Introduction

This volume collects together all of the essays and reviews Oakeshott published between 1952 and 1988 that have not previously been republished elsewhere. Together with its companion for 1926–1951, it makes the vast majority of these writings easily accessible in print for the first time. The rationale for republishing them given in the Introduction to the previous volume need only be restated briefly here.

Obviously, it is far more convenient to consult all these pieces between just two sets of covers. They also supply valuable bridges between the major works that Oakeshott published during his lifetime—in particular, in the case of this volume, between *Rationalism in Politics* (1962) and *On Human Conduct* (1975). The essays and reviews place Oakeshott in dialogue with his contemporaries in a way that his books seem almost to have been deliberately designed to avoid. Moreover, they constitute a distinctive record of developments in the humanities and social sciences over a good portion of the twentieth century. Finally, they have remained entertaining to read even though some of the books reviewed have been forgotten.

Such collections, however, are not often read through in sequence, so once more it is appropriate in this introductory essay to offer an overview of a collection of writings that were never designed to form a whole. Oakeshott’s review of E.M. Forster’s essays remarked that they were worth republishing ‘because the pieces re-enforce one another in a manner which might escape notice had they not been collected together’, and the reader will hopefully agree that this is also true of the writings collected here.²

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[1] For these previously published essays and reviews see M. Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, ed. T. Fuller (New Haven: Yale, 1993), and M. Oakeshott, *What is History? and Other Essays Selected Writings Volume 1*, ed. L. O’Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004) [SW hereafter]. A full list of the contents of these volumes is online at http://www.michael-oakeshott-association.org/bibliography.htm. ‘A Reminder from Leviathan’ (1951) appears here as reproduction rights were not obtained in time to include it in vol. 3.

The majority of the essays and reviews in this volume belong to the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, Oakeshott’s reviewing slowed considerably, probably because in retirement he was concentrating on finishing *On Human Conduct* and *On History*. In the 1980s, he published just three reviews, though he remained intellectually active—*On History* did not appear until 1983. His very last review is dated 1988, just two years before his death.

This volume contains fewer items than its predecessor, but is only slightly shorter as it contains several lengthy essays. Once again, it is named after its longest piece. ‘The Vocabulary of a Modern European State’ (1976) constitutes Oakeshott’s most thorough investigation of a theme that runs throughout this volume, the fundamental ambiguity of European political discourse. It is an essential companion piece to the search in *On Human Conduct* for a vocabulary of ‘civil association’ that avoided the use of words such as ‘democracy’, ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘socialist’, ‘conservative’, ‘liberal’, and so on.

Oakeshott generally eschewed all of these terms in his own philosophical works, and the reasons why he found them so ambiguous are discussed below. But in these shorter reviews, he was more prepared to acknowledge such conventional labels. If one is curious about what he made of contemporary American Conservatism, the New Right in Britain, or French Marxism, this is the place to look. But these pieces are also fertile sources for his views on the rhetorical character of political speech, on historiography, on political theory, and hopefully much else besides.

I: Religion

After WW2, Oakeshott ceased reviewing works on religion and theology altogether. The explanation seems biographical; a convinced Christian in his early twenties, he gradually became disillusioned in the 1930s, and never wrote exclusively on theological matters again. Nevertheless, his early interest in religion left a lasting impression. He was no less sensitive than Carl Schmitt to ‘political theology’, or the roots of contemporary European political ideas in earlier Christian beliefs.

While none of these reviews dealt specifically with religion, they contain a number of significant references to it. For example, Oakeshott more than once referred to modernity in general and to the Enlightenment in particular as ‘Pelagian’. The analogy is between the early fifth-century claims of Pelagius and modern ideas of human nature. Pelagius had denied, not the reality of sin, but its originality, and hence its

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ineffaceability. He claimed, furthermore, that divine grace (other than the grace of the act of creation itself) was unnecessary to salvation; free will sufficed.

The Council of Carthage definitively condemned Pelagius’ ideas as heretical in 418 CE. But Oakeshott was not concerned with early Christian doctrine as such; he was drawing an analogy between Pelagianism and two beliefs he ascribed to the Enlightenment and modernity. The first was that human beings were naturally good; and the second was that permanent solutions to political problems were possible because all difficulties lay in the structure of society and not in human beings themselves.

Oakeshott read Hobbes’s *Leviathan* as a rejection of both these beliefs. The Hobbesian state of nature took the place of Augustinian original sin, from which a final escape was impossible; it remained a permanent danger. This was the ‘reminder’ Oakeshott took from *Leviathan*; the threat of the breakdown of civilization was always lurking, as WW2 had made so abundantly clear.

Oakeshott sympathised with Joseph de Maistre for similar reasons. Maistre’s belief that there was no escape from ‘wickedness and suffering’ in the world found a parallel in Origen, another of the early church fathers. Like Augustine, Origen insisted that salvation was not of this world and that the earthly church must always contain sinners. Oakeshott found Maistre’s modern rendering of these themes ‘somber, even savage’, but, vitally, not ‘pessimistic’; the absence of unconditional perfection or final salvation was no justification for either political or existential despair.

Origen had also opposed the Gnostic heresy because it asserted the possibility of human beings obtaining absolute knowledge. Oakeshott (like Eric Voegelin) considered Rationalism analogous to Gnosticism; the idea that planning could reduce all political problems to the technical level implied a similar over-confidence. From a theological point of view, Rationalism constituted a form of impiety with potentially dangerous consequences, however well-intentioned. Thus, although religion and theology were no longer at the forefront of Oakeshott’s concerns, they continued to provide him with a critical frame of reference for modern political ideas.

**II: Philosophy**

After 1945 Oakeshott also reviewed fewer philosophical works lying outside the areas of political philosophy and philosophy of history in which he increasingly specialised. There are, however, two notable exceptions. The first is his review of Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* (1958), which had a major impact on the philosophy of science during the years covered by this
volume; the second is a review of *Realism and Imagination* by the critic and poet Joseph Chiari. With a background in physical chemistry, Polanyi’s scientific credentials were impeccable, so his attack on the current understanding of ‘objectivity’ in philosophy of science commanded attention. Oakeshott regarded Polanyi as seeking to debunk the empiricist idea that scientific knowledge was the result of pure observation. Polanyi proposed instead that science ‘begins not in naive observation of the world but in the current state of scientific explanation’.

A corollary was that a great deal of scientific truth was taken on trust; the place of doubt in scientific inquiry was much less fundamental than was commonly believed, and ‘objectivity’ was a property of a shared world of scientific inquiry. At the same time, no scientific truth could establish itself without provoking a feeling of inner conviction in the scientist—the ‘personal knowledge’ of the title.

But the ‘personal’, Oakeshott took Polanyi to be saying, was not merely subjective. Indeed, in a rather ‘disordered’ manner, he took Polanyi to be dealing with the problem Hegel had confronted of bridging the gap between subjectivity and objectivity. Rather than reaching, however, for the Hegelian concept of a ‘concrete universal’, Polanyi employed an idea of ‘rationality’ that was supposed to lift scientific theory beyond the realm of ‘personal conviction’.

Here, Oakeshott’s view of science parted company with Polanyi’s. While he clearly found its implicitly historicist position attractive, he could not endorse Polanyi’s ‘Platonic’ solution to the problems it raised. He regarded it as resting on a naive conception of rationality that revealed a certain ‘philosophical innocence’.

Oakeshott gave a similarly mixed reception to Chiari’s *Realism and Imagination*. On the one hand, he looked kindly on Chiari’s view of art as an ‘autonomous activity’ that could not be appreciated solely in biographical or psychoanalytic terms. This is unsurprising, as his own essay on ‘The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind’ (1959) had added ‘poetic’ or artistic experience to the four main autonomous forms of experience that he had distinguished in *Experience and Its Modes*. On the other hand, Chiari’s introduction of a concept of ‘reality’ raised problems similar to those he detected in Polanyi.

Chiari, like Polanyi, had resorted to ‘reality’ in an attempt to find an unconditional standard, a ‘true essence of things’, a move both problematic in itself and out of keeping with the main tendency of their thought. Chiari’s work had the additional difficulty of proposing the artistic imagi-

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nation as “the highest of the human faculties”, implying an adherence to a hierarchy of forms of experience from which Oakeshott had gradually liberated himself—though in his case it was philosophy which had once occupied the summit. Together, Oakeshott’s reviews of Polanyi and Chiari serve as useful reminders of his insistence on the conditional nature of all thought.

III: Culture

Oakeshott found a faith in the possibility of unqualified knowledge of reality in literature as well as philosophy, but at the level of implicit assumption rather than explicit argument. E.M. Forster is a good example.\(^5\) Clearly, there were significant similarities between Oakeshott and Forster; both began their careers as Cambridge undergraduates, and were broadly ‘liberal’ in their outlook. It is safe to say that Oakeshott, like Forster, was opposed to what Two Cheers for Democracy called ‘Belief’, or unconditional devotion to dogma.

But Oakeshott would not have accepted Forster’s view that ‘science … ought to have ruled’ in the modern world.\(^9\) Forster considered that the application of objective scientific knowledge to politics was a good thing in principle; it had been frustrated only by circumstances and bad faith. Oakeshott, by contrast, felt that precisely this belief was responsible for many of post-war Britain’s political problems.

At a deeper level, what restricted Oakeshott’s sympathy for Forster was his conviction that the civil and the contemplative transcended the purely personal. Though he shared Forster’s view that private life in the modern world ‘can only be enjoyed in the imprecisions of any social and political organization’,\(^10\) his own political philosophy laid far less emphasis on the importance of personal relationships.

In the end, despite their shared admiration for Montaigne’s scepticism, Oakeshott detected a ‘certain finicky self-centredness’ and ‘superiority’ in Forster absent from Montaigne himself. Jacob Burckhardt struck him as a more reliable guide to the problems of modernity.\(^11\) The Swiss historian undeniably possessed a personal style, but it had not blinded him to the way in which ‘prosperity was breeding a profound desire for “security” and uniformity, a love of mediocrity and a deep hostility to everything that was not commonplace’. This ‘subtle change of mood from “prosperity” to “security”’ had provided the backdrop to twentieth-century European politics.

\(^{[8]}\) #3, Two Cheers for Democracy, pp. 44–47.
\(^{[10]}\) Compare the remark that students of history should be ‘grateful for merely being allowed to exist’ in the modern world: LSE 1/3.
Burckhardt had speculated where this trend might lead; the masses, ‘helpless despots without initiative of their own’, would in the end give up all authority and responsibility to tyrants. Oakeshott, however, had no time for any suggestion that historical inevitability was at work: ‘to consider him wise because we have permitted to happen what he thought might happen is to pay ourselves an undeserved compliment through him.’

What Oakeshott admired was not Burckhardt’s prognostications but his rootedness in his own character. It was Burckhardt, rather than Forster, who had successfully emulated the ‘Epicurean detachment’ displayed by Montaigne. This attitude of ironic resignation lay beyond faith and hope but left his interest in life undimmed. Burckhardt never articulated this standpoint as a philosophy; it manifested itself instead as a historical and poetic vision of the past in all its specificity.

Burckhardt’s historical sense was far too refined to lead him to suggest the kind of ‘link between “blood” and “ability”’ suggested by Bloomfield’s *Uncommon People*. There was no dispute over the historical fact that certain English families since the sixteenth century—the Cecils, the Wedgwoods, the Darwins, and the Russells, amongst others—had produced a number of exceptional individuals, but the problem of ‘isolating blood from nurture when “ability” is in question’ was one that Bloomfield failed to overcome. Moreover, his judgments were eccentric; the limits of Oakeshott’s sympathy for Forster are revealed in his comment that in ‘the identification of the Bloomsbury set with the high point of English art and literature … Mr Bloomfield may be thought to have gone farther than he need or than it is wise to go.’

### IV: Historiography and Philosophy of History

English philosophers largely continued to neglect the philosophy of history between the 1950s and the 1980s, and nothing Oakeshott reviewed on the subject in these years struck him as surpassing Collingwood’s *Idea of History*. His reception of E.H. Carr’s *What is History* was scathing, but remained unpublished.\footnote{SW, i, 319–32.} W.H. Walsh’s essentially Collingwoodian *Introduction to Philosophy of History* was ‘an Introduction to a subject … by no means in a condition to be treated in that manner.’\footnote{#4, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, p. 48.}

Oakeshott agreed with Walsh that the starting point for any philosophy of history had to be the dual meaning of the term ‘history’ itself. Many of the confusions in philosophy of history stemmed from a failure to recognize that it could designate both a series of events and a form of enquiry. Thus, Walsh was right to distinguish speculative philosophical interpreta-
tions of historical events from critical philosophies of historical knowledge.

Oakeshott accepted that there was nothing illegitimate about either enterprise provided they were kept apart. Speculative philosophy of history was a ‘legitimate [attempt] to explain the past subordinated to a moral and practical purpose’, a form of ‘retrospective prophecy’; but it was entirely different from a philosophical investigation of the conditions of an understanding of the past exclusively in terms of its own past.

Other difficulties remained. Not only did Walsh take for granted that ‘cause’ was a crucial concept in history without explicating it, his conception of historical understanding focussed on truth at the expense of meaning. Though ‘is it true’ or ‘is it genuine’ could be important historical questions, ‘the historian is much more often concerned with the question “What does this mean” in which “what” and “why” are combined.’

Furthermore, Walsh’s account of the nature of historical thought shared the problems of Collingwood’s idea that historical understanding was fundamentally a matter of ‘re-enactment’. The project of ‘resurrecting or reconstructing the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the past’ suffered from the problem that ‘an historical account of the past at least purports to present something which was never in the mind of anybody at the time’. Historians at least appear ‘to have a way of thinking about the past which would have been impossible for anyone who lived in that past.’

Historians observed the conditions of their discipline with varying degrees of self-consciousness. Collingwood was as reflective a historian as one could wish, while at the other end of the scale stood the practitioner who might write excellent history but cared little about the philosophical issues involved. F.W. Maitland furnished Oakeshott with an example of a scholar whose perfect historical ‘manners’ did not extent to philosophising about his own practice.14

Somewhere in the middle stood writers like Forbes and Butterfield who took the history of historical investigation as their problem. Oakeshott gave The Liberal Anglican Idea of History and Man on His Past enthusiastic welcomes.15 Forbes’ book was a major contribution to the task of ‘replacing the contemporary myth (the understanding of the nineteenth century had of itself) by an historical “myth” (an understanding of the nineteenth century in the categories of historical thought’.

This idea that the historical past, like the practical past, could be understood as a ‘myth’ deserves emphasis. It explains how the historian, while inhabiting a world of theoretical discourse logically distinct from the world of ordinary speech, can nevertheless make a vital contribution to it. History can emancipate common sense from the ‘selective prejudices and

simplifications’ any received understanding of the past inevitably entails; this is its social value.

The received ‘myth’ of the past was necessarily unhistorical for two reasons, according to Oakeshott. First, ‘what is remembered is arranged in terms of what is believed to be the destiny of the age.’ Practical thought always takes place within a horizon limited by a vision, implicit or explicit, of what the future holds. Second, it ‘easily forgets whatever seems irrelevant to the fortunes of the age.’ In every era, common sense shapes the understanding of the past as well as the future to fit its own needs, which by definition are never historical.

Forbes’ book addressed the contrasting understandings of the past held by the ‘Liberal Anglicans’ (the moderate wing of the Church of England in the mid-nineteenth century) and the Utilitarians. The Utilitarian ‘myth’ was ‘heir to eighteenth-century rationalism’ in which ‘the past was the March of Mind: a single grand line of intellectual and moral progress’. In this ‘Lockean’ conception, only what had contributed to progress was perceived, and ‘the rest is forgotten, denied or relegated to the status of a dead end’.

The Liberal Anglicans, inspired by Vico, Coleridge, and Niebuhur, provided an alternative organic analogy; a nation, like an individual, passed through a definite cycle of life. Oakeshott’s main criticism was that Forbes confused this organic conception of the past with an authentically historical understanding of the past. While it ‘opened the door to a much closer and more detailed inspection’ of the historical past, it was later replaced by a still more sophisticated conception of history as ‘a manner of speaking about the world...not to be confused with any other’. It was this latter conception with which Oakeshott’s own attempt to identify the ‘categories’ peculiar to historical understanding was concerned.

Oakeshott had always admired Butterfield’s historical work, and was particularly struck by the account of the eighteenth-century Göttingen school of historians in Man on His Past. It was ‘among these, often obscure ... historians, who had felt the touch of both rationalism and romanticism, that the current conceptual problems of historical writing first came to the surface’ — though they did not attract the attention of English philosophers until F.H. Bradley published ‘The Presuppositions of Critical History’ in 1874.

Forbes and Butterfield were major contributors to ‘a genuine history of historiography’, a subject ‘only now beginning to be transformed into a genuine history’. While historians could do without critical philosophy of history, they could not ignore the history of their own subject. Historiography could make them ‘aware and critical of the intellectual fashions ...
liable to affect [their] work, and ... show [them] that to be an historian is to
think in a certain manner'.

*History in a Changing World* struck Oakeshott as a less accomplished
attempt at philosophically informed historiography. Barraclough's com-
plaint was not dissimilar to Butterfield's; it was that historical writing, at
least before 1939, often suffered from an implicit progressivism which
Oakeshott agreed was present there only illegitimately. Barraclough's
solution, however, was not to disregard the idea of history as having an
overall 'plan', but to supply an alternative one.

Whether or not civilisations 'enjoy similar fortunes and conform to a sin-
gle general pattern', this was not the sort of truth that Oakeshott thought
historical research could establish. Barraclough had been overcome by a
Spenglerian pessimism that was powerless to support his criticisms of the
historical 'specialist'. When Barraclough stuck to medieval history, he was
capable of 'masterpieces'; otherwise, his failure to appreciate the differ-
ence between historiography and the speculative philosophy of history
undermined his conclusions.

Oakeshott regarded Doris Stenton's *The English Woman in History* as a
more successful historical survey, probably because it was not carrying
the kind of philosophical baggage that hindered Barraclough's work. Nev-
evertheless, he felt this early milestone in feminist historiography retained a
somewhat 'whiggish' view of history as a story of progressive emancipa-
tion and might have been 'a little more “sociological” in ... outlook'.

Oakeshott sounded something of a feministic note himself when he
asked 'What is man ... that he should be made the model to be copied? Why is his status reckoned to be “emancipation”?'; modern feminists have
repeatedly raised the same question. Overall, however, Stenton's book
achieved its aim of showing how 'the legal subjection which overtook
women' after the Norman Conquest slowly began to break down after the
Restoration.

In Oakeshott's eyes, Barraclough and Stenton were only two instances
of a much more widespread post-war trend towards revisionism in his-
tory. Historiography had become 'an activity in which a more or less
familiar story is perpetually revised and modified. The historian begins
with a current interpretation; and his task is one of criticism and recon-
struction.' With respect to the eighteenth century, the works of John
Brooke and Sir Lewis Namier as well as Butterfield supplied an exemplary
instance of historical controversy.

The publication of Namier's *The Structure of English Politics at the Acces-
sion of George III* in 1929 had provoked a major re-assessment of the period,
but its conclusions were by no means unanimously accepted. Butterfield

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was one of Namier’s most prominent critics, and Oakeshott tended to take his side. As Oakeshott read him, Butterfield was complaining that Namier’s method of analysis turned historical actors into ‘automata, slaves of a situation’. Whether or not this was a fair criticism of Namier, it suggests that Oakeshott thought the historical virtue of contextualism could be taken to excess.

What happens when this occurs is that ‘a set of dispositions and possibilities allowing room for movement and individuality [becomes] a perpetually operative set of necessary and sufficient conditions and is even regarded as the cause of events and actions’. But even if one avoided this problem, it seems that Oakeshott believed there were other structural conditions of thought that the historian of political ideas needed to take account of, as we shall see below.

**V: History and Political Thought**

The numerous works Oakeshott reviewed on the history of political thought permit the construction of an outline narrative of the subject that runs from Hobbes to Marx. In considering *Leviathan’s* enduring appeal, Oakeshott suggested there was ‘something undeniable’ in it. It contained nothing of immediate political relevance to the modern world, but the crisis that provoked Hobbes to write it revealed the nearest thing to a timeless political truth Oakeshott could accept—that beneath the ‘uneasy achievement’ of civilized life, there lay always ‘a volcano of primordial barbarism’.

Modernity had tended to ignore this fragile quality of civilisation. In turn, this had produced confusion about what could realistically be expected from government. Civilisation itself was not the task of government; it sprang from the way of life of a society. All government could do was ‘maintain that peace and order without which civilization is impossible’. The ‘limited but essential office’ of Leviathan was ‘to be guardian of the peace’, and it ‘was to operate, not arbitrarily, but by rule of law’. This ‘liberal’ reading of *Leviathan* has continued to grow in popularity, and Oakeshott played a significant part in disseminating it.

Though Oakeshott acknowledged the continuing influence of Leo Strauss on Hobbes research in the 1960s, it was Warrender’s *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* with which he engaged most closely. Warrender focussed on a problem central to political philosophy, the ground of obligation. In what Oakeshott called a ‘brilliant performance’, Warrender argued that political obligation ‘is not, in Hobbes’s argument, a
special kind of obligation but is grounded upon the moral obligation, common to all men (save atheists), to obey the law of nature.’

Warrender’s conclusion that Hobbes’s theory of obligation is ‘less divergent from the current natural law theory than is commonly supposed’ may well have prompted some of the revisions to Oakeshott’s own ‘Introduction’ to Leviathan when it was republished in 1975. At any rate, in the revised ‘Introduction’, Hobbes’s appropriation of the language of natural law assumes an importance not given to it in the earlier version.

What pleased Oakeshott most was that a ‘somewhat dim figure in the positivist’s calendar of saints’ had been replaced by ‘an incomparably greater degree of historical authenticity.’ To the subjects raised in Brown’s volume of Hobbes Studies, which included religion, politics, and ethics, a later generation of scholars has added rhetoric, natural science, psychology, mathematics, and much else besides. Oakeshott would have surely welcomed this ongoing expansion of Hobbes scholarship.

However, Hobbes was by no means the only figure undergoing major reinterpretation after 1945. Oakeshott hailed Laslett’s edition of Locke’s Two Treatises as definitively superseding the text with which he had grown up, and the change in its significance that resulted from Laslett’s showing that it was initially written as a contribution to the failed attempt to exclude James from the succession rather than to justify the ‘revolution’ of 1688 has become well known.

Oakeshott was particularly impressed by Laslett’s re-integration of the first Treatise, written against Filmer. It emphasized the importance of religion to Locke, and it underlined the extent to which Locke’s position was, if not directly influenced by Hobbes, then very much a reflection of ‘Hobbism’. The difference between Locke and Hobbes, however, was the level of political reflection at which they wrote.

Whereas Leviathan was ‘a work of political philosophy’, the Two Treatises had to be understood at least partly as ‘not explanatory … but prescriptive.’ Locke had blended ‘political theory’, or ‘the questionable enterprise of recommending a political position in the idiom of general ideas’, with ‘political philosophy’. This mixture gave ‘a spurious air of principle to his recommendations and a false suggestion of practical applicability to his explanations’, ensuring that the Two Treatises was ‘exactly the sort of work to make a profound impression upon mankind’.

This distinction between different levels or types of political argument is a persistent theme in Oakeshott’s thought, and he criticised Isaiah Berlin

[26] #40, Two Treatises of Government, p. 163.
for showing an insufficient appreciation of it. Historians needed to grasp it if they were not to be misled as concepts ‘move from one employment to another’, or be ‘inhibited by the instability of the concepts themselves’. To do so was not impossible; J.G.A. Pocock was an example of a historian who could ‘combine, without coming to grief in irrelevance, the analytical activity of the philosopher and the exploration of contingent connexions’.

On Oakeshott’s reading of him, Montesquieu had been entirely self-conscious about the level of argument *L’Esprit des lois* was employing; it was an exploration of ideal types of government. Oakeshott praised Shackleton’s biography as ‘more complete than any other I am acquainted with’, and applauded its ‘well-considered attention to historical detail’. If there was a fault with *Montesquieu*, it was its handling of philosophical ideas; Oakeshott was ‘not sure that Montesquieu’s debt to Aristotle is as fully recognized as it should be’.

This is significant, because Oakeshott described his own work on political philosophy as ‘Aristotelian’, and regarded Montesquieu’s exploration of ‘monarchy’ in particular as one of the precursors of his own discussion of civil association. Aristotle’s ‘distinction … between “kingship” and “tyranny”’ was in terms not of the number of rulers but the manner of ruling, the one by law and the other without law, and in this respect it corresponds very closely to Montesquieu’s distinction between Monarchy and Despotism. It also corresponded very closely to his own distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘enterprise’ association. As Oakeshott understood Montesquieu, monarchy was ‘the only genuine form of government in modern Europe’ because it fell between the extremes of Despotism and Republicanism, preserving a lawfulness which each of the other two corrupted in their own fashion.

De Maistre, writing in the aftermath of the French revolution, sometimes employed arguments that struck Oakeshott as ‘bizarre’, but he argued that the rule of law and the problem of obligation were as important to Maistre as they had been to Hobbes and Montesquieu. Maistre’s target was an erroneous understanding of authority as derived ‘from the quality of its acts’. That this was indeed an error (of a logical, categorial, kind) was a view Oakeshott shared; we shall go more deeply into his reasons for holding this position below.

Moreover, Oakeshott was sympathetic toward Maistre’s ‘recognition … of contingency in politics’, something he had also found in Hobbes. For Maistre, ‘circumstance is everything’, and even authority ‘rests upon con-

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tingent current opinion’. He attributed to Maistre the view of political speech that we shall see he held himself: ‘Political discourse can never be demonstrative; the event never corresponds to the design’.

Where Oakeshott did not follow Maistre was in seeking an understanding of ‘the world as it lies in the hand of God’. The relation of human affairs to ‘divine love and justice’ was not a major theme in his own work. Unlike Maistre, he wished to separate ‘the politics of time’ and ‘the politics of eternity’. Nevertheless, as we observed at the outset, Oakeshott regarded theology and religion as vital for understanding the history of political thought.

The response to Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution* underlines this point. If the response of his close LSE colleague Maurice Cranston is any guide, Oakeshott would have found little to admire in later works such as *One Dimensional Man* (1964). However, this relatively early work struck him as having ‘great merits’. Marcuse’s reading of Hegel made clear that:

The most important texts for understanding the modern are Biblical: the two passages in the Book of Genesis in which human beings are recognized to be free of the world and as having to exert themselves in the practice of this freedom—dominion and work. These were the spring of Bacon’s understanding of the exploitation of the world which he both observed and preached; and it was to their authority that Locke somewhat naively pointed. It was left for Hegel to construct an incomparably more critical and more profound philosophy on this hypothesis.

Hegelian *Geist* was interpreted by Oakeshott as the same recognition of a conditional human freedom that informed his own distinction between intelligent practices and non-intelligent processes. *Geist*, like a practice, implied a distinctively human realm of existence unintelligible by reduction to ‘scientific’ explanation of any kind. The notion of ‘individuality’, to which Oakeshott’s Hegel attached as much importance as he himself did, belonged to this realm.

This individuality had emerged relatively late in the history of humanity, and was notable for being ‘difficult to manage’. Whereas Hobbes had seen the modern individual as ‘pre-eminently a centre of religious belief apt to conflict with others of his kind’, Hegel ‘recognized him as a centre of practical activity apt to collide with others in his efforts to enjoy the world’. The solution was the *Rechtsstaat*, whose inhabitants were governed ‘by laws, not imposed from above but made by the people con-

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[34] #17, *Reason and Revolution*, pp. 90–92.
cerned.’ Like Oakeshott’s reading of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, this interpretation treats Hegel’s Rechtstaat as a broadly liberal defense of the rule of law.

Following Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies*, the argument that Hegelianism was the ‘foundation’ of fascism was put forward by some influential political theorists in the 1950s, but whenever Oakeshott encountered this sort of claim, he was completely dismissive. It was nevertheless true that the young Hegel had spoken ‘the language of Jacobinism’, often identified (not least by Kuehnelt-Leddihn) as one of the roots of fascism.

In Oakeshott’s opinion, what had attracted Hegel to Jacobin ideas in his early work was the view of government as ‘a sovereign activity in which men exercised their power to make rational laws for themselves’. Whether or not this is correct, it underlines Oakeshott’s belief that a philosophy of the rule of law had been articulated in the vocabularies of both ‘left’ and ‘right’. His review of Hegel’s *Theory of the Modern State* argued that this early ‘Jacobin’ phase was composed of writings ‘exploring what may be called a negative identification of a still largely notional association … the procedure is one of exclusion, and … the terms are descriptive and concern characteristics’.

In other words, Hegel’s early writings were mainly concerned to rule out an identification of a state as association in terms of religious or national consciousness, on the one hand, or in terms of bureaucratically imposed purpose, on the other. There was room to question Hegel’s view that the idea of the state as ‘an association of persons wedded to the enjoyment of a multiplicity of substantive conduct’ had been ‘promoted by the French Revolution’, but once he abandoned his early affinity with Jacobinism and became more concerned with the aspect of the state he called *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, he began to examine ‘an ideal mode of association and to theorize it in terms of its postulates’.

In Oakeshott’s terms, then, the later Hegel moved away from ‘political theory’ and towards ‘political philosophy’; in Hegel’s own terms, away from ‘understanding’ and towards ‘reason’. *The Philosophy of Right* certainly provoked reservations in Oakeshott—he described it as ‘dreadfully miscellaneous’—but he insisted that Hegel had known which level of reflection he was employing. Key terms such as *der Geist*, *das Subjekt*, *der Wille*, *das Recht* and *das Gesetz* did not refer to ‘contingent states of affairs’. They were philosophical ideas designed to distinguish a particular ‘ideal mode of relationship’ (‘non-instrumental or moral law’) from other such ideal modes, including love, virtue, and interests or wants.

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[37] #9, *The Vocabulary of Politics*, p. 64.
In Oakeshott’s view, no English thinker produced a political philosophy of comparable sophistication during the nineteenth century, unless perhaps one counts Bosanquet’s *Philosophical Theory of the State* (1899). Coleridge was not the philosophical equal of either Hegel or Hobbes.\(^40\) His work was more akin to Locke’s, occupying that ‘middling level of generality’; Coleridge’s ‘understanding of life in a modern state is in terms of the tensions of its historic character … between solidarity and volatility, between civil authority and intellectual freedom, and between the public and private characters of those who govern.’

This approach had allowed Coleridge to attack ‘the modish notion (still, regrettably, with us) of a state as an economy’ which Hegel’s distinction between state and civil society had also been designed to dispose of. But the extent to which Coleridge’s writings were rooted in what Oakeshott called ‘their local context of European and English thought’ had left him of less lasting interest than either Hobbes or Hegel.

The dissemination of Marx’s early writings on Hegel, unpublished until 1927, was a major stimulus to the reconsideration of Marxism in the West following the rise of Soviet totalitarianism. They contributed to the development of the intellectual movement known as the ‘new Left’, so Oakeshott’s response to Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* is particularly significant.\(^41\) In the inter-war era, Oakeshott’s attitude to Marx, if not to Marxism, had been critical but not entirely unsympathetic.\(^42\) After the war, however, his attitude hardened.

Marxists, Oakeshott complained in 1957, ‘used to have some semblance of pride, the cloudy dignity of fanaticism’; but their ‘whining complaint that they are always misunderstood by those who do not agree with them’ had now just become ‘tiresome’.\(^43\) Moreover, the interpretation of Hegel on which revisionist Marxism was partly based was deeply flawed. Marx, Oakeshott argued, had simply failed to recognize the philosophical character of Hegel’s writings. ‘Instead of understanding Hegel to be asking the question, “What is the character of a society of rational free agents — persons in respect of being ‘wills’? that is, What is the idea *State*?, Marx understands him to be offering a demonstration of how the Absolute Idea (regarded as a kind of cosmic demiurge) *creates* the empirical actualities of political sentiments and relationships.’

Oakeshott realised however that Marx’s aim had been practical change, and from this point of view his philosophical confusions were relevant only insofar as they impacted on the kind of changes that he sought. Action as such did not require a philosophical understanding of the issues to be faced before it could take place, and political action in particular

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\(^{42}\) See *SW*, iii. 17.

tended to take place in what (misquoting Conrad) he called a ‘blessed fog of ideas’. The nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, and Mazzini’s thought in particular, provided a pertinent illustration of this point. As ‘one of the chief progenitors of the rhetoric of liberalism’, Mazzini’s nationalism also served as a reminder of ‘how unprotected this liberalism is against metamorphosis into its opposite’.

Given this mention of liberalism, we might note that Oakeshott described Mazzini’s author, Gaetano Salvemini, as himself a ‘great liberal’. An Italian MP from 1919–21, Salvemini, later the author of some highly critical works on fascism, actually sat as a socialist before his arrest for opposition to Mussolini in 1925 forced him to flee Italy. Whether this is a misrepresentation of Salvemini’s politics or an example of how Oakeshott’s interpretations tend to cut across the standard categories of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is something readers may decide for themselves.

In principle at least, Oakeshott wanted to avoid an overly synthetic approach to ‘the’ history of political thought. At a minimum, the ideas of the Greek, Roman, medieval and modern periods needed to be kept distinct. Hence his unfavourable reception of Bowles’s attempt to represent it as ‘a cumulative process’, ‘a tradition in which the ideal sought is a “constitutional commonwealth” [that] constitutes a norm for judging the projects of statesmen and the speculations of theorists’.

But Oakeshott qualified his view the history of political thought was composed of a number of entirely distinct periods in at least one important respect. He always insisted that modern political thought must be understood in as a modification of medieval ideas. A good illustration of this belief can be found in his enthusiastic review of Holt’s ‘first-class’ history of Magna Charta. From being part of the nineteenth-century ‘legend of English life’, in which it appeared as ‘the palladium of English liberty’ the Charter had now been placed firmly in its thirteenth century context.

But precisely because the Charter was now historically ‘recognized as a political document’, it could also be treated in terms that transcended time and place. The Charter as ‘a piece of political thinking ... reveals practical men grappling with a practical situation with the aid of ideas which sprang directly from their experience’. It occupied the first rung on the ladder of political thinking that led on to political theory and ultimately political philosophy.

To see the Charter in this way, of course, meant that one was necessarily no longer treating it exclusively in its own historical context. Instead, it

[45] #12, Politics and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century, p. 75.
[46] See the Introduction to SW, ii. 6.
became an instance of resistance to arbitrary government which had threatened to produce ‘political novelty’ with respect to ‘the duties of rulers and the obligations of subjects’. In this respect it was obviously comparable to 1688 and to many other moments in history.

The most important of these novelties was the beginnings of a practice of ‘opposition’. Opposition is ‘something more sophisticated than either mere dissidence or insurrection’ because it ‘assumes a distinction between “ruling” and “opposing”. Again, the conditions of the practice of opposition can be specified in terms that do not address a particular historical situation; it requires ‘a legitimate government recognized to have authority to “rule”, and … an unshaken allegiance to this government’. Opposition ‘is possible only when it is recognized to have an authority of its own—an authority to “oppose” but not to “rule”’.

Oakeshott admitted that to apply the term ‘opposition’ to the activities of the English barons without qualification was anachronistic; the barons were more accurately identified as ‘quasi-rebels’. Even though the barons ‘never denied the authority of kingly government’, they were still ‘negotiators who had no recourse but to withdraw their allegiance’. Nevertheless, at this structural level of the transmission of practices, Oakeshott asserted a significant degree of continuity between medieval and later English politics.

VI: Politics—The Reviews

In the decades immediately after the war, there was a vogue for ‘comparative government’ in political studies, but it was not a trend Oakeshott welcomed. ‘The expression “comparative government” has settled itself like a blight upon the academic study of politics’, he remarked, but there seemed to be no clear notion of what it involved. The ‘dilemma’ it raised was that ‘to know something in comparison with something else is to know only an abstraction’.

In the rhetorical tradition, comparison was ‘an old and valued literary device’, but The Study of Comparative Government and Politics failed to show that it could be anything more. What sustained ‘comparative government’ was the ‘Baconian fervour and optimism’ then surrounding the idea of modelling ‘political science’ on the natural sciences. Oakeshott, who had always wanted to keep the physical and human sciences firmly separate, had never found this attractive.48

‘Public administration’ seems to have struck Oakeshott as a more promising branch of political science. He devoted considerable attention to Nevil Johnson’s In Search of the Constitution. Johnson’s notion of a constitution as a ‘kind of corset for us all … establishing the boundaries for the

exercise of power by both office holders and by one citizen against another’ was very close to Oakeshott’s own, and so was Johnson’s diagnosis of Britain’s predicament. Both used the term ‘providential’ to describe the type of government that they opposed. Oakeshott rejected ‘a patronising, providential, bogusly ‘caring’ government’; Johnson complained that ‘we accept like sheep the providential view of the role of Government’.

Both Johnson and Oakeshott also argued that considering government policies solely in terms of outcomes had marginalized the question of its authority to undertake them in the first place. The authority of parliament in particular had been diminished as a result. Oakeshott’s observation that ‘The House of Commons is composed of two highly disciplined parties, related to one another as “adversaries”, irresponsible, without constitutional recognition, unrepresentative of the variety of local political interests and become “mere agencies for the competitive production of rulers” ... dominated by an executive government over which it exercises little control’ endorsed rather than merely paraphrased Johnson’s view.

Johnson’s suggestion that a Bill of Rights might provide a solution to this constitutional malaise was greeted with more scepticism. It lacked content, and it ignored ‘the muddle which we ... have already got ourselves into by awarding rights, in absolute terms, to the enjoyment of substantive satisfactions’. Nevertheless, Oakeshott did not decisively reject a Bill of Rights that would make acts of government subject to judicial review, although he considered it a departure from the British tradition of using common law to protect civil rights.

Wheare’s Government by Committee, like Johnson’s In Search of the Constitution, stemmed partly from practical experience of day to day problems of government. Wheare had combined his career at Oriel with tenure on Oxford City Council, and was able to discriminate carefully between the various functions of committees (‘advice, inquiry, negotiation, legislation, administration and scrutiny’) and the nature of their members (‘officials, experts, laymen, party men and interested parties’).

Oakeshott welcomed Wheare’s recognition that the use of committees was ‘not only valuable in public administration’ but also ‘has significance in government’; they could be used to rule as well as manage. ‘They may be designed to allay suspicion, to remove opposition, to secure co-operation, to pacify popular agitation, or to conceal, to postpone or to avoid action’. Indeed, they were the natural counterparts of ‘democratic’ government.

The belief that constitutional and administrative changes ought to be in keeping with existing practice was characteristic of Oakeshott, even though he had decided well before 1939 that most contemporary statements of conservatism were unsatisfactory because of their reliance on natural law or Christianity. The continued reliance of conservative think-
ers on these foundations after 1945 meant that in the last resort they were unable to resist sceptical criticism.49

A good example was Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s *Liberty and Equality*, which based a conservative defence of liberty on monarchical and Catholic foundations. While Oakeshott sympathised with the view that ‘democracy’ understood as ‘the pursuit of equality’ led inevitably to collectivism and thus was incompatible with liberty, Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s was not the best foundation for conservative thought. What was needed, in Oakeshott’s mind, was a kind of conservatism that avoided invoking particular religious or constitutional forms.

Oakeshott increasingly inclined to the view that religious and political traditions could only provide *ex post facto* justifications for what was really a ‘disposition’. Oakeshott did not equate this conservative disposition either with a party political affiliation or with support for particular policies. In reviews of two works by prominent American writers, Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* and Clinton Rossiter’s *Conservatism in America*, he detected visible signs of a revival of conservative thought. Indeed, what Oakeshott called the ‘New Conservatism’ became the transatlantic movement known more generally as the ‘new Right’.50

In both England and America, Oakeshott argued, conservatism had been on the defensive against liberalism, utilitarianism, and other forms of radicalism since the early nineteenth century. But he found the attempts of these other schools of thought to identify this type of Conservatism simply with ‘reaction’, or the impossible task of arresting change altogether, implausible.

However, Oakeshott explicitly distanced himself from Russell’s view of Burke as the author of a “charter” for modern Conservatism, a view he felt Rossiter shared. It was a mistaken reading of Burke, who was a ‘great intellectual melodist’ rather than the creator of a philosophical system. Furthermore, it was an unfortunate pedigree for these writers to fasten onto modern conservatism, because Burke’s thought suffered from at least two significant shortcomings.

First, Burke had failed to achieve a ‘clear recognition of politics as a specific activity’. His general dislike of change extended to matters Oakeshott considered politically irrelevant. There was, Oakeshott emphasized, ‘no inconstancy in being conservative in politics and “radical” in everything else’. Second, Burke lacked ‘speculative moderation’. He had a tendency to invoke ‘a manner of reasoning characteristic of the Middle Ages’ with no real place in the modern world. Oakeshott’s remark that ‘it would perhaps have been more fortunate if the modern conservative had paid more

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[49] See the Introduction to *SW*, iii. 30.

attention to Hume and less to Burke’ has not been noticed often enough, but it surely indicates his sceptical distance from Burke.

Though Oakeshott has sometimes been seen as a ‘Burkean’ Conservative (chiefly on account of his use of ‘tradition’ in *Rationalism in Politics*), for the label was far more appropriate Russell, whose later conversion to Roman Catholicism underlines their differences. Though Oakeshott was often sympathetic to Anglo-Catholic writers like Hilaire Belloc (whom he quoted at the end of his review of Russell’s book) and T.S. Eliot, in the last resort he did not share their faith and never made religion the basis of his political thought.

In Britain, the fortunes of the ‘New Right’ are charted in reviews of three collections of essays published roughly a decade apart. The first, *The Conservative Opportunity*, appeared in 1965, at the beginning of a period of Labour dominance in British government; the Conservative party was in power for only four of the fifteen years between 1964 and 1979. It contained contributions from a number of Conservative politicians who later held high office under Margaret Thatcher, including Geoffrey Howe (Chancellor and Foreign Secretary) and John Macgregor (Leader of the House of Commons).

On the whole, Oakeshott’s reception of this volume was enthusiastic. The contributors, faced with the choice between ‘government charged with a managerial task and responsibility (“telocracy”) and … one which conforms to a judicial analogy (“nomocracy”),’ had chosen the latter. They favoured ‘government as a custodian of a system of law designed to allow the maximum freedom of choice among its subjects’. While he detected ‘the language of telocracy’ in the commitment of David Howell (also subsequently a Thatcher cabinet minister) to “the growth of productivity”, he gave the collection the benefit of the doubt. The ‘occasional perfunctory bow to current gibberish’ and ‘lapses into … commercial’ rhetoric did not alter its fundamentally ‘civil’ nature.

A more dubious note is discernible in Oakeshott’s response to the collection of *Conservative Essays* edited by Maurice Cowling, and published shortly before Thatcher’s first electoral victory. The insistence that British politics is ‘a tension between two … different beliefs about the office and authority of government’ was still present, but it was no longer clear that the Conservative party consistently favoured the idea of government as the ‘custodian’ of ‘rules of conduct which do not represent the demands of interests’. Instead Oakeshott detected the increasing influence of ‘the belief that a State is (or should be) a purposive association’.

Oakeshott still displayed enthusiasm for particular essays, notably Shirley Letwin’s piece ‘On Conservative Individualism’, but was concerned

that the contributors ‘do not all understand that “capitalism” is a supreme irrelevance’ or that ‘a Conservative government … has no place for an “economic policy”’. Moreover, the frequently expressed desire to “roll back the frontiers of the state” struck him as ‘a near-disastrous blunder … a surrender to the old parody of Conservatism as a “do-nothing” conception of government, whereas what needs to be emphasized is merely that such a government has no place for managerial activity.’ His remark that ‘Mrs Thatcher … seems to be more of a genuine Conservative than her predecessors’ must surely be qualified by his subsequent refusal of an honour from her government.

Oakeshott’s last ever review examined two collections of essays from the conservative journal Salisbury Review. It was published in 1988, towards the end of Thatcher’s term in office. By this time he had decided that ‘conservative’ had become an almost uselessly corrupt term: ‘Stalinists in Russia are now commonly called “conservatives”’. The implication was that in Britain, a party bearing the Conservative name could no longer be relied on to support political conservatism understood as a ‘relationship in terms of rules (laws) which impose obligations to observe simple conditions … while performing our self-chosen actions’.

That said, Oakeshott remained complimentary about the intellectual quality of individual contributions. If genuine conservatism was currently lacking from British politics, he plainly felt that it survived in philosophical circles; Robert Grant, John Gray, and Roger Scruton were all singled out as authors of ‘reflective’ and ‘carefully and honestly argued’ essays.

Several reviews of works by French authors give some indication of Oakeshott’s response to developments in political theory outside the Anglophone world. We can begin our discussion of them by noticing his responses to two books by Bertrand de Jouvenel. Apart from anything else, these serve as a useful reminder of how small the worlds of academia and politics could still be in the 1950s: Jouvenel had once worked as the private secretary to Eduard Beneš, whose memoirs are also reviewed here.

Their works neatly illustrate Oakeshott’s point about the existence of distinct levels of political reflection. The aim of Beneš’ account of his years as President of Czechoslovakia (which included a period of wartime exile in England) was chiefly to justify the political calculations guiding his efforts to preserve Czechoslovakian independence, while Jouvenel was interested in the meaning of concepts such as sovereignty, equality and authority.

Obviously, Jouvenel’s work lay much closer to Oakeshott’s own interests, and the two almost certainly met in 1949 when Oakeshott attended a
meeting of the Mont Pelerin society which Jouvenel helped to found. This organisation, which still exists, was established after WW2 by a number of leading political philosophers including Friedrich Hayek, Walter Lippman, Karl Popper, and Ludwig von Mises. Its aims were to provide intellectual opposition to socialism and to promote a view of politics and economics inspired by classical liberalism. Oakeshott’s public expressions of disdain for political planning in general and the politics of the post-war Labour government in particular made him a natural invitee.

Jouvenel’s conclusion that the ‘difficulties involved in any genuine process of redistribution of income are … so serious that it seems they must in the end defeat the enterprise’ was identical to the view Oakeshott himself had reached, and he endorsed Jouvenel’s argument that the approach to redistribution was logically incoherent. The most important consequence of redistributive policies, he argued, was to produce a ‘vast increase in the powers and activity government’. Power, not incomes, was what really ended up being redistributed, and police powers are ‘at their greatest whenever the destruction of private property has been most completely achieved.’

It is easy to see, given this analysis, why both Jouvenel and Oakeshott considered sovereignty important. Indeed, Oakeshott stated that ‘nothing matters more to the well-being of an association than firm agreement about the identity and character of its sovereign’. The question of the political ‘good’ that an association is dedicated to pursuing was a distinct problem. As we shall see below, the claim that beliefs about the source of sovereign authority (for example, that it is located in the *demos*) carried no implications for what government ought to do assumed a central importance in Oakeshott’s later political philosophy.

As Oakeshott read him, Jouvenel made a distinction between the temporary authority of a *dux*, ‘appropriate to an action-group devoted to a specific enterprise, like victory in war or success in business’, from the authority of a *rex* ‘appropriate to associations whose members have common interests but are engaged in a variety of enterprises’. Evidently, he found Jouvenel’s argument compatible with his own distinction between government devoted to the pursuit of a particular purpose and government in accordance with the rule of law.

Oakeshott still had criticisms to offer, however. In particular, he felt Jouvenel treated the idea that governing was the activity of a leader rather than a ruler’ as simply ‘an error, a confusion of categories’. For Oakeshott, confused though it might be, it was one of the two distinctive attitudes to government in modern European history. Hence, Jouvenel did not make as clear as he might have the ambiguity contained in terms such as ‘justice’ and ‘liberty’.

Maurice Duverger’s work on *Political Parties* also drew a positive response from Oakeshott for its appreciation of the way in which studying politics raised just this kind of linguistic problem.53 ‘[The] terms of this science are never securely insulated from those of the world of political enterprise ... words which the political scientist would like to use dispassionately’, like ‘democracy’, ‘conservative’, ‘liberal’, and so on, ‘are being shouted in the street as terms of approval and abuse’.

Duverger’s book was a model of ‘the kind of analytical historical study which promises to be the most profitable direction for a science of politics to take’. What Duverger had done was to ‘establish certain ideal types and then to interpret the generation and structure of the parties of contemporary European and American politics as approximations’ to them. In Oakeshott’s opinion, any meaningful study of politics that was not philosophical had to be historical, and Duverger’s analysis was employing the same approach as ‘Troeltsch’s study of the ecclesiastical structures of the sixteenth century’.

Oakeshott’s criticisms of Duverger were again in terms of his own understanding of European historical development. For example, the political party as Duverger portrayed it was essentially modern, a product of ‘the extension of popular suffrage and the necessity for organising a mass electorate’. But for Oakeshott, there was less novelty in their organization than Duverger imagined. Political parties, like every other feature of the modern political landscape, reflected one or other of the two dominant dispositions in European politics. Either parties were ‘organizations appropriate to the understanding of a political activity ... as the pursuit of a single comprehensive end’, or they were bodies suitable to ‘the pursuit of heterogeneous ends which compose no comprehensive pattern’.

The third French political thinker whose work drew a favourable response from Oakeshott during this period was Raymond Aron. However, Oakeshott’s review of *The Opium of the Intellectuals* puts his attitude to French thought into perspective. Despite his admiration for Jouvenel, Duverger, and Aron, Oakeshott believed had ‘taken a remarkably silly turn’.54 Dominated by Communism, it had become ‘the monologue of a set of “intellectuals” ... remote from the current problems of French politics.’

Though Oakeshott did not mention Sartre by name, the reference to philosophers publishing in *L’Esprit* and *Les Temps Modernes* whose ideas had also been novelised by Simone de Beauvoir (in *The Mandarins*) would have left little doubt as to his main target. If any remained, the reference to ‘a quixotic longing to transpose the contingent into the idiom of a set of metaphysical notions, part Marxist, part Existentialist’ (almost certainly an allusion to *Being and Nothingness*) would have dispelled it.

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54 #34, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, pp. 141–44.
Oakeshott’s hostility to Sartreanism was not an expression of a general dislike of all ‘left-wing’ thought. He praised Bassett’s *The Essentials of Parliamentary Democracy* (though he was writing a Preface to a work by a late colleague). Still, there is no reason to doubt that he found Bassett’s membership of the Independent Labour Party compatible with a kind of Whiggish attachment to the institutions of British parliamentary government, or that his respect for Bassett as a historian of contemporary politics was genuine.  

The Fabian Society (to which his father Joseph Oakeshott belonged) also commanded a certain respect. Reviewing Margaret Cole’s history of Fabianism, he commented that Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw offered an ‘unbeatable’ combination of ‘colour … humour … lightness … and … capacity for irresponsibility’.  

Even anarchism was not dismissed; reviewing Herbert Read’s *Anarchy and Order*, Oakeshott found ‘something endearing about the bearded-bomb throwers of the past’, who at least ‘belonged to an individualist world’. Anarchism’s attractiveness was largely illusory, being inversely proportional to the existence of a real threat of a Hobbesian absence of government. Nevertheless, insofar as ‘the philosophical anarchist’ was protesting against a government with a ‘propensity for over-activity’, he was ‘a friend whose head may be a little light but whose affections may be trusted’.  

We have already seen, however, that Oakeshott had considerably less respect for those still willing to espouse socialism or Marxism by the later 1950s. The belief in the ‘piecemeal social engineering’ favoured by the British Labour party and its supporters had inspired the polemics of *Rationalism in Politics*, so it is unsurprising that he received Blackham’s *Political Discipline in a Free Society* in a weary tone. This was nothing, however, compared to his contempt for the French left. ‘[D]isfigured by an unusual amount of intellectual dishonesty’, was his verdict. The only exception was Camus, whose ‘attempt to rescue the “truth” of human revolt against the absurdité of the universe from the hands of false prophets’ possessed an integrity the writings of other authors lacked.  

Oakeshott endorsed Aron’s judgment that ‘the foundation of Marxism as it is understood by these French writers is a teleological interpretation of history’. He described it as ‘a refined sort of secular millennialism … in which the “Redeemer” (the Proletariat) turns out to be miscast for its role and obstinately refuses to act its part’. Part of the appeal of Communism had always lain in its ability to offer the Christian ‘the reflection of an attractive heresy’; but the real secret of its success was its participation in the ‘heterogeneity and vagueness’ of left-wing thought as a whole.

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Once again, Oakeshott read Aron in the light of his own account of European politics. He was not persuaded by Aron’s argument that ‘we are in the process of coming free from the war of ideologies’. Even if the current ideological conflict were to end, ‘the conditions which generated this style of politics are much older and much more deeply rooted than M. Aron supposes’. In other words, the enterprising style of politics could continue, even if shorn of its ideological element. The only genuine defence against the subordination of society to a single purpose was to keep the sceptical style of politics alive.

In 1939, Oakeshott had edited a reader entitled *The Social and Political Doctrines of Modern Europe*. The book had proved timely, and was reprinted several times in America as well as Britain. By the mid-1950s, however, the topical character that had made it successful had rendered it out of date. When Oakeshott reviewed its successor, *Documents of Modern Political Thought*, he remarked (without acknowledging his original editorship) that Fascism and National Socialism were no longer ‘operative and significant bodies of political belief’.59

More importantly, Oakeshott now considered that ‘the section devoted to Representative Democracy’ in the original volume had been ‘far too narrowly conceived’. ‘The passages chosen … were one-sided and too exclusively concerned with what may … be called “Liberalism”. The eligibility of so-called “democratic” institutions and of the current political vocabulary of “democracy” to push political activity in a variety of divergent directions and to be interpreted in widely different senses, was concealed.’

The new edition had partly corrected this fault by recognizing a divergence of opinion over ‘democracy’, though it also left out some important figures whom Oakeshott would have preferred to see included, like Tocqueville. What it had not done was to trace the disagreements to their source. In the post-war era, Oakeshott had increasingly come to think that ‘democracy’ was subject to the same general tension that he had first pointed to in a note in the 1939 volume contrasting a society subjected to total planning with one governed by law.60

### VII: Politics — The Essays

The final, most sophisticated form of this contrast—the distinction between democracy as ‘civil’ and as ‘enterprise’ association—was set out in *On Human Conduct*, but in the intervening decades it underwent numerous reformulations in which some significant nuances are detectable. To the contrasts between the ‘politics of faith’ and the ‘politics of scepticism’, and between ‘telocracy’ and ‘nomocracy’, we can now add the distinction

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59 #35, *Documents of Modern Political Thought*, p. 145.
between government as a ‘primary’ and a ‘secondary’ order of activity drawn in the lecture on ‘The Concept of Government in Modern Europe’.\(^{61}\)

This is one of four essays in this volume which if read together provide some useful clarifications to Oakeshott’s political philosophy. The other three are the ‘Reply to Professor Raphael’; ‘Political Laws and Captive Audiences’; and the title-piece ‘On the Vocabulary of a Modern European State’. These pieces, written over a period of roughly twenty years as Oakeshott increasingly left his post-war polemics on Rationalism and ‘tradition’ behind, can effectively be treated as a unity.

Amongst the published works, they fit most closely with essays such as ‘Talking Politics’ and ‘Political Discourse’, owing to their focus on the nature of political speech. This focus had two main aspects, historical and philosophical, though the emphasis varied. In ‘The Concept of Government in Modern Europe’ the discussion is weighted toward history; in the reply to D.D. Raphael and ‘Political Laws and Captive Audiences’ it is more philosophical; and in ‘The Vocabulary of a Modern European State’ the two approaches were more or less evenly pursued.

‘The Concept of Government in Modern Europe’ argued that modern European political thought and practice revolved mainly around the question of what the government of a state should do.\(^{62}\) This was not the only possible question for political reflection, but since at least the late eighteenth century there had been a consensus in Europe over the source of the authority of governments; they were held by their citizens to be legitimate insofar as they were based on the principles of nationality and democracy.

These beliefs about authority necessarily rested on a kind of myth; they could have no other basis. Practical reason, simply as such, could not ground authority; nor could political philosophy, which we have seen he thought bore no direct relation to practice. Oakeshott was of course not alone in thinking that even in an era of science and technology, ‘myth’ was the basis of the state’s authority; Cassirer is a notable example of another major twentieth-century philosopher who put forward the same argument. Another relevant comparison is with Tocqueville, who had pronounced democracy to be the difficult ‘fate’ of modernity at an early stage of its development. Oakeshott can be said to have accepted this view, though he also believed the political ‘predicament’ democracy represented had by now reached an ‘advanced stage’.\(^{63}\)

The modern acceptance of the myth of the democratic foundation of state authority nevertheless allowed for fundamental disagreement over the kinds of things governments should do. These disagreements had

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\(^{61}\) #13, *Political Parties*, p. 80, actually adds an additional contrast between ‘the politics of scepticism’ and ‘the politics of passion’, possibly the only place in Oakeshott’s writings where the distinction is drawn in these terms.


\(^{63}\) #5, *Liberty or Equality*, pp. 51–52.
arisen for reasons largely unconnected with politics, in particular the rise of technology. This had made much more power available, and governments, like every other institution, had taken advantage of it. Policies that would have been literally unthinkable in the medieval era now seemed perfectly feasible. The great divide since the Reformation had been between those who thought governments should use this power to impose the pursuit of a single purpose on their citizens, and those who believed that governments should be confined to using it to uphold a framework within which citizens could pursue purposes of their own.

As we have seen, Oakeshott sought to bring out this qualitative contrast by using a number of different terms. But all of his contrasts pointed to the same ideal distinction, between a kind of government devoted to an all-embracing goal, and a government whose goal was solely the preservation of the rule of law. He also argued that it was precisely this difference which was responsible for the ambiguity of European political language; it was almost impossible to find ‘political’ words that had not been part of the vocabulary of both styles of government. A ‘right’, for example, could mean both a formal and a substantive entitlement.

The historical reasons for the development of this ambiguity could in part be traced back to the theory and practice of medieval kingship. Kings had been enterprising in respect of their lordship of their own lands, but as monarchs they were expected to do justice on behalf of their subjects. The Reformation, in which kings acquired many of the rights and duties that previously belonged to the church, greatly increased the temptation for governments to become enterprising towards their own citizens, as princes were now also in charge of their moral and spiritual welfare. So had the development of a market economy in which the nascent state was intimately involved, and so had state adventures like colonialism and war.

But the rival conception of government in which the state was expected to confine itself to providing legal redress for its citizens had also found plenty of defenders. Indeed, given that on Oakeshott’s reading of them so many leading political philosophers of the post-Renaissance world favoured the non-instrumental concept of the state, one might question how the purposive state ever gained such popularity; though in response one could point out that his interpretation is quite consistent with his belief that philosophy has no direct impact on practice.

Oakeshott did hold, though, that the ambiguities arising from the dispute over the character of the modern state had systematically affected our modern political vocabulary. Furthermore, he regarded the search for an unambiguous and demonstrative form of political argument of the sort which Hobbes and Spinoza had tried to construct as a response to this situation. But as his reply to D.D. Raphael and his address on ‘Political Laws
and Captive Audiences’ made clear, he considered this search had led down a blind alley. No such form of political discourse was possible.64

Following Aristotle’s approach in the Rhetoric, Oakeshott treated all political argument (‘argument designed to recommend an action’) as a species of practical reason. We can now see more clearly why he insisted on the existence of different ‘levels’ of political argument. It was a corollary of the fundamental distinction between explanatory and injunctive or persuasive forms of speech. ‘Theory’ was an ambiguous concept because it could refer to reasoning designed to support both forms. Where Raphael seemed to Oakeshott to acknowledge only that kind of ‘political theory’ which supported ‘normative reflection’, he wanted to establish the existence of a realm of political theory which was purely explanatory.

Normative political theory, correctly understood, could not possibly be regarded as demonstrative. It was inevitably the product of casuistry; Raphael had not appreciated that any search for an absolute standard for evaluating political argument resulted in an infinite regress. Such a search could only culminate in the Platonic paradox of a need for a ‘form of forms’ or ‘norm of norms’. The circumstantial and contingent could never be removed from political discourse, and its conclusions, even in the rare circumstances where they commanded something approaching to general assent, could never be regarded as universally formally valid.

Raphael’s approach also failed to grasp the situation of radical ignorance which necessarily formed the context of all political discourse. This ignorance was not merely due to a condition of ‘imperfect information’ of the sort that might be specified in rational choice analysis; it was dictated by the impossibility of being informed in advance of the consequences of one’s actions. There would always be unintended consequences, welcome or unwelcome, and they would always be impossible to foresee in their entirety.

Both Liberalism and Marxism, in different ways, had attempted to deny the reality of this situation by invoking laws of social development or economic progress. When Oakeshott revisited the theme of the persuasive nature of all political discourse in the talk he supplied for Radio Free Europe (a series to which two other senior members of the LSE Department of Government, Leonard Schapiro and Maurice Cranston, also contributed),65 Oakeshott argued that there was an inherent tension in political speech between truth and plausibility. What is essential, from the point of view of the politician who wishes to persuade an audience to undertake a certain course of action, is that what is said is believed; that what is said is good or true are only instrumental considerations in this context.

There was always the danger, therefore, that political discourse could suffer fundamental corruption, becoming a purely persuasive means to the pursuit of power for its own sake. This, one might say, is the structural reason behind Oakeshott’s belief that a return to barbarism was a permanent possibility. National Socialism was an instance of precisely this reduction of politics to an intellectually counterfeit activity; so was the political discourse of Stalinist Russia with its rhetorical invocation of inevitable historical development. These examples doubtless represented an extreme, but they rested on the same ambiguities of thought about the role of government that marked European political discourse at large.

‘The Vocabulary of a Modern European State’ was Oakeshott’s last major effort to disentangle the confusions he detected.\(^66\) The metaphor of the ‘state’ was ambiguous in itself; a state was somehow like an ‘estate’, a description of a ‘tract of land and a condition of its inhabitants’, but quite how initially went unanswered. Gradually, three main characteristics were identified. Statehood entailed (i) authoritative offices, possibly identified in a constitution which might also express some beliefs about the sources of this authority; (ii) an executive apparatus through which power was exerted; and (iii) a distinctive kind of relationship between its members. Each of these three aspects of the state had its own peculiar logic.

Confusion over the nature of the state had arisen for two main reasons. Each of these three characteristics could be thought of in terms that made it more likely the state would be understood as a civil rather than an enterprise association, or vice versa; and second, the conceptual structures of all three characteristics had been conflated with one another. This resulted in ‘categorial error’. In his early writings, Oakeshott had been concerned mainly with confusions between different modes of experience such as history, science, philosophy, and practice. Here he was dealing primarily with confusions within the world of practice itself. Still, the result of categorial error was the same as the outcome of mixing modes of experience—logical irrelevance and conceptual confusion.

(i) The coherence of the vocabulary of authority depended on its being restricted to considerations of right. The question of whether or not an agent had the right to speak or act could not be answered with reference to whether what the agent said or did had a positive outcome. This ‘logic of right’, as we might call it, could not encompass such considerations. Similarly, our reasons for having a particular obligation cannot have anything to do with the fact that we believe those in authority to be particularly wise or holy or benevolent. This belief might provide good reasons for fulfilling our obligations, but it cannot be the ground of them. For Oakeshott such a ground can only lie, as we observed earlier, in a ‘myth’ of the state which founds authority on some culturally acceptable source.

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\(^{66}\) #58, *The Vocabulary of a Modern European State*, pp. 232–66.
‘Sovereignty’ was one of the terms belonging to the vocabulary of authority that had suffered from such confusions. For example, being a property of authority, and thus legal in character, it presupposed a limited and conditional form of rule; but ‘absolute’ sovereignty (an office beyond which there was no further legal appeal) had been confused with absolute power as if it were the ability to overcome all possible opposition. ‘Power’, too, contained a confusion in itself; it had frequently conceived of in mechanistic or naturalistic terms as if it were identical with force, but this ignored the fact that in politics one was always dealing with human relationships.

The practices in terms of which these relations must be understood, Oakeshott insisted, are never identical with causal processes of any kind. It is impossible, he argued, to exert power (in any sense other than pure force) over someone who does not fear you and wants nothing from you. Nor is pure force ever what is at issue in the exercise of political power, because the person exercising it is looking for a particular response from the other party and not merely seeking their subjugation. That would be ‘war’, not ‘politics’. Political power is always power that has been moralized in some fashion; the claim that a citizen should obey an official is always grounded in the fact that the official holds an office and can therefore claim a right.

Whatever the ground of this sovereign right of the state to insist that its citizens meet their obligations, it had no implications for its constitutional shape. Certain institutions had, historically speaking, been closely linked with particular beliefs about sovereignty, but this was, in Oakeshott’s eyes at least, a contingent relationship. One might debate this; Dahl’s work has suggested that the holding of regular free and fair elections in which all citizens have the right to office is a minimum requirement of democratic authority, for example. But Oakeshott could respond that the use of elections is not exclusive to democracy, and in that in any case their presence says nothing about what offices there should be, which is what really defines a constitutional shape.

The idea of ‘consent’, which has played a central role in both early modern contract theory and in modern liberal and democratic theory, also contained a significant ambiguity. It begged the question of whether this consent was simply an acknowledgment of authority, or signified approval of what those in authority had done. The maintenance of authority required acknowledgment, but approval was logically irrelevant to it. Nevertheless, consent had increasingly been identified with approval of the measures taken by authority. Seen in this light, the state appeared as simply one provider of satisfactions amongst others.

In itself, this development had simply marginalized the question of state authority; it had not necessarily undermined it. It had, however, resulted in a changed meaning for ‘democracy’. From signifying beliefs about the
source of authority and about the proper shape of a constitution, it had increasingly come to stand for ‘what is called a “method of government” ... “a utilitarian device” ... distinguished by its propensity to generate prescriptive conclusions which “concur with the will of the majority”’. The proof of this change was the appearance in the nineteenth century of criticism of democracy’s propensity to create a ‘tyranny of the majority’ (a criticism Oakeshott had once made himself). An authoritative constitutional shape was designed precisely to limit power, and therefore could not be tyrannous.

(ii) ‘Democracy’ in the modern sense, however, referred to the activities of government. The claim that a popular mandate legitimated the imposition of certain goals on the citizenry as a whole was characteristic of ‘enterprise association’, and in this sense Oakeshott agreed with Read that ‘modern “democratic” governments are often the most hostile towards individualism’. The idea that there was an inherently democratic form of ‘bureaucracy’, or of the state’s executive apparatus (the second of its features) was one that he dismissed. In respect of their possession of power, states were indeed indistinguishable from corporations. Nevertheless, ‘bureaucracy’ was an inherently unfortunate term, suggesting etymologically that it belonged to the vocabulary of constitutional authority even though conceptually it could not possibly do so. Incidentally, Oakeshott came to dislike ‘telocracy’ on similar grounds; it suggested a government could derive its authority from the purpose it pursued, a notion he also found logically incoherent.

(iii) The third and final characteristic of the state was that it implied a distinctive relationship between its members. It was quickly realised that a fundamental feature of state membership is that it is an unchosen condition. As the outlines of the modern state became visible in the early modern period, an analogy was needed to describe it more fully. Oakeshott pointed in particular to the use of two terms from Roman law, societas and universitas, which provided contrasting answers. A universitas, or corporation aggregate, seemed to imply that people were joined in promoting ‘a chosen substantive purpose or interest’. Societas, by contrast, was conventionally distinguished precisely by being association exclusively in terms of rules which prescribed no common purpose.

As with the two other features of the state, categorial confusions had hindered the theoretical and practical exploration of these analogies. There had been a persistent tendency to use the vocabulary of authority to describe the kind of relationship state membership involved. Ambiguous terms like ‘nation’ and ‘society’ that ‘purport to disclose conditions of association but which specify no mode of association’ had further muddied the waters. Perhaps most importantly, however, there had been an

[67] See the Introduction to SW, iii. 28.
enduring confusion ‘between the constitutional shape of an office of government and another quite different aspect of such an office which is necessarily related to the mode of association, namely, the character of its engagement.’ In other words, it had been expected of a republican form of constitution (by thinkers like Kant and Paine) that it would provide a government that would act in certain ways but would be incapable of acting in others.68

Oakeshott believed this was a serious error. What was relevant to the nature of the relationship between citizens, state, and each other was not the constitutional form of the government but ‘the character of its engagement’. In other words, if state membership is thought of as an instance of instrumental or enterprise association, then the proper office of government will be ‘necessarily a managerial engagement’. Whatever its constitutional shape, such a government will assist and direct the ‘exploitation of the appropriate resources of the association in the furtherance of its purpose’.

In contrast, where state membership involves rules designed to allow groups and individuals to pursue their own purposes, the task of government is simply to ensure these rules remain appropriate and if necessary to punish violations. Government based on this analogy of societas does not presuppose any particular constitutional form; it need not have a ‘democratic’ constitution any more than it must have an ‘oligarchic’ one. The muddle into which Oakeshott thought the term ‘democracy’ had fallen was underlined by his remark that it was used to mean ‘a constitutional shape, a method of governing, an apparatus of power and a mode of association’.

The trend since the eighteenth century had been unmistakably in the direction of the state as a universitas, a ‘development corporation’. Distinctions of ‘left’ and ‘right’ were irrelevant here; socialism and liberalism, as well as national socialism, communism, and fascism, had all shared this understanding of the purpose of the state. Its moral failing was that it necessarily lacked the freedom characteristic of enterprise association—the freedom to choose whether or not to belong.

Non-state forms of enterprise association preserved the ‘link between belief and conduct’ by allowing members to come and go as they pleased, but in a state this was impossible. This is why Oakeshott found it ‘disingenuous’ when Read described the workers collectives he intended should “administer the whole economic life of the community” as “voluntary associations”; it was not clear one could opt out of such an organisation, and so the type of ‘freedom’ involved in enterprise association was

lost. It is noteworthy, too, that he considered the Labour Front ‘probably the most important of all the party institutions’ of National Socialism.\textsuperscript{69}

‘Freedom’ was only possible if the state was confined to a primarily judicial role, leaving its citizens the greatest possible scope to decide for themselves what goals and purposes to pursue, including their degree of participation in market relations; there was no necessary relation, in Oakeshott’s mind, between societas and capitalism. Seen in this light, the philosophy of civil association is clearly a more stringent rephrasing of liberalism in the tradition of J.S. Mill that retains the bohemian tinge of the original. He was keen, moreover, to insist that the form of the state and the nature of its rules always remained subject to choice.

That is not to say that they were the outcome of design; indeed, they were often the results of the conceptual confusions Oakeshott had identified. These had helped to render the modern state ‘a strange and perhaps unstable mixture of civil and enterprise association’. Nevertheless, the idea that the development of the modern state represented an ‘evolutionary process’ we could do nothing about was one that he completely rejected. No political change, whether the development of world government or anything else, was inevitable: ‘human associations are not processes but practices intelligible and acceptable in terms of the understanding of the associates’.

Finally, Oakeshott turned to the term ‘political’, arguing that this adjective shared in the confusions affecting the rest of the vocabulary surrounding the modern state. In an attempt to extricate it from them, he proposed the following definition:

Formally, the word “political” identifies utterances in the active voice, the subjunctive mood, the present tense and (usually) in the first or second person plural (‘Let us …’, or ‘Do you …’), which may be responded to in a conditional or an unconditional ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, with a request for elucidation, ‘For what reasons do you urge me/us to agree to do this? Substantively, they are the utterances of one who acknowledges himself to be associated with others in terms of understood conditions which are eligible to be changed or added to in some recognized procedure and are thus capable of being considered not only in terms of their authority (that is, as authentic rules of conduct) but in terms of the desirability or cogency of what they prescribe. They are utterances about some large or small part of the acknowledged conditions of association in respect of their desirability or cogency. And they are utterances concerned argumentatively or persuasively to defend their desirability or cogency, or to question it and to propose or to canvass a change in which it is alleged they will become more desirable or cogent, this proposal being supported by reasons which relate to these considerations and addressed mediately to any who are disposed to listen and ultimately to the occupants of an office with authority to institute or to reject the proposed change.

\textsuperscript{69} #11, \textit{Anarchy and Order}, pp. 72–74; #50, \textit{Nazism}, p. 211.
This dense definition encompasses formal and informal contexts, and action as well as speech, up to and including civil disobedience: ‘It is inherent in “political” engagement that it needs neither office nor power’. Genuinely ‘civil’ or ‘political’ disobedience, however, cannot be a denial of authority; ‘civil war … is not “politics”’. Ultimately, all conceptions of ‘the political’ presuppose an authoritative framework of rules and a similarly authoritative body with recognized procedures for changing them.\[70\]

Oakeshott’s definition also makes plain why he found ‘political state’ or ‘political association’ less satisfactory terms than ‘civil association’. If ‘politics’ is debating what the terms of association should be, then clubs or parties may be devoted to this activity, but the state as a whole cannot be defined as a type of community primarily devoted to debating its own conditions. Oakeshott seems to have appreciated this distinction between the ‘political’ and the ‘civil’ fairly late, for in reviewing Lucas’ *The Principles of Politics* in 1967 he had declared that it was disappointing to find that Lucas had ‘more to say about the conditions of a “civil” than of a “political” society’\[71\].

This definition, we should also note, was designed to exclude the pursuit of exclusively financial or material ‘interests’ as conceptually distinct from ‘politics’. On one reading, this would rule out the kind of liberalism associated with Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*. There, the ‘original position’ was used partly to determine the level of enjoyment of what, in Oakeshott’s terms, were substantive satisfactions. It is tempting to argue that he would have seen Rawlsian ‘politics’ as the politics of enterprise association, ‘deliberation and utterance about desirabilities in respect of managerial decisions contingently to deploy these resources in this way or that’. This ‘engagement which seeks to determine who gets what, when, and how’ may be an important consideration in the life of the state but it was not, as Oakeshott understood it, ‘politics’.

In fact, however, Oakeshott had given an extremely positive reception to Rawls’s essay ‘Justice as Fairness’.\[72\] He declared Rawls’s philosophy of justice was important precisely because it rejected the utilitarian view of justice as simply the satisfaction of desires. Rawls appreciated that justice must not be arbitrary, and that it must decide between competing claims, two features of the concept that Oakeshott likewise regarded as essential. In addition, he drew attention to Rawls’s condition that judicial procedure should reflect ‘the constraints of having a morality’. He appears to have accepted without reserve the Rawlsian view that the practice of doing justice should satisfy the principles of those who participate in it.

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\[70\] This passage on the political complements the discussion of ‘politics’ in *On Human Conduct*, pp. 160–74.


This is all the more important because, as Oakeshott re-emphasized in ‘On Misunderstanding Human Conduct’, civil association was itself a kind of non-instrumental moral practice. Moral practices are always non-instrumental, but they are not necessarily civil. Romantic love, familial loyalty, and friendship are all moral practices that are not part of the practice of civil association, even if they are protected by it or inform it. Rules of civil conduct (the laws of a state) differ from the ‘rules’ of such private and personal moral practices in several ways.

Firstly, they are ‘subject to enactment, repeal, and alteration in a recognized procedure’. Secondly, there is an ‘authoritative procedure for determining whether or not an agent in acting has adequately subscribed to these rules, and in there being known penalties attached to inadequate subscription and an apparatus of power to enforce them’. And thirdly, ‘the conditions they prescribe are narrower, less demanding, and more precisely formulated’ than those of other moral practices. The ‘rules’ that may be abstracted from the moral practices of private life may be used to criticize the laws of the civil association, but they can never be identical with them; they always remain informal.

The distinctions of On Human Conduct were finely drawn, and after the easy style of Rationalism in Politics, its dense prose proved too elusive for many. Oakeshott, now openly claiming Aristotle, Hobbes, and Hegel as ‘predecessors’, had written a philosophical work without a word wasted. Consequently, those unwilling or unable to read him carefully badly misconstrued his meaning. One of the commonest errors was to assume the ideal type of civil association was intended as a kind of blueprint for setting up a government, whereas (just as Oakeshott had remarked of Hobbes’s Leviathan) it was explicitly intended to lack any particular constitutional ‘shape’. Oakeshott’s bitter disappointment at the book’s reception was reflected in the sardonic, patronising, and even vicious tone of his reply to his critics (Auspitz excepted).

Oakeshott’s review of Skinner’s Foundations of Modern Political Thought, struck a completely different note. He received it as ‘a notable historical achievement’, although he by no means agreed with all it contained. One criticism was methodological; Skinner had not brought out clearly enough the level of political reflection occupied by the texts he addressed. What he called ‘ideology’ was what Oakeshott had sometimes called ‘political theory’; the ‘middling level’ of political thought that excluded both the purely practical at one extreme and the purely philosophical at the other. The book ‘leaves out of account both the instrumental reflexion devoted to

[74] ‘[T]he civil condition…is an ideal character … not … specifiable in terms of … its own rules or arrangements’: On Human Conduct, p. 108.
administrative invention and philosophical reflexion concerned with reasons of a different kind from mere justifications or rebuttals’.

There were also differences over the substance of historical interpretation. Skinner presented the emergence of the idea of the modern state as a change from “the idea of a ruler maintaining his state” to the idea of a state as “a form of political power separate from both the ruler and the ruled and constituting the supreme political authority within a defined territory”. Oakeshott, however, questioned whether the idea of ‘the ruler maintaining his state’ was available so early or so widely as Skinner believed; it might be ascribed to Machiavelli, but he did not find it in the medieval era.

The idea of ‘Foundations’ seemed to Oakeshott to imply an anachronistic view of what medieval authors had been doing. Skinner, notoriously, emphasized the intentions of the author; but as Oakeshott pointed out, something that Marsilius of Padua could not possibly have understood himself to be intending was laying the foundations of the modern state. The modern state was a historical contingency; it was the outcome of no-one’s design, and could not be understood as the result of a deliberate attempt to construct it. Skinner had confused ‘the analytical components of a concept’ with ‘the devious and often logically irrelevant historical circumstances which mediated its emergence’.

Nor had medieval efforts to assert what later became ‘sovereignty’ resulted in a single conception of the modern state as Oakeshott took Skinner to be claiming. As we have repeatedly emphasized, Oakeshott distinguished two main varieties or types of conception of the state, and within each of these many variations were possible. In modern European politics, nothing had ‘disappeared beyond recall and nothing was established beyond peradventure—not even the requirement that the authority of the government of a state should be “sovereign”’. Skinner’s idea of the state as ‘an independent association of persons … ruled by a government … whose office … is to maintain the “peace”’ clearly fell within the history of approximations to the type of civil association, but it was still only one idea amongst others. To the end, Oakeshott insisted on the essentially ambiguous character of the modern European state.

A Note on the Texts

As this fourth volume consists entirely of previously published material, obtaining a good text was generally unproblematic. Assembling the contents was greatly facilitated by the comprehensive bibliography maintained by the Michael Oakeshott association. Photocopies were made and either transcribed by the editor or electronically scanned using optical

\[76\] See n. 1, p. 1 above.
character recognition software and checked for accuracy. Obvious errors in spelling and punctuation in the originals have been silently corrected, and to assist the reader, fuller bibliographic details have been provided.