LUISS

Degree Program in Politics: Philosophy and Economics

Course of Liberalism, Its Critics, And Contemporary Challenges

Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism: Antagonists and Contribution to Liberal Theory

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Academic Year 2024/2025

Contents

Introduction

"Not to detect a man's style is to have missed three-quarters of the meaning of his actions and utterances"[1] Micheal Oakeshott once said. This thesis is nothing but an attempt to do just that, to present a portion of Micheal Oakeshott's argumentative fashion in the hope of unveiling an outlook of his thought. The 'style' in question, that I want to look at, is the use of human types in Oakeshott's writings.

As I shall present, Oakeshott explains much of his political philosophy through characters. These figures do not aspire to reflect any real man, but serve as devices to make tangible the passions, cultural backgrounds, and political drivers that Oakeshott seeks to comprehend. It shall be resisted the temptation to label such a practice stemming from a rhetorical choice, for the implementation of human types serves the scope of rooting in practice intellectual and moral movements that characterized the evolution of Europe "for the last five centuries or so."[2]

This thesis pursues a twofold objective. First, it aims to reconstruct Oakeshott's political thought not primarily through abstract categories, but through the prism of his human types. he rationale for this undertaking lies in its consistency with Oakeshott's enduring philosophical interest human dispositions. In this sense, his reliance on human types underscores his deep concern with individuality. Rather than subsuming human beings under impersonal doctrines, Oakeshott consistently highlights the distinctiveness of personal conduct and the concrete choices of individuals.

Second, the thesis contends that Oakeshott's philosophy is not exhausted by his critique of rationalism, as much of the secondary literature tends to suggest. Rather, Oakeshott offers a substantive and credible reformulation of conservatism. By piecing together the often dispersed insights across his writings, this study will reconstruct his conservative philosophy as a coherent and positive contribution to political theory. Oakeshott should be regarded not merely as a critic of rationalism but as a constructive

[1] Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 56.
[2] Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new and expanded edition, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990), 413.

conservative thinker in his own right. For this reason, the first chapter is devoted to the discussion of the conservative man.

The structure of the thesis reflects this dual purpose. Chapter one offers a detailed account of the conservative man, analyzing his temperament, epistemological orientation, moral outlook, and conception of political activity. The central contention is that the conservative disposition is defined above all by its regard for tradition.

Chapter two introduces two archetypal counterparts: the rationalist and the *individual manqué*. The rationalist is characterized by a systematic contempt for tradition, holding instead that human conduct can be fully generated by abstract reason. The *individual manqué*, by contrast, represents a historical byproduct of individualism—one who repudiates genuine individuality and substitutes it with collective political projects that impose a common morality. Both figures are treated by Oakeshott as negative types. They embody 'errors of the mind,' the rationalist through the deliberate rejection of tradition, and the *individual manqué* through a reactionary antagonism against individual freedom. By contrast, the conservative man, who avoids these errors, emerges as a fundamentally positive type in Oakeshott's scheme.

Having thus reconstructed Oakeshott's account of conservatism in contrast to its rationalist and collectivist adversaries, Chapter three turns to his relationship with the liberal tradition. While Oakeshott's position within liberalism remains contested, this thesis will argue that he should indeed be regarded as a contributor to it. In particular, his elaboration of the theory of civil association in *On Human Conduct* provides a systematic restatement of liberal principles, one that preserves individual liberty while avoiding materialist and purposive justifications.

1. The conservative man

In this first chapter, I examine the figure to whom Oakeshott is most sympathetic, that is the conservative man. His defining feature lies in his regard for tradition, intended not as the sum of past events, but as the reservoir of all habits and practices. While tradition originates in the past, it is present in the circumstances that shape our daily lives. For Oakeshott, all knowledge arises from tradition, and all conduct ultimately owes fidelity to it. Tradition, in this sense, forms a concrete whole in which apparent contradictions are reconciled. This, I argue, is its true substance.

Much of this chapter draws on Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics*. However, in this book he does not provide a systematic account of the conservative man, but only offers scattered observations. My goal is to assemble these into a coherent portrait of the conservative man and of Oakeshott's conservatism. The purpose of this chapter, then, is not primarily to interpret Oakeshott's thought, but to present it through the lens of a coherent conception of the conservative man.

I begin with the conservative man's disposition, understood as his temperament and inclinations. He is a moderate figure: able to acknowledge tradition, he is diffident towards rupturing change and finds contentment in familiar circumstances. Next, I consider his epistemic outlook. Oakeshott emphasizes that a conservative mode of inquiry grounded in experience and in practical repetition. I then examine the conservative man's morality. Rooted in tradition, this morality is strengthened by its flexibility, which allows adaptation while preserving identity. To this traditional morality, however, Oakeshott recommends that it is added a reflective component of self-criticism, in order to kick-off change. Finally, I discuss Oakeshott's conception of conservative politics. Politics, in his view, is a limited endeavour: its role is not to impose abstract ideals but to secure conditions in which individuals can pursue their own fulfilment. Political action follows the unfolding of tradition, guided by its intimations rather than by invention.

1.a The conservative disposition

In this section I shall present the disposition of the conservative man. Oakeshott himself uses this term, and although it may appear general and therefore imprecise, a commentator has noted that the employment of this word is consistent with Oakeshott earlier writings, in particular *Experience and its Modes*.[3] There, in an idealist fashion, he reflects on the relationship between 'theory' and 'practice,' denying that any opposition between the two concepts exist. Rather, they are held coherently in an absolute whole. Therefore, "an attitude or disposition is neither a mere intuition nor a preconceived theory of life, for both of these presuppose that very distinction between experience and reality which Oakeshott holds to be incoherent." Instead, a disposition is something in the middle—or above—which comprehends them both in a concrete ideal.[4] A conservative disposition, consequently, involves acting in a manner that integrates 'theory' and 'practice' in a distinctive way. In Oakeshott's words, it is to "be disposed to think and behave in certain manners; it is to prefer certain kinds of conduct and certain conditions of human circumstances to others; it is to be disposed to make certain kinds of choices."[5]

The central argument of this section is that the defining feature of the conservative disposition is the value attributed to tradition. This does not imply that the conservative individual's criterion of judgment rests solely on the contingent circumstances of a given situation. Rather, it reflects an acknowledgment that one's circumstances—and reality more broadly—are structured over time in continuity, manifest in what is called tradition. Furthermore, a key aspect of the conservative disposition is the recognition that tradition inherently contains sources of enjoyment; ultimately, the conservative individual exhibits an "appropriate gratefulness for what is available."[6] I will discuss the disposition of the conservative man mainly from the essay *On Being Conservative*,[7] where Oakeshott carefully describes this man.

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[3] Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).
[4] Rayner, Jeremy, "The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism: Sceptical Philosophy and Limited Politics," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 18 (1985): 317-18.
[5] "On Being Conservative," 407.
[6] *Ibid.* 408.
[7] "On Being Conservative," 407-437.

The characteristic that justifies the affinity of Oakeshott to this man is a distinct moderate temperament, for which he is reluctant to embrace sudden changes in life. Instead, the conservative man is content with what he has at the moment, taking "delight in what is present."[8] Indeed, the fact that he truly enjoys things at the present state (or, at least, tries to accommodate as best as possible) is the reason why he is reluctant to give them away in exchange for an uncertain improvement[9]. Importantly, the conservative man is not attached to things as they are out of timidity, but he positively finds worthiness in the things he has at hand. He is not 'weak' in the sense that he fears the future, but rather is 'intelligent' enough to be aware of his circumstances and to appreciate their value. For this reason, implicitly recalling Burke, Oakeshott claims that the conservative disposition "will appear more naturally in the old than in the young, not because the old are more sensitive to loss but because they are apt to be more fully aware of the resources of their world and therefore less likely to find them inadequate."[10]

Closely linked to this reluctance is the recognition that what is available to us at a given time does not originate from human or natural ingenuity, but it is passed to us in time. Here I come to discuss one of the central concepts of Oakeshott's political philosophy, that is *tradition*. Tradition is "flimsy and elusive, but it is not without identity."[11] It causes the small changes that bring the things of the past to what we have now. In other words, tradition is the reservoir of all habits and behaviours. One may note that it is in this passage that Oakeshott's vocation of philosophy of history emerges, and indeed I may argue that tradition is what links history to the present, it provides "*continuity*"[12] and "coherence" to an otherwise dead letter. Now it is clear how tradition is congenial to the conservative man: in it, he finds a sense of familiarity in the things that surround him,[13] and this familiarity is so reassuring that he would rather not renounce to it. Put simply, for Oakeshott, tradition is the living inheritance of practical experience, providing a framework of continuity that cannot be fully derived from reason or invention.

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[8] *Ibid.* 408.
[9] *Ibid.* 412.
[10] *Ibid.* 408.
[11] Oakeshott, "Political Education," in *Rationalism in Politics*, 61.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] "On Being Conservative," *ibid*.

To better understand what tradition is, it is useful to recall that Oakeshott's earlier works were heavily influenced by the idealist school of thought, and *Rationalism in Politics* is no exception. I believe that tradition, to Oakeshott, is not simply 'how things came about.' Thus, insisting that conduct should be accorded to a tradition does not mean that in practice one should first consult history and then act accordingly, 'as things have always been done.' For Oakeshott, the idealist, the most important point is that "practical experience is a unified world of ideas."[14] It is an inevitable background from which all deliberations originate, all knowledge is drawn from, and all morality is founded upon. To use a more appropriate term, tradition is a concrete whole.

Oakeshott discusses *the concept of* tradition; he is not interested in *any particular* tradition. Therefore, Hanna Pitkin is missing the point when she criticizes Oakeshott on the basis that "the preservation of tradition does depend on the objective quality of the inheritance."[15] Attachment to a tradition does not entail attributing intrinsic value to the inheritance itself. Rather, it involves acknowledging and respecting the source from which this inheritance arises, and appreciating the conditions that shape our present circumstances. Therefore, the conclusion Pitkin gets to, *id est* that tradition is defenceless if nobody feels the need to take its part, because "the tradition yields them nothing of real benefit," is wrong. Jeremy Rayner clearly sums up this idea: Oakeshott's interest is not that "we all become "traditionalists," but a description of what we actually succeed in doing in conduct."[16] In other words, the conservative man's attachment to tradition is sustained not by the inherent value of what is inherited, but by its role as the living foundation from which our present actions and circumstances emerge.

In this section, I have argued that the defining characteristic of the conservative individual lies in his attachment to tradition, understood as an organic whole and the genuine source of present circumstances. The conservative individual first recognizes this condition and, owing to his particular disposition, is generally inclined to find in it a source of contentment.

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[14] Rayner, "The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism," 320.
[15] Fenichel Pitkin, Hanna, "The Roots of Conservatism: Michael Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics," *Dissent* 20 (Fall 1973): 260.
[16] Rayner, "The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism," 320.

The conservative's attachment to tradition bears significant implications across multiple fields of conduct. Indeed, from Oakeshott's essays it is possible to distinguish a specific conservative epistemology, mode of action, and political understanding. In the following sections, I shall examine these aspects, and discuss how they result from this valuation of tradition.

1.b Epistemology of the conservative man

In this section, I will examine the epistemological foundations of the conservative disposition, as articulated in Oakeshott's seminal essay *Rationalism in Politics*.[17] Oakeshott distinguishes between two modes of knowledge: the first supports conduct by elucidating the technical aspects, while the second entails a deeper comprehension of the practice's traditional character. These modes are not only compatible but also mutually indispensable in the formation of concrete knowledge—that form of knowledge exemplified by the conservative individual, or at least that which Oakeshott prescribes for him.

The conservative man finds his knowledge in the tradition he inherits. This sort of knowledge is evident "only in use,"[18] meaning that it is discernible only in the act of performing an activity. It cannot be written down, because it is "not reflective" and is independent from the "formulated rules" that are inscribed in a manual. A seasoned carpenter may not have studied a single book about the craft, yet experience and repetition have made him a master at inlaying wood. Fittingly, an alternative name for this kind of knowledge is 'practical' knowledge. A telling example is the apprenticeship a painter takes under a mentor. The knowledge he can find in art theory books will not suffice him to become a painter himself, but observation and "continuous contact" with the master will instruct him in a "taste or connoisseurship" that he may never learn anywhere else. Practical knowledge arises through the repeated engagement in a practice, most often acquired by observing the actions of others. We now get a sense of how tradition is shared, through practice and expertise. It is evident this sort of knowledge is 'traditional' because

[17] Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics*, 5-42.
[18] *Ibid.* 12-15.

it does not spring from human reflection in a void but is passed through in custom. And, just like tradition, this sort of knowledge is hard to pinpoint, it is loose and changeable, but surely not unuseful. Oakeshott's conservative account of knowledge holds that all forms of knowing, across every field, are embedded within a tradition of conduct. Consequently, the appropriate course of action in any given circumstance is always discernible, insofar as the tradition of conduct invariably provides a response to practical questions.

Regarding technical knowledge, here it will be enough to mention that it is precisely the form of knowledge that is susceptible to formulation into fixed proposition, to which explicit reference may be made to. These are "rules, principles, directive, maxims," just like the Highway Code or a cookery book.[19] These are repositories of knowledge, but only that portion which can be codified in written form: the technical dimension of knowledge, rather than its inherited tradition. Now, Oakeshott's argument is that these two forms for knowledge—practical and technical knowledge—are not only necessary to complete knowledge, but they also are inseparable. They are "twin components of the knowledge involved in every concrete human activity"[20] and they concur equally to forming complete knowledge. Oakeshott provides the example of a doctor, which will make use of his medical knowledge in understanding what to do in a given medical situation, but it is practice that will inform how he will deal with the individual patient's medical situation. From this consideration, Oakeshott concludes that "even in the what, and above all in diagnosis, there lies already this dualism of technique and practice: there is no knowledge which is not 'know how'." Oakeshott maintains that the concrete knowledge underlying any practical activity necessarily consists of both technicalities and the coherence derived from tradition and practice.

How does the conservative man obtain this knowledge, then? I have already mentioned how observation of another one's practice, for Oakeshott, is an essential part of our own learning conduct as a tradition of behaviour. In more detail, Oakeshott explores how a conservative begins engaging in a tradition. He claims that, granted a certain 'mystery' that always accompanies how tradition works—and, in this case, how it is transmitted—acquiring a tradition of behaviour "is at once initiation into an

[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*

inheritance in which we have a life interest, and the exploration of its intimations."[21] This passage evokes the example of the apprentice, who acquires mastery of the art gradually through sustained practice and close engagement with an experienced practitioner. Education in tradition is nothing more than experiencing the contingencies of life, and discovering in them a pattern, worthy of being preserved. To such an education there is no 'short cut,' but nonetheless this education is "inevitable," because "it is impossible to engage in any activity whatever without contributing to this kind of moral education."[22]

In conclusion, Oakeshott's epistemology shows that the conservative disposition is sustained by the inseparable relation between technical and practical knowledge: the former can be codified in rules and principles, while the latter is embodied in tradition and sustained through practice. Tradition, in this sense, constitutes the medium in which knowledge is both preserved and enacted, ensuring that conduct is never detached from inherited patterns of understanding. Upon this foundation rests Oakeshott's conception of morality, which likewise appears as the product of tradition and of the habits through which knowledge is transmitted and exercised.

1.c Morality of the conservative man

In this section, I examine Oakeshott's discussion of morality and his conception of the most appropriate moral framework for the conservative individual. As with his account of knowledge, Oakeshott distinguishes between two forms of morality: 'habitual' and 'reflective.' Both elements are essential for a coherent moral outlook, as reliance on either in isolation can lead to undesirable outcomes. A traditional morality, understood as an observation of customary behaviours rather than as a prescriptive solution to specific problems, possesses the flexibility to adapt to diverse situations. Oakeshott, therefore, advocates for the integration of both dimensions, which he regards as particularly suitable for the conservative individual.

[21] "Political Education," 62.
[22] Oakeshott, "The Tower of Babel," in *Rationalism in Politics*, 469.

In the essay *The Tower of Babel*,[23] Oakeshott defines morality as "activity which may be either good or bad … conduct to which there is an alternative."[24] Moral activity is the "art" of choosing the criteria that will guide our action, even though it may not be a decision clear "consciously before the mind." Two forms of morality are distinguished by Oakeshott. The first, is a "habitual form of morality," which is acquired in practice, "by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner." Analogous to the apprentice who learns through close association with a mentor, this form of morality emphasizes the recognition of an existing tradition, within which one can situate oneself and gradually develop a personal moral understanding. Indeed, this habitual morality is the consequence of an epistemology of 'traditional' knowledge. We know that tradition is nebulous, but it is not inconsistent. Indeed, it manifests in time in a sort of *continuity*, flexible to all changes. The form of morality of following a 'tradition of behaviour' finds its stability precisely in its flexibility and "ability to suffer change without disruption."[25] A traditional morality, being an observation of manners of behaviour rather than a solution to specific problems, can adjust to any situation.

Although the morality I have described might be classified as 'traditional,' it would be mistaken to assume that Oakeshott equates this form of morality directly with the conservative individual. He recognizes that habitual morality, while significant, is fundamentally constrained by a notable limitation. Because traditional morality is based on observance and repetition of a habit, it is entirely non-reflective, "it does not amount to moral self-criticism." Traditional morality is unable to judge itself, it coherently guides in action but without a clue why or how. Therefore, it is susceptible to "degenerat[ion] into superstition," and it lacks the power to disentangle itself from the hash.[26] To avoid this consequence, Oakeshott recommends that to the morality of a tradition of behaviour we mix some elements of another form of morality, in many ways opposite to that. This is the moral activity of "*reflective application of a moral criterion*." Put simply, reflective morality functions by setting a criterion and then engaging in activities to fulfil it. Moral activity in this case will be a constant comparison of one's own action to the moral criterion. It will involve high level of self-criticism. Oakeshott notes that traditional

[23] *Ibid.* 465-87.
[24] *Ibid.* 466-68.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.* 471-74.

morality risks degenerating into superstition and therefore advocates a more robust form that incorporates self-reflection—the capacity for moral judgment. He endorses this integrated morality, which combines attachment to tradition with reflective consideration, for the conservative individual.

It is by adding a reflective component to habitual morality that we obtain a solid form of morality. It will ground activity in the continuous solidity of traditional morality, and it will "enjoy the advantages that spring from a reflective morality—the power to criticize, to reform and to explain itself, and the power to propagate itself beyond the range of the custom of a society."[27] I believe this explanation of morality is Oakeshott's favourite, and therefore the one he associates to the conservative man.

In sum, this section has demonstrated how Oakeshott constructs an account of morality for the conservative individual, stressing the importance of interplay between the habitual and reflective dimensions. Habitual morality provides continuity, stability, and adaptability through engagement with tradition, while reflective morality contributes the capacity for self-criticism and reform. By integrating these two elements, Oakeshott offers a moral framework that is both grounded and dynamic, capable of guiding action with coherence while remaining responsive to change. This synthesis captures the distinctive conservative approach to morality: a fidelity to inherited practices tempered by critical reflection, ensuring that moral activity is both rooted in tradition and capable of self-examination and development.

Having considered the moral dimension within Oakeshott's conception of conservatism, the following section will examine the ways in which this outlook informs practical human conduct. Since Oakeshott situates morality at the centre of an acknowledgment of tradition, it follows that concrete action, for the conservative individual, cannot diverge from this foundation. Indeed, in the essay *Rational Conduct*,[28] Oakeshott contends that 'rational' conduct—in the sense of 'intelligent' conduct—consists in "*faithfulness to the knowledge we have of how to conduct the specific activity we are engaged in*."[29] Particular attention will be devoted to political action, which, although not regarded by Oakeshott as a special or inherently superior activity,

[27] *Ibid.* 477.
[28] Oakeshott, "Rational Conduct," in *Rationalism in Politics*, 99-131.
[29] *Ibid.* 121-22.

nonetheless receives a detailed treatment in his thought. Crucially, the essence of political practice lies in the recognition of tradition and the effort to act in fidelity to it. In this sense, conservative politics may be understood as the pursuit of the "intimations" embedded within an inherited tradition of conduct.

1.d Politics of the conservative man

For Oakeshott, politics is a 'secondary and limited' activity, [30] which means that not only its performance follows the same procedures as any other conduct,[31] but also its goal is to allow the flourishing and the achievement of satisfaction in the other activities of life.

Being a concrete activity, an activity which privileges active endeavour over reflection or speculation, it has particular affection towards tradition, in the same ways that particular kinds of knowledge and morality do. Political activity is not to bring about innovations decided upon a principle, it is not inventing a better situation for society, but rather observing the tradition we come to experience and try to act accordingly. A conservative disposition towards political activity is necessarily the attempt of preserving a tradition of behaviour, therefore trying to preserve its consistency in time: the focus of the conservative in politics is "diffused between past, present, and future; between the old, the new, and what is to come."[32]

Two passages from *Political Education*, Oakeshott's introductory lecture to the London School of Economics, are helpful to understand what he believes politics is, and how the conservative man ought to conduct political activity. The first goes like this: "In politics … every enterprise is a consequential enterprise, the pursuit, not of a dream, or of a

[30] "On Being Conservative," 433.
[31] The validity of this statement is disputed, for there seems to be an evolution in Oakeshott's thought on the matter. There is the earlier version, in *Rationalism in Politics*, for which political activity is no different than any other activity, and the older Oakeshott in *On Human Conduct*, for whom political activity acquires a special character as "association or relationship in terms of a moral (i.e. noninstrumental) practice," where the recognized authority of law is the chief adverbial condition of individual practice (Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*, 154-64). There is no room in this project to discuss what changed from *Rationalism in Politics* to *On Human Conduct*; here may only I mention that, whether we intend politics in the earlier or later Oakeshottian sense, it is always true to say that the task of performing politics demands no *ad* hoc procedures.
[32] "Political Education," 61.

general principle, but of an intimation. What we have to do with is something less imposing than logical intimations or necessary consequences."[33] The idea that politics is a 'pursuit of intimations' is telling of the fact that tradition gives indications of how to go about in politics. A traditional approach to politics is not an inventive one, but rather the acknowledgment of contingent situation and the attempt to not disrupt its character of continuity. We now understand how politics is a limited activity. Its job is not to realize an ideal situation, but rather it is to be an impartial and moderate umpire that allows for the smooth conduct of individual operations. This should not be taken to suggest that the conservative is politically apathetic or indifferent to the sphere of politics. On the contrary, the conservative will surely engage in political discourse. Yet, this engagement is ultimately subordinated to a broader objective. Instead of pursuing radical change or ambitious projects, the conservative seeks above all to secure the most stable and orderly circumstances in which society can function. The conservative attitude in politics here is at full display. Politics should not be the way to revolutionise the present situation by imposing—believed to be—better arrangements for society, but rather "the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together."[34] I argue that by 'arrangements' Oakeshott refers to the socio-political and cultural structures that exist at a given moment. In other words, they constitute the circumstances that the conservative is expected to acknowledge and value, rather than seek to reconstruct entirely from the ground up. Politics for the conservative man is not to make 'an encounter of dreams,' but rather the attempt not to be a nightmare.

In another passage, Oakeshott is stylistically more imaginative:

> "In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter not floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friends and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion."[35]

Some critics have been left puzzled by this sceptical reading of politics,[36] unable to get their head around the fact that politics may be simply the task of 'keeping the ship afloat,' and wondering if a conservative disposition in the end consists just in this. I believe that,

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[33] *Ibid.* 57.
[34] *Ibid.* 44.
[35] *Ibid.* 60.
[36] Lessnoff, M. H., 'Michael Oakeshott: Rationalism and Civil Association' in M. H. Lessnoff, *Political Philosophers of the Twentieth Century* (London: Blackwell, 1999): 130.

from the discussion I just proposed of Oakeshottian intuition of politics, conservatism is exactly the preservation of a manner of behaviour. On a sceptical understanding of politics, the task of governing is a limited one, because political activity is not the kind of activity through which individuals may achieve satisfaction, but only the activity of creating the best circumstances for this pursuit. In this sense, Oakeshott writes: "The office [that the conservative man] attributes to government is to resolve some of the collision which this variety of beliefs and activities generates … by enforcing general rules of procedure upon all subjects alike."[37] In this sense, politics is 'not rocking the boat' primarily as the preservation of stability, that is, the minimal exercise of political action required to secure the fairest possible conditions for the pursuit of private happiness.

Another line of criticism targeted the absence of an 'appointed destination' for the boat. I believe it is useful here to restate that the limited character of political activity is due to the fact that tradition, per se, 'intimates' multiple things. For this reason, it would be inconsiderate to elect one principle and impose it to the whole society. Moreover, if one argued there was a destination to devote all our efforts to, we may ask him—as Oakeshott does—"where they got it from, and whether they imagine that 'political' activity' will come to an end with the achievement of this condition."[38]

Up to this point, it has been shown that politics, from a conservative perspective, is not about realizing ideals or remaking society, but about preserving the continuity and the stability of the 'arrangements' that are already in place. Conservative political activity, far from being apathic, is the effort of creating the best conditions under which individuals can pursue their own ends. By framing politics as the careful management of existing arrangements rather than the pursuit of ambitious projects, Oakeshott underscores that true political wisdom lies in restraint, prudence, and the defence of tradition.

For Oakeshott, politics is a continuous and open-ended activity precisely because its aim is not the resolution of specific problems. Rather, it constitutes a practical effort to recognize and sustain the coherence of tradition. It is clear, therefore, that for Oakeshott, politics is far from negligible. Nevertheless, some critics contend that Oakeshott's conception of politics amounts to an essentially passive theory, that denies politics any

[37] "On Being Conservative," 428.
[38] "Political Education," footnote 7, 60.

distinct intrinsic value. I shall discuss this critique in the version prominently elaborated by Hanna Pitkin. In short, she contends that Oakeshott reduces politics to such a marginal and restrained role that it loses its significance and potential as a site for human purpose or accomplishment.

Initially, Pitkin accepts the conception of politics as a 'conversation,' in the sense that it is a "restless activity" whose goal is not the mechanical resolution of problems of a certain sort. But, contrary to other philosophers that share this vision—*inter alia*, Aristotle and Harendt—Oakeshott's place for politics is not that of the "potential locus of human greatness."[39] The fact that for Oakeshott 'happiness' is generated in private activities, and not in the public, political sphere, adds injury to insult to the fact that political activity is assigned a very limited reach. She writes that for Oakeshott "our private activities make just as much of a contribution to the great, underlying stream of our civilization as any explicit political action," so much so that he intends "to eliminate purpose from politics altogether." Therefore, she can conclude that Oakeshott recommends "we minimize politics as much as possible—ideally we eliminate it altogether or conduct it in a nonpolitical way, like culture, language art."[40] The central idea here is that if politics is stripped both of its extensive competence and its potentiality as recipient of human realisation, then it is useless, it is effectively denied.

Before addressing the critique, it is necessary to offer a brief preliminary observation. I believe that it is inappropriate to claim that Oakeshott would *possibly* do without politics because his philosophy is in fact entirely based on 'things as they are,' not on possibilities. Political activity clearly is a reality and Oakeshott cannot argue against its existence. His theorising is necessarily practical.

I would like to disagree to this claim, and I would like to elaborate my argument in two layers. First, Oakeshott's caretaker view of politics is functional rather than utilitarian, as its purpose is to maintain the conditions in which individuals can pursue their own ends. The task of 'keeping the ship afloat' does not render politics insignificant but highlights its essential role in preventing conflict and preserving the framework for private activity. Politics, though limited, is therefore both necessary and meaningful.

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[39] Fenichel Pitkin, Hanna, "The Roots of Conservatism: Michael Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics," *Dissent* 20 (Fall 1973): 27-75.
[40] *Ibid.* 285.

First, I would like to argue against Pitkin's claim that Oakeshott's view of politics, which reserved role is a "minimal, caretaker conception of government"[41] incidentally comes to resemble the utilitarian outlook, an outlook that Oakeshott would otherwise reject. Pitkin's rationale here is that politics, devoid of any scope per se, is essentially a device to allow the enjoyment of activities, whatever they are. This interpretation also warns that Oakeshott falls into a relativistic stance, for his scepticism about 'the direction to go' means that all directions are equivalent. I believe that more than utilitarian, Oakeshott's view on politics may be regarded, with a touch of imagination, *functional*: the activity of the umpire who avoids collision is functional to the performance of activities in which *you and I* can find satisfaction. It is clear, from other essays we do not have time to discuss here, that Oakeshott is not afraid of taking a stance against the utilitarian strand of liberalism, and in favour of a form of government which is liberal, but devoid of materialistic purposes.[42] Here, I may rehearse that in *On Being Conservative* Oakeshott is clear that a traditional approach to politics does not result in a utilitarian institutional framework. Political activity is "not the management of an enterprise:" government should not guide us to a substantive purpose—be it happiness, or *utility*; rather, it should be "the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises."[43]

The second aspect of my argument builds upon this minimal but consistent role of politics. Pitkin, as I have said, claims that the job of politics being solely 'not rocking the boat' is too minimal of a task, and therefore Oakeshott's view is that politics is useless. I argue that 'keeping the ship afloat' does not mean to deny politics, but rather to free this specific kind of activity from the pursuit of any substantial goal. This captures both the core of the conservative approach to politics, which prioritizes the maintenance of stability, and the thrust of Oakeshott's last big work *On Human Conduct*, that is the idea of a non-purposive politics. I shall discuss this in more detail in chapter *3*, but even from

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[41] *Ibid.* 272.

[42] In this passage, I am referring specifically to two essays: *Contemporary British Politics* and *The Political Economy of Freedom.* In these works, Oakeshott offers a polemical engagement with the political landscape of contemporary Britain. The central thrust of his argument lies in his critique of the central-planning policies pursued by the Attlee administration, which he contrasts with his own conception of governance grounded in the 'rule of law.' While these essays are unmistakably opinionated, they are nonetheless marked by a notable degree of philosophical rigour, such that Oakeshott cannot be dismissed as merely advancing personal views.

[43] "On Being Conservative," 429.

the essays we now have at hand it is clear that Oakeshott's intention for political activity is 'limited,' but nonetheless important. The activity of an umpire, that directs traffic to avoid conflict, is essential to enable the pursuit of private happiness. And this is no small feat: oftentimes, the game can't be played without a referee.

In sum, the response to Pitkin's critique shows that Oakeshott's conservative conception of politics, though limited and non-purposive, is neither insignificant nor utilitarian. By understanding political activity as the careful management of existing arrangements and the preservation of stability, we see that politics plays an essential role in creating the conditions in which individuals can pursue their own ends. Far from being denied or relegated to a passive role, conservative politics is a practical effort to maintain continuity, prevent conflict, and sustain the coherence of tradition. This perspective not only refutes the charge of political marginality but also highlights the distinctive achievement of conservative thought: recognizing the indispensable yet restrained value of political activity.

Another recurrent critique directed at Oakeshott's traditionalist conception of politics concerns its alleged incapacity to evaluate its own circumstances, thereby reducing it to a passive acceptance of the status quo. The central force of this critique of Oakeshott's conception of conservative politics lies in the claim that it amounts to little more than a passive acceptance of existing circumstances, since it lacks the normative resources to evaluate the worth or legitimacy of a given tradition.

This line of argument is advanced, among others, by M. H. Lessnoff, who contends that Oakeshott's framework can endorse, *exempli gratia*, liberalism only in contexts where a liberal tradition already exists—such as in the United Kingdom. By contrast, in societies such as Russia or China, where liberalism represents a countercultural current rather than a dominant inheritance, Oakeshott's theory would be unable to promote it, since it falls outside the established tradition.[44] The critique thus suggests that a politics rooted in tradition risks degenerating into mere historical determinism, in which the trajectory of the past unavoidably dictates the shape of the future. Lessnoff's critique maintains that Oakeshott's account provides no substantive alternative to prevailing circumstances. For instance, in the Russian context—where

[44] Lessnoff, "Rationalism and Civil Association," 130-31

liberalism has no established presence—Oakeshott's framework offers no remedy, since advocating for liberalism in such a setting would require an external imposition upon the existing tradition, something his theory explicitly precludes. Moreover, Lessnoff's critique contends that Oakeshott's theory lacks the critical capacity to judge the worth of a tradition, as it remains confined with an appreciation of the boundaries of the given inherited practices. Thus, it results that Oakeshott's theory is not self-sufficient. To avoid the mistake of "accept[ing] all traditions as self-validating"[45] it must adopt an "external criterion" of judgement.

To this criticism, I contend that it stems from a misunderstanding of Oakeshott's concept of tradition. Tradition cannot be reduced to a set of practices, which in a present situation may be present or not but refers more generally to the entirety of practices that compose activity in a given society. The concrete whole that is tradition comprises many instances of practice, often contradictory, and here it is important to remember that the 'method' that tradition requires is *faithfulness* to such practices. Oakeshott's conservatism does not reject political innovation. However, it constrains it by stipulating that any innovation represents a continuation of, rather than a rupture with, tradition.

This point is clearly put by Roy Tseng: "to converse with tradition is not to be satisfied with the status quo, it is to understand ourselves by making more coherent the given situation which we inhabit. In the case of politics, we have seen that the coherence of practical truth is freedom, insofar as it is the "faithfulness" to our free will that will tell us what we ought to do an what we ought not to do in the actual circumstances."[46] Paul Franco also insisted on this: "[Oakeshott's] point is not that the criticism of current arrangements is impossible, but only that such criticism must come from within a tradition itself. No matter how bad things are, there is no remedy outside the resources of a tradition of behavior."[47] Oakeshott himself clarified this point by contending that Europe's two most momentous revolutions—the French Revolution and the Soviet Revolution, each representing profound critiques of tradition—did not originate *ex nihilo* or from external sources, but were themselves grounded in, and made possible by, the very traditions they

[45] *Ibid.*
[46] Tseng, Roy, *The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of the Enlightenment* (Imprint Academic, 2003): 159.
[47] Franco, Paul, *The Political Philosophy of Micheal Oakeshott* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990): 137.

sought to challenge: "The Russian Revolution … was not the implementation of an abstract design worked out by Lenin and others in Switzerland: it was a modification of *Russian* circumstances. And the French Revolution was far more closely connected with the *ancient régime* than with Locke or America."[48]

In this respect, Oakeshott's conception of conservative politics reveals itself not as a passive acquiescence to the status quo, but as a deliberate limitation of the role of politics. Politics, for Oakeshott, is not the arena for the pursuit of abstract ideals or the wholesale reconstruction of society, but a practice of attending faithfully to the coherence of inherited traditions. Far from rendering politics inert, this restraint situates it within the concrete circumstances of a way of life, where criticism and innovation are possible only as continuations of practices already present. Thus, the modest scope Oakeshott assigns to politics should not be read as a deficiency, but rather as the distinctive strength of a conservative disposition.

In this chapter we have examined the conservative individual, who derives his coherence from a resolute faithfulness to tradition, conceived as the cumulative reservoir of habits and practices. His appreciation for tradition underpins his capacity to find circumstances worthy of enjoyment, an appreciation grounded in familiarity. His conduct is informed by a form of knowledge that integrates both technical awareness and the experiential insight that emerges through repeated practice. His morality likewise rests upon the recognition of tradition as a source of guidance. In politics, he neither pursues abstract ideals nor denies the possibility of change, but carefully attends to the intimations of tradition, ensuring continuity while allowing for prudent adaptation. What defines him, therefore, is not passivity but an intelligent awareness of the conditions that sustain human flourishing.

This constitutes the substance of Oakeshott's positive portrayal of the conservative disposition. The next chapter, by contrast, turns to its theoretical counterpart, that is the rational man. As will be shown, the rationalist's outlook rests upon the conviction that only knowledge reducible to certain formulae is of value, leading him to

[48] "Political Education," footnote 6, 59.

dismiss traditional knowledge as mere 'prejudice.' This disposition, as we shall see, shapes the very character of the rationalist, and carries far-reaching implications.

In addition to the rationalist, the following chapter will examine another disposition, namely that of anti-individualism. The discussion will demonstrate the extent to which the rationalist and anti-individualist orientations exhibit a series of shared tendencies. Both will be considered in contrast to the conservative disposition, which serves as the standard against which the errors of the former are revealed and the soundness of the latter affirmed.

2. Counterparts to conservatism: the rational man and the individual manqué

In this second chapter, after having outlined the positive characterisation Oakeshott attributes to the conservative disposition, I now turn to the contrasting figures of the rational man and the individual *manqué*. My contention is that by examining these alternative human types, the distinctive features of the conservative outlook will emerge with greater clarity. Both, indeed, are presented as negative figures, whose dispositions are marked by fundamental errors and detrimental tendencies from which the conservative man remains exempt. Oakeshott's analysis is consistently structured around comparisons between the conservative man and these contrasting types, and this chapter will follow the same approach.

I will begin with the rational man, whose disposition Oakeshott analyses with a degree of care comparable to his treatment of the conservative. The defining trait of the rational man lies in his conviction that the human mind functions as an infallible instrument for attaining truth, and that truth itself is reducible to technical components. According to Oakeshott, this perspective involves a fundamental 'error of the mind.' This is the elevation of technical knowledge as the sole legitimate form of knowledge, thereby disregarding the value inherent in traditional or practical epistemology. This rationalist disposition manifests across various domains—epistemology, moral conduct, and political activity—each of which bears the consequences of this epistemic error.

Then, I will describe the figure of the individual *manqué*, whom Oakeshott presents in sharp opposition to the individualist disposition, both historically and theoretically. The individual *manqué* represents, in essence, the historical by-product of a failure to embrace the emerging *ethos* of individualism. His character is defined not positively, but by antagonism toward the individual. Although at first glance this figure may appear tangential to the rationalist–conservative debate, I argue that he in fact exhibits affinities with the rationalist disposition, particularly in his contrast with the conservative man.

2.a The rationalist

Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is very vast, and its success has been such that it sometimes overshadows his positive affirmation of conservatism. I will begin with the description of the rationalist disposition, then I look at the foundational aspects that characterise him, and I will finish with how the rationalist conceives of politics. In the course of this discussion, I will continuously recall the characteristics of the conservative man I have laid out in the previous chapter. The reason for this is that, in Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics* essays, the discussion of the rationalist and the conservative man are complementary and mutually clarifying. Accordingly, the continual comparison with conservatism throughout the discussion of rationalism will function both as a backdrop for elucidating the rationalist disposition and as a mirror that highlights the distinctive character of the conservative outlook.

2.aa The rationalist disposition

The rationalist disposition, as articulated in *Rationalism in Politics*, is characterized by a thorough rejection of tradition in favour of "independence of mind on all occasion." [49] For the rationalist, adherence to tradition is a burdensome experience, since tradition is perceived as an 'encumbrance,' a constraint upon the exercise of his otherwise autonomous thought. Consequently, he seeks to make He seeks to eliminate all inherited knowledge, to reduce it to a *tabula rasa*, and to begin 'afresh' from a mind conceived as empty and unencumbered. Past knowledge is, for him, invariably dismisses as 'prejudice,' in order to reconstruct it from principles born and approved through a strictly logical process. Anything less rigorous than this is false, knowledge stained by bias. As Oakeshott observes, "[the rationalist's] mind has no atmosphere, no changes of season and temperature; his intellectual processes, so far as possible, are insulated from all external influence and go on in the void … he strives to live each day as if it were his first, and he believes that to form a habit is to fail."

[49] For the rest of the paragraph, cf. "Rationalism in Politics," 6-8.

If one ever doubted whether the antagonism between the rationalist and the conservative is a genuine opposition or merely a rhetorical construction, it is sufficient to recall several details that Oakeshott himself emphasizes. The rationalist, he observes, is "sceptical, because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls his 'reason';" and with regard to attachment to existing things, "to the Rationalist, nothing is of mere value because it exists … familiarity has no worth, and nothing is to be left standing for want of scrutiny." Oakeshott's precise choice of words here constitutes, I believe, a deliberate contraposition to the conservative's disposition: the latter's attachment to habits of behaviour and the sense of reassurance he finds in the continuity of tradition.

Having shown the rationalist's emphatic rejection of tradition, I can now identify a central criticism that Oakeshott levels against him. I have argued that the conservative disposition is genuinely 'intelligent,' in the etymological sense of *discerning reality*—and it is for this reason that he can come to peaceful terms with his circumstances. By contrast, the rationalist overlooks essential dimensions of reality in his understanding of the world. He deliberately devalues tradition. Consequently, Oakeshott regards the rationalist as lacking wisdom and full awareness of the circumstances; he is, in this etymological sense, not 'intelligent.'

Within this framework, 'reason' emerges as the highest value. Its unrestricted capacity to interrogate every circumstance provides the rationalist with a sense of 'optimism,' grounded in the conviction that rational procedures will eventually yield definitive answers. Importantly, however, 'reason' per se is not the distinctive hallmark of Oakeshott's rationalist. Rationalism is not criticised for its affiliation to the work of mind, but rather for a crucial misunderstanding that such a theory implies, that 'reason,' conceived primarily as technique, is capable of guiding human conduct alone. Oakeshott, by contrast, proposes a more nuanced and constructive understanding of 'rationality,' in which the faculty of reason is exercised in a manner that avoids this reduction. At its core, the rationalist's error derives from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge. It is, in essence, an epistemological mistake.[50]

[50] Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Micheal Oakeshott*: 121-22.

2.ab Epistemology of the rational man

Just like for the conservative, the rationalist disposition finds its spring in a certain understanding of knowledge. The rational man, in particular, has a special preference for 'technical' knowledge. Technical knowledge is the sort of knowledge that is susceptible to formulation. In other words, "it is possible to write down in a book."[51] The maxims and the principles of a technique are possible to contain in the lines of a page. Oakeshott argues that it is this "character of being susceptible of precise formulation gives to technical knowledge at least the appearance of certainty." Knowledge of technique, being contained in the form of a finite formulation, gives the impression of being self-complete, of being a sufficient form of knowledge to orient action. The rationalist man, impatient with the elusiveness of tradition, finds in technique a readily available substitute, so much that he convinces himself he can do without practical knowledge altogether: "for him, [it] is knowledge which does not require to look beyond itself for its certainty." He assumes that knowledge ought to yield immediate certainty rather than foster deeper understanding. Now, Oakeshott believes that the mistake of the rational man is precisely this belief: that "there is no knowledge which is not practical knowledge." The rationalist is so captivated by the apparent certainty he can get from technique that he forgets that to complete knowledge an education in a tradition of behaviour is just as necessary as the reading of a book.

To believe that the pursuit of technical knowledge alone can obtain concrete understanding is to subscribe to a myth. Technique, as discussed in chapter *1*, is only part of complete knowledge. In a book, that is the most fitting form that technical knowledge can take, one may find only a portion of the whole knowledge, specifically that which can be rendered into written form. Should one assume this to be sufficient, he will miss out on half of the picture, for the 'taste' and the 'mastery' of a practice cannot be transmitted but by habituation and experience. This limitation is clear from the beginning, when a book is written. The author may be a connoisseur of the subject, yet a book can convey only its technique, not his profound appreciation. Oakeshott explains this through the example of a religious man: "St. François de Sales was a devout man, but when he

[51] "Rationalism in Politics," 14-6.

writes it is about the technique of piety."[52] The virtue of piety that the Saint expresses in practice cannot be formulated in a book. In it, it only fits the technical aspect.

The false belief of the sovereignty of technique amounts to an 'error of the mind,' because the mind is conceived by the rationalist as "somehow different from and superior to its contents, being the faculty or instrument which sorts the true from the false among the propositions it entertains"[53] or a "receptacle, empty or otherwise"[54] which collects data from reality and elaborates them. But this is not true. Oakeshott claims that mind exists only in use, and its functioning is not that of an "apparatus for thinking,"[55] precedent to concrete activity. Instead, the mind is correspondent with activity. It is its offspring, following from the denial of a separation of theoretical and practical activity already discussed. An example that Oakeshott uses may be illuminating. In art, there is not a division between reflection and subsequent performance, which had to be the translation into practice of a speculative effort: "what the poet says and what he wants to say are not two things, the one succeeding and embodying the other, they are the same thing; he does not know what he wants to say until he has said it."[56] This quotation is significant because it illustrates how the mind engages simultaneously in the intellectual activity of composing a poem and in the practical act of inscribing it. Such a view challenges the conception of a strict separation between theory and practice, whereby the mind is thought to operate exclusively in the former.

A central question emerges from this discussion: what is the origin of this 'error of the mind?' Both commentators and Oakeshott himself have reflected upon this issue, and two explanations appear especially plausible. The first explanation for this epistemological confusion lies in the recurring misinterpretation of the idealist theme. This error consists in the mistaken belief that a categorical distinction can be drawn between 'theory' and 'practice,' or the idea that one thing is knowledge, and another is action. From this perspective, knowledge is conceived as something idle and detached. The idea that epistemic activity might occur *in the course of* action is dismissed as inconceivable. Yet

[52] *Ibid.* footnote 8, 14.
[53] Watkins, "Political Tradition and Political Theory," 328.
[54] Rayner, "The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism," 319.
[55] "Rational Conduct," 109.
[56] "The Tower of Babel." 479.

this is precisely the claim Oakeshott advances. To fail to acknowledge the idealist reconciliation of 'theory' and 'practice' in the concrete whole of 'conduct' is, therefore, to overlook this fundamental insight and to commit a fallacy. Franco, commenting on this point, emphasizes that the rational individual becomes the victim of an "illusion," undergoing—whether consciously or not—a negative "process of neglect and abstraction."[57]

The second explanation, provided by Oakeshott in *Rationalism in Politics*, situates the issue within a historical context. He argues that the emergence of modern rationalism can first be traced to the intellectual efforts of Francis Bacon and René Descartes. In the early seventeenth century, as Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, individuals—in themselves a novelty, as I shall discuss in the next section—were confronted with the recognition that, on the one hand, knowledge was advancing rapidly, liberated from the constraints of the past, while on the other, "it appeared that something of supreme importance was lacking." [58] What seemed absent was precisely a "consciously formulated technique of research, an art of interpretation, a method whose rules had been written down." European intellectuals consequently undertook the task of devising such a method, most notably in Bacon's *Novum Organum* and Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*, both aiming to establish a new theory of knowledge. This development constitutes the first historical manifestation of the rationalist disposition. Oakeshott concludes this argument by conceding that these early intellectuals were sufficiently honest to acknowledge doubts regarding the feasibility of a perfectly mechanical method of knowledge. Their successors, however, did not preserve this cautiousness; instead, they embraced the theory unreservedly, such that "with every step it has taken away from the true sources of inspiration [becoming] cruder and more vulgar." Tseng is perspicacious in noting that Oakeshott successfully overcomes this shortcoming of the Enlightenment era; he writes: "Oakeshott transcends the Enlightenment contrast between "Reason and Tradition" by maintaining that reason always function within traditions."[59]

To sum up, the rationalist 'error of the mind' consists in a misconception of its operations. According to Oakeshott, mental activity is marked by a fundamental unity that intrinsically links theoretical reflection and practical engagement.

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[57] Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Micheal Oakeshott*: 124.
[58] "Rationalism in Politics," 17-25.
[59] Tseng, *The Sceptical Idealist*: 155.

2.ac Conduct of the rational man

It is notable that Oakeshott's critique of rationalist epistemology is not based on its potentially undesirable consequences. In reality, the epistemic system of the rationalist is impossible. It is just not how the mind works. The detrimental effects of a flawed rationalist epistemology become apparent when it is used to guide practical activity. The following discussion will examine the difficulties that arise when an untenable theory of knowledge is applied in practice.

The rationalist epistemology is thoroughly described by Oakeshott in the essay *Rational Conduct*. There, rational conduct is clearly defined as "behaviour *deliberately* directed to the achievement of a *formulated* purpose and is governed solely by that purpose."[60] Because the mind of the rational man is composed of autonomous ideas, he believes that in conduct his attention shall simply be devoted to the fulfilment of these ideas.

Moreover, the contingencies of life provide no assistance in the course of practical activity, since, for the rationalist, the steps to be taken are already inscribed within the idea itself. Oakeshott illustrates this with his well-known example of the bloomers, a garment designed in Victorian England for women for the act of propelling a bicycle.[61] This example is illuminating, for it shows how the designers pursued a single aim—to create trousers that women could use when riding a bicycle—and the result was, in their eyes, entirely 'rational.' Their process of design was conducted in abstraction, apparently unimpeded by the constraints of reality. But all of this, Oakeshott argues, is a mistake, for it presupposes that rational conduct is one where "its end hav[e] been specifically determined in advance and in respect of its achieving that end to the exclusion of all others."[62] Such a conduct, as the epistemology that informs it, is "impossible," because "it is the activity itself which defines the questions as well as the manner in which they are answered."[63] The process of premeditating an end to conduct and then working to live up to it is, for Oakeshott, a misrepresentation of how human conduct works. This logical correction is shown in the explanation that Oakeshott gives to the tale of the bloomers. If

[60] "Rational Conduct," 103.
[61] *Ibid.* 101-2.
[62] *Ibid.* 110-11.
[63] *Ibid.* 117-18.

bloomers were really designed in a void, free of any external consideration, then why did the designers stop at the ankle and did not go up to create shorts? The answer is not that they failed to act 'rationally,' but rather that their process of creation never actually occurred in the manner they supposed. In designing the bloomers, they inevitably respected historical and cultural circumstances: the bloomers represented the most suitable form of women's trousers for cycling, given the fashion of the time, which prohibited women from wearing shorts. As Oakeshott explains, the real question they succeeded in answering was not 'what is the best form of women's dress for propelling a bicycle,' but rather, "What garment is best adapted to the activity of propelling a bicycle and of being suitable, all things considered, for an English girl to be seen in when riding a bicycle in 1880?"[64] Oakeshott here brilliantly exposes the rationalist assumption that action can occur independently of the constraints imposed by circumstances. In reality, such a mode of action is impossible, since the operations of the mind ensure that activity is always conducted 'all things considered.'

Here we return to a point already posited in chapter *1*: 'rational' conduct, for Oakeshott, does not consist in the pursuit of abstract principles or fixed ends, but rather in *faithfulness* to an inherited tradition of behaviour. Such a tradition intimates the modalities of conduct, offering tacit guidance rather than explicit rules, and is continually reaffirmed each time it is 'consulted.'[65] Importantly, this 'rationality' makes continuous reference to reality, contrary to the erroneous 'rationality' which whole consistency was in an abstraction to concrete conditions. Recall again Oakeshott's example of the bloomers: their design was 'rational' because it respected reality, namely the fashion codes of the time.

Commentators have raised doubts as to whether Oakeshott's aim is merely to persuade us of the undesirability of rationalism, or instead to demonstrate the impossibility of such an approach.[66] From the discussion I have presented, I contend that it is the latter. Oakeshott argues that rational conduct, conceived in this manner, is in fact impossible. Thus, even if the rationalist believes himself to be acting in a 'rational' way,

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[64] Italics mine
[65] Franco, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*: 126.
[66] Pitkin claims that "it seems that he cannot decide whether the Rationalism he opposes is impossible, so that we in fact cannot act Rationalistically in politics, morals, education; or merely undesirable, so that there is a real danger that we might do so" (Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 248).

this is in fact not the case. He does not, in practice, behave as he imagines. This raises a further question: what, then, becomes of the rationalist disposition? If the rational man cannot truly be a rationalist, what does his temperament really consist in? Oakeshott does not outline extensively the consequences of such a disposition, but he offers certain insights that we can draw out. Most importantly, this "corruption of the mind"[67] leads inevitably to confused and incoherent conduct. Corruption is here intended as a misinterpretation of the mind's nature. As Oakeshott observes, "his knowledge will never be more than half-knowledge, and consequently he will never be more than half-right," such that his actions are necessarily marked by the guidance of a mistaken mind. In my view, action prescribed by an impossible theory of the mind is dangerous, for one can never be fully aware of the grounds of one's conduct. The product of this is thus a manner of conduct. Such conduct is unpredictable, because it is inconsistent with underlying motives, and lends itself to manipulation. The rational man cannot in practice act in the way his theory prescribes. Indeed, should he attempt to explain himself, he would ultimately be unable to provide adequate justifications. Moreover, if I may recall the idealist unity of theory to practice, it is evident that from an inconsistent theory naturally flows an inconsistent manner of behaviour.

At one point, in the *Tower of Babel*, Oakeshott also suggests that believing that rational conduct functions in this way can have even more disastrous consequences. He argues that a morality founded on the application of moral ideals implies that concrete action becomes subordinate to the preoccupation with adhering to the ideal: "there will be a resistance to the urgency of action; it will appear more important to have the right moral ideal, than to act."[68] As a result, the rationalist's action is paralyzed, caught in a prior, never-ending cycle of moral scrutiny. This demonstrates how an overreliance on abstract ideals can undermine practical efficacy, leaving action perpetually suspended.

In sum, Oakeshott shows that rationalist epistemology is fundamentally incompatible with the way the human mind operates. By treating action as the execution of pre-formulated ends, detached from circumstance and tradition, rationalist conduct becomes impossible, leading to confused and inconsistent behaviour. Overreliance on abstract

[67] "Rationalism in Politics," 35-42.
[68] "The Tower of Babel," 473-76.

ideals can further paralyze action, subordinating practical decision-making to endless theoretical scrutiny. True rationality, Oakeshott argues, lies in fidelity to tradition and context-sensitive engagement with reality.

2.ad Politics of the rational man

Political activity, given its inherently delicate and compromise-oriented character, might be considered a domain of limited interest to the rationalist, who lacks patience for action that is uncertain or indirect. Yet, Oakeshott observes that 'rationalism in politics' is a phenomenon of continually increasing significance. He writes that "of all words, the world of politics might seem the least amenable to rationalist treatment—politics, always so deeply veined with both the traditional, the circumstantial and the transitory … [However], if we except religion, the greatest apparent victories of Rationalism have been in politics."[69]

Oakeshott repeatedly emphasizes that European politics has increasingly been dominated by the rational man, whereas the conservative disposition is today "far from being notably strong." [70] What, then, characterizes the rationalist style of politics? Primarily, since the rational man cannot bear to act accordingly to what a tradition recommends, rationalist politics is necessarily ideological politics. Oakeshott defines ideology as "the formalized abridgement of the supposed substratum of rational truth contained in the tradition."[71] In this sense, an ideology represents an attempt to replicate the idealist unity of theory and practice. But this attempt ultimately translates to a different thing than behaviour: instead of a coherent practical tradition, it is a universal principle. Ideology, in Oakeshott's account, represents only one dimension of political activity, specifically, its 'technique.' In continuity with the preceding discussion, ideology is frequently formulated in a book. This written 'crib,'—as Oakeshott mockingly describes it—appears to offer an ideal solution for the inexperienced politician eager for ready-made guidance in the conduct of political affairs. In Oakeshott's own words, it is a "political training in default of a political education, a technique for the ruler who had no

[69] "Rationalism in Politics," 7-8.
[70] "On Being Conservative," 413.
[71] "Rationalism in Politics," 9.

tradition."[72] Oakeshott cites several notable examples of such 'cribs,' including Machiavelli's *Prince*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, and the writings of Marx and Engels. Each of these works, he argues, illustrates how philosophical ideas came to be misinterpreted as universal principles to be implemented irrespective of circumstance.

If politics is the pursuit of an ideology, the rational man will devote his energies to approximate reality to his imagination. The scope of politics for the rational man is therefore broader than that of the conservative, for whom politics consists primarily of 'not rocking the boat.' For the rational man, politics is an energic endeavour aimed at problem-solving, and his passionate—yet confused—temperament leads him to address the "felt need."[73] Whenever the rationalist is faced with an intricate situation, he senses a problem to be solved, and he understands that his satisfaction depends on it.[74] Although the rational man may not fully comprehend these problems, he nonetheless invests his full energies in addressing them. Pitkin correctly observes that "the politics of the felt need … makes no allowance for needs existing but not yet felt, or not yet articulated, or not yet organized, … or for goals that transcend need."[75] The rational man's confidence in an infallible principle—his ideology—provides sufficient assurance to embark on this adventure, certain in the expectation that, in the end, his sentiment will be satisfied.[76] This illustrates how the political project aligns with distinct expectations for the conservative and the rational man. The former, as already discussed, has a prudent approach towards politics, and only asks that it provides for the stability necessary to pursue individual satisfactions. The latter, instead, sees in politics a path to realisation, a practice able to solve all problems. In other words, if for the conservative man politics is a 'limited activity' aimed at avoiding collisions, for the rationalist it is an "encounter of dreams"[77] properly.

In pursuing these lofty goals, the rational man approaches political activity in the same manner he approaches any other task. He first establishes a universal principle and then endeavours to conform reality to it. As Oakeshott writes, "A political ideology …

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[72] *Ibid.* 29-31.
[73] *Ibid.* 9
[74] Some commentators interpret the 'felt need' as the government's urgency to take control in a perceived crisis. In other words, it is the style of central planning. (Franco, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*: 141; Tseng, *The Sceptical Idealist*: 163).
[75] Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism," 257.
[76] Himmelfarb, "The Conservative Imagination," 409.
[77] "On Being Conservative," 426.

supplies in advance of the activity of attending to the arrangements of a society a formulated end to be pursued, and in so doing it provides a means of distinguishing between those desires which ought to be encouraged and those which ought to be suppressed and redirected."[78] This method, in stark contrast to the conservative's careful engagement with the nuanced lessons of tradition, is described by Oakeshott as the "assimilation of politics to engineering,"[79] suggesting that ideological politics reduces political activity to a series of mechanical tasks.

However, this approach—impossible even in other spheres of activity—is similarly misleading in politics. Just as it is erroneous to believe that a rational end can be set in advance and pursued unimpeded, so too does the premeditation of an ideological goal constitute a fundamental 'error of the mind.' Oakeshott writes: "If, however, we consider more closely the character of a political ideology, we find at once that this supposition is falsified [that it can be premeditated and it can guide political action]. So far from a political ideology being the quasi-divine parent of political activity, it turns out to be its earthly stepchild."[80] Indeed, a political ideology—often transmitted as a formulated technique in the form of a book—can never serve as the true source of political activity. At most, it represents a preposterous attempt to codify an approach to certain problems. Two points must be emphasized: first, written text contains only what can be actually written down, and thus ideology should never be equated with concrete knowledge. Second, as Oakeshott concisely puts it, "political activity comes first and a political ideology follows after."[81]

In conclusion, Oakeshott demonstrates that rationalism in politics, by relying on abstract principles in the form of ideology, fundamentally misrepresents the nature of political activity. While the rationalist seeks to shape reality according to universal principles, this approach inevitably produces mechanical, confused, and ultimately unattainable outcomes. Politics, by contrast, is not about 'solving problems' in abstraction, but about responding to circumstances in context, guided by inherited practices and sustained

[78] "Political Education," 48.
[79] "Rationalism in Politics," 9.
[80] "Political Education," 51.
[81] Oakeshott actually concedes that a political ideology may be useful insofar as it "gives sharpness of outline and precision to a political tradition" ("Political Education," 55), but only as a reflective supplement to political activity.

engagement with tradition. Consequently, the conservative and rationalist temperaments approach political life with profoundly different expectations and methods.

Before addressing the *individual manqué,* it is useful to mention here two critiques to this account of rationalism. Engaging with these critiques is valuable as it provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between rationalism and tradition. In particular, the central insight to be drawn from this discussion is that the emergence of activity from an inherited tradition does not imply anything more than its necessity. The mistake of the rationalist lies precisely in the failure to understand this.

The first, by J. W. N. Watkins, maintains that Oakeshott fails to "*evaluate*[] the roles of reason and tradition in politics in the light of a higher order, reasoned, political philosophy," and that his rejection of ideology suggests "there can ever be any real novelty or originality in speculative thought." [82] I would like to respond to this by noting that Oakeshott does not rebuke innovation, but he affirms that it must come from a traditional manner of behaving. Oakeshott elucidates this point through the example of the scientist, whose innovations do not originate from an independent impulse but are embedded "in an idiom or tradition of activity," such that "a man who is not already a scientist cannot even formulate a scientific problem."[83] Thus, while the scientist contributes genuine innovation, this creative activity is enabled by an existing tradition rather than arising from autonomous initiative.

The second critique, advanced by M. H. Lessnoff, introduces the idea of a *rationalist tradition,* claiming that rationalism has developed over time so that it has become a tradition in itself.[84] This point supposedly puts Oakeshott's argument in check, for the object of his critique would simultaneously be the thing that is most valuable to him—tradition. However, Oakeshott's critique is not that rationalism emerged from the void, in a 'rationalist way,' but rather that it conceives of knowledge as arising from a void, independently directing action.

[82] Watkins, "Political Tradition and Political Theory," 334.
[83] "Rational Conduct," 120.
[84] Lessnoff, "Rationalism and Civil Association," 128.

2.b The individual manqué

Alongside the figure of the rationalist, Oakeshott also directs our attention to another human type, namely the individual *manqué,* whose defining characteristics I shall now outline, and contrast with the character of the conservative man and the rationalist. I contend that the defining feature of the individual *manqué* lies in his thorough antagonism toward the individualistic disposition. Both in the realm of morality and in that of politics, his orientation emerges not from an independent standpoint but as a deliberate reaction against the principles of individualism.

Before delving in the discussion, it is worth noting that this figure may initially appear somewhat out of place within the context of *Rationalism in Politics,* because, as I will try to show, its playing field is different that the conservatism-rationalism antithesis. Nevertheless, it constitutes a coherent and essential element of Oakeshott's broader philosophy, especially in *On Human Conduct*. Accordingly, it is appropriate for this thesis to examine this human type. In reality, there are significant points of contact that align the *individual manqué* with the rational man, and these will be examined in what follows. It will also become clear that, in Oakeshott's account, the *individual manqué* emerges as a negative figure, whose behavioral weaknesses may be fruitfully compared to those of the conservative man. This comparison, too, will be addressed.

A second premise concerns the developmental aspect of the *individual manqué*. Oakeshott presents this figure as an evolving character, using different names for it throughout his work. For the sake of consistency, however, I will use the term 'individual *manqué*' exclusively.

2.ba Historical emergence of the individual disposition

The tale of the individual *manqué* is told in *The Masses in Representative Democracy*,[85] an essay in which Oakeshott traces the earliest manifestations of this disposition. Significantly, however, the essay does not commence with a direct analysis of the *manqué* itself, but rather with an exploration of its antithetical counterpart: the concept of

[85] Oakeshott, "The Masses in Representative Democracy," in *Rationalism in Politics*: 363-83.

individualism. Oakeshott locates the origins of individualism in Europe during the transitional centuries between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.[86] In these years, sparsely across Europe, but altogether as a diffused phenomenon, the communal ties that had characterized society began to wane. In its place, the people emerged with a novel self-consciousness: the realization that happiness was not necessarily dependent on the fulfilment of a role in society, or on the contribution to the common enterprise.[87] Instead, "men examined themselves and were not dismayed by their own want of perfection." A new disposition was thus emerging—one in which the pursuit of private satisfaction was no longer a cause of shame. Upon closer analysis, it is evident that the profound point Oakeshott wishes to make here is that individualism is a historical achievement rather than an innate human condition,[88] *contra* a handful of theorists of natural law and Enlightenment. Individualism, in his account, does not constitute a universal principle—such as the rationalist might contend—but rather a disposition that emerged in historical practice and consolidated into a traditional pattern of conduct. The historical character of individualism is underscored in a particularly striking passage: prior to the fourteenth century, "individual human character was rarely observed because it was not there to be observed."

The magnitude of this transformation cannot be overstated. Indeed, Oakeshott regards the emergence of individualism as the most significant achievement of modern Europe, surpassing, in his view, the more commonly cited accession of the masses to political power.[89] As will become clear, Oakeshott interprets this latter development in tragic terms. The rise of individualism reshaped all aspects of human life, most notably in the intellectual fields of ethics and metaphysics, and in politics. Regarding philosophical thought, Oakeshott limits his contribution by mentioning Hobbes and Kant as key advocates of a morality designed to safeguard the individual sphere. But it was the way the 'office of government' is understood that underwent the most radical transformation. Oakeshott contends that once the individual came to recognize himself,

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[86] "The Masses," 365-70.
[87] While a full discussion of individualism falls beyond the scope of this work, it should be noted that Oakeshott's notion does not refer to a fully developed, universal form of individualism, but rather to the more limited disposition to seek happiness in one's own activities, in line with the Oakeshottian conservative outlook.
[88] Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 108.
[89] Franco, *ibid.*

he sought to establish political institutions that advanced the peculiar interests of his individual status. To this end, he required "an instrument of government capable of transforming the interests of individuality into rights and duties,"[90] and one that was also capable of safeguarding those rights and duties. This arrangement corresponds to what is generally described as 'modern representative democracy,' whose most fully developed expression, according to Oakeshott, was realized in the British parliamentary system of government.[91]

Now it is necessary that I make a point of particular significance for the present thesis. Crucially, Oakeshott contends that representative democracy emerged "upon *exploring the intimations* of individuality."[92] This observation illustrates how, in his view, the figure of the individual is faithful to a concrete tradition in his exercise of political activity. Indeed, his manner of action is exactly the one of the conservative man, which is to say the pursuit of what a tradition intimates.

2.bb The opposite reaction: from the individual manqué to the mass man

At the same time that the individualist disposition was flourishing, there was a segment of the population that did not welcome this development as an improvement in their condition. For some, the responsibility of making choices for their own life and happiness was experienced as a burden rather than an opportunity. They were despised that they had to give away the "familiar anonymity of communal life."[93] Their resistance to the individual disposition prevented them from adapting to the transformations occurring in Europe. Consequently, they did not become fully realized individuals but rather *failed* individuals—individuals *manqué*. From this concise analysis, it emerges that the *individual manqué*, constitutes a distinctly 'modern' figure. However, unlike the individual, the *individual manqué* cannot be considered an authentic product, for he does not arise from a coherent adaptation to the prevailing social and cultural dispositions. Rather, it represents a failure of such adaptation. Consequently, the *individual manqué*

[90] "The Masses," 368.
[91] *Ibid.* 369.
[92] *Ibid*. Italics mine.
[93] "The Masses," 371-73.

occupies a derivative position relative to the individual, signifying both deviation and degeneration.[94]

The *individual manqué* is defined by an attitude of resignation. His disposition appeared to have no place within modernity, as his morality had suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of the individualist *ethos*. According to Oakeshott, in some people this frustration ultimately gave way to more fiery sentiments. It happened that the passivity of the *manqué* was transformed into a militant campaign against individualist morality, leading to the emergence of the 'anti-individual'—a figure solely driven by "resentment," whose only project was the "impulse to escape from the predicament by imposing it upon all mankind." The animating force behind the anti-individual was a rage so profound that it manifested in the desire to "depose the individual," and his only conceivable way of achieving this was by "destroying his moral prestige" and replacing it with "a uniformity of belief and conduct that leaves no room for either the pains or the pleasures of choice."[95]

Oakeshott emphasizes that the anti-individual is even less authentic than the *individual manqué* since his entire character is but an opposite reflection of the individual. There is no originality in the anti-individualist disposition, as its essence lies solely in antagonism with individualism. He concludes this historical progression by observing that, once the anti-individual realized he was not alone in Europe—but in fact he was the majority— he eventually became what is commonly referred to as the 'mass man.' Yet, Oakeshott stresses that the defining trait of the mass man is not numerical predominance, for the mass is merely an aggregation of copycats, a set of "anti-individuals united in a revulsion from individuality."[96] Oakeshott adds, almost with a note of concern—but it is impossible to ignore the ironic tone—, that the mass man tragically "can have no friends (because friendship is a relation between individuals), but he has comrades."

Before addressing the political orientation of the anti-individual, I need to add a word in the hope of clarifying the difference between anti-individualism and conservatism in Oakeshott's thought. In fact, if one were to look from a distance, it might seem that the *manqué*'s resistance to the individualist innovation shares similarities with the

[94] *Ibid.* 382.
[95] *Ibid*. 371-72.
[96] *Ibid*. 373

conservative disposition, which values established arrangements, regards change as "deprivation," and generally "will not himself be an ardent innovator."[97]

Such an interpretation, however, constitutes a gross error. For one, Oakeshott himself never links the two dispositions. More importantly, there exists a fundamental difference between the conservative and the individual *manqué*. As argued in the first chapter, the conservative disposition represents a credible and genuine mode of conduct. Its sincerity is evident above all in the conservative's inclination toward the enjoyment of things as they are. It is through this habitual enjoyment, grounded in familiarity, that a certain diffidence toward change emerges. Yet this reluctance must be understood as a consequential product of a *positive* temperament, and not as the essence of conservatism Moreover, the conservative, while reluctant, remains capable of adaptation. His disposition is marked by the flexibility to "accommodat[e]"[98] change, which, though a "disturbance," does not unsettle his temperament. By contrast, the disposition of the *manqué* is entirely defined by antagonism toward innovation. His consistence lies only in the *negative* desire to eliminate individualism. Outside of this, the disposition of the individual *manqué* is simply empty.

While the anti-individualist disposition has little to spare with conservatism, it may be aligned more closely with the rationalist disposition, particularly in its characteristic distrust of time. The individual manqué is unable to endure the present with its individualistic vitality. As a reaction, he develops nostalgia for the past. This theme also appears in the outlook of the rational man. He, too, regards the present as inadequate, though his imagination moved in the opposite direction—towards the future. For the rationalist, the unrest he feels towards the present is to be cured by an improved future. By contrast, the conservative's stance toward time is that of an affection.[99] Yet, the conservative avoids both idolizing the past and repudiating the present: in the end, he will always adapt.

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[97] "On Being Conservative," 409.
[98] *Ibid.* 411
[99] *Ibid.* 408.

2.bc Politics of the individual manqué

Over time, the individual *manqué* developed a precise understanding of how to conduct political activity, manifested both in a specific political project and in a corresponding form of government. The politics of the anti-individual, like all aspects of his disposition, is defined in opposition to individualism. In place of 'parliamentary government,' the individual manqué advocates 'popular government,' whose aim is not the protection of individual rights but the promotion of the 'common good.' Though framed theoretically, with occasional allusions to communism, this political style is best understood as a form of absolutism. For the sake of clarity, I will examine these two dimensions in turn and treat them separately.

The first point concerns the very essence of the individual *manqué*, which lies in his insistence on advancing a political project. In essence, this project is to depose individualism and, in its place, impose a uniform morality upon all. Because he cannot stand diversity between human beings, he seeks to abolish it altogether, in effect returning to a pre-Renaissance condition of 'anonymity,' when the pursuit of personal happiness was regarded as shameful. The end goal of this anti-individualist project is the construction of the 'common good.' Individual aspirations must be repressed for the sake of the higher 'community' to eliminate the possibility of any deviation from the script.[100] Thus, the plan of the individual *manqué* is to transform individual happiness from a private pursuit into a public one, forcibly redirected through the collectivity.

Yet perhaps the most striking—and worrying—aspect of the *manqué*'s political project is precisely that it takes the form of a project. In direct opposition to Oakeshott's teaching, the individual *manqué* relentlessly pursues a premeditated plan, that he as most probably read in a book, and his effort will be to approximate reality to what the book commands. This is the origin of the 'common good,' that is not the sum of all the individual goods, but a premeditated "independent entity." And where could this entity ever come from, if not from the abstract activity theorizing? Oakeshott here is arguing that the core substance of anti-individual politics is an abstraction, it is 'independent' because it is unrealistic. In other words, it is ideology.

[100] "The Masses," 375.

And here I come full circle, making the plausible claim that Oakeshott essentially considers the politics of the rationalist and that of the individual *manqué* to share the same essential weakness, namely the indebted belief that political action can rest upon the execution of a premeditated plan. Even if such a similarity were judged far-reaching, it remains that the two figures exhibit an obvious solidarity in mindlessly ignoring the conservatist's call for prudence—that politics is a matter of 'not rocking the boat.'

The second central aspect of the *individual manqué*'s conception of politics concerns the form of government he ultimately brings about. His aversion to the responsibility of making choices for himself leads him to seek a substitute capable of assuming this task in his place. He finds this substitute in the figure of the ruler who, for the *individual manqué*, becomes more than a mere executor of rules. The ruler is elected into a true *leader*, one who is expected to show the masses the path to salvation and guide them to destinations they would not otherwise have pursued. In particular, the sovereign is the figure entrusted with giving substance to the 'common good' and with guiding the community towards its realization. It is the blinding resentment of the anti-individual that effects this transformation: *"The 'anti-individual' had feelings rather than thoughts, impulses rather than opinions … Consequently, he required 'leaders'."*[101] The leader's essential function, then, is to make the choices that the *individual manqué* refuses to make for himself, thereby suppressing individual conscience in favor of the leader's will. The leader's field of action is thus that of a *"moral leader."*[102]

The form of government corresponding to the rule of the leader is what Oakeshott, in explicit opposition to representative democracy, identifies as *popular government*. This form purports to safeguard the claims that the *individual manqué* makes, under the guise legitimate rights. Yet, as Oakeshott perceptively notes, what the *individual manqué* asserts as rights are in fact nothing more than the distorted inversion of the rights derived from the individualist tradition.[103] Thus, while the individual claims the right to *pursue happiness*, the *manqué* insists instead on the right to *enjoy happiness*. Through a tautological formula—you can't demand to *enjoy* happiness—Oakeshott demonstrates

[101] *Ibid.* 373. A negligible confusion appears here in Oakeshott's thought, since elsewhere he contends that it is the unscrupulous leader who 'evokes' the resentful anti-individual from the resigned *individual manqué* by inflaming his passions (Rayner, "The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism," 326).
[102] Italics mine
[103] *Ibid.* 377-79.

that such claims are not genuine rights at all. Indeed the 'social' rights demanded by the individual *manqué* are not real rights, but only concealed demands of the "abolition of the rights appropriate to individuality."

In the end, all the individual *manqué* wants is to escape the burden of making choices, even at the cost of abolishing individual morality altogether. This is the scope of the 'popular government' that ends up being no genuine creation, but rather a distorted modification of the conditions of 'representative democracy.'

This chapter has examined Oakeshott's account of the rational man and the individual *manqué* as negative counterparts to the conservative disposition. The rational man relies excessively on technical knowledge and premeditated principles. In doing so, he misconstrues the nature of the mind and commits what Oakeshott calls an 'error of the mind.' The consequences of this error are most evident in conduct, especially in politics. Rationalist politics rests on a priori ideology and disregards tradition as a credible guide to action. The individual *manqué*, by contrast, represents the failure to embrace individualism. His outlook is defined not positively but by resentment, antagonism, and reliance on leaders and collective projects. In politics, this attitude produces the attempt to abolish individual aspirations in the name of an abstract "common good," conceived as an independent entity.

Although distinct, both figures share a rejection of tradition and an incapacity to inhabit the present with composure. Their contrast with the conservative disposition highlights the latter's distinctiveness. Fidelity to tradition and openness to circumstance make the conservative temperament the only coherent and genuinely intelligent mode of conduct.

The analysis developed in this chapter, together with that of Chapter 1, contributes to a coherent account of Oakeshott's thought—most notably his critique of rationalism, which I contend also functions as a positive affirmation of conservatism. Building on this foundation, the next chapter examines how Oakeshott's philosophy relates to other intellectual traditions, with particular attention to its relationship to liberalism.

3. Oakeshott and the liberal tradition

Following the examination of Oakeshott's thought in the first two chapters through the framework of the conservatism–rationalism antagonism, the discussion can now turn to its relation to external philosophy. Indeed, in this third chapter, I will examine the relationship between Michael Oakeshott's philosophy and the liberal tradition. This issue has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate, as a central question concerns whether Oakeshott can legitimately be regarded as a contributor to liberal theory. Part of the discussion, in my view, is due to the fact that Oakeshott never explicitly identified himself with 'liberalism' and, indeed, he rarely employed the term at all.[104] I will argue, however, that Oakeshott should be considered a contributor to liberal thought, albeit with certain qualifications. This though is shared by several commentators, that believe that Oakeshott articulated a coherent liberal conception of limited state authority in conjunction with the safeguarding of individual freedom. I will address as the chapter develops.

First, However, I will consider the position of those who maintain that it is mistaken to classify Oakeshott as a liberal. These views share the concern that placing Oakeshott within the liberal tradition oversimplifies the complexity of his philosophy. The thesis of this chapter, however, is that despite his distinctive features, Oakeshott should indeed be regarded as part of that tradition. Next, I will examine the debate over the classification of Oakeshott's conservatism. The mistake I wish to clarify is the belief that Oakeshott's explicit embrace of conservatism makes his thought incompatible with liberalism. Instead, I shall distinguish his conservative outlook from others, particularly American conservatism, and argue that his conservatism does not make him anti-liberal.

Having ruled out incompatibility between Oakeshott and liberalism, I will then explore how this relationship unfolds. I will centre my discussion on the theory of civil association laid out in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott's most systematic and coherent political work, and the one that most clearly links his philosophy to liberalism. I will first

[104] Franco, Paul, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," *Political Theory* 18 (August 1990): 411.

outline this theory, before considering its contribution to liberalism, especially regarding the tension between individual liberty and civil authority. Finally, I will examine how the theory of civil association responds to common criticisms of liberalism. I argue that its capacity to respond to such critiques strengthens Oakeshott's place within the liberal tradition.

3.a Rebutting Oakeshott's incompatibility with liberal theory

In this section, I will examine the position of two commentators that argue that Oakeshott cannot be regarded as a liberal thinker. Stuart Isaacs and Roy Tseng share the point that Oakeshott's writing cannot be included in the category of liberal thought. I contend that these claims are not that Oakeshott's philosophy is devoid of liberal elements, but rather that his liberalism must be understood in a qualified sense. Oakeshott, indeed, should be seen as a liberal, not for uncritically embracing liberalism, but for engaging in and contributing to its debates in generative ways.

The discussion of Tseng highlights another important aspect of Oakeshott's relationship to liberalism: his philosophy constitutes a critique of it. This is further addressed in the argument advanced by Gertrude Himmelfarb, which contends that Oakeshott's conservatism is incompatible with liberalism. It will be shown, however, that this critique targets only the strand of liberalism shaped by rationalist tendencies, leaving the possibility of alignment with other forms of liberal thought.

In conclusion to this section, I will turn to the character of Oakeshott's conservatism and its position within broader conservative debates. Himmelfarb's argument is significant for this discussion, as in approaching Oakeshott's thought she ultimately finds only what she describes as a 'philistine' disposition, seemingly incapable of appreciation any kind of idea. My contention, however, is that Oakeshott's conservatism cannot be reduced to such a charge. Rather, it is an attitude that grounds action in tradition while at the same time operating a radical scepticism that resists the appeal of any preformulated doctrine or prescriptive guide. Oakeshott's conservatism is therefore distinctive, and it warrants closer examination. To that end, I will outline Irving Kristol's account of the divergences between Oakeshott's conservatism and the American

neoconservative tradition. The goal of this analysis is to show how Oakeshott's thought has not much to spare with this American tradition, not least the latter's contempt for liberalism.

3.aa More than a marriage of convenience

Among the scholars who question Oakeshott's association with liberalism, a useful starting point is the position advanced by Stuart Isaacs. His central point is that to characterize Oakeshott as a liberal is to misinterpret his philosophy and to reduce the complexity of his thought by cherry-picking those elements of his arguments which evince liberal affinities. Isaacs's interpretation of Oakeshott is at times overly general, however, which prevents him from fully appreciating the distinctiveness of Oakeshott's political theory. A better reading reveals that Oakeshott does, in fact, articulate a coherent theory of politics, one that exhibits significant affinities with liberal thought.

Isaacs argument can be understood through the criticism he directs at John Gray's vision of Oakeshott, who, in his view, improperly associates Oakeshott's limited conception of politics with the liberal idea of 'limited government.' To do so, Isaacs examines Oakeshott's famous claim that politics is "a conversation, not an argument."[105] Gray interprets this remark as implying that in politics no voice—no ideology—should presume to possess ultimate truth, thereby seizing the right to impose his vision on society as a whole. Instead, the idea of 'conversation' advocates for a non-conflictual view of politics. In a conversation, every voice is to be heard and none should be silenced. After all, liberalism in politics seeks "peace, not truth."[106] Accordingly, a liberal government should not privilege one voice over others but, in Oakeshottian terms, act as an 'umpire' that facilitates coexistence and minimizes conflict. Put simply, Gray is arguing that Oakeshott is a liberal.

Isaacs, however, contends that this reading is overly reductive. For him, the notion of 'conversation' must be understood not in narrowly political terms, but as the method of Oakeshott's entire philosophy. Recalling what contained in *Experience and Its Modes*,

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[105] "Political Education," 58.
[106] Isaacs, Stuart, *The Politics and Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 178-79.

'conversation' signifies that all modes of experience are abstractions, each telling only a part of the whole.[107] Politics, Isaacs argues, "does not [even] have its own separate voice, as such."[108] Rather, it is an incoherent practice that occupies a marginal place in the wider 'conversation,' and thus can be understood only in the light of Oakeshott's whole philosophical system. He writes that Oakeshott's politics is "an account that is wedded to his philosophy as a whole, and this is not a marriage of convenience for liberalism."[109] Thus, Gray's attempt to label Oakeshott as a liberal because of his political ideas "reduces the detail of his work," since Oakeshott's writings are only partially political, and ultimately "no particular type of state, government or party of government is being recommended."[110]

In response to Isaacs' argument, there are two observations to make. First, contrary to Isaacs's contention, Oakeshott does 'recommend forms of government' throughout his work. This is evident just by considering the already discussed essay *The Masses in Representative Democracy*, where Oakeshott clearly privileges 'parliamentary democracy' over 'popular government.'[111] He may not be discussing forms of government with the rigour of the political scientist, but he nonetheless expresses concrete preferences. The second observation follows from this point: the notion of 'conversation' in Oakeshott's thought pertains as much to knowledge theory as to political philosophy. While politics was not granted a 'distinct voice' in *Experience and Its Modes*, his later writings surely treat it as a subject worthy of distinctive consideration in its own right. Thus, although Isaacs is correct in noting that Oakeshott stipulates a relationship of 'conversation' between different modes of knowledge, it is equally possible to argue that he envisions a similar dialogical relationship among political positions and interests. In conclusion, Gray's characterization of Oakeshott as a liberal is not misplaced. By contrast, Isaacs displays a marked reluctance to acknowledge the intrinsic coherence of Oakeshott's political philosophy. Yet, once this coherence is recognized, further substantive affinities between Oakeshott's thought and liberalism emerge.

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[107] Cf. Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 46-55.
[108] Isaacs, *Ibid*.
[109] *Ibid*.
[110] *Ibid.*
[111] "The Masses," 377.

A concern similar to Isaacs's is raised by Roy Tseng. His argument likewise rests on the claim that identifying Oakeshott too closely with liberalism reduces the complexity of his philosophical system. Moreover, Tseng further emphasizes that Oakeshott himself was a critic of certain brands of liberalism. I will show that Oakeshott himself occasionally offered critiques of certain strands of liberalism in his writings. Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to conclude that such critiques amount to a wholesale rejection of liberalism. Rather, participation in the liberal tradition may be understood as contributing critical perspectives to it, rather than as necessarily aligning with its canonical formulations.

Tseng begins his argument by emphasizing that Oakeshott himself was a critic of certain forms of liberalism. He interprets Oakeshott as suggesting that a certain liberal strand—namely, "liberal-rationalis[m]"—approaches politics much with the same tentative methodology of "Newtonian science,"[112] to the extent that political practice turns into a process of fine tuning through trial and error. In Tseng's view, this reflects a problematic tendency within liberalism to conceive of politics as an experimental field analogous to empirical science. This view is mistaken in two respects: first, as Tseng notes, it encourages an unwarranted "optimism about moral and political matters," contrary to Oakeshott's sceptical understanding; and second, it rests on an incoherent theory of action, since—as noted in section *1.c*—the notion that rational conduct consists solely in the execution of a set of rules is untenable.

Evidence of this argument appears also in Oakeshott's famous observation that "a plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it nonetheless belongs to the same style of politics."[113] Many commentators agree that this statement is a pointed critique of F. A. Hayek, who is accused of opposing rationalist-collectivist politics with a form of liberalism that, for its schematism and ideological tendencies, ultimately exhibits the same fundamental weaknesses of the system it seeks to contest.[114] The core of this argument is that a theory opposing rationalist illiberalism can be liberal, yet it may still retain an overly rationalist character. And this is essentially Tseng's point in the comparison between liberalism and the empirical sciences. Up to this point, Tseng's interpretation is consistent with Oakeshott's original ideas.

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[112] Tseng, *The Sceptical Idealist*: 163.
[113] "Rationalism in Politics," 26.
[114] Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 85.

Where Tseng diverges from Oakeshott is in the conclusion he draws from this insight. In fact, he explicitly denies that Oakeshott can be fruitfully connected to liberal theory. He writes that "the uniqueness of Oakeshott's *philosophical* politics would simply evanesce, if we make him into a liberal just because he happens to advocate some of the values that liberalism simultaneously maintains, such as the value of the individual and the idea of rule of law."[115] This argument closely parallels Isaac's points. The central concern is that labelling Oakeshott as a liberal risks reducing his philosophical system to a narrow set of values. Indeed, upon closer analysis, his endorsement of certain values differs significantly from that of much of the liberal tradition. If we consider individualism, for classical liberal thought it constitutes an inviolable right justified by the 'state of nature.' Oakeshott, by contrast, merely observes that individualism has become a pervasive "condition of modern political practice"[116] and is able to appreciate it in terms of this functional role, rather than in relation to the theoretical construct that underpins it. This example shows that Oakeshott can defend the same values of liberalism, but need not share the convictions that underpin it. In other words, he offer a distinctive philosophical grounding of liberalism.

This argument is sufficiently convincing, though it necessitates a clarification regarding the precise nature of Oakeshott's engagement with liberalism. Characterizing Oakeshott as a liberal does not merely entail assigning him to a category and leaving it at that. Rather, I contend that Oakeshott can be understood as a liberal insofar as he engages with the traditional values and concerns of liberal thought, while bringing an original and critical contribution to the table. For instance, while Oakeshott critiques Hayek's formulation of liberalism, this does not constitute a repudiation of the liberal tradition as such. Rather, it illustrates his mode of engagement with it, consisting in a critical judgement of the theory's articulation. From this perspective, Oakeshott's participation in the liberal conversation by no means reduces his intellectual stature, as Tseng fears. The fact that Oakeshott engages with liberal thought does not involve that his ideas perfectly overlap to that framework, nor does it entail overlooking aspects of his thought. On the contrary, it is an acknowledgment of the value of his ideas, and the finding that they are relevant to ongoing discussions with relevant schools of thought.

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[115] Tseng, *Ibid.* 170-73.
[116] *Ibid.* 173

3.ab Misinterpreting Oakeshott's conservatism

The third argument, advanced by the American neoconservative Gertrude Himmelfarb, addresses the purported incompatibility between conservatism and liberalism. It is necessary to consider two separate claims by Himmelfarb. First, from a conservative perspective, she interprets Oakeshott's thought as reinforcing the critique of liberalism. While partially valid, her reading applies primarily to rationalist liberalism. Second, I will note some reservations she discloses about Oakeshott's conservatism and argue that they reflect a misunderstanding of his distinctive approach.

The core of Himmelfarb's argument is captured in the following passage: she observes that "it is obvious that, in describing rationalism, and in characterizing it as the prevalent mode of thought in our time, [Oakeshott] has in mind what would normally be called liberalism."[117] In this statement, Himmelfarb interprets Oakeshott's thought as an evident critique of liberalism, grounded in the association she draws between liberalism and rationalism. From her perspective, Oakeshott's critique of the rationalist disposition directly translates into a critique of liberalism itself. In the same essay, she asserts that liberals are Oakeshott's "antagonists," to highlight how much, by her lights, the two schools of thought conflict.

However, as has been previously demonstrated, liberalism and rationalism do not fully coincide. Rather, rationalist liberalism constitutes only a subcurrent within the broader liberal tradition and is therefore a plausible—but limited—target of Oakeshott's critique. To portray Oakeshott's conservatism as inherently antagonistic to liberalism rests on the flawed premise that liberalism is synonymous with rationalism. In this respect, I align with Paul Franco, who observes that "Oakeshott does not identify liberalism with rationalism … [indeed he] envisages liberalism … as a countertradition to rationalism."[118] Oakeshott's conception of limited government is indeed a sceptic response to the rationalist's vision of politics as an instrument of perfectibility. If strands of liberalism adopted this rationalist orientation, Oakeshott would rightly critique them. However, his criticism targets the rationalist element specifically, not their liberal character.

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[117] Himmelfarb, Gertrude, "The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott," The American Scholar 44, no. 3 (1975): 410.
[118] Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 98.

The second aspect of the argument concerns Himmelfarb's assessment of Oakeshott's conservatism. She begins by noting that he "makes short shrift of those conservatives who rely not upon a disposition but upon a principle or creed,"[119] suggesting that even the conservative is vulnerable, like the rationalist, to adopting an ideal or principle as both the starting point and ultimate goal of practical activity. Himmelfarb further argues that Oakeshott's distrust of ideology becomes "disturbing" when it becomes a "tendency to equate ideology with ideas, to be equally suspicious of both, to be impatient with the very exercise of the mind."[120]

Himmelfarb contends that Oakeshott's work conveys a form of radical scepticism which, in its effort to avoid the pitfalls of rationalism, risks rejecting any substantive reflective engagement. In its swift repudiation of ideology, his thought precludes the possibility of genuine appreciation for ideas. Therefore, Oakeshott's conservatism surpasses a simple critique of ideology, tending toward "philistinism" insofar as it "cannot allow itself to embrace any idea, principle, or belief lest that imply a commitment to some truth."[121] In practice, she is accusing Oakeshott of relativism. Ultimately, Himmelfarb concludes that his philosophy lacks the consistency necessary to sustain civilization, leaving us "obliged to look elsewhere for guidance—to invoke mind, principle, belief, and whatever else is required."

However, Oakeshott's conservatism, far from being 'philistine,' affirms a real appreciation of ideas. It may be diffident to trust ideas, in the sense that of full commitment to one of them, but he shows great affinity towards tradition, which serves as the foundation of the conservative disposition. Crucially, tradition does not function as prescriptive 'guidance' in the manner of a rationalist ideology. Rather, it unfolds in practice, such that acknowledgement of it emerges through engagement and experience. Although tradition is not as rigid or codified as a rationalist ideology, it maintains coherence, while faithfulness to it provides for a credible framework for action. This practical orientation constitutes the core of Oakeshott's conservatism. It emphasizes learning and judgment through participation rather than adherence to abstract principles. Himmelfarb, however, encounters difficulty with this conception, as she seeks a clear and explicit 'guide' to follow, rather than recognizing the coherence and authority inherent in

[119] Himmelfarb, *ibid.* 413.
[120] *Ibid.* 418.
[121] *Ibid.* 420.

a living tradition. Thus, Oakeshott does not reject ideas, but rather offers a framework that grounds them within lived practices, allowing for continuity and reflection without relying on rigid ideological structures.

3.ac Ideology and scepticism: between neoconservatism and scepticism

Himmelfarb offers a perceptive observation regarding the tensions within Oakeshott's account of conservatism. From an American perspective, conservatism occupies a prominent place in the political landscape, yet it is informed by philosophical premises distinct from those underpinning Oakeshott's thought. In what follows, we shall take a look at these differences, drawing on the analysis of American neoconservative Irving Kristol, who contrasts the conservative traditions of England and the United States. These reflections demonstrate that Oakeshott's conservatism constitutes a distinctive form, one that remains open to engagement with liberalism. In particular, Oakeshott's conservatism maintains a highly sceptical attitude towards ideology.

Irving Kristol, a leading figure of neoconservatism, identifies two principal features that, in his view, account for the divergence between American and Oakeshottian conservatism. As a sidenote, Kristol significantly presents Oakeshott as opposed to its American counterpart. This, however, is a debatable claim, in particular in relation to Edmund Burke. Paul Franco notes that Oakeshott sceptic's conservatism is in contrast with the thought of Burke, described as "cosmic tory," for he inevitably stains his conservatism with metaphysical considerations.[122] Rayner also touches on this issue, claiming that Oakeshott's intention is not to establish a conservative theory in Burkean style, but rather to advance a general scepticism appropriate for political activity.[123] This is evident from the fact that "nowhere in his work is Oakeshott concerned … to endorse any general beliefs about the nature of politics. He is concerned simply with the misues of general beliefs."[124] rather than offering guidance on which ideologies are preferable, Oakeshott is primarily concerned with discouraging the pursuit of ideologies altogether.

[122] Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 102.
[123] Rayner, "The Legend of Oakeshott's Conservatism," 315.
[124] *Ibid.* 329.

Turning back to Kristol's discussion, first, it has been noted that Oakeshott conceives conservatism as "irredeemably secular."[125] His understanding of the conservative disposition is notably devoid of transcendental aspirations, privileging instead a sceptical understanding of conduct. Kristol emphasizes that this vision stands in sharp contrast to American culture and history, which are rooted in the notion of a "creedal nation."[126] The American experience has long been animated by a sense of pride in national achievement, such that its orientation toward both past and future cannot be reconciled with the restrained moderatism that characterises Oakeshott. Rather, Americans maintain what Kristol terms a "most emphatic and explicit relation"[127] to their national accomplishments, accompanied by a persistent conviction that, compared to the deploration of the present, political activity is to prepare "ameliorative possibilities" for the future.[128]

In Kristol's own words, then, American conservatism is "ideological," insofar as it is grounded in principles whose value is understood to be *a priori*. Oakeshott, by contrast, seeks to purge political practice of precisely these ideological residues. Where American conservatism rests upon an explicit affirmation of the nation's greatness, in the very notion of America's "ideological patriotism," being conservative for Oakeshott means disposing of a temperament reluctant to commit itself to any principles or programmatic projects. This divergence is equally apparent in their respective conceptions of time. The conservative disposition, for Oakeshott, neither idolizes the past, nor it is anxious of the future, but it esteems the present "on account of its familiarity."[129] The significance of time derives from the way tradition manifests itself across past, present, and future: "authority is diffused between past, present, and future; between the old, the new, and what is to come."[130] Tradition, for Oakeshott, coherently integrates these distinct temporal dimensions: the past provides its origins, the present its acknowledgement and reinforcement, and the future its modest yet continuous development. Therefore, in essence, the first difference between Oakeshott's

[125] Kristol, Irving, "America's 'Exceptional' Conservatism" in Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995): 374.
[126] *Ibid*.
[127] *Ibid.* 375.
[128] *Ibid.* 377.
[129] "On Being Conservative," 408.
[130] "Political Education," 61.

conservatism and American conservatism is their reach. For the Americans, conservatism is a way to evaluate their country's heritage, while for Oakeshott it is to tone down expectations and to remove any ideological residue, as it proves inconsistent as a guide to action.

Kristol's second point of contrast between American and English conservatism is that, in his words, "conservatism in America is a *movement*."[131] American conservatism neither coincides with nor is confined to the Republican Party. This distinction is significant, as it implies that intellectual activity in the United States is conducted free from the interest of a political party, as it is argued is the case in England. A remarkable development of this movement has been the emergence of *neoconservatism*, a novel current of thought characterised by the fact that "its chosen enemy was contemporary liberalism, not socialism or statism in the abstract."[132] In this sense, American conservatism has assumed the form of a sustained critique of liberal institutions. The clearest example is that "the Republican Party was no longer interested in destroying the welfare state, in the name of "antistatism," but intended rather to reconstruct it along more economical and more humane lines."[133] Neoconservatism thus arose from a recognition of liberalism's detrimental effects on American society and directed its energies toward opposing them. By contrast, Kristol identifies no comparable development in English conservatism. Indeed, it it appears evident that English conservatism—and thus Oakeshott, too—does not openly criticizes liberalism in the same way neoconservatism does.

One last relevant point to this is that Oakeshott should be understood as a *philosophical* conservative, rather than a *normative* or *political* one. By this, I mean that Oakeshott engages in concrete debates at a theoretical level, rather than in terms of any practical political outcomes. For instance, his arguments do not advocate adherence to any specific tradition—be it American or English—as a prescriptive mode of action. Rather, he values the concept of tradition for its theoretical qualities and the insights it provides. This differentiates his work from the neoconservative critique of liberalism, which focuses primarily on tangible political and social consequences. In contrast, Oakeshott's thought operates within the more abstract, philosophical domain. This insight

[131] Kristol, *ibid.* 377.
[132] *Ibid.*
[133] *Ibid.* 379.

provides an additional basis for distinguishing Oakeshott's thought from the political movement of neoconservatism.

In this section they have been outlined the principal differences between American and Oakeshottian conservatism. First, American conservatism is explicitly 'ideological,' whereas Oakeshott's project is defined by its rejection of ideology. Second, American conservatism has developed into a movement positioned in deliberate opposition to liberalism. Moreover, Oakeshott's conservatism is not altogether comparable with neoconservatism, as the former is more philosophical and the latter more political. In conclusion, I argue that Oakeshott's conservatism is distant enough to the American that we can exclude that it shares with it the anti-liberal stance.

3.b Locating Oakeshott within liberal thought

In the previous sections, we examined and refuted the arguments against classifying Oakeshott within the liberal tradition. Consequently, there is no compelling reason to deny the association of his philosophy with liberalism. The present section will therefore undertake this task by identifying the respects in which Oakeshott can be regarded as a liberal thinker, with particular attention to his contributions to liberal theory. I will contend that his most significant contribution to liberal theory is that he freed liberalism from materialistic and purposive scopes.

First, I shall consider the liberal insights contained in *Rationalism in Politics*. While this work does not present a systematic political doctrine, the critique of rationalism nonetheless discloses some aspects of Oakeshott's sympathy for the liberal project. This affinity receives its fullest articulation in the theory of civil association, that Oakeshott develops in *On Human Conduct*. Therefore, I shall briefly outline this theory. Then, I will examine the specific contribution that the theory of civil association makes to liberal theory. Finally, I will assess Oakeshott's contribution to liberalism in light of how civil association addresses communitarian critiques of the liberal tradition.

Before addressing the theory of civil association, it is appropriate to set out certain points regarding the liberal achievements discussed thus far in *Rationalism in Politics*. In particular, I will focus on the limited conception of politics articulated by Oakeshott.

Paul Franco, in a careful analysis of Oakeshott's contribution liberalism, notes that "the critique of purpose which forms such a prominent feature of Oakeshott's overall critique of rationalism also forms the basis of his politics of skepticism."[134] Indeed, Oakeshott responds to the rationalist disposition in politics—the false belief that political action stems from a premeditated purpose—with a thoroughly sceptical view of the instrument of government. Whereas the rationalist conceives political power as a means to 'impose a dream,'[135] Oakeshott contends that the function of government is restricted to the establishment of manners of conduct. Because he regards politics as incapable of originating from the intentional pursuit of an ideology, he concludes that politics cannot be a purposeful activity but rather a matter of simply 'attending to the arrangements.' The limited role of government thus rests on a distrust toward the view that politics is, or ought to be, purposive.

Throughout *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott develops a 'politics of scepticism' which, though not fully systematic, is nevertheless robust. The conception of limited government is of course a defining feature of liberal thought indeed, but Oakeshott justifies it in a different manner than that of most liberals. In fact, he understands that 'libertarian' arguments for limited government are grounded in abstractions such as individuality and natural rights. This points logically converge in the common opposition between 'individual' and 'government.'[136] Instead, Oakeshott treats individualism as an historical achievement and situates government as an integral and harmonious component of it.[137] In essence, he reaches the same conclusion as traditional liberalism—the affirmation of limited government—but by a different route: not by the ideological belief that government must refrain from restricting individual aspirations, but by the recognition that government cannot sustain the pursuit of an ideological project and must instead act as an 'umpire.' As Franco observes, "For [Oakeshott], the crucial consideration is not the quantity of government but rather … its mode."[138] Oakeshott is thus less concerned with the degree to which government intervenes in individual

[134] Franco, "Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," 419.
[135] "Political Education," 124.
[136] Franco, *ibid.* 420.
[137] In *The Masses in Representative Democracy*, Oakeshott argued that the emergent individual established government to safeguard his interests.
[138] Franco, *ibid.*

endeavours than with the *quality* of such interventions—namely, whether they serve a substantive purpose or merely minimize collisions among private enterprises.

In sum, *Rationalism in Politics* defends limited government through a non-purposive conception of politics, without attributing intrinsic ideological value to the 'individual.'

3.ba The theory of civil association in On Human Conduct

I now turn to the theory that most closely aligns Oakeshott with liberal thought: the theory of civil association, as elaborated in *On Human Conduct*. In this work, Oakeshott presents his political philosophy in a systematic and coherent form. The aim of *On Human Conduct* remains consistent: to articulate a theory of the state grounded in human individuality, not as a natural right, but consistent with Oakeshott's overall scepticism. In this respect, it represents a significant contribution to liberal theory. To substantiate this claim, I shall first outline Oakeshott's theory of civil association, drawing on the authoritative commentary of Paul Franco.[139] Only then I will be able to interpret the worth of the theory of civil association with respect to the liberal debate.

In the first essay of *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott begins to outline the theory of civil association by examining the concept of 'freedom.'[140] He conceives it as an intrinsic quality of human agency. Human conduct is free insofar as it is an exhibition of intelligence, in the sense that it involves understanding. Freedom so understood is distinct from notions of 'self-determination' or 'autonomy.'

He next contrasts ordinary human 'transactions,' defined as exchanges that last the duration of the interaction with another, more enduring form of human conduct: 'practices.'[141] A practice is a set of manners or rules that qualifies human actions and relationships 'adverbially;' that is, they prescribe the conditions under which exchanges occur without determining the substantive choices or performances of the agents

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[139] For the rest of this paragraph, cf. Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 144-72; and Franco, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," 420-29.
[140] Oakeshott, Michael, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975): 32, 36-7, 89.
[141] *Ibid.* 35-6.

involved.[142] He compares a practice to language. Just as language is the necessary *medium* of communication, but does not determine the subject of our conversation, a practice "does not impose upon an agent demands that he shall think certain thoughts, entertain certain sentiments, or make certain utterances."[143] Instead, it specifies the formal conditions within which conduct must take place. From here, Oakeshott distinguishes between two kinds of practice. The first type consists of practices whose substance is suited to achieving the success of the conduct they govern—for example, the arrangements constituting an economy. These have an instrumental character, insofar as they are directed toward specific results. The second type, however, is entirely non-instrumental: this Oakeshott calls 'moral practice.'[144] Defined precisely by the absence of a substantive purpose, moral practice is "the *ars artium* of conduct; the practice of all practices; the practice of agency without further specification."[145]

Before proceeding, it is important to establish what has been achieved. Human agency is necessarily qualified by a moral practice. Yet this does not amount to a restriction of the agent's freedom, because morality does not specify substantive utterances but rather sets the conditions under which the action is performed.

The second essay of *On Human Conduct* concerns directly the character of 'civil association.' Oakeshott describes it as association in terms of a moral practice. Because morality is not purposive, civil association is a non-instrumental form of association. In contrast stands 'enterprise association,' defined as association for the joint pursuit of a substantive goal or interest.[146] For the agent's freedom to be preserved, participation in an enterprise association must be voluntary. If not, its substantive purposes would compromise freedom. Civil association, however, entails no such purposes, which is why participation in it can be regarded as 'compulsory.'[147]

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[142] Importantly, Oakeshott understands 'practice' in the same way he had previously spoken of 'tradition,' though he decided to adopt this new term to avoid the common misunderstanding of tradition as a fixed or immutable pattern of conduct (Franco, *Introduction to Oakeshott*: 150).
[143] *Ibid.* 59.
[144] *Ibid.* 60-2.
[145] *Ibid.* 62
[146] *Ibid.* 114-15.
[147] *Ibid.* 114-19.

Oakeshott develops further by identifying civil association as a particular kind of moral practice: one "composed entirely of rules."[148] These rules provide the adverbial conditions of conduct in civil association. Rules are characterised by four defining features: first, they are authoritative assertions, whose authority rests on the fact that they command rather than persuade; second, they are general and abstract; third, they prescribe only procedural conditions, not substantive outcomes; and fourth, their status as rules depends on their recognised authority rather than the degree to which they are obeyed.[149] In this sense, the bond of agents in civil association lies in the shared condition of submission to the system rules.

The final step in Oakeshott's argument is to describe civil association as a particular mode of recognising rules—namely, "the recognition of rules as rules."[150] It is the acceptance of rules as authoritative, and the acknowledgment of obligation to them, that constitutes civil association. To treat rules in terms of their authority rather than their desirability is the essence of this form of association. Such a condition leaves freedom unaffected, because rules, due to their adverbial character, establish only formal requirements without prescribing substantive acts.

In sum, then: civil association is association in terms of a moral practice, specifically a system of rules whose force lies in them being recognised as authoritative by the participants. The fact that participation to civil association is compulsory does not compromise the agent's freedom, because the rules that make up civil association do not have a substantive character, rather they prescribe formal conditions of action.

3.bb Civil association as a restatement of liberalism

Having outlined the theory of civil association, this section will examine its coherence in relation to liberalism. As I have previously argued, Oakeshott's contribution to liberal thought lies less in the theoretical alignment and more in the originality with which it engages liberal themes. Oakeshott is a liberal insofar as it productively enters into conversation with the themes of liberalism. Paul Franco, on his part, comments that

[148] *Ibid.* 124.
[149] *Ibid.* 124-27.
[150] *Ibid.* 148-49.

Oakeshott operates a "*restatement*" of liberalism, in order to highlight the distinct position from which it approaches it.[151]

First, I will argue that the theory of civil association's greatest achievement with respect to liberal theory is the introduction of Oakeshott's characteristic *scepticism in politics*. Then, I will show how Oakeshott's version of liberalism can be assessed by way of its capacity to defend liberalism against communitarian critiques.

Arguably, the most significant achievement of *On Human Conduct* is its formulation of a credible political theory that brings classical liberal thought—summarized in the proposition that "value is individual"[152]—into dialogue with a sustained form of scepticism. The individualist foundation of the theory of civil association is evident in that it consistently adopts the perspective of the individual. This achievement has two notable dimensions. On the one hand, individual freedom is emancipated from metaphysical appeals. On the other, the state is conceived as an association devoid of substantive material purposes, thereby rejecting the utilitarian strands of liberalism. I shall briefly discuss these two aspects.

First, Oakeshott's justification for the liberal claim that 'value is individual' does not rest upon preordained metaphysical claims, but rather upon the recognition that freedom constitutes a condition of human agency. Yet this freedom, to be meaningful, requires qualification through practice. Civil association, as a distinctive moral practice, provides this necessary mediation. It qualifies freedom without undermining it. Instead, if individual freedom is defended as a natural right, any state intervention appears as an infringement. This is the problem Paul Franco identifies in Isaiah Berlin's liberal account of negative freedom. By conceiving negative freedom as liberalism's highest value, Berlin cannot clearly distinguish between forms of state-action, as all are an "encroachment to our negative liberty to pursue our wants."[153] To Berlin, who sees negative liberty as a sacred value, unemployment relief programs and liberty-restricting measures are equally encroaching. The result, Franco argues, is a "criterionless" framework for evaluating political authority. By contrast, Oakeshott, conceiving freedom

[151] Franco, "Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," 411.
[152] Coats, Jr., Wendell John, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 18 (December 1985): 774.
[153] Franco, Paul, "Oakeshott, Berlin, and Liberalism," *Political Theory* 31 (August 2003): 497-98.

as an intrinsic feature of human conduct, justifies state-action insofar as it qualifies freedom in a non-purposive way. In this way, Oakeshott reconciles individual freedom with legitimate state-action.

Second, it is true, as Franco points out, that through the theory of civil association, Oakeshott "succeeds—as perhaps no other contemporary thinker has—in freeing liberalism from the utilitarianism, materialism, and economism which have haunted it since its inception."[154] Indeed, civil association allows for compulsory participation precisely because its non-instrumental character does not infringe individual freedom. By contrast, an association organized around the pursuit of a determinate purpose—be it economic prosperity or social utility—constitutes an '*enterprise association*.' In such case, members are bound by their shared commitment to achieving a purpose, but participation must remain voluntary if liberty is not to be compromised. Civil association, however, unites individuals solely through their common subjection to the law, and nothing further. On this basis, Franco maintains—and I agree with him—that civil association offers a more coherent justification of liberal state authority, insofar as it secures the legitimacy of state power without subordinating individual freedom to extrinsic purposes.

The foregoing discussion illustrates Oakeshott's *restatement* of liberalism. In essence, he conceives of the liberal state as non-purposive, whose compulsory participation to is justified by the recognition of its authoritative system of rules.

We are now in a position to examine how this theory stacks up against critiques frequently posed to liberalism. Franco compares Oakeshott's liberalism to two critiques originating in the communitarian tradition.[155] Building on his analysis, I contend that the theory of civil associations provides a solid response to such critiques, thereby also reinforcing its place within the liberal school of thought.

The first critique asserts that liberalism "rests on an atomistic conception of the self as prior to or independent of society and its substantive commitments."[156] To this, Franco insightfully observes that, since Oakeshott neither appeals to metaphysical conceptions of individuality nor posits individuality as a natural right, his account does

[154] Franco, "Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," 429.
[155] Franco, *Ibid.* 429-32.
[156] *Ibid.*

not reduce the self to an isolated, abstract entity. Rather, for Oakeshott, the individual exists in relation to others under the authority of the rules that constitute civil association; importantly, such association does not require the renunciation of liberty. Put differently, Oakeshott "erects his liberal theory on a view of freedom or autonomy perfectly compatible with historicity, government, law, and civil authority."[157] In sum, Oakeshott avoids atomistic criticism because his individualism is congruous with communal relationships and civil authority.

The second critique maintains that liberalism seeks "ahistorical criteria by which to justify liberalism instead of simply recognizing it as an historical (and valuable) practice." To this, it may be argued that, on the one hand, Oakeshott fully acknowledges the historical component of liberalism—one need only recall the discussion of 'parliamentary democracy' in *The Masses in Representative Democracy*—and, on the other—following Franco—he sustains a level of philosophical sophistication that avoids collapsing into historicism, as the complexity of the theory of civil association demonstrates. Oakeshott thus is able to combine two modes of inquiry, the historical and the theoretical, in a way that they sustain and complement each other.

In sum, this chapter has examined Oakeshott's relationship with the liberal tradition, moving step by step from the critiques of his alleged incompatibility with liberalism, through the clarification of his distinctive conservatism, to the articulation of his positive contributions to liberal theory.

First, objections were rebutted, showing that Oakeshott's scepticism and conservatism do not preclude, but rather enrich, his engagement with liberal thought. Second, the contrast with American conservatism and neoconservatism confirmed that his outlook remains free from anti-liberal tendencies. Finally, the theory of civil association in *On Human Conduct* was outlined as his most systematic and original contribution: a restatement of liberalism that frees it from rationalism, materialism, and purposive doctrines, while reconciling individual liberty with the authority of law. In this way, Oakeshott emerges not merely as a marginal interlocutor, but as a thinker who decisively renews and strengthens the liberal tradition.

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[157] *Ibid.*

Conclusion

In drawing the strands of this inquiry together, it becomes clear that the examination of Michael Oakeshott's political philosophy through the prism of his human types has illuminated not only the coherence of his intellectual project but also its enduring contribution to political theory. Beginning with the figure of the conservative man, the thesis highlighted how Oakeshott grounds political understanding in a disposition of fidelity to tradition, understood as the living inheritance of practices and manners that shape human conduct. Far from being passive, this disposition demonstrates an intelligent awareness of circumstances, combining scepticism with a deep appreciation for the contingencies of history. In contrast, the rationalist and the individual manqué exemplify the perils that arise when conduct is severed from the grounding of tradition. The former does this, through a misguided reliance on technical knowledge and the promise of universal designs, and the latter, through resentment and the abdication of individuality in favour of collective substitutes. These two human types, while different in orientation, share the incapacity to inhabit the present with composure, thereby highlighting the virtues of the conservative disposition.

Building on this foundation, the analysis of Oakeshott's engagement with the liberal tradition revealed the originality of his contribution to modern political thought. His elaboration of the theory civil association in On Human Conduct represents a sophisticated restatement of liberal principles. By conceiving freedom as an intrinsic quality of agency and by defining political association in non-instrumental terms, he crafted a solid vision of the state that reconciles individual liberty with the authority of law. Civil association represents the possibility of a political order that neither prescribes substantive ends nor erodes the freedom of its participants, but instead provides the conditions under which individuals may pursue their diverse and self-chosen enterprises. In this sense, Oakeshott renews the liberal tradition by rescuing it from the pitfalls of utilitarianism and materialism, offering instead a sceptical yet constructive defence of limited government.

Taken together, these lines of argument establish Oakeshott as more than a critic of modern ideologies. He emerges as a thinker whose constructive philosophy of politics integrates conservatism and liberalism into a coherent whole. His scepticism does not amount to cynicism but rather to a mode of inquiry attentive to the complexity of human practices, while his conservatism is not reactionary stasis but a disposition of care for the conditions that make freedom possible. At the same time, his engagement with liberalism demonstrates that fidelity to tradition need not entail hostility to governmental authority but can in fact intertwine with individual freedom. The figures of the conservative, the rationalist, and the individual manqué serve as illustrative devices that bring into focus the strengths and weaknesses of alternative dispositions, while the theory of civil association provides a systematic articulation of Oakeshott's positive vision.

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