

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

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In Plato's dialogue the *Protagoras*, the sophist Protagoras recalls a story of how Zeus sent Hermes to teach men to be just to one another. The necessity for introducing justice into the world derived from the fact that while, thanks to Prometheus, men were well practiced in the life supporting skills and arts (*techne*) they lacked the political wisdom (*arete*) necessary to sustain the arts of government. As a result they began dealing unjustly with one another, were continually locked in internecine strife, and soon verged on the edge of dispersion and extinction. Fearing that the entire race would be exterminated Zeus sent Hermes to initiate human beings into the arts of civil relationships. Upon accepting his mission Hermes asked Zeus how he should impart justice and reverence among men: "Shall I distribute them as the arts are distributed; that is to say, to a few only, in accordance with a principle of specialization, or shall I give them to all?" "To all", said Zeus, "I should like them all to have a share; for cities cannot exist if a few only share in justice and reverence, as in the arts (*techne*). And further make a law by my order that he who has no part in reverence and justice shall be put to death, for he is a plague of the State." (320c-322d)

In this myth the art of civility (*arete*) and the civil condition to which it gives rise is recognized as intercourse in a language of *law* which prescribes the conditions of just conduct. It is an art unlike any other in being the concern of everyone and not being itself concerned with the satisfaction of any of the specific wants that arise in the continuous effort to serve self-interest by exploiting and enjoying the resources of the world. At the same time, it is recognized as association in terms of the assurance that the prescriptions of law will be enforced. If justice is what obtains from the learnt practice of civility, injustice is a violation of civility which necessarily invites redress or penalty. This is the condition specified in the *Agamemnon* (l. 183) as the grace which comes to human life when penalty is annexed to injustice and recompense to injury, a condition held to be so important that it is said to be the greatest of the blessings of Zeus. As Socrates puts it in the *Theaetetus*, in both this world and the next, the penalty you pay is the life you lead answering to the pattern you resemble.(177a)

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

The myth of the *Protagoras* contains all the ingredients for an account of the human condition. It is both a statement concerning what it means to *act* humanly and morally, and a statement of the conditions under which the engagements of human conduct can be confidently pursued. Justice is not simply the condition of subscribing to certain conditions *inter homines*, but the expectation and assurance that these conditions shall not be ignored with impunity. While fear of punishment supplies neither the reason nor motive for being just and acting civilly it is nevertheless a necessary condition of order. Hence the need for engagements such as "legislation" and "ruling".

The task of political theory then is clear. It is to explain first of all the meaning or postulates of the conditions of civility and human conduct, and secondly to explain the meaning or postulates of civil order. It is this challenge that Michael Oakeshott takes up in *On Human Conduct*.<sup>1</sup> Like Plato, he acknowledges that the condition of civilisation is the ability and willingness of men to behave civilly or justly towards one another out of respect for the idea of justice itself rather than because to do so will be profitable while not to do so will be punished. Oakeshott is less ambitious than Plato, however, and rather than attempting a systematic demonstration or proof of the superiority of justice, he sets out more modestly to describe the meaning of conduct pursued in this manner. In a collection of three lengthy and at times highly concentrated essays, entitled respectively "On the Understanding of Human Conduct", "On the Civil Condition", and "The Character of a Modern European State", Oakeshott steps aside from the main stream of Western political thought and denounces as spurious the pretensions of both "theorists", who espouse systematic "theories" of political behaviour, and "theoreticians" who attempt to apply the results of theory to action; where by action is meant the process of achieving specific satisfactions and wished for goals. For Oakeshott, theorizing is an intellectual "engagement" rather than an empirical and behavioural science, or an exercise in system building. It aims at understanding rather than explanation, and while it may enrich one's humanity to understand better the meaning of conduct and the conditions of civility, there is no guarantee or promise that it will make one either craftier, as a framer of policies, or more effective in one's practical dealings. For the tradition of Western philosophy committed to the belief that "all thought is for the sake of action", Oakeshott's claim that at best philosophical thought is for the sake of understanding what is already understood will come as unwelcome news.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with the spirit of his conclusions, Oakeshott's style of writing is more like the style of a diarist than a "theorist" or "theoretician". It is the style of a thinker reporting on the outcome of his own personal adventures and

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

reflections in self-understanding; a phenomenological disclosure of the conditions of an understanding which although it has grown and taken shape slowly throughout the long course of human history, has somehow come to rest within the perspective of an individual historian whose intellectual biography forms the subject matter of these essays. Oakeshott himself refers to it as a "traveller's tale" which has a course to follow but no destination, "a personal but never really 'subjective' intellectual adventure recollected in tranquility", which although it may enlighten, "does not instruct". (vii)

Finally, in addition to rejecting the pretensions of philosophy, social science and social theory to provide explanations of behaviour and moral justifications for the pursuit of specific policies, Oakeshott rejects any reading of the history of Western civilisation which attempts to uncover the underlying patterns and purposes of that history. Instead of searching for a single clue to the meaning of Western civilisation, Oakeshott regards it as the outcome of a series of self-understandings, each experienced within a distinct historical context, which collectively result not in a single universal character but in something far more equivocal. The character of the modern European State, like that of its predecessors, emerges as a contingent response to a specific historic situation, and as such contains within itself a variety of diverse responses which resist assimilation into a single homogenized unity. As in the case of human conduct and the civil condition to which conduct gives rise, the attempt to force the modern state, whether in theory or practice, into conformity with a unifying, universal and homogenizing essence, is nothing short of a blasphemy.

### I. Human Conduct as Self-disclosure and Self-enactment

Oakeshott's tale begins with a series of reflections or "soundings" on the meaning of being human. The first and most basic disclosure is that being human is not simply a matter of behaving in accordance with a theory or policy. It is rather an engagement or adventure that rests upon postulates, and it is only when these postulates are rendered explicit that we begin to understand the human presence as an enactment of an unique form of rationality. Accordingly, to theorize human conduct is the engagement of disclosing the rationality inherent in that conduct; an engagement which is categorially distinct from the theoretical attempt to explain conduct in terms of causes and covering laws.

The most basic postulate underlying the rationality of human conduct is the conception of "free-agency"; the perceiving and understanding of situations, recognized to be wanting, and inviting of responses through which agents both disclose and enact themselves. The agent's response is characterized by an intention to seek a wished-for satisfaction through an exercise of intelligence.

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

The instruments or avenues of response, the choice of *this* rather than *that* set of means, cannot be accounted for, or explained, according to a mere stimulus-response model, or as the outcome of structural factors over which the agent has no control. Where the actions of agents are concerned there is no set of internal (*i.e.* psychological, biological) or external (*i.e.*, political, economic, social) circumstances such that in these circumstances the agent will necessarily act as he does, or from which the agent's actions could be deduced. What the agent does depends not upon "genes", "human nature", "psychology", or "social process", but is the outcome of an "intelligent engagement" and depends on what he has learned in the course of deliberating, and responding to situations, over the years. This learning is the source of the agent's "character" (not to be confused with the conditioning of personality) and it is this "character" rather than some "biological", "psychological", or "socially conditioned" human nature, or externally imposed "social structure", or even, for that matter, the so-called "free-will", that comes into play in the course of deliberating the means and responding to situations. Thus, Oakeshott declares, the agent has a "history" but no "nature"; he is in conduct what he becomes, and he becomes according to how he understands himself to be. If he understands himself to be a free agent, then he will understand that the eligible alternatives in conduct are virtually unlimited, as are the meanings of the situations in which he finds himself.

According to Oakeshott, then, the relationship postulated in conduct is an understood relationship, capable of being engaged in only by virtue of having been learned. In addition to having learnt the skills associated with the satisfaction of specific wants, the agent also learns the arts of agency which make it possible for him not only to engage in instrumental conduct *inter homines*, but to engage in moral conduct *inter homines*. In the case of moral conduct *inter homines*, what is learned are the practices of civility to be observed in making substantive choices but which as practices do not determine these choices. What they determine is the quality of justice that attaches to substantive choices. The difference between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is not man's superior capacity to apply his skills to the realisation of goals. It is his capacity to pursue his wants while subscribing to the practices of civility, and to do this, moreover, for no other reason than that he recognizes the authority of the practices entailed by civility. It is by virtue of having assented to this authority that agents take on the character of what Oakeshott calls *cives*. Thus, for example, an agent may subscribe to the practice of "telling the truth" in all of his substantive dealings, not out of habit, or fear of punishment, but because he has adopted the way of life and mode of being made possible by this practice; a way of life and mode of being whose meaning can be understood and experienced as an enactment of intelligence and

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

character. Education is initiation into both orders of practices. It is initiation into the prudential arts but it is also initiation into the art of agency, the art of transmitting the results of experience and the art of experiencing oneself as a moral being. Rather than indoctrinating the young into "truth telling", "fidelity", "justice", "respect for person", education makes possible the experiencing of the world through these modes of conduct so as to render them more sensitive to the moral obligations entailed by their conduct. Oakeshott makes no such claim as Plato that a well educated citizenry guarantees a just outcome for society. His purpose is not to provide a recipe, or method or technology for becoming human, but to describe what it means to be human.

Oakeshott's account of the human condition thus rests upon a basic distinction between the "prudential arts" and the "arts of civility". Prudential arts are hypothetical instruments for the achievement of imagined and wished for satisfactions. The arts of civility, on the other hand, are moral practices concerned with the justice rather than the success of the enterprise of agents. While there may be advantages to subscribing to moral rules, the utility of a practice does not constitute a source of moral legitimation. Morality is indifferent to the outcome of performances and is therefore not to be confused with "policy". It is a relationship solely in respect of conditions to be subscribed to categorically in seeking the satisfaction of any want. The conditions which comprise a moral practice are instruments of self-disclosure through which agents reveal themselves to one another, and instruments of self-enactment through which they make themselves. The basic vocabulary of moral discourse are *rules* which declare what it is *right* to do. Moral rules are prescriptive-normative, to be taken into account while making choices but not designating or compelling choices. They are not commands to be obeyed but relatively precise considerations to be subscribed to. They are *used* in conduct but not *applied* to conduct and the moral reflection in which they may be brought to bear upon choosing is deliberative, not demonstrative. (68)<sup>3</sup>

The employment of moral rules in conduct is thus logically distinct from the operation of principles in the genesis of natural events and it would therefore be inappropriate to attempt an explanation of human conduct as if it were a species of natural phenomena. To engage in human conduct *inter homines* in the fullest sense is to subscribe to rules believed to be just, with the intention of achieving an imagined or wished-for satisfaction. Genuinely human action is motivated from a sentiment of justice as opposed to organic impulses and instincts. Accordingly, such conduct can be described, and appreciated, but not explained. The distinguishing feature of the morally authentic agent, is that while he acts with the intention of procuring wished-for substantive satisfaction, the style of his conduct, his commitment to subscribe to the rules of civility, is motivated by nothing more than a sense of loyalty to himself. In

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

short, the compunction of virtuous self-enactment concerns the character of the agent, rather than consequences, such as fear of punishment, pride, etc. The important thing is to be honest and to act in "character", rather than being able to "justify" one's actions.

What does this imply about the so-called human condition? It would seem that just as the moral integrity of the individual human agent cannot be subsumed under the abstractions of psychology, or any other "science" for that matter, neither can the human community, the inter-personal, be subsumed under abstractions such as "society", and "class". The attempt to theorize human conduct can at best be a descriptive-narrative history of individual actions. There is no "science" or psychology of society. Human conduct is continuously and decisively "social" only in respect of agents being associated in terms of their understandings and enjoyment of specific practices. Once the full meaning of being human is understood it should be clear why the so-called science of society is a blasphemy. Understanding human conduct is understanding the "arts" of agency. What constitutes a society is not the common goals pursued, but the common respect paid by individual agents, to the conditions which specify practices.

For Oakeshott the great undertaking and achievement of human self-understanding is the capacity to comprehend what it means "to be human" not as a system or process subject to "law", but as an "ideal character", an organization of dispositional capacities, the outcome of learning and education, in which the supposed organic needs, appetites, tensions, etc., of the species are wholly transformed and superseded. There is all the difference between simply exemplifying the interplay of "love" and "hate" for example, and subscribing to practices in which one enacts oneself as a "loving" agent or performer. To understand the agent as performer, however, cannot account for his choice to do *this* rather than *that*. It is precisely the inexplicable character of substantive choices that defines their status as human performances.

Oakeshott's denial of the pretensions of the social sciences to explain human conduct either in terms of psychological variables or as the outcome of social forces, is therefore an affirmation of the irreducible humanity of mankind. Whatever the variables of the so-called social sciences might be they are not terms in which the choice of an agent to do or say *this* rather than *that*, in response to a contingent situation, and in an adventure to procure an imagined and wished-for satisfaction, may be understood. My social no less than my individual "being" is a practice, that is to say, an intelligent engagement concerned with responding to an understood situation. I do not do *this* rather than *that* "because" I am neurotic, middle-class, unemployed, deprived, an immigrant, orphaned, or whatever. It is rather that I respond to situations in a middle-class etc., manner, by which is meant simply, that I subscribe to practices characteristic of persons who are middle-class etc. In the end,

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

however, my identity as a person depends upon recognizing myself as a free agent.

Understood in terms of the ideal character "human conduct", a substantive performance is identified as an intelligent "going-on", composed of related circumstantial occurrences: an assignable agent engaged in self-disclosure and self-enactment, the understood emergent situation in which he recognizes himself to be, the beliefs, sentiments, understanding, and imaginings in terms of which he deliberates and chooses his response to it, the conditions he acknowledges in making his choice, the actions he performs, and the reply it receives. To "theorize" is to accept it in its character as a manifold of related occurrences, to discern the identity it constitutes and thus to understand it without explaining it away. (p. 101)

While denying the pretensions of social science to be explanations of social reality, Oakeshott is not without compassion in understanding why it is that causal explanations have such a wide-spread appeal. The human condition, being human, is necessarily one of diversity in self-expression and language. This plurality cannot be resolved by being understood as so many contingent and regrettable divergences from a fancied perfect and universal language of moral intercourse, whether in the form of Hegel's cunning of reason, the laws of Providence, or the principles of evolution. It is hardly surprising, however, that such a resolution should have been attempted. Faced with plurality, human beings seek security in the monistic constructions of the muddled theorist: the ecumenical yearnings of the moralist for whom the categorical imperative or the principles of liberty are not just practices to be subscribed to, but commands to be obeyed, the behavioural engineer whose desire to control is rationalized by a belief that behaviour is lawful. In all of this we see at work the operation of a nostalgia for permanence or yearning for immortality, the attempt to ground existence in an immutable set of laws so as to relieve mankind of the burden of responsibility which derives from the encounter with nothingness.

It is the same yearning that finds expression, but more appropriately, in religion. Unlike science and metaphysics, religious faith makes no pretension to being descriptive, prescriptive or normative. It is not a cancellation but an affirmation of human freedom. Thus, Oakeshott writes, in one of his most eloquent passages:

... while religious faith may be recognized as a solace for misfortune and as a release from the fatality of wrongdoing, its central concern is with a less contingent dissonance in the human condition; namely, the hollowness, the futility of that condition, its character of

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

being no more than 'un voyage au bout de la nuit'. What is sought in religious belief is not merely consolation for woe or deliverance from the burden of sin, but a reconciliation to nothingness.... Religious faith is the evocation of a sentiment to be added to all others as the motive of all motives in terms of which the fugitive adventures of human conduct, without being released from their mortal and their moral conditions, are graced with an intimation of immortality: the sharpness of death and the deadliness of doing overcome, and the transitory sweetness of a mortal affection, the tumult of a grief and the passing beauty of a May morning recognized neither as merely evanescent adventures nor as emblems of better things to come, but as *aventures*, themselves encounters with eternity. (83-85)

Oakeshott's characterization of the difference between science and religion as responses to the same encounter with nothingness is not intended to discredit science as a legitimate mode of rationality. What is brought into question here is the pretension of science to provide a paradigm of rationality to which all specific modes of rationality are required to conform. While many social scientists and political theorists will undoubtedly be upset with the seemingly arrogant manner in which he dismisses the credibility of a "science of conduct", whether as an explanatory device or as a policy science, there is nevertheless some merit in his characterization of human conduct as inexplicable. In the first place, it is because human conduct is inexplicable that it can be regarded as the outcome of free choice, and it is only as free agents that men can engage in the practice of justice. The most important factor in maintaining an image of man that is consistent with the practice of justice is that he conceive of himself as a being capable of learning how to be just by making just choices, as opposed to regarding his behaviour as the outcome of his nature or conditioning. Since he is not born with an innate knowledge of justice, his wisdom and character must be earned through doing. This condition is also the basis of trust. Only human agents can trust one another because only man is capable of making choices unimpelled by considerations that lie beyond the choice itself.

In the second place, if there were a science of human conduct, it would necessarily be subject to the same value system as science in general. The paradigm of scientific rationality is mathematics which is essentially an homogenizing enterprise, and while pure science lays claim to a value-free status, there is a sense, and a profoundly important one, in which the scientific



## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

enterprise harbours a value system which is both implicit and inescapable. The foundation of this value system is the belief that "to be is to be explained". This is a variant of the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason: *nihil existere nisi cujus reddi ratio existentiae sufficiens* (*Monadology*, Section 32). Nothing exists unless a sufficient reason for its existence can be rendered. Causal explanation is the activity *par excellence* by which this sufficiency can be rendered. To reduce the essence of something to its cause is to affirm the value of homogeneity, which is, that to be rational is to be a member of a class united by the sharing of some definite abstract characteristic. Homogenization fosters a value system of conformity to abstractions. The danger inherent in the application of this model to human conduct is that by accepting this image of human conduct we render ourselves vulnerable to the technology of management, and we may even accept the psychology of adjustment as "normal"; it is "normal" to behave in predictable ways, and abnormal to behave idiosyncratically.

Finally, there are a number of logical points that might be considered in favour of Oakeshott's contention that science is an inappropriate model for the understanding of human conduct. The sciences are for the most part pre-occupied almost exclusively with the definition of abstractions. Thus, for example, an abstraction like "aggression" may be explained as the effect of "an instinct for aggression". Or, middle-class behaviour is explained as a function of upward mobility, which in turn is defined as characteristic of middle-class behaviour. Not only are such explanations circular, but they assume that the terms appearing in the *explanandum* are behavioural instantiations of the terms appearing in the *explanans*; that hostility and aggression, for example, are behavioural instances of the instinct for aggression. The impression is thus given that social science explanations refer to the 'real world of social action or social relations. In fact, according to Oakeshott, such explanations have no relation whatsoever to the reality of human conduct.

While Oakeshott clearly rules out the social-science approach to the study of human conduct, his distinction between "substantive" and purely "civil" conduct, suggests a possible relationship between the social sciences and philosophical theorizing, in which each may be understood to play a distinctive and yet complementary role. As a study of human conduct, philosophical theorizing concentrates on what is distinctively human about that conduct. This lies in man's capacity for justice, as expressed through the conduct of subscribing to the practices of civility. It does not apparently lie in his conduct as an agent seeking the satisfaction of specific wants; but to the extent that this latter form of conduct is open to investigation, it forms the subject-matter of the social sciences, and while it is important that the study of moral conduct *inter homines*, the practice of civility, can do nothing more than describe the

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

postulates of that activity, no such constraint applies to the study of the satisfaction of wants. In so far as these activities are concerned, we do not rule out motives and beliefs as causal factors nor do we rule out the causal efficacy of the social context in which individuals make their substantive choices. It must, however, remain clear that causal explanation in the social sciences is categorially distinct from explanation in the natural sciences. The reason for this lies in the very nature of the subject matter itself.

To begin with, the subject of understanding in the social sciences (which should be more properly called "human" sciences) is the relationship between an agent and the "understood" situation in which he finds himself, which often includes other agents. Oakeshott characterizes such relationships as "contingencies" and the engagement or adventure of theorizing contingencies is categorially distinct from the engagement of theorizing functional relations, as in the case of science. While contingent relationships are relationships of dependency this dependency is not of the sort suggested by a mechanistic model of causality. They are dependent in the sense that they "touch", and in "touching" identify themselves as belonging together and as composing an intelligible continuity of conditionally dependent occurrences. The intelligibility of the relationship lies in the recognition of the consequent "what came after" as acknowledging, taking up, and in some manner responding to the antecedent, and of "what went before" as in some respect conducive to what came after.

If then we are to use the term causality at all with respect to the agent's substantive engagements, it can only be in the sense in which that which is "caused" is the free and deliberate act of a conscious and responsible agent, and "causing" him to do it means affording him a motive for doing it. This is what R.G. Collingwood has called the historical sense of the word cause, because it refers to a type of case in which both "cause" and "effect" or "antecedent" and "consequent" are human activities such as form the subject matter of history. A cause in this sense, according to Collingwood, is made up of two elements, a *causa quod* or efficient cause and a *causa ut* or final cause. The *causa quod* is a situation or state of things existing; the *causa ut* is a purpose or state of things to be brought about. Neither of these could be a cause if the other were absent. Thus, for example, a man who tells his stockbroker to sell a certain holding may be caused to act thus by a rumour about the financial position of that company, but this rumour would not cause him to sell out unless he wanted to avoid being involved in the affairs of an unsound business. *Per contra*, a man's desire to avoid being involved in the affairs of an unsound business would not cause him to sell his shares in a certain company unless he knew or believed that it was unsound.<sup>4</sup>

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

The principle implicit in this account is that the explanation of a human action depends upon understanding the agent's understanding of the situation in which he finds himself, so that his action is seen as a self-chosen attempt to respond to the situation in a manner appropriate to his beliefs, motives and intentions.

Understanding in terms of contingent relations is therefore contextual and historical. To understand a substantive performance in which an agent discloses and enacts himself is to get it into a story in which it is recognized to be an occurrence contingently related to other occurrences. The story or narrative has no over-all meaning or message other than the intelligibility with which the historian endows the occurrences by putting them into a story. To impart meaning and teleology to the narrative is to give up the historian story-teller's concern with the topical and transitory and to endow occurrences with a potency they cannot have without surrendering their characters as occurrences. It is not to tell a story or narrate history but to construct a myth.

For Oakeshott, then, understanding human conduct is a primarily "historical" enterprise, to be distinguished from explanations in terms of either "covering laws" or "purposes". The theoretical understanding of human conduct is, in effect, simply an extension of common sense understanding. Since human conduct is itself an exercise of "intelligence" on the part of "free" (*i.e.*, "intelligent") agents disclosing and enacting themselves by responding to the understood, contingent, situations in which they find themselves, the understanding of this conduct must parallel the exercise of intelligence that is being understood. The *a priori* condition of understanding, which accounts for the fact that it is possible at all, is the fact that the theorist is also an agent responding to his understood contingent situations in chosen actions and utterances related to imagined and wished-for satisfactions in terms of practices he has learned to subscribe to. The key to understanding is the imaginative capacity to recognize and acknowledge the conditions and compunctions of the multitude of practices subscribed to in substantive conduct. Understanding thus pays tribute to and reinforces the image of man as a free agent, and is, in its own right, a mode through which that freedom is celebrated. In short, the theoretical understanding of human conduct, in its dual nature as disclosing the postulates of civility, on the one hand, and the conditions of substantive engagements on the other hand, is itself an affirmation and enactment of the postulates underlying that conduct.

While theoretical understandings of whatever sorts may be regarded as performances of "free agency", it would be Oakeshott's contention, if I understand him correctly, that the historical explanation of transactional conduct, which takes the form of the pursuit of substantive wants and in which motives, intentions and other causes are considered, is not equivalent to the understanding of moral human conduct *inter homines*; the understanding of

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

persons as *cives*. If, for example, we explain the economic policies of a political statesman as a deliberate attempt to court favour with the electorate, and his foreign policies as an outcome of his perception of what constitutes the national interest, what we have explained is a categorially different phenomenon from the conduct through which that same statesman both discloses and enacts himself as a human being or *cives*. If, as *cives*, the overriding concern of a statesman is for justice, then we can expect that he will pursue his substantive wants in a just manner; even though it is clear that the basis for his substantive choices lies in a host of pragmatic considerations which are appropriately considered to comprise the subject-matter of the social sciences.

There are a number of problems posed by this account of the relationship between the conditions of civility and the conditions of substantive conduct. Of paramount concern is the claim that while morality is acknowledged to determine the manner in which one enacts oneself humanly, it is not as such a conceptual source of policy. Thus, for example, a person's preference for capitalism over socialism, or for conservatism over liberalism, can never be explained as arising from strictly moral deliberations, nor does the efficacy of the policies implied by these preferences require moral justification. In any case, according to Oakeshott, what passes for moral justification is often simply ideology disguised as morality.

Whereas morality cannot as such be conceived as supplying a justification for policy, there are times, even on Oakeshott's reckoning, when it may be apparent that a particular policy conflicts with morality. Such conflicts arise whenever the actual terms of one's substantive commitments require one to be unjust. If, to cite another example, I find that in order to practise a particular religious faith I am required to be intolerant (and possibly even belligerent) towards persons of other faiths, then to behave in accordance with this faith would be inconsistent with my commitment *qua cives* to subscribe to the practices of civility. Thus, while it is clear that my civil character cannot ever serve as a ground of compulsion for me to pursue this rather than that policy, it can serve to guide me against the pursuit of specific wants, in cases where to do so entails a violation of the rights and liberties of others.

Much the same considerations apply to the pursuit of economic and political policies. The pursuit of a conserver society, for example, is motivated by prudential rather than strictly moral considerations. The only moral constraint is that it be pursued in accordance with the practice of civility. The preference of conserver society economics over the free-enterprise economics of exponential growth thus lies in its more rational use of resources rather than in any specifically moral considerations, such that it facilitates more personal autonomy, conviviality and human growth. If upon recognizing that the free-enterprise economics of growth depends upon rapidly dwindling non-

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

renewable resources, we decide to opt for a conserver society, it is for reasons having to do with self-interest. We do not need a moral justification for what is simply a matter of common sense. We could, however, argue that it would be morally improper to engage in the tactic of engineering a resource crisis in order to panic people into paying higher prices for allegedly scarce resources and for expensive alternate technologies, to the profit of those who monopolize those technologies. The principle here is that while our pursuit of substantive interests is causally independent of moral considerations and moral justification, there are moral justifications for establishing constraints on human actions. To repeat, I am under no moral compulsion to pursue this rather than that goal, but the manner in which I pursue my goals is subject to moral considerations.

Oakeshott's reluctance to define the pursuit of substantive goals as the outcome of moral commitments is partially understandable. It is one way of avoiding the evils of ideology and dogmatic morality, and it is consistent with his further claim that the characters of national communities or nations cannot be determined by forcing them to conform with some pre-established purpose, whether defined by tradition or by those who hold power. However, the suggestion that moral constraints apply only to cases involving an infringement of liberty is simply not acceptable. There are surely times when the pursuit of certain goals is morally indecent even if it does not entail an explicit infringement upon the liberty of others. Consider once again the economics of growth. Suppose there were no resource crisis, or that new technologies capable of sustaining such a system were within range of completion. Could we not say that there are good moral reasons for rejecting it, on the grounds that the goals of such a system are simply without "worth"? If, conversely, there are goals which are worthy of being pursued could we not regard ourselves as under a moral obligation to pursue them?

Oakeshott's rejoinder would no doubt rest on the complaint that to set limits to the pursuit of some goals and to oblige the pursuit of others on strictly moral grounds presupposes an ability to determine a concept of "worthiness" for which there is simply no adequate instrument. This is precisely where Oakeshott parts company with Plato and shows himself to be more in sympathy with Protagoras. Protagoras was, of all the sophists, the most humane, and his humanism is admirable precisely because he believed that the pursuit of self-interest must not conflict with the standards of justice. Plato, however, believed that the pursuit of justice was more than a skill to be practised in such a manner that it does not infringe upon the liberty of others. In its positive aspect, according to Plato, it means the pursuit of the "Good". Oakeshott believes that the agent both expresses and forms his distinctively human character as *cives* through commitment to the principles of civility which are learned in the course of being taught how to behave justly. Plato insists that a human character is also formed through substantive transactions involving the

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

pursuit of goals. It is for this reason that we are obliged to pursue goals that are worthy. How do we evaluate the concept of worthiness? Plato's answer is that to pursue goals that are worthy entails knowledge of the "Good" and this in turn presupposes an encounter with divine transcendence. The primordial encounter with transcendence and its subsequent re-enactment through philosophy are the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of ordering the soul so that it is capable of philosophical insights into the nature of the "Good". The task of political theory, therefore, is to define the substantive conditions of the order of a just society as well as to describe the postulates of civility. Indeed, it could be argued, the very practise of civility itself presupposes a just social order dedicated to the pursuit of the worthy: the *agathon*, the *kalon* and the *sophon*. Thus Eric Voegelin writes, in a passage which represents an antithesis to the position so persuasively argued by Oakeshott:

The decisive event in the establishment of *politike episteme* was the specifically philosophical realization that the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order. And this insight was itself rooted in the real movement of the human spiritual soul toward divine being experienced as transcendent. In the experience of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in eros toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man became a philosopher.<sup>5</sup>

The sentiments expressed in this passage carry the support not only of Plato but of the eighteenth century philosopher Giambattista Vico, who at the conclusion of his monumental and truly epoch-making work *The New Science* instructs his readers with the declaration that "from all that we have set forth in this work, it is to be finally concluded that this science carries inseparably with it the study of piety, and he who is not pious cannot be truly wise".

With Plato's concept of transcendence, however, we pass beyond the limits of philosophy as conceived by Oakeshott and into a realm of metaphysical-ontological speculation which leads away from "theorizing" and back to "theory". It could be argued, however, that neither transcendence nor metaphysics need be conceived in strictly ontological terms. When fully understood, Oakeshott's "theorizing" can easily be assimilated to a concept of metaphysics; such as, for example, that proposed by R.G. Collingwood. The fundamental principle of metaphysics, as defined by Collingwood is that human conduct is an historical and not a purely natural phenomenon. As history, man's activities are conditioned neither by nature itself nor by society

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

but by what man has been able to make of nature and society through the exercise of his own freedom of choice. Since what man makes of nature and society depends upon his own historical achievements, such as the arts of agriculture, technology, science, government, etc., the so-called conditioning of history by nature and society is in reality a conditioning of history by itself. In this process, man's choices are guided by a variety of principles which taken together comprise the world view or metaphysical outlook of a particular civilisation. Included among these principles are the postulates that make possible scientific thought as we understand it and practise it today, and the arts of "civility" as Oakeshott understands it and claims it is practised among the civilised peoples or *cives* of the world.

Oakeshott, like Collingwood, regarded the postulates of civility as essential to the fabric of our civilisation. Oakeshott does not, however, share Collingwood's conviction that their disclosure and reaffirmation through metaphysical analysis is sufficient to ensure the survival of the practices to which they give rise. Nevertheless, I suspect that he would be prepared to concede that their continuous affirmation through metaphysical analysis or "theorizing" is at least a necessary condition of the survival of civilisation, and that philosophy does after all have some role to play in the drama through which man makes himself. Collingwood declared, in a passage which Oakeshott might be imagined to agree with, that the sciences of history and metaphysics should be regarded not as luxuries, or mere amusements of minds at leisure from more pressing occupations, but prime duties, whose discharge is essential to the maintenance not only of a particular form or type of reason, but of reason itself.<sup>6</sup> For it is precisely through the practice of metaphysics, so defined, that the mind enjoys an encounter with transcendence through which an *a priori* concept of worthiness can be formed.

### II. Civility and the Civil Condition

Oakeshott's account of the existential character of human conduct forms the basis for his even more arresting account of the civil condition, the condition in which individuals form associations for the purpose of realising common goals. Like human conduct, the civil condition is an "ideal character" to be understood by theorizing its postulates. In the course of "theorizing" the postulates of the civil condition, Oakeshott provides new and challenging insights into the character of legislation, ruling, the social contract, and politics.

To begin with, the civil condition is an association to be distinguished from other types of associations such as transactional associations, in which agents seek substantive satisfaction of their wants in their mutual responses, and collective or enterprise associations, whether in the form of industry, business,

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

professional activities etc., in which agents are engaged in the joint pursuit of some imagined or wished-for common satisfaction. Unlike transactional and enterprise associations, civil association consists in the mutual acknowledgment of the practices subscribed to in the course of seeking substantive satisfactions which, as practices subscribed to, help illuminate or render intelligible transactions without being themselves constitutive of the transactions. Civic association is relationship in terms of the conditions of a practice, rather than the joint pursuit of a common good or the satisfaction of substantive wants.

Oakeshott characterizes the ideal character of the civil condition as *civitas*, which consists of *cives* or persons related to each other by means of, or in terms of, *lex* (or law) within a comprehensive framework of association which is called *respublica*. While corporate or enterprise association is exclusive and voluntary and may be dependent upon skills and talents possessed by some but denied to others, civil association or *civitas* is necessary and all inclusive. Everyone is, by virtue of being a person at all, a *cives* and as such necessarily recognizes practices that provide for the possibility of other types of association involving the pursuit of substantive satisfactions. Subscription to these practices which are essentially moral is a necessary condition of the possibility of pursuing substantive goals of whatever sort. As a set of practises then the civil condition is an enactment of the language of civility; the instrument of conversation in which agents recognize and disclose themselves as *cives* and in which *cives* understand and continuously explore their relations with one another. They do this simply by subscribing to rules or prescriptions (*lex*) to which everyone falling under their authority or jurisdiction is obliged to conform. The rules of *civitas* are not hypothetical imperatives enjoining substantive actions, but moral considerations to be acknowledged and taken into account in acting in whatever manner one chooses to do so.

A rule subsists in being understood and in being recognized as an authoritative prescription of identifiable conditions to be subscribed to in human conduct.(126)

Now since the norms of conduct do not as such include a recipe for applying them to contingent situations (in which case knowing what they are does not include knowing precisely how to embody them in practise) the condition of civil association necessarily postulates uncertainty and dispute about how the norms of *lex* relate to contingent situations and about the adequacy of circumstantial responses to these norms. This entails the postulate of an authoritative adjudicative procedure for resolving such uncertainties and



## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

disputes. Such a procedure is not to be confused with the procedures of arbitration or compromise, and is not to be negotiated in terms of "social policy", "expediency", "the national interest", "common purpose" or "general happiness". Adjudication, in other words, is not a means for achieving certain goals or achieving specific substantive wants. The evaluation of an act as "just" is categorially different from evaluating it in terms of its "consequences".

The rationality of adjudication is therefore not a species of deductive reasoning nor does it consist in the application of rules or *lex*; *i.e.*, the subsumption of individual instances under general principles. The rationality of adjudication is concerned with the explication of the *meaning* of *lex* in a contingent situation, which is an exercise of attribution rather than deduction. Just as enterprise association is necessarily a relationship in terms of acknowledged "managerial" decisions contingently connected with a common purpose, so civil association is necessarily a relationship in terms of the accumulated meanings of *lex* which emerge in the adjudication of disputes.

The enactment of *lex* postulates, first of all, a belief that *lex* is alterable in principle and secondly, a legislative procedure for alteration. Unlike managerial opinion, or social policy analysis, legislative opinion is concerned with the composition of a system of moral not instrumental considerations and is therefore unconcerned with the claims or merits of any interest in procuring substantive satisfactions. Legislative opinion must therefore include rules specifying the jurisdiction of *lex*; rules for ascertaining the meaning of *lex* and for adjudicating disputes about its meaning in contingent situations; rules for making, repealing, or amending *lex*; rules in which offices such as those of adjudicator or legislator are set up or recognized and which specify their powers, duties and procedures; and rules for identifying and evaluating rules — all of which constitute a single system of related conditions, a practice of civil association.

The civil condition, specified as relationship in terms of a system of *lex*, prescribes conditions for the intercourse of *cives* and provides offices and procedures concerned with enacting *lex* and with settling uncertainties or disputes about its meaning in contingent situations. *Civitas* is a mode of association within which to engage in all those adventures of self-disclosure and self-enactment and to explore all those relationships of affection, of compassion, of business, or of joint enterprise which constitute the substantive concern of human life. An overriding postulate of this possibility is the expectation and assurance that the conditions will be generally and adequately subscribed to, and this postulates procedures and offices which do not belong to the engagement of enacting *lex* or of elucidating its meaning in contingent situations but to the engagement of "ruling", an engagement which is both

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

necessary and unique to civil association.(141)

Rulers *qua* rulers are not themselves persons with substantive wants. They are not managers, arbitrators or patrols of preferred interests, or protectors of ideology. Oakeshott admits, however, that rulers may also be "Lords" and as Lords they may unavoidably seek imagined and wished-for satisfactions — not the least of which is the satisfaction of power; and for this purpose they may employ the services of employees, whose conduct they manage. Nevertheless, Oakeshott insists, the preservation of the civil condition depends absolutely upon a ruler's "Lordship" not being allowed to invade, to usurp, or even to colour his rulership, so that the relationship between ruler and subject does not devolve into a transactional relationship. Ruling is an engagement *sine ire et sine studio*:

If ruling were itself to be understood as the deliberation, the choice, and the execution of a 'policy' in which the substantive resources of the ruled (their attention, their energy, their time, and their wealth) are compulsorily or contractually enlisted, in whole or in part, in a joint undertaking or series of such undertakings of which the rulers are the 'managers', then it could have no place whatever in civil association. It would be the substitution of 'lordship' for rulership, of demesne for realm, of role-performer for subject, and of transactional relationship for civil association.(146)

The ideal condition of *Cives* is called "*respublica*", the public concern or consideration of *cives*. *Respublica*, however, does not define or even describe a common substantive purpose, interest, or "good". It cannot therefore serve as a vehicle for nationalism and ideology. It is a manifold of rules and rule-like pre-emptions to be subscribed to in all of the enterprises and adventures in which self-chosen satisfactions or agents may be sought, without itself being an enterprise or adventure or satisfaction.

From this account of *respublica* Oakeshott offers what might be regarded as a revisionist account of the social contract. In contrast to the usual interpretation of the social contract, Oakeshott insists that the recognition of the authority of the rules comprising the contract does not entail either "approving" or "disapproving" the conditions prescribed. It does not mean recognizing the "desirability" of subscribing to them, or even acknowledging the consequences of subscribing or not subscribing to them. Finally, Oakeshott insists, the obligation to subscribe to the terms of *lex* has nothing whatever to do with

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

having taken part in the deliberation in which they were determined. If there is a motive for subscribing to rules it is neither hope nor fear, but respect for rules as such.

Rules are not rules in virtue of the sanctions attached to them or in respect of the power of rulers to exact penalties or to refuse recognitions. And to be associated in terms of expectations about the consequences of subscribing or of not subscribing to rules is not associated in terms of the recognition of rules as rules .... What relates *cives* to one another and constitutes civil association is the acknowledgement of the authority of *respublica* and the recognition of subscription to its conditions as an obligation. Civil authority and civil obligation are the twin pillars of the civil condition. (149)

While the acknowledgement of the authority of a rule does not entail recognition of the desirability of the conditions it prescribes, Oakeshott does not rule out or forbid this as a legitimate enterprise in its own right. The obligations of *cives* in respect of *respublica* simply disallows the substitution of one for the other. As a legitimate enterprise, however, the evaluation of the desirability of the conditions of conduct prescribed in *respublica* is the business of "politics". In keeping with the concepts of adjudication, legislation and ruling, politics, too, must remain free of any considerations having to do with the satisfaction of substantive wants — this is the business of management. The proper business of politics is the consideration of what constitutes civil association as such.

Political action or utterance is action or utterance whose imagined and wished-for outcome is not another or others responding in a wished-for performance but is a rule which prescribes conditions to be subscribed to by all alike in unspecified future performances. (163)

The possibility of political engagement entails a relationship to *respublica* which is at once acquiescent and critical. The ingredient of acquiescence is assent to its authority. Without this there can be no politics; for to deny it is not merely to refuse to subscribe to the conditions specified in *lex*, it is to deny civil

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

obligation and thus to extinguish civil intercourse and with it the possibility of reflecting upon its conditions in terms of their desirability. As a critical enterprise politics "theorizes" the postulates of civil association. As a theoretical engagement, however, politics is deliberative, persuasive and argumentative, rather than demonstrative. (173 ff.) Political theory is not a "science" which attempts to ground the authority of rules in transcendental principles, norms, laws of reason or nature. While civil rules are in principle non-deducible, neither are they merely opinions, acts of will, irrational preferences or so-called subjective judgments of civil "value" or "interest".

Finally, Oakeshott declares, politics is categorially distinguished from ruling as ruling is from managing. Ruling is a diurnal engagement, the concern of persons who occupy offices; and its utterance is authoritative and not persuasive. Deliberation and argument are not, of course, entirely absent from a civil rule, and particularly not from adjudication; but there they are concerned with the meaning of *lex* in contingent situations, not with the desirability of the conditions it prescribes. Nevertheless, just as rulers will sometimes engage in "management", so they may participate in politics. However, as in the exercise of "Lordship" they must put aside their *majestas* and thus notionally vacate their offices in order to participate. One does not rule politically, and neither ruling nor politics should be confused with managing.

Rulers who design to purchase the assent of their subjects to the authority of *respublica* by the argumentative recommendation of the desirability of its prescriptions, by instigations to subscribe, by negotiation with those of their subjects who are disposed to disapprove, by bribes or benefactions, by cajolery, by indistinct promises of better things to come, by reproach, encouragement, dissimulation, or foreboding, in short, by the exercise of the art of persuasive leadership, have ceased to be rulers and have become managers. (168)

Under such circumstances civil association is corrupted by having imposed upon it what is appropriate only in enterprise association concerned with the satisfaction of wants; where the terms of association are agreements about what is to be done, where the recognition of the desirability of doing it is what constitutes the association, and where "leadership" is the means of sustaining this agreement. Genuine politics thus excludes "benevolent plans for the general betterment of mankind", "for diminishing the discrepancy between wants and satisfactions", or for "moral improvement". Also excluded are both

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

patronage and proposals for awards of benefits or advantage to ascertainable individual or corporate interests claimed on account of merit. Such claims are not merely contingently excluded from political discourse, they are necessarily excluded by the character of *respublica*. Civil rulers and legislators, whose business it is to enact changes in *respublica* cannot be patrons of powerful, preferred, or otherwise meritorious interests nor can they be advocates of social policy.

A proposal to prescribe as a rule that a certain opinion, theorem, purported a statement of fact, doctrine, creed, dogma, or the like be believed to be true or false, or that certain conduct be believed to be morally right or wrong or be believed to be organically beneficial or harmful to human beings, cannot be a political proposal.(170)

Oakeshott's view of legislation, ruling, politics and political theory is thus clearly anti-enlightenment. While he does not invalidate the conception of a policy science as an ingredient in management and enterprise association, he is hostile to the encroachment of this science upon the enterprises of politics and ruling. To argue such a position is difficult, however, since by Oakeshott's own ruling the rules of philosophy expressly forbid complying with the demand for demonstration. Is it then self-evident that the terms of *respublica*, ruling, and politics must exclude such considerations? If so we are left with a number of perplexing issues.

In the first place, while the ideal relationship between ruler and subject is an engagement *sine ira et sine studio*, the dilemma facing modern *cives* is that as a result of irresponsibility in the pursuit of substantive goals, civil association is threatened with dissolution or destruction, and it is becoming increasingly necessary for rulers to become managers. The reason for this is that the conditions of civility as such do not guarantee sound management or sound social policies or even wisdom with respect to the selection of goals. For example, at the present rate of energy consumption, and assuming a continuous policy of environmentally hazardous exponential growth, the world population will soon face a crisis of unparalleled proportion. If we cannot trust common sense to intervene on behalf of sanity what alternative do we have but to invite intervention by rulers?

Oakeshott warns, however, that "if there is civil virtue in this response to a threat of dissolution, there is also equivocation. For rulers to become managers even of an undertaking such as this and for subjects to become partners or role-performers in a compulsory enterprise association even such as this, is itself a

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

suspension of the civil condition. *Inter armis silent legis*' (147) Worse still, if I may continue the argument on Oakeshott's behalf, it may be the prelude to totalitarianism. In this substitution of "Lordship" for "ruling" is the seed of the satanic vision of the happiness of man brought about through the application of management techniques. Here is the satanic vision of the happy state in which the government is operated and managed as a vast institution of accounting and control, in which "the whole of society will have become one office and one factory".<sup>7</sup> Add to this "policy" the power of behavioural engineering, which, in the words of B.F. Skinner, promises "to shape the behaviour of the members of a group so that they will function smoothly for the benefit of all",<sup>8</sup> and the suspension of the civil condition is complete and irreversible.

A second and related difficulty stems from Oakeshott's refusal to consider whether there are any circumstances that would justify the use of force to restore a society in dissolution or to effect a transfer of power by revolutionary means. As Oakeshott defines the ideal conditions of *respublica*, there is simply no basis for arguing a morally theoretical justification for revolution or even civil disobedience; "belligerence is alien to civil association". (273)

Yet it could be argued that no adequate political philosophy can presume to define the conditions of a social contract without at the same time defining the conditions under which the contract can be and indeed ought to be challenged, through such processes as protest, disobedience and revolution. If so, then, Oakeshott's adventure in political theorizing will not qualify as an adequate account of the social contract. Let us not forget, however, that there is a profound reason for this. For Oakeshott, theorizing is an adventure in understanding the conditions of civility, and there is simply no "civil" procedure whereby *cives* can engage in revolutionary action and remain *cives*. The very need for revolutionary action at all is a sign that civility has been overwhelmed by barbarism, and it is questionable whether it can be restored by resorting to further acts of barbarism. Since revolution proceeds by means of a logic of terror and must necessarily be managed, it is difficult to imagine that once successful, revolutionary leaders and terrorists will voluntarily consent to becoming "rulers" (in Oakeshott's sense), thus running the risk of re-creating the conditions of corruption all over again. At best we might expect a solution not unlike that proposed by Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In the case of Sartre, his inability to provide a more "civil" means of maintaining the pledge that lies at the basis of his contract is consistent with his refusal, as a philosopher, to show any confidence in the cumulative reliability of human character. Like Oakeshott, Sartre abhors the need for justifications, motives and policies, as sources of moral and political commitment and obligation, whether by *cives* or rulers. Like Sartre, Oakeshott may find that his purity of outlook

## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

will provide nothing of relevance to the needs of those who are compelled by their circumstances to revolt. If, in such times, philosophers cannot offer wise counsel, what remains but to seek it elsewhere, from the logicians of terror? Much the same point is made by David Kettler in his perceptive review of Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics* published in 1962. "The interpretive enterprise of social and political theory", writes Kettler, "has been carried on by intellectuals animated by moral responsibility, and it makes no sense apart from that impetus".

Unquestionably, that spirit has often led to grave errors: worship of illusion instead of sober appraisal of reality, intoning glib or murky moralizing slogans instead of the painstaking search for a human perspective, delusions of omnipotence instead of accepting the intellectual's place as gadfly, critic, and conscience. But the alternative to responsibility remains complicity. In postulating a radical disjunction between theory and practice, Oakeshott has misinterpreted his own task and misjudged the very considerations which lead him to argue as he does — or to argue at all ... particularly when we attend his words against the background of the great events of our time: the attempts to stave off thermonuclear devastation and the terrible efforts of suffering multitudes to obtain a decent human existence. His conception of his own activity derives primarily from the Epicurean tradition; his discourses are set in philosophical groves. Oakeshott's work dramatically raises again the question which was debated in Roman antiquity and which the Scottish moral philosophers reopened for modern thought in their violent attacks on their dear friend David Hume: how is it possible to eliminate illusion without becoming a "traitor to the cause of mankind"?<sup>9</sup>

The dilemma is not an easy one to resolve. For if philosophy is both the language and guardian of reason and civility, then to adopt the language of tactics, strategies and policies, turns philosophers into managers and philosophy into ideology. At the same time, however, because of the very nature of "civility" and "the civil condition", which is man's freedom from nature, philosophy necessarily grants men the freedom to submit to nature. The risk of corruption is thus permanent; and while in its moments of infinite

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

yearning, philosophy may aspire to a higher wisdom than it has hitherto been able to attain, it is a prospect whose pursuit must necessarily be suffered in fear and trembling. This is the equivocal but inescapable condition in which we are placed by Oakeshott's "well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquility".

In the third and final essay, "On the Character of a Modern European State", Oakeshott rejects most of the more popular readings of the history of Western civilisation. These may be divided roughly into two approaches. The first is the somewhat romantic characterization of the growth of Western civilisation as a continuous, painful and partly successful "quest for community". According to this speculation the quest for community has been disrupted in the modern world by a type of "possessive individualism" which is said to have supervened upon the tradition of communal intimacy and warmth. The result is that the contemporary world bears witness to a profound expression of longing of peoples for their lost sense of community, combined with an effort to recover a lost sense of communal identity. One might even regard the writings of philosophers such as Rousseau as an attempt to recall, on behalf of the alienated peoples of the European states, what Comté spoke of as *la pensée de l'ensemble et le solidarité commune*. Oakeshott has no more regard for this philosophy of history than he has for the pretensions of the social sciences to disclose the underlying laws of human conduct. As in the case of the social sciences, this interpretation of history stems from the yearning to relieve ourselves from the burden of uncertainty that derives from the encounter with nothingness; the realisation that as in the case of the individual, the life of a community is also "*un voyage au bout de la nuit*".

Nor has he much regard for the view that the dominant disposition of the modern European consciousness is for a functionally integrated solidarity and the enjoyment of uniform benefits, to be achieved, not by the recovery of a lost sense of community, but by bold initiatives undertaken by governments prepared to bring the world under technological control and management. This view, which Oakeshott calls, "teleocracy", has no more credibility than the nostalgia for the recovery of paradise lost.

In place of a teleological view of history, Oakeshott suggests what amounts to a hermeneutical approach, according to which the human character may be conceived as harbouring two contrary dispositions, neither of which is strong enough to defeat or put to flight the other. The one is a disposition to be "self-employed", in which a man recognizes himself and all others in terms of self-determination and in terms of wants rather than satisfactions. The other is to identify oneself as a partner with others in a common stock of resources and a common stock of talents with which to exploit it. In such co-operative undertakings there is a tendency to prefer outcomes to adventures and satisfac-



## ON THEORIZING HUMAN CONDUCT

tions to wants. Although the self-understandings of the various states comprising the present European community are varied and manifold, it may be that they are formed within the context of a struggle between these two dispositions; with the result that the modern state has emerged as equivocal in character. For Oakeshott, it would be unwise to even attempt a resolution of this tension; to attempt, for example, to submit to the first impulse by removing all restraints to action, save the protection of liberty. This is the position of libertarianism and anarchism. Equally unacceptable is the attempt to force everything into conformity with some "common good". Indeed, Oakeshott contends, the attempt to impose upon people, by whatever means, the character of purposive associations is simply contrary to the natural order. It does not give rise to a genuine community. For, as Oakeshott declares in a reply to his critics, which serves as a fitting conclusion to his "tale":

it is an indispensable condition of this kind of association that each and every associate shall have expressly chosen to be joined in its enterprise or shall have otherwise acknowledged its purpose as his own and that he be permitted to contract out of the association if and when he no longer wishes to be associated .... Consequently, the undertaking to impose this character upon a state whose membership is compulsory constitutes a moral enormity, and it is the attempt and not the deed which convicts it of moral enormity. And it matters not one jot whether this undertaking is that of one powerful ruler (or *coup d'étatiste*), a few, or a majority. Thus the only "animosity" I have ever entertained or expressed towards "community" or association in terms of the pursuit of a substantive purpose is concerned with the attribution of this character to a *state* or the attempt to impose it upon a *state*. And indeed, genuine purposive association can exist only when this character has *not* been imposed upon a state.<sup>10</sup>

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### Notes

1. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975, pp. 329 + x
2. Above all, the philosopher must resist the temptation to return to the cave in order to redeem his fellow men. There is simply no room in Oakeshott's perspective for the idea of politics as *engagé* or committed to action in the relief of human suffering and injustice. Oakeshott follows Hegel in his judgment that politics is a purely philosophical enterprise, and the task

## LIONEL RUBINOFF

of philosophy as political science is not to teach the state what it ought to be but simply to show how the state, the ethical universe, is to be understood. For both Hegel and Oakeshott, the ideal political world is one in which the theoretical mind can be at home regardless of conditions obtaining in the real world; the world of human suffering, hunger and injustice. Engagement in politics, he writes, entails a disciplined imagination. "It is to put by for another occasion the cloudy enchantments of *Schlaraffenland*, the earth flowing with milk and honey and the sea transmuted into ginger beer, it is to forswear the large consideration of human happiness and virtue, the mysteries of human destiny, the rift that lies between the aspirations of human beings and the conditions of a human life, and even the consideration of the most profitable or least burdensome manner of satisfying current wants, and to focus attention upon civility." (164)

Oakeshott defines moral rules as practices in terms of which to think, to choose, to act, and to utter. (79) As such they may be likened to the rules of artistic endeavour, to be followed in such a way as to permit improvisation. Their authority does not depend upon any transcendental principles from which they may have been derived, nor even upon their having been chosen. Moral rules are non-deducible and there is no such experience as "moral choice" (although there are, of course, choices with respect to the pursuit of substantive wants). (79) To put it in slightly different terms, which again draws on the analogy between moral rules and the rules of artistic creativity, in authentic human conduct, moral rules are not simply observed but interpreted and every interpretation contains a moment of self-enactment as well as self-disclosure.

This view of morality may be further explicated in terms of what he says in his previously published *Rationalism and Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962). In this work Oakeshott defines rationality in general and morality in particular as knowledge of how to behave appropriately in the circumstances. There is no way in which such knowledge can be made to spring solely from a knowledge of propositions about good behaviour. (108) Knowledge of *how* to practice an activity is acquired only *in* the practice of the activity, and a person's moral integrity is nothing more and nothing less than faithfulness to the knowledge acquired in this manner. To act morally is therefore to act in such a way that the coherence of the "idiom" of the activity to which the conduct belongs is preserved and possibly enhanced. What is crucial in Oakeshott's understanding of morality is his insistence that to the extent that moral conduct involves subscription to rules and principles, this should not be confused with slavish adherence to rules and principles. As he puts it in *Rationalism and Politics*, "principles, rules and purposes are mere abridgements of the coherence of the activity, and we may easily be faithful to them while losing touch with the activity itself". (102) The faithfulness which characterizes "moral integrity" is not faithfulness to something fixed and finished (for knowledge of how to pursue an activity is always in motion): it is a faithfulness which itself contributes to and not merely illustrates the coherence of the activity. (*ibid.*)

4. *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1941, pp. 291-2.
5. *Science, Politics & Gnosticism*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968, p. 18.
6. *The Idea of History*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1946, pp. 227-8.
7. V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, pp. 173-4.
8. *Walden Two*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1962, p. 175.
9. "The Cheerful Discourses of Michael Oakeshott", *World Politics*, April 1964, p. 489.
10. "On Misunderstanding Human Conduct: A Reply To My Critics", *Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 3, August 1976, p. 367.