

Michael Oakeshott's Critique of Modern Rationalism

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This essay lays out the critique of modern Rationalism by the twentieth century English philosophical essayist and political theorist, Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), and then attempts briefly to assess its general cogency as well as its practical implications for especially political and moral life. It draws largely upon two of Oakeshott's works - - *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) and *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (1962). It will become evident to those who have familiarity with these two works, that the popular essays of the latter work develop in detail the implications of a view of human knowledge and experience articulated initially in the more philosophic *Experience and Its Modes*. And although Oakeshott (like Plato's Socrates and Chinese Daoists) occasionally resorts in his expositions to the use of everyday skills such as cookery and pottery, we shall find that his central concerns are with the effects of what he calls modern Rationalism in the political and moral life of Western civilization of the past four centuries or so.

In *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott presents a view of the relationship obtaining among various forms of knowing and doing as they present themselves in human experience over time. He says his viewpoint owes much to the Idealist philosophers Hegel and Bradley, and we can observe it certainly would fall within that school insofar as it begins from the "whole" of which something less than the whole is predicated in various forms of thought and action. This is a complex and lengthy work which goes into much detail on various, settled "modalities" of experience such as "history," "science" and "practice," but here we will only look at those of its arguments which Oakeshott subsequently develops in some detail in his critique of modern Rationalism. Arguably, the most important point relevant to his subsequent critiques of

“rationalism” is the anti-realist claim that there is no common subject matter in human experience. (“there is never in experience an *it*”, Oakeshott, 1933, p. 31) Rather, each particular settled way of experiencing, creates its own subject matter in the tension between *how* and *what* is experienced. (Or, as Oakeshott sometimes says, every subject matter is “correlative to” the distinctive method of experiencing which creates it.) For example, the scientist does not study a falling apple; rather the scientist first resolves the apple into an abstraction (called “mass”) with universal proprieties before plugging it into a formula such as $d=1/2gt(t)$ and so on. (Science, on Oakeshott’s account, is experience under the category of “quantity” or quantity-like). Or to take another illustration, the historical past (created by the principle of continuity) is *not* the same subject-matter as the practical past, the realm of value and desire; the former looks at the past for its own sake, the latter for useful lessons. (It has been suggested that Oakeshott developed this general view as a young man when trying to mediate between the claims of religion and science.)

Owing to the absence of a common subject matter to address, Oakeshott is often critical of various settled modalities of experience from the standpoint of logical irrelevance (“*ignoratio elenchi*”), for attempting to give advice to one another, as though they were all addressing the same subject matter. Attempting to derive practical implications from a poetic image would be an illustration of this logical error on Oakeshott’s view.¹

A related point for our exploration of Oakeshott’s critique of Rationalism is that “truth” for Oakeshott is a matter of logical (and ontological) coherence, not realist correspondence between an idea and a something “out there.” On Oakeshott’s view, the coherence theory of truth comprehends the correspondence theory, not the other way round. To take a contemporary example (clearly not Oakeshott’s), the laws of Newtonian physics are still considered valid by

the scientific community even in the wake of the post-Einsteinian discovery of the curvature of time and space, so long as the context for Newton's laws is not subject to conditions of extreme speeds (e.g. the speed of light) and extreme gravitational pulls (e.g., that of "black holes"). Oakeshott would have called this accommodation of Newtonian and Einsteinian physics a matter of increasing coherence within the mode of science. To rehearse thus far, we have taken and summarized a few arguments from *Experience and Its Modes* as a preface to our exposition of Oakeshott's critique of modern Rationalism. These are: that there is no common subject matter in human experience; that distinctive subject matters are created in the tension between a *how* and *what* of experiencing; that it is a logical error to pass from different subject matters as though they were the same; and that truth is a matter of the increasing coherence of a settled field of thought and activity, rather than realist correspondence to a common-sensical reality.

In the popular essays of the 1940s and 1950s collected in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Oakeshott defines modern Rationalism as a mode of thought appearing over the past four centuries, and characterized by a belief in the "sovereignty" of technique, to the exclusion of practical knowledge of timing and judgment acquired in a patient apprenticeship. Although he sees this development as a potential in both Platonic rationalism and medieval rationalist theology, he sees it as crystallizing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, saliently in the thought of Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Oakeshott's fundamental critique of it as an approach to human activity and conduct is its *partiality* in the definition of "rationality." In brief, it fails to grasp the full context for its own thought, "like a man who turns off the light and then complains he cannot see." (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 32) In its quest for certainty and in its belief that the only true knowledge is that of a technique which can be written down and put in books, it resolves human activity into a series of problems with distinct starting and ending points

amenable to “rational” solutions, and loses the balance and comprehensive judgment of traditional knowledge acquired in patient apprenticeships. A related blindness it engenders as it spreads in a culture, is the misguided belief that there are universal techniques which can be abstracted from one particular skill or profession and applied directly in others without loss of skill and balance. And as it creates new crises (saliently wars) and problems through destruction of genuine skill and moral balance, it becomes even more “rationalist” in the illusory search for more “rationalist” solutions, only compounding the problems facing it.

This entire critique is based in turn upon Oakeshott’s view (not yet developed in *Experience and Its Modes*) that modern Rationalism proceeds from an erroneous theory of the mind, viewing it as a neutral instrument existing in advance of the human activity it directs. As he explains in the 1950 essay “Rational Conduct,” this erroneous view is based upon “the supposition that a man’s mind can be separated from its contents and its activities.” (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 86) In its place, Oakeshott offers an account of the “concrete” mind, which arises from, and in, apprenticeship to a tradition of behavior and consists in knowing *how* to behave in some particular idiom by pursuing its coherence and intimations (and not in the illusory belief that it is pursuing antecedently existing ends.) For Oakeshott “rational conduct” has no meaning outside of a particular idiom of conduct (including that of scientific research); there are no universal methods because there is no universal subject matter - - each subject matter arises in the tension between a something given identity and the method creating it.

By way of more detailed illustration of Oakeshott’s critique of Rationalism let us look at what he has to say about the corruption of Western political and moral life of the past four centuries or so, as it has come increasingly under the spell of the Rationalist illusion that not to

have a ubiquitously applicable and abbreviated technique or code or ideology, is not to be serious. Let us start with Oakeshott's account of a healthy morality, and how it is corrupted by the "Rationalist" illusion, and then go on to his critique of Rationalism in politics. In the 1948 essay, "The Tower of Babel," Oakeshott says that "our morality appears to be a mixture of two ideal extremes," (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 61) the character of the mixture depending on which of the two is dominant as the spring of belief and conduct. *One* is a morality of habits of feeling and conduct, the *other* of reflection. The *first* is acquired "by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner," (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 61) and the *second* by reflection upon either moral *ideals* or moral *rules* and laws in deciding upon a course of action. He suggests that all existing moralities subsist as a mixture of these two pure cases, and that Western morality since about the fourth century has been a mixture (owing to the disarray of both classical and early Christian traditional morality in the face of the barbarian invasions) in which the "rationalist" or reflective element is dominant in conduct, that is in which choice of action is determined by (apparent) antecedent application of a moral ideal or a moral rule or law. He goes on to suggest that a healthy or balanced and skilful morality arises in the opposite mixture, one in which the role of reflective intellect is *subsidiary* in the choice of conduct *to* a habit of behavior, and in which its proper role is as critic and protector of habitual morality during crisis or emergency, *not* as the normal spring of action, so to speak. By implication, Oakeshott's account has it that the continual progression of Rationalist morality and ideology from self-induced crisis to crisis and the continued loss of balance and acquired skill, leaves little hope of a Rationalist escape from this imbalanced moral "mixture." Arguably, the central insight on which Oakeshott's argument here is based (with Daoist² and Hegelian influences) is that the *implicit* ("*an sich*") is normally stronger than the *explicit* ("*für sich*") the latter of which is best restricted to times of crisis and emergency, when normally healthy moral and intellectual ambiguity becomes a

liability. (An illustration of this - - not Oakeshott's - - might be the Roman Catholic resort to rationalist Aquinian theology to defend itself from criticisms of the Protestant Reformation.)

In the 1947 essay "Rationalism in Politics," Oakeshott turns his attention to the expressly *political* errors of modern Rationalism. Having defined it as a belief in the sovereignty of technique (as we have seen), Oakeshott goes on to explore its expressly political manifestations. He calls its myth "the assimilation of politics to engineering" (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 4) and says that it resolves politics into a series of "felt needs" and crises to be solved by the application of perfectionist universal techniques, and that the "modern history of Europe is littered with the projects of the politics of Rationalism," (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 6) giving as examples, among others, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, national or racial self-determination, open diplomacy, a single tax, Federalism, the World State, and so on.

When Oakeshott's turns to the provenance of this "intellectual fashion in the history of post-Renaissance Europe," he starts with the circumstance under which a series of slowly mediated changes emerged unmistakably in the seventeenth century investigation into the conditions necessary for the achievement of human knowledge of both nature and civilization, by dispensing with the presuppositions of Aristotelian science. Oakeshott focuses in this context on the attempts of Bacon and Descartes to formulate universal methods of inquiry capable of "certain and demonstrable knowledge" of the world, applicable to all subject matters, and capable of being applied by persons of average intelligence (the new method placing "all wits nearly on a level" in Bacon's words). He suggests that the advance of the doctrine of the certainty and sovereignty of technique into the realm of politics came largely by way of the needs of the "inexperienced" in politics - - that of the new ruler, the new ruling class, and the

new political society, all searching for a “crib” or ideology to fulfil their newly acquired functions. Machiavelli’s *Prince* (in advance of Bacon and Descartes³) speaks to the needs of the first; Locke’s *Second Treatise* to the needs of the second; and the work of Marx and Engel (“the most stupendous of our political rationalisms”) to the needs of the last. (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 26)

This invasion of Rationalism is illustrated especially well, Oakeshott thinks, in the views of the American founders, who, thinking they were beginning government anew by basing it on the natural rights discerned by Locke, merely re-articulated the historic rights of Englishmen which Locke had abbreviated as the (Liberal) ideology of the *Second Treatise*:

The Declaration of Independence is a characteristic product of the *saeculum rationalisticum*. It represents the politics of the felt need interpreted with the aid of an ideology. (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 28)

Before turning to an assessment of Oakeshott’s critique of modern Rationalism (in especially politics and morals), let us rehearse briefly its main features. We might summarily say that (1) Oakeshott has presented us with a constructivist⁴ (“reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own”), neo-Kantian⁵ account of the relative autonomy of various modalities which make up the conditional plurality of human experience (less any account of a noumenal realm); and (2) which also shows influences of the ancient Chinese Daoist view of right action flowing from implicit pursuit of what is *appropriate* in any particular idiom of activity at any particular moment (versus the illusory application of distracting moral ideals and precepts, *a la* Confucius).

Oakeshott's rather original formulation of this general viewpoint we have seen expressed as the claims (1) that there are no universal methods because there is no common subject matter in human experience; (2) that therefore it is a mistake to take methods achieved in one settled idiom of activity and apply them indiscriminately in another such idiom; and (3) that since "mind" is not a neutral instrument existing in advance of, and detachment from, its acquired contents, political and moral activity especially are mis-conceived (with disastrous effects) when viewed as the application of antecedently existing codes and ideologies to particular cases or problems. By way of assessing the cogency of these Oakeshottian claims, let us attempt very briefly to analyze these claims critically.

Arguably, an intelligent way of assessing the cogency of Oakeshott's critique of Rationalism is to start with those of its claims which appear most indisputable. Arguably, doing so requires finding the level of generality at which Oakeshott first conceived it, which appears to be neither at the level of particular crafts, nor at some grand epistemological or ontological level, but rather at the level of the "theory-practice" problem, that is, at the level of political and moral analysis (which Aristotle calls "*praxis*"). This approach would allow us to bypass rehearsing the various philosophic debates between, for example, Idealism and Realism, coherence theory of truth and correspondence theory of truth, Hegelianism and Cartesianism and Aristotelianism, and so on. To say this differently, let us try to find those of Oakeshott's claims which appear the soundest at first blush, and which have the most explanatory "force" in making sense of political and moral events. Arguably, these are two - - (1) the claim that there are no universal methods because each settled activity arises in the tension between its distinctive *how* and *what*, or form and content of activity; and, hence (2) it is a mistake which results in loss of balance and skill to attempt to export, wholesale, methods from one settled activity to another as though they had a

common subject matter (a mistake implied in the old adage, “constitutions, like wines, do not travel well”). Or to say this latter point differently, each method creates, or is correlative to, its own subject matter (a constructivist approximation to the realist Aristotelian claim in the *Ethics* that an educated person will choose a method appropriate to the subject matter, neither too precise nor too rough). (Aristotle, 1936, p. 9)

This is not the forum for a careful policy discussion, but consider momentarily, by way of illustration, the baleful effects of the of the ongoing, misguided 20th century attempt to export the quantitative methods of corporate business management into the academic and military professions. In the former case, “general education” is reduced to vocational training as measures of successful teaching are reduced to those criteria which can be quantified (number of books written, number of students taught, number of students placed with employers, etc.) In the latter case both tactical military skill and moral balance generally are lost as the measures of success are quantified (e.g. body counts, number and tonnage of bombs dropped, etc.) to the exclusion of achievement of strategic and tactical goals insusceptible of quantification.

Arguably, in both instances, academic and military, the effect of this corporate import is really the creation of a new activity only nominally akin to what preceded it and deficient in performing the functions required of it. Viewed as supplements to the formulations of this middling level of generality, Oakeshott’s sometimes rhetorically hyperbolic⁶ ontological and epistemological claims find their appropriate fit and full explanatory force.

Concerning Oakeshott’s political tastes, we might simply observe in conclusion that his writing shows a clear preference for loose, general arrangements (such as civil association and

markets) which mirror the creative or “poetic” structure of experiential reality by allowing spontaneous orders to arise and function with minimal, prosaic centralized direction. However, that theme would be the subject of another paper.

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Notes

1. In his lengthy 1959 essay, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” Oakeshott presented the view of poetic or aesthetic experience as a separate modality of experience, detached from practical experience.

2. For development of the parallels between Oakeshott’s critique of Rationalism and Chinese Daoist thought (especially the *Zhuangzi*) see Coats and Cheung (2012). According to Oakeshott biographer Robert Grant (in private correspondence) Oakeshott read and discussed Emile Havelaue’s 1923 book *China* which is keen on similarities between Hegelianism and Daoism. Also, Oakeshott’s essays from the 1940s and 1950s are peppered with footnotes quoting Daoist and Confucian texts.

3. Oakeshott says that Descartes himself never became a “Cartesian,” but for the view that Oakeshott is too kind to Descartes on this point, see my essay “Oakeshott’s Descartes, Vico’s Descartes,” in Coats (2019).

4. There are limits to the degree to which Oakeshott’s account of experience may be called “constructivist” since he asserts an abiding structure in the emergence of settled modalities of experience arising in the tension between their form and content. (The quotation is from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1965, p. 20, where Kant is explaining his own subjectivist “Copernican Revolution” in metaphysics by exploring the possibility that the objects in experience “must conform to our knowledge” (p. 22) rather than the other way round.)

5. For development of the parallels between Oakeshott and 19th and 20th century German neo-Kantianism (especially that of Simmel and Rickert), see Podoksik (2013). For the view that Podoksik goes too far in characterizing as “fragmentationist” Oakeshott’s account of modern plurality, see Coats, 2019, pp. 20-35.

6. For examples of Oakeshottian hyperbole consider the claims that philosophy has no bearing on the practical conduct of life; that the human mind is incapable of functioning as a “neutral instrument” even when conducting operations of formal logic; that *no* skills are transferable from one idiom of activity to another; that to know the gist of something is to know nothing at all, and so on.

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