

Burke, Oakeshott and the Intellectual Roots of Modern Conservatism

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Director, members of the LSE faculty and staff, students, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I want to start by thanking the London School of Economics, and in particular Professor Richard Sennett, for inviting me to give this Michael Oakeshott Memorial Lecture.

It is a huge honour to speak about Michael Oakeshott. I first came across his thought while I was at university in the early 1980s. When he died in 1990 I was living in America, but even so I kicked myself at length for never having made the journey to visit him in his stone cottage in Acton in Dorset; a defect only partly remedied when I edited a collection of memorial essays about him for Duckworth two years later. Part of the point of that collection was to capture the courtly power of his thought before it was fed into the academic mill. And it is notable that now, twenty years later, that courtly power is evident in the rapidly burgeoning field of Oakeshott studies.

It is also an honour to address you here at the LSE, at an institution in which Oakeshott flourished for so long as Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Department of Government, and which proved so fertile an environment for the development of his extraordinary late philosophy. Oakeshott's preferred metaphor for social and cultural exchange was that of conversation, and I am sure he would have been the first to acknowledge the effect of the LSE and its manifold internal and external conversations on his own thought.

Hume's Task

My subject this evening is "Burke, Oakeshott and the Intellectual Roots of Modern Conservatism". We shall end with politics, but I want to start with philosophy, and specifically with a fascinating but I think under-appreciated article by Oakeshott's friend and executor Shirley Letwin—mother of my great colleague Oliver Letwin, who gave this lecture two years ago—from the May

¹ Member of Parliament for Hereford and South Herefordshire, and author of *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet* (William Collins, 2013). I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Marcus Giaquinto for his very helpful comments on an early draft of this lecture, and to Lee Auspitz both for his comments and for first bringing Shirley Letwin's article to my attention.

1975 issue of the academic journal *Political Theory*.

This may seem somewhat paradoxical, for—ostensibly at least—the article is not about Burke, or Oakeshott, or indeed even conservatism; on the contrary, it is entitled “Hume: Inventor of a New Task for Philosophy”. Shirley Letwin’s central thrust is to suggest that none of the common readings of David Hume is quite right; not Hume the great sceptic, not Hume the logical atomist, not Hume the positivist or empiricist, not Hume the naturalist, not Hume as a founder of the social sciences.

Rather, Letwin argues that Hume is engaged on an entirely different project altogether: that of recognizing and reflecting upon both the limits and the richness of human life itself. On this view, man is for Hume “an inventive species”, and the “variety and complexity of human institutions are the products of human invention.” And that is all there is. Ideas originate in our sense perceptions, not in God. Reason is guided not by the divine light, but by the emotions; indeed it is, famously, “the slave of the passions”. What we would call pure mathematics is merely a relation between human ideas, not the product of any faculty of insight into a transcendent realm of truths. Justice and morality are not derived from nature, or from God’s law, but from what Hume terms “artifice” or “contrivance”. Civilization is to be identified with “understanding rules, standards and discriminations”, and “to make proper discriminations a man needs to be sufficiently well versed in the appropriate procedures, principles, and rules to recognize when they are relevant.” Error arises when we poor humans pass from one kind of idea to an apparently similar one, without noticing the difference.

This is not all. For Letwin’s Hume “We have at our disposal the whole of human civilization... within which we can move by way of emendation, excision, addition, variation or criticism... We act and think always on something that is truly ‘given’ to us... [Hume] was the first philosopher who disclosed bluntly that there is nothing but the cave, yet nonetheless valued what is in the cave without seeking to escape.” For him, Letwin concludes, “although the philosopher understands a great deal... he cannot explain everything. He can live, however, with mystery... He admits freely that the power to create and to order ideas remains an enigma. But he does not in the least doubt, disdain or deprecate all that it has created.”

At this point the reader’s nostrils may be quivering, and not without reason. This is splendidly revisionist stuff, but can it really withstand critical examination? We can leave specific rebuttals to the Hume scholars, who will note *en passant* Letwin’s slightly unnerving acknowledgement that even Hume seems on occasion to be unaware of the project she ascribes to him. The real problem is that her argument requires us to ignore or downplay what is most distinctive in Hume: the mordancy of his scepticism. Letwin’s Hume is a quietist, even mystical conservative, one who clears the philosophical decks in order to explore what remains in a connoisseurial spirit. But the real Hume is surely a wildly subversive thinker who is temperamentally incapable of taking anything at face value. Far from avoiding “doubt, disdain and deprecation”, he specializes in

them. Almost every aspect of nature, human and otherwise, is grist to his cool but vigorous scrutiny.

So what's really going here? An initial clue lies at the very end of the article, in the footnote attached to its final word: "For an unambiguous elucidation of this view of philosophy, see Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Clarendon [Press], 1975)." It is not an enormous leap of logic, then, to see here not merely a highly ingenious reconstruction of Hume's thought, but a quiet act of homage, in which Letwin places Oakeshott in a sceptical tradition which, as she sees it, originates in the modern era with David Hume.

But this itself creates a mystery. For one might have expected the link to be not to Hume but to his rather younger contemporary and acquaintance, Edmund Burke. After all, aren't Burke and Oakeshott the two greatest British conservative thinkers of the past two hundred and fifty years? Indeed aren't they, some would argue, the two greatest British political philosophers *tout court* since Locke?

The matter becomes more surprising still if we look closely at one specific issue, that is, their anti-rationalism: their views of the scope and limits of human reason. This is one of the central intellectual roots of conservatism through the ages.

Burke on "Abstract Reason"

Burke's views on this subject are often rather misunderstood. In particular, some parts of the *Reflections of the Revolution in France* and other late writings are often seen as a polemic against reason as such. After all, Burke famously denounces the "sophisters, economists and calculators" who have, he claims, extinguished the glory of Europe forever. For him Rousseau is "the insane Socrates of the National Assembly", a philosopher whose person and thought were dedicated to an "ethics of vanity", which exalted the self and ignored values of honour, duty, humility and personal virtue. He is invariably rude about "metaphysicians... the most foolish of men, and who, dealing in universals and essences, see no difference between more and less."²

On this view, then, the Enlightenment sets up a deep opposition between tradition and reason, between ancient prejudice and modern ideas, and Burke is a throwback, a pre-Enlightenment anti-philosopher who defends tradition and prejudice and attacks reason.

Unfortunately, this is a hopeless misreading. In the first place Burke was in many ways an Enlightenment figure: highly educated, making his mark in London in the 1750s and 1760s amid the hubbub of new ideas, conversing with men of the genius not merely of David Hume, but of Adam Smith and Samuel

² *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe.*

Johnson. He had read and reviewed Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire, and had been much influenced by Enlightenment thinking on history and historiography. And in his politics and his life he worked unceasingly to promote reforms consistent with Enlightenment ideals. He had begun to argue for religious tolerance in Ireland as early as the 1760s, and wrote a memorandum arguing for the humane treatment of slaves as a preliminary to abolition of the slave trade in 1780, seven years before the abolition movement was launched. He had defended the rights of American colonists, and pressed for the East India Company to be held to public account for its abuses of power in India. He had practised scientific agriculture on his much indebted estate near Beaconsfield.

Burke, it is true, reveres tradition and what he calls “prejudice”. But he does so precisely because he thinks they preserve and embody human wisdom, and the reasoned arrangements and understandings on which society depends. For him, man is a social being and human institutions are ultimately grounded in the emotions, which guide and direct man’s reason. Institutions are bound together by affection, identity and interest. They matter for three reasons. First, they constrain each other, competing and co-operating as required to survive, diffusing power across communities, and providing a social challenge to state power. Secondly, they give shape and meaning to people’s lives, as work or play, setting rhythms to the day or year, creating overlapping identities and personal loyalties. As Burke famously says in the *Reflections*: “to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is... the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.” Finally, institutions trap and store knowledge. Composed of a myriad private interactions, traditions and practices as it is, the social order overall becomes a repository of shared knowledge and inherited wisdom. “Prejudice” for Burke is thus not racial or religious or political bias, but simply that composite experience or intuition which works prior to reasoning or the weighing of evidence. It too is often a source of wisdom.

Burke is, then, an anti-rationalist not in opposing reason as such, but in insisting on its limitations. In particular, he draws a deep distinction between what we might term “embodied” reason—reason as expressed through evolving human relationships, habits, manners, “prejudice” and institutions—and what he calls “metaphysical” or “abstract” reason and ideas. It is because for him the French Revolution is the product of a deranged collective reason, that the perils of abstract reason are to the forefront in his later life. But the contrast between what I have called embodied and abstract reason is always present in his thought. Indeed his very first work, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, is an elaborate parody on the mischiefs deriving from abstract reason.

But what are we to understand by “abstract reason”? In the first place, this is reason divorced from its context. In Burke’s words early in the *Reflections*, “Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.”

Here again, however, Burke seems to have a deeper philosophical point in mind as well. Concepts from mathematics and the exact sciences can be given precise definitions, which are not tied in any way to a particular time or place: for example, a circle can be defined as a set of points in flat space an equal distance from a given point, and this will be true now or 1,000 years hence, here or in a distant galaxy. Similarly, axioms and rules of inference can be precisely specified, such as in Newton's Second Law, that Force equals Mass multiplied by Acceleration. But the same is not true in relation to the conduct of human life and human affairs. Here the principles are imprecise, and their meaning heavily governed by context, and the "distinguishing colour and discriminating effect" of circumstance.

According to Burke, moreover, it is a deep mistake in logic to seek to apply abstract principles out of context to human affairs: "Aristotle, the great master of reasoning, cautions us, and with great weight and propriety, against this species of delusive geometrical accuracy in moral arguments, as the most fallacious of all sophistry." Universal principles are thus never sufficient in themselves to guide practical deliberation. Their imposition always involves a degree of fallacy or logical error; in extreme cases that error may prove to be disastrous, leading to huge and often damaging unexpected consequences. When Burke talks of the "age of sophisters, economists and calculators" in the *Reflections*, it is this error that he has in mind.

The Centrality of Circumstance

However, I actually think Burke is on to something still more specific. Recall that the logic of the day was based on the Aristotelian syllogism, of which a familiar modern example is this:

- 1 All men are mortal
- 2 Socrates is a man
-
- 3 Socrates is mortal

In this form the syllogism has three elements: a major premise 1, offering a general proposition; a minor premise 2, offering a specific proposition; and a conclusion 3. In a theoretical syllogism, the conclusion is a further proposition ("Socrates is mortal"); in the so-called practical syllogism, however, the conclusion according to Aristotle is an action.

Thus, transposed into the world of politics, a practical syllogism (drawing on the language of the Declaration of Independence) might be:

[Political principle P]: Secure ... the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness

- 1 Adopt the policy which best achieves P
- 2 Policy A best achieves P
-
- 3 Adopt policy A

Aristotle, it will be recalled, makes quite a strong distinction between theory and practice. In particular, in several places he insists that man only deliberates about what could be otherwise; that is, not about the paradigmatically unchangeable truths of mathematics, but about human institutions and human conduct, or what we would call “circumstances”. This deliberation can be personal, or it can be shared and public—it can be political deliberation. But whether political or personal, deliberation starts from a given goal and a given array of circumstances, of which some and only some will be relevant. The question is what course of action in the circumstances will achieve the desired goal.

Burke was no logician, but we know he had read plenty of Aristotle, including the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which there is a substantial discussion of practical reasoning.³ So I suggest his position can be reconstructed as a practical syllogism roughly as follows:

[Political principle P]: Secure ... the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness

- 1* In relevant circumstances X, Y, Z, to achieve P, adopt policy B
- 2* The relevant circumstances here and now are X, Y, Z
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- 3* Adopt policy B⁴

But if this is so, then we can immediately see why Burke insists that “Circumstances ... give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect.” Following Aristotle, he takes political principles to be those involved in public deliberation about what can be changed by government, and these always mention or imply a set of circumstances.

³ It is not clear whether Burke had specifically read Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. But it seems highly likely to me; and in any case he was imbued in the Roman rhetorical tradition of Cicero and Quintilian, which was deeply influenced by Aristotle.

⁴ Needless to say the underlying issues are a lot more complicated than this sketch suggests. Rhetoric for Aristotle is conducted in “enthymemes”, which start from shared tacit premises but are syllogistic in their fully explicated form. Some of Aristotle’s specific views on the practical syllogism are not at all clear, and his examples are rather varied. This schema differs from e.g. *NE* vii.3 in deploying the imperative mood; and in using if-then reasoning, whose formal logical treatment requires technical resources not available to Aristotle.

Indeed, they paradigmatically have a set of circumstances for their application specified within them, as we can see from 2* above.

Thus circumstances fundamentally condition the character of practical reasoning. For even when the overall goal is not in question, the practical public reasoner—let's call him or her the politician—must determine what the relevant circumstances are which make A the right policy to achieve it. A similar set might imply policy B, or a further set policy C. An obvious policy A may fail depending on circumstances, while an unobvious policy B succeeds.

Moreover, circumstances include not merely contingent or transitory facts about the how things happen to be; they also include more long-term or even permanent facts about human nature, or social dynamics. These cannot be determined *a priori* by armchair reasoning, or by mere casual acquaintance or anecdote. They can only come through personal experience and the shared and filtered experience of institutions. Good government for Burke goes “with the temper of the people”, and this requires the politician to have both the capacity to master detail, and a deep understanding of human nature. It is little wonder that Burke says “The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.” Moreover—and this is sometimes forgotten—the logic of a piece of reasoning can flow in both directions. If an action is unacceptable, then the principle and indeed the overriding goal may be put aside, or rejected altogether.

In effect, then, the politician is constantly seeking to achieve, temporarily at least, a kind of deliberative equilibrium between circumstances, goals and actions. And of course the goals of political action are invariably underspecified, often mutually conflicting and almost always heavily contested.

It is this complexity that makes politics so difficult, and so fascinating. It is why the art of government is just that: an art. It is why political wisdom lies in great part in the ability to select, attend to and master the relevant details—the circumstances—that condition and inform political principles. And it is why politics at its core demands not merely the capacity to take action, but to deliberate publicly about the principles that should inform it. As Burke says, “It is the business of the speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect.”

Far from rejecting philosophy, then, Burke places it where Aristotle placed it, at the centre of public life. But by the same token we can now see the full force of Burke's critique of the “abstract” reasoning of “metaphysicians”. For they commit the horrible philosophical blunder of confusing the deliberative principles of public action with the theoretical principles of mathematics. They take principles that are universal—anchored in no time and place—and confuse them with principles that do and must make specific reference to given circumstances as they actually are at a given time and place.

In a revolutionary context these abstractions, shorn of their encumbering detail,

circumstance and complexity, become slogans used by demagogues to whip up popular support. Thus a philosophical blunder, made by thinkers who should know better, can lead to violence and bloodshed. It is little wonder that Burke regards such thinkers, perhaps even more than the foolish revolutionaries they inspire, not merely with intellectual disdain, but with horror.

Oakeshott as Anti-Rationalist

Let us move forward a century and a half, to Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott is highly unusual among British academics of any kind in identifying himself as a conservative, most notably in his 1956 essay "On being Conservative". In part as a result Oakeshott and Burke are often joined together, invoked by politicians and commentators on the centre-right wanting to identify a conservative intellectual line of succession, to buff their own intellectual credentials or to call philosophical authority in aid of present policy. This is so, even though we can be rationally certain that very few of those who invoke Oakeshott in and around politics have actually read much of him, since they almost always ignore his greatest works *Experience and its Modes* and *On Human Conduct*.

At first glance, this linkage between Burke and Oakeshott seems well grounded. For Oakeshott too is an anti-rationalist, who believes like Burke that there are intrinsic limitations to human reason beyond which it is folly to trespass. In his first book *Experience and its Modes* Oakeshott critically examines the three domains of science, of history and of practice. These are "modes... independent, self-consistent worlds of discourse, each the invention of human intelligence." Each is conditioned and characterised by a distinct set of organising categories that have developed over time, but achieved a certain conceptual coherence in their own right.

We can think of these modes as offering different frameworks or languages through which the scientist, the historian and the practitioner interrogate the world: presented with a piece of music, for example, the scientist will see it quantitatively, as a set of sounds or wavelengths with a distinct pattern or ordering; the historian will see it as a contingent cultural artefact; the practitioner as offering an occasion for performance. The function of philosophy is to identify and describe each set of concepts, and so make clear each framework's intellectual boundaries.

Rationalism for Oakeshott is what arises when the Promethean attempt is made to step outside modal constraints themselves. It is the belief that different languages or modes of understanding can be applied willy-nilly to different subjects. In politics, it manifests itself in the confusion of science and practice, and so in the ideas that all politics is a matter of technique, and that skilled activities like the activity of governing can be reduced to a set of explicit rules or instructions. Its further implication is that tacit knowledge, the inarticulable knowledge of the craftsman, has no place in politics.

At its most politically extreme, rationalism can be seen in totalitarian societies,

which seek to capture and organize the staggeringly diverse potential of human beings, and frame it on some Procrustean bed. But what is more disturbing is to see it in the utterly familiar idea today that politics merely consists of a series of economic, social or cultural problems to be solved—and in the anguish that follows when those problems turn out to be deeply interrelated and their solutions to have unanticipated consequences.

But rationalism also shapes the minds of its believers. It substitutes a single idea for a messy reality. It dispels sober judgement, complexity and contingency and replaces them with easy slogans and the search of certainty. In short, it encourages fundamentalism: what Oakeshott calls a politics of faith over a politics of doubt.

Oakeshott and Burke, then, both offer a profound critique of the excessive claims of reason. Indeed, we can read Oakeshott as a highly sophisticated and nuanced generalization of Burke. Burke criticizes those who would apply abstract principles to human affairs, in the geometrical spirit; Oakeshott characterizes the worlds of science and practice as distinct modes of human experience among others, and pinpoints the fraud involved in applying one mode to another in general. Burke highlights the importance of circumstance in shaping the application of political principle; Oakeshott gives us a defence of the tacit knowledge of the political practitioner.

But we can go further. For both thinkers are in fact pursuing a deeply and distinctively conservative line of thought, one which has its roots in Aristotle. This pushes us away from ideology and towards scepticism and pragmatic principle. And politically it cuts away some of the leading dogmas of modern politics. On the one hand, it is a devastating intellectual critique of Fabian socialism, with its belief in the guiding role of intellectuals in using the state to remodel society—a point with some poignancy, perhaps, in the London School of Economics. On the other, it undermines the economic fundamentalism of über-libertarians of the right. And it debunks the seductive claims of technocrats of any party, who would reduce all political or social questions to economic ones, or indeed substitute economics for politics as such.

All is, then, well and good. Except that it isn't. For this whole argument faces one simple and serious problem. If there is this conservative line of succession, if Burke and Oakeshott are both anti-rationalists, if Oakeshott is in fact generalising a Burkean insight, then why does Burke barely feature in Oakeshott's writings? Why is his name nowhere to be found in Oakeshott's extraordinary, indeed canonical 1947 essay "Rationalism in Politics"? And far from embracing Burke, why does Oakeshott specifically distance himself from Burke by name in his great lecture "On being Conservative" of 1956, classifying himself not with Burke but with Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes and, yes, David Hume?

The simple answer is, I think, that Oakeshott was not a close reader of Burke, and did not hold him in especially high regard. The two are stylistically and temperamentally quite different: Oakeshott cool, playful, speculative and

detached; Burke warm, serious, practical and engaged. Oakeshott is, recognisably, a philosopher; Burke a man of politics, or what he calls a “philosopher in action”.

But there is a deeper answer, for in fact the two men differ about the very nature of conservatism itself. Burke’s is a conservatism of value: the social order is what preserves value through time, and it is the duty of those in public authority to preserve and enhance that value for future generations. Oakeshott’s is a conservatism of disposition: man is naturally disposed to value what works, the familiar, the everyday; and the task of government is to generalise that disposition and so preserve man’s freedom to pursue his own projects without interruption or oppression.

But these different conceptions of conservatism can and do come apart. For Burke the social order is a providential gift, which it is the duty of all those in authority to preserve, enhance and pass on to future generations; and so his conservatism of value is anchored in what we would today call moderate moral community. This carries across from politics to other spheres of human activity, and from the public to the private realm. The politician who preaches about upholding established institutions and then grubs up a hedgerow in his own garden has erred both in morals and logic, and it is a point of consistency as well as of character and honour for him that a person’s conduct should remain the same in the public square and in the home.

For Oakeshott, matters are otherwise: there is no providential endowment or embedded value in society as such, and a person’s private dispositions may radically differ from those which properly animate government in the public realm. As he puts the matter, “It is not at all inconsistent to be conservative in respect of government and radical in respect of almost every other activity.”⁵ And in some ways, he himself was such a radical.

Now I have described these two different conceptions as a conservatism of value, and a conservatism of disposition. But if we are determined to extract doctrines from these two undoctinaire thinkers, and to give their ideas contemporary tags, we might call them social conservatism and liberal conservatism, and say that, within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, they find their modern intellectual origins in Burke and Oakeshott respectively.

It becomes easier, then, to see why it is to Hume and not to Burke that Oakeshott, and Shirley Letwin on his behalf, defers. But if Oakeshott’s—at least the Oakeshott of the 1940s and ‘50s—is the more purely philosophical account, and a work of genuine intellectual elegance in its own right, it is Burke who I suggest

⁵ *EM*, p. 195. The two men’s private lives reflected this difference of view. Burke was irreproachably married to Jane Nugent for forty years, at a time of considerable sexual licence. Not so Oakeshott: see Robert Grant, “The Pursuit of Intimacy, or Rationalism in Love”, in P. Franco and L. Marsh, *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

has the last laugh. First, because we can now see what Oakeshott was at this time unaware of, or underplayed: that his anti-rationalism in fact owes a lot to Burke. Secondly, because it is Burke's vision of moral community rather than Oakeshott's more neutral and more purely philosophical account which strikes the deeper chord in a modern world seemingly bewitched by materialism and ego.

And thirdly, because in fact we can read Burke, the reflective practitioner, the 18th century philosopher in action, as striking a body blow in advance to the thought of the Oakeshott of this period, a blow which Oakeshott sidesteps in his late work, which supersedes and relocates his critique of rationalism in a different philosophical idiom.⁶ For it will be recalled that in *Experience and its Modes* Oakeshott identifies "practice" alongside science and history as a mode, whose proper limits it is the role of philosophy of elucidate. But, Burke would ask, how can this be? If practice and philosophy, history and philosophy are indeed radically distinct, then what account are we to give of the practice of theorising, or of its contingency? In mathematics and the exact sciences, as we have seen, we can give fixed and stable meanings to the concepts and principles we use in theorising; but elsewhere, and above all in the public deliberation that is the very stuff of politics, we have no choice but to work with what we have, and give it shape and definition as we can. Or as Burke would put it, "Circumstances... give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect." To this extent at least, politicians or no, we are all Burkeans now.

And with that I will close. Thank you very much indeed, and good night.

⁶ See, for example, the late Ken Minogue's essay "The Fate of Rationalism in Oakeshott's Thought", in P. Franco and L. Marsh, *op. cit.*