on shared assumptions.”⁵⁴ The ties that bind seem to snap when Oakeshott concludes “[p]hilosophy consists, not in persuading others, but in making our own minds clear.”⁵⁵ The result is something that we simultaneously recognize as professionals—philosophy as critique—and reject as egalitarians—philosophy as privilege; something that we sign-up to voluntarily—philosophy as resistance—and reject wholeheartedly—philosophy moving outside of the historically contingent site of its beginning. In Oakeshott then, at first sight,

⁵² This is Oakeshott’s famous definition of experience, but truth as the articulation of the experiential components may be considered to densify the tension of this definition. *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵³ Nardin, 48. See also Michael Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 322.

⁵⁴ Nardine, *Oakeshott* *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience*, 3.

the old specter of the superiority of *vita contemplativa* returns to haunt a century that thought itself beyond that “conservative” claim. According to him, theorizing is the only mode faithful to the whole experiential arc towards its own coherence. All other modes consist of a variety of derailments of the philosophical ideal.⁵⁶

This admission through the window of the two-world theory that Oakeshott has thrown out the door⁵⁷ clearly misses the punch of his argument however. What I have called the broad directionality of experience is not teleological or uni-directional. In fact, it is a double-movement; simultaneously outwards, *away* from the postulates of the given order and inwards, *towards* the complete coherence of order. True, philosophy begins as an act of resistance to the surrounding world.⁵⁸ But this act of resistance has simultaneous to its *destructive* character vis-à-vis the surrounding world, its *constructive* or *constitutive* character. Should it not, philosophy would take an arbitrary place outside order and break down under its own incoherence. Just as it resists, philosophy also evokes; just as it moves *away from*, it simultaneously moves *towards* the coherent human order.⁵⁹ It is thus neither a directionless (i.e., subjective or willful) movement beyond the given nor a strictly-directed (i.e., logical) questioning of postulates. It is rather a deliberate effort to orient, attune, or calibrate the experiential movement of the thinker to coherence with the reality in which she exists. The difference between philosophy and practice lies in the degree of transparency achieved by the philosophical movement, which makes its identity so clearly distinguishable.

From the perspective of the structure of experience, the philosopher’s engagement reflects that of everyman.⁶⁰ Both act out of dissatisfaction with the order as a given; both engage that order

⁵⁶ Oakeshott’s language even suggests that to be a practical person simply is to suffer from a form of ‘false consciousness.’ Oakeshott, *Experience*, 305.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 261, 180-4.

⁵⁸ Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *Understanding Political Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), 20-45.

⁵⁹ Cf. Eric Voegelin’s analysis of the beginnings of philosophy in Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 68-9.

⁶⁰ This is not to say that philosophy and practice are actually the same of course; practical man pursues coherence in action which is not the case of the philosopher. Further, as different modes, philosophical concepts necessarily are different from the same concepts used in practice. Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, 128.

dialectically by superseding its givens; both are driven to “coherence”⁶¹ and; both do so in pursuit of their “implications” or “intimations.”⁶² That is because there are not two, but one human order. When taken in its totality—*i.e.*, not immanently—that order is coherent or rational. The immanent in human order presupposes an ordering beyond itself. The immanent and its beyond do not exist as such; they are tensional poles within which the human order takes its recognizable form.

Human beings, and not simply thinkers or authors of great deeds, participate in the given order through their supersession of it. A person, says Oakeshott, is an intelligent being who engages in individual performances⁶³ in an order that is *not* made by her. Human beings are always engaged in this movement beyond the appearances of things. They always and everywhere live as if their life were eternal. They ask questions about what is not present. They are never wholly absorbed in the particular projects that seem to occupy them nor are they ever wholly satisfied with the results. Furthermore, the knowledge that they might not reach the desired fulfillment does not undermine their movement for, it seems, such movement does not rely on a promise to be cashed out at its end. On the contrary, human beings embark freely but not blindly on their adventure for they already perceive, however dimly, the truth they are after. “The process is always one of coming to know more fully and more clearly what is in some sense already known.”⁶⁴ This knowledge makes the superseding movement not entirely devoid of assistance; human beings are moved by the reality which draws them in; “the process is always one of radical reformulation of the whole of what is already known.”⁶⁵

I may articulate Oakeshott’s understanding of the structure of human existence in two stages. First, human existence is simultaneously rationally intelligible *and* intelligibly historical. Human beings experience the order contextually but, insofar as they are always already superseding it, they can make sense rationally of their participation in order. To understand a human doing is to begin from

⁶¹ The difference is one of gradation or modality; practice is a self-contained perspective on the whole of experience that remains ultimately abstract and “must overstep itself” while philosophy, as an Idealist concept, is the pure movement that is experience. Oakeshott, *Experience*, 332.

⁶² For Oakeshott’s definition of politics as the “pursuit of intimations” see *Rationality and Politics*, 56-8. For his definition of philosophy as “pursuing the implications of what is given,” see *Experience and its Modes*, 37.

⁶³ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 1-107.

⁶⁴ Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, 128.

⁶⁵ Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, 128.

understanding its historical context but, at the same time, to supersede that context. Second, that structure does not dominate human being; on the contrary, it illumines her trajectory beyond this world. The person is the highest *in* the world because, an Oakeshottian would say, the person is never wholly *of* the world. It is not merely that a human life cannot be separated from its context—as varieties of usually communitarian critiques of liberal thought would have it—but that human life is radically incapable of exhausting itself in the sum total of its doings or the interlocking historical contexts within which it occurs. Insofar as it is, it is stretching beyond them.

This implication of Oakeshott's thinking unites him with other thinkers of conservative bent such as Etienne Gilson, Eric Voegelin, Mircea Eliade and Stanley Rosen who, in their own ways, converge on this point.⁶⁶ All three have studied human experiences of order occurring in and across time which, they agree, despite their substantive differences display a morphological equivalence. Gilson and Rosen have studied such articulations in the field of philosophy while Voegelin has extended the inquiry to symbolizations of socio-political order throughout human history. Gilson's finding that "strikingly similar movements can be observed"⁶⁷ in the history of these articulations arising from the structure of the reasoning process itself applies to each of them. The end-result, says Gilson, is that once the first principles of their inquiry are laid out, philosophers "no longer think as they wish—they think as they can."⁶⁸ Human beings thus are not free to make the order in which they live according to their wishes. In Oakeshott's words "[r]eality is not whatever I happen to think; it is what I am obliged to think."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See respectively Eric Voegelin, "What is History?" and "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth," in *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, eds., Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works* 28 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 173-232 and Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 115-133; Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937); Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). Cf. Thomas Heilke, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization: Historic Constant or Changing Structures?" Gilson, Rose, and Voegelin on Equivalences and Constancy amidst Change," Paper presented at the *Eric Voegelin Society*, 108th APSA Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA: Aug. 20-Sept.2, 2012.

⁶⁷ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 299.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁶⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience*, 59.

Oakeshott thus extends Gilson's finding that the philosopher is "the metaphysician [who] looks behind and beyond experience for an ultimate ground of all real and possible experience"⁷⁰ to everyman.⁷¹ If Gilson finds that philosophy is metaphysical in the sense that it aims to "transcending all particular knowledge"⁷², Oakeshott responds that this is the wider context of human life as such. The sharp differentiation between theorizing and doing, which is a red thread of conservative thought, is, on final reflection, subtly reconciled by their common structure as experience.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have characterized conservative thinking mainly by its dissenting relation to liberal thinking. The previous section has yet shown that this dissent can take a sympathetic attitude to the liberal order. That this sympathetic attitude proved to be at the same time a thoroughly philosophical attitude, may be surprising, as conservatives have often defined themselves as anti-intellectuals or anti-theorists. In these concluding remarks I therefore wish to highlight the political significance of Oakeshott's sympathetic dissent.

The central insight that emerges out of the second section places Oakeshott in the company of liberal, conservative, as well as the pre-liberal classical and theological sources to which conservative thought continuously harkens back. It is the recognition that a human being is always more than what we see in front of us. In recognition of this insight, liberal thinkers have striven to open up the space in which individuals can freely pursue their own intimations of the good. But in recognition of that very same insight, unsympathetic dissenters have turned away from a liberal symbolization that they see as hopelessly mired into instrumental rationality, self-interest, or neutrality. For unsympathetic dissenters, the intense immanence of liberal thinking deprives the order of precisely the resources that it needs to overcome the dilemmas, which, within the immanent perspective seem irresolvable. The temptation for liberal politics to close down the free

⁷⁰ Ibid., 307.

⁷¹ With the important caveat that actual experience—philosophical or otherwise—is non-foundational in the sense that the idea of demonstrative foundations of order is a categorial mistake. Oakeshott's thinking, I believe, obsoletes the language of the debate surrounding foundationalism.

⁷² Ibid., 309.

movement of human beings in order to correct its abuses is intense within the immanent perspective. It certainly finds no counter-balance in the practical conservative response of maintaining the status-quo, which privileges the privileged. Within the immanent order no good answer is forthcoming and the undertaking of programmatic actions to solve problems that are immune to programs—a dynamic that Oakeshott has eloquently analyzed in later work—gathers pace.

Oakeshott's response is that the immanent order is no order at all. As a matter of fact, the immanent order does not exist precisely because human meaning is impossible in immanent terms. However precariously, human life gains its meaning from all that draws it beyond its present limits.⁷³ Should that cease to be the case—should we find our satisfactions simply in what is—human life would literally be over.

Oakeshott's account of experience illumines the structure of moral reality by pointing out how the hold of problems that otherwise seem irresolvable is broken. In his participatory account,⁷⁴ values are not incommensurable, foundations are not demonstrable, talk of rights cannot be purged of talk of the good, and freedom cannot be purged of virtue to bring but a few examples. The agent's dissatisfaction with that which *is* points to what the order *can be*. The more reality discloses itself in the participatory movement, the more the agent moves towards what is most real. The more she moves towards what is more real, the more the immanent structures of order—shot through with naked power, incommensurable values, heterogeneity and contingency—lose their capacity to impose on the superseding movement. The more the agent moves beyond the immanent order, the more that order is drawn into actuality in her speeches and deeds. The more the possibilities of order are drawn into actuality, the more the order reveals what it truly is. The incommensurability of the goods of order that holds true from the immanent perspective, is broken by its supersession. Particular moral goods and conflicts no longer form unalterably fixed quantities; what had previously appeared immovable and incommensurable reveals its capacity for growth. This is the structure of moral reality for all; theorizing merely brings it to evidence. By outlining it, Michael Oakeshott has employed anew what has been the driving intimation the liberal order from its very

⁷³ For the diverse expressions of this in practical conservatism cf. Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 334.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

beginnings. Thus, it is in his conceptualization of experience rather than in a particular disposition, that I find the greater political import of Oakeshott's thought.