

OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF SOVEREIGNTY OF REASON

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1. PREAMBLE

Without doubt *Rationalism in Politics* is Oakeshott's best known work; but it is also Oakeshott's most misunderstood work. For his critique of sovereignty of reason – a core thesis of the work – is often read in a manner that dissociates it from the larger milieu in which it properly subsists, namely, Oakeshott's philosophy of experience.¹ Indeed on account of this selective reading, Oakeshott is sometimes labeled as an enemy of politics—one who is detached from politics and is uninterested in political affairs—or, again, as a conservative—that is, one who is at odds with modernity.²

Yet it remains to be seen whether these labels do justice to the complexity of Oakeshott. Paradoxically what is evident from Oakeshott's writings, as some commentators maintain, is that it is also possible to read Oakeshott as a liberal; given that a strong strain of individualism runs through all of Oakeshott's thought, as his account of the modes in *Experience and Its Modes* indicates. Or, again, as his account of moral agency in *On Human*

¹ Paul Franco, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 1. See also Debra Candreva, *The Enemies of Perfection: Oakeshott, Plato and the Critique of Rationalism* (London: Lexington Books, 2005), Chapter 1. The following abbreviations are used in the text to designate Oakeshott's works: EM=*Experience and its Modes*, RP=*Rationalism in Politics* and Other Essays, OHC=*On Human Conduct*, TB=*Tower of Babel*, RC=*Rational Conduct*, PE=*Political Education* and OBC=*On Being Conservative*

² See Elizabeth, Corey, "The World of Michael Oakeshott" *Book Review*, Summer 2006: pp. 260-268

Conduct also evidences, so that Oakeshott arguably emerges as a critic of modernity at the same time a defender of modernity.³

Indeed, if Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is inserted into the background of his philosophy of experience as articulated in *Experience and its Modes*, we begin to see that Oakeshott's concern in his critique of rationalism is to separate political activity from political theorization and ground ideology in tradition, so that with a bit of detachment from political experience, the philosopher of politics can assume philosophy's oversight function in critically interrogating the assumptions behind political activity and political theorization, with a view to underscoring the limits of ideological politics and the priority of tradition.⁴ It is our contention in this paper that this way of looking at Oakeshott's critique of the sovereignty of reason allows for a better appreciation of the contemporary relevance of Oakeshott's contributions to political discourse.

Consequently for sake of convenient exposition we develop our argument in terms of the following procedure. After a brief exploration of Oakeshott's concept of rationalism, especially the ambiguity that bedevils Oakeshott's relation to rationalism, we consider how Oakeshott's philosophy of experience provides a basis for his critique of rationalism. Following this we focus on Oakeshott's account of moral agency and how it enables Oakeshott to define the limits of ideological politics, with the result that Oakeshott's account of civil association is arguably a refined statement of the overall thrust of his critique of rationalism. The final step of our reflection considers the question of the contemporary relevance of Oakeshott. Let us begin then by focusing attention on Oakeshott's concept of rationalism and the ambiguity that defines it.

2. THE QUESTION OF OAKESHOTT'S CONCEPT OF RATIONALISM AND ITS AMBIGUITY

Of course it is in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* that Oakeshott systematically articulates his view of on the nature of politics. The core issue Oakeshott addresses in this series of post-war essays published in 1956 is the place of rationalism in politics or practical affairs in general. Understood as the view that reason is the measure of truth and knowledge the question is: what is the pertinence of rationalism in the organization of political affairs? Can we bring lasting order to bear on socio-political affairs by relying on the deliverances of pure reason alone in forms of theories of society and politics, or are there limits to which the dictates of reason can serve in managing the practical concerns of politics?⁵

2.1. OAKESHOTT'S SCEPTICISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE STATUS OF RATIONALISM

Instructively, in dealing with the question of the status of rationalism, Oakeshott's approach is skeptical in contrast to the optimism of the rationalist who believes that the practical problems of politics can be solved by mere intervention of the tribunal of pure reason. Of course in adopting a skeptical stance, Oakeshott does not necessarily deny there is a correlation between theory and practice.⁶ Nonetheless the point is that the correlation is

³ Wood, Neal. "A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott" in *Journal of Politics*, Volume 21, No 24 (November 1959), pp. 647-662

⁴ See Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 111-135. See also Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" in *Rationalism and Other Essays*, pp. 169-197

⁵ As Fuller correctly observes, "The very structure of *Rationalism in Politics* as a collection of essays is part of Oakeshott's stance against the modern quest for a science of social life."

⁶ EM, 34-5. See Terry Nardin, "Oakeshott on Theory and Practice" in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, Vol. 5, 2, 2015: pp. 310-322; See also Steven B. Smith, "Oakeshott on the Theory-Practice Problem: A

extrinsic rather than intrinsic, so that there is no guarantee that the light of pure reason necessarily brings any adequate solution to the troubled waters of politics.

Significantly while Oakeshott does not say there is an outright disruption between reason and political experience, he also does not share the rationalist assumption that *a-one-to-one* correspondence subsists between the structure of reason and the structure of political affairs.⁷ In other words, his overall point is that the link between the two spheres is so weak that we cannot hope to effectively solve the problem of the political by recourse to mere ideologies.⁸

It is a bit like the common saying that “life is larger than logic”. In this respect if logic is to serve at all in enabling us to navigate the perplexities of life, logic has to understand that there are mysteries in life that are in excess of its possibilities, so that the bound of meaning and truth is not co-extensive with the bound of reason.⁹ In other words logic cannot impose itself on life but must allow itself to be guided by the inherent template of life.¹⁰

Thus it emerges that pressed to the limit, political realities—like all existential realities, are ridden with ambiguities and to this extent—are in excess of what reason alone can decipher or master.¹¹ Indeed, politics, as the saying goes, is more about interests than simply a matter of rational principles or logical calculations, so that while our rational principles may be sound, the question, in the end, is whether they effectively address the particularity of the situation on the ground without needing the contributions of other voices beyond the voice of reason such as the voice of faith?¹²

The foregoing consideration enables us to place in proper context Oakeshott’s celebrated scepticism regarding the place of rationalism in politics. Oakeshott’s scepticism about the possibility of effective application of rational principles in dealing with the perplexities of politics is evident in the opening passage of *Rationalism in Politics*, for, here, he maintains that to fail to understand the limits of rationality in politics is to fail to understand the nature of political experience.¹³ In other words an understanding of the true nature of political experience instantiates the celebrated divide between theory and practice, meaning

Reply to Terry Nardin” in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, Vol. 5, 2, 2015: pp. 323-325

⁷ Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 3-4

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See “Rationalism in Politics” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 48

¹⁰ Ibid. In *Rationalism in Politics* Oakeshott notes that this is essentially the basic thrust of Pascal’s criticism of Descartes and Bacon, two great figures associated with the origin of modern rationalism. Nonetheless Oakeshott says that both figures are not necessarily to be blamed for the prevalence of the belief in the sovereignty of technique despite their commitment to the ideal of technique. The prevalence of the belief was a later development made possible by their over-zealous followers. Nonetheless Oakeshott recognizes Pascal as one of the earliest critiques of the idea of sovereignty of technique.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² We can detect of a possible influence of Bradley on Oakeshott here in respect of Bradley’s account of the ideality of judgment on account of both the ideality of the object and the ideality of the idea in terms of which judgment seeks to describe reality unconditionally. See F. H. Bradley, *Principles of Logic*, Vol. 1, 34. See also Damian Ilodigwe, “Bradley’s Account of Judgment: Between Metaphysics and Epistemology”, A Paper presented at the *Workshop of the British Idealism Specialist Group*, Gregynog, December 2014

¹³ See Michael Oakeshott, “Political Education” in *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 111-135

effectively, as noted, that our theories may be sound but fail to apply to concrete existential situations of political life.¹⁴

On Oakeshott's view, the *Achilles heel* of rationalism consists precisely in failure to grasp the significance of the disjunction between logic and political life and the restraint it legislates in respect of our desire to deal with practical matters by appealing merely to the tribunal of pure reason.¹⁵ Indeed Oakeshott complains in *Rationalism in Politics* that this failure to take into account the disconnection between rationality and politics and the scepticism it warrants defines the contemporary situation of European politics.¹⁶ Thus as Oakeshott makes clear at the start of his discourse in defining the object of his investigation into the place of rationalism in politics,

The object of this essay is to consider the character and pedigree of the most remarkable fashion of post-renaissance Europe. The rationalism with which I am concerned is modern rationalism. No doubt its surface reflects the light of rationalism of a more distant past, but in its depth there is a quality exclusively its own, and it is this quality that I propose to consider, and to consider mainly in its impact upon European politics. What I call rationalism in politics is not of course the only (and it is certainly not the most fruitful) fashion in modern European political thinking. But it is a strong and a lively manner of thinking which, finding support in its filiation with so much else that is strong in the intellectual composition of contemporary Europe has come to color the ideas, not merely of one, but of all political persuasions and to flow over every party line. By one road or another, by conviction, by its supposed inevitability, by its alleged success, or even quite unreflectively, almost all politics today have become Rationalist or near-Rationalist. (RP, 1)

Anyone familiar with the history of modern philosophy should be able to place Oakeshott's concern in the above passage, especially in the light of the changes introduced into the scheme of things by the birth of modern science. The breakdown of the medieval synthesis apparently witnesses the supremacy of reason.¹⁷ This in a sense is what the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century celebrates in the end, as should be evident from the enlightenment movement that sought to liberate mankind from immaturity and bring him into a new epoch of civilization.

Apparently the sign of man's liberation and self-becoming according to the proponents of the enlightenment is that humanity relies on his rationality while jettisoning any form of reliance on tradition and authority.¹⁸ Kant, for instance, a major proponent of the enlightenment was convinced that the emergence of modernity heralded the maturity of mankind, liberating him from excessive dependence on authority that characterized his mode

¹⁴ See Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 11-12; See also Terry Nardin, "Oakeshott on Theory and Practice" in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2015, Special Issue Rationalism in Politics and its Limits, pp. 310-322.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, See also his "Tower of Babel" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 59-79

¹⁷ See W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: The Modern Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), Chapter 4

¹⁸ Cf. Marvin Perry, Joseph R. Peden and Theodore H. Von Laue, *Sources of the Western Tradition*, Third Edition: Volume 1: From Ancient Times to the Enlightenment (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), Chapter 12ff.

of operation hitherto.¹⁹ Indeed Kant insists that the “motto of the enlightenment is: “sapere audare! Have the courage to use your own understanding! In the words of Kant,

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.²⁰

From what Kant says it is evident that the march of enlightenment and its agenda of bringing progress were predicated on this clarion call to abandon authority and enthrone reason as the measure of things. The evolution of modern philosophy can hardly be understood without reference to the claim of reason as the ground of normativity.²¹ Thus with the collapse of the medieval synthesis and the emergence of the modern world the authority of Aristotle and the Bible increasingly came under attack as the new science of nature promoted by the likes of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo continued to make waves and win admirers.²²

Indeed the pragmatic success of the new science in dominating nature and harnessing its resources to the benefits of mankind conferred unprecedented credibility on the method of the new science, thus legitimizing its extension to other areas of existence as the legitimate method of investigation.²³ Indeed with more than three hundred years of the emergence of modern science, the scientific method has come to be accepted as a valid method of investigation in several domains including philosophy, humanities and the social sciences. It has been effectively adopted in the study of nature, the study of man, the study of economics, the study of society and indeed the study of politics.²⁴ Virtually no areas have resisted the influence of the scientific method so far as the basic belief that the same success recorded in the study of nature can be replicated in other areas, if the scientific method is rigorously applied in the study of the phenomenon.

2.2. THE QUESTION OF CHARACTERIZATION OF THE RATIONALIST DISPOSITION

Instructively it is the extension of the method of science to other domains of existence especially politics that Oakeshott interrogates in *Rationalism in Politics*. Like Hume had done before him in respect of rationalist metaphysics, predicated on geometric method, Oakeshott introduces a moment of deflation in accentuating the limits of pure reason and the fundamental disconnect that subsists between the structure of reason and the structure of political experience.²⁵ As Oakeshott says in exposing the positivist prejudice concerning the supremacy of scientific rationality as it pertains to matters political,

¹⁹ See Kant, “*What is Enlightenment?*” a tract in which he offers a definition of the enlightenment.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See William Maker, *Philosophy Without Foundation: rethinking Hegel*, Chapter 11

²² Cf. Marvin Perry, Joseph R. Peden and Theodore H. Von Laue, *Sources of the Western Tradition*, Third Edition: Volume 1: From Ancient Times to the Enlightenment (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), Chapter 12ff.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See “Rationalism in Politics” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 23. At the start of the *Treatise* Hume boldly announces his intention of instituting the science of Human nature. At the heart of this of course is the craze to apply the new method of science as articulated by Newton to interrogate human nature and explain its dynamics. Of course within the frame-work of such science of human nature there is clearly no place for the sort of

The general character and disposition of the rationalist are, I think not difficult to identify. At bottom he stands (he always stands) for the independence of mind on all occasion, for thought free, from obligation to any authority save authority of reason. His circumstances in the modern world have made him contentious: he is the enemy of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual. His mental attitude is at once skeptical and optimistic: skeptical because there is no option, 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 (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion, or properly of an action. Moreover, he is fortified by a belief in a 'reason' common to all mankind, a common power of rational argument. But besides this, which gives the rationalist a touch of intellectual equalitarianism he is something also of an individualist, finding it difficult to believe that anyone who can think honestly and clearly will think differently from himself (RP, 1)

Apparently the portrait of the rationalist that Oakeshott sketches above is of one who is out of touch with reality or experience in its concreteness but super-imposes his theoretical determination on reality or experience; and, so far as the determinations are not informed by what is actually the case, there is no way of doing justice to concrete experience.²⁶ In other words in his seeming inhospitality to the concreteness of experience and to inherent values, the rationalist relies on the power of reason and builds his own constructions which are hardly true to the way things are; and, as a result, he runs the risk of misunderstanding what is on the ground.²⁷ Yet if the rationalist is out of touch with concrete experience, it is all because of excessive reliance on the power of reason without having a real anchor in *experience qua experience*.²⁸

The point is that by its very nature pure reason as deployed by the rationalist cannot be anchored in experience and so cannot do justice to political experience. Here lies precisely the Achilles heel of rationalism and so long as this is not understood its limits will also be misunderstood. On his part Oakeshott apparently understands the import of the disconnection between logic and reality hence he urges that our attitude must be one of circumspection when it comes to relying on rational theories to solve practical problems of political life.²⁹ Oakeshott makes his point explicit in elaborating his complaints about the rationalist temper thus:

rationalist metaphysics that held sway before then and was exemplified by thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. It is little surprising, therefore, that Hume ditches metaphysics for a type of naturalism. As he says in a famous passage in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "When we run over libraries, persuaded by these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hands any volume - of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance-let us ask, "Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number (i.e. analytics truths)? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence (i. e. synthetic truths)? No. Commit it then to flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

²⁶ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 14-17

²⁷ Cf. Michael Oakeshott, "On Rational Conduct" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 80-109

²⁸ Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 23

²⁹ See Timothy Fuller, "Editor's Introduction" in *Michael Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, xii-xiii

He does not neglect experience but he often appears to do so because he insists always upon it being its own experience (wanting to begin everything *de novo*) and because of the rapidity with which he reduces the tangle and variety of experience to a set of principles which he will then attack or defend only upon rational grounds. He has no sense of cumulative experience; only of the readiness of experience when it has been converted into a formula; the past is significant to him only as an encumbrance. He has none of the negative capability (which Keats attributed to Shakespeare), the power of accepting mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness, only the capability of subjugating experience; he has no aptitude for that close and detailed appreciation of what actually presents itself which Lichtenbeerg called negative enthusiasm, but only the power of recognizing the large outline which a general theory imposes. (RP, 6)

2.3. RATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE CLAIM OF SOVEREIGNTY OF TECHNIQUE

To achieve a full conspectus of Oakeshott's concept of rationalism and its inherent ambiguity, it is important to keep in mind that Oakeshott's critique of rationalism has a specific target in view. While Oakeshott recognizes that all forms of rationalism are inherently inadequate –and to this extent his scepticism about the place of rationalism in practical affairs, but especially political affairs, will be effective against all forms of rationalism–Oakeshott's focus nonetheless is on modern rationalism. (See RP, 1)³⁰ Oakeshott's interest in modern rationalism stems from the fact that it involves a certain abuse of reason to the extent that reason is treated as sovereign over nature without recognition of the dependence of reason on nature. (Cf. RP, 7)

Thus while Oakeshott is not necessarily opposed to reason *per se* Oakeshott's overall point is to interrogate the *apotheosis* of reason under the rubrics of technique.³¹ Indeed Oakeshott takes it that modern rationalism paradigmatically exemplifies the abuse of reason under the rubrics of technique, given its obsession with the ideal of certainty and method, so that in attacking rationalism, Oakeshott's broader agenda is to understand how the prevalence of the belief in the sovereignty of reason as technique has conditioned European civilization in all its ramifications, especially in its morality and politics. (RP, 1)

Indeed Oakeshott explicitly sums up the predicament of European civilization in terms of rationalism, arguing, as it were, that the prevalence of the rationalist disposition in European

³⁰ Commentators are largely agreed about the equivocality of Oakeshott's target. It is usual to associate his critique of rationalism with the post-war political situation in Britain where collectivism and ideal of central social planning held sway. While there is nothing wrong in placing Oakeshott's attack on rationalism in this context the point is that it is simply too narrow as Oakeshott was fundamentally troubled by the enlightenment rationalism and its impact on European politics and morals. Arguably Twentieth century rationalism and its various criticisms are sophisticated versions of enlightenment's privileging of reason over tradition and prejudice. Viewed in this respect it is not surprising that Oakeshott is again and again associated with contemporary critics of rationalism such as Arendt, Hayek, Berlin and Habermas. Nonetheless to do justice to uniqueness of Oakeshott's position will require that we see his concerns with the problem of rationalism as much broader than the post-war situation in Europe. See Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), Chapter 4

³¹ Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4. See also his *Introduction to The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4 and also his "Oakeshott's Critique of Rationalism Revisited" in the *Political Science Reviewer*, pp. 16-43

politics and morality has precipitated certain crisis in European civilization. What this implies immediately is that Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is not culturally neutral, so far as, in the final analysis, it involves a fundamental diagnosis of the predicament of European civilization.³²

Significantly Oakeshott is not equivocal at all about the cultural underpinning of his attack on rationalism; for he tells us explicitly at the start *Rationalism in Politics* that his point is to "consider and consider mainly the impact of modern rationalism upon European civilization." (RP, 1) Elsewhere he says even more clearly in respect of his purpose, "My object is not to refute rationalism; its errors are interesting only in so far as they reveal its character. We are considering not merely the truth of a doctrine, but the significance of an intellectual fashion in the history of post-Renaissance Europe." (RP, 13)

Given Oakeshott's broad agenda in respect of his critique of rationalism it is not surprising that after characterizing the rationalist disposition in the early part of *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott moves immediately to address the question of the impact of rationalism in European politics. In accentuating the corruptive influence of rationalism in politics, Oakeshott identifies a number of anomalies (features) associated with rationalistic politics.

First is that because of the excessive emphasis on the claim of certainty and technique to the exclusion of the claim of tradition, authority and prejudice in the dynamics of politics, politics under the influence of rationalism often tends to degenerate into a matter of problem-solving.³³ Construed as a matter of social engineering with a mandate to fix the problem of society, rationalistic disposition also leads to ideological politics as the grounding assumption is that there is solution to every problem and the solution is to be found in different kinds of ideologies.³⁴

Yet apart from leading to ideological politics, Oakeshott also believes that the prevalence of rationalism in politics means that politics is bound to become "politics of perfection" and "politics of uniformity", whereby it is assumed that no problem is beyond solution and all problems can be subsumed under one mould, leading to unnecessarily determinism, artificiality and superficiality. For Oakeshott "the essence of rationalism" lies in the combination of both characteristics, so that either of them without the other denotes a different kind of politics.³⁵ In his words,

The evanescence of imperfection may be said to be the first item of the creed of the rationalist. He is not devoid of humility. He can imagine a problem which would remain impervious to the onslaught of his own reason. But what he cannot imagine is politics which do not consist in solving problems, or a political problem of which there is no rational solution at all. Such a problem must be counterfeit. And the 'rational' solution of any problem is, in its nature, the perfect solution. There is no place in his scheme for a 'best in the circumstances', only a place for 'the best', because the function of reason is precisely to surmount circumstances. (RP, 6)

Oakeshott continues:

Of course the rationalist is not always a perfectionist in general, his mind governed in each occasion by a comprehensive Utopia; but invariably he is a perfectionist in detail. And from the politics of perfection springs the politics of uniformity; a scheme which does not recognize circumstance can have no place for variety. (RP, 6-7)

³² Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

³³ Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism and Other Essays*, pp. 8-10

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy: An Introduction*, p. 84

3. OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF ITS EPISTEMIC BASIS

From our account so far it is evident that, for Oakeshott, the belief in the sovereignty of technique is the core element that defines the rationalist outlook, so that all that is wrong with rationalism arguably derives from this exaggerated interpretation of reason. Thus if rationalism tends to “reduce experience to a set of principles”, it is largely because of the confidence it reposes in the superiority of technique as the criterion of truth and meaning. Similarly if rationalism lead to ideological politics or the “politics of reforms” and “repairs”; or again, if rationalism leads to the “politics of felt needs” or the “politics of perfection” and “uniformity”, all these can be understood in term of the privileging of technique by rationalism.

Given Oakeshott's conviction regarding the centrality of the belief in sovereignty of technique in the architectonic of the rationalist outlook, it is not surprising that Oakeshott devotes considerable attention to examining the claim of the belief in the sovereignty of technique. Of course the understanding here is that if this account of reason is shown to be bankrupt the whole case for rationalism collapses, so that Oakeshott's rejection of the *apotheosis* of technique is a pivotal moment in his critique of rationalism.

3.1. THE QUESTION OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE: INTERROGATING THE CLAIMS OF SOVEREIGNTY OF TECHNIQUE

In what follows, therefore, we will focus on Oakeshott's specific objections against the ideal of technique and how it furnishes an epistemic basis for Oakeshott's rejection of rationalism. Approaching Oakeshott's critique of rationalism via his rejection of the sovereignty of technique not only cast Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in bold relief, but it also reveals how both considerations correlate, and, in fact, depend on Oakeshott's philosophy of experience as articulated in *Experience and its Modes*. But first let us start with the specifics of Oakeshott's critique of the belief in the sovereignty of technique.

In signaling the importance of the belief in the sovereignty of technique for the rationalist outlook, Oakeshott tells us in *Rationalism in Politics* that the “hidden spring of rationalism is the doctrine about human knowledge.” (RP, 11) Of course Oakeshott refers here to the two basic kinds of knowledge involved in every human activity, namely, technical knowledge and practical knowledge. For Oakeshott, “every science, art and indeed every practical activity” (RP, 11) is inconceivable without technical knowledge and practical knowledge. Technical knowledge, otherwise known as propositional knowledge is “knowledge that” as distinguished from “know how”, and it consists entirely of formulated rules, principles or maxims.

In other words, it is the sort of knowledge that can be found or learned from books, whether they be legal codes, cookbooks, or books containing rules or methods for an intellectual discipline or activity. By familiarizing ourselves with such rules or procedures one can participate in or engage in the activity in question. Concerning the dynamics of this first kind of knowledge Oakeshott explains thus in *Rationalism and Politics*,

In many activities this technical knowledge is formulated into rules which are or may be deliberately learned, remembered, and as we say put into practice; but whether or not it is or has been precisely formulated, it is susceptible to precise formulation; although special skill and insight may be required to give it that formulation. The technique (or part of it) of driving a motor car on English roads is to be found in Highway Code; the technique of cookery as contained in the cookery book and the technique of discovery in the natural

science or history is in their rules of research of observation and verification.
(RP, 7-8)

The overall point here is that technical knowledge provides propositional guide for engaging in human activity. By contrast the second kind of knowledge, that is, practical knowledge or traditional knowledge is not the sort of knowledge that can be learnt from books or manuals nor can it be formulated into rules. Usually it is embodied in the activity itself within a living tradition and can be acquired only by being a member of a community in which the activity is carried out.³⁶ More often than not practical knowledge is learnt by observation, not by following rules or procedure. As Oakeshott says, practical knowledge exists only in use and is not reflective, so that it is not a matter of following a method but it is just a matter of just doing, hence it is also called knowledge how.

Indeed to contrast practical knowledge with technical knowledge, practical knowledge is sometimes designated as personal knowledge as opposed to propositional knowledge.³⁷ On Oakeshott's view practical knowledge or traditional knowledge is so fundamental that no concrete activity can be carried out without practical knowledge, meaning that even when technical knowledge is present it always presupposes practical knowledge so that on its own technical knowledge does not suffice.³⁸

As should be evident from the foregoing the highpoint of Oakeshott's account of the two kinds of knowledge involved in every practical activity is the fact that both of them constitutes the essence of knowledge, so that we cannot separate them without mutilating the structure of knowledge. We may assert the claim of technical knowledge but this must always be done with recognition of its dependence on practical knowledge.³⁹ Indeed as Oakeshott says by way of illustration of the inseparability of both forms of knowledge:

In a practical art such as cookery, nobody supposes that the knowledge that belongs to the good cook is confined to what is or maybe written down in cookery book; technique and what I have called practical knowledge combine to make skill in cookery, wherever it exists. And the same is true of fine art, of painting, of music, of poetry; a high degree of technical knowledge, even where it is both subtle and ready is one thing; the ability to create a work of art, the ability to compose something with real musical qualities, the ability to write a great sonnet, is another and requires in addition to technique, this other sort of knowledge (RP 12)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See Stevens B. Smith, "Practical life and the Critique of Rationalism" in *Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* edited by Ephraim Podolski, p. 137. In respect of the topic of practical knowledge and technical knowledge there are significant convergence between Oakeshott, Polanyi and Heidegger. Polanyi tends to present technical knowledge in terms of the category of propositional knowledge and practical knowledge in terms of the category of personal knowledge. The distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge is presupposed by Heidegger's account of what he calls technological thinking and the forgetfulness of being. For the reason of the affinity between Oakeshott, Polanyi and Heidegger, their thoughts are often compared as the distinction plays a key role in their critique of modern philosophy. See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). See also Walter B. Mead, The Importance of Michael Oakeshott for Polanyian Studies: Reflections on Oakeshott's The Voice of Liberal Learning, pp. 37- 44. See also Martin Heidegger, *On the Essence of Truth*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Stevens B. Smith, "Practical life and the Critique of Rationalism" in *Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* edited by Ephraim Podolski, p. 137.

What is clear therefore, for Oakeshott, is that while we can distinguish both forms of knowledge we cannot separate them without falsifying the nature of human knowledge or human activity.⁴⁰ Yet on Oakeshott's estimation the Achilles heels of rationalism consists precisely in such separation; for the essence of rationalism is that it denies the epistemic value of practical or traditional knowledge, recognizing only technical knowledge.⁴¹

Of course the problem with the rationalist is that he does not take into cognizance the fact that besides technical knowledge there is also practical knowledge and more importantly that technical knowledge is always privative on practical knowledge. On the contrary, the rationalist absolutizes technical knowledge and treats it as the only form of knowledge. But by so doing the rationalist ideal of knowledge is nothing but abstraction and, so, can hardly do justice to the principle of coherence at work in human activity. As Oakeshott makes explicit in *Rationalism in Politics*,

As I understand it, Rationalism is the assertion that what I have called practical knowledge is not knowledge at all, the assertion that properly speaking there is no knowledge which is not technical knowledge. The rationalist holds that the only element of knowledge involved in any human activity is technical knowledge and that what I have called practical knowledge is really only a sort of nescience which would be negligible if it were not positively mischievous. The sovereignty of reason for the rationalist means the sovereignty of technique. (RP, 15)

Oakeshott continues,

Now I have suggested that the knowledge involved in every concrete activity is never solely technical knowledge. If this is true it would appear that the error of rationalist is of a simple sort – the error of mistaking a part for the whole; of endowing a part with the qualities of the whole. But the error of the rationalist does not stop there. If his great illusion is the sovereignty of technique, he is no less deceived by the apparent certainty of technical knowledge. The superiority of technical knowledge lies in its appearance of springing from pure ignorance and ending in certain and complete knowledge its appearance of both beginning and ending with certainty. But in fact this is an illusion. As with every other sort of knowledge, learning a technique does not consist in getting rid of pure ignorance, but in reforming knowledge which is already there. Nothing, not even the most nearly self-contained technique (the rules of a game) can in fact be imparted on an empty mind; and what is imparted is nourished by what is already there. A man who knows the rules of one game will, on this account rapidly learn the rule of another game; and a man altogether unfamiliar with “rules” of any kind (if such can be imagined) would be most unpromising pupil. And just as the self-made man is never literally self-made, but depends upon certain kind of society and upon large unrecognized inheritance, so technical knowledge is never in fact, self-complete, and can be made to appear so only if we forget the hypothesis with which it begins. And if its self-completion is illusory the certainty which is attributed to it on account of its self-completion is also an illusion. (RP, 15)

What is clear from Oakeshott's account of the distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge is that the alleged sovereignty of technique as canvassed by rationalism is predicated on a false theory of knowledge. Simply put its claim to self-completion and independence does not reflect the true situation of human knowledge or

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction*, p. 84

human activity. For, it takes what is a part for the whole and endows it with the qualities of the whole.⁴²

3.2. THE QUESTION OF THE CORRELATION BETWEEN OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM AND HIS PHILOSOPHY OF EXPERIENCE

We should take particular note of Oakeshott's complaint that the error of the rationalist consists in mistaking a part for the whole. For, this point significantly echoes Oakeshott's doctrine of experience as articulated in *Experience and its Modes*, which doctrine furnishes the epistemological and metaphysical foundation for Oakeshott's account of the relationship between the various modes of experience, both in their internal constitution as well as in their relationship with other modes and indeed in their relationship with absolute experience.

Central to Oakeshott's doctrine of experience is the claim that experience is a concrete whole, "a whole which, analysis divides into experiencing and what is experienced." (EM, 8) In maintaining this position the point is not to deny that there are polarities in experience. Yet while experience admits of polarities or divisions within it, the overall point of saying that experience is a concrete whole, is to deny that the polarities or divisions within experience constitute the concrete whole of experience. Indeed as Oakeshott affirms explicitly in clarifying the main thrust of his doctrine of experience:

The view I propose to maintain is that experience is a single whole within which modifications may be distinguished, but which admits of no final or absolute division; and that experience everywhere, not merely is inseparable from thought, but is itself a form of thought. It is not, of course, wrong to distinguish (for example) sensation, reflection, volition, feeling and intuition; the error lies in supposing that in so doing we are considering activities which are different in principle and can be separated from one another finally and absolutely. They are products of analysis, lifeless abstractions which (like all such) call out to be joined to the concrete whole to which they belong and whence they derive their nature. All abstract and incomplete experience is modification of what is complete, individual and concrete, and to this it must be referred if we are to ascertain its character. (EM, 10-11)

The issue here clearly concerns the question of the unity of this concrete whole of experience and whether any of the elements within it can constitute its unity. The answer, for Oakeshott, is no. None of the elements within the whole, or, all of the elements put together constitute the unity of the whole. The elements relate to the whole as abstract experience relate to concrete experience. In other words while there is allowance for division within the concrete whole of experience, the divisions are abstract expressions of the concrete whole. That is why Oakeshott says that "Experiencing and what is experienced are, taken separately, meaningless abstractions, given that as correlates "they stand to one another in the most complete inter-dependence, composing a single whole." (EM, 9)

This doctrine of experience, otherwise known as the doctrine of concrete universal, eschews dualism in all its ramifications and is part and parcel of what Oakeshott inherited from his idealist predecessors.⁴³ As Franco Paul notes, the doctrine constitutes the philosophical backbone of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism.⁴⁴ Franco is certainly right; for

⁴² See Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 16

⁴³ See Damian Ilodigwe, "Oakeshott's Debt to Bradley", Paper presented at the Conference on "The Place of Michael Oakeshott in Contemporary Western and Non-Western Thought" at the Centre for Idealism and New Liberalism, Hull University, UK, 17-19 September, 2015, pp. 1-32

⁴⁴ Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction*, p. 85

what Oakeshott invokes in rejecting the alleged sovereignty of technique is the principle of coherence at the heart of the doctrine of concrete universal.⁴⁵

The point is that, if, both technical knowledge and practical knowledge are forms of knowledge involved in human activity, as Oakeshott says, and as such make up the concrete whole of knowledge in this specific context, we cannot treat either of them as independent without violating the principle of coherence at work in concrete experience. The point is that neither practical knowledge nor technical knowledge make up the concrete whole of experience. As an element within the concrete whole, they relate with the concrete whole but do not constitute the concrete whole and to treat either of them as independent of the other, as the rationalist does with technical knowledge is to baptize an abstract experience as concrete experience.

What emerges therefore is that the concrete logic of experience Oakeshott articulates in *Experience and its Modes* constitutes the epistemological and metaphysical foundation for his rejection of the doctrine of the alleged sovereignty of technique and by implication his critique of rationalism, if indeed the belief in the supremacy of technique is the core element that defines the rationalist outlook.⁴⁶ We certainly cannot underestimate the broader significance of Oakeshott's doctrine of concrete experience, for, the service it renders in *Rationalism in Politics* in rejecting the apotheosis of technique is the same service it renders in *Experience and its Modes* in moderating the relationship between the modes of experience and thus obviating the despotism of one mode against another.⁴⁷

In this specific context Oakeshott's rejection of the despotism of technique in *Rationalism in Politics* parallels his rejection of the despotism of positivism, historicism and pragmatism in *Experience and Its Modes* so far as the same logic of coherence informs all the rejections.⁴⁸ Indeed it is instructive that in discussing practical experience in the fourth chapter of *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott is careful to insist that practical experience is not concrete experience even though by virtue of the principle of coherence at work in practical experience, its inherent telos is to overcome its abstract nature and attain wholeness.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 16

⁴⁶ Cf. Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction*, Chapter 4

⁴⁷ As Oakeshott says explicitly in EM 4, "Philosophy when it is taken to be experience without reservation or arrest cannot disdain its responsibility of accounting for the arrests which occur in experience, or at least the responsibility of determining their character. Indeed, this might be considered the main business of a philosophy conceived in this way. For ordinarily our experience is not clear and unclouded by abstract categories and postulates, but confused and distracted by a thousand extraneous purposes. And unless we are exceptionally fortunate, a clear and unclouded experience is to be realized only by a process of criticism and rejection. In philosophy, then, it is not less necessary to be unwearied in rejection than in invention, and it is certainly more difficult. But, further, in philosophy, nothing may be merely rejected. A form of experience is fallacious and to be rejected in so far as it fails to provide what is satisfactory in experience. But its refutation is not to be accomplished merely by ignoring or dismissing it. To refute is to exhibit the principle of the fallacy or error in virtue of which a form of experience falls short of complete coherence; it is to discover both the half truth in the error and the error in the half truth"

⁴⁸ See Damian Ilodigwe, "Oakeshott's Debt to Bradley", Paper presented at the Conference on "The Place of Michael Oakeshott in Contemporary Western and Non-Western Thought at the Centre for Idealism and New Liberalism, Hull University, UK, 17-19 September, 2015, pp. 1-32

⁴⁹ See Michael Oakeshott, EM, Chapter 4

In the context of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism, this point is significant, for, in rejecting technical knowledge as abstraction Oakeshott is also wary not to constitute practical knowledge into the whole of knowledge, albeit he recognizes the priority of practical knowledge to technical knowledge as far as the architecture of knowledge is concerned.⁵⁰ The point, then, is that all the time Oakeshott's account of the distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge points us back to the doctrine of experience he articulated in *Experience and Its Modes*, so that properly understood, Oakeshott's critique of rationalism must be situated in the larger context of his doctrine of experience.⁵¹

4. OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM AND HIS ACCOUNT OF MORALITY: THE QUESTION OF THE LIMITS OF IDEOLOGICAL POLITICS

So far our account of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism has assumed the form of interrogating the use to which Oakeshott put the distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge in debunking the apotheosis of technique. Yet it is arguable that apart from this epistemic premise, there are other possible bases for rejection of rationalism in Oakeshott's thought. Oakeshott's concern in *Rationalism in Politics* no doubt is to articulate an epistemic basis but in later essays that constitute the collection of essays known as *Rationalism in Politics* such as *Tower of Babel* and *On Rational Conduct* and *Political Education*, there is an intimation of moral as well as political bases for rejecting rationalism – which intimation finds consummate expression in Oakeshott's *magnum opus*, *On Human Conduct*.⁵²

4. 1. OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CUSTOMARY MORALITY AND REFLECTIVE MORALITY

As a way of complementing our account of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism we shall consider in what follows the moral and political bases intimated in Oakeshott's other works, beginning with the *Tower of Babel*, an essay that Oakeshott published in 1948. In *Tower of Babel* Oakeshott continues his assault on Rationalism; but in this context Oakeshott offers a further characterization of the rationalist temper in terms of a moral category, not the epistemic category of *Rationalism in Politics*.⁵³ Precisely, without necessarily abandoning the distinction between technical and practical knowledge that looms so large in *Rationalism and Politics*, *Tower of Babel* reformulates the predicament of European civilization in terms of the distinction between two kinds of morality, namely, customary morality or the morality of habit of behaviour in contradistinction from reflective morality.⁵⁴

The hallmark of customary morality is that it is not self-conscious, that is, it knows nothing of moral ideals or principles but enjoys a certain degree of immediacy as far as its inner dynamics is concerned so far as it is driven by habit. As Oakeshott says in explaining its dynamics,

It is a habit of affection and behavior; not a habit of reflective thought, but a habit of affection and conduct. The current situations of a normal life are met, not by consciously applying to ourselves a rule of behavior, nor by conduct recognized as expression of a moral ideal, but by acting in accordance with a certain habit of behaviour. The moral life in this form does not spring from the consciousness of possible alternative ways of behaving and a choice, determined by an opinion, a rule or an ideal, from among other alternatives;

⁵⁰ See EM, Chapter 4

⁵¹ See Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See Michael Oakeshott, "Tower of Babel" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 59-79

⁵⁴ Ibid.

conduct is as nearly as possible without reflection. And consequently most of the current situations of life do not appear as occasions calling for judgment, or as problems requiring solutions; there is no weighing up of alternatives or reflection on consequences, no uncertainty, no battle of scruples. There is nothing on the occasion, nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up. (TB, 61)

Oakeshott defines the second type of morality, that is, reflective morality by contrasting it to the first. The hallmark of reflective morality is the emphasis that is placed upon self-consciousness, for in this type of morality, there is no room for habit. Activity is not determined by habit but by the reflective application of a moral criterion. In the words of Oakeshott, reflective morality is “a form of morality in which a special value is attributed to self-consciousness, individual or social; not only is the rule or the ideal the product of reflective thought, but the application of the rule or ideal to the situation is also a reflective activity.” (TB, 66)

In explaining the dynamics of this sort of moral life, Oakeshott identified a threefold task the subject must perform. First is to articulate the ideal in words. Second is to be ready to defend them for once in the public domain they are inevitably liable to attack and third there is also the need to translate the articulated ideals into behavior by applying them to current situation. In this respect existential situation of life appear as problems to be solved.⁵⁵

At face value both forms of morality appear to be exclusive opposites as one affirms what the other denies, namely, customary morality is “all about habit and reflective morality is all about self-consciousness”.⁵⁶ Instructively Oakeshott is aware of the seeming opposition between the two types but he says that neither of them constitutes the essence of the moral form, so that we cannot rest on either of them without misunderstanding the true nature of morality. Each of the forms represents an extreme and, to attain the ideal form of morality, both forms require to be mixed.⁵⁷

In this respect Oakeshott envisages two scenario of mixture. First a mixture of the two types in which reflective morality is the dominant type and second a mixture of the two types in which customary morality is the dominant. Whatever option obtains the point is that the two form an amalgam. Yet the question as to which is dominant is crucial for Oakeshott for he does not believe that it is appropriate for reflective morality to be dominant in the mixture.⁵⁸

On his view the mixture in which reflection dominates always represents a certain corruption of morality.⁵⁹ It is to the credit of reflective morality that it is self-critical but its advantage pales into insignificance relative to its disadvantages for the latter outweigh the former.⁶⁰ Paradoxically what counts in its favor in one context is what rubbishes it in the final analysis; for, in view its excessive stress on self-consciousness, it tends to undermine or paralyze action just as it is also incapable of adapting to change. Moreover it is inelastic, unnecessarily perfectionistic and can lead to obsession about one moral ideal to the exclusion of others.⁶¹ As Oakeshott says explicitly in respect of the disadvantages of a mixture in which reflective morality dominates:

⁵⁵ Michael Oakeshott, “Tower of Babel” in *Rationalism in Politics*, 66

⁵⁶ Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

⁵⁷ Michael Oakeshott, “Tower of Babel” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 60-62

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ See Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

⁶¹ Ibid.

A morality whose form is a mixture in which the second form of our extremes is dominant will, I think suffers from a permanent tension between its component parts. Taking charge, the morality of the self-conscious pursuit of ideals will have a disintegrating effect upon habits of behavior. When action is called for, speculation or criticism will supervene. Behaviour itself will tend to become problematical seeking its self-confidence in the coherence of an ideology. The pursuit of perfection will get in the way of a stable and flexible moral tradition, the naïve coherence of which will be prized less than the unity that springs from self-conscious analysis and synthesis. It will seem more important to have an intellectually defensible moral theology than a ready habit of moral behaviour. And it will come to be assumed that a morality which is not easily transferable to another society, which lacks an obvious universality, is (for that reason) inadequate for the needs of the society of its origin. The society will wait upon its self-appointed moral teachers, pursuing the extremes they recommend and at a loss when they are silent. The distinguished and inspiring visiting preacher, who nevertheless is a stranger by the way we live, will displace the priest, the father of his parish. In a moral life constantly or periodically suffering the ravages of the armies of conflicting ideals, or (when these for the time have passed) falling into the hands of censors and inspectors, the cultivation of a habit of moral behaviour will have little opportunity as the cultivation of the land when the farmer is confused and distracted by academic critics and political directors. Indeed, in such a mixture (where habit of behavior is subordinate to the pursuit of ideals) each of the components unavoidably playing the role foreign to its character; as in a literature in which criticism has usurped the place of poetry, or I a religious life in which the pursuit of theology offers itself as an alternative to the practice of piety. (RP, 71-72)

Interestingly what seems to be the loss of the mixture of morality in which reflection dominates is the gain of the mixture in which habit dominates. For, instead of the arrest of moral spontaneity, which reflection provokes, the morality in which habit dominates witnesses no such inhibition.⁶² Indeed as Oakeshott says in praise of the latter model of mixture:

In a mixture in which the first of these extremes is dominant, the moral life may be expected to be immune from confusion between behavior and the pursuit of ideal. Action will retain its primacy, and whenever it is called for, will spring from habit of behavior. Conduct itself will never become problematical, inhibited by the hesitations of ideal speculation or the felt necessity of bringing philosophic talent and the fruits of philosophic education to bear upon the situation. The confidence in action, which belongs to the well-nurtured customary moral life, will remain unshaken. And the coherence of the moral life will not wait upon the abstract unity which the reflective relation of values can give it. But, in addition, this mixed form of the moral life may be supposed to 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. It will enjoy also the appropriate intellectual confidence in its moral standards and purposes. And it will enjoy all this without the danger of moral criticism

⁶² Ibid

usurping the place of habit of moral behaviour, or of moral speculation bringing disintegration to moral life. (RP, 71)

4. 2. OAKSHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE MORAL PREDICAMENT OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION

It is instructive that Oakeshott raises the question of the form of morality in presenting the two types of morality; for, in the final analysis, as we have seen, his point is that none of the two types singly constitutes the form of morality but both have to combine in order to generate the proper form of morality, meaning effectively, therefore, that we are confronted with nothing but abstraction should either be presented as the form of morality.

As will emerge from our discussion Oakeshott's point, in fact, is that the balance between the two in constituting the essence of morality has not always been respected. In the context of modern European civilization the one that has been accentuated is reflective morality whereas on Oakeshott's view properly understood the two need to blend and even in this amalgam traditional morality strictly speaking should predominate and not reflective morality. As Oakeshott laments in his critique of Western morality:

The remarkable thing about contemporary European morality is not merely that its form is dominated by self-conscious pursuit of ideals, but that this form is generally thought to be better and higher than any other. A morality of habit of behavior is dismissed as primitive and obsolete; the pursuit of moral ideals (whatever discontent there may be with the ideals themselves) is identified with moral enlightenment. And further, it is prized (and has been particularly prized on this account since the seventeenth century) because it appears to hold out the possibility of that most sought-after consummation – a “scientific” morality. It is to be feared, however, that, in both these appearances we are sadly deceived. The pursuit of moral ideals has proved itself (as might be expected) an untrustworthy form of morality, the spring neither of a practical nor “scientific” moral life. (TB, 78-9)

Oakeshott continues:

The predicament of Western morals, as I read it, is first that our moral life has come to be dominated by the pursuit of ideals, a dominance ruinous to settled habit of behavior; and secondly, that we have come to think of this dominance as a benefit for which we should be grateful or an achievement of which we should be proud. And the only purpose to be served by this investigation of our predicament is to disclose the corrupt consciousness, the self-deception which reconciles us to our misfortune. (TB, 79)

From our exposition so far we must see immediately that Oakeshott's account of the distinction between customary morality and reflective morality in *Tower of Babel* mirrors his account of the distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge in *Rationalism in Politics*. Just as Oakeshott underscores the priority of practical knowledge over technical knowledge without opposing one to the other, given that they both constitute the concrete whole of knowledge, he also underscores the priority of customary morality in *Tower of Babel* over reflective morality without opposing customary morality to reflective morality, given that they both constitute the ideal form of morality.⁶³

Similarly, and, perhaps more importantly from the standpoint of his critique of rationalism, just as he rejects the apotheosis of technical knowledge to the effect that its

⁶³ Michael Oakeshott, “Tower of Babel” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 63-65

alleged self-completeness and independence is a falsification of the true essence of knowledge, he also rejects the sovereignty of reflective morality as a falsification of the true essence of morality.⁶⁴ In the same vein just as he treats the predominance of the doctrine of the sovereignty of technique as evidence of the corruptive influence of rationalism on Western understanding of knowledge, he also treats the predominance the morality of ideals as evidence of the corruptive influence of rationalism on Western morality.⁶⁵

In both cases we have a different basis for criticizing and rejecting rationalism, one epistemic and the other moral but the result is the same in both cases, namely, that rationalism is bankrupt and in each case its Achilles heel is its false understanding of human activity.⁶⁶ On the one hand it misunderstands the nature of the knowledge involved in human activity and on the other hand it misunderstands the nature of moral activity, assuming as it were that moral activity or rather human activity is driven by ideology while in actual fact human activity is spring board of ideology as it is dependent on a more fundamental level of experience.⁶⁷

In *Rationalism in Politics* and *Tower of Babel* Oakeshott limits himself to exposure of the bankruptcy of rationalism by accentuating the priority of practical knowledge over technical knowledge and the priority of customary morality over reflective morality.⁶⁸ In *Rational Conduct* and *Political Education* he is more explicit in offering an account of the positive doctrine that undergirds his critique of rationalism, namely a notion of tradition that embodies both human activity and ideology without making ideology the spring board of human activity.⁶⁹ Such notion of tradition certainly requires an explicit account of the nature of human activity and this Oakeshott undertakes in *Rational Conduct*. In *Political Education* however, he applies the positive doctrine to the situation of political activity, but the result is the same all time namely, that, like form of human activity, political activity is not driven by ideology but rather ideology is product of human activity.⁷⁰

4. 3. OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE RATIONALITY OF HUMAN CONDUCT: 'RATIONAL CONDUCT' AND 'POLITICAL EDUCATION' AS FORUNNER TO OAKESHOTT'S 'ON HUMAN CONDUCT'

In developing his account of rationality in *On Rational Conduct* Oakeshott criticizes the view of rationality on which purpose is understood as the distinctive mark of reality in conduct.⁷¹ According to this view rational activity is behavior in which an independently premeditated end is pursued and which is determined solely by that end. In taking issue with

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 78-79

⁶⁶ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, See also "Political Education" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 111-135 and "Rational Conduct" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp.

⁶⁷ See Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 165-196

⁶⁸ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 4-12

⁶⁹ See Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp.; See also "Rational Conduct" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp.

⁷⁰ See Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education" in *Rationalism and Other Essays*, pp. 111-135

⁷¹ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rational Conduct" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp.

this account of the human conduct, Oakeshott concentrates on its fundamental assumption, namely, the doctrine of mind as a neutral instrument.⁷²

On Oakeshott's view to see rational conduct in terms of the operation of independent mind is unsatisfactory because it mis-describes human behavior and to this extent it is impossible to produce any clear and genuine example of behavior which fits it. For Oakeshott

If this is rational behavior, then it is not merely undesirable. It is in fact impossible. Men do not behave in this way because they cannot. No doubt those who have held this theory have thought that they were describing a possible form of behavior and by calling it "rational" they recommend it as desirable, but they were under an illusion." (RC, 88-89)

So it emerges that central to Oakeshott's objection to this theory of rational conduct is certain dualism of mind and activity it presupposes. As Oakeshott says in assessing the idea of mind or intelligence at the core of the theory:

The notion is: that first there is something called "the mind", that the mind acquires beliefs, knowledge, prejudices – in short, a filling – which remain nevertheless a mere appendage to it, that it causes bodily activities, and that it works best when it is unencumbered by an acquired disposition of any sort. Now this mind I believe to be a fiction; it is an hypostatized activity; it is comprised entirely of thoughts. You do not first have a mind, which acquires filling of ideas and makes distinctions between true and false, right and wrong, reasonable and unreasonable; and then, as a third step, causes activity (RC, 88-89)

So Oakeshott is clearly opposed to what can be called the "myth of pure intelligence" without thoughts and activity and he thinks this notion is at the heart of the failure of rationalism.⁷³ The point simply is that genuine human conduct could never have its root from such a source. While Oakeshott does not deny that such pure intelligence exists, he argues that it is an abstraction made possible by human conduct itself and could never be prior to human conduct or taken as the causal origin of human conduct without taking an abstraction or a part as the whole. As Oakeshott maintains,

It is an error to suppose that conduct could ever have its spring in the sort of activity which is mis-described by hypostatizing a mind of this sort, that is, from the power of considering abstract propositions about conduct. That such power exists is not to be doubted, but its pre-requisite is conduct itself. This activity is not something that can exist in advance of conduct, it is the result of reflection upon conduct, the creature of a subsequent analysis of conduct. (RC, 90)

From what Oakeshott says in the above passage it is evident that Oakeshott returns to his key epistemic distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge in dismissing this notion of pure intelligence as the source of human conduct, or rational activity.⁷⁴ As we have seen Oakeshott's point in *Rationalism in Politics* where this distinction is classically formulated is that both forms of knowledge are constitutive of knowledge, so that we cannot take one as exclusively constitutive of knowledge without mutilating the concept of knowledge.⁷⁵

⁷² See Michael Oakeshott, "Rational Conduct", 89

⁷³ Michael Oakeshott, "Rational Conduct", 90

⁷⁴ Cf. Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 10-14

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Yet while Oakeshott insists on the continuity between both forms of knowledge he is nonetheless explicit about the priority of practical knowledge and the logical relationship that subsists between practical knowledge and technical knowledge.⁷⁶ In *Rationalism in Politics* Oakeshott focuses mainly on the relationship between both forms of knowledge and this provides the lynch-pin for challenging the alleged sovereignty of technical knowledge.⁷⁷ While Oakeshott does not abandon this result, he takes a step further in *Rational Conduct* by arguing that not only is technical knowledge privative on practical knowledge but more fundamentally, if the symbiosis between both forms of knowledge is denied we end up with a false image of human conduct or human activity, for the assumption then is that human conduct or activity could have no other source than propositional knowledge.⁷⁸

Yet if we understand that we could not have technical knowledge without practical knowledge, it emerges clearly that such an account of human conduct or activity is flawed as it tantamount to placing the proverbial cart before the horse thus effectively violating the natural order of things and turning things upside down. From the tone of Oakeshott in the above passage he is convinced that rationalism's mistake stems from misunderstanding of the true nature of human knowledge so that misunderstanding the nature of knowledge, it inevitably ends up with a skewed concept of human activity or rational conduct as it is unable to locate human activity or rational conduct in its proper milieu.⁷⁹

By attempting to develop a new concept of human conduct and activity Oakeshott's aim is to save rationalism from suicide and this agenda will lead Oakeshott ultimately to formulate a theory of human conduct that is rooted in the notion of agency such that his critique of rationalism then leads to a new concept of human association as purposeless association.⁸⁰

While the continuity between Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in *Rationalism in Politics*, *Tower of Babel* and *On Rational Conduct* is obvious, what is not so obvious is the foundation all of these moves provide for Oakeshott's account of the nature of human conduct in *On Human Conduct*. In these early essays what Oakeshott does is to put in place an epistemic and an ethical basis for his critique of rationalism.⁸¹

In this context the insistence that human knowledge cannot be reduced to merely propositional knowledge does the excellent service of laying the ground for Oakeshott's view that non-reflective morality cannot be reduced to reflective morality, or, again, that civil association cannot be reduced to merely enterprise association, so far as there is a form of purposelessness that undergirds the civil condition and as such, is no less important for an adequate account of civil association, so that to reduce human association to merely enterprise association is to repeat the same rationalist mistake of reducing the whole of knowledge to technical knowledge.⁸²

Of course it is largely in view of countering such reductionism that Oakeshott concludes that human activity or behavior cannot be taken ultimately derivative of propositional thinking, so that as he says, "these propositions are neither the springs of the activity nor are they in any direct sense regulative of the activity."⁸³ Thus to locate the ground of such activity

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rational Conduct" in *Rationalism and Other Essays*, 104-107

⁷⁹ See Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative", pp. 189-196

⁸⁰ See Michael Oakeshott, "On Human Conduct" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 109-121

⁸¹ Cf. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

⁸² Ibid, Chapter 4

⁸³ See Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education", pp.111-135

we must transcend the idea of mind as pure intelligence as there is a more fundamental basis for human activity and human conduct as such.⁸⁴

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

What is evident from our account so far is that central to Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is the effort to eschew dualism and reductionism in all its ramifications.⁸⁵ This is true especially in respect of the epistemic, moral and political foundations on which he predicates his rejection of rationalism. To overcome the tendency of rationalism to reduce experience to abstract principles, Oakeshott's strategy is to assert the claim of concrete whole of experience on which such abstractions are privative.⁸⁶

This is clear in respect of Oakeshott's distinction between technical knowledge and practical knowledge, or again, the distinction between customary morality and reflective morality.⁸⁷ This is no less clear in respect of the idea of civil association as a purposeless form of association and the idea of civil association as an enterprise.⁸⁸ While Oakeshott avoids the common mistake of reducing one of the polarities to the other, he is no less wary of setting the polarities in dualistic opposition. All the time his effort is to save both polarities at the same time he maintains that are elements that constitute a concrete whole of experience.⁸⁹

Thus, as we have seen, in rejecting the doctrine of sovereignty of technique that is at the core of the rationalist outlook his contention is that both technical knowledge and practical knowledge make up the concrete whole of knowledge, so that technique cannot be treated as independent and self-complete without falsifying the nature of human knowledge and activity.⁹⁰ The same argument is effective with respect to the question of the relationship between reflective morality and customary morality, or again the relationship between civil association as a purposeless association and civil association as an enterprise.⁹¹

All the time it the concrete logic of experience he formulated in *Experience and its Modes* that informs his critique of rationalism whether at the level of knowledge, morality or politics.⁹² It is doubtful whether we can do justice to Oakeshott critique of rationalism without reference to his doctrine of experience.⁹³

Indeed, if Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is inserted into the background of his philosophy of experience we begin to see that Oakeshott's concern in his critique of rationalism in politics is to separate political activity from political theorization. The

⁸⁴ See Michael Oakeshott, "*Rational Conduct*", pp. 91-107

⁸⁵ Cf. EM, 3-5

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ See Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 1-21 and "Tower of Babel" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp.

⁸⁸ See Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004)

⁸⁹ Michael Oakeshott, EM, 3

⁹⁰ See Michael Oakeshott "Rationalism in Politics" in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 8-15

⁹¹ See Michael Oakeshott, "Tower of Babel" in *Rationalism and Other Essays*, pp. and *On Human Conduct* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press)

⁹² See Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

⁹³ Ibid.

philosopher, as Oakeshott is fond of saying, has no business with politics but must leave politics for politicians.⁹⁴

This recommendation is consistent with the philosophy of experience he developed in *Experience and Its Modes*, for even though he attributes an over-sight function to philosophy on account of its approximation of concrete experience, Oakeshott is nonetheless clear that philosophy cannot dictate to other modes in respect of what obtains within their internal constitution.⁹⁵ Invariably this thesis makes its re-emergence in Oakeshott's interrogation of political experience in the sense that he maintains that philosophy must question the assumptions behind political activity but must refrain from interfering with political activity.⁹⁶

In this way Oakeshott is clearly maintaining a divide between philosophy of politics and political theorization. Without necessarily maintaining any final divide between theory and practice he nonetheless wants to keep them separate.⁹⁷ Pretty much the same scenario obtains in respect to his attitude towards morality. Moral activity is different from moral theorization. The moral philosopher can question the assumptions behind moral activity. But philosophy cannot legislate for morality.⁹⁸

Thus when viewed in the light of his philosophy of experience Oakeshott's critique of rationalism in politics emerges as a mirror of his critique of the despotism of science, historicism and pragmatism in the sense that it is the same logic that drives the exercise.⁹⁹ Philosophy exercises its oversight function of exposing and rejecting abstractions. Indeed this is what Oakeshott sees him-self as doing in the context of his critique of rationalism.¹⁰⁰ He exercises the over-sight function that uniquely belongs to philosophy in exposing the claim of sovereignty of reason as abstraction.

But in doing so he refrains from interfering in the internal constitution of the domain of the political.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately this is precisely the Achilles heels of the rationalist who simply fails to grasp that as a result of the disruption between the structure of political experience and the structure of reason, political theorization will not be sufficient to address the existential situation of political life.¹⁰²

From our account it emerges that Oakeshott's philosophy of experience as developed in *Experience and Its Modes* is the active background of his consideration of the status of rationalism in politics and indeed the claims of various modes of experience such as science,

⁹⁴ See Terry Nardin, "Oakeshott on Theory and Practice" in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2015, Special Issue Rationalism in Politics and its Limits, pp. 310-322.

⁹⁵ EM See also Steven B. Smith, "Practical life and the Critique of Rationalism", pp. 138-146

⁹⁶ See Terry Nardin, "Oakeshott on Theory and Practice" in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2015, Special Issue Rationalism in Politics and its Limits, pp. 310-322.

⁹⁷ Cf. Terry Nardin, "Oakeshott Memorial Lecture" in Hull University on 17th September 2015

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ See EM, 31-40.

¹⁰⁰ See EM 11-12

¹⁰¹ See Damian Ilodigwe, "Oakeshott's Debt to Bradley", Paper presented at the Conference on "The Place of Michael Oakeshott in Contemporary Western and Non-Western Thought at the Centre for Idealism and New Liberalism, Hull University, UK, 17-19 September, 2015, pp. 1-32

¹⁰² Ibid.

history and practice.¹⁰³ But it is also clear that the same skepticism that bedevils his philosophy of experience also remains at work in all ramifications of his thought, in respect to politics and morality and indeed in respect to philosophy itself.¹⁰⁴ Philosophy may enjoy the oversight function of moderating other modes, but in the end Oakshott is clear about the limits of philosophy.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Chapter 4

¹⁰⁵ See Michael Oakeshott, EM, Preface.

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