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Oakeshott Revisited

Beyond nostalgia

In 1992, almost two years after Michael Oakeshott's death and nearly one after the posthumous publication of an enlarged edition of his 1962 collection of essays *Rationalism in Politics*, Perry Anderson expressed his disconcertment and even surprise over how little public notice Oakeshott's passing received. After all, to Anderson Oakeshott had been “the most original thinker of post-war conservatism” and “one of the quartet of outstanding European theorists of the intransigent Right whose ideas now shape – however much, or little, leading practitioners are aware of it – a large pail of the mental world of end-of-the-century Western politics.”¹

To those sympathetic to the first part of Anderson's sentiments it must have seemed disparaging if not outright degrading that Oakeshott's conservatism should be classified as an “oddly fearful quasi-hedonism” a mere decade and a half later.² Prove was being offered in form of the perhaps most widely quoted passage of Oakeshott's work:

¹ Perry Anderson: The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century. In: *London Review of Books*, Vol. 14, No. 18 (September 24, 1992), pp. 7-11. Complementing the quartet are Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss and Friedrich von Hayek. Oakeshott's obituaries in the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Independent*, however, were generally laudatory with the *Daily Telegraph* of December 21, 1990 calling Oakeshott the “greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since Mill – or even Burke.” Even though Patrick T. Riley, a former student of Oakeshott at LSE, did not agree with anything else Anderson said, he also noted the inadequacy and inattention of most obituaries. Patrick Riley: Michael Oakeshott, Philosopher of Individuality. In: *Review of Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 649-664.

² Jan-Werner Müller: Comprehending Conservatism: A New Framework for Analysis. In: *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (October 2006), pp. 359-365, p. 363. In a latter essay, Müller just stops short of ridiculing Oakeshott by portraying him as a dandy-philosopher “fond of cocking and cricket metaphors [...] for whom politics appeared variously as ‘vulgar’ or as a ‘necessary evil’.” See Re-imagining Leviathan. In: *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 13, Nos. 2-3 (June-September 2010), pp. 317-336, direct quote at pp. 317-18.

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

It is this passage that led Princeton political scientist Jan-Werner Müller to classify Oakeshott as a proponent of what Müller calls *dispositional* or *aesthetic* conservatism. Semantically this may be justified in so far as Oakeshott himself frequently talks of conservatism as a disposition. But analytically this reduction to the level of passive nostalgia in favor of the past (or a peculiar vision of the present) seems hasty at best. Though Dana Villa and others have also picked up on “a palpable (Burkean) nostalgia for established ways of doing things”⁴, just a few pages further into the same essay, Oakeshott expounds on the conservative disposition in respect to government stating that it is found in

“the propensity to make our own choices and to find happiness in doing so, the variety of enterprises each pursued with passion, the diversity of beliefs each held with the conviction of its exclusive truth; the inventiveness, the changefulness and the absence of any large design; the excess, the over-activity and the informal compromise.”⁵

It is from this observation of the self-government practiced by men and the informal adjustments of interests to one another that Oakeshott’s understanding of the purpose of government develops. It is rooted in

“ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behavior, not in the search for truth or perfection. [It] rests upon the acceptance of the current activities and beliefs of its subjects, [and that] the only appropriate manner of ruling is by making and enforcing rules of conduct.”⁶

Oakeshott, thus, regards the exercise of government as a very specific and limited activity, as “the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises”⁷, not as the management of some broad political vision or single purpose of human activity, nor as the exercise of preserving present social and political arrangements, be it to undercut the rise to power of subordinate classes or simply out of aesthetic preferences.

³ Michael Oakeshott: On Being Conservative. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 407-437, p. 408. “*On Being Conservative*” was originally a lecture given at the University of Swansea in 1956.

⁴ Dana Villa: Oakeshott and the Cold War Critique of Political Rationalism. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*, ed. by Efraim Podoksik, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 319-344, 326. Villa, however, is clear that, unlike Strauss or Voegelin, there is “no longing in Oakeshott for ‘the world we have lost’” and, unlike Burke, Oakeshott is not anti-modern but an “idiosyncratic modernist”. Ibid.

⁵ Michael Oakeshott: On being conservative. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 426-27.

⁶ Ibid. , pp. 428-29.

⁷ Ibid. , p. 429.

The classification of Oakeshott's conservatism as aesthetic is even more surprising in view of the fact that in the intermediary years between Anderson's essay and Müller's research note more than two dozen monographs and numerous articles on Oakeshott's work had appeared on both sides of the Atlantic.⁸ These have recently been complemented by two companions and a bilingual edited volume which – a few contributions aside – also merits the name.⁹ All of these, though addressing often quite diverse aspects of the Oakeshottian oeuvre, show that it does not fit the clichés of political conservatism as reactionary, anti-modern or instinctively traditionalist. Meanwhile Oakeshott's reception has transcended Anglophone academia and is building across the Continent.¹⁰ This would suggest that Oakeshott – after an initial slump in interest – is indeed on the way to becoming a classic of twentieth century political philosophy. Perhaps not quite as iconic as Rawls or Habermas but certainly on par with Friedrich A. v. Hayek, John Dewey or Richard Rorty. It also seems that Oakeshott, in the greater perspective of the history of philosophy, has successfully secured a place for himself. Ann Hartle, for example, argues that Oakeshott is joined with Michel de Montaigne in what Montaigne terms *accidental philosophy* for “Oakeshott's account of the essay form and of the meaning of philosophy are identical” and both acknowledge

⁸ A bibliography compiled by Efraim Podoksik between 2003 and 2009 can be accessed via the Michael Oakeshott Association at <http://www.michael-oakeshott-association.com/index.php/bibliography> It incorporates John Liddington's earlier bibliography which up until 1993 provided the most complete overview of Oakeshott's published work. See John H. Liddington: *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott*, ed. by Jesse Norman, London: Gerald Duckworth, 1993.

⁹ Paul Franco and Leslie Marsh (Eds.): *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012; Efraim Podoksik (Ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Michael Henkel und Oliver Lembcke (Eds.): *Politik und Praxis – Michael Oakeshott im Dialog*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013. The latter includes ten contributions in English and seven in German.

¹⁰ Recent translations include in Italian: *La politica moderna tra scetticismo e fede*, ed. by Agostino Carrino, Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2013; in Spanish: *La actitud conservadora*, prólogo de Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez, Madrid: Ediciones Sequitur, 2009; *Moral y política en la Europa moderna*, traducción de Carmen Ors Marqués, prólogo a la edición Española Gerardo López Sastre, Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2008; *La voz del aprendizaje liberal*, traducción de Ana Bello, Buenos Aires y Madrid: Katz editors, 2009; *Lecciones de historia del pensamiento político*, vol. I (Desde Grecia hasta la Edad Media) y vol. II ((El carácter del estado moderno Europeo), introducción, traducción y edición al cuidado de Francisco Javier López Atanes, Madrid: Unión Editorial, 2012/13; *Sobre la historia y otros ensayos*, traducción de María Victoria Rodil, Buenos Aires y Madrid: Katz editors, 2013; in French: *Morale et politique dans l'Europe moderne*, preface de Olivier Seyden, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006; *L'association civile selon Hobbes* (suivi de cinq essais sur Hobbes), traduction de Dominique Weber, Paris: Vrin, 2011; *Du conservatism*, traduction de Jean-François Sené, preface d'Adrien Guillemin, Paris: Editions du Félin, 2012; in Hungarian: *Politikai racionalizmus*, trans. by T. Kállai and T. Szentmiklósi, Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 2001; in Portuguese: *Ser conservador*, tradução por Rafael Borges, available at https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/35133614/SerConservador_Oakeshott.pdf; and in Russian: *Ratsionalizm v Politike i Drugie Statii*, ed. by L.B. Makeeva, A.B. Tolstova and M.F. Kosilova, trans. by I.I. Myuoberg, E.V. Kosilova, Y.A. Nikiforov and O.V. Artemieva, Moscow: Ideia-Press, 2002.

the radical contingency of being and recognize the limits of politics.¹¹ Oakeshott's 1929 essay *Religion and the World*, Hartle claims, might well be read as a portrait of Montaigne.¹²

However, scholars of Montaigne as of Oakeshott have long debated whether they should be best thought of as conservative or liberal thinkers and both views seem credible to some extent but neither satisfactory by itself.¹³ This is the case because, as Hartle suggests, the categories of conservatism and liberalism do not capture but rather obscure the deeper division between those "who profess a faith in politics, and thus in human reason, to secure the human good (i.e. perfection) and those who are skeptical concerning the ability of government and who want to limit its power".¹⁴ And bearing in mind that "concepts are not hermetically sealed and allow for fluid, if controlled, movement across their vague boundaries"¹⁵, such quarrels over conceptual branding might be entertaining in their own ways but more often than not converge on tediousness. They also suffer from a misunderstanding of the workings of political ideologies. In his political essays Oakeshott himself recognized that political concepts are interrelated, mutually interacting and often characterized by fundamental ambiguity and it is this ambiguity which, as Hanna Pitkin points out, gives them their meaning and makes their functioning possible.¹⁶

For the political scientist, what takes precedence then is not the question of how to coherently integrate heterogeneous and often inconsistent elements of a particular ideology or distill a

¹¹ Ann Hartle: *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, direct quote at p. 37. Thanks to letter to Patrick T. Riley we know that Oakeshott regarded Montaigne – along with St. Augustine – as the "two most remarkable men who have ever lived". See Patrick Riley: Michael Oakeshott, Philosopher of Individuality. In: *Review of Politics*, Vol. 54. No. 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 649-664, 664.

¹² Ibid. , p. 167. See Michael Oakeshott: *Religion and the World*. In: *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. by Timothy Fuller, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 27-37.

¹³ On Montaigne see the overview in Hartle: *Michel de Montaigne*, p. 278n14; on Oakeshott see, for example, Leslie Marsh: Oakeshott and Hayek: Situating the Mind. In: *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott*, ed. by Paul Franco and Leslie Marsh, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012, p. 261; Andrew Gamble: Oakeshott's Ideological Politics: Conservative or Liberal? and William A. Galston: Oakeshott's Political Theory: Recapitulation and Criticisms. Both in: *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*, ed. by Efraim Podoksik, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 153-176 and 222-244 respectively, as well as the references given on p. 242n1. Edmund Fawcett has further argued that both Oakeshott's and Isaiah Berlin's "modest view of what politics could accomplish" exemplified "aspects of the constraints that liberals place on acceptable social order." Edmund Fawcett: Oakeshott and Berlin: Letting Politics Alone and 'Negative' Liberty. In: *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 317.

¹⁴ Hartle: *Michel de Montaigne*, p. 220. To the same effect see also Noel Malcolm: Oakeshott and Hobbes. In: *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott*, ed. by Paul Franco and Leslie Marsh, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012, p. 224.

¹⁵ See Michael Freeden: Political Concepts and Ideological Morphology. In: *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 140-164, direct quote at 154-55. Freeden argues that the specificity of political concepts is the result of respective combinations of two factors, "the presence of an ineliminable component, albeit an undifferentiated form rather than hard and substantive; and a nonrandom, even if widely variable, collection of additional components that are locked in to that vacuous 'de facto' core in a limited number of recognizable patterns". Ibid. p. 149. See also the in-depth discussion in Freeden's *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

¹⁶ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin: Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory. In: *Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (August 1976), pp. 301-320, 317.

'standard case' but rather why certain views attained a dominant political position at the time they did. Liberalism and conservatism thus do not appear as mutually contradictory sets of political ideas. Rather they need to be situated within the broader political, social and cultural shifts to which both had to find new ways to accommodate.¹⁷

Both, Montaigne as well as Oakeshott, did not believe that politics can provide a way for the attainment of the human good and it is this skepticism which moderates against rational schemes of change and rational ideals of perfection. Contrary to the modern belief that "the realization of the ideal state is inherent in reason itself", both seem to think that the task of political philosophy is not to be an instrument of rule but that of limiting the pretensions of politics. But perhaps Montaigne was more aware than Oakeshott that there is "no possibility of real innocence in the world of politics." That is, even if one consciously shied away from getting one's own hands dirty as Oakeshott, not out of a sense of aloofness but for genuine methodological reasons, seems to have done. Political philosophy, for him, could not be expected to provide secure foundations, nor to "increase our ability to be successful in political activity", it had no power to "guide or to direct us in the enterprise of pursuing the intimations of our tradition" and thus, in a sense, it had "nothing but a history."¹⁸

For Montaigne, the defense of private life – what Oakeshott called the richness and plurality of any tradition – required resistance to the ever-expanding claims of the universal and homogenous state.¹⁹ To be sure, this is of more than just incidental concern. In Oakeshott's time scarcely anyone needed reminding that the ethnic, religious and cultural homogeneity of the European nation states was the result of an age of extremes and Oakeshott's might in part have well been a "call for quiet"²⁰ as well as constraint in the face of totalitarianism's mid-century suffocating grip on the meaning of human existence. In our own time, concerns may seem of less immediacy and greater ambiguity such as the increasing disenfranchising and depoliticizing of the public sphere as a forum of political deliberation, the effects of a global consumer culture or the increasing

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion see Harald Bluhm und Christoph M. Michael: Anglo-American Conservatism since Thatcher and Reagan. In: *Neue Politische Literatur*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2013). It is especially in terms of comparative research that the contextualization of conservatism and liberalism within a shared conceptual field recommends itself. See also paradigmatically Daniel T. Rodgers: *Age of Fracture*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011.

¹⁸ Michael Oakeshott: Political Education. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 43-69, direct quotes at pp. 65.

¹⁹ Hartle: *Michel de Montaigne*, pp. 223-225.

²⁰ Edmund Fawcett: *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 317. Oakeshott had expressed a growing disdain towards political ideologies in *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939.

encroachment on private life by what to its critics seems like the realization of an Orwellian surveillance society.²¹

In what follows I cannot hope to comprehensively review the yields of almost a quarter of a century of scholarship since Oakeshott's death, nor distill his vision of politics – or for that matter political philosophy – in any conclusive form. I will have very little, if anything, to say on Oakeshott's philosophical inheritance of idealism, his philosophy of history and religion, nor on his writings on education and aesthetics. Rather, I would like to revisit two of his most important and widely read contributions to political philosophy and, secondly, in pairing Oakeshott with Sir Bernard Williams, I argue – perhaps counter-intuitively – for the continued relevance of his style of thought. As such, I'm not quite sure whether this makes me guilty of Jesse Norman's charge made at last year's Oakeshott Memorial Lecture at LSE that most of those who "invoke Oakeshott in and around politics have actually [not] read much of him, since they almost always ignore his greatest works *Experience and its Modes* and *On Human Conduct*."²²

"Rationalism in Politics" and "Hobbes on Civil Association"

What Oakeshott is, and very likely will continue to be, best known for is his critique of rationalism and his work on the history of political thought, in particular his reading of Hobbes. As a scholar of Hobbes Oakeshott argued that both the mechanistic-materialist view and that of Hobbes as a defender of despotism were in fact misconceived. As were the ones that saw in Hobbes's civil philosophy the beginning of "sociology, or a science of politics". Oakeshott, instead, read Hobbes as "the most radical" of all sceptics (e.g. Montaigne or Pascal) with a distinct late scholastic legacy that set him apart from Spinoza and Descartes, a philosophical rationalist and yet anti-rationalist when it came to politics.²³

What seemed to draw Oakeshott to Hobbes was a particular reading of the historical development of individuality and the form of political order – *civitas* – it gave rise to, and of *Leviathan* as an

²¹ Exemplarily see Helen Fenwick: *Criminalising Public Disorder and Anti-Social Behaviour*. In: *Civil Liberties and Human Rights*. London: Cavendish, 2007, pp. 505-517; and Graeme Gerrard and Richard Thompson: *Two Million Cameras in the UK*. In: *CCTV Image*, No. 42 (Winter 2011), pp. 11-12.

²² Jesse Norman: *Burke, Oakeshott and the Intellectual Roots of Modern Conservatism*. [Oakeshott Memorial Lecture], November, 12 2013. A podcast of the Lecture is available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2106>

²³ Michael Oakeshott: *Introduction to Leviathan*. In: *Hobbes on Civil Association*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975, pp. 11, 21, 27, 32.

exploration of the morality of individuality of “separate and sovereign individuals associated with one another” and into the causes of such association.²⁴ Oakeshott argued that it led to a particular form of mutual accommodation in which men “have not surrendered their right to pursue felicity, they have surrendered only their right each to do this unconditionally” and

“transferred the right of each to govern himself to a sovereign Actor; they have covenanted with one another to authorize all his actions, each to avouch every such action as his own, to submit their judgements and wills to his judgement and will in all that concerns their peace and security, to obey his commands, and to pledge all their strength and power to support the exercise of this authority”.²⁵

More interestingly, Oakeshott interprets Hobbes to understand human life as a tension between the primary passions of pride (to be recognized and honored by other men as preeminent) and fear (the dread of violent and shameful death at the hand of another man) and he ultimately thinks that Hobbes gave precedence to pride, not fear, in the emancipation of men manifesting itself within a civitas. This, Oakeshott thinks, is the “obscure heart of Hobbes’s moral theory”. Whereas “those whose heads were [not] strong enough to withstand the giddiness provoked by his scepticism” would only grasp Hobbes as saying that pride is a vice and mankind must purge itself of its illusions even when it is not vainglory; and that it is fear which provokes “reason to suggest the convenient articles of peace” (thus generating the morality of the tame man), Oakeshott recognized another, esoteric meaning in Hobbes’s theory of civil obligation.

In this implicit line of argument, emancipation from the fear of shameful death is still sought but it takes place by a “moralization of pride itself”, emancipation result from the character of a man “whose disposition is to overcome fear not be reason (that is, by seeking a secure condition of external human circumstances) but by his own courage”, a man, “who (in Montaigne’s phrase) ‘knows how to belong to himself,’ and who” [...] keeps his word “not merely because he fears the consequences of breaking it, but from ‘a glory or pride in appearing not to need to beak it’.” The virtuous side of pride is self-love free from delusions of omnipotence, a self-love which “appears as self-knowledge and self-respect,” and in which

“the delusions of power over others is replaced by the reality of self-control, and the glory of the invulnerability which comes from courage generates magnanimity, peace. This is the *virtue* of pride whose lineage is to be traced back to the nymph Hybris, the reputed mother of Pan by Zeus; the pride which is reflected in the *megalopsychos* of Aristotle and at a lower level in the wise man of the Stoics; the *sancta superbia* which had its place in medieval moral theology; and which was recognized by Hobbes as an

²⁴ Oakeshott: The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes. In: Ibid. , p. 82.

²⁵ Oakeshott: Introduction to Leviathan. In: Ibid. , p. 44, 47.

alternative manner to that suggested by fear and reason of preserving one's own nature and emancipating oneself from ... the strife which this fear generates."²⁶

Pride and self-esteem thus do supply "an adequate motive for endeavouring peace" and this specific idiom of the morality of individuality rescues proud man from the lows of the bourgeois morality of the tame man who has settled for safety instead of the brilliance of life; and thus can, according to Oakeshott, justly be called "aristocratic".²⁷

Hobbes is portrayed, here, as a stout individualist and perhaps this is most clear in the discussion of civil obligation and the non-instrumentality and non-purposiveness of the state. As Oakeshott puts it,

"Hobbes is not an absolutist precisely because he is an authoritarian" and this separates him from "the rationalist dictators of his or any age. Indeed, Hobbes [...] had in him more of the philosophy of liberalism than most of its professed defenders."²⁸

Neither, Oakeshott argued, does Hobbes's *civitas* compromise the individuality of the covenanters, nor is the Sovereign's absolutism destructive of individuality. This is the case since the covenanters "have not surrendered their right to pursue felicity; they have surrendered only their right each to do this unconditionally", even despite this right not being retractable, and, secondly, though as *cives* they are subject to artificial impediments to their conduct, namely civil laws, these impediments "have been authorized by themselves" and are thus a self-inflicted diminution of freedom. The moral authority of the sovereign, that "Mortall God", derives solely from an act of will of those obliged.

What is more, there is and can be no common or communal felicity since "neither before nor after the establishment of civil association is there any such thing as the *People*, ... Whatever community exists must be generated by individual acts of will", and there is in Hobbes's association "no concord of wills, no common will, no common good; its unity lies solely in the singleness of the Representative, in the *substitution* of his one will for the many conflicting wills."²⁹ As Hobbes famously put it in chapter 17 of *Leviathan*: "For by this Authoritie, given him by every particular man in the Common-Wealth, he hath the use of so much Power and Strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is inabled to forme the wills of them all". There is a distinct echo of Hobbes consistently present in Oakeshott's work on questions of political obligation and legitimate authority. In a 1975 essay, for example, Oakeshott faults what he perceives to have

²⁶ This and the preceding quotes come from Oakeshott: *The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes*. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 126-133, italics in the original.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁸ Oakeshott: Introduction to *Leviathan*. In: *Hobbes on Civil Association*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975, p. 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 44, 65, italics in the original.

achieved an unwarranted orthodoxy in political discourse, namely a conception of rule as the exercise of power and the modern state as constituted by an apparatus of power. This doctrine he dismisses as “a half-baked affair [...] unable to recognize the difference between legitimate and illegitimate power”. For Oakeshott, the relationship of the office of rule in a modern state and its subjects is first of all one of authority and obligation, and not a power relationship of compulsion and obedience. The authority to effectively enforce the fulfilment of obligations derives not from the power-apparatus at hand, but from the authority to prescribe non-instrumental rules of conduct. What turns a person into a subject of the apparatus of power, and an injury into a penalty, is failure to fulfil an obligation. Where this link between power and authority in an association is severed, tyranny reigns.³⁰

Interestingly though a look at the *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan* published in 2007 may suggest, quite to the contrary of much of the work on Oakeshott, that his framing of Hobbes lost its relevance for contemporary scholarship. There, Oakeshott is only mentioned twice and that merely in passing, trailing both Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt by a considerable margin while in the *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, Alan Ryan ploughs a lonely furrow in acknowledging that his general perspective on Hobbes is not “unlike that of Michael Oakeshott in *Hobbes on Civil Association*”.³¹

Oakeshott understood politics as “attending to the general arrangements of a society” by which he meant first of all those “hereditary co-operative groups ... aware of a past, a present, and a future, which we call ‘states’”. What he termed general arrangements included customs, institutions, laws or diplomatic decisions. A collection of people lacking “recognized traditions of behavior” and whose arrangements “intimated no direction for change” or “needed no attention” were to him clearly “incapable of politics”.³² These traditions of behavior from which politics as an activity “springs” are understood as dynamic, generating the need of their own amendment and Oakeshott viewed them as “at once coherent and incoherent”. Politics is thus concerned with the amendment of existing arrangements of a society, as an exploration of “what is intimated in them” or, as I would put it in a more contemporary idiom, as a continuous process of civil repair. This conception of politics urges us to thoroughly engage with our own tradition and make its

³⁰ Michael Oakeshott: Talking Politics. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 438-461, direct quotes at pp. 446, 447.

³¹ Alan Ryan: Hobbes's Political Philosophy. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, ed. by Tom Sorell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 208-245, direct quote on p. 241. See also Alan Ryan: Hobbes and Individualism. In: *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by G. A. J. Rogers and Alan Ryan, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 81-105.

³² Michael Oakeshott: Political Education. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 43-69, direct quotes at pp. 44, 56.

whole resources available to us – it is, at the academic level, primarily “an historical study ... concerned with the detail of the concrete”³³ – while it militates against the threat of rationalism.

The head-on attack on Rationalist and near-Rationalist politics Oakeshott launched in his 1947 essay *Rationalism in Politics* needs to be read, I would argue, as wedged between the traumas of European empires swept away, rabid nationalism, bloodshed and genocide on an unprecedented scale, and the seeming ascendancy of Fabian socialism to power with a postwar Labour government as well as the beginning of bloc confrontation of the Cold War.³⁴ This is of particular importance, for the contemporary reader unfamiliar with other parts of Oakeshott’s work may well think him to put forth an (epistemologically grounded) version of cultural critique.

The “disease” of Rationalism in politics, he claims, not only “amounts to a corruption of the mind” but also “dries up the mind itself”, “you cannot escape its errors” since it is “without the power to correct its own shortcomings”. Once a society has been thoroughly infected, there’s no cure and “how deeply the rationalist disposition of mind has invaded our political thought and practice is illustrated by the extent to which [unselfconsciously established] traditions of behavior have given place to ideologies”.³⁵ Especially in view of the passages in the beginning of section 5, one cannot but wonder whether Oakeshott is not in fact being ironic here in the same sense that Machiavelli himself was thought to be by Rousseau in Book III, Chapter 6 of *Du Contract Social*: the secret agent of republicanism. But also section 4, where Oakeshott argues that none of the

“new and inexperienced social classes which [...] have risen to the exercise of political initiative and authority [...] had time to acquire a political education before it came to power: each needed [...] a political doctrine, to take the place of a habit of political behavior [...] but they are abridgements of a tradition, rationalizations purporting to elicit the ‘truth’ of a tradition and to exhibit it in a set of abstract principles, but from which, nevertheless, the full significance of the tradition inevitable escapes”,³⁶

is bound to raise a number of eyebrows. Such knowledge of the political traditions of society, Oakeshott maintains, takes “two or three generations to acquire” in the most favorable of circumstances. If this alone were to be Oakeshott’s position, it surely invites ridicule, and well-justified at that. But although Oakeshott’s critique of Rationalism is primarily epistemological, it becomes clear that his reading of tradition as *practice* is tied to the morality of individuality he explored in Hobbes. First, it stands in opposition to a moral ideology, “the desiccated relic of what once was the unselfconscious moral tradition of an aristocracy”: a self-conscious pursuit of moral

³³ Ibid. , p. 63. This might justly be read as a sincere plea for full-fledged liberal education. It is also a timely reminder of its value in the face of the large scale cuts in higher education that have occurred over the last decade or two.

³⁴ Michael Oakeshott: *Rationalism in Politics*. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 5-42. In this essay I retain Oakeshott’s notation of Rationalism with capital-R.

³⁵ Ibid. , pp. 26, 37.

³⁶ Ibid. , p. 30.

ideas no longer “suspended in a religious or social tradition” or “belonging to a religious or a social life” and, thus, without any real moral significance.³⁷

The more sympathetic reader, familiar with *Experience and its Modes*, will undoubtedly grasp the similarity of concerns driving Oakeshott’s inquiry in *Rationalism in Politics*. As Steven B. Smith put it, his entire work can be considered as a “sustained reflection on a single problem: the relation of reason and the moral life [... and] at the core of Oakeshott’s moral theory is the concept of experience.”³⁸ Secondly, in *On Being Conservative* Oakeshott distances himself from the Burkean need to place absolute value in certain social edifices and general ideas such as the free play of human choice or private property in the guise of a natural right (and thus somewhat contradicts what he had written nearly a decade earlier), which he thinks is unnecessary and pretentious. Equally implausible is the assumption that “those who rule are endowed with a superior wisdom which discloses to them a better range of beliefs and activities and which gives them authority to impose upon their subjects a quite different manner of life.”³⁹ Oakeshott does not simply criticize the application of abstract principles to human affair but the failure to appreciate that science and practice (but also history and aesthetics) are distinct modes of human experience and none of these can be privileged over the others. Politics thus poses not merely problems of technique calling for the advancement of managerial solutions informed by science. Jesse Norman is right to point out that, contrary to Burke, Oakeshott’s is not a social conservatism of value but a liberal one of disposition. It is not the duty of those in public authority to preserve the social order because it is a reservoir of value but “the task of government is to generalise that disposition and so preserve man’s freedom to pursue his own projects without interruption or oppression.”⁴⁰

This individualism and the particular cast it received by Oakeshott’s interpretation of Hobbes, I believe, is key to understanding what might otherwise appear as aristocratic disdain for the newly enfranchised masses. The *uomo singolare* who emerged first in Italy and “whose conduct was marked by a high degree of self-determination and a large number of whose activities expressed personal preferences” in fact turned out for most of the newly created modern men plugged from the “familiar anonymity of communal life” a burdensome enterprise since they could not transform their personal identity into an individuality. The historical emergence of human individuality thus did not only create the individual but also the “individual *manqué*”, not as an

³⁷ Ibid. , p. 41.

³⁸ Steven B. Smith: Practical Life and the Critique of Rationalism. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*, ed. by Efraim Podoksik, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 131.

³⁹ Michael Oakeshott: On Being Conservative. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 407-437, p. 427.

⁴⁰ Jesse Norman: Burke, Oakeshott and the Intellectual Roots of Modern Conservatism. [Oakeshott Memorial Lecture], November, 12 2013.

relic of a past age in the individual's tow but a modern character in his own right.⁴¹ As a consequence, the masses as they appear in European history, Oakeshott claimed, were not composed of individuals, "they are composed of 'anti-individuals' united in a revulsion from individuality." Anti-individualism thus established itself as "one of the major dispositions of the modern European moral character" and the "mass man" had no disposition to become an individual.⁴² And to deliver the final blow in the face of all progressives, he dryly remarks that

"what, in fact, prevented him [the anti-individual] enjoying the rights of individuality (which were as available to him as to anyone else) was not his 'circumstances' but his character – his 'anti-individuality'. The rights of individuality were necessarily such that the 'mass man' could have no use for them. [...] In short, the right he claimed, the right appropriate to his character, was the right to live in a social protectorate which relieved him of the burden of 'self-determination'."⁴³

If, for whatever reasons, one's aim was to split wide open Oakeshott's later work and administer a scaring critical reassessment, *The Masses in Representative Democracy* surely must be seen as an invitation.

I think it evident, however, that the kind of abstract principles which Oakeshott denounces as progeny of Rationalism – such as Locke's 1690 *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, the 1776 *Declaration of Independence* of the thirteen state of America or the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* – have become a constitutive part of how we understand ourselves as human beings, that is, an essential and irreducible part of our political tradition. His peculiar argument for the recovery of our lost tradition becomes intelligible by understanding it as hermeneutically inspired by the Straussian distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching which Oakeshott had put to use in the *Introduction to Leviathan* a year earlier in order to clear away perceived inconsistencies in Hobbes's moral philosophy. This might also explain Oakeshott's own misunderstanding regarding the forms of knowledge constitutive of the genuine activity of politics, as he envisioned it. The practical knowledge destroyed by Rationalism cannot be recovered as the potentiality of acquiring this knowledge and forming corresponding sets of belief is no longer available to people and, even if it could be recovered, it would no longer provide guidance through those people's social world, nor could have a part in forming it.

Morality and the Ethical Life

⁴¹ Michael Oakeshott: *The Masses in Representative Democracy*. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 365, 371.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 371, 373, 376-377.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

It should have become clear from the preceding sections that Oakeshott was a moral particularist and the standard for moral reasoning, as he understood it, was not some abstract universal rule but the degree of coherence with the concrete tradition within which that reasoning occurred.⁴⁴ He was not expressing a conservatism of rootedness, unselfconscious traditional conduct and hostility towards reflection. Probing one's own tradition is a key prerequisite for any meaningful political education, not least because, as Bernard Williams pointed out, it matters a great deal in what way past conceptions of justice and legitimations of hierarchy in earlier societies are seen as either discredited or providing historical continuity.

In this section I attempt to read Oakeshott's position through the particular lens provided by Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* as well as a later essay on philosophy as a humanistic discipline.⁴⁵ This might well strike some as a contradiction in terms but generates, I believe, relevant insights beyond the question of what Oakeshott's position really was. Although there's scant reference to Oakeshott in Williams's work, in his 1972 essay *Knowledge and Reasons* Williams recognizes the distinction between propositional and practical knowledge as "genuine and ineliminable, neither sort of knowledge being reducible to the other". But it does not follow from this that what is not rooted in practice, is "in *that* sense theory" and Williams thinks that this idea has generated serious confusion on the part of Michael Oakeshott in *Rationalism in Politics*.⁴⁶

What Bernard Williams has called the *absolute conception of the world* helps to illuminate this misunderstanding.⁴⁷ Science might describe the world *as it is in itself*, that is, give a scientific – not a factual – representation of it, one which is to the largest possible extent independent of the local perspectives or idiosyncrasies of the enquirer. A representation that Williams called the absolute conception. Whether such conception is at all attainable or coherent is of course epistemologically much disputed and Hilary Putnam finds it hard to see why science would at all need to converge in the direction of an absolute conception, just one single explanatory picture of the world.⁴⁸ But much of the history of Western science, especially its inherent notion of progress, undeniably

⁴⁴ Steven B. Smith has further pointed out that Oakeshott, rather than being a relativist, is above all a moral pluralist who understands moral traditions as complex, attaches value to different moral voices and rejects the notion that specific features of a moral tradition could be privileged over others as imposing "an intolerable dullness and uniformity on the richness and variety of life." See Steven B. Smith: *Practical Life and the Critique of Rationalism*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*, ed. by Efraim Podoksik, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 131-152, here 140-141.

⁴⁵ Bernard Williams: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985; and *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. In: *Philosophy*, 75, October 2000, pp. 477-496, reprinted in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 180-199.

⁴⁶ Bernard Williams: *Knowledge and Reasons*. In: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 47-56, direct quotes at p. 47, italics in the original.

⁴⁷ Here and in the following I heavily draw from Bernard Williams: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, esp. pp. 133-139, and Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. In: *Philosophy*, 75, October 2000, pp. 477-496.

⁴⁸ Hilary Putnam: *Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction*. In: *Realism with a Human Face*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 170.

appears as an exercise in convergence. Be that as it may, in the present context the important point is another:

When reflecting on our conceptualisation of the world, it is possible to recognise from inside that very conceptualisation that some of the concepts and representations of the world are to a greater degree dependent than others on our perspective and particularities of apprehending things. Many of our everyday intellectual, social, political and other activities evolve from and require concepts and explanations which are deeply rooted in our local practices, our culture, and our history. Concepts that cannot be replaced by such minimally perspectival conceptions we might share with all of humanity. It is thus wrong to suppose that, even though our conceptions of the world are bound by our history, practices, and culture, they are all equally local or perspectival, thereby disallowing to contrast the concepts of physics and the concepts of politics or ethics. It is equally wrong to suppose that if such differentiation could be established, and one set of these concepts could be shown to be potentially universal, then it follows from this that those potentially universal concepts somehow intrinsically trump the more locally and historically grounded.

In both cases, the scientific and the ethical, convergence must – irrespective of whether it actually occurs – be understood differently. Actual convergence in the sciences can at least ideally be explained as having been guided by how things anyway are, whereas in the area of the ethics such hope cannot but remain frustrated. Agreement on how satellites are best flown into space entails a different sort of consensus than the approval or disapproval of the death penalty. Within the ethical sphere, an absolute conception of the world remains as much erroneous as inadequate in attempting to conflate two distinct epistemological spheres. This is, of course, not synonymous with Oakeshott's distinction between technical knowledge and practice but corresponds well enough. For my purpose here I believe it sufficient to note that Williams' distinction between ethical and scientific concepts amounts to the realization that our ethical descriptions (especially that of one human community as opposed to another) are indeed parochial. This should be both unsettling and relativize our confidence in our own ethical vocabulary⁴⁹ and, hence, it cannot remain without effect on our first-order ethical judgements.

Williams nevertheless does not mean to imply by it that ethical statements cannot have a truth value or, on a more general level, that there cannot be ethical knowledge, even if those who try to settle such epistemological questions would think it little better than a layman's conception or indeed a case of bad pragmatism, an allusion Ronald Dworkin has repeatedly made to the views Rorty expressed on the subject.⁵⁰ Ethical statements cannot be categorically true, even if it would make the lives of people, politicians and indeed many philosophers easier. They are contingent on

⁴⁹ Here I follow Richard Rorty's use of that term in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁵⁰ See Ronald Dworkin: *Justice in Robes*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 2006, pp. 36-41.

the acceptance of a certain set of beliefs, social practices, and public interpretation of those beliefs. The central question regarding the relation of ethical knowledge and political activity is, thus, not the philosophically inspired one of how ethical knowledge is possible (a question to which we might hope to find a kind of a priori answer absolving us from the messiness of real world contexts and that allows to bypass the historical conditions that gave shape to them). Rather than attempting such escape from history, thinking about the relation of ethical knowledge and political activity requires the historicization of social practices and self-images that give rise to the kind of beliefs that people consider both true and justified.

Ethical concepts can provide decisive reasons for action – as when giving away spare change to the homeless – or they can be outweighed by other reasons that prevent them from becoming action-guiding. At the same time, actions, irrespective of the type or set of reasons that motivate them, can impact on either our, the other's, or indeed both our thick ethical concepts. Because of the way these are tied to matters of identity, of what we understand ourselves to be, purely economically motivated actions, for example, can seem to threaten our beliefs and the ways we make our judgements, indeed our way of life. It is not hard to recognize the potential for group conflict in this. It is here that Williams' distinction between the ethical and the scientific helps us see that not all pieces of knowledge can be combined into a larger body of knowledge, that it is precisely the thick ethical concepts that sometimes evade translation or are incommensurable.⁵¹ Even the most sophisticated of rational choice accounts of behaviour, for example, must fall short of incorporating such distinction within their methodological apparatus.

People's thick ethical concepts (as opposed to another community's concepts whether distant in place or time) often are characterized by an *unwieldy singularity* in meaning ineliminably tied to practice that might not permit an observer to apply them in the same deep and substantial sense. The case for "irreducibly social goods" Charles Taylor makes in his *Philosophical Arguments* aims at this "peculiar strong relation" that presupposes and requires a particular background of shared meanings and practices, but it is slightly off target.⁵² I cannot see how it follows from the irreducibly social conditions in which thick ethical concepts historically develop that these concepts, but not only those, also the whole culture in which they have developed, is intrinsically good:

"To say that a certain kind of self-giving heroism is good, or a certain quality of aesthetic experience, must be to judge the cultures in which this kind of heroism and that kind of experience are conceivable options

⁵¹ Bernard Williams: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 142 ff.

⁵² Charles Taylor: Irreducibly Social Goods. In: *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 127-145, 132.

as good cultures. If such virtue and experience are worth cultivating, then the cultures have to be worth fostering, not as contingent instruments, but for themselves.”⁵³

In case of people’s thick ethical concepts there is a condition that needs to be satisfied in order to use those concepts. It is a matter of belonging to that culture, that is, it is a matter of belonging to a certain practice. But to judge that certain cultures are good cultures the way Taylor has in mind involves concepts on the level of reflective generality, concepts which Oakeshott would surely judge Rationalist.⁵⁴ Since in all societies there is some degree of reflective questioning or criticism (and it is perhaps here that Williams located Oakeshott’s confusion, because this reflective criticism is not synonymous with a self-conscious deliberation over the principles of moral behaviour, with what Oakeshott termed “reflective morality”⁵⁵), the relation between practice and reflection raises a question Williams phrased as follows: “Does the practice of the society, in particular the judgements that members of the society make, imply answers to reflective questions about that practice [...]?”⁵⁶

It seems sufficiently clear to me that the general answer to this question must be in the negative. It depends on the model of ethical practice we are adopting – an objectivist or a nonobjectivist one – and this, in turn, will determine whether we grant the members of a particular ethical practice to possess ethical knowledge or simply think their practice an unreflective contingent cultural artefact. The ethical knowledge in question is knowledge involved in people’s making of judgements that employ their thick ethical concepts.

As Williams points out, it is the collective reference to the society that invites a comparative perspective. But comparing the ethical representations of different societies (whether distant in place or time) is an exercise that occurs on the reflective level. Likewise Taylor’s judgement on the intrinsic goodness of cultures is clearly located on the reflective level and reflection, as Williams notes, characteristically disturbs and might even destroy the ethical knowledge those cultures unselfconsciously have. It is difficult to see how, at the reflective level, there can be an adequate body of ethical knowledge that would allow us to make judgements about what is worth

⁵³ Ibid. , p. 137.

⁵⁴ Williams grants that general and abstract ethical concepts within the perspective of practical reason might come to have a sort of weak objectivity in arriving at the truth about the ethical after having considered all ethical experience. Even so, Williams cannot see how reflective ethical thought could be epistemologically convincingly modelled to converge on ethical reality. It has been argued, though, that thick and thin ethical concepts might not be as different with regard to objectivity as Williams thinks. See Warren Quinn: Reflection and the Loss of Moral Knowledge: Williams on Objectivity. In: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16, (Spring) 1987, pp. 195-209.

⁵⁵ For the distinction between a ‘morality of affection and behavior’ and a ‘morality of reflection’ see Oakeshott’s 1948 essay *The Tower of Babel*, reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 465-487.

⁵⁶ Bernard Williams: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 146.

cultivating.⁵⁷ On the contrary, if we subscribe to a nonobjectivist view of ethical practice, as Taylor would surely do, it is simply not possible at all to advance such a claim.

Fostering cultures and arguing for their member's continuation of their practices is therefore a rather strange idea. It will remain one, even if we readily acknowledge both, the irreducibly social conditions that shape such practices and subscribe to the "affirmation of ordinary life" in locating the good life for human beings not in some higher activity but "at the very center of everyday existence, in the acquisition through labour of the means to live and the reproduction of life in the family."⁵⁸

Normative ethics, understood as a set of rationally acceptable moral judgements or principles of conduct, sacrifice the integrity of a moral tradition and the wealth of moral praxis in favour of the prior classifications of certain and often competing normative ethical theories and we can see that this is precisely one of the defects that Oakeshott criticized as the produce of Rationalism.⁵⁹ Normative ethics, Oakeshott may have agreed, is like a sound knowledge of the technical working of an instrument without being able to play it well; and neither yet makes a musician. It is thus important to look at the history of our own ethical concepts and view their content as an often contingent historical phenomenon. As Williams pointed out, a reflective stance towards our own ethical concepts must involve such historical understanding. Even conceptual description is not self-sufficient and attempts to derive our concepts a priori from universal conditions of human life are likely to leave unexplained many important features for understanding one's own concepts.⁶⁰ Though we are shaped by them, we are not chained to them and I think it is safe to say that we have stopped a long time ago believing that reason can instruct us both as to what our true end is and how to reach it, even if some endeavours of neuroscience still seem inclined to uphold the universality and categorical character of certain rules of reason. What Oakeshott called the morality of reflection, as much as the effects of Rationalism in politics he so adamantly criticised, both carry within them much more of the "rhythm and continuity" of society than he was prepared to acknowledge.

Political choices and their justification must be viewed as social phenomena rather than something that depends on the relation of our knowledge claims to reality. Since that message is a historicist one, political philosophy must win its game on a bigger field than the realm of reason provides. Only then will its inquiries be able to voice more than theory immanent criticism that is

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor: Irreducibly Social Goods. In: *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 127-145, 144.

⁵⁹ See Antonio S. Cua: Reflections on Moral Theory and Understanding Moral Traditions. In: *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. by Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, 280-93.

⁶⁰ Bernard Williams: Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline. In: *Philosophy*, 75, October 2000, pp. 477-496.

of relevance only within the narrow confines of our academic departments, even though some university departments may be more spacious than others. But this argument might reflect to a greater extent my own ideas of a direction worth traveling in than it is covered by both Williams and Oakeshott. It shows – far too briefly – that, and why, certain forms of liberalism and conservatism should be viewed as equally misguided in finding ways of dealing with common challenges and why neither of these labels do stick well with the Oakeshottian position.

Neither Aesthetic nor Political

In 1976, nearly a decade after Oakeshott's retirement from his chair at the London School of Economics, Hanna Pitkin claimed that

“more profoundly than anyone since Burke, he [Oakeshott] developed for us a vision of society that might today properly be called "ecological" an awareness of the complexity and delicacy of interrelationships among institutions, customs, and ways of life. [...]He has sought to remind us of the nature of a healthy political life and to defend it against both the fragmentation of self-interested conflict and the suffocation of bureaucratic administration.”⁶¹

Pitkin with her usual acuteness still provides one of the most rewarding reads on Oakeshott's work and we can now see that Oakeshott was neither the “quintessentially English gentleman scholar”⁶² well shielded from the messy world of politics in the ivory towers of elite universities and later on by the serenity of rural life with its stone-walled fields and meadows and its scenic views of the remnants of a vanished way of life turned heritage site, nor was he a “refusenik of modern life” as some commentators continue to claim.⁶³ Self-administered village politics was not Oakeshott's implicit ideal and to classify his political thought simply as the politicization of rural aesthetics would be a gross misrepresentation. On the contrary, he had an acute awareness of the deep shifts in the ideational and political make-up of his own century and would have concurred with Williams in his assessment that it was no paradox that “in these very new circumstances very old philosophies may have more to offer than moderately new ones, and a historical story could be told to show why this is so.” Oakeshott had Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes and Hume high on the list and not just for him the problem lay in

⁶¹ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin: Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory: Michael Oakeshott's On Human Conduct. In: *Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Aug 1976), pp. 301-320, 301-302.

⁶² Jan-Werner Müller: Re-imagining Leviathan. In: *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 13, Nos. 2-3 (June-September 2010), p. 317.

⁶³ Edmund Fawcett: *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 317.

“a false image of how reflection is related to practice, an image of theories in terms of which they uselessly elaborate their differences from one another, [and because] most of modern moral philosophy ... is too much and too unknowingly caught up in [the modern world], unreflectively appealing to administrative ideas of rationality.”⁶⁴

Oakeshott, however, Pitkin points out, adds

“a curious twist to a line of political theory running from Aristotle through Machiavelli and Tocqueville [...] But where the other writers in this tradition see self-determination in terms of collective self-government, Oakeshott is interested not in self-government but in obedience – obedience that is obligatory though unchosen”⁶⁵,

and thus never seriously considered the possibility of “freedom as collective self-determination”.⁶⁶ This, for Pitkin, is connected with Oakeshott’s failure to see that “procedure is *substance*” and although the civil condition is by definition without purpose, its purely formal rules entail social and economic consequences. From it results a dilemma Pitkin phrases as follows:

“[H]e is determined to protect moral and political ideals against selfishness and cynicism. This somehow becomes equated with protecting them against economic concerns, the poor, socialism, radicalism, and participatory political action. [...] The intent is to protect the integrity of these realms, their capacity to educate and ennoble us and to give our lives meaning. But the result is to empty morality and politics of all value and meaning, all significant connection with our actual lives and the cares and commitments that really move us. [...] Oakeshott has confused the aim of morality and politics with their substance.”⁶⁷

Pitkin’s criticism notwithstanding, it seems to me that Oakeshott indeed is conservative where modes of government are concerned, but a robust liberal when it comes to questions of political authority and (moral) obligation and for him there was no inconsistency in being conservative in respect of government and “radical in respect of almost every other activity.”⁶⁸ He had a much more sophisticated grasp on the workings of political ideologies than many contemporary scholars of conservatism. A disposition to be conservative in politics, for Oakeshott, neither presupposed certain beliefs, for example in natural law or a providential order, nor did it reflect an organic theory of human society. He acknowledged that many people disposed toward a conservative attitude in political activity have actually held such views but was adamant that “a disposition to be conservative in politics does not entail either that we should hold these beliefs

⁶⁴ Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, selected, edited, and with an introd. by A. W. Moore, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 197-198.

⁶⁵ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin: Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory: Michael Oakeshott’s On Human Conduct. In: *Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Aug 1976), pp. 310-311,

⁶⁶ The only passage I can think of where Oakeshott comes close to acknowledging a possible net gain of freedom in such arrangement is on p. 48 of *Hobbes on Civil Association*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975.

⁶⁷ Pitkin: Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory, pp. 314-316, italics in the original.

⁶⁸ Michael Oakeshott: On Being Conservative. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, p. 435.

to be true or even that we should suppose them to be true.”⁶⁹ For Oakeshott these views were quite divorced from beliefs about the proper task of government and its instruments.

As Christopher Ellis and James Stimson have recently shown in their excellent study of the meaning of ideology in America, there is indeed no systematic correlation between social conservative attitudes and political preferences.⁷⁰ There is in fact no systematic relation between ideological self-identifications of, for example, social, cultural or religious conservatives and political choices. For ideological unaware citizens, “ideological identification is not the cause of (nor does it reflect) a political worldview or a set of issue beliefs. Instead, to the extent that it reflects anything at all, it reflects identifications quite divorced from the realm of politics and political preferences, but strongly reflective of personal orientations to private life”.⁷¹ As I have argued elsewhere, this calls into question those approaches bent on distilling a unifying core or presenting conservatism as a coherent body of theory and practice.⁷²

In *On Being Conservative*, Oakeshott argued that a disposition to be conservative in respect to government, to think it inappropriate for government to be “conspicuously progressive”, was preeminently a disposition of those who “have something to do and something to think about on their own account, who have a skill to practice or an intellectual fortune to make, [appropriate] to people whose passions do not need to be inflamed, whose desires do not need to be provoked and whose dreams of a better world need no prompting.”⁷³ I have a hunch that, from a more sociological perspective, what we should take Oakeshott to be saying here is that what political conservatism is often portrayed as – a reactionary, anti-modern or socially and culturally instinctively traditionalist disposition – is most likely to be found in the lower middle classes and well-educated strata of the working classes. Below that, politics as such takes on a different relevance and Peter (Pete) Dorey has pointed to the changing modes of social stratification in this regard. They are no longer based on divisions of labor but rather on divisions of leisure: “Celebrity imitation, not social mobility, has seemingly become the goal of many poorer people, and the criterion by which they judge themselves (and each other).” This is not simply an instance of cultural critique from the left but shows how the desire for social mobility might be blunted and, in consequence, lead to “the blithe acceptance of gross inequality” with super-rich celebrities as the new “opium of the masses”.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid. , p. 423.

⁷⁰ Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson: *Ideology in America*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012.

⁷¹ Ibid. , p. 142.

⁷² See, for example, Corey Robin: *The Reactionary Mind. Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012.

⁷³ Michael Oakeshott: On Being Conservative. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 434-435.

⁷⁴ Peter Dorey: *British Conservatism: The Philosophy and Politics of Inequality*. London: Tauris, 2011, direct quotes at pp. 170, 249.

Finally, Oakeshott is of continued (if only perhaps historical) interest due to the fact that, as Reba Soffer argues, “[e]very issue that [British] conservatives championed [in the course of the twentieth century] already existed in the rhetoric and policy endorsements of conservative historians in the 1920s and 1930s”.⁷⁵ This might move Oakeshott’s perspective – however passionately denied by Oakeshott himself – in direct vicinity to the socially and economically accommodating type of “romantic Burkean Toryism”⁷⁶ prominently advocated by Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan. Indeed, the centrality of practice in Oakeshott’s thought provides the basis for a powerful conservative critique of capitalism, clearly marking the limits, if not exhaustion, of neoliberal dogma.

In a more general sense, Oakeshott was not a public intellectual and, to some, he was not even a political philosopher for he thought that there was nothing of immediate political usefulness in political philosophy, just the study of its history. He was concerned to understand which edifice of human life could be trusted to sustain a healthy balance in the forms of civil association characteristic of the modern state. What could be expected of the modern state was merely a “negative gift”, not a closely integrated manner of living, nor the advance of moral perfection, but the “only condition of human life that can be permanently established”: peace.⁷⁷ What is strikingly absent from Oakeshott’s account – so much so that it is not even indexed in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* – is the social edifice on which conservatives are often disposed to erect the whole architecture of society, the family. Once again, this illustrates both, his distance from Burke and his strong commitment to individualism.

And although Oakeshott was regarded as a voice of authority, both as a teacher and a scholar, and not even those in disagreement with the positions he took thought of him as “looking like a fat girl in a miniskirt.”⁷⁸ He himself, however, never seemed entirely persuaded of the importance of his own voice in the conversation of mankind. Remaining ultimately doubtful in the acknowledgement of the fallibility and limitations of reasoning may just be the most important ingredient in what makes for a great teacher. Or, as Oakeshott put it: “The irony of all theorizing is its propensity to generate, not an understanding, but a not-yet-understood.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Reba N. Soffer: *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America. From the Great War to Thatcher and Reagan*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009 p. 292.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁷⁷ Michael Oakeshott: Introduction to Leviathan. In: *Hobbes on Civil Association*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975, p. 79.

⁷⁸ Oakeshott, when being presented with a festschrift at the occasion of his retirement, commented that he “had the temperament, the will and the patience, but [...] lacked the ability. And that’s rather pathetic. I succeeded only in looking like a fat girl in a miniskirt. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Quoted from the Oakeshott archives at the British Library of Political and Economic Science at LSE, File 1/3, in Paul Franco: *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 18.

⁷⁹ Michael Oakeshott: *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 10.