

# Rationalism Revisited

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The essays Michael Oakeshott wrote on rationalism in the late 1940s occupy a curious place in his career. Because they contain occasional flashes of passion, they have sometimes been demoted to polemic. On the other hand, they initiate the relatively short period in which Oakeshott became a public intellectual, to be succeeded by his installation in the public mind as a kind of *eminence grise* mistakenly thought to lurk behind the revival of free market conservative politics in the late 1970s. The idea of rationalism was the closest thing Oakeshott produced to a popular idea: not, indeed, very popular, but certainly something that could be assimilated to familiar ideas of conservatism as the cultivation of tradition.

The point of the rationalism argument was to exhibit an intellectual mistake. A world that had grown accustomed to thinking of politics as a succession of problems to be solved was to be shown that faith in reason was merely the construction of a tower of Babel. Rationalism seemed to be a way of improving the world, but turned out to be a cluster of false beliefs and deluded hopes. With Oakeshott, one never gets anything as brutish as a trend, but we do learn that this thing has a “character and pedigree” and elsewhere it has a “shape”. He might have chosen to characterise it as a “parasite”, because it wrapped itself around science and history no less than practice. What he actually did call it was an “infection.”

“That all contemporary politics are deeply infected with Rationalism will be denied only by those who choose to give the infection another name,” he wrote. In other words, he was in the business of social critique, and his target was one already attacked in various forms by other writers. And indeed the names of the infection are legion: some talking of scientism, others of technology, ideology and even “the colonisation of the Lebenswelt”. Hayek was the critic of “constructive rationalism.” Rationalism intersects at least with all of these things and it has close affinities with other phenomena that Oakeshott discusses at various points, such as the politics of perfection or the character of the anti-individual. Rationalism is above all the attempt to snatch by main force what can only be plucked when the time is ripe. The rationalist is supremely the mono-modal bore targeted in *Experience and its Modes*, for whom philosophy, poetry history and even science are essentially practical. Rationalism is thus merely the name given to possibly the most comprehensive specification of the cast of mind whose features Oakeshott found both fascinating and repellent throughout his long life.

Perhaps the most striking feature of rationalism is that it is progressive. It is “of a kind which the passage of time must make more rather than less severe” because it

“amounts to a corruption of the mind.” (p. 37<sup>1</sup>) As the inevitable anomalies emerge from rationalist strivings, a fruitless hope will be invested in the next big idea for solving whatever the problem might be. The rationalist can see only a structure of abstractions. Like Midas, who is doomed to encounter only what he has transformed, the rationalist is characteristically incapable of experiencing anything “straight” because he turns everything he touches into a doctrine.

The main reason why rationalism is a progressive degeneration of a civilisation’s capacity for thought — indeed, for reason itself — is that “a society which has embraced a rationalist idiom of politics will soon find itself either being steered or drifting towards an exclusively rationalist form of education.” (p. 37) The sense that rationalism was a nightmare from which it was almost impossible to awake was further reinforced at the time by the fact that many people responded to his argument with the demand to be told how to solve this new problem. The essay “Rationalism in Politics” is thus a powerful account of the predicament of the West and one that points to continuing degeneration. I take this as an invitation to consider the evolution of rationalism since 1947. That is clearly a tall order, and I shall merely make some remarks on three questions. I shall consider first education, which he thought fundamental, then morality and religion, and finally I shall make one or two remarks about the current “shape” of rationalism.

## I.

First education, where my treatment will be unavoidably local, though not, I think, untypical of what has been happening in other countries.

Oakeshott disliked the Butler Act of 1944 which set up a system of education in Britain by which schools funded by the state were distinguished into grammar, technical and secondary modern. Here was educational provision evidently designed to correspond to what were then thought to be the needs of the economy: the provision of managers, technicians and workers. It is a good example of Oakeshott’s suggestion that rationalism often generates ideologies that are inappropriate because they are based on activities other than those that they purport to guide. And this inappropriate system was now being used to enforce the conviction that educational provision in Britain should be organised from the centre as a single comprehensive system. Did I say “comprehensive”? Indeed, for a new sense of that seductive word was the germ of the next big idea. The Butler Act was hardly in business before it collided, as abstract policies often do, with another abstract idea: that the schools should be instrumental to the remaking of society as something less stratified by class than what exists. Butler’s plans were socially divisive. Democracy required inclusive “comprehensives” in which pupils of all backgrounds and abilities were assigned to neighbourhood schools irrespective of tested ability. Some attempt was in fact made to balance in schools the distributions of A’s B’s and Cs. But the overriding aim was to avoid the process of selecting the more academically educable pupils at the age of eleven by examination. It was also predicated on the belief that forcing middle class children, with their supportive family life, to learn alongside pupils without much interest in learning

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers refer to the revised and expanded edition of *Rationalism in Politics*, ed. T. Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

would raise the general level of culture. These were no doubt beneficent aims, and no doubt some things may have improved, but the fate of this “reform” (as these changes are called) was to collide with another project.

That project was another rationalist idea bubbling up, this time from below. I refer to the belief, just coming to dominate teaching colleges from the 1950s onward, that the traditional form of education — as the authoritative imparting of knowledge to children — was a form of coercive indoctrination. Something called “rote-learning” (poems by heart, multiplication tables, for example) was regarded as especially pernicious. Pupils should rather be allowed freely to respond to their own individual need for knowledge, at their own pace. The combination of this pedagogic fashion with the comprehensive “revolution” in schools led to a collapse of authority and discipline in British schools. A new generation of illiterates began emerging from schools. They were alienated and unemployable. It did not help that yet another moral fashion had removed corporal punishment and other forms of effective control (such as summary expulsion) from the disciplinary repertoire. Classrooms became remarkably “inclusive”, and one element included was a good dose of Bedlam.

By the 1980s classroom disorder was widely recognised as yet another crisis unfolding in the crisis-ridden narrative of British education, but previous reforms had been so institutionally brutal that it was hard to see how improvements might begin. An end to mixed ability teaching in some schools was merely palliative, but the Ministry of Education, forever feeding off disaster in order to grow in power, soon came up with a solution: a succession of examinations at the ages of 7, 11, 16 and 18 would serve to test whether pupils were learning anything. An ingrained suspicion about the competence of teachers had now become ingrained throughout education, and teachers of course hated this. The original idea had been for relatively casual tests as a specific against the dangers of teacher-induced ignorance, but a perfectly sensible idea fell into the hands of experts. A new Education Act hundreds of pages long set out a whole new system elaborating what should be taught by creating a wholly new thing called a “national curriculum.” The Continental practice by which Ministers could tell at any given moment what children of any age were doing in schools had long been a joke in England. In the 1980s, the laughter died on our lips.

Nor did the new system immediately produce a harvest of scholarly achievement. A new plan for smoking out pedagogic incompetence now emerged: why not publicise how schools were faring in terms of exam results — what later came to be called “naming and shaming”. Performance indicators were the thing! Educational authorities began publishing lists of how many exam results at such and such a level each school was achieving. It was hoped that this system would reveal which schools were “adding value” to pupils, and which were failing in their task. The temptation to cheat about this, in one way or another, became irresistible, and indeed in the most obvious way, some schools did begin faking their results. The main corruption resulting from the long domination of education by government at this point was, however, the collapse of confidence in the tests themselves. Each year, it remarkably turned out, pupils were doing better and better, so that soon Britain was awash with pupils emerging from school with straight A’s. Had Britain thus become a nursery of genius? Alas no. Pupils were merely landing at the doors of universities with less preparation than ever before. They had to be given remedial training in the basics. And now to the rescue came the latest rationalist dodge: command pedagogy. The

Minister of Education decreed that each day primary school pupils should have a compulsory hour of maths and another of English.

British education has thus been vibrantly rationalist in the sense of exhibiting an “irritable tendency to solve problems” in its most extreme form. An activist government seeks to turn education into an instrument for achieving its own specific ends — productivity, equality, diminishing crime, fewer teen age pregnancies etc. — whatever comes into the heads of our rulers. A government thinking of the next election has no capacity to wait while people respond to their circumstances in their own way. Elements with an important though minor part in education (such as exams) are elevated above the basics, and the whole system suffers distortion. Beyond a certain point, those who learn how to pass examinations have merely mastered a narrow formula. They have been, as it were, trained but not educated.

And this leads us into the conceptual question. What are the ideas postulated in this process of degeneration? We may begin by observing that education as introducing the young to the resources of our civilisation has no specific purpose, but in all the various shifts we have followed, their point is precisely to bring about some effect. The evident distinction is thus between education (as cultivation of an inheritance) on the one hand, and training (as acquiring the power to bring about some effect) on the other. You educate people, but you train dogs. Training is often learning how to use various bits of technology, but in the process the learner tends to become part of the technology itself. It is learning how to perform set tasks in an orderly way. Training is largely unreflective, and much cheaper than education. The move from education to training is a move from creativity to formula or mechanism. And the master concept in this process is that of power.

Getting an education is currently taken as the acquisition of skills. A skill is the power to do something — what Oakeshott described as “a training in technique, a training that is, in the half of knowledge which can be learnt from books when they are used as cribs.” (p. 38.) Scholars would be replaced by clever chaps who were masters of many if not quite of all trades. And government responded to this new evolving insight into how to treat the young. The all-powerful Ministry became the Ministry of Education and Skills. We shall soon be able to drop off the “education” bit.

## II

Turning now to morality, we must begin by noting Oakeshott’s view that “Moral ideals are a sediment; they have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition, so long as they belong to a religious or a social life.” (p. 41) Tradition, of a social and religious kind is thus the sediment, and the process of rationalism is to be found in the steady detachment of moral ideals from their context. Religion had been important to Oakeshott in his earlier days, but it was marginal to the rationalism essays. He was, of course, a sceptic, but religion was at least important to him as varying the tedious one-worldism of pseudo-scientific practicality.

There is a terminological point needed here to avoid confusion. The term “rationalism” which Oakeshott was using in its philosophical sense was more popularly used to refer to the project of bringing all beliefs, and especially those of

religion, to the test of reason, which signified plausibility in empirical terms. Rationalists in this more popular and specific sense juxtaposed active reason against supposedly passive revelation. Christianity had, as it were, “italicised” certain past events as sacred history, but rationalists deployed hermeneutics and history to bring the events in the life of Jesus into line with everyday life. What had in Christian terms been identified as the “Arian heresy” (namely that Jesus was simply an inspired but human moral reformer) became in rationalist terms the conclusion of scientific history. The imperial sweep of rationalism decreed that anything mysterious must be explained in terms familiar to the wits of an empiricist and hence religion was “demystified.” Rationalism is a great leveller.

On this great levelled plain of human beliefs, the thing called “religion” can be mapped and reconfigured as a somewhat confused jumble of abandoned convictions and superstitions needing to be colonised by up to the minute results of current thought. But to understand religion and morality as merely one department of the vast continuum of all the beliefs we have is already an abstraction from the way in which beliefs relate to our emotions and to our experience generally. The only way to correct this error is to look again at the very idea of religion, which must be seen as a set of animating principles and convictions that make sense of how we live. Marx famously declared religion to be “the opium of the people” but it was soon evident that Marxism, with its cult of militant atheism, was in the same line of business as the religion, in effect the Christianity, which he sought to replace. Communist regimes expressed the pieties and devotions of a creed that sought to redeem a world of class oppression. Similarly, it is plausible to construe the secular rationalist as one who seeks redemption from error in the world by way of the progress of science and reason. In such a process of redemption, the politician, lawyer and administrator play their part, but the scientist and the technologist are the figures with the most secure authority.

If secular rationalism is a religion, then it evidently proposes a logic of inquiry which rules any other mode of thinking out of court: from this point of view, it is the most intolerant creed imaginable. Liberalism, which often functions as the political wing of rationalism, sometimes manages to evade this evident dogmatism by treating other religions than Christianity as forms of “culture” and thus out of bounds for criticism. Christianity, however, is a cultural competitor of rationalism and therefore treated differently. Put through the logical strainer of rationalism, Christianity is lucky to escape alive, and rationalism is bent, over the longer term, on its destruction. Other religions might survive so long as they accept the liberal condition of confining themselves to the world of private devotions, but Christianity could not.

For consider Oakeshott’s characterisation of the rationalist:

“the truth of an opinion and the ‘rational’ ground (not the use) of an institution is all that matters to him. Consequently much of his political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect; and the rest is rational administration, ‘reason’ exercising an uncontrolled jurisdiction over the circumstances of the case.” (p. 8.)

“Reason” here largely consists of what corresponds to the wits of the person in question, mitigated in some degree by a few, usually popularised ideas derived from science. As it happens, Christianity as a characteristically Western idea insists upon the truth (rather than the mere efficacy) of its dogmas. Most of these (such as those relating to Jesus and divine creation) are beyond the reach of rational experience, but many others (relating for example to cosmology, or the origins of life) were added from long standing, indeed ancient, tradition and they clash directly with the current conclusions of science. To insist upon rationalist criteria as a condition for religious belief is to set Christianity up as a cognitive competitor with science rather than as a civilisational practice. Even for the most cautious rationalist, Christianity, thus wrong footed, has been refuted, and it makes a tactical retreat into symbolism and metaphor. Issues of truth turn out to be fatal for the practical and moral issues with which they are actually connected, at best, in a highly complex way.

Much might be said about these difficult questions, but my concern is simply with Oakeshott’s characterisation of rationalism. The basic point here is rationalism’s relentless drive to monism. Oakeshott’s European civilisation is essentially pluralist, and it is pluralist in a variety of ways. One important dualism is that between the sacred and secular. Rationalism levels it, leading also to what has been called the “de-divinisation” of the state. Another aspect of Western pluralism is the juxtaposition in art and literature of Christian themes with the philosophy and mythology of classical times as these were influentially revived at the Renaissance — what Matthew Arnold called the Hebraic and Hellenistic strains in our thought. And a further pluralism is built into Western thought by its elaboration of the various modes of experience which Oakeshott had himself notably theorised. Against these large themes in our civilisation, the gruesome simplicities often discussed as “science versus religion” count for little.

In the name of a misplaced cognitive consistency, then, the rationalist reduces religion to a flavourless sub-philosophical ecumenism and creates a secular world in which the mind responds according to whatever resources it finds (largely journalistic as a rule) to a succession of crises and frustrations in a pursuit of happiness which as utilitarian lacks even the elementary reflectiveness of the Epicurean.

### III.

If religion declines, can morality be far behind? About morality, Oakeshott was especially pessimistic, because he thought that the rationalist had won a victory that his opponent did not even recognise as a defeat. For Oakeshott, these words are a dramatic foray into practice, and they deserve attention.

The morality of the rationalist consists in “the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals, and the appropriate form of moral education is by precept, by the presentation and explanation of moral principles.” (p. 40.) “In morality as in everything else,” Oakeshott goes on, “the Rationalist aims to begin by getting rid of inherited nescience and then to fill the blank nothingness of an open mind with the items of certain knowledge which he abstracts from his personal experience, and which he believes to be approved by the common ‘reason’ of mankind...unavoidably, the conduct of life,

for him, is a jerky, discontinuous affair, the solution of a stream of problems, the mastery of a succession of crises.”

The problem with ideals is that they are external to the activity of morality as a flow of sympathy animating our understanding of what we ought to do. In the jargon of a later time, Oakeshott is an “internalist” rather than an “externalist.” Ideals have been abstracted and detached from the flow of activity, leaving moral agents confused about the place of such things in the coherence of their lives. Instead of the moral apprentice learning from those around him, as it were, the moral actor becomes a reasoner trying to fit abstract propositions into his world. Ideals, for Oakeshott, are useful probing devices with which philosophers might try to explain morality, but they cannot be used as instruments of moral conduct. For who, it might be asked, is detached enough from the flow of life to use them as such? The moral life is enmeshed in circumstances, and abstractions have to be given some element of orientation in their contact with circumstances. They are the oil and water of the moral world.

The contemporary reader of “Rationalism in politics” can only feel that what is now happening is much worse than Oakeshott feared: it is the subversion of the entire understanding of morality in the name of social instrumentalism. Our sensibilities have so changed that “right” and “wrong” now have a dogmatic sound in the contemporary ear, and have often been replaced by such rhetorical tokens of politics as “socially acceptable” and “socially unacceptable.” Moral education in family life now turns out to be “social capital”, in which conduct is judged purely in terms of whether it is instrumental to the current purposes of the state. The morality that related individuals to each other has now become a relation between such categories as sex, race and sexual orientation. Morality largely consists in “the politics of identity.” The supposed imperfections of society have been formularised as a schedule of victimhood, and right conduct consists in the demanded treatment of the resulting categories.

Morality has, to put the matter simply, been replaced by social utility, but since the judgement of the useful is made by political authorities, we might as well move straight to its proper characterisation as “political utility.” And this development of the rationalist project is evident in the way in which the new social commendations and condemnations are diffused. Politicians in office now speak from the pulpit as well as the Despatch Box. We should remember here that Oakeshott had argued that proper constitutional government would tolerate nothing beyond the enforcement of rules: “it will not countenance government by suggestion or cajolery or by any other means but law; an avuncular Home Secretary or a threatening Chancellor of the Exchequer.” In contemporary politics, suggestion and cajolery (along with a certain element of menace) are everywhere. Governments spend large amounts of money on public relations in order to instruct their subjects on everything from diet to how young men should conduct themselves as fathers. Oakeshott thought that moral education came by example, and he was thinking of the adults a child encountered and the exemplars encountered in history. Today the state itself commends and often tries to control the conduct of entertainers and sports champions as things called “role models” for the young.

These developments are part of something implicit in rationalism from the beginning: its propagation of a single safe world in which everything may find a pigeonhole. The point of such a world is that it is suitable for management by the state in terms of convenience. The feminist slogan that the personal is the political, for example, is a licence to treat the moral world as subordinate to the political. Sometimes this is mediated by the project of making society more democratic, meaning more in accordance with what people want, or say they want. Our moral admirations are never still, but they have been changed more dramatically in recent times. A movement of responsibility for individuals to the state has paralleled the increasing dominance of social utility. We have experienced a notable lurch towards emphasising what might be called “the compassionate virtues” to the exclusion of those that demand self discipline.

All of this constitutes a corruption of the moral life, and one which abundantly justifies Oakeshott’s view that rationalism in morals has been especially pernicious. The new corruptions not only fail to recognise themselves as such, but are full of self-congratulation. Morality was once, rationalists are fond of saying, narrowly focussed on the bedroom, but we have now brought it into the public square and the Cabinet Room.

#### IV.

Oakeshott presents rationalism as a bad case of putting the cart before the horse. As he remarked of ideology, “so far from being a preface, it has all the marks of a postscript, and its power to guide derived from its roots in actual political experience.” (p. 53) Again, as the deployment of abstractions from past experience, rationalism is a case of the part masquerading as the whole. Rationalism thus cheats rationalists by selling them short. Something that might legitimately have been a useful insight into a tradition has been treated as an instrument of action, and the one thing necessary. The theorist has turned himself into that dire kind of sorcerer’s apprentice Oakeshott later call a “theoretician.”

Yet in this light, rationalism might well seem to be the destiny of all human activity as they become more complex. It corresponds, for example, to the Toynbean idea of challenge and response, in which the response becomes formularised and the tradition falls to the level of mechanism and repetition. Nothing fails like success, as they say, and rationalism of a possibly inescapable kind is the cause of such failure. Moral actors, learning the lessons of the past (as the French general staff in 1940 had learned about the power of the defensive from the experiences of 1914-18.) become imprisoned in them. Rationalism is, as the current cliché has it, “thinking within the box.”

This form of decline is certainly a large part of the reason why traditional empires, based on some conception of the one right ordering of society, have a cyclic career pattern. They discover one successful way of responding to the world, often entrenching that way in their cosmologies, and they stay with it long after it has ceased to yield benefits.

But must the modern world, which has broken out of the idea of one right ordering of life (except for recidivists such as communists and other ideologists) suffer the same fate? Does not the modern practice of competition allow new men and new movements to arise as others decline? Is not this process to be observed in the ups and downs of nations in modern Europe? I once floated this idea with Michael. He was polite, but he obviously didn't believe it for a moment. Besides, is not the Western world awash with the relics of its greatness and is it not busy mechanising the availability of the past in encyclopaedias and other formularisations of our civilisation? Is it not anthologising, setting in concrete its own achievements as a marvellous, but fixed, repertoire of responses to our situation?

We do not need these high level reflections in considering our first example, the case of education. In the last half century in Britain at least, the increasing power of government in organising education is largely fact enough to understand the disaster we have suffered. And the way it has done so recalls a suggestive remark Michael made in a letter to Karl Popper in January 1948. Rebutting the idea that his criticism of rationalism was an attack on reason itself, he wrote:

“The place of reason in politics and in life, is not to take the place of habits of behaviour, but to act as the critic of habits of behaviour, keeping them from superstition etc. And what the rationalist is trying to do, so to speak, is to make a literature which consists only of literary criticism.”

Educational policy in Britain is thus a machine grinding away with ever less to grind on. Not form, but a misguided formality is destroying the substance of teaching. It is a form of management whose dispositions continually frustrate the spontaneous rhythms of the tradition. A specific illustration of the kind of process involved in rationalism is Parkinson's Law, which resulted from the observation that as the number of ships in the British navy declined, the number of administrators needed to organise them increased. The movement of energy is from substance to a kind of parasitism of form.

With idealists, you never get far from the distinction between the abstract and the concrete. Concretely speaking, human life is a flow of contingent responses over time, in which past, present and future all have a part to play. The past is the core of identity. It tells us what we are and therefore what we can do. The present is the moment of urgency in which we mobilise as our resources those materials which at that moment we recognise as such (for the owl of Minerva will reveal to us later that other moves would have been possible), and the future is understood in terms of hopes and fears constituting the framework telling us what is possible. Rational action based on desire may be defined as coherence between these temporal elements, a coherence threatened when the past is indistinguishable from legend, the present dominated by impulse and the future no more than a dream or a utopia. Impulse is a kind of natural abstraction in which past and future have alike been suppressed. It is under the sway of this particular abstraction that rationalism generates supposedly independent ideas, such as ends, means, principles, ideals, ideologies and unreal dreams of agency often conceived in terms of willpower.

These considerations suggest that rationalism emerges from only a very slight misdirection of our civilisation. For it is only necessary to change very slightly the meaning of our moral vocabulary in order to embrace a highly athletic form of moral agency. Vulgar Socratism incites us to be forever examining our lives. It makes us feel that bringing our principles to the bar of criticism when we are deciding what to do is intellectually speaking a better class of life. And that leads to a curious misallocation of value both in the present and in the future. We commonly fail to recognise the many valuable things accumulated around us by the operation of a long tradition. Recognising the value of quite ordinary things about the way we live now came easily to Oakeshott. When he talks of conversation he is thinking of the local pub, not Oscar Wilde at the Café de Paris. As he remarks in characterising conservatism, the young “do not easily understand that what is humdrum need not be despicable.” (p. 436) These things are so much taken for granted that the rationalist in politics erroneously imagines that they will survive unchanged into the new world he is creating. He is fatally wrong.

This devaluation of the present is paralleled by an exaggerated view of the future condition adumbrated in the ends we have set for ourselves. In making these judgements, we lose contact with our past, which is the real clue to what we really are, losing the identity we have. The upshot is that we become irritable with the present and gullible about future. Consider the political bribery in elections. Or read, if you can bear to do it, endless stream of aspirations in that supreme concrete expression of rationalism the science of management.

Such a rationalist structure of life corresponds, of course, to how individuals live now. Urban prosperity has us at the mercy of advertising in which we are offered a stream of chances packaged as images of happier times, so that we live from one unfulfilled promise to the next. Rationalism resembles the prospect of distant gold that drew thousands of men to uproot themselves from their surroundings and take off for California in 1849. They abandoned the real for the fanciful. Society has always contained forty-niners; only the modern world has created an entire society of such fantasists.

Oakeshott did, however, (at the end of his essay on conservatism) distinguish between the individual's taste for adventure and the propensity for rationalist politics, which might well be taken as inappropriately transposing into political life the legitimate adventurousness of the individual, and especially of the young. For as Oakeshott wrote, in a puzzling sentence in *Rationalism in Politics*, the rationalist “is something also of an individualist, finding it difficult to believe that anyone who can think honestly and clearly will think differently from himself” (p. 6) This is puzzling because those who mistake their own wits for the world sound more like solipsists than individualists. And the further passage from solipsism to megalomania is short. Totalitarian dictators have this as standard issue psychology. Rulers identify their conclusions with social perfection, and “from this politics of perfection springs the politics of uniformity; a scheme which does not recognize circumstance can have no place for variety.” (p. 10)

Ultimately, the evaluative difference between Oakeshott and the rationalist is how they each located the discontents of their civilisation. For Oakeshott, it lies in the transitory character of human life. We are the children of contingency and we shall

never grow up into eternity as we yearn to do. Religion is the elaborate cashing out of that yearning. We must simply come to terms with it, and that involves turning inward to discover the riches we actually possess. For the rationalist, however, existential discontent has become misdirected towards the present arrangements of society. Earthiness is in love with the transcendent and is futilely trying to bring it down to earth.