

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

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Oakeshott to Popper

Gonville & Caius College
Cambridge

28 January 1948

My dear Popper,¹

Thank you very much for sending me your Hibbert Journal article.² I had heard about it, and had been trying to get hold of it.

As you may suppose all that you say of Utopianism is very much after my heart, & I agree with it entirely. But forgive me if I say something about the other part of your argument.

First, of course, when I argue against *rationalism*, I do not argue against *reason*.³ Rationalism in my sense is,

¹ In the possession of the Hoover Institute Archives (Collection title: K. Popper, box number: 332, folder ID: 17). I would like to thank Luke O'Sullivan for having drawn my attention to this correspondence.

² K.R. Popper, 'Utopia and Violence', *Hibbert Journal* 16(2), January 1948, pp. 109-116.

³ Oakeshott refers here to his article 'Rationalism in Politics', published in the *Cambridge Journal*, 1(2), November 1947, pp. 81-98 and 1(3), December 1947, pp. 145-157. The essay was reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen & Co., 1962), pp. 1-36. See also Oakeshott's exchange with D.D. Raphael on what Oakeshott saw as Raphael's misinterpretation of 'Rationalism in Politics': D.D. Raphael, 'Professor Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics*,' *Political Studies* 12(2), 1964, pp. 202-215; M.

among other things, thoroughly *unreasonable*.⁴ That reason has a place in politics, I have no doubt at all,⁵ but what I mean by rationalism is the doctrine that *nothing else* has a place in politics – and this is a very common view.

Secondly, while Utopianism is the great enemy of reason, I shall regard also as an enemy that modified form of Utopianism which picks at *one* problem of society at a given moment & is prepared to upset the whole of the society in order to get that one problem solved – e.g. the problem of unemployment as the one problem, just now, to be solved, & to be solved permanently.⁶ I should say that *no* problem in politics is *ever* solved permanently, and that *no* problem in politics should be allowed to get out of proportion & to exclude the real business of politics – which is to keep the society *as a whole*, in *all* its

Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael*, *Political Studies*, 13(1), 1965, pp. 89-92; D.D. Raphael, *Rationalism in Politics: A Note On Professor Oakeshott's Reply*, 13(3), 1965, pp. 395-397.

⁴ This point is developed by Oakeshott in the essay 'Rational Conduct', *Cambridge Journal* 4 (1), October 1950, pp. 3-27. A revised version was reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 80-110.

⁵ In the essay 'Scientific Politics,' *Cambridge Journal* 1(6), March 1948, pp. 347-358, published shortly after this exchange, Oakeshott distances himself from any form of irrationalism: 'There is as much difference between rational enquiry and "rationalism" as there is between scientific enquiry and "scientism" and it is a difference of the same kind. Moreover, it is important that a writer who wishes to contest the excessive claims of "rationalism" should observe the difference, because if he fails to do so he will not only be liable to self-contradiction (for his argument will itself be nothing if it is not rational), but also he will make himself appear the advocate of irrationality, which is going further than he either needs or intends to go.' (p. 349) The essay is reprinted in T. Fuller (ed.), *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 97-110. See also Oakeshott's defence of reason in philosophical enquiry and his objection to the identification of reason and rationalism in a much earlier review of L. Chestov, *In Jacob's Balance*, in *Scrutiny*, 2(1), 1933, pp. 101-104.

⁶ Compare with Popper's position: 'If I were to give a simple formula or recipe for distinguishing between what I consider to be permissible plans of social reform and impermissible Utopian blueprints, I might say: Work for the elimination of concrete evils rather than for the realisation of abstract goods... Or, put it in more practical terms: fight for the elimination of poverty by direct means – for example by making sure that everybody has a minimum income.' (Popper, 'Utopia and Violence', p. 114.)

arrangements, coherent and stable as well as progressive.⁷ And I think your true rationalism tends to get individual problems out of proportion.

Thirdly, under the inspiration of *true* rationalism you seem to me to break up political life into atoms of political action and to take the business of politics to be the right & reasonable solution of a series of problems. But political life only becomes this when it is governed by ideologies: normally, in the 19th century, for example, it was never this. The moral life of a man does not consist entirely in performing a number of reasonable actions, it consists in *living* according to certain habits of behaviour, which may be analysed into separate actions but which does not appear as separate actions except on a few occasions.

Fourthly, when you say that the *true* rationalist realizes that we owe most of our knowledge to others,⁸ I think you are giving him a character which he doesn't possess. He may *know* that he owes something to others, but the *rationality* of his behaviour never depends on this - it depends on his judgment that what he has appropriated from others is reasonable - that is, he really begins & ends *in himself*.

Lastly, I don't think your contrast, reason or violence, is a real one - that is, I, who hate violence as much as you do, do not believe, either that *reason* is capable of excluding violence (even in the long run), or that, because reason can't, nothing can. I think I know of a "method of politics" which is not either truly or falsely rationalistic - but which is the opponent of violence. Briefly, I would say that the politics I have in mind is the *politics of conversation*,⁹ as against your *politics of argument*.¹⁰ You

⁷ 'Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community.' (M. Oakeshott, 'Political Education,' in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, p. 112.)

⁸ Popper, 'Utopia and Violence', p. 116.

⁹ The famous metaphor of conversation is fully developed by Oakeshott in his essay 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 197-247. (First published by Bowes & Bowes in 1959.) There 'conversation' is opposed to 'argument' in the description of the proper character of the relationship between different

see, I don't believe that reason is the *only* bond which unites men, not because men are unreasonable sometimes, but because there is something else much stronger that unites them e.g. a common civilization (where it exists), common habits of behaviours (where they exist) – neither of which are rational, dependent upon argument or common to *all* men. There is *nothing*, I think, common to *all* men.

In short, the trouble with your true rationalism is not that it is impossible, but that it is impossible by itself. The place of reason, in politics & 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 is, so to speak, to make a literature which consists *only* of literary criticism.

I am going to write something on the moral life as the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideas, in which I shall try to develop this line.¹¹ But, perhaps, at bottom we are only disagreeing about how we use the words rational & rationalism.

Thank you again for your article

'voices' of modern civilisation. But the idea of 'conversation' in relation both to politics and to culture first appeared in Oakeshott's earlier writings. Thus, in 'Political Education,' first delivered as an Inaugural Lecture at the LSE in 1951, Oakeshott describes the recommended kind of politics as 'a conversation, not an argument'. Yet, 'conversation' is mentioned as early as 1949 in the essay 'The Universities,' *Cambridge Journal*, 2(9), June 1949, pp. 512-542. (Reprinted in T. Fuller (ed.) *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 105-135.) Oakeshott refers to the traditional university as a place which gave an impression of 'a conversation in which each study had a distinctive voice – a conversation which occasionally degenerated into an argument...' (p. 534) The discussion with Popper over his politics of argument may have been an origin of this important element of Oakeshott's thought.

¹⁰ Popper argued that there were two possible ways of reaching a decision: argument and violence. A true rationalist, in his view, was the one who would 'rather be unsuccessful in convincing another man by arguments than successful in crushing him by force'. ('Utopia and Violence', pp. 109-110.) The real argument should be based on the attitude of reasonableness, thus differing from arguments employed by propaganda. This reasonableness lies 'in our attitude of give and take, in the readiness not only to convince the other man but also to be possibly convinced by him'. (p. 110)

¹¹ Published as 'The Tower of Babel', *Cambridge Journal* 2(2), November 1948, pp. 67-83. Reprinted in *Rationalism In Politics and Other Essays*, pp. 59-79.

Yours sincerely

Michael Oakeshott

Will you write something for the Cambridge Journal? I am editing it now, and I should be delighted to have something from you.

Popper's Reply

The London School of Economics and Political Science
(University of London)

Houghton Street,
Aldwich
London, W.C.2

January 31st, 1948

Dear Oakeshott,

I was extremely pleased to get your long letter, and I am very grateful for your response to my little paper (which I wrote about eight months ago; it was the address to a philosophical conference in Brussels, mainly attended by communists).

Apart, perhaps, from some minor terminological differences, *I can agree with every word you say in your very interesting letter*. I fully agree with you that *no* problem is solved *permanently*; I should even put it this way: no problem in politics can be solved without creating a new one. And I am very ready to accept your delightful formula that a politics of conversation should replace my politics of argumentation.

Another of your formulae – that reason is not to take *the place of* habits of behaviour, but should act as the *critic* of habits and behaviour, - I can hardly consider as a criticism of my view, so much do I think it part of it.

But in spite of all this agreement, I feel there is a difference.

I do believe in tradition (in the tradition, for example, of Socratic rationalism, of the spirit of enquiry – but also in your “unselfconscious following of a tradition of moral behaviour” as you write in the Cambridge Journal p. 156). But I do not believe that “the passage of time” is “the only healer of social complaints worth considering” (p. 153). In other words, I am against a challenge to tradition because it is tradition, and in favour of any *status quo* except where there are strong reasons for interference. But I am against the spirit of non-intervention and wait-and-see, and perhaps even complacency, to use a strong and perhaps not quite just term, which speaks from the second passage quoted (p, 153) and others. *It is this spirit, which by way of a reaction to it, has created most of the symptoms you call by the name rationalism.* It has created the French (and Russian?) Revolution (to a large measure), and it has given Marxism its opportunity.

But I am far from preaching reform for the sake of avoiding revolutions. I am sure that this is a precept which does not work too well. I am for reforms because I believe in them, for their own sake – if you like, because of my (private) Utopian dream. But the point is that this dream – this moral idealism – (you write: “Moral Ideals are a sediment.” etc (p. 157). An important truth. But is it not a half-truth? What about moral revolutions? The rise of Christianity¹²) is a reality, a “historical force”, if you like, which has not been healed by the passage of the last 2000 years. This moral idealism is different from your “tradition of moral behaviour”. Perhaps, that the latter is the more important thing, politically and morally; perhaps that there is a hysterical element in this “moral idealism” of Christianity, and humanitarianism, in the refusal to look passively at human suffering (if so, we might be able to do a little to temper it). But although it seems to me quite clear that the very action of writing your article is

¹² The connection between the change of the character of morality and the rise of Christianity is discussed by Oakeshott in ‘The Tower of Babel’, pp. 81-83.

somehow inspired by it, you do not wish to admit its reality.

This makes you also overlook (a) the religious character of much you wish to dismiss as "rationalism"; (b) the fact that many Church men, especially in England, are not far removed from the Dean of Canterbury – and not because they are infested with rationalism. But this latter fact is perhaps unimportant, although symptomatic. My main point may be perhaps indicated thus:

*Even Burkeanism (if this word is possible) is not exempt from becoming Utopian.*¹³ (I am sure you idealize the old "politically experienced classes" in a romantic way, by implication, in your description of Locke's "crib" on p. 149. Is this not your "transformation of experience into an abstraction"? But this rationalism of your[s] is, nevertheless, brilliant and amusing.) True, we rationalists sometimes forget about Burke – his teaching is not so easily learned by us. But those who follow Burke are in the same predicament: they do not see that their ideas are Utopian; that the ideas of equality etc can be distorted (into rationalism etc), but not so easily neutralised.

You have criticized "rationalism". But have you tried to see the needs, desires, hopes, etc. to which it answers, in proper perspective?

Very sincerely yours,

[Karl Popper]¹⁴

¹³ In 'On Being Conservative' (1956) Oakeshott distances himself from Burkean conservatism, stating that 'there is more to be learnt about this [conservative] disposition from Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes and Hume than from Burke and Bentham'. (*Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, p. 195.) In the Harvard Lectures (1958) Oakeshott offers a more sympathetic account of Burke, yet the latter is presented here as a proponent of the morality of individuality and not as a conservative. See S.R. Letwin (ed.) *Morality and Politics in Modern Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 69-72.

¹⁴ This is perhaps an unsigned copy of the original letter sent to Oakeshott.

Oakeshott to Popper ¹⁵

The Cambridge Journal
General Editor: Michael Oakeshott

1st March, 1948

My dear Popper,

Will you write an article for the CAMBRIDGE JOURNAL?
Any subject you like, and four to six thousand words. I
would be delighted if you would, and even more delighted
if you would do it fairly soon.

Yours

sincerely,

Michael Oakeshott.

¹⁵ (This footnote made by Leslie Marsh). A somewhat pert note to Popper (following up his postscript a month earlier). Popper it should be remembered had already hit stardom with *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945); MO had yet to make his name with *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (1962).