
Rationalism in politics

Michael Oakeshott was born December 11, 1901, at Chelsfield, Kent, England. He attended St. George's School, Harpenden, from 1912 to 1920 and was a Scholar of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, from 1920 to 1923, taking the History Tripos, Parts I and II in 1922–23. He held a graduate studentship from 1923 to 1926 when he became a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, and began a period of study at Tübingen and Marburg. From 1929 to 1951 he was Official Fellow and Lecturer in History, Gonville and Caius College, and from 1933 to 1950, University Lecturer in History.

He served in the British Army in England, France, and Germany from 1942 to 1945. Returning to Cambridge, he founded *The Cambridge Journal* in 1947. He became a Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, in 1950–51, and then Professor of Political Science, The London School of Economics and Political Science, in 1951, a post he held until his official retirement in 1967. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1966.

He died December 19, 1990 at his home in Acton, Dorset, and is buried in the parish churchyard at neighboring Langton Matravers.



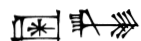
MICHAEL JOSEPH OAKESHOTT

Rationalism in politics and other essays

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

Foreword by Timothy Fuller

NEW AND EXPANDED EDITION



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word "freedom" (*amagi*), or "liberty." It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Preface to the first edition

Of these essays, composed during the last twelve years, seven were first published elsewhere. Each was written for a different occasion, but they seem to me to go together well enough to be put together. They are all concerned with doing, understanding and explaining; with different modes of these activities and with their relations to one another. And, although they do not compose a settled doctrine, they disclose a consistent style or disposition of thought. The essay on poetry is a belated retraction of a foolish sentence in *Experience and Its Modes*.

M.O.

1962

Oakeshott's rationalism in politics today

TIMOTHY FULLER

The publication of *Rationalism in Politics* in 1962 was a major event in contemporary political philosophy, accelerating Michael Oakeshott's advance to the forefront of contemporary political philosophers. This new edition adds six essays, five previously published, and the never before published "Political Discourse," each of which is consistent with the themes and the disposition of the original edition of *Rationalism in Politics*.

The essays now are arranged thematically rather than chronologically, for two reasons: to emphasize the consistency of Michael Oakeshott's thinking in this book with the arguments of *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) and *On Human Conduct* (1975), and to incorporate the additions in a coherent manner into the whole. It is important, however, to remember what kind of "whole" *Rationalism in Politics* is. Professor Oakeshott's own retrospective judgment, twenty-eight years on, was that the book remains a set of essays, "modest intellectual adventures in which a human circumstance is explored, understood and distinguished as an arrangement of related characteristics composing a coherent 'character'.

rather than an inquiry designed to extrapolate a non-circumstantial, definitive 'nature.'" In short, Oakeshott, like Montaigne who inspires the style of *Rationalism in Politics*, does not try to subjugate experience in an intellectual scheme. He "essays" to understand himself in relation to the circumstances of his time as he understands them, asking his readers to accept the invitation to respond out of their own reflections in conversation.

Parts One and Two establish Oakeshott's understanding of the uses and misuses of reason as they show themselves both in the conduct of politics and in the academic study of the history of politics.

Part Three provides a substantial introduction to the importance of Hobbes in the theoretical analysis of modern political life and his influence on Oakeshott's own thinking about politics. In Part Four, Oakeshott turns his attention to the issues of politics as illuminated by the theoretical foundation laid in the earlier parts. Part Five elucidates his understanding of the perennial human predicament and the possibility, through the poetic voice, of transposing the apparent curses of the human condition into blessings.

The reader will note some stylistic elements in *Rationalism in Politics* which have led to perceptions that Oakeshott wrote in an antiquarian, local, peculiarly British way. These opinions say much about his earlier readers who couldn't comprehend his political philosophy, differing as it did from the dominant liberalism of postwar thinking. The stylistic elements in *Rationalism in Politics*—often felicitous, unusual, and complex—do not define Oakeshott's aim.

This new edition of *Rationalism in Politics* is the best place to begin exploring Oakeshott's thought. These essays disclose aspects of the full range of his reflections. One must then also consult *Experience and Its Modes* and *On Human Conduct* to see the thematic consistency in Oakeshott's thought and the systematic exposition of his ideal of civil association.

The initial American reception of *Rationalism in Politics* was colored by some reviewers' ignorance of his earlier work, and among others by a progressivist attitude that distrusted thinkers loosely

defined as "pessimistic," "traditionalist," "Burkean," or "conservative." A generation later, conservatism is more respectable, and, to a degree, Oakeshott's prominence has risen accordingly among many who formerly ignored or discounted him. They can now see that he combines a commitment to individual liberty with a profound grasp of the historic achievements of European civilization. His skeptical conservatism, however, remains difficult to transform into programmatic activism. And his conception of philosophizing differs from some other schools of political philosophy in the Anglo-American world.

Oakeshott shares with traditional philosophy the skepticism that a great deal of what passes for knowledge is puffed-up nonsense, revealing itself for what it is whenever someone tries to "put it into practice." One can safely say that many Soviet, Eastern European, and Chinese citizens today know by hard experience what "rationalism in politics" is all about. It was more courageous to attack in 1962 (or in 1947, when the title essay "Rationalism in Politics" first appeared) what today is fashionably attacked by many. Contemporary world history dramatically illustrates the breakdown of the claims made for rationalism and ideology in the twentieth century. Oakeshott, from his earliest writings, shows remarkable insight and prescience about this, not because he made predictions, but because he kept his eye fixed on the seductive temptations of pridefulness endemic in the human condition.

Political life dramatically displays this human condition. In political life we conduct ourselves in terms of wished-for conditions that we think "ought to be" but that are "not yet." This world of the incessantly wished-for arises through the expression of individual opinions that can easily conflict. Often, those engaged in practical activity imagine there can be a state of affairs which, once attained, will bring to an end the necessity to desire anything more. The purveyors of plans for a Tower of Babel ever lurk on the street corners and in the alley ways of political life.

Actually, Oakeshott's work is a teaching about the limits of politics and the disillusioning effects of the effort to find the meaning of life there. A number of early reviewers of *Rationalism in Politics*

believed Oakeshott to be uninterested in argument, clarity, or, finally, political philosophy itself. He was incorrectly taken to mean that it is pointless to seek meaning in life. Clearly, this does not follow logically, and it does not, in fact, accurately describe Oakeshott's position. What it does reveal is how deeply politicized political philosophy has become in our time.

There is a categorical difference, Oakeshott believes, between philosophy and politics. Philosophy, which seeks understanding for its own sake, cannot be reduced to politics, and politics, which must ever seek to preserve and to change, cannot be transposed into philosophy.¹ Political life has its own character. If Oakeshott does not flatter that life, neither does he despise it. Politics he accepts, as did Aristotle, as an independent mode of human activity, needing no speculative master to put it right. This is not to say that politics cannot go astray. The "rationalists" Oakeshott seeks to refute in the present volume insist on ideologies or technocratic schemes of social engineering to guide the decisions of political life, overriding the practical sense of affairs to be found in experienced politicians. Philosophy, in opposing ideology as its caricature, neither forgets nor denies the impossibility of success in controlling and directing the political life to a predefined goal. 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.

The world, Oakeshott argues, is what we understand it to be. We are always engaged in interpreting a world of interpreted experience, actively participating in shaping our world even as we learn its already present characteristics. We can enjoy no fixed, permanent condition, and all intellectual constructs suggesting this possibility are misleading. We are born and grow up in an already ongoing world, learning its features from those who have already acquired an understanding of it. Gradually, we discover that we must make sense out of it for ourselves. We are cast into a world to which we did not seek entry, but we are dependent upon it in order

¹ For further discussion on this point see the first essay of Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct*, pp. 27–29, and also his debate with D. D. Raphael in *Political Studies*, Volumes XII, XIII (see bibliography of this book).

to move independently within it. We each must seek to understand in our own way what others already seem to understand, and in so doing we inevitably alter what we are seeking to understand. Hence, in altering it in order to understand it, we will never get to the end of the process of understanding it. Nothing is defined with finality for one's reflective intelligence. We must learn for ourselves what it means to be human.

But if the world is necessarily in continuous alteration, imagining its perfection as the attainment of the unalterable is a mistake. The intensity of the desire for completion is unfulfillable and yet by that very fact drives onward the practical life. Every circumstance is the harbinger of further circumstance. Life is a predicament, not a journey. We cannot accumulate and bank our successful decisions; past success does not guarantee future success; what is brought into being by our ingenuity has not the power to become immortal; what we have won, we can also lose.

This is the world of human freedom as Oakeshott understands it: Freedom is an inherent feature of human existence, present as soon as a human being is present. Freedom is not to be seen only as a condition eventually to be won, but as a perpetually present feature of conscious existence. Tyranny is bogus just because it tries to repress what cannot be repressed in human existence: the necessity for every human being to act out of his own response to the world. When human beings gain liberation from tyranny, they are not being given their freedom, for no one has special possession of it or the authority to dispense or withhold it; they are being acknowledged as having freedom.

This condition of freedom can appear as either a blessing or a curse. There is no doubt, however, that whatever different individuals make out of their freedom, they cannot eliminate it without eliminating themselves. The desire of some, in effect, to eliminate themselves as selves and thus escape the condition of freedom is chimerical. Thus, Oakeshott's counsel is to enjoy and to explore our opportunities and to beware of those who would offer us "relief" from the ordeal of being free.

Oakeshott characteristically sees the human condition as an adventure to be welcomed. The ordeal of consciousness is also a great opportunity, and he admires those who, whether humble or exalted, poor or rich, ordinary or brilliant, in different ways achieve a sense of themselves and a style that shows their success in achieving individual humanity. There are no collective achievements in these matters. We are to each other not role models but additions to the variety of human possibilities to be enjoyed.

In short, Oakeshott's nonteleological view of a human life is integral to what he thinks it means to be free and individual. We are free, he says, in interpreting and responding to our circumstances through the use of our intelligence, and we may do well or badly in this. And we are individual because we cannot deduce from another's life what we must do, suggestive though the lives of others may be. That there are those who fail to do well in the undertaking is among the mysteries of a complex human condition. There is no "rational solution" or formula for resolving this human diversity into a simple, unitary achievement.

Governing, in this essentially nonpolitical and nonrationalist vision, does not require a prior theory to get going. A farmer, he used to say in lectures to undergraduates, is not first an agricultural theorist, and politicians do not start out by theorizing politics. Here he harked back to Aristotle's view that the political scientist begins by examining the existing state of affairs and by finding out what its practitioners opine. The first task, in other words, is to understand what is going on in any activity that excites one's intellectual curiosity, and to try to understand it as it presents itself before presuming to pronounce upon it. If the farmer or the politician have learned their tasks by apprenticeship, they might then devise abstract descriptions of what they have learned, but the description must be an abridgement, derived from conversancy with the activity itself, and it cannot substitute for the activity itself.

Politics springs "neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves."² These arrangements to which politicians attend reflect the

² "Political Education," p. 56.

current state of long evolving combinations of desires and principles. They reflect manners of living, ways of life, composed over time by the myriad choices of individuals in learning to associate with each other. Practices evolve through which desires and principles are integrated in a concrete way, rendering civil association concrete and humanly possible.

There is no logically necessary direction to be pursued in such an arrangement, no self-evidently right "intimation" of further steps to be taken among all the intimations that appear. Oakeshott employs the word *intimation* specifically to avoid the thought of a "logically implied" direction. We cannot know ahead of our judgments and decisions what it is "necessary" to do. If we could, our anxieties over judgments and decisions would cease. Contingency is unavoidable: One event touches another but why they do so will always be, in some irreducible degree, inexplicable.³ Just as we cannot specify a final perfecting and unifying goal, but we may minimize the chance for disaster "if we escape the illusion that politics is ever anything more than the pursuit of intimations; a conversation, not an argument."⁴

Some object to emphasizing intimations and conversation, seeing them as a denial of the rough, coercive, often violent character of political life. Oakeshott has been accused of aestheticism, and of failing to appreciate the necessity of struggle to achieve creativity in practice. But Oakeshott's point emanates from an attitude toward political life that is both well informed and philosophically detached. He knows perfectly well what goes on in political life, but he sees in it a self-deluding tendency that he refuses to honor.

Like St. Augustine, Oakeshott can see the political order as the humanly available remedy for human insufficiencies without overrating its achievement. And from Aristotle, who showed us that human beings, although possessing the capacity to become morally

³ In "The Activity of Being an Historian," in this volume, and in *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), he gives detailed analyses of this point which, together with "Rationalism in Politics," "Rational Conduct," the first essay in *On Human Conduct*, and the criticism of the historical mode of knowing in *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), constitute something approaching a critical philosophy of the limits of the social sciences.

⁴ "Political Education," p. 58.

virtuous, do not automatically (by natural processes) become virtuous, Oakeshott derives the lesson that we humans must learn everything and go on learning as long as we live. Politics and government are “necessary evils.”

Political action ever hovers between pursuing perfection as the crow flies and declining into cynical grasping after power for its own sake. The Tower of Babel offers itself in many outwardly attractive guises, promising to overleap the limits of the human condition.

Thus, Oakeshott concludes, the turning of conversation into argument risks forgetting the limits of politics.⁵ If he cannot eradicate this risk, Oakeshott can still remind us of its perils. To meditate on the temporality and mortality of all human things is to dampen our misplaced enthusiasms which, horrifyingly in the twentieth century, have produced the ultimate caricatures of “enlightenment” and the “dignity of man.”

Fortunately, to dispel illusions is not to kill the human spirit; the latter arises from its own ashes. Nevertheless, sensible people will avoid recipes for ash heaps. There is something of a mystery about how we shall reacquire this good sense. Oakeshott thinks it has to do with long training for governance through many generations, and with an education that is not imbued with false hopes of perfection through “scientific policy-making.” “Government . . . does not begin with a vision of another, different and better world, but with the observation of the self-government practised even by men of passion in the conduct of their enterprises . . . the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection.”⁶

These reflections are preparatory to genuine moral achievements, those possible for an individual whose regard for others grows out of understanding, through experience and reflection,

⁵ The primacy of conversationality to a human and humane life is nowhere more powerfully evoked than in “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” and in his essays on education in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*.

⁶ “On Being Conservative,” p. 428.

what it means to be human. Oakeshott derives this also from that great, often misunderstood, English political thinker, Hobbes, who counseled us to learn to read in ourselves “not this or that particular man; but mankind,” and to remember that “much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.”⁷

Like Hobbes, Oakeshott, in seeking to understand the universal human predicament, acquires confidence out of the humility of honest human self-recognition. It is an aristocratic acknowledgment of the democracy of the human condition, not to be confused with democratic regimes that may or may not be respectful of freedom and diversity. Coupled with recognition of the astonishing diversity of human conduct, this protects against the politics of perfectionism and uniformity, those pervasive, damaging weapons of modern faithlessness.

Oakeshott expresses confidence, not despair. It is a confidence that human intelligence can continue to use its resources; that intelligence is not exhausted; that we actually can maintain an even keel in practice. The responsibility to do so falls to each generation in turn. No generation can be known to be the final one, and, in any case, to act as if it were is implicitly to claim what we do not and cannot know. Like Socrates and Montaigne, Oakeshott finds the courage to face mortality openly, and, in so doing, like them, he finds a release from despair, entering upon what can be termed a kind of nondogmatic faith in the power of the human spirit.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited with an introduction by Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), pp. 6, 36.

Bibliography

Principal works by Michael Oakeshott

Experience and Its Modes (Cambridge University Press, 1933, reprinted 1966; paperback edition, Cambridge 1986). Ultimately indispensable for a full understanding of Oakeshott's philosophical outlook, this is the foundation from which all of his subsequent thought develops and to which he has remained faithful in spirit, if not always in detail.

The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe (Cambridge University Press, 1939). A collection of texts illustrating the doctrines of Representative Democracy, Catholicism, Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism through Oakeshott's skeptical eye.

On Human Conduct (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; paperback edition, Oxford, 1990). This is the work Oakeshott himself considers the definitive statement of his political philosophy. It is modeled on Hobbes's *Leviathan* and *De Cive*, offering a systematic exposition of the ideal of civil association implicit in modern European history, and the nature of the historical opposition to it.

Hobbes on Civil Association (University of California Press and Basil Blackwell, 1975). Collects most of his essays on Hobbes. Two of them, including the famous Introduction to *Leviathan*, are included in the present volume.

On History and Other Essays (Oxford: Basil Blackwell and New York: Barnes & Noble, 1983). Contains three papers on the nature of historical knowledge, plus "The Rule of Law," to be read in conjunction with his theory of political authority and civil association in the second essay of *On Human Conduct*, and "The Tower of Babel," the second essay he has published with this title, the first appearing in *Rationalism in Politics*. It retells the biblical story as it pertains to our time.

The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education, edited with an introduction by Timothy Fuller (Yale University Press, 1989; paperback edition, Yale, 1990). Offers six essays on learning and teaching, evoking the education Oakeshott finds fit for potential subscribers to his ideal civil association.

The following two works provide virtually complete bibliographical information on works by Michael Oakeshott through 1976.

"A Bibliography of Michael Oakeshott" compiled by W. H. Greenleaf for *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of His Retirement*, edited by Preston King and B. C. Parekh (Cambridge University Press, 1968). Most of Oakeshott's writings to 1968 are listed.

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Wendell John Coats, Jr., "Michael Oakeshott's Critique of Rationalism in Politics" and "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist" in *The Activity of Politics and Related Essays* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press and London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), pp. 34–41 and 42–57, respectively. Acute expositions placing Oakeshott within the tradition of classical liberalism.

Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985). Examines Oakeshott's impact on contemporary British conservative thought.