
Oakeshott's Critique of Rationalism Revisited

The recent publication of an expanded edition of *Rationalism in Politics*¹ provides an occasion to reflect once more on what remains Michael Oakeshott's most influential and, in many respects, most characteristic political teaching. It is true that scholars have of late focused their attention more on Oakeshott's later masterpiece of political philosophy, *On Human Conduct*; and for good reason. Nevertheless, *On Human Conduct* remains a rather austere work of political theory, rarely disclosing the provenance of its concerns; and the idea of civil association as *a* purposeless form of association that lies at its center has left many readers somewhat puzzled.

For this reason, I propose to go back to Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in *Rationalism in Politics*, in the hope that through reflection on Oakeshott's original diagnosis of the modern political predicament we may gain a surer grasp of his political philosophy as a whole. In particular, I hope to abate *some* of the puzzlement over Oakeshott's emphasis on the purposelessness of civil association, for, as we shall see, the rejection of purpose as the key to understanding human activity, reason, and ultimately association lies at the heart of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism. Indeed, it goes all the way back to the concrete logic of human experience Oakeshott elaborated in his first work, *Experience and its Modes*. I spend *some* time toward the beginning of my essay bringing out the importance of this concrete logic for Oakeshott's critique of rationalism; and toward the

1. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), hereafter cited RP. References to the older edition of *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1962) will be provided in parentheses.

end of the essay I briefly indicate its bearing on his idea of civil association in *On Human Conduct*. It is, I shall argue, the single "passionate thought" (of which Oakeshott once spoke in relation to Hobbes)² that pervades and links the parts of his philosophy.

I

Oakeshott developed the main lines of his critique of rationalism in a series of essays written after World War II, beginning with "Rationalism in Politics" in 1947, and culminating in "Political Education" in 1951. The first few pages of "Rationalism in Politics," on the general character and disposition of the rationalist, identify clearly, if somewhat polemically, Oakeshott's target. It is not simply the collectivism or craze for social planning emergent in postwar Britain-though it certainly includes these-but rather the whole Enlightenment mentality which seeks to judge everything at the bar of individual reason and which has no use for authority, tradition, or prejudice. The rationalist "stands (he always *stands*) for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of 'reason'....[H]e is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary, or habitual."³ What more than anything else characterizes the rationalist mentality, for Oakeshott, is its reductive attitude toward experience, its desire to reduce "the tangle and variety of experience to a set of principles," its "irritable nervousness in the face of everything topical and transitory." The rationalist, he writes,

has no sense of the cumulation of experience, only of the readiness of experience when it has been converted into a formula: the past is significant to him only as an encumbrance. He has none of that *negative capability* (which Keats attributed to Shakespeare), the power of accepting the mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness, only the capability of subjugating

2. Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 16.

3. RP, 5-6 (1).

experience; he has no aptitude for that close and detailed appreciation of what actually presents its elf which Lichtenberg called *negative enthusiasm*, but only the power of recognizing the large outline which a general theory imposes upon events .⁴

Oakeshott is, of course, mainly concerned with the impact of this reductive, rationalist mentality on politics. Rationalist politics are, above all, ideological politics-the simplicity and (illusory) self-containedness of a set of abstract principles being preferred to the complexity and relative open-endedness of a tradition of behavior. They are also the politics of destruction and creation as opposed to the politics of repair and reform. For the rationalist "political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect"; and "the consciously planned and deliberately executed [are] considered. . . better than what has grown up and established itself unselfconsciously over a period of time." Rationalist politics are also "the politics of the felt need," in which a single problem or purpose is isolated and the entire resources of a society mobilized to solve or pursue it. Such a view of politics takes society in wartime as a model for society in peacetime-a view not uncommon in the 1940s and one which Oakeshott vehemently rejects in a number of places. ⁶ Finally, rationalist politics are "the politics of perfection" in combination with "the politics of uniformity": the rationalist believes not only that there is a single best (i.e., rational) solution for every political problem but that this solution should be universally applied.⁷

From this general characterization of the rationalist disposition Oakeshott goes on to develop-especially in the essays following "Rationalism in Politics"-his critique of rationalism. Before consid-

4. Ibid., 6, 7 (2, 3).

5. Ibid., 8, 26 (4, 21).

6. Ibid., 9, 400 (4-5, 52-53); "Contemporary British Politics, *The Cambridge Journal* 1(1947-48), 477; *The Voice Of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 116-17.

7. RP, 9-10 (5-6).

ering that critique in greater detail, though, we need to ask ourselves whence it comes, what it is that provokes it. Our attention is immediately drawn to the political circumstances in which Oakeshott writes. It is undoubtedly true that Oakeshott, like a number of his contemporaries, was responding to the perceived threat of collectivism and central social planning in postwar Britain. But there are two considerations which suggest we should not confine our understanding of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism to that immediate context alone-or assimilate it completely to the various critiques of rationalism, scientism, and utopianism current at the time.

In the first place, Oakeshott's critique seems to extend to much more than the local mischief of social planning and collectivism. It goes to the whole attitude of mind-which above I attributed to the Enlightenment-of which postwar social planning and collectivism are merely recent and extreme examples. Oakeshott's critique encompasses not only twentieth century totalitarianism but also a good deal of what we might call "liberalism"-viz., his remarks about the American Founders and John. Stuart Mill.⁸ If liberalism is understood to involve the demand that the social order be transparent to human reason, that it "should in principle be capable of explaining itself at the, tribunal of each person's understanding then Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is in an important way anti-liberal and profoundly conservative. That Oakeshott does not find this rationalistic belief in the transparency of the social order to be essential or intrinsic to liberal politics will occupy us later on in the essay. For now it is enough to point out that Oakeshott, along with Burke and Hegel, rejects this rationalistic strand in liberal thought.

It is the breadth of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism, the scope of his skepticism about the role of self-conscious ideals, principles, and purposes in politics, that in many ways distinguishes it from the critiques of his contemporaries. Even Hayek, with whom Oakeshott might seem to share so much, is seen to fall victim to the rationalist or ideological style of politics. The main significance of *The Road to*

8. Ibid., 31-33; 63-64 (26-28, 130-31).

9. Jeremy Waldron, "Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987): 146, 149.

Serfdom, Oakeshott remarks in one place, is, "not the cogency of [its] doctrine, but the fact that it is a doctrine. A plan to end all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics."¹⁰ Some have argued that Oakeshott's characterization of rationalism is too wide or abstract to be useful," but there is another view we might take of this feature. It is the breadth and radical character of Oakeshott's conception of rationalism that lifts it out of the narrow polemical context in which it was first formulated and gives it a relevance that the anti-totalitarianism of, say, Popper or Hayek lacks. Whereas the critiques of these latter now seem somewhat dated, Oakeshott addresses concerns that continue to inform the antifoundationalism of such contemporary writers as Bernard Williams and Richard Rorty, among others.

The second reason we should hesitate to explain Oakeshott's critique of rationalism simply as a response to the situation; of postwar Britain is that the specific character of this critique owes so much to Oakeshott's prewar philosophical outlook. Indeed, we find Oakeshott writing about rationalism as early as 1932 in an essay on Bentham. And what he says there tells us a great deal about the background of his later critique. Bentham, he writes,

is a rationalist, in the restricted sense that he believes that what is made is better than what merely grows, that neatness is better than profusion and vitality. The genius of the *philosophe* is a genius for rationalization, for *making* life and the business of life rational rather than for *seeing* the reason for it, for inculcating precise order, no matter at what expense, rather than for apprehending the existence of a subtle order in what appears to be chaotic.¹²

This passage betrays a definite affinity with the Hegelian belief in the rationality of the real. Reason is not something that needs to be

10. *RP*, 26(21):

11. Cf. B. Crick, "The World of Michael Oakeshott," *Encounter* 20 (1963): 72; H. V. Jaffa, "A Celebration of Tradition," *The National Review* 15 (October 22, 1962): 361; J. R. Archer, "Oakeshott on Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 41 (1979): 154.
12. "The New Bentham," in *RP*, 139. This essay, originally published in *Scrutiny* in 1932, has been added to the new edition of *RP*.

imposed on things from the outside; rather, it resides in them immanently. The task of philosophy is, as Hegel put it, "to comprehend what is... because what is, is reason;" it is "to recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present, and thereby to enjoy the present."¹³ It is this belief in the rationality of the real that ultimately explains Oakeshott's appreciation for the "negative capability" mentioned above; for, as one writer has put it, "mystery and uncertainty are not disconcerting to one who believes that in the end they fall within reason."¹⁴

The Hegelianism or idealism implicit in the passage on Bentham is, of course, explicitly defended in Oakeshott's first book, *Experience and its Modes*. There Oakeshott elaborates fully his understanding of the immanence of reason and his preference for "a subtle order in what appears to be chaotic" over any simple order that is imposed or manufactured from outside. What I have in mind here with respect to *Experience and its Modes* is not so much Oakeshott's famous doctrine about the relations between the various modes of experience-history, science, and practice-as his understanding of the logic of experience in general, a logic that governs the internal articulation of each of the modes. This logic again owes a great deal to philosophical idealism, and I shall speak of it as "concrete" in contradistinction to the "abstract logic" Hegel and his followers were reacting against. It is this concrete logic that ultimately forms the philosophical backbone of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism.

The core of this concrete logic consists in a doctrine about what gives unity to experience. According to the traditional view, the unity of experience was akin to that of a class, having its seat in an essence or principle which had been abstracted from the particulars that comprised it. Experience was unified, in other words, in terms of an abstract universal. Oakeshott, on the other hand, conceives the unity of experience in terms of the notion of a "world." The unity of experience is not of the simple sort that belongs to a class but, rather,

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 11-12.

14. Noel O'Sullivan, *The Problem of Political Obligation*, (New York and London: Garland, 1987), 246.

that which belongs to a complex whole or system. The unity of a world, unlike that of a class, is not arrived at by abstracting from the particulars that comprise it; indeed, it is nothing other than these particulars in their mutual coherence. The unity which belongs to a world or system is one "in which every element is indispensable, in which no one is more important than any other and none is immune from change and rearrangement. The unity of a world of ideas lies in its coherence not in its conformity to or agreement with any one fixed idea. It is neither "in" nor "outside" its constituents, but is the character¹⁵ of its constituents in so far as they are satisfactory in experience. In a world or system, universal and particular are inseparable. The universal is, in short, what the idealists call—though Oakeshott does not use this term—a "concrete universal."

Oakeshott's view of experience or knowledge here may be more easily grasped by considering his application of it to historical knowledge. Though the general theory is meant to apply equally to all the modes of experience, it is particularly adapted to historical knowledge and, indeed, seems to have grown out of reflection on it. In historical knowledge we encounter the total interpenetration of universal and particular that is characteristic of concrete universality. History is not a mere series of isolated particulars, what Bosanquet called a "tissue of mere conjunctions;"¹⁶ it is a world of coexistent, interdependent fact. Nor is the unity of an historical account to be conceived of as outside of, or as supervening upon, the original facts. The historian does not begin with isolated facts, fixed and absolute, and then proceed to synthesis or interpretation. In historical experience, fact and interpretation are inseparable. The facts derive their character from their place in a larger system or interpretation: And the interpretation is not something outside the facts, hovering over them; it is simply the character of the facts insofar as they fit together into a coherent whole.¹⁷ Oakeshott's consistent hostility to

15. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), hereafter cited *EM*, 32-33.

16. Bernard Bosanquet, *The Principle of Individuality and Value*, (London: Macmillan, 1927, 78-79). See also Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.G. Payne, (New York: Dover, 1959), 439-40.

17. *EM*, 89-101.

general laws in history and his later attempt to theorize history in terms of contingency, both derive from his original understanding of the concrete character of individual historical fact.¹⁸

Oakeshott goes on to apply this concrete logic to the realm of practice, which application bears more directly on his later critique of rationalism. As with history; he denies the common view that practical experience is a collection of isolated particulars bereft of universality or rationality, a tissue of mere conjunctions, a miscellany of disconnected desires, actions, and opinions. As with history, it is his logic of the concrete universal that enables him to grasp the systematic character of individual practical fact. Practical life constitutes a world of experience. Nothing in it is simply given, immediate, brutish, isolated, or irrational. Every desire, action, and opinion belongs to a larger system or world of meaning, and each is what it is by virtue of having a place in that world.¹⁹

How, in particular, is the world of practical experience integrated and made more coherent? Here we come closer to the core of Oakeshott's later critique of rationalism. Practice, according to Oakeshott, presupposes two discrepant worlds: a world of practical fact or "what is" and a world of value or "what ought to be." Practical activity is simply the attempt to reconcile these two discrepant worlds, to alter "what is" so as to agree with "what ought to be." But this alteration can only be carried out by means of action, which for Oakeshott means "the actual point-by-point qualification of 'what is here and now' by 'what ought to be.' Any attempt to resolve the discrepancy between these two worlds "generally or theoretically," he insists, "must be made without the sympathy of practice. The particularism of Oakeshott's analysis of practice here explains his later advocacy of incremental, piecemeal change and his rejection of utopianism or the "pursuit of perfection as the crow flies." It also entails the necessary endlessness of practical life—another promi-

18. For Oakeshott's rejection of general laws in history and his attempt to theorize history in terms of contingency, see *On History and Other Essays*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 70-96. See also *On Human Conduct*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 101-5:

19. *EM*, 251-54.

ment feature of his later critique of rationalism. The resolution of the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be" which practice undertakes, he writes,

can never finally be accomplished. No sooner is it realized at one point in the world of practical existence, than a new discord springs up elsewhere, demanding a new resolution, a fresh qualification of "what is here and now" by "what ought to be". A theoretical resolution would be, if it were successful, a final resolution. But since practical activity undertakes not this general resolution, but the particular resolution of all instances of this discrepancy, it undertakes what, from its nature, can never be brought to a conclusion.... Nowhere in practice is there uninterrupted progress or final achievement ²⁰

Having seen the extent to which Oakeshott's diagnosis of postwar Europe's discontents in terms of rationalism was determined by his prewar philosophical outlook, we may now examine in greater detail his actual critique of rationalism. It comes as no surprise that Oakeshott focuses on the theory of knowledge. The hidden spring of rationalism, he tells us in "Rationalism in Politics," is a doctrine about human knowledge. In order to explicate this doctrine, he distinguishes two sorts of knowledge present in all concrete activity: technical knowledge and practical or traditional knowledge. Technical knowledge consists entirely of formulated rules, principles, or maxims; it is the sort of knowledge which can be found in or learned from books, whether they be legal codes, cookbooks, or books containing the rules of method for an intellectual discipline. Practical or traditional knowledge, on the other hand, "exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules." No concrete activity, whether it be cookery, art, science, or politics can be carried on simply with a knowledge of the technique.

20. Ibid., 256-61, 288-91.

There is always something else-Oakeshott calls it variously style, connoisseurship, artistry, judgment-which tells us not only how and when to apply the rules but also when to leave the rules behind,²¹ This notion of practical or traditional knowledge recalls Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* and has obvious parallels with Ryle's "knowing how" and Polanyi's "tacit knowledge."²²

The essence of rationalism is that it denies the epistemic value of practical or traditional knowledge and only recognizes technical knowledge. Rationalism consists in the belief in the sovereignty of technique, which is not the same thing as the sovereignty of reason *per se*. It is important to make this distinction in order to avoid mistaking Oakeshott's critique of rationalism for an attack on reason simply, rather than on a certain misunderstanding of reason.²³ The attraction of technique for the rationalist lies in its apparent certainty and self-completeness. Technical knowledge seems to rest on nothing outside of itself, building directly on pure ignorance, the empty (or emptied) mind. But this apparent certainty and self-completeness of technical knowledge is an illusion. Knowledge of a technique does not spring from pure ignorance; it presupposes and is a reformulation of knowledge which is already there. "Nothing, not even the most nearly self-contained technique (the rules of a game), can in fact be imparted to an empty mind; and what is imparted is nourished by what is already there." It is only by ignoring or forgetting the total context of our knowledge that a technique can be made to appear self-contained and certain.²⁴

In politics the rationalist's belief in the sovereignty of technique translates into the belief in the superiority of an ideology over a tradition or habit of behavior: The superiority of an ideology, like

21. RP, 11-16 (7-11),

22. For Ryle, see "Knowing How and Knowing That," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 46 (1945-46): 1-16; *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), chap. 2. For Polanyi, see *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

23. M. Postan, "Revulsion from Thought," *The Cambridge Journal* 1 (1947-48): 395-408, makes this mistake.

24. RP, 16-17 (11-13).

that of a technique, is thought to lie in its being self-contained, "rational" through and through. This, again, is an illusion. An ideology, far from being self-contained or independently premeditated, itself presupposes a tradition of behavior and is merely an abridgement of it. As to the practical effects of this dominance of ideologies in politics, Oakeshott is rather brief in "Rationalism in Politics," other than to suggest it has been disastrous. The gist of his analysis seems to be that we have lost control over our affairs; that modern politics have come to be characterized by an ever increasing irrationality and arbitrariness. This has happened because what the rationalist takes for the whole of knowledge is really only a part, and not the most important part at that. The more we have become enslaved to technique and ideology, the more impoverished our concrete knowledge of how to act and conduct our affairs has become. To paraphrase a passage from "The Tower of Babel": the political energy of our civilization has for many centuries been applied to building a Tower of Babel; and in a world dizzy with political ideologies we know less about how to behave in the public realm than ever before.²⁵ Our moral and political predicament is one of great confusion; and this confusion stems not so much from a pervasive relativism (as some writers have suggested)²⁶ as from an erroneous belief about the self-sufficiency of technical or ideological knowledge.

This analysis of the dangers of ideology is somewhat more fleshed out in "The Tower of Babel" (1948). There the contrast between practical knowledge and technique is depicted in terms of the contrast between customary morality, or the morality of a habit of behavior, on the one hand, and reflective morality, or the morality of the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals, on the other. The chief danger of the latter is seen to lie in its tendency to inhibit, undermine, or otherwise paralyze action. "[T]ogether with the certainty about how to *think* about moral ideals, must be expected to go a

25. Ibid., 481 (74).

26. E.g. Leo Strauss. See his characterization of "the crisis of modernity" in "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *Political Philosophy: Six Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. (H. Giddin, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), '81-82.

proportionate uncertainty about how *to act*. In addition, whereas customary morality is highly elastic and adaptable-Oakeshott compares it to a vernacular language in this regard-from which stems its remarkable stability, reflective morality is characterized by rigidity and imperviousness to change. In such a morality, a single moral ideal is liable to become an obsession to the exclusion of other ideals; purity and intellectual coherence are prized above the impure coherence of a complex whole or system. As a result, the society which adopts such a morality "in action shies and plunges like a distracted animal;" it suffers from "a chaos of conflicting ideals" and "the disruption of common life."²⁷

It is worth noting the resonances of Oakeshott's concrete logic in this critique of reflective morality. The life of a society is pictured as a complex whole or system. from which reflective morality abstracts now this, now that isolated moral ideal. In a desperate attempt to impose an artificial unity on society, the moral rationalist ends up disturbing, and even destroying, the complex unity upon which that. society rests. Oakeshott raises the possibility that this disruptive, obsessive tendency *of* reflective morality might be held in check "by more profound reflection, by an intellectual grasp of *the whole system* which gives place and proportion to each moral ideal." But he goes on to add that "such a grasp is rarely achieved."²⁸ In this regard, the naive and inevitably less tidy coherence of customary morality proves, to be more reliable than the ;abstract and self-conscious coherence of a morality of ideals.

Of course, Oakeshott regards neither of these forms of morality, taken alone, as, a likely, or even desirable, form of moral life. , They are ideal extremes, concrete morality consisting in . some sort of combination of them both. Nevertheless, the mixed form. in which the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals dominates-the form that Oakeshott believes now characterizes the moral life of the West-will inevitably be unstable. Moral criticism and speculation will have a disintegrating effect on moral habit.

27. *RP*, 466, 467-77 (59, 61-70).

28. *Ibid.*, 476, (69), *emphasis added*.

When action is called for, speculation or criticism will supervene. Behaviour itself will tend to become problematical, seeking its self-confidence in the coherence of an ideology. The pursuit of perfection will get in the way of a stable and flexible moral tradition, the naive coherence of which will be prized less than the unity which springs from self-conscious analysis and synthesis.²⁹

In this mixed form of morality, moral ideals usurp the place of habits of behavior, and it is a role Oakeshott does not believe they can sustain. Why not? Because moral ideals are themselves the products of a habit or tradition of behavior. Here Oakeshott's argument parallels the one he made in "Rationalism in Politics" against the supposed self-completeness and independence of technique. Moral ideals, he argues, do not exist in advance of moral activity; they "are not, in the first place the products of reflective thought.... they are the products of human behaviour. . . to which reflective thought gives subsequent, partial and abstract expression in words." Torn from the concrete context of a tradition of behavior, moral ideals become.. increasingly incapable of determining behavior. What efficacy and determinacy they retain derives entirely from the traces of traditional behavior which continue to operate in them. "[T]he capital ... upon which a morality of the pursuit of moral ideals goes into business has always been accumulated by a morality of habitual behavior." By themselves, moral ideals cannot determine or generate human behavior; and a morality in which moral ideals are dominant "is not something which can stand on its own feet."³⁰

Oakeshott's most elaborate argument for the view that ideals and purposes are never the spring of human activity but merely abridge-
ments of our practical knowledge of how to go about an activity appears in "Rational Conduct" (1950). There he uses the famous example of Victorian bloomers to criticize the rationalistic understanding of rational conduct as "behaviour in which an independently premeditated end is pursued and which is determined by that

29. Ibid., 478 (71).

30. Ibid., 479-80 (72-73).

end." The activity of the designers of bloomers was not governed simply by independent reflection on the problem of efficiently propelling a bicycle. If it had been, why did their minds pause at bloomers instead of running on to shorts? The question these designers were really trying to answer, though they may not have realized it, was the question, "What garment combines within itself the qualities of being well adapted to the activity of propelling a bicycle and of being suitable, all things considered, for an English girl to be seen in when riding a bicycle in 1880." And it is this question, complex (involving more than a simple consideration) and tied to time and place, that they succeeded in answering. Of course, it is not in principle impossible that this more complex and circumstantial end could have been premeditated, but Oakeshott goes on to argue that such an end still cannot be considered the spring of activity. Our projects, and not simply the means by which we pursue them, derive from our knowledge of how to conduct an activity. A problem is not something pregiven; it is itself the product of a skillful "knowing how" (to use Ryle's apposite expression). A man who is not already a scientist cannot formulate a scientific problem. Whether a purpose is premeditated or not, it is never the spring of our activity, only a consequence.³¹

In "Rational Conduct," Oakeshott also begins to disclose more fully the positive view of human activity and rationality that lies behind his critique of rationalism. Having shown that particular actions, problems, and projects all presuppose activity itself, he defines rationality as "faithfulness to the knowledge we have of how to conduct the specific activity we are engaged in." Such faithfulness, however, does not imply that there is nothing to be achieved in activity, no improvement to be made. The knowledge with which we begin is never "fixed and finished;" it is fluid, both coherent and incoherent, and rational conduct is conduct which contributes to and enhances its coherence.³² Once again, the echoes of Oakeshott's concrete logic in *Experience and its Modes* should be noted here: Just as the criterion of experience in that work was said to lie "in its

31, Ibid., 101-3, 115-20 (81-84, 95-100).

32. Ibid., 121-22 (100-2).

coherence, not in its conformity to or agreement with any fixed idea," so now the criterion of activity, its rationality, is said to consist in the coherence of a complex and fluid whole, not in conformity to some overall purpose.

How does this relate specifically to practical activity? Practical activity, too, begins, ends, and is characterized throughout by coherence. This coherence is not introduced from the outside; it does not come from some external source, a rule, a principle, or a premeditated purpose; it is coeval with the activity of desiring itself. Desire, according to Oakeshott, is not an empirical or "natural" state antecedent to activity; "desire is being active in a certain manner;" it already exhibits a knowledge of how to manage practical activity. Sometimes this knowledge takes the form of moral approval and disapproval. But again, approval and disapproval are not to be thought of as somehow coming after desire; they are inseparable from it. Practical activity, then, "is always activity with a pattern; not a superimposed pattern, but a pattern inherent in the activity itself." Oakeshott refers to this pattern as a "current" or a "prevailing sympathy," and he defines a rational action as one which can maintain a place in this current or flow of sympathy. He acknowledges that this current or flow is subject to clog or compromise but insists that such a diseased condition cannot be cured by a transfusion of ideals, principles, or purposes, for these (as we have seen) are incapable of generating behavior. Recovery ultimately "depends upon the native strength of the patient; it depends upon the unimpaired relics of his knowledge of how to behave."³³

The positive account of human activity and rationality sketched in "Rational Conduct" is amplified and applied to politics in "Political Education. Here we finally get a sustained discussion of the idea of tradition that is the counterweight to rationalism. Oakeshott begins by reiterating his critique of ideology. It is claimed for political ideology that it provides the impetus for political activity, that it is something from which political activity can begin, but this is not the case. A political ideology is not the spring of political

33. Ibid., 124-29 (104-8).

activity but only the product of subsequent reflection on it. As Oakeshott succinctly puts it: "[P]olitical activity comes first and a political ideology comes after. A political ideology "merely abridges a concrete manner of behavior." Such is the case, for example, with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and with Locke's *Second Treatise*. These did not exist in advance of political practice, they were abridgements of it; they were not prefaces to political activity but postscripts. Apolitical ideology, in short, rests on or presupposes an already existing tradition of behavior. And it is in terms of such traditions of behavior that political activity must be understood.³⁴

Because (as we have seen) a tradition is not something fixed or finished, an inflexible manner of doing things, Oakeshott argues that political activity must be the exploration of what is intimated in a tradition. He describes the process in this way:

The arrangements which constitute a society capable of political activity, whether they are customs or institutions or laws or diplomatic decisions, are at once coherent and incoherent, they compose a pattern and at the same time intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear. Political activity is the exploration of that sympathy; and consequently, relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it.

He cites the example of women getting the vote. Here was a case in which what was already intimated in the already achieved legal status of women had yet to be recognized; here was an incoherence calling out for remedy. Natural right or abstract justice had nothing to do with it. The only relevant reason for enfranchising women "was that in all or most other important respects they had already been enfranchised."³⁵

Politics is (in the now famous phrase) "the pursuit of intimations." Oakeshott uses the word "intimations" because he wants to emphasize that what we have to do with in political activity is

34. Ibid., 48-54, (115-21).

35. Ibid., 56-57 (123-24).

something less precise and³⁶ more elusive than logical implications or necessary consequences. This relates back to the notion of tradition and ultimately to the concrete logic we explored earlier. A tradition of behavior for Oakeshott is a complex whole that does not point in a single direction, nor is it entirely self-consistent. A tradition of behavior is, in fact, a somewhat miscellaneous composition-in one place he calls it a "multi-voiced creature"-consisting of a variety of beliefs, many pulling in different directions or competing with one another. It has identity, but this identity is of a complex and not a simple nature. A tradition of behavior is, in short, a concrete universal, and Oakeshott evokes its complex many-in-oneness in the following way:

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

But that everything is temporary in a tradition does not mean that it provides no criterion for distinguishing between good and bad political projects. To be sure, this criterion cannot lie in correspondence to a fixed purpose or principle. But by denying such objectivism Oakeshott does not lapse into a featureless relativism. The criterion which governs a tradition of behavior is (as might be expected) coherence. He writes:

[T]hough a tradition of behavior is flimsy and elusive, it is not without identity, and what makes it a possible object of knowledge is the fact that all its parts do not change at the same time and that the changes it undergoes are potential within it. Its

36. Ibid., 57-58 (124-25).

37: Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael," *Political Studies* 13 (1965): 90. This brief response clarifies a great deal about Oakeshott's notions of tradition and the pursuit of intimations.

principle is a principle of *continuity*: authority is diffused between past, present and future; between the old, the new, and what is to come. It is steady because, though it moves, it is never wholly in motion; and though it is tranquil, it is never wholly at rest. Nothing that ever belonged to it is completely lost; we are always swerving back to recover and make something topical out of even its remotest moments: and nothing for long remains unmodified. Everything is temporary, but nothing is arbitrary. Everything figures by comparison, not with what stands next to it, but with the whole.³⁸

It is because a tradition of behavior is a whole in this complex and concrete way—because it does not disclose a single, unambiguous norm or principle—that politics is also said to be (*in* another famous phrase) "a conversation, not an argument."³⁹ Since the image of conversation has been a feature much commented upon, as well as appropriated, in Oakeshott's philosophy, we would do well to clarify here what he means by it. The image is designed to evoke the quality of relationship subsisting between the members of a complex whole. It is used by Oakeshott in two separate but related contexts. In the first, conversation is used to refer to the quality of relationship subsisting between the various activities and modes of discourse which compose a civilization—as in "the conversation of mankind."⁴⁰ In the second, it is used to refer to the quality of relationship subsisting between the multiplicity of considerations which compose a single tradition or activity. This is how; it is being used in "Political Education." The point Oakeshott is trying to make is that, in political activity, we do not have to do with deduction, subsumption,

38. *RP*, 61, 67-68 (128, 134). W. H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London: LongmansGreen, 1966), 55, was the first to suggest the connection between Oakeshott's notion of tradition and the idealist notion of a concrete universal.

39. *Ibid.*, 58 (125).

40. The image of conversation in this sense appears most frequently in Oakeshott's writings on university education, for it is in a university that this conversational character of a civilization is most apparent. See *The Voice of Liberal Learning*; also "The Study of 'Politics' in a University," in *RP*.

or demonstration; these belong to argumentative discourse. Rather, we have to do with a tradition of behavior that presents us with a number of different, frequently competing, always circumstantial considerations or intimations which have to be attended to, weighed, and balanced. "Conversation," like "intimation," evokes the open-endedness and flexibility of this engagement. What he does not mean to imply is that there are no "arguments" in politics.⁴¹ He certainly does not conceive of politics "in terms of the pleasant, somewhat idle but also valuable, civilized talk of university dons over their afternoon sherry."⁴²

Oakeshott's notion of tradition has, of course, been criticized from a number of directions.⁴³ The most common and powerful criticism has focused on the apparent fatalism or historicism involved in the idea. Oakeshott's notion of tradition does not seem to provide a basis for distinguishing a good tradition from a bad one; nor does it seem to supply a standard by which an entire tradition might be evaluated. Not all traditions are good; we need a criterion to distinguish the tradition of, say, British parliamentary democracy⁴⁴ from that of German National Socialism or Soviet Communism.

41. Michael Walzer makes this criticism in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 28-29. For an explicit recognition of the role of argument in political discourse, see the newly added "Political Discourse," in RP, 70-95.

42. Hanna Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism: Michael Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics," *Dissent* 20 (1973): 518.

43. I have treated these criticisms in greater detail in my book, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 134, 136-40.

44. Cf. R.H.S. Grossman, "The Ultimate Conservative," *The New Statesman* 42 (1951): 61; S. I. Benn and R. S. Peters, *Social Principles and the Democratic State* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), 316-18; N. Wood, "A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Michael Oakeshott," *The Journal of Politics* 21(1959): 660-62; Jaffa, 361; Pitkin, 508-10; G. Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," *The American Scholar* (Summer 1975): 417-18; D. Spitz, "A Rationalist *Malgre Lui*: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott," *Political Theory* 4 (1976): 340; W. Galston, *Justice and the Human Good* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 26; K. Koerner, *Liberalism and its Critics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Crick, 73-74, and Spitz, 340-41, add to this criticism the twist that, since *our* tradition is rationalistic according to Oakeshott, we are condemned to pursue the intimations of rationalism.

Oakeshott nowhere addresses this criticism directly, but this may be because it so misconceives what he is trying to say with the word "tradition." Tradition here seems to be equated simply with "what is" or the status quo-which may, of course, be "bad"-and to afford no standpoint outside itself by which to criticize itself. Tradition is thus opposed to human reason and the freedom that is intrinsic to it. But for Oakeshott-and here he joins other recent defenders of tradition such as Gadamer and MacIntyre-tradition is not the antithesis of human reason; rather, it is its ground or precondition.⁴⁵ Nor does he simply identify tradition with the status quo or deny the possibility of criticizing "what is." For Oakeshott, as we have seen, no tradition is simply fixed or finished; it contains within itself a multiplicity of different and frequently colliding considerations. Nor is the whole of a tradition to be identified with⁴⁶ what has become dominant or lies upon the surface of the present. By invoking tradition as the necessary context of all human activity, Oakeshott's point is not that criticism of current arrangements is

45, For Gadamer on tradition, see *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 249-53. For MacIntyre on tradition, see *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), chap. 15, esp. 206-7; also *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988, chaps. 1 and 17-20.

46. Hence the importance of education for Oakeshott. As he puts it in "Learning and Teaching," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 48-49:

To initiate a pupil into the world of human achievement is to make available to him much that does not lie upon the surface of his present world. An inheritance will contain much that may not be in current use, much that has come to be neglected and something even that for the time being is forgotten. And to know only the dominant is to become acquainted with only an attenuated version of this inheritance. To see oneself reflected in the mirror of the present modish world is to see a sadly distorted image of a human being; for there is nothing to encourage us to believe that what has captured current fancy is the most valuable part of our inheritance, or that the better survives more readily than the worse. And nothing survives in this world that is not cared for by human beings. The business of the teacher (indeed, this may be said to be his peculiar quality as an agent of civilization) is to release his pupils from servitude to the current dominant feelings, emotions, images, ideas, beliefs and even skills, not by inventing alternatives to them which seem to him more desirable, but by making available to him something which approximates more closely to the whole of his inheritance.

impossible, only that such criticism must come from within a tradition itself. No matter how bad things are, there is no remedy outside the resources of a tradition of behavior:

But what if an entire tradition is "bad," rotten through and through? What if the tradition we are talking about is that of German National Socialism or Soviet Communism under Stalin? Here again, there seems to be a confusion between tradition and what simply exists. For neither German National Socialism nor Soviet Communism can be identified with the whole of the political traditions in which they emerged. Indeed, they seem to represent what Oakeshott calls ideologies—rather severe abridgements of traditions in which one or two elements have been picked out and pursued to the exclusion of all the rest. Likewise, those critics who find Oakeshott's notion of tradition inadequate to combat the rootless, anarchic, and anti-authoritarian tendencies of contemporary life seem to confuse what has become momentarily dominant and lies on the surface of the present with the whole of our tradition.⁴⁷ Oakeshott would no doubt agree with Gadamer's warning—in response to the criticism that traditional knowledge and *phronesis* are no longer enough in a world characterized by a total chaos of norms and principles—that we must be careful not to "equate Nietzsche's anticipations and the ideological confusion of the present with life as it is actually lived with its own forms of solidarity.... [T]he displacement of human reality never goes so far that no forms of solidarity exist any longer."⁴⁸

III

We have seen that Oakeshott's notion of tradition does not imply simple acquiescence to whatever is, and that it is capable of dealing with at least some of the more obvious cases of so-called bad traditions. But this is a negative point. Oakeshott goes on to derive a more positive and specific—essentially liberal-political teaching from his critique of rationalism and the idea of tradition underlying

47.. See Himmelfarb, 4.1748.

48. From a personal letter Gadamer wrote to Richard Bernstein, reprinted in Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 263-64.

it. The question that confronts us now-and that will occupy us until the end of the essay-is how he does this. What exactly is the relationship between Oakeshott's critique of rationalism and idea of tradition, on the one hand, and his libertarian politics, on the other?

The first point that needs to be made is that Oakeshott does not, like so many other writers on rationalism, identify liberalism with rationalism. We have seen that Oakeshott rejects the belief, common to so much liberal thought, in the transparency of the social order to individual reason. This is the most characteristically conservative strain in his thought. But he does not regard this rationalistic belief as essential or intrinsic to liberalism; indeed, quite the contrary. In a review of one book attacking rationalism, for example, he criticizes the author for making precisely this identification of rationalism with liberalism. The truth of the matter, he writes,

is that parliamentary government and rationalist politics do not belong to the same tradition and do not, in fact, go together. [T]he institutions of parliamentary government sprang from the least rationalistic period of our politics, from the Middle Ages, and.... were connected, not with the promotion of a rationalist order of society, but (in conjunction with the common law) with the limitation of the exercise of political power and the opposition to tyranny in whatever form it appeared. The root of so-called "democratic" theory is not rationalist optimism about the perfectibility of human society, but scepticism about the possibility of such perfection and the determination not to allow human life to be perverted⁴⁹ by the tyranny of a person or fixed by the tyranny of an idea.

Oakeshott sees liberalism, then, as a countertradition to rationalism. But the, question still arises as to why we should adopt this particular tradition over any of the other alternatives that constitute our heritage-for example, rationalism itself. Given that our tradition is essentially ambivalent-a point urged by many of Oakeshott's

49. Michael Oakeshott, "Scientific Politics," *The Cambridge Journal* 1(1947-48): 357. This is a review of Hans Morgenthau's *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*.

critics, and one Oakeshott himself seems to recognize-why choose the liberal strand in it over any of the other strands? The Rortian response that we choose it simply because it is "ours" will not do here.⁵⁰ The concept of tradition alone does not seem provide any guidance on this question. And in the absence of any guidance, Oakeshott's liberal politics seems to rest on nothing more than personal preference.

Here, again, there may be some confusion about Oakeshott's notion of tradition, though it is a confusion that arises to a large extent from Oakeshott's own failure to make explicit what is involved in this notion. A certain ambiguity seems to attach to Oakeshott's notion of tradition. On the one hand, it seems to refer (in an ordinary way) to the actual beliefs, practices, and institutions of a given society. On the other hand, it seems to refer (in a more technical usage) to a certain set of formal properties characteristic of human experience, knowledge, or activity in general. It is this latter sense that is being invoked when one speaks-as I have above-of tradition as a concrete universal. Here tradition refers not to the past or the merely existent, but to the nature of a complex whole and the manner in which it is maintained and integrated. And it is because liberalism is a tradition in this more criterial sense that Oakeshott can adopt it over rationalism, which turns out not to be a genuine tradition at all.

The initial articulation between Oakeshott's notion of tradition and his liberal politics can best be seen in two essays from the late 1940s, "Contemporary British Politics" (1948) and "The Political Economy of Freedom" (1949). In "Contemporary British Politics" Oakeshott is primarily concerned to criticize the idea of central planning espoused by socialists. Central planning, he argues, involves the concentration of power in the hands of the government, and such concentration inevitably leads to despotism. The single

50. See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. S. G. Clarke and E. Simpson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 176-79; "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and its Consequences in American History*, ed. M. Peterson and R. Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 265-66; *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 54-56, 59-60, 64.

most important condition of human freedom is the diffusion of power in a society. What is interesting about Oakeshott's criticism of central planning here, especially in light of our previous analysis of tradition and the concrete logic underlying it, is that he develops it by distinguishing two different modes of integration or organization of a society. The mode of integration that belongs to a centrally planned society is of a simple and external sort. All power is concentrated in the hands of the government, and the government imposes order on society from the outside; as it were. To this simple mode of integration Oakeshott opposes another, of a more complex sort, based on the rule of law. This integration is in terms of rights and duties, which rights and duties, however, are not to be conceived of as "natural" or absolute. The integration provided by the rule of law is, of course, never perfect or final. Enjoyment of the rights and duties that comprise it can lead to dangerous concentrations of power, and such "maladjustments" call out for remedy or readjustment. But the key point is that these dangerous concentrations of power must be diffused by means of incremental adjustments in the rights and duties of individuals, never by means of an overhead plan.⁵¹

Oakeshott calls the politics he is defending "a kind of perennial politics."⁵² The holism and incrementalism that belong to them clearly recall the concrete logic of *Experience and its Modes*. They also recall Oakeshott's notion of tradition. Indeed, it is here, in connection with perennial politics, that we get a better idea of just how Oakeshott is deploying the notion of tradition in political argument. Tradition here is being used in the second, criterial sense distinguished above, referring not to the past or the merely existent, but to the nature of a complex whole and the manner in which it is maintained and integrated. It is in this sense that Oakeshott's skeptical, perennial, even liberal politics are traditional. Oakeshott concludes "Contemporary British Politics" by trying to recall us to

51. "Contemporary British Politics," 476-79, 482-84, 486-89.

52. *Ibid.*, 489. One is here also reminded of Oakeshott's famous image of politics as a boundless sea, with "neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination," *RP*, 60 (127).

this understanding of liberal democracy as a tradition, a way of living. We must not, he urges, think of liberal democracy as an abstract idea or as a fixed body of abstract rights but, rather, as "a living method of social integration, the most civilized and the most effective method ever invented by mankind."⁵³

This concrete approach to the liberal tradition carries over into "The Political Economy of Freedom." Inquiry into the political economy of freedom obviously presupposes some notion of freedom, and Oakeshott quickly points out at the start of the essay that the freedom he has in mind is not an abstract idea but a concrete way of living. The political economy of freedom begins not with an abstract definition of freedom but with the way of living we currently enjoy and which we are accustomed to call a free way of living.⁵⁴ It is frequently observed that the idea of freedom lies at the center of Oakeshott's political thought. It is perhaps too seldom remarked that he rarely talks about freedom in his earlier work (say, up through "Political Education") except in a rather deflationary way.⁵⁵ In *Experience and its Modes*, for example, he denudes the notion of freedom of any distinctive political or ethical meaning, simply equating it with practical satisfaction in general, practical truth, the possession of a coherent world of practical ideas." This same nonidealizing impulse operates in "The Political Economy of Freedom" when Oakeshott equates freedom with the way of living we currently enjoy. Indeed, in the course of the essay, freedom sometimes loses contact with any sort of conventional meaning and becomes indistinguishable from the stability, complex coherence, and continuity that belong to a tradition.

As in "Contemporary British Politics," Oakeshott here sees

53. Ibid., 489-90.

54. *RP*, 386-87 (39-40); see also *RP*, 53-54 (121).

55. There are some notable exceptions to this. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, "John Locke," *The Cambridge Review* 54 (1932-33): 73; "Thomas Hobbes," *Scrutiny* 4 (1935-36): 272; Introduction to *Leviathan*, in *Hobbes on Civil Association*, 60-63. Indeed, Oakeshott's original introduction to *Leviathan* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), xliii-xliv, anticipates remarkably some of his later reflections on freedom and its relationship to law in *On Human Conduct*.

56. *EM*, 267-68n.

diffusion of power as the most general condition of our freedom. And this diffusion of power appears first in the "diffusion of authority between past, present and future." In place of Burke's "great primeval contract," Oakeshott invokes his own idea of conversation: "The politics of our society are a conversation in which past, present and future each has a voice; and though one or other of them may on occasion properly prevail, none permanently dominates, and on this account we are free."⁵⁷ Again, as in "Contemporary British Politics," Oakeshott identifies the rule of law as the method of government, the mode of social integration, best suited to preserving freedom thus understood. And he speaks of the rule of law, along the lines of a tradition, as "control[ling] effectively. . . without breaking the grand affirmative flow of things."⁵⁸ The most striking overlap between Oakeshott's conception of a libertarian society and his idea of tradition comes, however, in his discussion of the purpose of a libertarian society. Such a society, he tells us, will not find its purpose in any sort of preconceived idea or external goal but, rather,

in a principle of *continuity* (which is a diffusion of power between past, present and future) and in a principle of *consensus* (which is a diffusion of power between different legitimate interests of the present). We call ourselves free because our pursuit of current desires does not deprive us of a sympathy for what went before. . . . We consider ourselves free because, taking a view neither short nor long, we are unwilling to sacrifice either the present to a remote and incalculable future, or the immediate and foreseeable future to a transitory present. And we find freedom once more in a preference for slow, small changes which leave behind them a voluntary consensus of opinion.... and in our perception that it is more important for a society to move together than for it to move either fast or far. . . . We find what we need in a principle of change and a principle of identity.⁵⁹

57. *RP*, 387-89 (40-41).

58. *Ibid.*, 390 (43).

59. *Ibid.*, 396-97 (48-49).

In "The Political Economy of Freedom" and "Contemporary British Politics" we find Oakeshott trying to conceive liberal society largely in terms of his critique of rationalism and the notion of tradition underlying it. While not ignoring the issue of freedom, he tends to subordinate it to, or at least place it in the context of, concerns with the stability, coherence, and continuity of a complex society. But when we turn to some of Oakeshott's later essays, beginning with "On Being Conservative" (1956) and "The Masses in Representative Democracy" (1957),⁶⁰ a subtle shift seems to take place in his outlook, particularly with respect to the grounds upon which he defends liberalism. Instead of tradition, we now hear a good deal more about individuality; and the liberal political order, characterized by diffusion of power, the rule of law, and the absence of any overarching purpose, is defended largely in terms of its appropriateness to this historic disposition of individuality. And what Oakeshott opposes to this morality and politics of individuality is not so much ideology any longer as the morality and politics of the common good: the imposition on subjects of a common substantive condition of human circumstance.

As this new articulation of Oakeshott's political teaching suggests somewhat different grounds for his defense of liberal politics, so it suggests different grounds for his rejection of rationalism in politics. Whereas in essays such as "The Tower of Babel," "Rational Conduct," "Political Education," and still to some extent "The Political Economy of Freedom," Oakeshott rejects rationalism on the basis that it does not accord with human reason or the logic of human activity, in "On Being Conservative" and the essays that follow it he rejects rationalism on the basis that it does not accord with individuality or human freedom. There has been a displacement in Oakeshott's critique of rationalism away from epistemological grounds to more recognizably moral and political ones. Indeed, one might raise the question whether the word "rationalism," which inevitably directs us to considerations of the theory of knowledge, any longer adequately specifies Oakeshott's target.

60. "The Masses in Representative Democracy" was originally published in German in 1957, in English in 1961, and has been newly added to *RP*, 363-83.

On Human Conduct, of course, represents the complete working out of the new approach signalled by "On Being Conservative" and "The Masses in a Representative Democracy." There Oakeshott defends the essentially liberal ideal of civil association in terms of an elaborate teaching about human freedom-both the freedom intrinsic to human agency and the historic freedom or individuality that has for centuries occupied a central place in the European moral imagination. Civil association is the mode of association that best accords with human freedom thus understood. In *On Human Conduct* the word "tradition" is nowhere to be found. And in place of rationalism or ideological politics, we find the managerial state, the state understood as an enterprise association *or universitas*, the object of attack. The only direct parallels with Oakeshott's earlier critique of rationalism and defense of tradition survive in his treatment of political deliberation, where once again he speaks of "the exploration of intimations."

For all that, though, the outlook of *On Human Conduct* remains profoundly related to Oakeshott's critique of rationalism. The rejection of purpose that formed the heart of that critique now becomes the defining characteristic of Oakeshott's vision of political life. Civil association is essentially a nonrationalistic, mode of politics: nonperfectionist, nonpurposive, skeptical. And while Oakeshott nowhere uses the word "tradition" in *On Human Conduct*, it is clear that what he theorizes under the rubric of "practice" is a further elaboration of that earlier concept.⁶² We saw above that Oakeshott's notion of tradition was ambiguous, having both an empirical and a formal or criterial dimension. With his concept of a practice he resolves this ambiguity in favor of the formal or criterial side. The concept of a practice brings to the fore the formal properties of the knowledge necessary to conduct any activity-e.g., adverbiality, noninstrumentality-while eliminating any reference to the past or the merely existent. As with tradition, Oakeshott analogizes a practice to a living language, and it is as a living, vernacular language

61. *On Human Conduct*, 177-80.

62. See Michael Oakeshott, "On Misunderstanding Human Conduct: A Reply to My Critics," *Political Theory* 4 (August 1976): 364.

that he understands morality and ultimately civil association in *On Human Conduct*. Like a language, and what Oakeshott used to call a tradition, civil association is not something consciously contrived, an artistic whole, something fixed and finished; it is a flexible instrument, with a complex organization, capable of maintaining its identity while tolerating change, diversity, and radical individuality.

In characterizing civil association in this way, I mean to suggest its continuity not only with Oakeshott's earlier notion of tradition, but also with the concrete logic that lay behind his entire critique of rationalism. It is the notion of a concrete universal, of a complex whole integrated not through correspondence to an external purpose or idea but through the immanent coherence of its parts, that I have traced from *Experience and its Modes* all the way through to *On Human Conduct*. This is, I have argued, the animating idea of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism and his notion of tradition. And it is, I would maintain; the single "passionate thought" that pervades the parts of Oakeshott's entire philosophy.

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