Michael Oakeshott, Conservative Governance, and the Limitless:
Finding a Home Amidst the Endless Journey of Life

by

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Michael Oakeshott's conception of conservative governance in the modern world.

I begin by reviewing his philosophical understanding of practical activity before analyzing the role of conservative conduct within the world of practice. Through understanding Oakeshott's view, the pervasiveness of the conservative disposition in much of human activity is revealed and defended as a legitimate aspect of how people come to find their place in the world through habit and familiarity. Finally, Oakeshott's notion of the conservative disposition is considered in light of the activity of governing, elucidating why a form of conservative government—at least as Oakeshott conceptualizes it—is well suited to govern the pluralistic and dynamic cultures prevalent in the Western world today.

Through Oakeshott, the conservative disposition is revealed to be a love of the present and careful management of its complexity, rather than a nostalgia for a time past as we often mistakenly believe.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Redeeming What It Means to Act Conservatively	1
Literature Review: Interpreting the Allusive Professor Oakeshott	10
Chapter 1 Oakeshott's Philosophy and Practical Activity	25
Chapter 2 The Pervasiveness of the Conservative Disposition	53
Chapter 3 An Umpire Among the Pursuers of Enjoyment.....	79
Conclusion: Our Solid Ship to Traverse the Unknown Seas	107
Bibliography	114

Introduction:
Redeeming What It Means to Act Conservatively

“I think it would be difficult to find a conservative in politics who had not some passionate interest other than politics; and any man who has a passionate interest other than politics will be disposed to be a conservative in politics.”
-Michael Oakeshott

In 2011, a book entitled *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* was released by journalist and author, Corey Robin. It was met with much critical acclaim, leading to a rerelease in 2018 with a new subtitle: *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*.¹ Evidently, given this subtle change in name, Robin is making an argument that is predominantly historical in nature; he is not necessarily interested in seeing how Edmund Burke intellectually influences the activity of either Sarah Palin or Donald Trump, but he is instead interested in the way in which the label of ‘conservatism’ has been grasped or used by one figure or another. This makes for a captivating read, as Robin traverses the intellectual-historical landscape to draw on a wide variety of thinkers who appear rather odd to lump together: Edmund Burke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott, Friedrich Hayek, and (of course) Donald Trump—just to name a few. From a strictly historical perspective, there is room for debate around Robin’s view of the development of conservatism; from an intellectual perspective, however, I believe that he has a lot of work to do, as many of the figures he manages to lump together have diametrically opposed views to one another.

Robin’s invocation and subsequent rejection of one specific intellectual figure who defends a conservative view caught my attention: the twentieth-century philosopher from England, Michael Oakeshott. Aside from simply misrepresenting what Oakeshott writes in a few places, Robin entirely decontextualizes certain points Oakeshott makes from the greater whole of the Englishman’s work, making the specific claims impossible

¹ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

to evaluate.² Of course, I am likely being too hard on Mr. Robin with these remarks; the book is not primarily about Oakeshott's work and it is evidently written for an American audience which causes some shortcomings, but I believe we should nonetheless be vigilant in preventing simplistic readings of any author from going unquestioned.

Considering that Robin collects all these different figures of Western thought under the umbrella of conservatism, I do think that it is important for us to understand what each of these thinkers says and to aim at comprehending them on their own terms. This is, therefore, the focus of this study: to hone in on one such figure who is considered a member of the Western conservative tradition in order to understand his work wholistically, a treatment that should be done of every figure attacked by Robin. For now, I have chosen to pursue Michael Oakeshott's understanding of the conservative disposition and governance as, for reasons that are made clearer throughout this analysis, I believe that he provides a thoroughly modern understanding of how to be conservative which is worthy of a rigorous study.

Michael Oakeshott, born in 1901 and passing away in 1990, lived to see nearly every major political event of the twentieth-century unfold. He was born the year Queen Victoria died, lived through both World Wars, saw the rise and fall of fascism and

² Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, 21-22—Robin provides what is possibly the least charitable reading of Oakeshott's "On being conservative," which is further exacerbated by a lack of context for the statements within Oakeshott's own work. As for the misrepresentation, see p. 21: "The conservative would enjoy familiar things in the absence of forces seeking their destruction, Oakeshott concedes, but his enjoyment 'will be strongest when' it 'is combined with evident risk of loss'." This is however not what Oakeshott says. See: Michael Oakeshott, "On being conservative," in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 408: "[the conservative disposition] asserts itself characteristically when there is much to be enjoyed, and it will be strongest when this is combined with evident risk of loss." Oakeshott is evidently referring to the conservative disposition, not enjoyment, being strongest when there is a risk of loss; yet, Robin spins this in a way which makes conservatism appear as if it is merely contrarian and therefore enjoys things more when enduring the challenge of the innovator or progressive, a claim that is simply foreign to Oakeshott's thesis.

communism, experienced the dread of the Cold War, and even lived to see the fall of the Berlin Wall one year prior to his death.³ As we might imagine would be the case for anyone who experienced such a life, Oakeshott became deeply engaged in politics and political discourse, and he did so in a manner that was profoundly aware of the terror that can be caused by an overactive government. Given what he heard and experienced of National Socialist Germany, Fascist Italy, and Communist Russia, it is not surprising that Oakeshott ended up tilting more toward an English sense of government that exercises restraint—at least by comparison to her continental neighbours.⁴ No doubt, Oakeshott's birthplace should be understood as having a tremendous impact on his later political thought, though his intellectual work can hardly be reduced to such a geographic explanation. In fact, Oakeshott studied theology in Germany from at least 1923-24 and he may even have returned for further education in 1925.⁵ This left an evident impression on him, as is made clear through a reading of his first and only major work of philosophy, *Experience and Its Modes*. As Oakeshott makes clear in his introduction, the philosophic school of German Idealism made a significant impression on his own thought, as it had on several other English thinkers before Oakeshott; thus, Oakeshott steeped himself in both German and English Idealism which clearly inform his philosophic views throughout his career.⁶ Where Oakeshott breaks with many of his Idealist forebears and contemporaries, however, is that he argues for a profound independence and importance

³ Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Books, 2004), 2.

⁴ George Feaver, "Being English: The Conservative Witness of Michael Oakeshott," in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 219-2020.

⁵ Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, 3.

⁶ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4-5.

for ‘practical activity,’ which likely intensified as he studied the work of Thomas Hobbes more closely in the 1940-50s.⁷

This image of Oakeshott thus presents him as a rather unorthodox thinker: he is evidently impressed by the lofty and radical approach of Idealist philosophy, yet he remains simultaneously grounded in his understanding of practical activity and the importance of volition through his rigorous study of Hobbes’s work. It is hardly self-evident that a man with such a background would eventually write essays such as “Rationalism in politics,” “Rational Conduct,” or “On being conservative” during the middle period of his academic career. What is unsurprising, however, is that Oakeshott would therefore be a man who is difficult to interpret and thus susceptible to wildly different and sometimes contradictory interpretations. What I find most captivating about Oakeshott is how a man who seems quite radical in his approach to philosophy, art, history, and science would come to advocate for a conservative approach to politics—a point of intrigue that is the fundamental impetus for my analysis of his work.

My thesis aims to understand both what Oakeshott means by conservative government and how he comes to the conclusion that it is the proper style of governance for a community such as his own, despite the radical tendencies he espouses in other aspects of his thought. I argue that Oakeshott sees life as an adventure in which the ends are never fully determined, a view implied by the radical approach he has to philosophy in which it is an ever-greater world of experience that is sought for the sake of mere understanding. In such an indefinite existence, however, man must find a sense of continuity amidst the confusion of life—he needs an identity to make his day-to-day life

⁷ Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, 6-7, 18, 35.

simpler and less fraught with peril. This pairing of, on the one hand, a desire to find a sense of meaning for oneself with, on the other hand, a desire for a stable ground to reliably fall back upon is something which he believes his own people of England thoroughly embody. They possess a constant desire to seek out happiness and find meaning in life for themselves, but they do so with the knowledge that such meaning is pursued in relation to other people doing the same. This manifests in the need for a basic, unifying identity that mitigates the collisions between people while also allowing them to pursue their various, fulfilling ends. This leads to the final conclusion of my argument that Oakeshott's view of conservative government is aimed at nothing more than peace—not 'truth,' 'goodness,' or 'justice'—in the hopes of supplying a common, stable ground for the community from which its members may, as individuals, leap to greater heights of meaning in life.

My study begins with a thorough reading of the first major work that Oakeshott ever published: his undeservedly underread philosophic text, *Experience and Its Modes*. As Oakeshott himself notes, philosophy—at least as he understands it—never instructs us in what we ought to do in life, but it can certainly inform us about our experience.⁸ I believe that this is true both in the sense that reading through this work can provide us with some understanding of experience as such, but also that it shows us how Oakeshott thinks about it for himself. He presents a radical and complex view of philosophy that denies the possibility of absolute divisions in experience, seeking after the one goal of subsuming all experience within a single intellectual pursuit—a task that is perhaps never truly completed but is made worthwhile by the mere attempt. Oakeshott then juxtaposes

⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 1.

this conception of experience with three other forms of experience: historical, scientific, and practical. In his view, these are “modes” of experience which—while looking at the same whole of experience that philosophy pursues—abstract out a limited view of reality through the invocation of unjustified presuppositions about experience. These abstract modes of experience are certainly confined within the whole as revealed by philosophy, but they also have an independence from philosophy as they are subject to fundamentally different presuppositions than philosophical experience. For the purposes of my analysis, which focuses upon Oakeshott’s treatment of practice and governance, I do not delve into Oakeshott’s explanations of history or science. Instead, I simply review why practice is an abstract mode of experience when compared with the sort of experience pursued by philosophy. Oakeshott reveals that practice is, nonetheless, the main mode humanity exists within; it is the world of temporality, contingency, and change which are all endured by people as volitional agents—though, from his philosophic perspective assumed in *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott can offer no guidance for practice since it falls short of philosophical experience. For this, we must turn to Oakeshott’s more practical and polemical essays which are firmly situated within practical experience, mainly contained in his compendium of essays, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*.

In addressing the first two sections of Oakeshott’s essay, “On being conservative,” I outline the concept of identity which Oakeshott believes is integral to anyone engaged in the world of practice—that is every person who has lived, is alive, or will live. What Oakeshott means by identity is not something which is simply dreamt up and then pursued, but it is the development and maintenance of a concrete manner of behaviour. To have an identity that is not detectable in what one says and does is to

misunderstand the nature of identity; it is something acted out and maintained over the course of time, though it can change minutely in the ebb and flow of humanity's temporality. For Oakeshott, identity is something that everyone attempts to conserve in one way or another. In fact, this is his main claim to the preeminence of the conservative view: it is that which maintains an identity over time so as to have a sense of learned place in the world. Though people may occasionally aim to make changes or improve their lives in some way, it is always buttressed within the confines of a learned self-knowledge that acts as a personal continuity from past to present to future. Oakeshott argues that this conservative impulse arises in two core ways amidst daily life: those activities pursued for their own sake and those activities which are apt to use a constant tool or set of tools to complete a variety of tasks effectively. In Oakeshott's view, social norms and customs should also be understood as 'tools' of a certain kind, as they are the instruments we possess to navigate communal life and conflict.

Finally, I address another of Oakeshott's essays, "Political education," along with Section Three of "On being conservative." From the former source, I first extract Oakeshott's generic understanding of government. From this definition, no specific formula for government can be derived as the needs of the community being ruled have not been taken into account within this definition. I, therefore, return to "On being conservative," in which Oakeshott discusses how he sees the people of his own country, England, as a dynamic and independent people who have come to enjoy both making decisions for themselves and recognizing that they are therefore responsible for their own decisions. In doing so, his people are free to pursue the many possible ends that we humans can enjoy throughout our lives. For such a people, Oakeshott argues that a

conservative style of governance is far more suitable than an innovative or directive one; to have a government that imposes a life upon a people who are accustomed to pursuing their own interests as they see fit is a recipe for conflict. Instead, Oakeshott argues that government, by attending to the extant and active arrangements of the people, should carefully observe where conflicts emerge and generate rules to prevent such destructive collisions among members of the community. The government thus becomes something akin to a referee or umpire among an active game of participants pursuing enjoyment throughout a diverse set of activities; for that umpire to become another player through pursuing its own interests will cause the legitimacy of its regulation to be questioned and the game to either halt or collapse.

In seeking to analyze and understand Oakeshott's view of conservative governance, I do not intend to recommend it unequivocally. There could indeed, as Oakeshott himself suggests, be circumstances in which the government must take an active role in certain endeavours. My intention, rather, is to clarify a perfectly intelligible view of conservative government from a perplexing and brilliant thinker through reading his work more wholistically. In coming to understand why Oakeshott recommends such a style of governance, we may find that, even beyond the borders of England, there are communal circumstances that call for the sort of government Oakeshott outlines in his work. Though his argument may not precisely instruct as to what the best way forward is, to understand Oakeshott will certainly inform us of greater possibilities for the situations in which we may find ourselves now or in some time to come.

Literature Review:
Interpreting the Allusive Professor Oakeshott

*“Not to detect a man’s style is to have missed three-quarters
of the meaning of his actions and utterances.”*
-Michael Oakeshott

Before considering Oakeshott's writings directly, I want to first indicate where I understand my contribution to sit within the small but growing literature on Oakeshott's thought. My work is by no means exhaustive of the ways in which Oakeshott's writings can be analyzed, and there is plenty of insightful scholarship on him that is unfortunately irrelevant to my work here. For this reason, I believe it necessary to give an overview of how I understand the body of commentary on his work before situating myself within this conversation about the thought of this English thinker. I begin by outlining a prevalent division in Oakeshottian scholarship: those who see 'Oakeshott the liberal theorist' and those who argue that he should be understood as 'Oakeshott the conservative actor'; I then review the prominent readings of Oakeshott's work as liberal theorist to demonstrate their lack of relevance to my analysis; and, finally, I end with a consideration of the analyses of Oakeshott's work as conservative practice to set the stage of the conversation to which I am contributing.

Despite his own aversion to using labels or various "-isms" when discussing someone's intellectual work, Michael Oakeshott's writing on politics is largely interpreted in one of two ways: Oakeshott as liberal or Oakeshott as conservative. Several other concepts present in his work are also discussed, such as normalization, totalitarianism, and extremism; however, these outlying considerations typically depend, nonetheless, upon understanding Oakeshott through the lens of either liberalism or conservatism.⁹ What tends to cause this division between the liberal and conservative

⁹ Examples of Oakeshott's liberal and conservative thought being used for different purposes: Jacob Segal, "Freedom and Normalization: Poststructuralism and the Liberalism of Michael Oakeshott," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (August 2003)—analysis of how Oakeshott's liberalism could counteract the effects of modernist normalization; Andrew Gamble, "Oakeshott and Totalitarianism," in *Michael Oakeshott's Cold War Liberalism*, ed. Terry Nardin, 83-97 (New York, NY: Palgrave

interpretations of Oakeshott is whether the commentator views Oakeshott as a political philosopher or Oakeshott as a proponent of practical politics, respectively. Despite the subtle and intelligent analyses provided by liberal interpreters of Oakeshott such as Paul Franco and Ephraim Podoksik, their focus on the more theoretical aspects of Oakeshott's thought is of little consequence for my present analysis. The conservative interpretation of Oakeshott's views on the practice of governance is, on the other hand, precisely the focus of my study.

Now, before diving deeper into this division between the liberal-theoretical and conservative-practical reading of Oakeshott's work, it should be noted (expectedly) that not all interpretations of Oakeshott's work neatly fit into these two categories. Several commentators attempt to either bridge this separation or deny the divide altogether. In Terry Nardin's work, one piece appropriately named "Michael Oakeshott: Neither Liberal nor Conservative," he seeks to demonstrate that Oakeshott ought to be understood simply as a skeptic, while the liberal-conservative paradigm only drags Oakeshott into debates that detract from the originality of Oakeshott's work.¹⁰ Josep Baqués and Steven Gerencser, both maintaining that skepticism is the dominant theme of Oakeshott's thought, instead attempt to reconsider the connection between Oakeshott's liberal and conservative labels. Baqués argues that Oakeshott is theoretically liberal based upon a skeptical foundation; this then informs his conservative stance to the present, desiring to

MacMillan, 2015)—analysis of Oakeshott's conservatism as a sufficient antidote to totalitarian impulses in politics; Ian Frowe, "The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism': Michael Oakeshott, Education, and Extremism," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55, no. 3 (September 2007)—analysis of Oakeshott as a defender of liberal education which may provide an antidote to extremist thought.

¹⁰ Terry Nardin, "Michael Oakeshott: Neither Liberal nor Conservative," in *Michael Oakeshott's Cold War Liberalism*, ed. Terry Nardin (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 36-37.

protect that liberal identity through political conservation.¹¹ Gerencser takes a different approach, instead arguing that as Oakeshott settles into a more ‘skeptical identity’ he becomes progressively more wary of philosophical claims and sees philosophy as only a tool for understanding things on a practical basis in a manner like that of Richard Rorty.¹²

Though these readings thoroughly demonstrate the skeptical style of Oakeshott’s thought, they neglect his modal conceptual scheme that is continually present, though not static, throughout his work. Nardin tends toward reading Oakeshott strictly as a philosopher, which erodes the capacity to understand Oakeshott’s work that could be considered ‘modal,’ such as his writings on practice, science, history, or art;¹³ Baqués glosses over the fact that Oakeshott argues that conservative politics requires no philosophical beliefs to be justified as Baqués proposes;¹⁴ and Gerencser’s position denies Oakeshott’s view that philosophy can move beyond practice, which would lead him to a deadlock in explaining why one philosophizes at all if it is no different than action.¹⁵ It may certainly be the case that what these thinkers are proposing is perfectly coherent or desirable, even more so than what Oakeshott proposes in his own writings; however, these interpretations tend to either conflate aspects of Oakeshott’s thought or

¹¹ Josep Baqués, “Michael Oakeshott’s Work as a Liberal-Conservative Paradigm,” *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, no. 145 (March 2014): 39.

¹² Steven Gerencser, “Voices in Conversation: Philosophy and Politics in the Work of Michael Oakeshott,” *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 3 (1995): 733-739.

¹³ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 407-437; Michael Oakeshott, “The political economy of freedom,” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 384-406—two of Oakeshott’s essays that are thoroughly practical in nature and would be insufficient for Oakeshott’s own standard of ‘philosophy.’

¹⁴ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 435—this will be a common theme throughout this paper; Oakeshott is clear about the pluralism of experience and there being no inherent connection between opinions in one realm and another, yet many of his commentators neglect to take this claim seriously.

¹⁵ Jeff Rabin, “Richard Rorty, Michael Oakeshott and the Impossibility of Liberalism Without Tradition,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic), 193, 202-203—Rabin’s article demonstrates why the Rorty-Oakeshott conflation is untenable: Rorty’s epistemic position can never extend beyond the present which puts him at odds with Oakeshott, especially in consideration of *On Human Conduct*.

simply leave out certain details of the British philosopher's writing. This confusion recurs throughout the scholarly literature, which is why I devote my first chapter to disentangling the differences between practice and philosophy in Oakeshott's thought.

This confusion is not, on the other hand, nearly as present among the work of scholars who read Oakeshott as a political theorist or political philosopher and do not consider his practical claims with quite the same enthusiasm, though they do acknowledge such practical considerations are present. Those who focus on Oakeshott from this perspective, such as Wendell John Coats Jr., Timothy Fuller, Paul Franco, David R. Mapel, and Ephraim Podoksik, are primarily concerned with the text which Oakeshott considered to be his magnum opus: *On Human Conduct*. Both Coats and Franco explicitly acknowledge the divisions between theory and practice in Oakeshott's conceptual framework; their work is then intentionally aimed at understanding Oakeshott *theoretically*, not in terms of providing prescriptions for what a specific government ought to do.¹⁶ Similarly, an insightful analysis from Fuller considers three theoretical considerations of political rights, looking to Ronald Dworkin's legal positivism, John Finnis's natural rights, and comparing these with Oakeshott's concept of civil association as most fully developed in *On Human Conduct*; the issue at hand is never how to implement these rights or which rights to implement, but rather how to *think* about rights as such—the goal is mere understanding.¹⁷ Mapel focuses on the notion of contingency present in *On Human Conduct* as being the unifying concept that Oakeshott is working to

¹⁶ Wendell John Coats Jr., "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 4 (December 1985): 776; Paul Franco, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (August 1990): 411-412.

¹⁷ Timothy Fuller, "Taking Natural Law Seriously Within the Liberal Tradition," in *Michael Oakeshott on Authority, Governance, and the State*, ed. Eric S. Kos (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 90, 94, 100.

understand philosophically and how this influences Oakeshott's notion of a purposeless 'Civil Association.'¹⁸ Lastly, Podoksik, in comparing the work of Oakeshott with the German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, argues that Oakeshott's theory of civil association allows him to "overcome" the merely skeptical conservatism that was surely present throughout Oakeshott's writing in *Rationalism in politics and other essays*.¹⁹ Podoksik does approach the same confusion as other thinkers who tend to confuse Oakeshott's position on the differences between philosophy and practice, particularly in the way that he views Oakeshott's theory as "overcoming" his practice. This point, however, is made in comparison to the work of Tönnies whose theory remained as conservative as his practical politics, so Podoksik's confusion can be more easily overlooked.²⁰

It is unsurprising that these commentators who have largely focused upon *On Human Conduct* in their scholarly work have taken such a theoretical position, as this is the position endorsed by Oakeshott himself. One need not look any further than the Preface of the text to understand their approach to analyzing Oakeshott's theoretical work:

Philosophical reflection is recognized here as the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands and in which the understanding sought (itself unavoidably conditional) is a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it. [...] It is, in short, a well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquility.²¹

¹⁸ David R. Mapel, "Civil Association and the Idea of Contingency," *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (August 1990): 393; David R. Mapel, "Purpose and Politics: Can There Be a Non-Instrumental Civil Association?" *The Political Science Reviewer* 21 (April 1992): 63-64, 78-80.

¹⁹ Ephraim Podoksik, "Overcoming the Conservative Disposition: Oakeshott vs. Tönnies," *Political Studies* 56 (2008): 858.

²⁰ Podoksik, "Overcoming the Conservative Disposition: Oakeshott vs. Tönnies," 876-877.

²¹ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1975), vii.

Philosophical reflection is something sought for its own sake, a form of understanding which does not supplant what is presently understood but which perhaps allows whatever is under investigation to be viewed from a different perspective. Coats Jr. remarks in his reflection upon Oakeshott that, unlike his predecessor, Hegel, Oakeshott sees the primacy of practical political considerations, and that to believe the philosophical considerations to be more true would cause a misunderstanding of the world as it is.²² Likewise, Franco understands Oakeshott as reformulating the theory of liberalism, not in the sense of developing a theory to recommend a certain path of action, but rather that it is a greater elucidation of the implications extant in present practical arrangements found in European politics.²³

In addition to these scholars who discuss Oakeshott's intellectual contributions in his own work, others focus on Oakeshott's reading of prior political philosophers, namely Thomas Hobbes, to understand how they may have influenced Oakeshott's own thought. Much of this literature is primarily concerned with Oakeshott's introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan* as well as some other essays that Oakeshott wrote about his English predecessor. Ted H. Miller, for example, discusses the apparent paradox in Oakeshott championing Hobbes considering Oakeshott's aversion to 'Rationalism,' as it may be argued that Hobbes himself was a Rationalist.²⁴ Bruce P. Frohnen attempts to reconcile this issue by arguing that Oakeshott reinterprets Hobbes through his more skeptical and idealist lens, which may indeed distort Hobbes slightly but in a manner that tempers his

²² Coats Jr., "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," 785-786.

²³ Franco, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," 432.

²⁴ Ted H. Miller, "Oakeshott's Hobbes and the Fear of Political Rationalism," *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (December 2001): 808-813.

more rationalistic tendencies.²⁵ Like the work by Franco and other theorists, these arguments are fundamentally predicated on Oakeshott's philosophical views as opposed to his more practical outlooks; they are discussions of men reflecting upon politics, not explaining how one ought to behave or could behave.

Scholars who have taken the more practical approach, as opposed to theoretical, concern themselves less with Oakeshott's work such as *On Human Conduct* and more frequently focus upon *Rationalism in politics and other essays*. This is true of both his proponents and detractors. This reading of Oakeshott tends to dwell far more on his essays such as "On being conservative," "Rationalism in politics," "Political Education," and "Rational conduct." Some of these essays, especially the latter, do have an evidently theoretical tone; however, all these essays predominantly discuss the world of practical activity—that is, the world of the "is" and the "ought." These essays do not merely pursue better understanding but also contain a clear advocacy for or against certain dispositions and conceptions of governance. This body of literature on Oakeshott's work is the one to which I consider myself to be contributing; my concern here is not with Oakeshott's political theory but with how he understands practical activity, specifically regarding the role of governance as an aspect of practical action.

This 'practical' reading of Oakeshott has several themes that are largely consistent: tradition, conservatism, identity, change, and innovation are among the most prominent. How a scholar understands the interaction of these themes as presented by Oakeshott is integral to understanding why he or she either criticizes Oakeshott's work or promotes it as profound and enlightening. There is a tendency for the critics of Oakeshott

²⁵ Bruce P. Frohnen, "Oakeshott's Hobbesian Myth: Pride, Character and the Limits of Reason," *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (December 1990): 794-797.

to view these themes as deeply intertwined or even conflate them, while his proponents tend to allow for a more fluid and independent understanding of how these themes interact.

Beginning with his critics, some early readers of *Rationalism in politics and other essays* criticize Oakeshott on the grounds that his advocacy of the conservative disposition is either disingenuous or hypocritical. D. D. Raphael takes exception with Oakeshott since Oakeshott claims that philosophy, and by extension political philosophy, is not an activity engaged in to advocate for change but simply to perform an exercise in understanding. Raphael argues further that many of Oakeshott's own forebearers would have rejected such a claim, aside from perhaps the lonely Hume.²⁶ This makes Oakeshott a deeply *unconservative* thinker, as he directly contradicts the philosophical tradition from which he emerges. For Raphael, to be unconservative is to be anti-traditional and to be traditional is to be conservative. In this same vein, Bernard Crick claims that "the most obvious character of Western thought—the belief that conscious political action can lead to human progress—is to [Oakeshott] detestable."²⁷ This interpretation of Oakeshott logically leads to the claim that without the capacity to consciously reformulate one's understanding of political action, one is left with only his traditions. They then claim, however, that Oakeshott never defines tradition therefore leaving his reader out at sea in a rickety boat without a map or oars.²⁸

²⁶ D.D. Raphael, "Professor Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics*," Review of *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, by Michael Oakeshott, *Political Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 1964): 208-209.

²⁷ Bernard Crick, "The World of Michael Oakeshott," Review of *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, by Michael Oakeshott, *Encounter* (June 1963): 73.

²⁸ Crick, "The World of Michael Oakeshott," 70.

This claim that Oakeshott's views on political activity reduce to an empty traditionalism leads to some commentators, such as Neal Wood, to claim that Oakeshott's politics are effectively no better than Edmund Burke's.²⁹ To perpetually look back to one's tradition leaves one in a position of not being able to account for future circumstances that may emerge, meaning that "without innovation there is nothing to conserve, and with conservation there is a continual need for innovation."³⁰ Wood argues that to be tied to the past never allows for the present to be understood on its own grounds, an error of which he claims Oakeshott is guilty.

A further criticism of Oakeshott's political thought is that since it is interpreted as being reliant on a vague notion of tradition, there is a hidden, principled claim lurking in the background. Scholars such as David Spitz have argued this as the main reason to reject Oakeshott's position.³¹ When 'tradition' is invoked as the overriding principle, it is not that the present manners of behaviour are being advocated for but that an abstract notion of 'tradition,' one that is just as imaginative as the vision of a futuristic utopian, is being inserted. This requires an evaluative discernment that such a vision of 'tradition' is preferable to any other vision for how society ought to look moving forward. What should then be focused on is not actually the tradition itself but whatever criterion is quietly being invoked to prove that tradition is superior to whatever alternatives are present in a moment of political action.³²

²⁹ Neal Wood, "A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott," *The Journal of Politics*, 21, no. 4 (November 1959): 660.

³⁰ Wood, "A Guide to the Classics," 662.

³¹ David Spitz, "A Rationalist Malgré Lui: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 4, no. 3 (August 1976): 339.

³² Spitz, "A Rationalist Malgré Lui," 340.

Some critics of Oakeshott who pursue the issue of how he could derive political action argue that Oakeshott's lack of substantive identity for a conservative government leaves his viewpoint vacuous and undesirable. Oakeshott's view of conservative governance does, in fact, contain no clear substantive content; nor does he advocate that it should possess a specific identity or aim at directing the substance of the citizens' lives who are living under a conservative government. Oakeshott is, interestingly, criticized for this position in two main ways: a left-wing critique and a neoconservative critique. These labels are not perfect, but they suffice to indicate the supposed problem being addressed in Oakeshott's work.

The most prominent left-wing critique of Oakeshott's view of conservative governance comes from Hanna Pitkin who takes exception with Oakeshott's view that government should not reorder society toward what she may consider a 'better' direction. She claims that Oakeshott's view of politics, in many ways, simply maintains the present order and never works to improve the lives of the dispossessed in society.³³ Pitkin rejects Oakeshott's supposed claim that change is for the worse, arguing that he never considers the fact that change, deliberate or not, could result in an improved self.³⁴ Pitkin assumes that this is an activity perfectly legitimate for governments to pursue, going so far as to say that Oakeshott's "vision omits the very stuff of political life, problematic but essential: power, interest, collective action, conflict."³⁵ In her view, Oakeshott's rather vacuous conception of politics prevents society from improving or from ever coming to a

³³ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," *Dissent* (Fall 1973): 510.

³⁴ Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 521.

³⁵ Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 523.

sense of democratic self-consciousness; it lacks identity and therefore has nothing to offer.³⁶

Strikingly similar criticisms of Oakeshott also emerge from the neoconservatives Irving Kristol and Gertrude Himmelfarb, who argue that Oakeshott's politics are vacuous and lack any semblance of a desirable identity.³⁷ Granted, they do not advocate for the same self-conscious, egalitarian identity as Pitkin; rather, Kristol and Himmelfarb take exception with Oakeshott's lack of religious identity within his conservative perspective. The neoconservative perspective, at least in the American context of Kristol and Himmelfarb, is married to a vague notion of religious identity which undergirds political action; this religious identity is typically of a murky 'Judeo-Christian' variety.³⁸ Himmelfarb goes as far as to claim that Oakeshott is outright hostile to religious identities and practices, based on a limited excerpt from Oakeshott's first philosophical text, *Experience and Its Modes*.³⁹ Kristol argues that this is incompatible with 'conservatism,' especially in its neoconservative variety, as there has been the continuous view of political philosophers—at least prior to the twentieth-century—that a strong religious foundation is necessary to maintain the heart of any political community.⁴⁰

In short, the criticisms of Oakeshott's view of conservatism and conservative government can be understood as follows: Oakeshott's own philosophical claims seem to be in opposition to the tradition he comes from, putting him in a rather hypocritical

³⁶ Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 524.

³⁷ Irving Kristol, "America's 'Exceptional' Conservatism," in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (Chicago, IL: Elephant Paperbacks, 1999), 374-375; Gertrude Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination of Michael Oakeshott," *American Scholar* 44, iss. 3 (Summer 1975): 419.

³⁸ Kenneth B. MacIntyre, "One Hand Clapping: The Reception of Oakeshott's Work by American Conservatives," in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 258-259.

³⁹ Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination of Michael Oakeshott," 414.

⁴⁰ Kristol, "America's 'Exceptional' Conservatism," 381.

position when advocating for conservatism; his rejection of philosophy having the capacity to direct action leads to the claim that humanity is left with only tradition, but this is in itself a value claim which is never justified; finally, the tradition invoked by Oakeshott is rather vague or even vacuous, never providing a substantial political identity, leading to rejections of Oakeshott's conservative politics from both left-wing and right-wing perspectives that argue this is a prerequisite for political action. It should be noted here that these criticisms tend to conflate the various themes of Oakeshott's work. Several of Oakeshott's critics hardly distinguish between conservatism and tradition, politics and identity are entirely interlinked, and there is no discernable difference between change and innovation in these critiques. Oakeshott's proponents tend to resist this reading by not allowing this conflation of concepts to occur so easily.

Two of the more prominent defenses of Oakeshott's view of what it means to be conservative come from Jeremy Rayner and, interestingly, Timothy Fuller. Fuller is discussed above as a liberal reader of Oakeshott, focusing more on Oakeshott's theory. This is itself true, in that Fuller focuses mainly upon Oakeshott's philosophical work, but he happens to also be a great reader of Oakeshott as a practical writer. This perspective in fact allows for Fuller to consider the ways in which politics and even practical activity as a whole fall short of philosophical experience, while Rayner aims more toward simply understanding how Oakeshott discusses practical activity and politics as such.

Fuller traces Oakeshott's view of philosophy and politics as irreconcilably different forms of experience, at least in part, back to David Hume who has a clear influence on Oakeshott's thought from early on in his career. Fuller is unabashedly clear that politics, as a temporal and practical activity, will forever be lesser than the

philosophical. It requires concessions, compromises, and unknowns, whereas philosophical experience pursues understanding for its own sake to the highest degree—even if this end is never fully achieved, which both Oakeshott and Hume at least implicitly concede.⁴¹ Fuller argues that the key difference between what Oakeshott considers ‘philosophic activity’ and ‘practical activity’ is that practical activity perpetually occupies a world of temporality—the world of the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ and in which those binary poles are constant.⁴² Philosophy, on the other hand, aims at understanding in a manner deeper than the merely contingent, not so as to supplant the contingent but to offer a way of understanding that suffers from less indeterminacy than things understood only practically.⁴³ Fuller presents this distinction between the worlds of philosophy and practice more succinctly than anywhere else in the literature on Oakeshott. His explanation is, however, nonetheless brief and leaves more to be unraveled. Chapter One of this paper aims to further explore this relationship between the two types of activity more fully so as to understand Oakeshott’s claims about government as a fundamentally *practical*, not philosophical, activity.

Rayner, unlike Fuller, is rather unconcerned with Oakeshott’s philosophical perspective, especially when discussing how Oakeshott conceptualizes governance. Instead, he begins with the assumption that politics is fundamentally a practical endeavour and therefore does not strive for some sort of eternal truth or incontrovertible order. Instead, he argues Oakeshott acknowledges that politics exists within a world that is constantly at risk of requiring reinterpretation—it will never have the solid and eternal

⁴¹ Timothy Fuller, “The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 113.

⁴² Fuller, “The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism,” 117.

⁴³ Fuller, “The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism,” 117.

status of a philosophical inquiry, or at least what philosophical inquiry aims to provide.⁴⁴ Rayner thus demonstrates that Oakeshott is not, for this reason, interested in outlining a set of political arrangements which he believes are incontrovertibly true, for he does not believe such a thing exists.⁴⁵ Different circumstances will require different arrangements, and thus to develop a singular understanding of how politics should be constructed makes one insensitive to circumstance and need. As opposed to such an arrangement, Oakeshott instead outlines what he believes to be the proper *disposition* for politics: a disposition not aimed at a certain political arrangement, but in a certain attitude toward experience, one aimed toward the enjoyment of life as presently experienced.⁴⁶ Though this does not break the eternal waves of new practical circumstances to be addressed, it at least provides a common basis for how to sail the boundless sea together.

My present argument thus has much in common with the scholarship about practice and politics presented by Fuller and Rayner, while looking to resist what I believe are some of the eristic tendencies present in the critical analyses of Oakeshott's practical writing. This is not to say that Oakeshott's concept of governance is without fault—it surely has some shortcomings which even he recognizes, as exemplified in his admission that conservative governance is merely one legitimate form of government and not necessarily the sole player.⁴⁷ I merely hope to revisit this conception of conservative governance as presented by Oakeshott to make it more intelligible for our current circumstances.

⁴⁴ Jeremy Rayner, "The Legend of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism: Sceptical Philosophy and Limited Politics," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 2 (June 1985): 317.

⁴⁵ Rayner, "The Legend of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism," 329.

⁴⁶ Rayner, "The Legend of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism," 317.

⁴⁷ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 426.

Chapter 1

Oakeshott's Philosophy and Practical Activity: Understanding Experience and Our Commonest Mode

*“Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind.”*

-William Wordsworth

Introduction

Understanding how Michael Oakeshott views the division between philosophy and practice is, to be blunt, a tumultuous endeavour. Little to no scholarship concerned with solely his view of philosophy presently exists. Nearly all commentary on his thought jumps directly to his political thought, whether that be Oakeshott's political philosophy or his more 'practical' political writings. I believe the lack of attention to this difference between philosophy and practice in Oakeshott's thought corresponds to the present confusion in understanding what Oakeshott argues about politics and conservatism. Some writers neglect to consider his theoretical writing when observing his practical claims;⁴⁸ others argue that there is little division between Oakeshott's two views.⁴⁹ Fuller and Franco, however, argue that to miss this division in Oakeshott's thought is to misunderstand him altogether, and I must concede my agreement with their readings.⁵⁰ The sole issue (though it is more precisely a gap) in their writings is that they have tended to consider Oakeshott as a political philosopher, disregarding his more 'practical' views—and my analysis is meant to begin filling this space. I argue that Oakeshott maintains a distinction between philosophy and practice and that ignoring this separation causes our thinking and conversation to fall into errors of category. Oakeshott understands philosophy as experience that is entirely self-supported, possesses no presuppositions, and is wholly coherent, while practice is predicated upon the abstract presupposition of the necessary 'I' of volition and an abstract division between what 'is' and what 'ought to be.'

⁴⁸ Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 497n.

⁴⁹ Gerencser, "Voices in Conversation," 729-731.

⁵⁰ Fuller, "The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism," 116; Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (King's Lynn, UK: Biddles Ltd., 1990), 141-142.

My analysis therefore proceeds as follows: I begin by analyzing how Oakeshott understands all experience to be a “world of ideas,” and that concepts such as “truth” and “reality” can only be understood through having a complete world in which all is understood as correlatively substantiated and revealed; in contrast to this, practice is an “abstract mode” of experience which contains presuppositions that can never be overcome, meaning that practical experience must perpetually contain a tension that demands supersession—though practice does have ‘truth claims’ which, due to its modified form of experience, cannot be directly intervened upon by philosophical experience. Through this argument, I believe the practical realities of a conservative disposition and political activity become clearer and, by extension, preclude a philosophical manner of thinking from guiding them per Oakeshott’s view of experience and its modes.

Philosophy as Total Experience

As Franco argues, Oakeshott’s philosophy, though not reducible to its time and place, emerges from a specific historical context that deeply influenced his approach. The nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were dominated by philosophies that could be described as fundamentally “historicistic,” “scientistic,” or “pragmatistic.”⁵¹ Each of these three positions holds that the totality of experience can be explained from a single vantage point: that of history, science, or practice, respectively.⁵² *Experience and Its*

⁵¹ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 16-17.

⁵² Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), xi—Oakeshott, in his preface to the original print of this collection and then reprinted in the 1991 edition, states, “The essay on poetry is a belated retraction of a foolish sentence in *Experience and Its Modes*”; he is referring to his essay “The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind,” in which he establishes ‘poetry’ as another mode. I have chosen to omit any recognition of it here for two reasons: this is a later addition that does not appear in his original philosophic text which I am here unpacking, and this later revision has virtually no impact on this present analysis.

Modes is, at its core, a repudiation of these views. Oakeshott's express aim is to explain why history, science, and practice are insufficient explanations for the whole of reality as they cannot substantiate their own activity, though they are legitimate forms of activity and should not be dismissed.⁵³ To do this, he provides a rough sketch of what he considers to be the character of philosophic experience before using this view to reject the alternative "philosophies" he is considering.

Oakeshott, at least in his earlier work, explicitly connects himself with what is commonly referred to as 'idealism' within philosophic circles. He identifies his thought directly with the German idealist, G.W.F. Hegel, and a major figure of English idealism, F.H. Bradley, though he is evidently indebted to ancient philosophers such as Plato as well.⁵⁴ Oakeshott, taking after his predecessors, argues that philosophy is concerned with the whole of experience which carries with it the evidence of its own completeness, as opposed to a partial view of experience that remains dependent upon presuppositions.⁵⁵ In short, "what distinguishes philosophy from all other experience is the explicit attempt to achieve what is finally satisfactory in experience."⁵⁶

Oakeshott's philosophical enquiry, directed toward understanding experience without any modifications, presuppositions, or divisions, begins by analyzing what he understands as "experience" in its totality. What this term signifies is not merely the subjective experience of an individual, but all that *could* be within experience in a *wholistic* manner. What Oakeshott outlines is not a sense of personal experience trying to

⁵³ Harwell Wells, "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no.1 (January 1994): 131.

⁵⁴ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 5.

⁵⁵ Timothy Fuller, "Michael Oakeshott, 1901-1990," *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 1, (Winter 2009): 101.

⁵⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 267.

take in the whole of ‘external,’ ‘objective’ reality. Like his idealist forebearers, Oakeshott is instead interested in collapsing such notions as the ‘subject’ and the ‘object,’ or the ‘experiencer’ and the ‘experienced.’⁵⁷ The notion of experience which he argues philosophy aims to achieve is one which breaks down all such binaries, leaving nothing outside of the coherence produced; this creates what many idealists have referred to as the “concrete whole” of experience of which there is nothing outside or left unconsidered.⁵⁸

For Oakeshott, this concrete whole of experience is thus always characterized by what he calls “thought” or “judgement.” In his view, there is no experience that could be considered outside of thought and judgement, for then it could never be known and talking about it would become an impossibility.⁵⁹ To further elucidate this point, Oakeshott reviews several concepts that are commonly considered ‘outside’ of thought and judgement: notions such as “sensation,” “perception,” and “intuition.”⁶⁰ When considered, at least in common parlance, these types of experiencing are often believed to receive a form of “datum” which is separate from thought itself and is collected by a thinking being. This implies that there is a form of ‘immediate’ experience that occurs before thought which is, in some capacity, ‘rawer’ and ‘truer.’⁶¹ This view suggests that thinking itself, the act of judgement, is something parasitic upon these initial, untampered experiences.

⁵⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 7.

⁵⁸ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 21.

⁵⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 8-9.

⁶⁰ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 22.

⁶¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 17.

Oakeshott rejects this notion of thinking because it creates an impassible division between thought and these forms of ‘immediate’ experience which makes such a claim impossible. This division is predicated upon the idea that there is a world outside of the mind and then a mirror of that world inside the mind;⁶² this ‘mirrored’ world is supposedly always deficient as it does not match the exterior world since the processes of thinking, reasoning, and judging cause distortions from the world as it is in actuality.⁶³ Oakeshott’s issue is that such notions of sensation, perception, and intuition do not fix this problem of distortion between the interior and exterior—if anything, they exacerbate it. Firstly, it is never clear how one moves from these forms of ‘immediate’ experience to thought; in denying thought access to such experiences, the division between the interiority of the mind and exteriority of the world has merely been shifted. What was before considered the ‘mind’ becomes ‘thought’ or ‘judgement,’ while the ‘exterior’ world becomes ‘immediate’ experience.⁶⁴ Secondly, the connection between ‘raw’ datum and truth is never adequately substantiated. To perceive a book upon a table is impossible without a larger context within which to situate such a claim; the recognition of the object requires further qualifications of experience to distinguish between disparate things, a process that always requires thought and judgement.⁶⁵

The various forms of ‘immediate’ experience thus do not carry with them their own justification and explanation, but rather rely on a larger judgement about their place

⁶² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018)—those familiar with Rorty’s major philosophical work will here notice a considerable similarity between Oakeshott and Rorty’s claims; despite this, Oakeshott should not be considered in the same vein as Rorty, who identifies himself as a post-modernist and views philosophy as little more than complicated practical assertions. This difference in Oakeshott’s work from Rorty’s will be made clear by the end of this chapter.

⁶³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 14.

⁶⁴ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 23.

⁶⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 14-15.

within the whole of experience.⁶⁶ What is referred to as ‘immediate’ experience is thus “a mode of judgement, differing only in degree from our more precisely formulated judgements.”⁶⁷ Sensations, perceptions, and intuitions are thus aspects of thought, but which require unifying judgements to be made sense of. In short, “the general character of experience [is] taken to be thought or judgement. And experience is, consequently, a homogenous whole within which distinctions and modifications may appear, but which knows no absolute division.”⁶⁸

Oakeshott’s philosophical view therefore provides no possibility of understanding something in total abstraction from the rest of experience. The mere perception of a book does not qualify such as an absolute truth claim, and instead such a truth claim requires the perception to be qualified within the whole of experience by which the identification of the book is made.⁶⁹ This is the necessary condition for how Oakeshott understands philosophic truth: *wholistic coherence*. For Oakeshott, truth is the whole of experience being reconciled to itself; “truth...is correlative to experience. It is the world of experience itself in so far as that world is satisfactory in itself.”⁷⁰

From this standpoint, Oakeshott seeks to prove that truth is based on interdependent relationships of various parts which comprise a whole. Within the whole of experience, “particular ideas may perhaps be said to be known in experience as the products of analysis and abstraction.”⁷¹ Oakeshott’s phrasing here is important: what is perceived as particular is a *product* that is born of *analysis and abstraction*, meaning that

⁶⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 20.

⁶⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 16.

⁶⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 21.

⁶⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 48-49.

⁷⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 21.

⁷¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 22.

a certain kind of thought must modify what is present in experience. Though it may appear that experience begins with particularized observations, Oakeshott argues that “we begin...with a world of ideas; the given is neither a collection, nor a series of ideas, but a complex, significant whole. Behind this there is nothing at all.”⁷² At first, the given whole is mysterious and unexamined—but it is nonetheless whole. As aspects of this mysterious whole are then analyzed and abstracted, the nature of the whole is gradually revealed, becoming more consciously concrete; “to modify the system as a whole is to cause every constituent to take on a new character; to modify any of the constituents is to alter the system as a whole.”⁷³ These subtle reformulations of the subject at hand, both in its totality and its details, continuously allows for a more complete understanding. The mysteriousness of the world as initially encountered gives way to a more concrete world.⁷⁴ This is the continuous effort of the philosophic impulse.

At this point, Oakeshott’s notion of philosophic experience can be summarized as the pursuit of a world of ideas that qualifies its claims of truth through interdependent developments of the whole and its constituent elements toward a total coherence. This may, however, seem to fall into an error approaching a form of solipsism or Gnosticism, in which everything becomes merely mental events and the ‘real’ or ‘material’ world is degraded to a mere illusion. Oakeshott anticipates this objection, which brings him to consider the nature of “reality.” Up to this point, Oakeshott has focused upon substantiating that no experience is outside of thought, but the issue of reality brings him to elucidate what he means by a *world* of ideas. Oakeshott first must reject what he

⁷² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 22.

⁷³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 23.

⁷⁴ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 25.

believes to be two erroneous understandings of experience as a world of ideas before explaining his own position of the connection between reality and experience.

The first position Oakeshott refutes is that which believes reality is always confined to someone's subjective view; this position claims that "we can only know our own states of consciousness, and these (if reality be experience) are the only reality."⁷⁵ The immediate problem with this position is that if everything is a product of consciousness, and consciousness as such is reality, then any contradictions found in conscious experience would have to be taken as 'real' with no way of resolving them since they are a part of consciousness which has been defined as the basis of reality; "if my experience were my psychical states as such and nothing more, I should be obliged to take every experience at its face value; to question would be contradictory, to doubt impossible."⁷⁶ Oakeshott further suggests here that it is self-defeating if someone argues that the reality he exists within is merely his own consciousness or psychical state. The proposition is refuted by the very position necessary to argue its validity: by claiming there is a world confined within his consciousness, he must appeal to a position that stands beyond his consciousness. How, though, he determines this—if he is confined to his own conscious world of ideas—is impossible to answer for it would contradict the initial claim being made.⁷⁷

The second position Oakeshott refutes is not that reality is confined to one's consciousness but that reality as such is mere ideas. He rejects here what is commonly referred to as Gnosticism, an idea which emerged from the thought of Plato that views

⁷⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 42.

⁷⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 42.

⁷⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 43.

bodily existence as a mere impediment to ‘true’ experience which is formal or immaterial in character.⁷⁸ Oakeshott argues, however, that this view becomes incomprehensible upon inspection. The gnostic claim is, typically, that there are merely ideas and what we refer to as the ‘substance’ of experience is either ‘less’ real or not real at all. The issue with this view is that ideas as such would become impossible to understand since they would be grounded in nothing; to reject the world as we find it in favour of ideas is akin to rejecting brick and mortar but still desiring the wall—it misunderstands the necessity of a concrete world which is understood together through the ideas. What does it mean to have the notion of ‘tree’ without substantial, particular trees? For Oakeshott, this logic cannot be made sense of.

In opposition to this erroneous conceptualization of reality as mere ideas, Oakeshott offers his own definition of reality: the whole and coherent—meaning true—*world of ideas* which experience perpetually pursues. Experience is not a collection of mere ideas, but rather ideas “are an aspect of every experience, but the concrete whole of no experience whatever.”⁷⁹ In his view, world and ideas are mutually revealing and the necessary ingredients for a coherent notion of experience—one cannot subsume the other. He argues that the ‘bodily’ or ‘material’ realities of experience should not be rejected, but rather reconsidered in light of the whole of experience through the connective tissue of ideas. Oakeshott, in short, believes that experience always involves thought, though not at

⁷⁸ See: Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato, Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997)—This Platonic dialogue may be read as degrading the bodily existence in favour of a purely ‘formal’ or ‘spiritual’ reality, though this reading has some legitimate objections; the point here is only that Oakeshott rejects this notion of degrading ‘matter’ in favour of ‘ideas’ or ‘forms,’ instead seeing these as necessary co-equals qua a *world* (matter) of *ideas* (form).

⁷⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 43.

the exclusion of a concrete world, and that this world is true when made whole and coherent through ideas.

The final step Oakeshott takes is to argue that “reality is what is achieved and is satisfactory in experience.”⁸⁰ This may appear nearly tautological, though Oakeshott hardly denies this fact. From the philosophical standpoint, everything must relate back to the whole world of ideas which is revealed in experience. This understanding of the whole would constitute what is true because it is whole and coherent which, by necessity, means it must be real since there could be nothing beyond this world of ideas.⁸¹

Oakeshott stresses that, in his view, “reality is not whatever I happen to think; it is what I am obliged to think. And to say that it is objective, a world of things, serves to distinguish it from this world of mere ideas, from the world *denken als denken* [*thinking as thinking*].”⁸² Reality is found in the fullest experience of the true world of ideas, characterized as true insofar as it is whole and coherent; there are no assumptions, modifications, or omissions found in philosophical enquiry. It is only the pursuit for the absolute whole of experience made coherent.⁸³

This conception of philosophy outlined thus far is, as Oakeshott explicitly concedes, “not a complete sketch of [his] view...but an imperfect sketch, a mere outline.”⁸⁴ The account of philosophy he gives in *Experience and Its Modes* is not a complete philosophy, but rather the groundwork of one that provides the core characteristics of what philosophy pursues. Oakeshott chooses not to continue pursuing

⁸⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 44.

⁸¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 44-45.

⁸² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 45; my translation.

⁸³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 51-52.

⁸⁴ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 5.

an affirmative philosophical enquiry at this point but rather decides to provide criticisms of other viewpoints from the perspective of this ‘mere outline’ he provides.

Philosophical experience is, therefore, given a special role: it can both pursue the whole of experience in its own right and it can also criticize other incomplete modes of activity by demonstrating how they fail to meet the criteria of philosophy proper.⁸⁵ Provided that philosophy is as Oakeshott describes—whole, coherent, and without presupposition or modification—he can then study the other forms of activity such as history, science, and practice from the standpoint of philosophy to demonstrate why these forms of experience do not sufficiently meet the criteria of full experience.⁸⁶ This distinction between philosophy and the various modifications of wholistic experience is an integral aspect of Oakeshott’s thought, and thus misconceptions about his position must be clarified to gain an adequate understanding of his view. For the purposes of this present argument, I will only be considering his argument about the insufficiency of practical experience, as historical and scientific experience run too far astray from the purpose of this analysis—though they are equally liable to criticism from Oakeshott’s philosophical standpoint.

As outlined above, Oakeshott recognizes that “experience is a world of ideas. And the condition of a world of ideas satisfactory in experience is a condition of coherence, of unity, and completeness”; yet this presents a problem for Oakeshott since he is arguing in an era that is ultimately concerned with what is often called “the fact of diversity.”⁸⁷ The charge against Oakeshott, which he anticipates, is that his singular and unified description

⁸⁵ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 26-27.

⁸⁶ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 28.

⁸⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 53.

of philosophical experience does not allow for the other forms of truth and experience which have emerged, at least notably, in modernity: the facts of history, science, and practice. Now, Oakeshott does not deny the existence of some sort of diversity or plurality of experience—rather, he agrees that “diversity no less than unity appears in experience, and some explanation of it must be offered by any theory which expects a hearing.”⁸⁸ Given his description of philosophical experience, however, it must follow that there can be no sort of experience outside of philosophy for there is indeed nothing outside of the complete world of ideas for which he argues. This sense of diversity must, therefore, refer to an internal diversity that coexists within the unity—this is the essence of the *modes*, or the *modified* forms of experience, which Oakeshott analyzes.⁸⁹

Oakeshott’s choice of word is specific and intentional: *modification*. To understand this view, what must immediately be discarded is the idea that a mode restricts the whole of experience—which philosophic experience seeks—to a merely partial aspect, an island so-to-speak, within the whole.⁹⁰ It is not as if historical, scientific, or practical experience act as blinders that prevent a subsection of the whole from being seen; rather, the modes are like coloured-lens glasses that cause certain aspects of our visual spectrum to become more relevant than others while still looking at the same whole of experience. When engaged in the various forms of modified experience, all aspects of the whole can be seen, but the modification implies that several aspects of the whole are ‘irrelevant.’ Such a qualification is impossible for philosophy which attempts to understand experience as a complete world of ideas. On the other hand,

⁸⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 54.

⁸⁹ Gerencser, “Voices in Conversation,” 727.

⁹⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 54.

history sees the future as irrelevant, science has no place for the qualitative, and practice has little time for that which cannot be affected by the will of a subject. A mode of experience thus does not simply abandon the criteria of experience per philosophical experience but is instead defective in comparison “because it no longer attempts to satisfy that criterion in full.”⁹¹

Not satisfying the criteria in full, however, does not make these modifications of the whole either separate from the whole or contrary to it. Instead, since “a mode of experience is *not* a part of reality, but the *whole* from a *limited standpoint*,” it may indeed no longer be ‘complete’ or ‘concrete’ in the same sense as experience pursued philosophically, but it remains nonetheless “a *world of ideas*, and the *character* of the *mode* is the *character of the world*.”⁹² Oakeshott refers to these modifications as “abstractions,” meaning that there is—from the perspective of philosophy—an arbitrary arrest in the thought and judgement of experience, which consequently generates a lesser world of ideas based upon presuppositions that undergird these abstracted worlds. The world of history cannot justify the importance of the past, nor science the importance of the quantitative, nor practice the importance of the will—rather these modes tend to be justified merely by their persistence despite them being incomplete worlds of ideas. In this sense, Oakeshott is positing that, as observed above, that only a truly complete philosophy is ever concrete, and that all other forms of knowing are—perhaps counterintuitively—abstract experience which presuppose unjustified assumptions.⁹³ By “unjustified,” Oakeshott means two things: the first is that the philosophic impulse would

⁹¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 55.

⁹² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 57 (my italics).

⁹³ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 28.

never allow for such an arrest, and the second is that the presuppositions each modified world of ideas rests upon cannot be justified from within that world.⁹⁴ In Oakeshott's view, then, there is the unified world of philosophic experience, which then may be abstractly modified in order to generate lesser worlds of ideas. Theoretically, there is no limit to how many abstract worlds could be found, but Oakeshott believes that among this pluralism of abstract worlds, three in particular have made themselves apparent and relevant in modernity: history, science, and practice. The object of the remainder of Oakeshott's argument in *Experience and Its Modes* is to demonstrate what the presuppositions of these forms of abstract experience are, and why they fall short of the whole, concrete, philosophic experience.

A question may naturally emerge as to why Oakeshott is pursuing such a line of enquiry but, again, Oakeshott anticipates this question. Due to these differing but progressively more dominant modes of knowing emerging—history, science, and practice—Oakeshott is concerned that the different forms of truth they generate, due to their different and unjustified arrests in the whole of experience, are becoming confused and causing errors in thinking.⁹⁵ To highlight this problem, we may consider a simple example: cancer treatment. What Oakeshott is attempting to point out is that the presuppositions that undergird the research into what cancer is and what is effective against it are scientific questions. They require quantitative tests and certain methods to procure the truth about such claims. The question of treatment itself, however, is fundamentally a practical matter, as it involves the volition of individuals saying they should do one thing or another based on how they understand the world and what sort of

⁹⁴ Wells, "The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott," 131.

⁹⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 4.

world they wish to live in. Of course, there will be a sort of overlap on these matters between the various modes, but Oakeshott maintains that they be understood as fundamentally distinct, for to not recognize this may cause a discussion or argument to go awry since one interlocutor is arguing practically while another is arguing scientifically—this is what Oakeshott refers to as *ignorati elenchi*.⁹⁶

Before analyzing the mode of practice in relation to philosophy, I would like to briefly make a final note on Oakeshott's philosophical view: its pitfalls. Despite Oakeshott putting forth his view in such a succinct manner, there are two aspects that he simply either passes by or ignores that I believe leave something to be desired in his explanation. The first, which is hinted at above, is that there is no explanation for *why* the various modes occur, and his system seems to posit that philosophy cannot provide this answer, nor can the modes do so for themselves—a problem which Oakeshott simply asserts “lies beyond [his] purpose.”⁹⁷ The best Oakeshott offers up is that “the easily approachable is preferred to what, in the end, can alone afford complete satisfaction,” meaning that the modes offer an easier route for understanding, one which perhaps the feeble human condition has the capacity to endure.⁹⁸ The second issue is that Oakeshott offers no explanation of hierarchy or relationship between the modes, a criticism often leveled against him by his contemporaries.⁹⁹ Other idealists have often attempted to demonstrate the primacy of philosophy as a sort of ‘ruling’ form of experience made out

⁹⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 4.

⁹⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 54.

⁹⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 54.

⁹⁹ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 28-29.

to organize the other modes of knowing.¹⁰⁰ Oakeshott, on the other hand, rejects this and posits that, though the modes are contained within philosophical experience, the ends pursued by the modes are fundamentally distinct from philosophy and cannot be entirely determined by philosophy.¹⁰¹ How precisely then the confusion between the modes is meant to be abated seems to be somewhat obscure from this position as there is no form of experience in control, and I believe Oakeshott would have been well-advised to consider this problem more carefully—a consideration that can, unfortunately, never come to fruition. My purpose in highlighting these shortcomings is only to address that Oakeshott's view is far from perfect—such a claim would be foolish to make, and I believe Oakeshott himself would be the first to acknowledge this.

Despite whatever shortcomings Oakeshott's view may suffer, it can nevertheless be understood that he views philosophy as the pursuit of experience as a concrete, coherent, and complete world of ideas, but that this is not the only possible form of experience. Abstract arrests in the whole of experience are possible, which themselves create lesser, simpler worlds of experience to be considered. This provides philosophy with two functions: to elucidate the whole of experience and to understand the deficiencies present in the various modes of experience. It is from this conclusion that I now move on to Oakeshott's conception of practical experience: the world of ideas predicated upon the abstractions of volition, the 'is,' and the 'ought.'

¹⁰⁰ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato, Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997)—arguably the earliest known suggestion of such a position, although there is debate around whether Plato truly believes in the rule of the philosopher.

¹⁰¹ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 28.

The Mode of Practice

Although I do not discuss them here, the two other modes which Oakeshott considers in *Experience and Its Modes* are science and history. In both cases, Oakeshott sees them as excursions; they are intellectual achievements that have little bearing on the day-to-day life of men and are therefore rarely ventured into, perhaps never ventured into by some people.¹⁰² They are not excursions, however, from philosophy—they are only modifications of philosophy. The other modes are only considered excursions from the standpoint of the practical world of ideas, for it is the most common to man; in some sense, it is the mode of living as humanity knows it, and “unless we make some conscious effort to step outside, it is within this world that we pass our lives.”¹⁰³ It is, therefore, considered the concrete form of experience by many thinkers—to be practical is to experience reality as it truly is.¹⁰⁴ Given Oakeshott’s view of philosophy, however, we may expect that he will refute such a position of practical truth being synonymous with philosophical truth.

In his elucidation of wholistic, philosophic experience, Oakeshott demonstrates that he understands all experience as a world of ideas. What distinguishes modified experience, as opposed to the whole of experience as sought by philosophy, is the character it takes on which consequently limits what is relevant for that sort of experience. In identifying a mode, one finds not some alternate reality from that pursued by philosophy; to be within a mode is to encounter that same whole of experience but with unjustified presuppositions that affect how one engages the whole of experience.

¹⁰² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 190.

¹⁰³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 191.

¹⁰⁴ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 56.

Oakeshott argues that these presuppositions compose the character of a mode—a character which is present in the mode of experience as a whole and in all its particularity. As stated above, the ultimate goal of *Experience and Its Modes* is to distinguish between philosophy and these other lesser modes of experience. When discussing practical experience, therefore, Oakeshott proceeds as follows: he first considers the objections to his notion of practice as a world of experience; then how he conceptualizes the character of practical activity; and he lastly establishes why this is an abstract mode of experience in comparison with the complete, concrete reality as sought in philosophy.¹⁰⁵

As is usual with Oakeshott, his first move is to anticipate objections to his claim that practice is a modified world of ideas—he focuses on three in particular. By first hearing these objections, I believe Oakeshott’s own conception becomes easier to understand as he refutes these three erroneous views and develops his own view. The first objection is that “practice...is activity and not thought; and the world of practice is a world of actions, not of ideas.”¹⁰⁶ This view holds that what is considered ‘judgement,’ such as considering what to eat for lunch, is irrelevant to practice and only actions taken have importance; this notion of practice would hold that it is merely the eating of the ham sandwich that matters, not that there was deliberation between eating that or spaghetti with meatballs. The second dissenting view, however, could grant that judgement is an aspect of practice, but it disagrees that practice makes a world of ideas in the manner Oakeshott describes.¹⁰⁷ Instead, this view holds that practice is little more than a series or

¹⁰⁵ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 193.

¹⁰⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 194.

collection of events that have no internal coherence, merely existing as a set of quasi-independent and disconnected occurrences. The third view moves in a much different direction than the prior two, as it rejects neither ‘judgement’ nor practice as a ‘world,’ but instead argues that the practical life is “a mere collection of opinions.”¹⁰⁸ This view holds that knowledge itself is not possible within the practical mode as there exists no criteria for it, and therefore practice is something akin to a war of wills.

Oakeshott dismisses the first dissenting view, that practical experience is a world of pure action with no thought, on the grounds that it is as mistaken as considering ‘perception’ or ‘sensation’ as something which is external to thought.¹⁰⁹ Oakeshott observes that this view typically considers ‘volition’ to be the aspect of experience that drives action, in the sense of ‘asserting one’s will.’ If this is taken as entirely distinct from judgement and thought, however, it would be impossible to understand what volition even is—it, *ipso facto*, could not be thought about. Instead, Oakeshott argues that volition is merely ‘judgement’ within the confines of the practical mode; “volition itself is thought and not the mere result of thought,” meaning that volition is to practice what judgement is to philosophy.¹¹⁰ Oakeshott rejects the second position by arguing that to understand practice as an incoherent collection of occurrences is to make it impossible to understand what is then meant by practice at all.¹¹¹ If we were to consider any other designation—man, rabbit, shoe, candle—but then argue that it is an incoherent set of

¹⁰⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 195.

¹⁰⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 193.

¹¹⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 194—I must concede here, that the language Oakeshott uses may feel confused in light of how many of us speak on a day-to-day basis; we would, likely, render a courtroom ruling a ‘judgement,’ yet that is surely in the practical mode as it requires action. We must remember, however, that this text is written from a philosophical perspective and the language therefore has a different meaning, which is only revealed in understanding Oakeshott’s position as elucidated in the text itself.

¹¹¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 194-195.

instances, we would evidently say that the category itself becomes an irrelevance or nonsense. The general character of the world of practice is known through the particulars that instantiate it, and the particulars can only receive that general character through the notion of the world within which it exists.¹¹² Particulars and universals are mutually revealing in Oakeshott's view, and judgement or thought would be impossible without that being true. Lastly, Oakeshott refutes the notion that practice is "mere opinion." Oakeshott points out that "mere opinion" is meaningless since it implies there is no true concept or 'fact' being striven for; this view "implies an absolute distinction between knowledge and true opinion," however, "opinion is not the negation of knowledge, it is merely unorganized, immature knowledge."¹¹³ If one person says that a strawberry is a small red fruit while another says that it is a type of bird, we may say that neither opinion is true in an absolute sense as neither definition is exhaustive, however, we can certainly say the former is more accurate than the latter.¹¹⁴

Oakeshott has thus indicated three significant aspects of his view of practice: it is characterized by a mode of thought called volition; it is a world of ideas or else it could not be understood as experience at all; and, though practical experience may often be a matter of opinion, this does not make it a world of *mere* opinion since some opinions are truer than others as revealed by the coherence of the world of practice itself. Indeed, Oakeshott pushes this a bit further and argues that practice, being a modified form of experience, is destined to be within the realm of opinion as it does not take into account

¹¹² Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 58.

¹¹³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 196.

¹¹⁴ I concede that this discussion of knowledge and opinion is somewhat rushed, but this problem is one that is fundamental to the philosophic problem of epistemology—a problem to which I hardly have a solution. Despite that Oakeshott could be analyzed to give a more robust understanding of both concepts, I feel that it goes too far astray of my purposes for this paper and have therefore chosen to leave further discussion to the side for now.

the complete realm of experience; in its failure to be *complete* experience, it prevents itself from ever being true or real in the absolute sense which philosophy pursues. It can, however, be considered more or less true by maintaining conditions of coherence within the practical world of ideas, characterized by its unjustified presuppositions.¹¹⁵ It is to these presuppositions that I now turn.

At the broadest level, Oakeshott describes practical activity as experience in which “the alteration of existence is undertaken. Practical life comprises the attempts we make to alter existence or to maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change.”¹¹⁶ Oakeshott does not shy away from the fact that this notion of practice has vast implications; what Oakeshott is discussing here is not merely a set of moral rules, nor those things which are typically viewed as significant aspects of life such as family, jobs, and finances. “Practice comprises everything which belongs to the conduct of life as such,” as it must be maintained as a coherent world of ideas in which all particulars affect one another and the whole world to which they contribute.¹¹⁷ A set of moral dictates or the highlights of what we are concerned with in day-to-day life are not exhaustive of our experiences, as there are many micro-happenings perpetually at play in our lives that are necessary for what may concern us self-consciously.¹¹⁸ Practice, as Oakeshott considers it, is the whole experience of being human—of stumbling around in a cosmos far greater than oneself in an effort to understand what it means to live at all.

This is indicative of the first presupposition that is inherent to the world of practical activity: individual volition. Oakeshott refers to practical experience as “*sub*

¹¹⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 196-197.

¹¹⁶ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 197.

¹¹⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 197.

¹¹⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 231.

specie voluntatis,” or ‘under the form of will.’¹¹⁹ This necessitates that there be at least one individual within the world of practice who possesses volition and causes changes within the world he inhabits. It is important to note that such “individuals are designated, not defined,” meaning that this notion of the individual is presupposed and cannot be justified internally by the practical mode.¹²⁰ Oakeshott points out that for the volitional individual to question his own legitimacy as a being who possesses a will would contradict the very foundation of practical experience; in so doing, he has left the world of practice and must engage in a different sort of experience, perhaps that of philosophy.¹²¹ The individual must consider his own will as self-evident if he is to act practically. Having thus understood the necessity of volition for practice, it must be asked how the will engages with the practical world of ideas: what is necessarily implied by a world of change?

Oakeshott argues that the existence of volition, of a self who can change his world from within, necessitates a world two other undoubtable presuppositions: the world of ‘what is’ and the world of ‘what ought to be.’¹²² The volitional individual must consider both his world as it is and the world as he desires it to be, and these two conceptions must have a relative degree of autonomy; he first considers the world as it presently exists in order to find his place in it and must then consider his world as he would like it to be. Now, though Oakeshott does refer to both of these concepts as worlds, I believe it is more effective to consider them as ‘sub-worlds.’ The reason I make this distinction is that the realm of practical experience is itself a single world comprised of these two sub-worlds:

¹¹⁹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 198.

¹²⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 206-208.

¹²¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 200 & 208.

¹²² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 200-201.

“Practice is the alteration of one given world so as to make it agree with another given world. And it is, therefore, qualified and governed at every step by the character of the two worlds it presupposes and the character of the alteration it attempts.”¹²³ Conversely, the two sub-worlds of ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ become nothing more than “vicious” abstractions in absence of one another.¹²⁴ The practical world allows for a dynamic interplay between the two sub-worlds to create a coherent and relatively complete world of activity; each sub-world, however, cannot be made sense of without the invocation of the other—the world of ‘what is’ stagnates when isolated and the world of ‘what ought to be’ has no foundation from which to begin if taken by itself.¹²⁵

These three presuppositions—designated volition, the world of ‘what is,’ and the world of ‘what ought to be’—comprise the character of the world of practice. If any one of these three presuppositions collapses, the other two must go as well.¹²⁶ In the absence of a volitional individual, there is no agent to consider the present and how it may change; without the world of ‘what is,’ there is no basis from which the volitional individual may incite change; and, without the world of ‘what ought to be,’ the present must be taken as the whole of experience and volition becomes impossible.¹²⁷ Now, in some sense, to have identified this trio of presuppositions is to have understood the character of practical activity in Oakeshott’s view. There are, however, two further points to consider that I believe are relevant for Oakeshott’s understanding of conservatism and governance: firstly, the character of practice is, by definition, a world which is dependent

¹²³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 222.

¹²⁴ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 201.

¹²⁵ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 221.

¹²⁶ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 62.

¹²⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 222.

upon the possibility of change; and secondly, Oakeshott's proof of philosophy being ultimately distinct from practice further distinguishes philosophy from what practice can never claim to have achieved: a whole and coherent form of experience.

Oakeshott argues that practical life is something naturally thrust upon mortal humanity and thus the circumstance of human life is defined by change; aging and death are inevitable, though their precise movements and details are, to some degree, malleable by human volition.¹²⁸ The human condition is thus one of seeking reconciliation of the self with the inevitability of change. Insofar as a volitional individual can maintain an understanding of his world as it is alongside the world as he would like it to be, he continues to live in a manner that can be called practically 'true.' The truth can, therefore, change for a man from one moment to another. What is true for a man in his twenties may not be precisely true for the same man in his seventies; his younger self may have not hesitated when anticipating the sixty-hour workweek, while his older self could handle little more than resting in a chair and reading a book. What holds perpetual for this form of experience, however, is that there is always the future; and "so long as the future is an essential element of practical appraisal, coherence has eluded us; we are never without unrealized ideas."¹²⁹

Oakeshott foresees that this will be something which many people find difficult to accept; people tend to understand what is factual in a static manner, as in the way that "scientific and historical experience presuppose a world of fact which does not change or move."¹³⁰ The fact that the molecular structure of water is understood as H₂O must

¹²⁸ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 210.

¹²⁹ Fuller, "The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism," 124.

¹³⁰ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 202.

always remain true or it must be overturned and deemed to have only ever been mistakenly thought of as true; though we think that President Lincoln was shot and killed by John Wilkes Booth, if this was proven untrue it means that we were once simply in error about that fact. If something is deemed to be scientifically or historically untrue presently, it is also asserted that it was always untrue, and we were only mistaken about the factual nature of a given idea for some period of time. Practice, on the other hand, does not function in this manner. Invoking his understanding of truth once more, Oakeshott argues that truth is found in particulars when they are in accord with the world of ideas to which they contribute; in other words, “what is [a] fact in practical experience is, in the end, the world of practical experience as a coherent whole.”¹³¹

This means that, for Oakeshott, there can be no static ‘answer’ to the questions of practical life. It is a world characterized by change, but it is not a sort of change that has a destination. Unlike the worlds of science and history, practice does not seek to generate a ‘factual’ world that is, theoretically, static and immortal. To seek a sort of truth in practice that is akin to the truths of history or science is to confuse what is being pursued at all—a confusion which Oakeshott believes plagues the “modern mind.”¹³² The volitional individual, the world of ‘what is,’ and the world of ‘what ought to be’ are always necessary for the world of practical ideas. As soon as a desirable world of ‘what is’ is realized, “a new discord springs up elsewhere, demanding new resolution, a fresh qualification of ‘what is here and now’ by ‘what ought to be’.”¹³³ It is these characteristics that make the nature of practical experience ultimate unsatisfactory as, in

¹³¹ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 202.

¹³² Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 240.

¹³³ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 223.

Oakeshott's view, its necessary trio of presuppositions—the self, the present, and the future—are never able to be utterly reconciled to one another to allow for ultimate coherence; practice must inevitably, then, cause a desire to be superseded by the complete and coherent experience pursued in philosophy.¹³⁴

Conclusion

As stated above, the ultimate task Oakeshott seeks to achieve in *Experience and Its Modes* is to demonstrate that only philosophic experience is ultimately complete and coherent; all other modes of experience are only ever partially satisfactory, demanding to be superseded by the philosophic impulse. I believe, additionally, that it should be noted how often people—both theorists and common folk alike, though the former certainly

¹³⁴ There are two points that should, here, be recognized, but which stray far beyond the purpose of my present thesis: does Oakeshott believe philosophy is ultimately possible, and how is political philosophy possible if there is such a division between philosophy and practice? These two questions are relatively separate in Oakeshott's framework and should therefore be dealt with as such.

The first question is difficult to answer with any certainty. Oakeshott provides little by way of answer and writes almost no philosophy himself. As implied above, he does seem to argue in *Experience and Its Modes* that philosophy carries us well beyond the human circumstance; it may, therefore, also be something well beyond the human capacity, at least for most of us. Yet, he does provide us this one text in which he evidently is attempting to heighten himself to such a level. He also views figures of the past such as Plato and Hegel as great philosophers, which presumably means he believes some have been capable of philosophy. Additionally, he does not seem to think that we ever form a 'complete' philosophy; rather, he argues in *Experience and Its Modes* that a philosopher is judged by his attempt to follow the philosophical impulse of containing as much of experience as possible. The philosopher begins with an apparent, specific aspect of experience and attempts to view it from the perspective of the whole, providing a 'philosophical view,' though this is eventually exhausted, and he must come back to the world of mere practice.

The second question has more direct answers which Oakeshott addresses explicitly. See: Michael Oakeshott, "The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics," and "Political Philosophy," in *Michael Oakeshott: Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993): 119-137 and 138-155. These essays explore how a thinker may apply the philosophic impulse to political concepts or political activity; Oakeshott acknowledges, however, that these exercises are never fully philosophic because this would be the highest form of reflection applied to a mere aspect of experience, in this case politics, whereas proper philosophy is reflection upon the whole of experience as such. In attempting to further disentangle this confusion, Oakeshott no longer considers this sort of reflection upon politics as "philosophy" by the time he writes *On Human Conduct*. In that later text, he considers his engagement as political "theory," distancing the work from an exercise of philosophy as such.

These topics are, however, not particularly important for my present discussion. How precisely Oakeshott understands political philosophy has little to do with what it means to be conservative in respect of change—change, of course, being emblematic of practice as outlined by Oakeshott. I have made these notes here to acknowledge the legitimate confusion in trying to understand these aspects of Oakeshott's thought, however, I must leave those concerns to people far more diligent and thorough than myself.

seem more susceptible to this—erroneously desire for practical life to be as satisfactory as philosophic experience. The utopian and revolutionary impulses are frequently aimed at moving the world toward total coherence.¹³⁵ If we grant that the world is malleable, then it will remain perpetually insufficient in some sense—even when we supposedly arrive at the destination desired by the utopian or the revolutionary—as new possibilities for change will present themselves. The question then becomes not about how to reconcile the present and the many possible futures at hand, but how to situate oneself so as to enjoy this brief “dream of life.”¹³⁶ If humanity cannot fix the world in place, perhaps it can learn to preserve that which makes the present delightful—such a notion of conservation may provide some insight into what it means to live life well, at least as conceived by Michael Oakeshott.

¹³⁵ Fuller, “The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism,” 116-117.

¹³⁶ Michael Oakeshott, “The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 541—Oakeshott approaches life as having something of a mystical quality which is most notable in this essay.

Chapter 2

The Pervasiveness of the Conservative Disposition: Maintaining Identity Within a World of Change

*“How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell:
Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well.”*
-William Shakespeare

Introduction

In exploring Oakeshott's philosophic view in *Experience and Its Modes*, we gain a preliminary explanation of how he understands the nature of experience and, more importantly for my analysis, what sort of experience is entailed in the world of practice. This should not, however, be understood as fully explicative of the practical mode; just as the art historian who observes a painting from without possesses a different perspective from that which allowed the artist to compose his painting in the first place, the philosopher only understands practice from an external perspective looking in on those who act practically—and, for this reason, I now engage Oakeshott's views on practice from within. As explained above, practice is the world of volition, a world which contains an agent considering and engaging the two sub-worlds of 'what is' and of 'what ought to be'—at least as understood philosophically. When Oakeshott engages these matters on a practical level, on the other hand, he assumes the role of the volitional individual, no longer looking in as if from the outside.¹³⁷ He begins to consider these two views of the world of 'what is' and the world of 'what ought to be,' though they do not maintain these labels. Rather, they must take on new labels and be engaged with the knowledge that he, as the volitional individual, is now taking part in the movement between the world as it is and the world of what will become; Oakeshott is no longer seeking absolute coherence and completeness as he does when engaging in philosophy but is now attempting to act in a manner that maintains the practical world of inevitable change—an engagement in which Oakeshott believes a conservative disposition is often required and should therefore be properly understood.

¹³⁷ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 409.

In this chapter, I argue that Oakeshott's explanation of the conservative disposition is a description of *how* someone engages in life as opposed to *what* he does practically. To be conservative, as Oakeshott sees it, is for a man to maintain a sense of familiarity in what he does and to desire that his comfort in the present remains relatively constant, as opposed to justifying his actions based on an extrinsic principle to prove why his current manner of living is 'just' or 'true.' To do this, I first address some common assumptions about conservatism that ought to be set aside in order to understand Oakeshott's view. I then review his division between 'change' and 'innovation,' a critical distinction because Oakeshott thinks a conservative man views the former as inevitable but the latter as precarious or even dangerous. In confronting change and innovation, Oakeshott describes the conservative disposition as that which maintains an identity, a way of life that has been habituated, desiring to protect it so as to have a continuous sense of self in the world. This leads to a discussion of which kinds of activity specifically call for the conservative disposition; Oakeshott suggests that activities performed for their own sake are emblematic of the conservative man, though people are also often conservative in respect of their tools used to perform various tasks, even when performing something innovative. Lastly, Oakeshott refers to manners and customs as kinds of 'social tools,' which segues into his argument that politics should have a proclivity toward the conservative disposition.

Setting Aside Assumptions About the Term 'Conservative'

I anticipate that this term 'conservative,' due to its wide and even contradictory use in contemporary political dialogue, comes with some conceptual baggage. Commonly, conservatism is understood as being in opposition to another ideology, such

as socialism, communism, or liberalism. Such a characterization is hardly descriptive of Oakeshott, however, as he has sympathy for both the communal elements of contemporary, left-wing movements as well as a great love of the individuality (notably distinct from individualism) that liberalism championed.¹³⁸ To be conservative as Oakeshott describes is not to hold to a set of principles or dictates, but rather to have a certain disposition: one which can incorporate different elements of different ideologies which may allow one to have a sense of joy and comfort in the present.¹³⁹

Further confusion can be laid at the feet of both those who criticize and those who praise what is often termed ‘conservatism’ or ‘Conservatism,’ depending on regional and temporal contexts. It is common for those who are critical of conservative attitudes to conflate certain concepts and views of what it means to act conservatively in order to present a picture that appears incoherent, despite that it may only be the presented picture that lacks coherence.¹⁴⁰ There are, on the other hand, great proponents of conservatism, such as Sir Roger Scruton, who may also cause confusion in writing wide-spanning histories of conservative movements, despite the many inherent contradictions that such a project possesses.¹⁴¹ Additionally, there is a tendency among both supporters and

¹³⁸ Luke O’Sullivan, “Michael Oakeshott and the Left,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75, no. 3 (July 2014): 488—discussion of Oakeshott’s affinity for neo-Marxist theorists such as Marcuse; Roy Tseng, “Conservatism, Romanticism, and the Understanding of Modernity,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 134—discussion of what Oakeshott views as the positive elements that emerged in the modern era.

¹³⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 407.

¹⁴⁰ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*—See Introduction.

¹⁴¹ See: Sir Roger Scruton, *Conservatism* (New York, NY: All Points Books, 2018)—Sir Scruton discusses various times and places in which a conservative temperament has revealed itself throughout Europe over the last four hundred years, considering conservatism in politics, philosophy, and culture. These concepts are often discordant with one another and contradictions emerge, such as differences between conservatisms in different countries like Germany and England due to their differing social contexts. Combining these historical developments into what can be considered a ‘disposition’ is not entirely helpful, as the particulars often end up being confused for what it means to be *dispositionally* conservative. Oakeshott, on the other hand, offers a more suitable definition by recommending no specific outcomes or goals, but rather gives a manner of approach to practice and politics.

detractors of this position to speak as if the conservative outlook must apply to the whole of life or none of it. This, however, sets up a false dichotomy that does not allow for a nuanced view in which certain circumstances or activities may require the conservative disposition while others do not—something Oakeshott recognizes with great clarity.¹⁴²

Another issue that must be addressed before coming to Oakeshott's own position is the accusation that a conservative view requires a conception of tradition which ends up acting as just another criterion to legitimate certain actions like the notions of 'justice' or 'truth.' Some scholars claim that 'tradition' is a vacuous concept that provides no guidance; though, even when the claim is that tradition is an empty concept, there is often a concern that there is a mysterious criterion being smuggled in.¹⁴³ This is a point made by nearly every critic of Oakeshott, a rejection best summarized by David Spitz:

¹⁴² Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 416.

¹⁴³ See: Wood, "A Guide to the Classics: Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott," 661: "The criterion of the traditionalist would seem to be outside the tradition itself"; Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," 420: "So long as he provides us with no means for distinguishing between good and bad, let alone for cultivating a disposition to do good rather than bad, we are obliged to look elsewhere for guidance"; Crick, "The World of Michael Oakeshott," 70: "There is never any discussion of whether one thing is intrinsically preferable to another. There are no principles; it is all a matter of analogy from previous experience (and if you have no previous experience, back luck jack, try again in three generations time)."

This is, evidently, a persistent and common criticism of Oakeshott's view. What is missed in nearly every criticism, however, is an adequate understanding of Oakeshott's view of experience as a world. To move toward what is good from what is bad cannot be encapsulated by a simple explanation such as "equality," "fairness," or "justice." Each of those concepts must be incorporated into a whole world of experience that will only ever be partially fleshed out due to the malleable and contingent character of practice. Oakeshott's position is more reflexive and open to the change of circumstances intrinsic to practice, despite his conservative leaning (as discussed below); what such 'principled' positions seek is a 'final answer' to what is good which is a philosophical impulse—not a practical one—from Oakeshott's standpoint, as they cannot grant the possibility beyond the stage of practical life they propose. They seek a coherent and whole form of experience, offered only by philosophy.

As for the specific charge of Oakeshott invoking "tradition," this is a concept that is more common among his work on education as opposed to his discussion of conservatism; yet, even there, Oakeshott does provide a limited answer. See: Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education," in *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, 59: "A tradition of behaviour is not a fixed and inflexible way of doing things; it is a flow of sympathy." An important shift, however, occurs in Oakeshott's terminology throughout his later work, *On Human Conduct*. He begins using the term 'practice,' as opposed to 'tradition.' What he seeks to highlight with this term is that there is a 'practiced' world of experience which is necessary for all human activity; certain habits will have developed in certain places which make life manageable, though

...the appeal to tradition, though it eschews principle, in fact offers tradition as itself the right principle by which human affairs ought to be, as in this view they necessarily have been, controlled...[but] since no tradition is characterized by a univocal and coherent set of arrangements and practices, since every tradition includes a multiplicity of traditions, we must determine which traditions are truly traditional...this determination cannot come from the tradition itself but from a source outside the tradition, from the rational judgement of the person analyzing that tradition, which entails a standard or principle other than the tradition itself.¹⁴⁴

I take this objection to be, on the face of it, true. To possess a specific notion of tradition and to attempt to implement it by using governmental force is methodologically identical to the revolutionary socialist or the technocratic futurist; government, in this view, is merely an instrument that a man can use to shape nearly every aspect of his society according to his vision for the future. But this is not, in fact, what Oakeshott proposes.

Throughout his entire essay “On being conservative,” in fact, he never mentions tradition or any substantial view to be imposed upon society whatsoever. Oakeshott does not desire a form of governance that directs the lives of private citizens. The concept with which these critics are likely concerned, on the other hand, is something akin to what may be called ‘natural’ or ‘metaphysical’ views of conservatism—Leo Strauss being a leading figure of such a theory.¹⁴⁵ Strauss “did not seek an accommodation with

those specific structures may not be true in a foundational or philosophic sense. To deny this aspect of human sociality seems to me to be an arrogant viewpoint that asserts that humans can be simply changed with the right amount of planning and coercion; yet this very claim is implicit in many calls for radical change—we need look no further than the attempts at ‘rational’ upheaval in France from the 18th to 19th centuries, and how quickly these devolved back into the prior ways of life since the people could know no differently. This is what Oakeshott means by tradition—it cannot be enforced or fully described, but it always lingers in our communal living and must always be considered carefully in all we do.

¹⁴⁴ Spitz, “A Rationalist Malgré Lui,” 339-340.

¹⁴⁵ See: Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965)—This may be one of the core texts in which Strauss, using a predominantly textual approach, indicates a clear preference for the coherence of the theories provided by Plato and Aristotle—as well as a few others—as opposed to those of modern theorists like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, or Burke. There are certain objections to be made against Strauss, the clearest from the Oakeshottian perspective being a lacking historical sensitivity and an unclear distinction between theory and practice, but this subject goes too far afield of my present work—perhaps a more substantial comparison of Strauss and Oakeshott is, however, due to emerge sometime in the near future.

modernity but defended conservatism on the basis of ancient natural law and metaphysical truth. Oakeshott and Strauss are undoubtedly the two most important conservative theorists of the second half of the twentieth-century, but their conservatisms are diametrically opposed.”¹⁴⁶ Saying that Strauss generated another rationalistic view for the future from historical conceptions of politics is not easily dismissed; such a charge of Oakeshott is, however, almost impossible.¹⁴⁷ This is, in my view, what sets Oakeshott apart from other conservative thinkers and makes his description of this disposition worthy of consideration.

Lastly, it must be acknowledged that Oakeshott, unlike his critics and many of his fellow conservative proponents, does not begin in the realm of governance; instead, he begins by considering the nature of human affairs in general and understanding where the conservative disposition fits into this general view of life.¹⁴⁸ Oakeshott is not attempting to generate something of a political manifesto in favour of a conservative leaning but is rather interested in the way people tend to conserve much of what they possess in the present and why they do so. It is in this sense of conservative, as a disposition within human conduct in general, that this chapter is concerned; the implications of Oakeshott’s analysis of conservative politics are then fleshed out in the following chapter.

To Be Conservative: A Disposition toward Change

Now, in dispelling misconceptions of what Oakeshott means by conservative, it is apparent that he is considering neither a specific vision of the future nor a return to some

¹⁴⁶ Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, 16.

¹⁴⁷ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 412—“There is, indeed, not much profit to be had from general speculation about ‘human nature’, which is no steadier than anything else in our acquaintance. What is more to the point is to consider current human nature, to consider ourselves.”

¹⁴⁸ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 407-408.

antiquarian past: he is therefore left with what we may call ‘the present.’ This should not, however, be understood as something static; rather, the present is better understood as a perpetual state of change.¹⁴⁹ As discussed above, in his philosophic language, Oakeshott refers to his notion of the present as the sub-worlds of ‘what is’ and of ‘what ought to be’ which are explored and affected by the volitional individual. Now, on the other hand, speaking in a more practical idiom in “On being conservative,” Oakeshott is further developing what it means to be a volitional individual. He considers how, as an agent, he must deal with the movement between the world as he finds it and the world as it could be but is not yet. This circumstance is an imperfect one, as the world as it could be always persists in contrast with the world as it is—the reconciliation of the two being ultimately impossible.¹⁵⁰ Oakeshott argues that there are two oppositional but mutually informative dispositions possible for this engagement: to be conservative or to be innovative.¹⁵¹ I will begin with the conservative disposition, as that is Oakeshott’s main focal point, and will come to the innovative disposition later by way of comparison.

As noted above, despite some views of what it means to be conservative aiming to prove the existence and necessary recognition of eternal truths that humanity must follow, Oakeshott’s view is nothing of the sort. Rather, what he describes is “a certain attitude toward change and innovation; change denoting alterations we have to suffer and innovation those we design and execute.”¹⁵² There are, therefore, important differences between these two notions of change and innovation; I begin with the former as it is inevitable of the two. Change is understood by Oakeshott as those aspects of life which

¹⁴⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 414.

¹⁵⁰ Tseng, “Conservatism, Romanticism, and Understanding Modernity,” 135.

¹⁵¹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 408, 413.

¹⁵² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 409.

are, by and large, beyond our total control; if no person were to act, such changes would go on of their own accord. No one escapes aging, the sun sets and rises each day, and the grass will continue to grow—we might even say that “changing—themselves and their world—*is* what human beings *are*.”¹⁵³ Though it is true that people may take care of themselves to slow aging, invent their own notions of time so as to not be entirely ruled by the sun, or they can mow their lawn to keep it pristine, the changes beyond humanity’s control are nevertheless accepted, and people will only ever abate the ramifications of such inevitable occurrences. The conservative man, as Oakeshott sees him, is hardly naïve about this: change he “recognizes as inevitable, and he accommodates himself to it gracefully if somewhat regretfully.”¹⁵⁴ This may, however, appear to be a somewhat confused view of the world: if change is unavoidable, why would it be something to avoid or to engage regretfully?

Oakeshott argues that human beings, to get by amidst the constant flux of human endeavours, require a sense of identity that is, for the most part, continuous. What is meant by ‘continuous’ is not the invocation of any transcendent principle or an appeal to some notion of ‘human nature.’ Instead, Oakeshott believes that “a man’s identity (or that of a community) is nothing more than an unbroken rehearsal of contingencies, each at the mercy of circumstances and each significant in proportion to its familiarity.”¹⁵⁵ What he means by ‘identity,’ therefore, is something which has been *practiced*—hence, practical activity—so as to make the experience of life itself less confusing and more enjoyable. Identity has less to do with evaluating one’s experiences based on some external criterion

¹⁵³ Eno Trimçev, “Conservative theory as sympathetic dissent: the example of Michael Oakeshott,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 24, no. 3 (2019): 288; italics are of the author.

¹⁵⁴ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 149.

¹⁵⁵ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 410

such as ‘goodness’ or ‘truth,’ but on a familiar set of given customs and manners that allow for engagement with the world in the first place. Furthermore, Oakeshott does not care to prescribe specific customs, as he understands that these only emerge among the contingencies of life as people stumble their ways through the world—prescribing particulars would require knowledge of a context, but conceptualizing a disposition can nonetheless describe how people may act in differing contexts.¹⁵⁶ To take an example: a man who prefers his native tongue of German over other languages is hardly making this judgement based upon German being ‘truer’ or ‘better’ than other languages, but rather on account of his capacity to express himself most fully in German due to his familiarity with the language. For him to find out that he is the last German speaker alive would be a tragedy, not on account of German being the best language he could possibly know or that there are no other languages for him to eventually learn, but because our *deutscher Freund* may never again find someone to whom he can fully convey himself. This example of German falling out of usage may seem impossible for now but, by incremental and contingent changes, may eventually be a reality as fewer people learn the language. This would not necessarily happen because someone was attempting to eradicate the language or kill off the German people but would come about due to the changes that slowly and inevitably occur within practical life—no differently than the loss of Latin. The conservative recognizes all these aspects of life and understands that “changes...have to be suffered,” but he “cannot be indifferent to them. In the main, he judges them by the disturbance they entail and, like everyone else, deploys his resources to meet them.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 406-407.

¹⁵⁷ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 410.

Emphasizing this aspect of familiarity within identity is critical to understand the importance of the conservative disposition as Oakeshott sees it. Every “change is a threat to identity, and every change is an emblem of extinction,” but the conservative can accommodate himself so as to possess a continuous sense of identity and what he enjoys in life despite the flux of emergent contingencies he will endure.¹⁵⁸ This is what Oakeshott means when he says that a conservative man will “prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery...the near to the distant...the convenient to the perfect.”¹⁵⁹ This is a *preference*—and hardly an irrational one—which emerges from the recognition that people rely on what they already know in order to move beyond toward what they may not know yet. If I were learning a new language, I would not attempt to grasp it as if I had never encountered any language before; rather, I, as an Anglophone, would rely on my mother tongue as I worked through the intricacies of French, German, or whatever other language I may pursue. To do otherwise is impossible, as I cannot know what I do not yet know, nor can I come to know what is presently unknown without transitioning from what is presently known. Even when someone reaches beyond his bounds, he will inevitably rely on what he already has in order to make sense of the new boundaries he is breaking.¹⁶⁰

In short, Oakeshott’s view of what it means to be conservative is to actively maintain a sense of identity—a manner of living which a man has learned through habituation—in order to find a sense of peace and joy in the world of action because it is

¹⁵⁸ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 410.

¹⁵⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 408.

¹⁶⁰ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 410.

a continuously changing world that perpetually threatens his learned identity.¹⁶¹ The conservative disposition “breeds love and affection,” it allows human beings to find a place in which they feel they belong, despite the recognition of their imperfect knowledge.¹⁶² To feel that one is *home* is to have something worth conserving, something seemingly anyone can understand by their own experience or what they desire to experience.

Now, some critics of Oakeshott have objected to him on the grounds that not everyone has such a feeling of occupying a circumstance worth conserving, nor does Oakeshott, supposedly, “allow the possibility that change might also enhance or develop the self, that change is opportunity, that a self without challenges must either invent some or atrophy.”¹⁶³ The first claim is, in my view, simply self-defeating; it must be granted that, even if someone had absolutely nothing worth conserving, his desire for innovation would not be for its own sake—rather, he would be doing so in the hopes of eventually having something worth conserving, which reinforces the claim that the conservative impulse has on human action and identity. Conservation and innovation are continually interlinked. This brings us to the other objection: in my view, this second claim against Oakeshott only makes sense if he argues that the conservative disposition is the only legitimate approach to life—but he does not. It is, in fact, “not part of Oakeshott’s purpose to recommend, simply and equivocally, this conservative disposition.”¹⁶⁴ He is a

¹⁶¹ See: Pitkin, “The Roots of Conservatism,” 497: “Oakeshott can teach us about what Simone Weil called the “need for roots,” about what we have lost in losing traditional society; stability, security, meaning, a sense of self and purpose”—despite the many disagreements I have with Pitkin’s reading of Oakeshott, this acknowledgement gives tremendous credence to the time and energy she spent trying to understand Oakeshott.

¹⁶² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 409.

¹⁶³ Pitkin, “The Roots of Conservatism,” 521.

¹⁶⁴ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 149.

thinker who is supremely aware of the dynamic and pluralistic manner of life to which we are accustomed, but he believes that a dynamic system must ultimately have a common identity in something which can act as its foundation.¹⁶⁵

Oakeshott is perfectly cognizant of situations in which someone may believe innovation is necessary given the circumstances in which he finds himself. It is easy to imagine examples of people stumbling upon situations to which they object and then desire to change. Oakeshott provides an innocuous one: “a customer who finds a shopkeeper unable to supply his wants either persuades him to enlarge his stock or goes elsewhere; and a shopkeeper unable to meet the desires of a customer tries to impose upon him others which he can satisfy.”¹⁶⁶ We may think of many other situations such as a child persuading his mother that he deserves a new toy, an employee bartering with a co-worker to get a certain day off, or a lover attempting to coax his beloved with flowers and chocolate for just a moment of her attention. These circumstances may not *feel* particularly innovative, but they nonetheless involve an agent actively attempting to change the way things are as opposed to what would happen if he or she made no such effort. What is evident, however, is that in each of the cases addressed above, there is still something maintained in each circumstance: the customer and shopkeeper both acknowledge the art of bartering; the child recognizes his continued dependence upon his mother for his needs and desires; the co-workers understand a relationship of mutual support in; and the lover uses conventional signs of affection to indicate his love.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Sungmoon Kim, “Abating contingency: Michael Oakeshott’s political pluralism,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42, no. 3 (2016): 271.

¹⁶⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 416.

¹⁶⁷ We may add here the obvious observation that none of these circumstances would work very well without something of a common language—be that a spoken language, a form of body language, or language of facial expressions—which both participants rely on and cannot reject for their arrangements to function.

Considering such examples, we may assume that much of the human experience strikes a mean between the two dispositions toward change: a mean, in this sense, not as a half-and-half between the dispositions, but as the unequal commixture of the two in order to address the needs of a specific circumstance. An important detail about this observation is that to be conservative, as Oakeshott sees it, is a positive form of action. Change will happen—this is undeniable. Conservation and innovation are then two ways in which to react to the reality of change. When Neal Wood criticizes Oakeshott by commenting that “without innovation there is nothing to conserve, and with conservation there is the continual need for innovation,” he is treating conservation as if it is a purely negative endeavour or as if it merely blocks innovation.¹⁶⁸ This is a misunderstanding of how people behave in the world. If a man owned a cottage in the countryside, he would have a series of actions he would undertake to ensure the building remained habitable and comfortable; in performing these acts, such as restoring wood panels, cleaning the radiator, or switching out a leaking pipe, he would not be innovating as he is not fundamentally changing the present as he experiences it. He is, however, certainly acting in a positive manner so as to enjoy living in his home as he is accustomed. To innovate in such a circumstance would be to perform a large-scale renovation, put an addition on the building, or even knock down the whole cottage and start anew—each option having possible positive effects, but they will simultaneously lessen or eliminate the man’s familiarity with his abode which he has come to love as it is.

This example illustrates the main concern that the conservative has with the innovative spirit: there is a continuous threat against a man’s identity, as deliberate

¹⁶⁸ Wood, “A Guide to the Classics,” 662: “Without innovation there is nothing to conserve, and with conservation there is the continual need for innovation.”

modification of his experience risks upheaving how he has come to understand his place in the world, leaving him open to the anxieties of an uncertain existence. From the conservative “point of view, because every improvement involves change, the disruption entailed has always to be set against the benefit anticipated.”¹⁶⁹ A man may be initially enthused by his purchase of a new, luxurious home, but only recognizes its downfalls of a longer commute and fewer nearby shops after he has made the life-altering decision to move. Though he does not reference it here, Oakeshott identifies in *Experience and Its Modes* that all activity takes place within a world of ideas where one change will cause many others as the whole world of activity adapts to a single change—the conservative is sensitive to this risk, always convinced “that it is difficult or impossible to calculate the potential effects,” and is therefore averse to such upheavals which risk shattering the identity he has cultivated and come to love through habituation.¹⁷⁰ The conservative man is disposed to working with what he has, as he has come to understand how to enjoy his present lot; to risk what is good for what *might* be better is not a calculus he feels the need to conduct.

A possible problem that could be leveled against Oakeshott’s view is the issue of providing evidence for his claims in favour of conservatism. As Stephen Turner aptly identifies, Oakeshott’s aversion to risk seems to imply that he has a knowledge of the effects an innovation will entail. Yet, if this is true, innovation should not be an issue because then even Oakeshott is conceding that he knows the outcome of said innovation and can simply evaluate if it is worthwhile. If he denies this knowledge, on the other

¹⁶⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 411.

¹⁷⁰ Stephen Turner, “The Conservative Disposition and the Precautionary Principle,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 207.

hand, the critic may then argue that Oakeshott's knowledge of the future is as uncertain as the innovator's. The innovator therefore presents no more of a risk than the conservative.¹⁷¹

Despite the merit of this critique, it misunderstands the relationships between the world as it is found presently and the world as it could be. These are not two distinct notions that exist independently of one another but are instead mutually revelatory and require each other to be understood. A man cannot act in the world if he has no vision of how the world might eventually be; he also cannot disregard the world as it is if he would like to arrive at some desired world that is not yet. What the conservative man has learned to enjoy through habituation is sustained and known; if anything, it is as close as one can come to a continuous conception of the world as it is and will be—any radical shift would need to come from change beyond the scope of human control, and this is nevertheless better dealt with when one has a familiarity with his manner of living. The innovator, on the other hand, incites the change that can cause instability as he “generates not only the ‘improvement’ sought, but a new and complex situation of which this is only one of the components.”¹⁷² Additionally, having shaken the familiar ways of living, there is now the added confusion of not understanding how to deal with whatever changes may emerge from beyond the influence of human intentions. This means that, though the specifics of the circumstance may not be known, there is a general risk ever present when a man decides he is going to incite some form of innovation.

With these tensions between the conservative and innovative viewpoints in mind, Oakeshott does not seek to merely dismiss the role of innovation in human affairs.

¹⁷¹ Turner, “The Conservative Disposition and the Precautionary Principle,” 209.

¹⁷² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 411.

Instead, he argues that what is often sought by the conservative man is something of a middle ground with the innovator. Despite his concerns about the costs and benefits of innovation, the conservative man knows that there are times when a specific defect in his manner of life can be improved upon; in this way, the innovation in question emerges slowly from within his present identity, allowing him to adapt to it more easily.¹⁷³

Oakeshott's concern, however, is that such a middle ground is not being pursued. He believes that the people of his own time and place have become disconnected from any sense of the conservative disposition, always "ready to drop the bone we have for its reflection magnified in the mirror of the future," instead of enjoying the delights of life with which they are presently familiar.¹⁷⁴

This leads Oakeshott to worry about the possible ramifications of an all-consuming desire to innovate.¹⁷⁵ Innovation is, as noted above, actively attempting to change the world as we find it so that it might accord with a vision of what it could be. If this disposition is pushed to an extreme, it could eventually call for the total overhaul of the world as presently experienced. The conservative disposition ought to be the counterbalance to this innovative impulse, but it is impossible to gain equilibrium when the innovative spirit is drowning out the cry of its conservative counterpart. Each disposition plays a role in the human circumstance, and one cannot merely overcome the other. Their relationship should be understood not as a boxing match with a single victor but a dance in which each partner moves with the other to create a sense of delight for all involved. No doubt, this also means that the conservative disposition cannot exist apart

¹⁷³ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 412.

¹⁷⁴ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 414.

¹⁷⁵ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 413-414.

from its innovative counterpart, and to perpetually conserve is as irrational as perpetually innovating.¹⁷⁶ But, as Oakeshott believes, there is hardly such a present risk since people have lost the sense of what it means to conserve at all. He therefore outlines two sorts of activity that he believes demonstrate that the conservative disposition still has a strong influence on much life: activities done for their own sake, and activities that require the use of tools to be executed effectively.

Situations Which Call for the Conservative Disposition

Oakeshott remarks that, given the present proclivity toward innovation in all manner of life, “the disposition to be conservative...might be expected to end, with the man in whom this disposition is strong last seen swimming against the tide, disregarded not because of what he has to say is necessarily false, but because it has become irrelevant.”¹⁷⁷ As so succinctly put by Neal Wood, there is a present assumption that humanity must reach beyond what it presently has, for “time does not stop. Men deserve more than poignancy and old port.”¹⁷⁸ Yet, it seems more likely to Oakeshott that the conservative disposition is seen as *passé* only due to a lack of understanding; conservation in action persists throughout the human circumstance, and to not recognize this will only cause further confusion and turmoil. Indeed, Oakeshott argues it is not difficult to see that “there are many occasions when this disposition remains not only appropriate but supreme.”¹⁷⁹ In looking to aspects of practical life that are emblematic of this disposition, people may begin to see how various aspects of their own lives are governed by approaching life from this conservative view.

¹⁷⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 416.

¹⁷⁷ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 415.

¹⁷⁸ Wood, “A Guide to the Classics,” 662.

¹⁷⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 415.

Oakeshott argues that all activities and relationships “which are engaged in for their own sake and enjoyed for what they are and not for what they provide” are thoroughly conservative—indeed, they are the emblem of what it means to conserve.¹⁸⁰ Oakeshott’s often used example is that of friendship, a theme he returns to throughout his works. To hold someone as a true friend is not to obtain anything other than the experience of having someone who is familiar and comprises a part of what one considers his ‘world,’ what he considers *home*. With other relationships, this may not be so: “to go on changing one’s butcher until one gets the meat one likes...is conduct not inappropriate to the relationship concerned; but to discard friends because they do not behave as we expected and refuse to be educated to our requirements is the conduct of a man who has altogether mistaken the character of friendship.”¹⁸¹ In a friend, one may find a confidant, a counselor, or a jokester; though he may be appreciated for all these qualities, the love that a friend has for him will not be reducible to any of those singular aspects. It is no wonder that friendships often develop when people are traversing great challenges in life, be that in grade school, traveling, or war. For, in those moments, friends discover themselves together, their mutual journey acting as a continuous reminder to each friend of who they are in themselves. The identity of my friend, as separate and uncontrolled by me, can provide me with a reminder of who I was, how I came to be as I am, and what I shall become; to force my friend to be what he is not will crush the sense of identity I possess through him being an external and continuous pillar of my own self-realization.

In brief, to enjoy something for its own sake is not to engage in the endeavour for some other end to come, but rather to engage in the activity because it approximates an

¹⁸⁰ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 416.

¹⁸¹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 416.

end in itself. As Oakeshott sees it, life is a delight when engaged in this sort of activity, but human beings—as finite creatures that must always be conscious of change—often must work to provide for their needs through activities that derive some external end, such as labours for a wage to put food on the table. Such activities that are done for the sake of an end to come always cause a separation of the world as presently engaged compared with the world as it is desired to be. In performing any activity for its own sake, however, the separation between the world as it is and the world as it is desired to be is abated for a moment—whether that is in enjoying a walk through a flowering meadow, reading T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, or enjoying the company of one’s husband or wife. It is in such experiences that the conservative disposition has taken hold, as the enjoyer of such activities desires to stay in that state of delight as long as humanly possible.¹⁸²

A perfectly legitimate objection could be made against this desire for activities pursued as ends in themselves: do these not make up just a fraction of the human experience and are we not much more often engrossed in activities that require the separation of the world as presently engaged and the world as it could be? This is a question that cannot go unaddressed—fortunately, Oakeshott is well equipped to anticipate such objections. He recognizes that human affairs so often entail the emergence of unforeseen circumstances and it should therefore be expected that any activity pursued for its own sake cannot sustain itself perpetually. This is a perfectly valid point, which is why Oakeshott is no less receptive to actions pursued for the sake of an

¹⁸² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 417-418.

extrinsic end; he is not, however, willing to grant that these activities are beyond the scope of the conservative disposition.

Oakeshott points out that, even among activities that are the means to an end to come, most “projects are often provoked and governed by the tools available.”¹⁸³ What he is pointing out is that, even if an activity has radical or varied ends that it pursues, the means with which that activity is performed will likely remain constant.¹⁸⁴ Now, this topic can become muddled in certain details, particularly the fact that the end produced by one man may become the tools of another; for example, some time ago, a woodworker would have used his carpentry tools to perfectly cut and shape pieces of wood into a hockey stick—the end of the woodworker’s activity—which would then become the tool used by a professional hockey player to try and score goals to win games. Notwithstanding that this distinction between means and ends may be somewhat relative in certain instances, it is still helpful for understanding situations in which someone may be conservative despite the circumstance not being an end in itself.

Oakeshott argues that “tools are less subject to innovation than projects because, except on rare occasions, tools are not designed to fit a particular project and then thrown aside, they are designed to fit a whole class of projects.”¹⁸⁵ A sense of familiarity necessary for tools to be effective, as a man who has never touched a chisel—let alone taken the time to figure out which chisels are best for him and his work—will have a tough time doing even the simplest stone sculpting. Any tradesman will acknowledge that “tools call for skill in use and skill is inseparable from practice and familiarity.”¹⁸⁶ It

¹⁸³ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 418-419.

¹⁸⁴ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 420.

¹⁸⁵ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 419.

¹⁸⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 419.

would not be a stretch to say that tools—when discussed in the context of certain roles, be that a trowel to a mason, a saw to a carpenter, or a wrench to a plumber—eventually become an extension of the tool-user, and the tools are valued insofar as they are connected with a conserved practice of using them.

Now, though tradesmen are helpful for understanding this point, as they use readily recognizable tools such as trowels and shovels, the conservative implications of tool-using extend beyond to other professions or activities that may appear less obvious. For example, a professor of English will likely have a copy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, complete with his substantial underlining, highlighting, and marginalia. If I were to steal his copy and replace it with an identical edition, save for the various page markings he had inserted over the years, his next lecture about the play would likely be far less organized and informative; perhaps he would be no longer remember the exact line in which he believes Lady Macbeth shows herself as the true mastermind behind the plot, or this professor will no longer recall precisely how he wished to describe the influence of the witches' prophecies upon Macbeth himself. The professor has lost a sense of his bearings as an educator through the loss of this text which had become something of a map for him in traversing the intellectual landscape of Shakespeare.¹⁸⁷ What is clear is that, in both the case of a tradesman using a literal tool or an intellectual using his own annotated copy of a text to organize his thoughts, "familiarity is the essence of tool using; and in so far as man is a tool using animal he is disposed to be conservative."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*—here, I am evidently reliant on Oakeshott's later conception of moral practices as something of a 'map' that help individuals more aptly traverse the world by using the experiences of wiser people who have come before them, a theme he uses heavily in his last major political work.

¹⁸⁸ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 419.

Oakeshott's final move in his analysis of tools is to expand the conception of what is generally meant by a 'tool.' He wants to move beyond the idea of an external object such as a drill or saw designed to help with some task and instead consider "a certain kind of tool in common use, namely, general rules of conduct."¹⁸⁹ This may not seem to follow, but what Oakeshott is here acknowledging is that there is an aspect of relativity about our social customs—what is important about them is not that they are immutable but that they are useful, just like any other tools. It is true that people's mother tongues are largely a product of chance, no one chooses where he or she will be born, and our customs emerge spontaneously through local interactions of different peoples. Yet neither language, nor geography, nor custom precisely dictates what people ought to do substantially. Rather, they act as guidelines, conduits to help people more easily engage with the world and provide common spaces within which they can express themselves and seek a sense of delight. They constitute something of a routine for all involved; but, whether on the scale of a community or just one person, a routine does not go from non-existence to perfect order overnight. A man must begin with simply *a* routine which is often more important than the substance of the routine, and one can only generate a good or better routine by first establishing a sense of routine at all.¹⁹⁰ This is the sense in which customs, routines, or habits are *social tools*, as they make the social interactions of humans more manageable through practice. Just as having a shovel makes digging a hole much easier than doing so within one's bare hands, so is it that having a common language, familiar routines, and habituated customs makes human interaction much easier to navigate—thereby making them worthy of conservation.

¹⁸⁹ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 421.

¹⁹⁰ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 421

Oakeshott acknowledges that human customs “are the product of reflection and choice, there is nothing sacrosanct about them, they are susceptible of change and improvement; but if our disposition in respect of them were not, generally speaking, conservative, if we were disposed to argue about them and change them on every occasion, they would rapidly lose their value.”¹⁹¹ Oakeshott, as stated, acknowledges that there is a relative aspect to much of the human circumstance; the customs used by a people have a sense of arbitrariness in that we could imagine that they could have been otherwise. What does not follow from this line of inquiry, despite the protestations that may emerge from many contemporary readers, is that these social tools and customs should therefore be thrown away. The fact that something exists does not make it sacred, but it certainly implies that it informs the manner in which a person or a people presently live—especially if it is a long-enduring practice. To simply dispense with a certain custom because it is not understood is as foolish as saying a word is meaningless because *I do not know what it means*.¹⁹²

In short, the conservative disposition is most obviously present in situations when an activity is being performed for its own sake or in relation to the tools people use to perform certain tasks. In both cases, the reason for conservation is never justified on the grounds that the specific activity or tool is ‘naturally’ or ‘metaphysically’ necessary. Rather, through practice of a specific activity that is its own end or the habituated use of a tool that makes a certain sort of tasks easier, people will begin to consider those things as

¹⁹¹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 421.

¹⁹² Richard Flathman, “Conversation, Conversion, and Conservation: Oakeshott, Arendt, and a Little Bit of Cavell,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 179—Flathman discusses the way in which Oakeshott argues that a practiced manner of conversation is present in nearly everything that human beings do, and this provides humanity with a necessary unity that allows for the correlative sense of individuality.

aspects of their identity in the world. It is not that this developed identity is immutable or that there is no other manner of living and acting that we could imagine, but that this identity *is developed* and therefore governs present ways of living. The claim of the conservative disposition is never truth or goodness, but familiarity and practice.

Conclusion

Oakeshott, in attempting to give a final image of why a conservative disposition towards customs and rules is important, discusses the way in which the rules of a game are used. He points out that the acknowledgement of some rules is necessary for a group of people to even play the game in the first place; to question the rules, the game must, disruptively, be suspended momentarily; and to demand such a review of the rules would be “supremely inappropriate...in the heart and confusion of play.”¹⁹³ This does not mean that the players in the game are restricted from finding new ways to achieve their objective within the bounds of the game’s rules, but to require that the rules themselves be renegotiated is suitable only to the offseason.¹⁹⁴ What we might note of this analogy is that the players in question are merely those who are invested in winning the game; they abide by the rules but are otherwise innovative in much of what they do so as to guarantee a win. The rules, however, require that there be a referee to manage the various players interacting with one another in the calamity of the game to ensure the rules are enforced—not out of a desire for one team to win over the other, but so that the game may be sustained, allowing all involved to continue in its enjoyment. The question we may ask here is if there is such a role of the referee or an umpire in the whole of a

¹⁹³ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 422.

¹⁹⁴ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 422.

community's life, a question to which Oakeshott answers in the affirmative: the activity of governing.

Chapter 3
An Umpire Among the Pursuers of Enjoyment:
The Case for Conservative Governance

*“Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen
Who do, some well, some ill, planning and guessing,
Having their aims which turn in their hands in the pattern of time.”*
-Thomas Stearns Eliot

Introduction

To seek Michael Oakeshott's guidance for how one should govern may appear, from some perspectives, to be a misguided exercise. Reading through his notebooks, it seems that he finds nothing of value in government, declaring that "politics are an inferior form of activity."¹⁹⁵ It is no wonder that Bernard Crick believes it apt to label Oakeshott as the "lonely nihilist" among recent political theorists.¹⁹⁶ Despite the sympathy I have for the scholars who believe that Oakeshott is either pessimistic about or denigratory toward politics and governance, I believe that this accusation is, at best, overstated. Oakeshott is instead concerned with a people that has become enthralled in political discourse and desirous of directive governance. In understanding how Oakeshott considers practical activity to be an ever-changing reality in which humanity attempts to find a place (or various places) for itself to settle and feel at home—an activity with many conservative tendencies—we can begin to appreciate his more modest understanding of politics. Having outlined his notion of practice and the conservative disposition above, it is now time to turn to his notion of governance to understand when and where a conservative temperament ought to be primary in governmental activity.

The first aspect of this topic to which I attend to is what precisely Oakeshott means by 'governance.' I review how he describes governance at its simplest along with some additional implications of this view which have been drawn out by scholars. I then discuss how the conservative disposition shapes the activity of governing. This topic has

¹⁹⁵ Michael Oakeshott, *Notebooks, 1922-86*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2014), 303.

¹⁹⁶ Crick, "The World of Michael Oakeshott," 65, 74.

three main points: conservative governance is not necessarily attached to any comprehensive worldview as is commonly thought, that there is a myriad of interests always at play in the world of practice which government must consider, and that people ought to be compelled only to follow rules which allow for the maintenance of common living as such. Finally, this manifests in the ultimate conclusion of my argument: that conservative governance, at least as Oakeshott sees it, should aim to maintain the peace of a community, not its ‘good.’ The benefit of this style of governance is that what is thought to be good may be considered and sought by the citizenry without prescribed and coerced ends; and this is the style of government that is most appropriate for a dynamic and lively community, which Oakeshott believes he inhabits.¹⁹⁷

A Preliminary Definition

A fair criticism of Oakeshott, one which can certainly be leveled against him regarding his discussion of governance in “On being conservative,” is that he never gives an adequate description of what precisely it is that he is discussing. He outlines both conservative and innovative notions of what it means to govern, but a description of what exactly governance entails is, at best, only implicit or, at worst, entirely absent. Fortunately, there are other sources that shed some light on Oakeshott’s view. In elucidating this point, I believe Oakeshott’s overall argument about *conservative* governance is made clearer. For this, I turn to his essay, “Political education,” which

¹⁹⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” *The American Political Science Review* 51, no. 2 (June 1957): 455, 473—It is fair to acknowledge that which I am here outlining in Oakeshott is hardly a novel view of what it means to be conservative. Rather, I believe Oakeshott provides two things worth reconsidering: first, he provides a strong case for why “situational conservatism,” as Huntington would have it (though I am skeptical of this being designated as an “ideology”), is the most rigorous form of what it means to be conservative; and, second, that Oakeshott provides an excellent defense of this sort of conservative action from various critics.

provides more insight into what Oakeshott considers to be at the heart of governance before considering some scholarly additions which have attempted to add more flesh to the skeleton provided by Oakeshott's generic definition of the term.

Oakeshott's most succinct explanation of what is at the core of governance is that it is "the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together."¹⁹⁸ He notes that he consciously implants a sense of contingency in this idea, which is why he refers to "this activity as 'attending arrangements', rather than as 'making arrangements', because in these hereditary co-operative groups the activity is never offered the blank sheet of infinite possibility."¹⁹⁹ One generation will always take over from another as the laws created by parents will eventually be passed to their children who will continue in the same governmental circumstance. Simply casting off what came before, despite what we often think, is still a reaction to the past and thereby includes a consideration of that past, even if only by way of negation. To begin with the revolutionary's goal of a *tabula rasa* is simply an impossibility—to wipe out the laws of a people is to make a judgement about those laws, one which evidently implies disapproval and rejection. This notion of the continuity of law and government coincides perfectly with Oakeshott's understanding of practice. Human beings find themselves in possession of a living political circumstance—they do not construct it and there is no ground zero to which they may simply return. Action is only possible through understanding the world in which one finds himself and by considering what one believes can be improved upon within that world. The trinity of

¹⁹⁸ Michael Oakeshott, "Political education," in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 44.

¹⁹⁹ Oakeshott, "Political education," 45.

necessary conditions for practice laid out by Oakeshott is also present in governance: a political community acts as a *volitional entity* that makes judgements about the possible *futures* it may arrive at through consideration of the *present* in which it finds itself.²⁰⁰

In addition to the observation that Oakeshott's definition implies continuity between generations of people maintaining the general arrangements they possess, it should also be noted that these are "arrangements of a *set of people*."²⁰¹ This is not merely a habit an individual develops to simplify his manner of living for himself; rather, government implies something that will be applied to a collective for the sake of that collective. We all know this more commonly as the laws of a community or state: their purpose is to regulate the collective to prevent it from tearing itself apart or to achieve certain ends deemed relevant by political leaders. As Oakeshott argues, in thinking about politics, "we are considering the manner in which its legal structure (which in spite of its incoherencies cannot be supposed to have a competitor) is reformed and amended."²⁰²

For Oakeshott, there is no such thing as political contest from outside the political sphere, as politics is conducted by a people "in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, [composing] a single community."²⁰³ In a given community, there cannot be multiple legal or governmental structures as those structures are what the citizenry has absolute recourse to in the event of an intracommunal conflict. To have multiple legal structures implies difference (as if there were no differences why would there be more than one?) and such differences would lead to conflict since both legal structures would attempt to beat the other into submitting to its respective rules. In

²⁰⁰ Fuller, "The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism," 117.

²⁰¹ My italics

²⁰² Oakeshott, "Political education," 69.

²⁰³ Oakeshott, "Political education," 56.

Oakeshott's view, this would mean that there are actually two separate political entities and they are now engaged in a struggle that approximates warfare.

Scholars who are receptive to this aspect of Oakeshott's political writing, most notably David D. Corey and Carlos Marques de Almeida, argue that what is consistent in Oakeshott's understanding of politics is that it always maintains *the absolute capacity to compel*. Indeed, bearing in mind that the structure of law and government must be singular to be made sense of, it must consequently be understood that politics is a monopolistic activity—and one which will protect its monopoly. There are no competitors; you must take over from within. Regardless of the specific content or direction of the government in question, “one must understand that by “rule” is meant the power to compel someone to do something without his or her consent.”²⁰⁴ Thus, this implies that “the starting point of this line of enquiry is the admission...that government begins in the exercise of power, force, and even violence.”²⁰⁵ In any engagement, no matter how small or large, rules provide a structure within which a collective of people can function together and to which the members of the collective can appeal in the event of a transgression—regardless of if the engagement is a mere soccer match with a presiding referee or the fullness of communal life as regulated by a government. As perfectly identified by Corey and Marques de Almeida, ruling in this sense is meaningless without the right to compel and the right to force as a means of regulation.

²⁰⁴ David D. Corey, “The Problem of Liberal Political Legitimacy,” in *Michael Oakeshott on Authority, Governance, and the State*, ed. Eric S. Kos (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 45.

²⁰⁵ Carlos Marques de Almeida, “The Authority of the State and the Traditional Realm of Freedom,” in *Michael Oakeshott on Authority, Governance, and the State*, ed. Eric S. Kos (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 118.

In brief, Oakeshott's conception of governance implies three main components: first, it is attending to the arrangements of a given people who are engaged as a community for one reason or another; second, it assumes that the governmental structure of a people is the only political entity in question, outside of warfare and diplomacy, which guarantees it a monopoly on rulemaking; and, last, that said political entity has the power to use force to ensure the rules of the community are followed. From this conception of governance, however, no specific formula for government can be deduced. It is certainly possible that styles of governance that fall within these parameters could abuse power or exercise self-restraint, strive for strict conformity or be more laissez-faire, write thousands of laws or just a few. The criterion for good governance thus will have a contextual flavour based on what the characteristics of the ruled society may be, and the actions of that government can only be judged on how it meets the needs of the society in question. Bearing this elaboration of Oakeshott's view in mind, we can return to "On being conservative" to understand the characteristics and virtues of conservative governance and why this style of politics may be relevant today.

Abating Misunderstandings: Ruling & Tradition

Oakeshott begins his discussion of conservative governance by noting that there are common assumptions about governmental conservatives such as affiliations with religion, believing in some form of natural law, or having an 'organic' view of society—all clear allusions to Oakeshott's conservative predecessor, Edmund Burke. Oakeshott, however, sees no need for a connection between conservative government and any given worldview.²⁰⁶ This aspect of Oakeshott's thought has been attacked at length. Critics of

²⁰⁶ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 423, 435.

this point have predominantly emerged in one of two distinct camps: those who simply do not acknowledge that governance is a distinct form of activity and those who believe Oakeshott is smuggling in a worldview through an appeal to tradition.

The first set of commentators, focusing upon his rejection of necessary religious or metaphysical views, believe that Oakeshott is breaking with conservative tradition. Specifically, Oakeshott's rejection of the connection between government and Christian values in the West has been met with the ire of several commentators. Irving Kristol, a prominent 'neoconservative' voice, goes so far as to criticize Oakeshott's understanding of conservatism purely on the grounds that it does not affirm a religious view of society.²⁰⁷ Another American neoconservative, Gertrude Himmelfarb, makes similar accusations against Oakeshott, arguing that he seems to inherit David Hume's atheism and skepticism, possessing "a dislike for religion itself...[or] for any idea that has the presumption of truth"—making Oakeshott's label of conservative problematic.²⁰⁸

Ironically, however, Oakeshott is also criticized by several 'progressive' detractors because they believe his understanding of conservative governance is reliant on a comprehensive notion of 'tradition' that smuggles in a conceptual scheme for good governance without making it explicit.²⁰⁹ Despite Oakeshott distancing himself from

²⁰⁷ Kristol, "American's 'Exceptional Conservatism,'" 381.

²⁰⁸ Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," 415—Given many of Oakeshott's lesser-known works that show a clear interest in religion and, particularly, Christianity were published in the 1990's, this may seem like an entirely false claim from Himmelfarb; it should be noted, however, that she likely had no access to those works in the 1970's and that the shortcomings of her Oakeshottian analysis are likely due to this circumstantial limitation.

²⁰⁹ Such a conflation between conservatism and tradition is not necessarily due to spurious accusations. See: Rutger Claassen, "The conservative challenge to liberalism," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, no. 4 (September 2011): 465-466—Claassen never justifies this connection between tradition and conservatism, nor does he provide a clear definition of tradition, but, in this case, he is doing so out of a desire to understand contemporary politics and not to criticize any particular thinker such as Oakeshott.

figures like Burke, David Spitz argues that if we “extract the appeal to God and natural law, [...] the substance of what Oakeshott has to say is largely derivative from Burke. [...] Consequently...the criticisms of Oakeshott are in part the usual criticisms of all appeals to tradition.”²¹⁰ Despite that this tradition to which Oakeshott supposedly appeals is never precisely defined, Spitz nevertheless claims that the goal in mind is maintaining the status quo. He claims, in essence, that Oakeshott smuggles in an evaluative structure but one that is nothing more than a preference for what is presently possessed. There are others, however, such as Hanna Pitkin, who go further by arguing that such an appeal to tradition actually becomes the *tertium quid* which she refers to as “ideological, radical politics as of Burkean conservatism.”²¹¹ In short, criticisms of this sort can all be said to charge Oakeshott with making tradition into the evaluative structure or even an ideology disguised as something more robust.

What is striking about these two views, concretized by Kristol and Himmelfarb on the one hand with Spitz and Pitkin on the other, is that they seem to be in tension with one another. Does Oakeshott leave his readers without a proper evaluative model as the neocons seem to hold, or does he have an ideological vision masked under the concept of ‘tradition’ as the progressives seem to posit? Of course, these critiques of Oakeshott do not address one another directly; if anything, they coemerged with little crosspollination with each another and we should therefore expect that they have mutually exclusive readings of Oakeshott. I do, however, think that these two critiques highlight key misunderstandings of Oakeshott and addressing them provides critical insight into his view of governance—both generically and for the conservative.

²¹⁰ Spitz, “A Rationalist Malgré Lui: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott,” 339.

²¹¹ Pitkin, “The Roots of Conservatism,” 502.

In my view, there are two predominant issues with the neoconservative response to Oakeshott's work: the first is that they mistake communal interests for political interests, which is a symptom of the second issue which is that they lack a careful discussion of governance as such. As stated above, Oakeshott is interested in the rules of compulsion which emerge internal to a community for the sake of that community. What Kristol discusses, on the other hand, "is *a movement*, a popular movement, not a faction of a political party."²¹² His subject is not a style of governance but is rather a cultural vision; this does not invalidate what Kristol may be arguing for, but it does prevent him from seeing the purpose of Oakeshott's argument with any clarity. Himmelfarb, unlike Kristol, has a much more nuanced reading of Oakeshott's view as she does recognize his position that governance is about ruling.²¹³ Yet, despite this astute understanding of Oakeshott's point, she objects that his view of conservative government is not concerned with seeking truth and therefore leaves something to be desired.²¹⁴ What she overlooks, however, is that if government is to be the umpire of a people, it cannot also tell people how to conduct their lives in detail, let alone in totality. The soccer referee and rules of the games do not instruct the players how to score a goal; rather, the ref and rules merely maintain the space within which the various players can achieve their goals, doing so in whatever manner they are capable and see fit. Oakeshott must be taken seriously in his claim that his concern is with *governance as such*, and to begin invoking the larger world of practical life is something of an irrelevance.²¹⁵

²¹² Kristol, "American's "Exceptional Conservatism"," 377.

²¹³ Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," 413.

²¹⁴ Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," 420.

²¹⁵ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 423.

In turning to the other main objection as voiced by Spitz and Pitkin, I must address the ‘problem of tradition’ in Oakeshott’s thought. As noted in Chapter Two, “On being conservative” contains no explicit mention of tradition. We therefore must turn to another of his essays, “Political education,” to review his understanding of “tradition,” as that is the source of many negative responses to Oakeshott. In reading this essay, however, we find that many critical scholars seem to have made a mountain out of a molehill in interpreting what Oakeshott means by this term. For example, Spitz argues that Oakeshott uses “tradition” as the proper and prescriptive criterion for action. Spitz’s interpretation holds that there is an implicit value being inserted to argue that tradition is ‘good’ or ‘useful’ which justifies it being imposed, which means that tradition is like any other ideological system.²¹⁶ Pitkin extends this by treating tradition as something either stagnant or as a bygone relic; she argues that “for slaves, perpetuation of the tradition and enhanced coherence in it can only mean a systematization of their oppression...Oakeshott’s [view] is not an attractive teaching for slaves, nor for anyone, whom the tradition offers ‘little or nothing to be used or enjoyed’.”²¹⁷ These two objections to Oakeshott’s understanding of “tradition” give the impression that tradition is something set in stone and which is applied in some mechanical manner. If we turn to “Political Education,” however, such an understanding of tradition is not only absent but firmly rejected by Oakeshott.

What Oakeshott refers to as a “traditional manner of behaviour” is just that: a way of acting which has formed and is forming a people. It is fluid and malleable, it is difficult to define in its entirety, and it informs our activity but only ever partially

²¹⁶ Spitz, “A Rationalist Malgré Lui: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott,” 339-340.

²¹⁷ Pitkin, “The Roots of Conservatism,” 510.

instructs it. To implement tradition as if it were another ideology is impossible for, as Oakeshott noted, “it may appear to be essentially unintelligible,” as it is the stream of experience within which we live.²¹⁸ To enforce tradition is an impossibility because acting is to be within and extensive of that tradition. This does not mean that this makes it absolutely unknowable, though it may appear difficult to know where to begin. In Oakeshott’s view, “though a tradition of behaviour 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.”²¹⁹ If we are attentive we will recognize that this sounds suspiciously similar to Oakeshott’s notion of practice as discussed in the prior chapters: tradition *is* the life of a people.

Attending to tradition is to have great concern for the world ‘as it is’ and then how the world of ‘what ought to be’ emerges from within that same, living continuity of human experience. To return to Pitkin’s rejection of Oakeshott through her invocation of slavery, it may be true that the traditions of America allowed for horrendous slavery and continued racism, but it is also within that same tradition that racial emancipation and a rejection of basing character on skin colour has emerged. In practical life, seen here as tradition, everything already *is* in some sense, but its exact configuration changes over time. Oakeshott is not oblivious to the fact that the governmental systems of a people are always imperfect; he recognizes that “the arrangements which constitute a society capable of political activity...are at once coherent and incoherent; they compose a pattern and at the same time they intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear.”²²⁰

²¹⁸ Oakeshott, “Political education,” 61.

²¹⁹ Oakeshott, “Political education,” 61.

²²⁰ Oakeshott, “Political education,” 56-57.

Governing is the act of exploring patterns within a tradition of law and attempting to reconcile the incoherencies of the political apparatus unto itself and unto the ruled community.²²¹ This does not mean that significant changes cannot be made or that radical upheaval is always unnecessary; rather, the claim is that such drastic movements must be relevant to the existing laws along with the manner and sensibility of the people being ruled.

In addressing these two widespread criticisms of Oakeshott's understanding of governance, two core concepts of his thought become clearer: the nature of governance and the nature of tradition. Governance is the activity of creating rules for the continuity of a community that are enforced without the explicit consent of the ruled and with as much force as necessary to maintain the rules; to conflate this with a concrete vision for society, religious or otherwise, is to have misunderstood the act of governing. Tradition is the manner of living present within a people in all its complexity; this dynamic experience always contains coherence and incoherence, and the people in that tradition are always attempting to preserve the former while reducing the latter—even if it is the nature of practice that the activity can never be made fully coherent as discussed in Chapter One. What is elucidated by understanding these two concepts in Oakeshott's thought is twofold: first, governance is a distinct activity that does not comprise the whole of a society but merely what is necessary for its continuity, therefore requiring no connection with religious or metaphysical views; second, government is, in fact, dependent upon the tradition it is ruling as it must adhere to the patterns and

²²¹ Oakeshott, "Political education," 57.

contradictions present in that people.²²² These two observations demonstrate that Oakeshott sees the need for rules to stabilize the life of a people, but also that he believes that those rules do not rest on their own ground.

Sustaining a Life Held in Common

Oakeshott, possessing a profound awareness of the contingent reality of practical life, is careful to begin outlining his own position for what form government should take by analyzing the community he is invested in: his own, England.²²³ In fact, Oakeshott stresses that we should begin always with “the proper starting-place; not in the empyrean, but with ourselves as we have come to be.”²²⁴ This is as close as Oakeshott comes to stating that his views in “On being conservative” are aimed at working within his tradition—of course, tradition here being understood as a living and malleable entity as I outlined above, rather than what Spitz or Pitkin accuse it of being. Now, even here, Oakeshott already has an angle that is emerging: he is intentionally avoiding the “empyrean,” implying that, what we also called the world of ‘what ought to be,’ should be set aside for the moment. Oakeshott begins with a desire to understand the present on its own grounds before attempting to produce a vision of what could be; he wants to understand what he may be disrupting before he disrupts it.²²⁵

²²² Leslie Marsh, “Ryle and Oakeshott on the ‘Knowing-How/Knowing-That’ Distinction,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 146—Marsh’s discussion of this aspect of Oakeshott’s thought is enlightening, describing Oakeshott’s view as being one of “*Political Skepticism*: the idea that politics has no intrinsic purpose or end...Aims are only incompletely accomplished and unforeseen side-effects always cause results to be markedly different from intentions.”

²²³ Ferenc Hörcher, “Government as a British Conservative Understands It: Comments on Oakeshott’s Views on Government,” in *Michael Oakeshott on Authority, Governance, and the State*, ed. Eric S. Kos, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 187.

²²⁴ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 424.

²²⁵ Feaver, “Being English: The Conservative Witness of Michael Oakeshott,” 221.

Oakeshott believes that his people have come to enjoy a sense of personal autonomy, passionately pursuing their varied interests. He argues that this dynamic circumstance is largely characterized by an underlying desire for each to “pursue happiness by seeking the satisfaction of desires which spring from one another inexhaustibly.”²²⁶ This should not, however, be understood as some individualistic dream in which everyone is doing as they please without recourse to anyone or anything. Oakeshott, rather, acknowledges the prevalence of human interaction as necessary for communal life—indeed, it is so by definition—with a constant interplay “of interest and of emotion, of competition...love, friendship, jealousy and hatred, some of which are more enduring than others.”²²⁷ There are evidently some problems as people may “not all approve the same sort of conduct. But, in the main, we get along with one another, sometimes by giving way, sometimes by standing fast, sometimes in a compromise.”²²⁸ It should be emphasized that this manner of living which Oakeshott is describing is not held up as some sort of ‘eternal truth’ or ‘fact of human nature.’ Instead, Oakeshott is merely observing that there is a collection of people doing quite well in acting both independently and within their community. “A different condition of human circumstances can easily be imagined,” but this does not mean that what has been gained in England is therefore of no value or to be changed based on any whim.²²⁹ To see two Frenchmen kiss each other on both cheeks as a manner of greeting does not invalidate the Englishman’s preference for a firm handshake. For Oakeshott, we can recognize that *mores* and customs do not appear identically everywhere and that they are developed by

²²⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 424.

²²⁷ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

²²⁸ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

²²⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

and for a people, as well as that such an acknowledgment does not invalidate the moral precepts of one's own culture even if differing precepts may be found in foreign peoples.

Evidently, given Oakeshott's description, his own community is somewhat chaotic, as its members are not necessarily coordinated in much of what they do and will likely make poor decisions from time to time—collisions between people and projects should be expected. There is no member of the community who knows precisely what the future of the collective holds, as each member is largely concerned with his own plot and taking care of what he hopes to responsibly maintain.²³⁰ Despite its possible appeals, Oakeshott acknowledges that some folks may view such a manner of living as inefficient and unduly lacking in collective meaning; they may be “provoked by the absence of order and coherence...its wastefulness, its frustration, its dissipation of human energy, its lack not merely of premeditated destination but even of any discernable direction of movement.”²³¹

Such critics of calamity look upon their fellow men and believe that there must be a way to convert the present disorder into something supposedly more rational and human, a situation in which collision and upset are nowhere to be found in society.²³² Now, of course, we should not suppose that all these visions for society which these critics conjure up will accord with one another. We may find some who want state socialism, others who desire to return to the Greek *polis*, or yet another who believes there is a technological solution for every problem which should be sought at the behest of government. What is integral to recognize, however, is that all such visions—

²³⁰ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

²³¹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

²³² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 426.

regardless of which one specifically—always suggest that “the office of government [is] the imposition upon its subjects of the condition of human circumstances of their dream.”²³³ In essence, all these dreams or visions for society are predicated upon the presumption that things are being improved or bettered; we have thus returned to Oakeshott’s use of language discussed in Chapter Two: that of innovation and conservation. The man who looks upon the dynamic and apparently disorganized manner of life and wants to impose something upon it is evidently ‘innovative,’ always desiring to change the present society through the force of government—for better or for worse.

Oakeshott is not interested in criticizing this innovative view of governance absolutely. In fact, he does not believe it to be “at all unintelligible,” but rather “there is much in our circumstances to provoke it.”²³⁴ One can envision a great many aspects of communal life that seem to require a single, centralized actor to be adequately handled; historical examples may include the construction of roads and walkways, management of interregional railways, or organizing communal waste removal. Such enterprises, if left to people to handle of their own accord, may present difficulties due to different local approaches clashing with one another or the limitations imposed by funds only collected from within a small community—problems which will simply halt the desired end in question. Oakeshott believes that there may be perfectly comprehensible moments in which innovative governance is therefore warranted, but his project is to suggest that there is another alternative notion of governance that is also perfectly legitimate and

²³³ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

²³⁴ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 426.

intelligible.²³⁵ Unfortunately, it is a style of politics that we tend to forget or misunderstand: that of conservative governance.

As discussed above, the conservative has a propensity to make the best of what he has at present. Thus, when confronted with the chaotic, rough and tumble nature of the community Oakeshott is here discussing, the conservative governor does not want to overhaul this manner of living but to shave off its more negative tendencies. He is not interested in prescribing what the ruled people must do, but rather aims to create rules that minimize the more destructive collisions of such a dynamic and lively society.²³⁶ The conservative governor is not interested in taking sides on issues but instead in ensuring that the various actors engaged in whatever enterprises they deem desirable do so in a manner that is conducive to the continued life of the community. The precise content of this community could, in fact, change considerably while still under conservative rule. Even while regulating various manners of behaviour that may be violent or dishonest, significant changes to society may occur: new forms of cuisine or fashion could wax and wane, different religions could grow or shrink in prominence, and business could be conducted in different or even new sectors. This is only made possible, however, when—below the everchanging particulars of this communal life—there is a continuous identity emanating from the government which binds the people together. What is critical for Oakeshott is that the rules regulating the dynamic changes of the community are largely constant; the continuity of government and law is what allows for a continuity of free exploration without major frustration by a people in their many endeavours. We should be reminded that the engaging competition between two clubs on the soccer pitch is only

²³⁵ Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 150.

²³⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 427.

ever possible with the referee and his rules which everyone involved, at least implicitly, consent to; without those rules and the referee to enforce them, the game is liable to devolve into nothing but conflict which is undesirable for all involved.

What often concerns some of Oakeshott's detractors, however, is that his description of how to generate laws seems rather vague; several argue that he provides no real criteria for governmental judgement. To be fair to his detractors, some of his statements can seem somewhat unclear when read in isolation; for example: "the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection."²³⁷ Spitz, once again, argues that with Oakeshott, "there are no general principles...to guide us in distinguishing good from bad conduct or even in pursuing the intimations," which informs Spitz's more broad rejection of Oakeshott's understanding of tradition as such.²³⁸ Pitkin argues that "intimations" offer nothing for a people who possess no tradition or system of law; in her view, Oakeshott has little to offer since he relies on tradition but then denies that a tradition can be deliberately made.²³⁹ Again, we see that Oakeshott's critics continue to seek after an abstract principle to direct governance—derived, presumably, from outside of the political circumstance—because they feel that, if they have no such a *tertium quid*, they have no solid guide for their political conduct. The problem with such objections, however, is twofold: one, I believe they overlook the meaning of the term "ritual" as used here by Oakeshott; and second, reading Oakeshott's argument wholistically provides a clear conception of what is meant

²³⁷ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 428.

²³⁸ Spitz, "A Rationalist Malgré Lui: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott," 338.

²³⁹ Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 509-510.

by intimations, though it is a notion that is always contextually bound and thus not universally prescriptive.

Oakeshott's use of the term "ritual" is critical to what he is discussing here. Firstly, we must recall that Oakeshott claims that his notion of governance has been developed not from contemplation from within the *aether*, but through attending to his people as he understands them presently. He believes they have come to behave in a certain manner that is predicated predominantly upon self-sufficiency and a desire to work well with others, though this does have its conflicts now and then.²⁴⁰ What he means, therefore, by "the intimations of government are found in ritual" is that the need for rules is revealed in the actions of a people as they conduct themselves; ritual is the constant communal engagement seen among a people day after day. Thus, in attending to the rituals of a people, he means that a governor should be concerned with finding where problems arise within the extant conduct of a people—not in abstract beliefs about 'justice,' 'fairness,' or 'equality.'²⁴¹ It may happen that a society becomes just, fair, or equal, but that only emerges within the context of a given people disposed to such characteristics and not because it was imposed by the governing body. To object to Oakeshott's view because he offers no 'third term' by which to judge government in a more durable or universal sense is like saying that a baker should be able to give you a universal concept by which to judge all pastries: what he comes up with will either become a meaningless abstraction irrelevant to his practice or he will cease to produce

²⁴⁰ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 427.

²⁴¹ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 431.

the delicious variety of pastries per methods necessary to their diverse flavours and textures—a potential loss that cannot be overstated.²⁴²

Oakeshott is uninterested in making the dynamic and rich communal life of his people succumb to a governor with a vision—even if this means putting up with a little bit of social chaos. As opposed to a governor that dictates what the content of life should be, Oakeshott argues for a conservative stance in which “governing is recognized as a specific and limited activity; not the management of an enterprise, but the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises.”²⁴³ In attempting to maintain the community as such, the conservative governor is not interested in concrete persons but in activities, and in those “activities only in respect of their propensity to collide with one another” which is revealed through them being already acted out by the community.²⁴⁴ The act of ruling, as the conservative sees it, is not one of creating a perfectly harmonious system to be forced upon a people, but of attending to them as they have learned to be and only restricting them from performing actions that utterly destroy the peace of the community. This is not an activity that can easily be formalized, as it will always be contextually based upon the needs of the ruled people. A people devoid of avarice may not need as many laws around issues of theft; a people who deplore violence will likely have less specificity in their criminal code around prosecuting assault and murder; a people who have never been introduced to the automobile will be without traffic laws.

²⁴² Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in politics,” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991): 12—Here I am evidently reliant on Oakeshott’s elegant metaphors and similes that use the image of cookery to explain tradition and practice.

²⁴³ Michael Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 429.

²⁴⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 430.

Rules and laws emerge based on the conflicts and struggles of a people, upon contingent and historical occurrences that are not applicable in every time and every place.

Oakeshott also clarifies that, contrary to what Pitkin claims, a conservative style of governance is hardly lazy or stuck in the past. To recognize the primacy of rules and familiarity with those rules in governmental activity is not to deny the possibility of novel issues which must be addressed:

The current condition of human circumstance is one in which new activities (often springing from new inventions) are constantly appearing and rapidly extending themselves, and in which beliefs are perpetually being modified and discarded; and for the rules to be inappropriate to the current activities and beliefs is as unprofitable as for them to be unfamiliar.²⁴⁵

The turn of the twentieth-century came with the increased production and prevalence of the automobile; thus, a whole new branch of law became necessary to protect the people from new collisions (now of a quite literal sort). The conservative governor sees this not as something to be ignored or resisted, but rather understands that new rules will be required to address the needs of his people. “Innovation, then, is called for if the rules are to remain appropriate to the activities they govern”; but it is a restrained form of innovation, as the conservative ruler believes that “modification of the rules should always reflect, and never impose, a change in the activities and beliefs of those who are subject to them, and should never...be so great as to destroy the *ensemble*.”²⁴⁶ To say that a carpenter may add a tool to the dozen he has in his toolkit or even to say that he may replace one tool with another is never the same as arguing that he can just up and abandon his present kit in favour of an entirely new one or that he should expect to find a universal tool to replace the many he has presently. Small additions, modifications, or

²⁴⁵ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 430.

²⁴⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 431.

substitutions should never be confused with total overhaul or supposedly ‘universal’ solutions.

The conservative governor thus recognizes a balance in the way that laws are constituted and developed. On the one hand, he understands that there may be new circumstances that require novel approaches through moderate innovation; yet, on the other hand, this is always tempered by the recognition that the already extant rules were developed to provide clear boundaries between passionate people. He therefore must conserve the laws insofar as they are applicable and not be too quick to replace or add new laws so as to disturb the life of the people as they have come to be, though he recognizes that this will be necessary now and then.²⁴⁷ For Oakeshott, government is a set of tools, which we call the law; it does not have some sort of divine or eternal status—an unfortunate confusion that has been caused by the writing and reading of political philosophy. Laws and government can change over time, but this does not mean that they have no meaning without being firmly grounded in some sort of ‘Platonic-Form’ of politics—rather, they need only be grounded in our practices as we have come to know them and act them out; “everything is temporary, but nothing is arbitrary.”²⁴⁸ As Oakeshott sees him, the conservative man has a humble and simple view, regarding “politics as an activity in which a valuable set of tools is renovated from time to time and kept in trim rather than as an opportunity for perpetual re-equipment.”²⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the simplicity of this view has often been lost by those figures who attempt to defend it.

²⁴⁷ Flathman, “Conversation, Conversion, and Conservation,” 180.

²⁴⁸ Oakeshott, “Political education,” 61.

²⁴⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 431.

Many intellectuals and scholars who focus upon modern conservatism fall prey to a perilous temptation in defending their conservative view of governance: to accidentally generate new ‘external’ standards of evaluation, simply making more enemies of their own position. By engaging the non-traditionally minded voices, conservative figures have indulged in “the intellectualization of and reflection on tradition,” allowing for modern thinkers to “[force] tradition-bound people to give reasons for their prejudice and institutions, to argue for them.”²⁵⁰ This is not, however, a trap to which Oakeshott falls prey; he is keen to note that many who attempt to defend a conservative stance for governance make appeals to abstract concepts such as freedom, private property, or dialectical social life.²⁵¹ Yet, Oakeshott observes that such principles can easily switch from becoming descriptive virtues of the community to being prescriptive impositions for a society, which inverts the disposition of the government toward the ruled people. Oakeshott thinks that this is a shift from a conservative argument about governance to something closer approximating just another innovative view—and thus this defense becomes either impotent or counterproductive for what it aims to achieve. Oakeshott believes that an argument that is “much smaller and less pretentious will do: the observation that this condition of the human circumstance is, in fact, current, and that we have learned to enjoy it and how to manage it.”²⁵²

This may sound as if Oakeshott is merely ‘defending the status quo’ as some of his detractors have accused him of doing in one way or another.²⁵³ His critics argue that

²⁵⁰ Attila K. Molnár, “Conservative’s Paradox in Post-Communism,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010), 271.

²⁵¹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 427.

²⁵² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 425.

²⁵³ For examples, see: Pitkin, “The Roots of Conservatism,” 510-513; Spitz, “A Rationalist Malgré Lui: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott,” 339-340; Wood, “A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott,” 662.

Oakeshott's notion of politics is simply one of maintaining that which is already; it is as if Oakeshott has an understanding of his society and he wants to write a series of laws to maintain the present order with as little change as possible. Now, even if this were true, then Oakeshott's position becomes nothing but one more dream among the many others; if all the conservative has is an alternative vision to impose upon his society, he is no further behind than the Marxist, utopian, or technocrat.²⁵⁴ Yet, given what has been elaborated above, I believe that nothing of the sort can be said of Oakeshott's position. Per his view of government, the rules never prescribe the substance of what a people must do, but rather inhibits them from the more destructive sorts of action that are deleterious for the community as such. If anything, Oakeshott's elucidation of conservative government contains an implicit celebration of a dynamic and diverse manner of living, free to be explored insofar as the periphery of action reined in by the law is not breached. What Oakeshott is describing is the way in which government can hold together the life of a passionate people—a matter that is not about living in accord with abstract principles we may derive but in protecting the identity of the people as it has come to know itself.

The benefit of conservative governance is only that it adds a spot of restraint in a people less inclined to restrict themselves, “not because passion is a vice and moderation a virtue, but because moderation is indispensable if passionate men are to escape being locked in an encounter of mutual frustration.”²⁵⁵ Oakeshott's view provides a manner of government that can endure within a lively people; if, on the other hand, the government attempts to add its own vision of life along with all that is going on among the people, it

²⁵⁴ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 427-428.

²⁵⁵ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 432.

is then “understood to be just like any other activity.”²⁵⁶ There is no longer an umpire among the pluralism of actions being undertaken, and government morphs into merely another player in the game—regulation as such therefore disappears as the umpire becomes a contestant. At best, we must expect the community to begin to fracture and decline; at worst, the monopolistic nature of governance will lead to the barbaric slaughter of all activity not approved by the government.²⁵⁷ What Oakeshott argues, on the other hand, is that conservative governance can provide a sense of moderation in a lively people, a characteristic which allows for a continuous sense of identity to persist for the community; “government, in short, should be a calm oasis of conservatism in the confusion of contemporary over-activity.”²⁵⁸ Oakeshott is merely recognizing that governance is “easily corrupted when it is combined with any other [activity]”; if, however, the umpire remains peripheral to the engagement, the players will evidently see his value structuring the space within which they continue to enjoy their engagement.²⁵⁹

This leads to a final point of criticism that has been leveled against Oakeshott which is simply misguided: that he denies the possibility of improvement in politics or that he is nihilistic about our capacity for governance. J. R. Archer goes after Oakeshott for his “dismissive treatment of Soviet politics,” and believes that Oakeshott is guilty of denying government “the possibility of inventive thought.”²⁶⁰ Bernard Crick argues that Oakeshott is breaking from “the most obvious characteristic of Western thought—the

²⁵⁶ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 432.

²⁵⁷ Ivo Mosley, “‘A Dark Age Devoted to Barbaric Affluence’: Oakeshott’s Verdict on the Modern World,” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2010): 281.

²⁵⁸ Rayner, “The Legend of Oakeshott’s Conservatism,” 325.

²⁵⁹ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 427.

²⁶⁰ J. R. Archer, “Oakeshott on Politics,” *The Journal of Politics* 41, no. 1 (February 1979): 156.

belief that conscious political action can lead to human progress.”²⁶¹ What both Archer and Crick overlook is Oakeshott’s clear appreciation of the community to which he belongs in all its dynamism, granting that much change and innovation may be had in the other realms of life. Politics is only excluded because Oakeshott believes there should be an activity that maintains an underlying identity for all involved and which prevents harm and frustration from damaging the community—a task that requires the conservative disposition to be done effectively. Even looking past the highly questionable claims about Soviet politics or what supposedly is characteristic of Western thought, it seems that both critics fall into the trap of viewing politics as, if not the sole form of communal action, the most important sort—a claim which is both unjustified and highly questionable. Oakeshott’s view of conservative governance is not stupid or aristocratic; it is attentive and responsive to those it rules.

Conclusion

If governance is “attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together,” then our first step toward proper governance must be to understand the community in question. In Oakeshott’s case, he believes that his community has a dynamic and lively character, marked by a sense of individual self-sufficiency and desire to make one’s own decisions. Happiness is not a given, but it is something that can certainly be found. Though there may be some communities in which a much stronger and more direct hand from the government is necessary to keep things in order and provide a sense of identity for its people, Oakeshott believes that his own would only suffer from such an approach. He must therefore seek after an alternative, a

²⁶¹ Crick, “The World of Michael Oakeshott,” 73.

manner of governance which befits a passionate and self-sufficient people. He calls this alternative style ‘conservative government.’ As Oakeshott understands, this view of government is not an active player in the dynamic affairs of a community but is the ruler at the periphery who is never involved in the exact character of the community—he simply makes the rules which allow for our diverse activities to continue in a stable and peaceable manner, in effect creating a space within which we may discover how to enjoy the fruits of communal life. “We keep a government of this sort to do for us the scepticism we have neither the time nor the inclination to do for ourselves.”²⁶²

The brilliance of Oakeshott’s position emerges not out the heights from which he is able to grasp such a view, but how humble it is in remaining right here on earth—it is a supremely human exercise. Politics and governance exist within the life of practice, always caught between what is and what could be. To engage with government is to attempt “to manage what is never fully under control. [...] There is always more that could be said than has been said, and those who may say it.”²⁶³ In his defense of the conservative disposition, Oakeshott shows us that there is a way in which we can gain a sense of familiarity with our circumstance that can at least put enough soil under our feet that we may learn to stand on our own. This is, evidently, never enough for a fully satisfactory life. Other endeavours will be needed for that, be they also practical or—perhaps—scientific, historical, philosophical, or poetic; in engaging with such activities, we may come to grasp the richness of experience that extends beyond our mere mortal flesh. But, in the end, politics never provides us with such an end—it can only ever provide the ground from which we leap to heights yet unknown.

²⁶² Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 434.

²⁶³ Fuller, “The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism,” 125.

Conclusion:
Our Solid Ship to Traverse the Unknown Seas

“This is the condition of the modern intelligence, and it is also the ideal encouraged by modern civilization—the man at home everywhere who is really never at home anywhere.”

-Michael Oakeshott

Reading through several works written by Michael Oakeshott—either version of ‘The Tower of Babel’; “The voice of poetry in the conservation of mankind”; the posthumously published text *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*; or his *Notebooks 1922-86* (wonderfully compiled by Luke O’Sullivan); and many others to choose from—we find a man who is fascinated by art, history, and religion. His political writings, on the other hand, express a desire to limit the scope of governance so as to allow for the flourishing of these explorative activities that provide a sense of joy, adventure, and meaning in life. Politics, for Oakeshott, should not be included within that more intrepid side of life, as it provides the boundaries within which a stable and peaceable community can be maintained for us to return to after falling from an attempt at greatness in some other activity. This theme permeates much of Oakeshott’s work, but is most succinctly put in his 1948 essay entitled “The Tower of Babel”:

The pursuit of perfection as the crow flies is an activity both impious and unavoidable in human life. It involves the penalties of impiety (the anger of the gods and social isolation), and its reward is not that of achievement but that of having made the attempt. It is an activity, therefore, suitable for individuals, but not for societies. For an individual who is impelled to engage in it, the reward may exceed both the penalty and the inevitable defeat. The penitent may hope, or even expect, to fall back, a wounded hero, into the arms of an understanding and forgiving society. [...] For a society, on the other hand, the penalty is a chaos of conflicting ideals, the disruption of common life, and the reward is the renown which attaches to monumental folly. *A mesure que l’humanité se perfectionne l’homme se dégrade.*²⁶⁴

This view of the relationship between the individual and the community could be legitimately objected to; however, the purpose of my argument is to demonstrate that Oakeshott does not arrive at this position through mere prejudice or assertion. Rather, by contextualizing some of Oakeshott’s claims about politics within his philosophy and view

²⁶⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “The Tower of Babel,” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 466.

of what it means to be conservative, I hope to abate some of the more ill-considered criticisms of his work.

Despite the lack of consensus on how it is that Oakeshott separates philosophic experience and practical experience, I believe that to misunderstand this aspect of his thought is to have no ground for understanding what he says elsewhere. Despite that Oakeshott evidently believes that philosophy may not instruct, it most certainly does inform us of our circumstance. Oakeshott's philosophic considerations provide an insightful interpretation of the human experience as something which is never made whole or self-sufficient. Despite that we may always desire the ultimate satisfaction of philosophical experience, in that it is experience whole and coherent unto itself, it is ultimately too burdensome for humanity to maintain perpetually. Instead, Oakeshott offers us the mode of practical experience, which is the mode into which we are born and spend most of our lives. It is a world in which past, present, and future are always recognized; it is characterized by change and contingency and how we manage this circumstance as volitional agents; it is a world where nearly anything can be changed but in which such a possibility also presents a perpetual burden. To engage with the world at the level of practice is our continuous starting place, as all other activities—philosophy, science, history, art—all must first be willed before they can break free of the confines thrust upon us men as practical creatures.

In recognizing our primary mode as practical in nature, we are confronted with the need to stabilize the ever-changing movement between who we were, who we are, and who we will become. Oakeshott refers to this thread which moves across time as 'identity'; it is not something fixed or wholly definable, but it is something which we

have a sense of and which we attempt to maintain so as to not endure the hardship of an ever-uncertain feeling in the present. For Oakeshott, this shifts every man toward being *conservative* in at least some aspects of his life, not because what he is maintaining is necessarily ‘good’ or ‘true,’ but because it is the sense of familiarity that allows for a sense of continuity over time—it is his identity: “not, *Verweile doch, du bist so schön*, but, *Stay with me because I am attached to you*.”²⁶⁵ Perhaps this is what it means for a man to say that his wife is the perfect woman—it is not that he is incapable of imagining a woman who is more beautiful, eloquent, or talented: it is that his wife is already extant and deeply integrated into himself, a role in his life now only capable of being fulfilled by her and her alone. Such familiarity and affection are bred through habituation, which takes considerable time and effort, but every person will encounter this in some manner—be that simply through learning a language in conversation or learning the roadways in one’s neighbourhood due to constantly traversing them. To find comfort in the world, to enjoy a sense of continuity and simplicity, requires the presence of the conservative disposition in some form or another, regardless of if we are aware of it—to be without it is to continually begin anew in our daily endeavours.

Finally, this leads to Oakeshott’s argument that governance, at least in the circumstances which he argues he inhabits, should be preeminently conservative. Oakeshott believes he lives in a society filled with lively and independent people; all members of the community are treated as adults; people are accountable for their actions and accustomed to making their own decisions. This is not because these are always the best decisions, but because the decisions are *their* decisions. They live with the

²⁶⁵ Oakeshott, “On being conservative,” 408.

consequences and adjust according to the circumstances they cause. Government for such a people, in Oakeshott's view, should be conservative—it should not impose a vision for the future upon the people but should instead attend to where the most dangerous of collisions between people and projects continue to emerge. The proper response is to enact rules to prevent such destructive occurrences—nothing more. The relationship between the community and governance should be understood like a warrior and his shield: the shield has no meaning apart from the warrior in question who crafts it to suit his needs and protect himself in all he does; and though the design of the shield may affect the way in which the warrior conducts himself as he carries it and defends himself with it, we always recognize that the shield is secondary to the warrior himself.

Of course, as Oakeshott himself addresses, there may be moments that require the government to take control of the circumstances and forcefully direct its people in a specific way—but such exercises should be done sparingly and face the utmost scrutiny. Despite the good intentions an innovative government may possess in pursuing a certain end on behalf of the people, when the ruler enters the arena of action it is likely to bend the rules in its favour and crush the activities and intentions of the people that it supposedly aims at protecting. In Oakeshott's view, government should serve as little more than a guardian for its people; when the armour of law is removed and melted down to be made into the sword of innovative policy, the body politic is most likely to suffer damage.

Now, it must be acknowledged that the acceptance of Oakeshott's view that governance is a conservative endeavour may have been made obsolete with the movement away from the society of twentieth-century England in which Oakeshott was

writing. Indeed, to export Oakeshott's theory to other nations would seem, in some sense, to contradict Oakeshott's own understanding of community, tradition, and government.²⁶⁶

I believe, however, that any nation which can be said to contain independent and self-sufficient citizens should take seriously the claims made by Oakeshott. I believe—and this need not be treated as anything more than a conjectural hypothesis for now—that people who have such a view of themselves as described by Oakeshott are present throughout the entire Anglosphere, especially those nations who are or were colonies of Great Britain, equally applicable for myself as a Canadian or for a citizen of Australia. From this tradition developed this practice that allows for people to be able to make free choices for themselves, not because that leads to the best outcomes but because it lets the people in question feel connected to *their* circumstance, to *their* community. It is only through the exercise of the will that one can become himself; to be forced into a certain conception of oneself will always feel like an imposed idea of the self that came from without—making it *ipso facto* not the self and identity begins to crumble. If the government does not impose a way of life on the people, if the members of that community get to choose their own circumstances within the confines of the law, they will have a deeper sense of attachment to it due to their will being bound up with the community as such.

As a final note, I wish to suggest a perhaps tenuous but nonetheless provocative aspect of *Experience and Its Modes* in connection with Oakeshott's writing on governance. Throughout his political writings, Oakeshott is careful to ensure that freedom and choice are always recognized as integral to practice; as I read him, there is

²⁶⁶ Oakeshott, "On being conservative," 424.

something essential about volition itself in Oakeshott's view—we could even say that because volition is characteristic of practical life and practical life is supremely human, volition is a supremely human form of experience. Most notable, perhaps, is that love itself is impossible without the will; it is not possible to force love. In a perhaps throw-away excerpt from *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott cryptically remarks about love and its power to transcend our contingency:

If the separate and single self, the self as will, appears sometimes to be an illusion...it is never the philosopher, persuading us that this separate self is an abstraction, who will succeed in ridding us of this obsession; it is the lover who momentarily convinces us that it is an illusion.²⁶⁷

The peculiar aspect of the human will is that it is the very thing that must be exercised to move beyond itself to a more complete and fulfilling form of experience; as Oakeshott here indicates, it may be in loving someone freely that I come to see beyond my own temporary self. In allowing the wills of citizens to move as freely as possible, they may find what it means to move beyond themselves into deeper understandings of themselves and their community—something which binds the community together. For this reason, it may be integral to protect volition from the encroachment of other possible manners of living that could be imposed upon the will by some entity with the force and power to do so—a protection afforded, at least for us as we have come to be, through government exercising its rule as conservatively as possible.

²⁶⁷ Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, 209.

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