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The Conservative's Dilemma : The Case of Michael Oakeshott

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the Master of Arts Degree**

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Abstract

The subject of the present thesis is the political thought of the 20th century British philosopher Michael Oakeshott. More precisely, we are interested with the relationship Oakeshott establishes and believes ought to exist between political theory and active politics. As we will show, because of his critique and opposition to what he terms Rationalism and Ideology, Oakeshott severely limits the definition and the role he attributes to political theory and the political theorist. Political theory and the role of the theorist are restricted to such an extent that when Oakeshott himself theorizes the state, we argue that he has tremendous difficulty respecting his own criteria. Therefore, we are interested in taking Oakeshott seriously, in order to see if he himself is able to respect the strict criteria he establishes regarding political theory when he goes about theorizing the state.

**À la mémoire de Suzanne Aubry-Riendeau, Marguerite Riendeau, Florine Isabelle et
Yolande Giroux.**

**«You seem to be yearning after one of these Rebel Angels, who people the universities
and have established what Paracelsus calls The Second Paradise of Learning, and who are
ready and willing to teach all manner of wisdom to the daughters of men.»**

- Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels*

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Introduction

Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) , is a British 20th century political philosopher. While he is considered by his admirers and followers as one of the century's leading writers on politics (Holliday, 1992: 131), he has largely been marginalized by the mainstream of political philosophy. The reason for this is most likely because

Oakeshott has been an avowed conservative and traditionalist during a period in which the prevailing ideology among intellectuals has been democratic socialism, and the predominant mood in almost all fields of endeavor has been more favorable to innovation than preservation (Havard, 1984: 150).

This has lead to the common portrayal of Oakeshott as, “[...] ‘a right-wing guru’, a high-Tory oracle centrally concerned with interpreting (and usually decrying) current political events [...]” (Riley, 1992: 649). This description of Oakeshott is a paraphrase taken from the *New York Times* obituary dedicated to him. Following in the same vein, at his death the *Times* of London said of Oakeshott, “[...] he was, though a philosopher who ‘stood fastidiously aside’ from politics, nonetheless the ‘articulator’ of ‘the real philosophical foundations of Mrs. Thatcher’s policies’” (Riley, 1992: 649). From these obituaries it is easy to grasp the fact that Oakeshott is a controversial figure of 20th century political philosophy and politics.

Besides the image and the common portrayal of Oakeshott as a “right-wing guru” the concrete facts concerning his life are as follows. Oakeshott was born in 1901 and graduated with a degree in history from Cambridge University in 1923. In 1925 we was made a fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He set aside his academic and intellectual career for five years in order to serve in the army during World War II. On his

return, he reintegrated his position at Cambridge and went on to found and edit the *Cambridge Journal* from 1947 to 1953. He left Cambridge and spent a short time at Nuffield College, Oxford before being appointed to the University Chair in Political Science at the London School of Economics, where he stayed for the remainder of his academic career. Although he retired from university life in 1969, he remained active in intellectual life up until his death in 1990 as his publications prove.

Oakeshott had a long career and published on a regular basis starting in the 1920s up until the 1980s. His thought and ideas concerning, most notably, philosophy and politics developed considerably during this sixty-year period. The first part of his writings deals mainly with metaphysics and philosophy and culminate in the publication of *Experience and its Modes*. This work is strongly influenced by the philosophical tradition of British Idealism and is often considered to be a fine example of late British Idealism. It never gained main stream attention, but the chapter devoted to history was considered by R.G. Collingwood to be, “[...] the most penetrating analysis of historical thought that has ever been written” (Boucher, 1984: 193). In the 1940’s, Oakeshott mainly devoted his attentions to the study of the works of Thomas Hobbes. He is considered by many critics to be, “[...] the supreme interpreter of Hobbes in this (or perhaps any) century” (Riley, 1992: 654). Oakeshott’s major intellectual contributions to the field of Hobbesian study are, first of all his famous “Introduction” to the 1946 edition of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and secondly his essay “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes” which can be found in the 1991 edition of *Rationalism in Politics*. A less important, yet highly interesting text dealing with Hobbes and Aristotle is “Logos and Telos”, which can also be found in the new edition of *Rationalism in Politics*. As

Oakeshott's degree was in history, he was also interested in and published numerous essays dealing with the philosophy of history. The most important of these essays can be found in 1983's *On History and Other Essays*. However, Oakeshott's most important contribution to 20th century intellectual life is arguably his writings on political philosophy. His two greatest contributions in this field are undoubtedly 1962's *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* and *On Human Conduct* published in 1975. To this list may be added three posthumous publications, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* (1993), *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (1993) and *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (1996).

The present thesis is interested in the political writings of Michael Oakeshott. With such a controversial reputation, we are more particularly interested in gaining a complete and full understanding of Oakeshott's philosophical and political positions. It is to be suspected that Oakeshott's thought is more complex than that of a "right-wing guru". Furthermore, what can also be noted is that since Oakeshott's death, many writers have begun turning out new readings of his major texts. The more traditional interpretations of Oakeshott's thought have more often than not associated him to another famous British conservative, Edmund Burke. The principal reason for this association being the strong historicist bent to Oakeshott's writings. However, since Oakeshott's death, there has been a quasi-renaissance in Oakeshottian studies. This new found interest in Oakeshott has given rise to many interesting debates among scholars. The most fruitful of these debates is arguably the one opposing thinkers like David Boucher who adamantly maintain Oakeshott is an idealist, to those, who like Steven Anthony Gerencser steadfastly maintain Oakeshott is a political sceptic. Subsequently, it is

important to gain a thorough and complete understanding both of Oakeshott's thought and of his philosophical influences in order to make sense of the current debates concerning what Oakeshott's political and philosophical legacy might be. Although, it must be made clear that the present thesis does not have the ambition of settling the debate; but rather, its aim is simply to gain a clear understanding of Oakeshott's ideas and of his major intellectual influences. In order to do this, the first part of the thesis, more precisely the first chapter, will be dedicated to grasping the constitutive ideas behind British Idealism, through a reading of F.H. Bradley's writings. Following this, we will be concerned with the philosophical tradition of historicism by studying the key elements of Edmund Burke's theory. The second chapter will study Oakeshott's conceptions of philosophy, political philosophy, politics and the role of the theorist in relation to society and we will compare them throughout with Bradley's and Burke's key conceptions. The third and final chapter will examine how Oakeshott theorizes the political. His theorization of the political is a major component of his contribution to the understanding of politics and comprises of important reflections on the state, politics, agency and morality, which will all be studied in turn.

However, the aim of this thesis is not merely to remain descriptive. That is, we wish to go beyond a mere description of Oakeshott's thought. The aim of the thesis is also to have a critical attitude towards his writings and a good place to start our critical questioning is with the quote from the *Times* of London obituary which pointed out that Oakeshott "stood fastidiously aside" from politics because he was a philosopher, yet he was nevertheless the "articulator" of the philosophical foundations of the Thatcher government's policies. What this quote points to is a certain ambiguity or tension that

may be said to exist within Oakeshott's thought about the proper relationship that is to exist between the philosopher and politics. It is this tension the thesis aims at investigating and fleshing out, by first examining in chapter two how Oakeshott conceives of correct philosophical and theoretical activity in relation to politics, and then, in chapter three, by studying Oakeshott's actual theorization of the political. The goal of this comparative study is to find out if Oakeshott is able to respect the criteria he sets up in his definition of philosophy and of the philosopher when he himself goes about theorizing the political. This analysis will constitute the second part of chapter three. What we can tentatively put forward at this point is that, just as the *Times* pointed out there appears to exist manifest tensions between what Oakeshott says and what he does regarding philosophizing. Why is this the case? As we will see in greater detail throughout the thesis, Oakeshott firmly believes that political philosophy is poorly defined and that political philosophers have come to address the subject of the political any which way. In reaction to what he believes to be the degraded state of political philosophy, he goes about defining and limiting considerably the breadth of legitimate political philosophy. As we will see, through his arguments concerning rationalism in politics and ideology, he severely constricts the legitimate role of philosophy as well as that of the theorist in relation to active politics. He constricts the legitimate role of the theorist to such an extent that he himself has considerable difficulty respecting the limits of political philosophy as he defines them. We will argue that his restricted view of philosophy and politics have severe repercussions for him, not only because he has difficulty respecting his own criteria, but because, by defending a purely descriptive conception of philosophy, he is unable to accept any political change that may be brought

on by an abstract ideal. As we will see, this puts him at times in an awkward position. A position that is illustrated by the quote from *The Times*. Although Oakeshott steadfastly maintained that philosophy and politics are to remain completely separate and distinct, his political philosophy was nevertheless at the root of major political change in Great Britain. It is this ambiguous and tension filled reality that the thesis aims to understand and flesh out.

Chapter 1: The Idealist and Historicist Traditions

Like every other thinker, Michael Oakeshott has been unable to escape categorization and labeling. He has been qualified as the following: idealist (see Boucher 1984, Wells 1994), conservative (see Havard 1984, Rayner 1985, Pitkin 1973), sceptic (see Boucher 2001), sceptical idealist (see Havard 1984), liberal (see Coats 1985), pluralist (see Kekes 2001) and communitarian (see Outhwaite and Bottomore 1996), to name a few. In fact, the major debate in current Oakeshottian studies is the one between those who argue he is an idealist and those who maintain he is a sceptic. In order to make sense of all these different appellations and categories, we need to understand Oakeshott's major intellectual influences before we can set out and examine his own thought. That is, we need to explain the context in which Oakeshott's thought evolved and how these influences may be responsible for some inherent tensions in his thought. This first chapter then will attempt to determine Oakeshott's influences. In order to do this we will examine two traditions that are fundamental to Oakeshott's thought. Those traditions are British idealism as represented by the works of F.H. Bradley and historicism as represented by the works of Edmund Burke. However, we need to point out that the purpose of the thesis is not an exercise in intellectual genealogy. In other words, we are not looking to determine specifically what Oakeshott inherited from which thinker. But rather, we are interested in the practice/theory problem that exists in Oakeshott's work. Therefore, the scope of this first chapter will be limited to examining the major ideas which emanate from idealist theory as well as historicist theory in relation to the following questions : the role of philosophy; the role of politics; the practice/theory

debate; finally the idea of change. It is not possible to determine Oakeshott's position when it comes to these questions at this time, simply because it would be too long to do so and because we will be examining and elaborating Oakeshott's position in great detail in subsequent chapters. Therefore, this first chapter will be limited to establishing the positions of Bradley and Burke respectively to these questions, and comparison with Oakeshott's position will follow subsequently. This chapter then will simply be divided as follows. First of all, we will examine the tradition of British idealism through two of Bradley's major works: *Appearance and Reality* and *Ethical Studies*. Secondly, we will determine the main ideas developed by Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, an important example of the historicist tradition.

1.1 Bradley's Idealism

We start off then with a look at two of Bradley's works: *Appearance and Reality* and *Ethical Studies*. The concepts behind idealism are most clearly defined in the first work, whereas their consequences for ethics and politics are laid out in the second. What is idealism then? Bradley begins by defining the term appearance. Appearance means, "[...] that which, taken as it stands, proves inconsistent with itself and for this reason cannot be true of the real" (Bradley, 1897:114). In other words, appearance is a thing which is inconsistent with itself and therefore this cannot be the real, as the real must be consistent with itself. Appearance can also be defined as a way of regarding reality which is unsatisfactory because fatally inconsistent (Bradley, 1897: 213). Bradley develops his

thought on the subject by maintaining that although appearance is inconsistent with itself, this in no way means that it must be separated from the real. In fact, he argues that appearance has a positive character which is fact and that consequently it must live in reality. Therefore, according to Bradley, appearance and reality are somehow joined (Bradley, 1897: 114-115). Before Bradley determines how this is, he argues that the very move of condemning or judging appearances negatively, that is, saying that they cannot be real because of their inconsistency, is an absolute criterion. In other words, when we condemn appearance as being inconsistent with itself, we apply an absolute criterion. This implies that Bradley can now argue against any form of relativism, that is he opposes saying that “every nonsense” is truth (Bradley, 1897: 120). Consequently, following this logic, Bradley concludes that, “Hence to think is to judge, and to judge is to criticize, and to criticize is to use a criterion of reality” (Bradley, 1897: 120). The criterion of reality being that ultimate reality does not contradict itself.

Having described appearance and determined an absolute criterion for reality, that it does not contradict itself, Bradley pursues his thought by providing greater detail as to the character of reality. He defines reality in several different ways. First by saying that, “The character of the real is to possess everything phenomenal in a harmonious form” (Bradley, 1897: 123); or he defines reality as being, “[...] one in this sense that is has a positive nature exclusive of discord [...]” (Bradley, 1897: 123). Therefore, the real is self-consistent, it is individual and everything which appears belongs to the real.

Following this discussion of the real, Bradley enters the sphere of the Absolute, which is the equivalent of Reality in his thought. Bradley argues that the Absolute is one system, in that, “[...] its differences exist harmoniously within one whole, beyond which

there is nothing” (Bradley, 1897: 127). Again, every appearance belongs to the Absolute. As for the concrete nature of the Absolute, Bradley argues that its content or matter is experience. This part of the argument is essential to understanding idealism. What Bradley means by this is that there is no fact outside psychical existence. That is, there are no facts outside of ideas we have. This limits existence to feeling, thought and volition. There is no other possible material for existence (Bradley, 1897: 127). This is what Bradley means when he states that, “You cannot find fact unless in unity with sentience [...]” (Bradley, 1897: 129). So far then, according to Bradley the Absolute is one system and its content or matter is experience, that is psychical existence. In other words, “Every element of the universe, sensation, feeling, thought and will, must be included within one comprehensive sentience” (Bradley, 1897:140).

Reality or the Absolute then can be understood as, “[...] a whole superior to and embracing all incomplete forms of life” (Bradley, 1897: 213). In order to properly understand this statement, we need to understand the relationship Bradley develops between the Absolute and Appearances. As we have seen previously, there is one Reality consisting of psychical experience. All appearances come together in Reality and in doing so, they lose their distinctive natures. However, although appearances may lose their distinctive natures, they are never lost as such in Reality or the Absolute. That is, Bradley argues that each one contributes and is essential to the unity of Reality (Bradley, 1897: 403-404). In other words, their characters are merged in Reality or the Absolute. Again, then, Bradley underlines the importance of understanding Reality as one system or as a whole.

Bradley develops in greater detail the concept of experience, which is the content of the Absolute or Reality. He explains that experience can be apprehended through different attitudes or what he calls modes. They are: perception/thought; will/desire; aesthetic attitude; pleasure/pain. Of these modes, Bradley argues that not one of them can be said to be resolvable into the others. That is, "There is not one mode to which the others belong as its adjectives [...]" (Bradley, 1897: 405), since each mode is incomplete and requires assistance from the outside. Therefore, no one mode is supreme and the Absolute is said to be present in each of its appearances (Bradley, 1897: 405). Finally, Bradley concedes that he is unable to explain how these modes of experience come together to form a whole (Bradley, 1897: 414).

To conclude this first section on *Appearance and Reality*, if we review the argument we can see that appearance for Bradley is anything which is not Reality. Therefore, anything that is not self-consistent. Consequently, Reality or the Absolute is a whole or system which is self-consistent and its content is psychical experience. Furthermore, only the whole of experience is real. This idea of self-consistency or self-containment can be explained in further detail. What Bradley means when he speaks of self-containment, is that, the thing involves in its essence a relation to the outside. This implies that the thing is inwardly infected by externality according to Bradley (Bradley, 1897: 430). Therefore, the thing or the finite is alienated from itself and it passes away from itself towards another existence. These finite elements which transcend themselves are appearances (Bradley, 1897: 430). The Absolute on the other hand, is each appearance but is not any one appearance as such and furthermore, it is not each appearance equally (Bradley, 1897: 431). What Bradley means by this is that every

appearance is essential but each one of them is worthless when compared to the others (Bradley, 1897: 431). Finally, Reality or the Absolute is not the sum of things. Bradley defines it as, “[...] the unity in which all things, coming together, are transmuted, in which they are changed alike, though not changed equally” (Bradley, 1897: 432). The Absolute then is one system in which all appearances come together.

At this point, seeing as we have yet to bring in Oakeshott into the fray, the presentation of Bradley’s idealism may not seem pertinent. However, in the following chapter which deals with Oakeshott’s conception of philosophy and with his first major work *Experience and its Modes* the ties between the two authors will become apparent and a brief comparison will be possible. In order to give a preview of the argument, it will be shown that Oakeshott may be considered idealist when it comes to his metaphysics.

However, before pursuing the present chapter with an analysis of Burke’s ideas, we need to examine Bradley’s thought regarding ethics and politics in order to establish an interesting and satisfying comparison with Oakeshott. Because, as will be argued later on, Oakeshott is not simply idealist in his metaphysics, but also in his conception of politics, change and the relationship between practice and theory.

In order to understand how idealism applies to ethics and politics, we will study two of Bradley’s essays from *Ethical Studies*, essay V entitled “My Station and its Duties” and essay VI, “Ideal Morality”. In the first of these two essays, Bradley defines several crucial concepts for idealism. First of all, Bradley explains the relationship he believes exists between the individual and his community. The individual according to Bradley cannot realize himself outside of the community. By this he means that the

community is one whole body with one will. This will lives within each member that makes up the community. Furthermore, the individual cannot find the function which allows him to realize himself without the whole that is the community. Therefore, the self-realization of the individual requires the whole of the community (Bradley, 1952: 162-163). This implies that, “[...] to live his life he must live a life which is not *merely* his own, but which, none the less [...] is intensely and emphatically his own individuality” (Bradley, 1952: 163). Therefore, the individual knows who and what he is once he knows what his function or his “station and duty” are in the community or social organism (Bradley, 1952: 163). Furthermore, according to Bradley, the individual at first, “[...] does not even think of his separate self; he grows with his world, his mind fills and orders itself [...]” (Bradley, 1952: 172). However, when the individual does separate himself from the whole, the content of his individuality is filled with the relations of his community (Bradley, 1952:172). For Bradley then, the individual becomes himself by sharing with others and by including in his essence relations to the whole of the community (Bradley, 1952:173). Consequently, the individual and the community are inseparable, the individual cannot realize himself without the community, but this is also true of the community, which would be unimaginable without the individuals. The community does not exist before individuals. The latter compose it by placing themselves in certain relations (Bradley, 1952:164). The community therefore is the sum of its parts (Bradley, 1952:164). Bradley illustrates this by stating that, “[...] moral institutions are carcasses without personal morality, and personal morality apart from moral institutions is an unreality, a soul without a body” (Bradley, 1952: 178). Finally then, the individual and the community need one another in order to realize their essence.

Following the description of the existing relationship between the individual and the community, Bradley delves further into the theory behind the idea of “My station and its Duties”. He begins by asking what it is that the individual is suppose to realize. The first part of the answer goes back to what was just said about the individual being inseparable from his community. Bradley explains that the individual is born into a certain family, society and state. What the individual has to do then depends on what his place and function are within the social organism. This means that his life, including his moral duties are determined by his station or function within the social organism. Consequently, the state gives him not only the life which he lives, but also the life which he ought to live (Bradley, 1952:173; 181). Bradley justifies this by saying that man is a social being. He is only real because he is social and can only realize himself because he is social (Bradley, 1952: 174). All this implies then that in “My station and its Duties” the function of the individual is prescribed to him and that this is the case whether he likes it or not (Bradley, 1952:176). However, once again, to underline how the individual and the social organism are conjoined, Bradley uses the imagery of organs and the whole in order to argue that the organs work for the whole and that the whole is at work in its organs (Bradley, 1952:176). This idea is developed more clearly when Bradley explains what it is for the individual to be moral. He argues that in order to be moral, the individual must will his station and his duties. By this he means that the individual wills to particularize the moral system in a given case, his case. Meanwhile, the moral system wills to particularize itself in a particular individual. This implies that the individual’s moral self is not simply his own (Bradley, 1952: 180). That he in fact particularizes the moral system, which in turn particularizes itself. This act of particularization on both sides

means that the individual does not have to force what he has to do onto the world. Each individual has a place to fill within the social organism and by filling it allows for the soul of the social organism to become personal in the individual, who by acting as he should, externalizes both the soul of the social organism as well as himself into a solid reality (Bradley, 1952: 180-181). Therefore, with “My Station and its Duties”, what ought to be in the world is and what the individual ought to be he is (Bradley, 1952:181). Consequently, the one important idea that comes out of the theory of “My Station and its Duties”, is that the individual and the community are inseparable. One cannot realize itself without the other as can be gathered from the complex relationship which governs the acts between them.

One of the interesting points of the theory exposed in “My Station and its Duties” is the play that is allowed for between the individual and the social organism. As Bradley points out, this allows to avoid or resolve the tension that traditionally exists between the social and the individual. The theory developed here is able to save the truth of both individualism and of the social organism. An example of what this implies is that if it were not for a strong individual, the social organism would quickly become ossified. On the other side of the equation, if it were not for a strong social organism, the individual would never realize his individuality because he would be unable to particularize the moral system. The individual and social organism are two faces of a same coin and are therefore inseparable. Each without the other would not be possible and, what is more, Bradley argues that, “[...] the better the one, the better the other” (Bradley, 1952: 188). In brief then, Bradley argues that the community is moral because it realizes personal

morality and personal morality is moral because it realizes the moral system (Bradley, 1952: 187-188).

The third important element to Bradley's argument in "My Station and its Duties" is the idea of change. He clearly states that he believes in change for the following reason: what this theory is aiming at is the realization of man as an infinite whole (Bradley, 1952: 190). This can only be done if the individual is a member of a higher life. And this life is slowly developed in a series of stages. This implies that for Bradley morality is relative. However he argues that it is none the less real because, "At every stage there is the solid fact of a world so far moralized"(Bradley, 1952: 190). He states that, "There is an objective morality in the accomplished will of the past and present, a higher self worked out by the infinite pain, the sweat and blood of generations [...]" (Bradley, 1952: 190). This morality which has been worked out by the previous generations is transmitted to the individuals and community of the present generation as a trust. For Bradley, this morality is the truth of the nature of individuals, of the power and the law which is superior to any opinion of the individual (Bradley, 1952: 190). Therefore, the morality of every stage is real and superior to the mere opinion of individuals. What all this signifies is that the morality of every stage is justified for that stage, and because of this very fact, morality must be qualified as being relative. It is also qualified by Bradley as being relative as opposed to being absolute because in every stage the essence of man is not realized. Therefore, since one stage is never final, there is always room for change or evolution towards a more complete morality.

The fourth point of interest of Bradley's theory of "My Station and its Duties" is the role he attributes to philosophy which, as will be seen later on, can be interestingly compared to Oakeshott's thought on the matter. Bradley starts off by declaring that moral philosophy cannot tell us what to do and that furthermore, it is not the business of philosophy to do so. The role Bradley attributes to philosophy is one of understanding. The business of philosophy is to understand what is. This means for instance in the case of political philosophy that it does not have to, "[...] play tricks with the state [...]" (Bradley, 1952: 193). Rather, it simply has to understand it. Briefly then for Bradley, those who believe that the role of moral philosophy is to supply individuals with particular prescriptions are confusing science with art. Even more problematic, they are confusing reflective with intuitive judgment. To know what is right and wrong according to Bradley is not reflection but rather intuition (Bradley, 1952: 193-194). Therefore, the role of philosophy is to understand what is and not to determine what should be.

A fifth point that flows from the previous point, is the idea of reform of the social organism. How does Bradley conceive of social reform? Is it at all possible? How does it relate to theory? Bradley does allow for reform. In fact he even goes as far as to state that it is a duty for the individual to try and make himself as well as his world better. However, he warns against the temptation the individual might have of starting with himself and with personal ideals and to compare them with the moral world (Bradley, 1952: 200). He argues against this practice because the moral world, since it has social institutions is a fact and is real, whereas ideals are not real. These ideals are nothing more than abstractions and Bradley argues that they are fit for the heads of individuals but not for actual existence. Therefore, for Bradley, the community is a real moral idea and it is

stronger than the theories of its members who attempt to argue against it. For Bradley, a theory of what is to be is a theory of that which in fact is not. Therefore, this is only a theory and not a fact. Consequently, in order to change or reform the social organism, individuals have to start off with what is a fact, that is the community which is a real moral idea, and not some abstraction of what is to be, which only exists in the head (Bradley, 1952: 201-202).

The final argument Bradley makes in “My Station and its Duties” is to say that on the whole, the theory of this essay fails. Why does it fail? Essentially because a man cannot take his morality from the world he is in. This is the case for two main reasons. First of all, because the moral world, as we have seen is relative and in constant historical evolution, it cannot be self-consistent. This leads to knowledge that the world is not as it should be and to the individual wanting to make it better. Secondly, Bradley realizes that not every endeavor towards improving oneself is a social act. For example in the case of art and science, the individual attempts to realize himself as a non-social being (Bradley, 1952: 204-205; Nicholson, 1990: 32).

The main difficulties which lead to the theory of “My Station and its Duties” failing are resolved in essay VI of *Ethical Studies* “Ideal Morality”. The problems are essentially resolved by Bradley by his adding two new ideas to the basic theory of the individual and the community developed previously (Nicholson, 1990: 33). The basic idea remains untouched: each individual has a function in the social organism along with accompanying duties. Although this does not allow for the complete self-realization of the individual, the addition of two new ideas resolves the problem according to Bradley. First of all, Bradley adds to the original theory the idea that there are social duties which

are beyond the individual's station. What this means is that for each individual there always exists claims that go beyond what the social organism expects of him. More precisely, what exists is a will for good which is never completely realized in the existing world. Furthermore, it is not realized in the individual. It is in fact what the individual strives for. It is an ideal social self (Bradley, 1952: 220). Therefore, the individual goes beyond what his station requires of him and imposes on himself higher standards of moral behaviour than society demands (Nicholson, 1990: 34). Bradley's theory has to make room for such individuals and their practice of judging and improving the morality of their station and of society (Nicholson, 1990: 34). This is what he does by improving the idea of the social self by giving this social duty to the individual.

The second idea Bradley adds to the basic theoretical construct of "My Station and its Duties" in order to allow for the self-realization of the individual and community, is the idea of a non-social self who realizes non-social duties (Bradley, 1952: 219-220). What Bradley means by this, is that there exists some activities such as art and science which do not require the involvement of the individual in social relations. The individual realizes truth and beauty for himself. The content and realization of truth and beauty does not necessarily involve the good of other men (Bradley, 1952: 222-223). What Bradley means by this is that the artist or the scientist has a moral duty to lead the life of an artist or scientist. Their work may benefit others, but that is not their purpose nor their essence. The duty of the artist or of the scientist is to produce the best work of art or science as an end in itself. That is not as a means to another end, such as improving individuals' general welfare (Nicholson, 1990: 34). Clearly then for Bradley, there exists a non-social duty which is essential for the realization of the individual.

Briefly then, for Bradley, as we have seen, “Morality is co-extensive with self-realization [...]” (Bradley, 1952: 224). This self-realization refers to, “[...] the affirmation of the self which is one with the ideal [...]” (Bradley, 1952: 224). There are three elements which contribute to the content of this self. The first being the objective world of “My station and its Duties”. The second being the ideal of social perfection. The third being the ideal of non-social perfection (Bradley, 1952: 224-225). Finally, within the sphere of morality the universal is only ever partially realized. As Bradley states, “[...] it is something that for ever wants to be, and yet is not” (Bradley, 1952: 231). This then is what is qualified as being Bradley’s idealist theory of ethics and politics which we will compare in the following chapters with Oakeshott’s ideas on the subject in order to determine how much of his thought owes to Bradley’s.

1.2 Burke’s historicism

Before moving onto Oakeshott’s thought we first have to study Burke’s ideas exposed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in order to establish a comparison with Oakeshott in the following two chapters. If several critics and specialists such as David Boucher claim that Oakeshott’s intellectual heritage is mainly idealist (see Boucher 1984, Boucher 2001), others, such as A.J Ayer, claim that Oakeshott is simply a rehash of Burke (Minogue, 2001: 20). To evaluate the merit of such a claim we first need to determine what it is that Burke says about philosophy and politics. The main ideas Burke defends regarding these two subjects can be gathered from his seminal work *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Burke begins by debating the question of circumstances versus abstraction. He argues that although in abstraction government and liberty are good things, what makes these things good in reality are the circumstances of every existing political structure. In other words, the circumstances are what determines if a particular political regime is beneficial or harmful to mankind (Burke, 1967: 6). Consequently, there are many fine principles in the abstract that may be beneficial to mankind, but only convention and circumstances are what allow for human beings to live in actual liberty.

A second important idea developed by Burke relates to change and conservation. Although conservative thinkers are often labeled as being opposed to change, this is usually a misunderstanding of a more elaborate argument. In Burke's case, he clearly claims that a state has to be able to change in order to ensure its conservation. He adds to this by saying that without being able to change, a state might in fact lose the part of the constitution it most wanted to preserve. By being able to change this can be avoided according to Burke, because the deficient part of the constitution can be regenerated by the means of healthy parts of the constitution (Burke, 1967:19-20). However, although Burke is not opposed to change as such, he does oppose the notion of fabricating new governments at every moment. In fact he says that, "The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror" (Burke, 1967: 29). Therefore, changing and improving what already exists is permissible for Burke. Scrapping everything and throwing it all out and starting over is not. The idea this introduces is the idea of tradition and inheritance. Burke wants to build on, modify and improve a governmental structure and tradition passed down through the generations. This implies that time and the fact that an institution has existed for a given amount of

time is important. This means something and adds to the worthiness and propriety of the institution. For Burke then, it is important to preserve prejudices rather than throw them aside. Furthermore, the longer the prejudices have lasted, the more they are to be cherished. This means that prejudice is to be preferred to abstract reason. Simply ignoring tradition and a way of thinking developed through several generations is quite unacceptable for Burke (Burke, 1967: 29; 84). Therefore, when we change and improve the institution of government, always with the idea of conservation in mind, we have to proceed, “[...] upon the principle of reverence to antiquity [...]” (Burke, 1967: 29). Or again, the reformations have to be, “[...] carefully formed upon analogical precedent, authority and example” (Burke, 1967: 29). This means that change and reformation have to be mindful of the tradition within which the society and its institutions are evolving in order to be logical and acceptable. In other words, society and institutions evolve and by understanding this evolution the reformations that need to be made become clear. In reforming state institutions, members of society ought to follow the example of their ancestors (Burke, 1967: 243). Circumstances also have to be respected and members of the society cannot implement reformations based on abstract principles of justice and freedom as was the case in 18th century France. Doing so is what Burke terms a spirit of innovation which he believes to be, “[...] the result of a selfish temper and confined views” (Burke, 1967: 31).

What Burke’s argument suggests so far is that liberties in England are an inheritance derived from forefathers that ought to be transmitted to posterity. Here he suggests that this inheritance should be likened to an estate belonging to the people of England as opposed to an inheritance whose justification or existence is derived from a

prior or general right (Burke, 1967:31). Therefore, Burke's understanding of the political and civil society rests on the idea of convention, circumstance and tradition rather than reference to a general or universal right. This idea of referring to tradition and to forefathers is what Burke calls behaviour that follows nature. When a constitutional policy works in accordance with nature, Burke argues the society receives, holds and transmits its government and privileges (Burke, 1967: 31). What this implies is that the whole at any given time is never old, middle-aged or young, but is a, "[...]condition of unchangeable constancy [...]" (Burke, 1967: 32). The whole then is always constant and is always slowly changing and adapting itself. Finally on this point, Burke argues that by adopting the method of nature relatively to the conduct of the state, when we improve an aspect of the said state, we are never wholly new and when we retain an aspect of the state, we are never wholly obsolete. Therefore, according to Burke, Englishmen, "[...] have chosen our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines of our rights and privileges" (Burke, 1967: 32-33). Rights and privileges are an inheritance from forefathers to be conserved and transmitted to posterity and not something to be rejected and replaced by speculation and abstract principles.

Burke pursues the argument by developing more thoroughly the idea of government. As opposed to the ideas put forward by English political philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, namely Hobbes and Locke, Burke does not believe that government is made in virtue of natural rights. Rather, Burke argues that, "Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*" (Burke, 1967: 57). The main want to be satisfied by civil society is to ensure that sufficient restraint is exercised

upon human beings' various passions. This can only be satisfactorily achieved by an external power and not one subjected to those very passions that have to be restrained. Therefore, Burke argues that the restraints on men and their liberties have to be considered to be among their rights. However, Burke underlines the fact that liberties and restrictions vary with time and circumstances and therefore cannot be based on or refer to an abstract rule. For Burke it would simply be foolish to have a discussion about liberties and restrictions based upon such a principle (Burke 1967: 57-58). To make his point he states that it would be ludicrous, for example, to discuss a man's abstract right to food or medicine, when the question to be answered is how to provide and administer them (Burke, 1967: 58). Therefore, no government or society can be based upon natural abstract rights.

As for the role of philosophy and that of the philosopher in all this, Burke makes it quite clear. He argues that philosophers should not insist upon destroying prejudices, but rather that they should strive to discover the wisdom that exists in them. This way, the prejudice can be continued, with the reason being made clear, as opposed to simply being cast off (Burke, 1967: 84). Burke is quite hostile towards what he names the "clan of the enlightened" and maintains that they would rather destroy old prejudices simply because they are old and consequently they have no respect for the wisdom of others (Burke, 1967: 84-85). In contrast to this position, Burke maintains that, rather than theory being developed and politics subsequently violently adapted to respect the new abstract principles, what in fact happens and ought to happen is that theory is drawn from and developed from the old and lasting institutions. That is, that political theory is an abstraction of existing political and social practices (Burke, 1967: 168). Theory can help

us to understand political institutions and make appropriate changes, but it can never start from mere thought and impose pure abstract principles onto old standing political institutions.

In brief, for Burke then, the main idea he defends is that any change made to the political institutions of a society has to be made slowly, and must take into account tradition, circumstances as well as the future. If this mode of change is not respected, Burke only foresees problems and disasters. He claims that by changing the state as often and in as many ways as there are “floating fancies”, the future of the English commonwealth would be endangered (Burke, 1967: 92). By this, Burke implies that, by changing the state according to every new principle that comes along, the commonwealth would crumble away and disappear within a few generations (Burke, 1967: 93). Therefore, Burke makes a clear distinction between those who, “[...] despise the ancient, permanent sense of mankind [...]” (Burke, 1967: 160), and who are forever setting up a scheme of society on new principles; and those who think favourably of the social and political heritage that is transmitted through generations (Burke, 1967: 160). Again, Burke rejects the idea of constant political innovation. He argues that the correct form of reformation is one in which preservation and reform go hand in hand. That is, the useful parts of an old institution are to be preserved, and what is added on has to fit seamlessly into what has been retained (Burke, 1967: 164). Burke concedes that this manner of going about change is slow, but that this is the way it ought to be (Burke, 1967: 165). Furthermore, when reforming, members of the society have to take into account and reconcile differing views and ideas in order to create a consistent social and political whole. Burke argues that time and several generations are required for this type of

reformation to be successful (Burke, 1967: 166). Therefore, political change is a slow process that has to preserve as much as it reforms.

To conclude briefly, this first chapter was concerned with the philosophical and political theory of F.H. Bradley and Edmund Burke. The aim of the analysis of Bradley's thought was to define the main points defended by the school of British idealism, of which Bradley is the main representative. The analysis of Burke's thought had as its purpose the definition of the general ideas defended by the historicist school of thought. In the following chapter we will be directly addressing Michael Oakeshott's conception of philosophy and political theory and we will be able to establish a comparison between his thought and that of Bradley's and Burke's. This comparison should allow to observe that Oakeshott is divided between these two traditions.

Chapter 2 : Oakeshott and the Idealist and Historicist Traditions

The goal of this chapter is twofold. Its first purpose is to define several key concepts of Michael Oakeshott's thought. These concepts being: philosophy and theory, practice and politics, political philosophy, ideology and finally the role of the theorist in relation to active politics. The second aim of this chapter will be to compare Oakeshott's position on these questions with Bradley's and Burke's in order to determine how these two traditions influenced his thought. In order to accomplish all of this, the chapter will be dedicated to a discussion of Oakeshott's various concepts, which will be submitted throughout to a comparison with those of Bradley's and Burke's.

Arriving at a satisfactory understanding of what Oakeshott means by philosophy, practice, politics, political philosophy, ideology and the role of the theorist, is not a straightforward endeavour. His ideas are often intertwined and cannot be explained separately without losing a great deal of their meaning. Which is why, instead of giving a list of terms and definitions, we will broach the meaning of these concepts through a general discussion of Oakeshott's thought.

2.1 *Experience and its Modes*: Oakeshott's Idealist Grounding

In order to understand Oakeshott's conception of philosophy, practice and politics, we have to turn to his first major work, *Experience and its Modes*. Published in 1933 this book exposes Oakeshott's conception of what the world is and how human

beings are able to understand it. This work is often considered to be a fine example of late British idealist thought and for very good reason. Oakeshott's position regarding the concept of experience is reminiscent of Bradley's conception. First of all, Oakeshott defines experience as being a single whole, within which modifications may be distinguished and furthermore, that experience is a form of thought (Oakeshott, 1933: 10). Oakeshott argues that experience is thought because to be conscious of something is to recognize it. The act of recognition involves judgement, inference, reflection and consequently thought (Oakeshott, 1933:14). Therefore, through this reasoning, Oakeshott argues that experience is thought. For Oakeshott then, we perceive what we recognize. This implies that the thing we recognize holds some meaning or significance for us and for meaning and significance to be possible, there has to be judgement. And again, judgement is impossible without thought (Oakeshott, 1933:16). Consequently, Oakeshott understands experience to be a single, homogeneous whole or in other words, thought. He strenuously underlines the fact that for him, "There is, in my view, no experiencing which is not thinking, nothing experienced which is not thought, and consequently no experience which is not a world of ideas" (Oakeshott, 1933: 26-27).

After having determined that experience is thought, Oakeshott delves further into the subject matter in order to examine more closely the character of experience. He starts off by explaining that what is given in experience is a world of ideas and that this world is a unity. The given world of ideas however cannot remain as is. It is given in order to be transformed. In other words, the given can never merely be accepted, it is never satisfactory (Oakeshott, 1933: 28-29). This implies that human beings must always have a critical attitude in relation to the given world of ideas. Starting from what is given,

human beings must turn to what is to be achieved. The achieved being defined as what is complete and is able to sustain itself. The given world of ideas then is transformed and the resulting, achieved world differs from its starting point by being more of a world or a more complete world. When the whole or the world of ideas is transformed in this fashion, all of its constituent parts are also modified. This implies then, that when transforming the given, what is to be achieved is a more unified world. That is, the given world of ideas is reorganized into a more unified whole. The unity achieved is always to be found within the given according to Oakeshott (Oakeshott, 1933: 29-31). That is the given contains the new, superior unity, it simply needs to be worked out more coherently in order to become the reorganized world of the achieved. In Oakeshottian terms, this means that, “[...] a given world of ideas is always amplified by the elucidation of its implications” (Oakeshott, 1933: 33). This means that the given is both simultaneously conserved and transformed into the achieved (Oakeshott, 1933: 37). Furthermore, Oakeshott points out that this process of transforming the given is not to be understood as being teleological. That is, the process of transformation is not pursuing an already fixed and determined end. Rather, this process is simply pursuing the intimations or implications of the given world of ideas (Oakeshott, 1933: 35). A final important point Oakeshott makes on this matter of unity is that the unity of a world of ideas lies in its coherence and not in its conformity to one fixed idea. That is, there is no one idea according to which ideas are organized. All that is required is that the world of ideas be coherent and self-sustained (Oakeshott, 1933: 32).

A second characteristic of experience is the notion of completeness Oakeshott attributes to it. Experience cannot be considered complete unless the world of ideas is

coherent and self-sustained, in such a way as there can be no other way of conceiving it (Oakeshott, 1933: 34). A third characteristic related to experience is truth. Oakeshott declares that truth is a correlative of experience. In other words, a world of ideas is true when it is coherent and because it is coherent (Oakeshott, 1933: 48). A final relationship Oakeshott describes is the one between experience and reality. Here again he states that experience is equivalent to reality. He firmly believes that no separation is possible between reality and experience. And, just as experience is a world of ideas, so is reality. Reality is a coherent world of concrete ideas. It is also a single system and it is real only as a whole. As such, it is perfect and complete. Therefore, the real is what we are obliged to think (Oakeshott, 1933: 50-67).

We now have an understanding of what Oakeshott means by the term experience. It is a single whole, a coherent world of ideas. However, as the title of Oakeshott's book suggests, experience has modes. These are defined as being the whole from a limited standpoint. In other words, modes of experience are a limited view of the totality of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 71). What this means is that when complete coherence is not achieved there is an arrest or a modification of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 71). This lack of completeness and of coherence also means that the modes of experience are abstractions. Once it has been established that modes of experience diverge from the concrete, coherent whole, put another way, once it has been determined that they are abstractions, Oakeshott explains that a separate world of ideas is constructed at the point of the arrest. These separate, abstract worlds of ideas can either be understood as an arrest in experience or as being the whole from a limited standpoint (Oakeshott, 1933: 73-74). Throughout all of his works, Oakeshott identifies four modes of experience, which can

themselves contain modulations (Oakeshott, 1991: 491). These four modes being history, science, practice and poetry (Oakeshott, 1933; 1991). These four modes of experience, being wholly independent, are completely autonomous from one another. This implies that there is no direct relationship between the modes of experience. Since each mode is the concrete whole understood from a limited standpoint, Oakeshott argues that it is impossible to pass in argument from one mode of experience to another (Oakeshott, 1933: 75-77). As for the relationship that exists between the modes and the whole or coherent world of ideas, because the whole cannot be composed of abstractions and is implied in the modes, it is not dependent of them. Rather it is prior to them and therefore completely independent, self-consistent and self-sustained (Oakeshott, 1933: 78-79). However, one last remark must be made on the subject. In his final essay written on the subject, Oakeshott somewhat alters this inflexible position. In the “Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” an essay to be found in *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott defines human relations as partly consisting of a conversation between these different modes or voices. Which is a departure from the position he defends in *Experience and its Modes*. He defines this conversation as an, “[...] unrehearsed intellectual adventure [...] in it different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another” (Oakeshott, 1991: 490). The main thesis Oakeshott defends in this particular essay is that the conversation has become boring because it is dominated by the voices or modes of practice and science. He believes that a more active role for poetry would be able to rescue the conversation from its current tediousness (Oakeshott, 1991: 489-493).

Having grasped what Oakeshott means by modes of experience and having identified them, we now have to examine the mode of practice more closely if we are to understand Oakeshott's conception of active politics and philosophy of politics. Oakeshott begins by stating that the concept of practical experience can be formulated in four propositions. First of all, practical experience is a form of experience and therefore a world of ideas. It is then abstract and defective from the standpoint of the totality of experience. Thirdly, it cannot enter into direct relationship with other modes of experience. Finally, because the mode of practice is defective from the standpoint of the totality of experience, in other words, because practical experience is not the totality of experience, it cannot be readily accepted as the correct understanding of concrete experience. This is true not only of practice, but of all the modes of experience. They all have a tendency to present themselves as constituting the whole of experience and what Oakeshott demonstrates in *Experience and its Modes* is that this is not the case. No mode of experience corresponds to the whole of experience. According to Oakeshott, they are to be understood as an arrest in experience and an abstract world of ideas. (Oakeshott 1933: 79; 249).

Oakeshott follows this enumeration of propositions with a more in depth analysis of the mode. Practice is a world of experience and the principle of this world, like all others, is coherence. Oakeshott pursues his analysis by examining the character of practical activity. Practical activity is essentially the alteration of existence. In other words, it is the attempts made by human beings to either alter or maintain their existence. Consequently, practical activity is both change and continuity (Oakeshott, 1933: 256).

Both change and continuity imply the idea of a world “to be” according to Oakeshott. That is, there exists an unrealized idea that is discrepant with the present reality. Therefore, change implies the existence of a world where change is possible (Oakeshott, 1933: 257-258). Practice is the introduction of change into present existence. In order for this to be possible, human beings need to possess and exercise their will. Practice, like any other world of experience, is thought, and in this particular case, is will or volition (Oakeshott, 1933: 258).

In practical activity then, Oakeshott claims that there exists two worlds, a “what is” and a “to be” which are to be reduced to one world (Oakeshott, 1933: 260). In this process of reduction something is to be altered. The question then becomes what precisely is to be altered? Similarly to experience, what is attempted in practical activity is to make the given practical world of ideas coherent or more unified (Oakeshott, 1933: 261). This means then that change is never provoked simply for its own sake, nor is maintenance simply chosen for its own sake. The world “to be” must be more coherent than the world “that is” or if you will, the world “to be” must be more valuable than the world “that is”(Oakeshott, 1933: 261). However, it should be noted that for Oakeshott, the world “to be” is not an abstract world. He argues that what ought to be does in fact exist in another world. According to the author, when human beings make the statement “this ought to be”, they are able to do so only because in another world it is. Consequently, the world “to be” is a world of being rather than one of mere ideas. It is a specific world of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 285). Once again, as was the case with experience as a whole, coherence here is not measured or compared to an external standard. It is the coherence of the world of practice with itself (Oakeshott, 1933: 278). In

short, practice is action, it is the alteration of “what is” into “what ought to be” (Oakeshott, 1933: 274). The business of practice, “[...] is to realize in the world of practical fact what exists and is already real in the world of value [...] ‘What ought to be’ can be realized in the world of practical fact only by means of action, by means of specific change” (Oakeshott, 1933: 290).

Another important point to observe with Oakeshott’s conception of practice is that the attempt at resolving the discrepancy between “what is” and “to be” can never be fully accomplished. This means that there are always new disagreements that appear which have to be resolved. Therefore, there can be no such thing as a final resolution (Oakeshott, 1933: 290-291).

Finally, Oakeshott concludes his analysis of the mode of practice by stating that it is an arrest in experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 299). He justifies this conclusion by arguing that because practical activity is one of change, it contradicts the character of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 304). “[...] practice purports to throw reality into the future, into something new and to be made, only to discover that this also is a contradiction of the character of experience” (Oakeshott, 1933: 305). In short, because practical experience is divided between the reality of “what is” and the reality of “to be”, it ends up contradicting the character of the totality of experience and can only be said to be abstract and incomplete experience. It is an arrest in experience and cannot therefore be truth because it is incomplete (Oakeshott, 1933: 308).

2.2 Rationalism in Politics: Politics

Now, within each mode of experience there exists what Oakeshott calls modulations. One of practice's modulations is politics or political activity. We will briefly discuss what Oakeshott understands politics to be, but this must not be confused with the forthcoming discussion in chapter 3 on his theorization of the state. Oakeshott discusses politics most extensively in his book *Rationalism in Politics*. In the essay "Political Education", Oakeshott simply defines politics as

[...] the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together [...] the communities in which this manner of activity is pre-eminent are the hereditary co-operative groups, many of them of ancient lineage, all of them aware of a past, a present, and a future, which we call 'states' (Oakeshott, 1991: 44).

Therefore, for Oakeshott, politics is the activity of attending to the arrangements of society rather than the making of arrangements, because, as he puts it, "[...] in these hereditary co-operative groups the activity is never offered the blank sheet of infinite possibility" (Oakeshott, 1991: 45). This means that members who make up these groups or societies cannot do whatever they please or invent any new arrangement. For Oakeshott, the arrangements which are considered to be valid or correct always far outweigh those that need to be altered or modified. Furthermore, new arrangements are always far fewer in number than the arrangements being modified or altered. This means that the new is an insignificant proportion of the whole (Oakeshott, 1991: 45). Finally, it is to be noted that this activity of attending to the arrangements of society is a universal

one. By this Oakeshott means that every member of the group has some part of responsibility in the activity of politics (Oakeshott, 1991: 44-45).

Oakeshott pursues this definition of politics by asking about the origin of the activity. He argues that it springs from the existing traditions of behaviour (Oakeshott, 1991: 56). Political activity is essentially the amendment of existing arrangements by the exploration and pursuit of what is intimated in these traditions of behaviour (Oakeshott, 1991: 56). These arrangements are at once coherent and incoherent and, “[...] they intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear” (Oakeshott, 1991: 57). Oakeshott argues that political activity is the exploration of this sympathy. This implies that appropriate political reasoning is the “[...] convincing exposure of a sympathy [...]” (Oakeshott, 1991: 57), as well as the convincing demonstration that now is the time to recognize this sympathy (Oakeshott, 1991: 56-57). Oakeshott gives the example of the legal status of women. Various civil rights were granted to women in England not because of arguments referring to abstract principles such as human rights, but rather because it was incoherent at the time not to grant women civil rights because they were active in the areas of business, education and health for instance (Oakeshott, 1991: 57). This was the remedy to the problem of incoherence. In short, for Oakeshott, political activity is not the pursuit of a dream or of a general principle, such as equality or justice, but of an intimation. Put another way, “Politics, briefly, are the means by which the institutional expression of approval and disapproval is adjusted to the gradual shift of judgement, and the means by which the integrity of the methods of satisfaction is preserved” (Oakeshott, 1993a: 146).

A second definition Oakeshott gives of politics in "Political Discourse" adds important ideas to the one already given. Here he defines politics as a, "[...] practical activity concerned with making a response to situations of a certain sort: political situations" (Oakeshott, 1991: 70). In this sense, a political situation is a "public" as opposed to a "private" situation (Oakeshott, 1991: 70). Furthermore, it is a contingent situation, by this Oakeshott means it is a situation that has sprung from human choices and actions and does not derive from natural necessity and to which more than one response is possible (Oakeshott, 1991: 70). It is expected that somebody with the authority to do so (i.e. the government) would respond to the situation (Oakeshott, 1991: 70-71). The last element that makes up political activity is deliberation. In politics, individuals deliberate about the potential consequences the proposed responses would have on a political situation and they also reflect, "[...] about the relation of these consequences to beliefs about better and worse conditions of things" (Oakeshott, 1991: 72). Therefore, three elements make up this definition of politics. It is a contingent situation to which a figure of authority is expected to respond to by choosing among a variety of possible solutions. This process of responding to a political situation must also include deliberation.

Before moving on to Oakeshott's understanding of political philosophy, it is interesting to note the similarities that can be established between Oakeshott's and Bradley's thought. What can we say then after having laid out Bradley's and Oakeshott's ideas about metaphysics, politics and change? If we recall Bradley's argument in *Appearance and Reality*, in which he presents Reality as being a complete and coherent

whole, we can safely make the argument that Oakeshott is strongly idealist when it comes to his metaphysics.

First of all, just like Bradley, Oakeshott argues that all experience is thought. As he explains, the mind is the offspring of knowledge and activity and as such, it is composed entirely of thoughts. Furthermore, as he made clear in *Experience and its Modes* and “Rational Conduct”, experience is thought, because the act of recognizing something involves judgement, analysis and inference, therefore thought. Secondly, Oakeshott’s understanding of how the world works and how human beings understand it is undeniably close to Bradley’s conception. Oakeshott conceives of experience as being a coherent and complete world of ideas, whereas Bradley defines Reality as the whole of experience, which does not contradict itself and whose content is psychical existence. Oakeshott’s and Bradley’s systems are also similar in their understanding of modes and appearances. In both cases, the authors understand their wholes to have either modes or appearances. These elements do not make up the whole. In one case they are modifications of the whole. That is they perceive the whole from a partial standpoint. In the other, the name of appearance is given to anything which comes short of Reality or of the whole because it is not self-contained. Therefore, what is crucial for both authors is that the whole is unique and must be complete. Finally, all its elements must remain coherent.

It also may be said that Oakeshott is idealist in the way he conceives of the structure of his world of experience. That is, it is always a whole within a whole. By this we mean that there is the whole of experience and there are modes of experience, and that, although they are only an understanding of the whole of experience from a partial

standpoint, they do constitute worlds of ideas of their own. If we take practice as an example, it constitutes a world of ideas dealing with change. Furthermore, within the mode of practice, it is possible to identify the modulation of politics, which, following Oakeshott's understanding is also a world of ideas, in this case a tradition of political behaviour. Consequently, politics or the activity of attending to the arrangements of society is a whole that must remain coherent. It is the role or business of political activity to examine the intimations of a political tradition in order to ensure that the coherence of the whole is maintained. The activity of tending to the intimations within a tradition of behaviour is what leads to change. As is the case both with experience and the mode of practice (transforming the given into the achieved), change is the attempt to make the whole more coherent and complete. Although Oakeshott's conception of change is often associated with Burke's idea of slow, gradual change, it is important to note that they are quite different. For instance, Burke's conception of change involves a deep sense of reverence to the past which is absent from Oakeshott's conception. He strenuously states that all change must take the past, present and future into account. In other words, Oakeshott just like Bradley does not support an idea of tradition for tradition's sake although they certainly do not defend the opposite view point of nothing but change (Nicholson, 1990: 42; 47). It may be argued that Oakeshott does not defend a position that allows for the ossification of society and politics. The reason Oakeshott ends up with an argument in favour of slow, gradual change is because the movement of the whole of experience is slow. Searching for and coming to understand the intimations of a tradition of political behaviour is a long reflective process which requires an in depth knowledge of the whole. Politics and political activity is an attempt to maintain the coherence of a

tradition of political behaviour, and as such, the only permissible change is one that supports the completeness and harmony of the tradition.

2.3 Philosophy and the Concept of a Philosophy of Politics

Having grasped Oakeshott's conception of experience, modes, practice and politics, we are now able to broach his conception of philosophy. Oakeshott's earliest definition of philosophy is to be found in *Experience and its Modes*. In the introduction to the work, Oakeshott immediately states that philosophical experience is, "[...]experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification" (Oakeshott, 1933: 2). Therefore, if we recall the definition of a mode of experience, it is not a mode of experience. Oakeshott pursues by arguing that philosophical knowledge, "[...] is knowledge which carries with it the evidence of its own completeness" (Oakeshott, 1933: 2). This idea leads us to think that philosophy is associated with the whole of experience, which, if we recall is complete. Consequently, if philosophy is experience without presupposition or arrest and is complete what is its business? According to Oakeshott, the business of philosophy is, "[...] to see clearly and to grasp firmly a single idea [...]"(Oakeshott, 1933: 3). This implies that philosophy is not concerned with what is partial or abstract. It is a critical activity that may attempt to explain arrests in experience and to surpass the presuppositions in thought. Oakeshott elaborates his conception of philosophy more fully in the following chapters of *Experience and its Modes*. In the second chapter he defines philosophy as, "[...] experience which is self-conscious and

self-critical throughout, in which the determination to remain unsatisfied with anything short of a completely coherent world of ideas is absolute and unqualified” (Oakeshott, 1933: 82). Again, Oakeshott underlines the importance for philosophy of remaining complete. It becomes philosophy’s task to recognize abstraction and to overcome it. For instance, it can examine the different worlds of experience, but it must study them from the viewpoint of their capacity to provide what is satisfactory in experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 83). Essentially, philosophy is experience without reservation or presupposition. That is, the concrete purpose is pursued without hindrance or distraction (Oakeshott, 1933: 81-82). In other words, philosophy is the attempt to realize the character of experience absolutely and therefore cannot be satisfied with anything less than a coherent and complete world of experience (Oakeshott, 1933: 347). In Oakeshott’s conception of philosophy we find the idea of a continual search for completeness and of surpassing what is merely abstract.

In an essay entitled “The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics” and another entitled “Political Philosophy”, Oakeshott explains in greater detail what he means when he defines philosophy as experience without presupposition or reservation. He explains that, “The aim in philosophy is to arrive at concepts which, because they presuppose nothing, are complete in themselves; the aim is to define and establish concepts so fully and completely that nothing further remains to be added” (Oakeshott, 1993a: 127). Therefore, philosophy is to be understood as an activity whose aim is to arrive at definitions of concepts which are complete because they do not presuppose anything. All thinking for Oakeshott is the attempt to define concepts, and philosophy is thought which is entirely free, because it is not saddled with reservations, presuppositions and arrests (Oakeshott,

1993a: 127). Where precisely do the concepts being defined come from? Oakeshott argues that philosophical concepts are in fact ordinary, everyday concepts that have been refined. Philosophizing is a process of getting to know what we already know in fuller detail. It is impossible to proceed from pure ignorance to complete knowledge. Every human being possesses some basic, everyday knowledge. Without it, life would simply be impossible. What philosophy does is extend and add detail to these concepts so as to make them complete (Oakeshott, 1993a: 128;138). This completeness is achieved when the presuppositions and reservations contained in the original concept have been resolved or disposed of. This process therefore implies doubt. Human beings are not satisfied with the knowledge they have and wish to pursue a full and complete knowledge. What occurs then is a process in which something is recognized as being true but yet at the same time assumed not to be true (Oakeshott, 1993a: 139). This allows the definition of the concept to evolve by eliminating the presuppositions and reservations it contained. Consequently, this implies that philosophy is subversive since it subverts the knowledge with which it began (Oakeshott, 1993a: 140). Not only is philosophy subversive for Oakeshott, but it is radically subversive because it eliminates any and all possibility of foundation. Philosophy has to avoid foundations or other points of reference such as presuppositions. It is not the reflective enterprise consisting of, “[...] building a structure on an assured foundation [...]” (Oakeshott, 1993a: 141). It is not philosophy’s business to become more acquainted with something whose identity is already fixed. There can be no such certainty in philosophy for Oakeshott. Philosophy must be completely free of any point of reference and this is what distinguishes it from other activities or forms of experience.

Again, according to Oakeshott, philosophy is an unhindered reflective enterprise (Oakeshott, 1993a: 143).

We can state that for Oakeshott, philosophy is essentially an unhindered reflective enterprise, aiming to resolve all presuppositions and reservations impeding a full and complete understanding of a given concept. However, one final element of Oakeshott's conception of philosophy has to be understood and it is one which he stresses repeatedly and strenuously. This element is the relationship between philosophy and the modes of experience, more particularly, the mode of practice. The first thing Oakeshott writes in *Experience and its Modes* is that, "[...] philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life [...]" (Oakeshott, 1933: 1). That is there is no link between philosophy and practice, nor can there be if philosophy is to exist. Oakeshott argues that philosophy actually depends for its existence on its independence from all extraneous interests, including and most especially practical interest (Oakeshott, 1933: 3). Oakeshott is clear and leaves no doubt to his meaning when he claims that philosophy does not offer a gospel (Oakeshott, 1933: 3). For Oakeshott, a philosophic life or practice is a "monstrosity" (Oakeshott, 1933: 354) pure and simple. Philosophy must supersede practical experience and it certainly cannot take the place of practical experience or integrate itself into it because Oakeshott cannot conceive of practical life being judged by the criterion of philosophy. As he explains it, practice is the pursuit of a more satisfying way of life and is therefore change while philosophy is an unhindered reflective enterprise. Philosophy's aim and goal is completely irrelevant to practice according to Oakeshott. In fact, it is quite simply dangerous for philosophy to enter into practical life. Human beings' first business is to live and life can only be lived at the expense of an

arrest in experience. Those who are preoccupied with philosophy are the last people who should act as rulers or leaders according to Oakeshott. Practical life is an arrest in experience and can only be lived as an arrest in experience, whereas philosophy aims for a resolution of presuppositions, of arrests, abstractions and reservations. In other words, it surpasses and eliminates practical life. Consequently, the relationship that must exist between philosophy and practice is one of independence and separation. Philosophy must supersede the practical mode of experience, but it can never take its place (Oakeshott, 1933: 320-321). It is important to note at this point the extremely limited role attributed to legitimate philosophical activity. It is essentially reduced to or limited to determining definitions and working out the problems and the presuppositions that impede an in-depth understanding of the whole. It is also particularly important to note that Oakeshott does not conceive of a very profound relationship between philosophy and practice. In order for philosophy to exist it must remain independent and perpetually "en voyage" (Oakeshott, 1975: 11), whereas for practical activity to exist there must be an arrest in experience. If it were to be perpetually "en voyage" practical activity would disappear or disintegrate altogether. Finally, if philosophy were to enter into practice, it would only become a gospel, which cannot be, both for the good of philosophy and practice. Philosophy cannot merely be a gospel for practice and practical activity would become nonsensical if it were to be determined by a mode of reflection interested in the whole of experience rather than the mundane trivialities of everyday life.

This is Oakeshott's conception of philosophy. However, it is not the only term or concept he uses to describe processes of thought and reflection. Oakeshott has also written considerably about what he calls theory and theorizing. This concept is

undeniably similar to his concept of philosophy. He begins with the same premise, that is, a search for a more intelligible world, or an unconditional engagement of understanding. However, Oakeshott studies the process of thought and reflection involved in theorizing in greater detail than he does with philosophy. A considerable portion of *On Human Conduct* is devoted to Oakeshott's conception of theory and theorizing. It may be seen as an expansion on his earlier writings on philosophy, and philosophy and theory may be assimilated to one another. Oakeshott starts off by identifying the features of theorizing. The first feature being what he calls a "going-on" attended to. The second, a reflective consciousness attending to it and wanting to understand it, namely a theorist. The third, an inquiry designed and undertaken by a theorist in which he seeks to understand a "going-on", namely theorizing. Finally, the theorem that emerges from the activity of theorizing (Oakeshott, 1975: 1).

As was the case for philosophy, theory begins with something that is already understood. What, in this case Oakeshott terms a fact, or, in other words, a primary understanding of a "going-on". This is the starting place of theorizing. It is something we understand that needs to be more thoroughly and critically understood. Theorizing consequently is the critical engagement of understanding undertaken by a theorist who recognizes facts as being not-yet-understood and as invitations to inquire. Furthermore, Oakeshott strenuously argues that what a theorist ends up with, a theorem, is not to be understood as an end point in theorizing. The theorem itself becomes a fact which must be critically investigated (Oakeshott, 1975: 2). This is made clear when Oakeshott states that, "The engagement of understanding is, then, a continuous, self-moved, critical

enterprise of theorizing” (Oakeshott, 1975: 2). The principle of theorizing for Oakeshott clearly then is “[...] never ask the end [...]” (Oakeshott, 1975: 2).

Following this basic understanding of theorizing, Oakeshott amplifies his conception of the enterprise by explaining that what in fact occurs during theorizing is a process of identification. What Oakeshott means by this is that the “goings-on” being theorized can only be understood if they are identified to ideal characters, “[...] specified as compositions of characteristics” (Oakeshott, 1975: 4). Identifying “goings-on” in terms of ideal characters is an advancement in the enterprise of theorizing according to Oakeshott, essentially because it is now possible, “[...] to distinguish an otherwise unknown *this* from an otherwise unknown *that* in terms of a characteristic [...]” (Oakeshott, 1975: 4). Furthermore, identifying a “going-on” in terms of an ideal character is also considered progress for Oakeshott because the “going-on” is now understood, “[...] as a unity of particularity and genericity” (Oakeshott, 1975: 5). Therefore, the identification of “goings-on” in terms of an ideal character allows for better understanding, and that is what theorizing is aiming for.

However, understanding in terms of ideal characters does not go far enough according to Oakeshott. He argues that just like facts they invite further inquiry. For instance, it is obvious that a new interrogation or process of theorizing might study the relationship that exists between the ideal characters. Although Oakeshott believes that all of this is interesting and is a legitimate activity, it is an activity which remains conditional (Oakeshott, 1975: 6). What Oakeshott wants to explore and what he believes to be theorizing deals with the unconditional. More precisely, theory is the unconditional engagement of understanding. Theorizing deals with facts that are understood but that are

also waiting to be understood and not merely related to one another or used (Oakeshott, 1975: 8). How then does Oakeshott conceive of unconditional understanding? Unconditional understanding is the recognition of an identity but not simply the recognition of an identity as an end-point but as an invitation to further inquiry. Theorizing then is making identities more intelligible. How can the activity of theorizing make identities more intelligible? Essentially by seeking to understand them in terms of their postulates or in other words, in terms of their conditions (Oakeshott, 1975: 9). What the activity of theorizing is attempting to accomplish is to understand what it does not understand about identities, namely, their conditionality (Oakeshott, 1975: 9). Therefore, in attempting to understand the conditionality of identities, theory becomes unconditional according to Oakeshott. How is this possible? Oakeshott argues that, “[...] what constitutes its unconditionality is the continuous recognition of the conditionality of conditions” (Oakeshott, 1975: 11). This is reminiscent of Oakeshott’s earlier writings on philosophy where he argued that the business of philosophy is to understand and resolve the presuppositions and reservations that impede a complete understanding of a given concept. Both philosophy and theory are unconditional in the sense that they are unhindered reflective enterprises. In other words, they never ask the end and are perpetually “en voyage”.

Oakeshott’s conceptions of philosophy and theory both stress the importance of unconditional and unhindered understanding. They look to resolve and surpass reservations and presuppositions in order to arrive at a complete and whole understanding of experience. Oakeshott clearly states that philosophy is to surpass the modes of experience as they constitute partial understandings of the whole of experience. How then

does Oakeshott reconcile philosophy and politics to arrive at a philosophy of politics, especially when he states that philosophy and practice, of which politics is a modulation, do not mix? Part of the answer is to be found in *On Human Conduct* where the relationship Oakeshott develops between conditionality and unconditionality in relation to the enterprise of theorizing is more complex than what has just been described. Oakeshott argues that although theorizing is an unconditional enterprise, it may be arrested without being denied. Furthermore, he states that theorizing must be arrested in order to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of an identity in terms of its postulates, for example political philosophy. In other words, theory cannot continually be moving on, it has to stop and carefully understand a given identity in order to furnish a satisfactory definition of it (Oakeshott, 1975: 11). Therefore, theory and philosophy may be arrested at the stage of politics in order to provide a satisfactory definition of its concept.

Oakeshott wrote two essays specifically dealing with political philosophy, both appear in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*. In the first, entitled "The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics", Oakeshott provides a definition of political philosophy which coincides with his understanding of experience, modes, philosophy and theory. Political philosophy according to Oakeshott can be defined as the enterprise of explaining political life and activity from the standpoint of the totality of experience (Oakeshott, 1993a: 126). Moreover, political philosophy does not separate political life and activity from everything else in human experience. Rather, it aims at distinguishing political life and activity within the totality of experience and at relating them to the totality so that it becomes possible to understand how they fit into the totality (Oakeshott, 1993a : 126-127). Therefore, the business of political philosophy is at once to understand and explain

politics as well as to understand how politics fits into the whole of experience. By understanding and explaining politics, Oakeshott argues that political philosophy is aiming to accomplish two goals. The first is to define the concepts that make up political life and activity. It is concerned with the presuppositions of political beliefs, actions and institutions. Political philosophy is the attempt to reformulate the concepts of political life in order to include these presuppositions (Oakeshott, 1993a: 137). The second is to economize the use of these concepts. In other words, limit the use of concepts to explain political activity (Oakeshott, 1993a: 131).

Oakeshott describes in greater detail the actual activity of political philosophy in the second essay entitled "Political Philosophy". Here he explains, just as is the case for philosophy and theory, that political philosophy is a reflective enterprise that begins with something that is already known or a "going-on", in this case politics. Just as is the case for philosophy and theory, the goal is to arrive at a more complete understanding of political experience through the means of an unhindered reflective enterprise. What is known about politics from the very beginning, according to Oakeshott, is that they are a practical human activity concerned with the arrangements of a society. In other words, politics are a practical activity concerned with the relations of human beings to one another (Oakeshott, 1993a:144-145).

Based on this primary knowledge of politics, what are we to expect of political philosophy? In order to answer this question, it may be advantageous to first understand what we are not to expect of political philosophy. First and most importantly, it is not the business of political philosophy to determine the end of political activity. For Oakeshott, then, political philosophy cannot say what the end of political activity should or ought to

be. The most political philosophy can be expected to say about ends in politics, is to deliver a purely logical judgement about which of many ends is true as opposed to posing a moral judgement about which end is preferable or is the best (Oakeshott, 1993a: 124-125). This implies that political philosophy cannot result from dissatisfaction with the current political order (Oakeshott, 1993a: 125). In short, political philosophy cannot serve as a guide for action, it is not a political program, it cannot provide any principles to be followed, nor rules for political conduct, nor ideals for policy (Oakeshott, 1993a: 137, 153). For Oakeshott then, political philosophy cannot provide any practical political conclusions whatsoever (Oakeshott, 1993a: 153). Oakeshott's reasoning to sustain this position relies in part on the idea that political philosophy serves a larger, more important purpose. What is meant by this, is that when Oakeshott argues that political philosophy is the enterprise of understanding how politics fits into the whole of experience, this in fact supersedes any menial concern with the ends of political activity. The second reason Oakeshott provides for defending this position is that politics is a limited reflective enterprise whereas political philosophy is an unhindered reflective enterprise. Therefore, political philosophy cannot furnish any practical conclusions, because it is simply the wrong kind of reflection. If it were to provide practical conclusions, it would have to be limited as political reflection is. Consequently, for political philosophy to provide practical advice, it would have to divest itself of its philosophical character (Oakeshott, 1993a: 154-155).

Having established what political philosophy cannot do, what is its legitimate business according to Oakeshott? Here is how he defines political philosophy, "Political philosophy, then, as I see it, is saying something concerned with political activity such

that, if true, things will be as they are; not as they were when we first caught sight of them, but as they permanently are” (Oakeshott, 1993a: 151-152). Political philosophy then is the attempt to understand political activity as it permanently is. By this Oakeshott means how it permanently relates to the complete world of experience. This becomes evident when he states that, “Wherever there is genuinely philosophical reflection something is being said, such that if true, things will be as they permanently are – that is, as they are *not* in the world of practical politics” (Oakeshott, 1993a: 155). Therefore, political philosophy looks to surpass practical politics. Its business, rather, is to conceive of change and activity concretely, in other words as abstract aspects of a genuine and changeless totality (Oakeshott, 1993a: 136). What all this means, is that, although practical experience and its modulation, politics are change, it is political philosophy’s business to understand this change within the larger context of the whole of experience, which is changeless. Consequently, political philosophy views the politics from the standpoint of the totality of experience and aims at explaining politics from that standpoint. Once again, as was the case with philosophy and practice, it is important to note the extremely limited role accorded to political philosophy as well as the strenuously limited relationship between political philosophy and politics. Political philosophy must retain its descriptive character and avoid prescription at all costs. When political philosophy becomes prescriptive according to Oakeshott, it derives into ideology as we will see.

It is interesting to note that Oakeshott’s and Bradley’s conceptions of the role of philosophy are quite similar. It is important to notice that the role both Bradley and Oakeshott attribute to philosophy in relation to politics is almost identical. Both clearly

state that philosophy cannot act as a guide for practical life and more particularly, when it comes to politics, both argue that it is not philosophy's business to determine political activity. Both agree that philosophy's business is simply to understand experience.

2.4 *Rationalism in Politics* : Rationalism and Ideology

After having studied Oakeshott's conceptions of experience, modes, the mode of practice, politics, philosophy and political philosophy, there are two remaining conceptions that need to be understood, those are ideology and the legitimate role of the theorist in relation to politics. We will begin by examining what Oakeshott means by ideology and will end with his conception of the theorist as this will lead us into chapter 3 in which we will discuss how he himself theorizes the state and politics.

In order to grasp what Oakeshott means by ideology or by an interchangeable term, rationalism, we have to first understand Oakeshott's conception of knowledge. Oakeshott published two major essays in his collection *Rationalism in Politics* that deal substantially with knowledge. The first of these essays, "Rational Conduct" , as the title makes clear deals with rational conduct and the mode of reflection that accompanies it. Oakeshott begins by identifying rational conduct or activity. For Oakeshott, the term stands for, "[...] behaviour in which an independently premeditated end is pursued and which is determined solely by that end [...] 'rational' conduct is behaviour *deliberately* directed to the achievement of a *formulated* purpose and is governed solely by that purpose" (Oakeshott, 1991: 102-103). A rational activity then is one in which the end is

clearly determined and decided before the activity even begins. Furthermore, rational conduct is also defined by its determination to accomplish the predetermined end. It is in fact governed by the end. Oakeshott adds that in order for the activity of accomplishing a predetermined end to get underway, means of accomplishing the end also have to be selected (Oakeshott, 1991: 102-103). Therefore, rational conduct is activity in which an end as well as the means of accomplishing the end have been predetermined, that is before any factual activity has ever taken place. What this means for Oakeshott is that conduct which emanates from, “[...] the unexamined authority of a tradition, a custom or a habit of behaviour” (Oakeshott, 1991: 104) is rejected and perceived as an illegitimate form of conduct.

Tradition and custom are unacceptable modes of conduct for the rationalist. Why does Oakeshott make such a claim? Essentially because of the way he understands the view defended by those who support rational conduct and the assumptions this view implies. The first assumption made by those who support rational conduct is that human beings have the capacity to “reason” about things. The idea that human beings are able to reason implies a second assumption, that the mind is a neutral and independent instrument. It is from this instrument that rational conduct springs from. A further assumption made by the supporters of rational conduct is that the mind is capable of being trained. This training is what Oakeshott calls intelligence and he argues that for the tenants of rational conduct the mind can only be successfully trained if it is emptied of all knowledge or acquired dispositions. In other words, the only way to deal with experience is to have an empty, rational mind free from the knowledge of traditions and customs (Oakeshott, 1991: 105-107). For Oakeshott, all of this is complete nonsense and rubbish.

The mind according to Oakeshott is the offspring of knowledge and activity and is composed entirely of thoughts. What this means is that in order to have activity or conduct, activity and conduct are required. Put another way, the prerequisite of conduct is conduct itself. That is, when, during rational conduct the individual is thinking about conduct, this is in fact conduct (Oakeshott, 1991: 109-110). Therefore, for Oakeshott, any form of conduct already involves conduct. Furthermore, Oakeshott argues that there is no way of determining an end or a purpose for the activity in advance of performing the activity itself (Oakeshott, 1991: 111). It is only by participating in an activity that it becomes possible to identify a problem and to draw out solutions for it. In other words, the problem and the solution are both hidden in the activity and it is by a process of abstraction that they are drawn out (Oakeshott, 1991: 120). Consequently, an action always originates in a tradition of activity. It is impossible to predetermine the action and the activity, and although this does not imply that rationalism is impossible, it certainly implies that it is incoherent. Here again, Oakeshott reverts to the idea elaborated earlier that we begin with what we know, a tradition of behaviour or conduct. From what we know we are gradually able to improve our knowledge of how to go about the activity. This gradual extension of our knowledge allows us, according to Oakeshott, to develop rules and principles about the activity that are inherent to the activity itself (Oakeshott, 1991: 121). Reflecting on the activity and its rules and principles is what constitutes philosophy. However, Oakeshott is careful to point out that these rules and principles are simply abridgements of the activity itself. They do not exist in advance of the activity nor do they govern the activity (Oakeshott, 1991: 121). Finally then, Oakeshott defines rational conduct in a completely opposite way to the definition he purports the supporters

of rational conduct defend. Oakeshott argues that there exists a tradition of moral activity and that conduct can only be deemed as rational in so far as it remains faithful to the tradition of activity. This does not mean that Oakeshott is opposed to change. It is the business of the mind to detect disharmony or problems in the tradition of activity and to solve them (Oakeshott, 1991: 129-130). This according to Oakeshott is what constitutes rational conduct, activity and action. An action is considered to be rational if it is able to maintain a place within the tradition of behaviour or activity or what Oakeshott calls the flow of sympathy (Oakeshott, 1991: 130).

Oakeshott aims to complete this partial understanding of knowledge by adding to it what he names rationalism's doctrine about human knowledge. This argument is to be found in Oakeshott's seminal essay "Rationalism in Politics". Oakeshott begins by denouncing the rationalist's understanding of knowledge for not being philosophical. He identifies two types of knowledge, technical knowledge and practical knowledge. He defines the former as being, "[...] formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and, as we say, put into practice [...]" (Oakeshott, 1991: 12). Technical knowledge then can be formulated into rules and be written down. This ability to formulate rules gives the impression that technical knowledge is certain. In other words, it appears possible to be certain about technical knowledge. Furthermore, these rules can be learned by heart and applied mechanically. Finally, technical knowledge gives the impression of being self-complete (Oakeshott, 1991: 14-17). As for practical knowledge, Oakeshott argues that because it exists only in use it cannot be formulated into rules since it is not reflective. It is only through traditional knowledge that practical knowledge can come to be generally known and shared (Oakeshott, 1991:

12). In other words, practical knowledge expresses itself through custom and tradition or quite simply, through a practice. As opposed to technical knowledge, practical knowledge cannot be formulated into rules and consequently gives the impression of being uncertain or of simply constituting mere opinion. Practical knowledge is associated with probability according to Oakeshott as opposed to technical knowledge which is associated with truth (Oakeshott, 1991: 14-15). Furthermore, not only is it impossible to formulate practical knowledge into rules, it is impossible to teach it as such. Oakeshott claims that since practical knowledge exists only in practice, it can only be imparted or acquired as opposed to taught or learned. The only way by which to acquire knowledge is through apprenticeship with a master because it is the only manner to be in constant contact with someone who is continually practicing the practice (Oakeshott, 1991: 14-15). Therefore, whereas technical knowledge is associated with rules, practical knowledge is associated with custom and tradition. Oakeshott argues that both these sorts of knowledge are involved in any concrete human activity. That is, they may be distinguishable, but they are inseparable. It is this very point that Oakeshott claims the rationalist disputes. According to Oakeshott what defines rationalism and rationalists is their belief that the only form of valid, legitimate knowledge is technical knowledge. Oakeshott argues that rationalists dismiss practical knowledge as simply not constituting knowledge (Oakeshott, 1991: 15). Why does the rationalist only recognize technical knowledge as knowledge? Essentially because the rationalist deals in certainty and only technical knowledge can provide certainty, or, more fairly according to Oakeshott, an illusion of certainty (Oakeshott, 1991: 16).

This brings us directly into the heart of the matter. What is rationalism, ideology and a rationalist? As we have already been able to gather, rationalism is a conception of knowledge that only recognizes technical knowledge as constituting knowledge. By only recognizing technical knowledge, Oakeshott claims that the rationalist holds certain beliefs and he proceeds to enumerate them in order to draw the rationalist's character. The rationalist believes in the independence of the mind. What is meant by this is that the mind should not be subjected to any form of authority other than the authority of reason. And reason, as was stated earlier, is a faculty common to mankind. The rationalist is opposed to authority, prejudice, tradition, custom and habit. This implies that no opinion, belief or tradition can escape the rationalist's judgement and avoid destruction. More importantly, in relation to tradition, the rationalist does not value experience and the accumulation of experience in any way (Oakeshott, 1991: 5-6). This implies that nothing is of value merely because it exists. Furthermore, although a way of doing things may be tested and true, Oakeshott claims that a rationalist will always prefer a new invention, a new solution developed merely through the use of reason. As for change, the rationalist only recognizes change that is self-consciously induced (Oakeshott, 1991: 8). This fact can be derived from Oakeshott's account of rational conduct. A precise, predetermined end and means are selected for and well before an activity is undertaken. This implies induced, self-conscious change, as opposed to the gradual, slow change to be found in a tradition of behaviour or flow of sympathy where incoherencies are mended as they appear in order to keep the whole coherent.

How does the rationalist, his doctrine and his conception of knowledge, technical knowledge relate to politics? Oakeshott claims that rationalism's greatest success has

been in the world of politics. He bases this claim on the idea that rationalism has a negative attitude towards a tradition of ideas, in this case a tradition of ideas about politics. Rationalism has a negative attitude towards a tradition of ideas because it involves an attitude of submission and therefore must be destroyed (Oakeshott, 1991: 8). To be replaced with what? With something the rationalist invents himself by the means of his rationalist method: an ideology. Consequently, an ideology is the application of rationalism to politics. This implies that ideology respects the rationalist doctrine. How and why is this the case? First of all, Oakeshott defines ideology as, “[...] the formalized abridgement of the supposed substratum of rational truth contained in the tradition” (Oakeshott, 1991: 9). An ideology then is the abridgement of rational truth that is thought to exist in a given tradition. An example of this would be the abridgement of the political tradition in England that results in the writings of John Locke and subsequently in the American Declaration of Independence and constitution. In other words, Liberalism is an abridgement of the English political tradition (Oakeshott, 1991: 30-33). When we look at how Oakeshott defines ideology we can appreciate how closely its structure and composition resembles that of rational conduct. In the essay “Political Education” Oakeshott defines ideology as

[...] an abstract principle, or set of related abstract principles, which has been independently premeditated. It supplies in advance of the activity of attending to the arrangements of a society a formulated end to be pursued, and in so doing it provides a means of distinguishing between those desires which ought to be encouraged and those which ought to be suppressed or redirected (Oakeshott, 1991: 48).

As is the case with rational conduct, Oakeshott claims that ideology sets out to define an end for political activity (what he calls the attending to the arrangements of society) in

advance of the activity ever taking place. Furthermore, as with rational conduct, because ends and means are predetermined, this implies that a choice has been made between desires that ought to be pursued and those which ought to be ignored or suppressed. Furthermore, Oakeshott qualifies ideology as constituting an abstract principle because it has been independently premeditated. This means that instead of being intimidated by the unfolding tradition of political activity, (an example of this would be the attribution of political rights to women in England as mentioned earlier), ideology employs reason and the rationalist method in order to identify the end to be pursued and consequently impose change. In other words, ideology is oblivious to tradition. Oakeshott enumerates a certain number of ideologies common to the modern world. He states that the simplest and probably the most frequent type of ideology is a single abstract idea such as Freedom and Equality. When ideology has determined that the end to be pursued is Freedom for example, then political activity becomes the enterprise of seeing that the arrangements of the society conform to the chosen abstract idea (Oakeshott, 1991: 49). However, it is usually the case that a single abstract idea is not sufficient to organize complex modern day societies. What is required is, “[...] a complex scheme of related ideas [...]” (Oakeshott, 1991: 49). An example of such a scheme would be “Liberalism”, or again “Democracy”. According to Oakeshott, the value of these abstract principles lie in the fact that they have been premeditated and because of this they clearly lay out what is to be pursued by society through its political activity. Furthermore, Oakeshott argues that political ideology claims to, “[...] supply in advance knowledge of what ‘Freedom’, ‘Democracy’ or ‘Justice’ is [...]” (Oakeshott, 1991: 49) without the benefit of any type of tradition to rely on. The principle of “Freedom” for instance has been independently

premeditated, understood and fleshed out through the use of reason. The knowledge a tradition can provide is never required in this enterprise. Therefore, what Oakeshott claims the rationalists impose on politics, is the idea that attending to the arrangements of a society (politics) can begin with a premeditated ideology (Oakeshott, 1991: 51). In other words, politics can begin with independently acquired knowledge of the ends to be pursued. What is supposed then is that ideology is the product of reason. And for this reason is a more appropriate guide for political activity precisely because it is in no way dependent of the unfolding political tradition. In rationalist politics, an independently premeditated principle must guide political activity. However, Oakeshott argues that assumptions made by rationalist politics are false. He argues that ideology does not constitute an independently premeditated principle. How do rationalists come up with the principle? As was explained briefly earlier on, ideology merely abstracts, “[...] the manner in which people have been accustomed to go about the business of attending to the arrangements of their societies” (Oakeshott, 1991: 51). Ideology simply abstracts into neat principles the political traditions of various societies. In other words, political ideology does not derive from independent premeditation in advance of political activity, but rather from meditation upon a political tradition. “In short, political activity comes first and a political ideology follows after [...]” (Oakeshott, 1991: 51).

The discussion of rationalism and ideology underlines both Bradley’s and Burke’s influence on Oakeshott, specifically in relation to the question of an abstract principle and of natural rights. In Bradley’s case, he makes an argument reminiscent to that of Oakeshott’s regarding the role of abstract ideals in relation to change. Bradley maintains that change cannot start from personal ideals, because these ideals are abstract and as

such, they cannot be real. Abstract ideals then, because they are not real cannot be applied to social institutions which are real. Ideals may be fit for the heads of human beings, but they cannot be applied to real institutions because they do not actually exist. They do not exist because ideals are a theory of what is to be. Consequently, because it is a theory of what is to be, it actually is not. This aspect of the argument is quite different from Oakeshott's argument on this point. As we saw, what is "to be" is real, in other words, it is a world of being and not one of mere ideas. However, on the whole, we can state that Bradley's conception of political change is close to Oakeshott's in that they both oppose the idea that an abstract ideal is at the root of change.

As for Burke's influence on Oakeshott, it is apparent that both thinkers oppose the idea of having an abstract principle, for instance justice or freedom, on which to ground and develop human beings' natural rights. Burke supports this argument by stating that because of time and circumstances rights always change and evolve. Therefore, grounding them seems to be a nonsensical proposition. Oakeshott also argues that rights are conditional and depend on circumstance, as his argument concerning the importance of following the intimations to be found in a tradition of political behaviour makes clear. As we have seen, an example of this would be the political rights given to women in England. Furthermore, Burke argues that liberties are an inheritance from past generations. In a similar sense, Oakeshott argues that liberties, as we saw, depend on a tradition of behaviour. That is, freedom for instance, is not just a bright idea. For Oakeshott it is only possible to talk about freedom because we are free and have an understanding of what it means and incurs. Consequently, in a sense, just as for Burke,

Oakeshott does consider liberties to be an inheritance, although he does not have the same reverence for the past as Burke.

A further point of comparison between Oakeshott and Burke is the idea of reason. The basis for Oakeshott's critique of rationalism appears to come in part from Burke. The latter clearly states that prejudices are to be preferred to the destructive use of reason. He argues that long lasting institutions are to be valued because of their very longevity. He adds to this by stating that men of reason have a tendency to destroy the old scheme of things merely because it is old. As for the use made of reason by philosophers in relation to the order of things, Burke argues that although they may be able to justify a prejudice because of the reason found within it, it is always better to maintain the prejudice, rather than dispose of it and simply keep the bare reason. Oakeshott's critique of the use of reason and of rationalism are obviously much more complex than what Burke presents. It is however possible to see the roots of Oakeshott's critique here, especially as it relates to the idea of the destructiveness of reason. Like Burke, Oakeshott believes that old institutions and schemes are valuable because of their longevity and ought to be respected as such.

A final point on which Oakeshott and Burke may be interestingly compared is on that of the role of political philosophy. Like Oakeshott, Burke is critical of what he terms the "clan of the enlightened" who simply destroy old prejudices because they are old. Furthermore, like Oakeshott, Burke opposes the idea that a theory or, more appropriately, an ideology is first developed and that politics are to be violently adapted in order to respect the abstract principle. This means that, like Oakeshott, Burke believes that the role of political philosophy is not to impose pure abstract principles onto political

institutions. Rather, the most political philosophy can be expected to do is to help us understand political institutions and make certain, limited changes accordingly.

Finally, Oakeshott's arguments concerning ideology and politics have important repercussions for the way he understands society and certain philosophical debates. The principle repercussion can be gathered from this quote from "Rationalism in Politics", "The notion of founding a society, whether of individuals or of States, upon a Declaration of the Rights of Man is a creature of the rationalist brain [...]" (Oakeshott, 1991: 11). In other words, Oakeshott strongly disagrees with the idea that societies are founded and more precisely that they are founded on an abstract principle, the aim of which is to guide and order the society. Quite simply put, for Oakeshott, societies cannot be founded on an abstract principle because they already have a rich tradition and heritage before the principle is ever determined. He makes this idea quite clear when he claims in "Political Education" that, "Freedom, like a recipe for game pie, is not a bright idea; it is not a 'human right' to be deduced from some speculative concept of human nature" (Oakeshott, 1991: 54). If freedom exists according to Oakeshott it is due to circumstance and nothing more. It is due in other words to the arrangements of society and to certain procedures. In short, freedom is intimated in a political tradition and such a principle cannot be independently premeditated and imposed onto a society as its guide. A society and political tradition never refer to an external principle or idea. But what exactly does Oakeshott mean by the term "tradition" or "tradition of behaviour"? He fleshes out the meaning of the term in "Political Education" when he states that a tradition of behaviour, "[...] is neither fixed nor finished; it has no changeless centre to which understanding can anchor itself [...]" (Oakeshott, 1991: 61). Furthermore, it pursues no goal nor does it aim

at copying a model, realizing an idea or following a rule. Its parts all change at a different pace, but what is crucial to Oakeshott's conception of a tradition is that it does indeed change, it is always temporary (Oakeshott, 1991: 61). However, change is never self-conscious, nor is it imposed by a premeditated, external principle. Change is intimated in and by the tradition. One of its parts will at some point become inconsistent and it is the duty of political activity to mend the inconsistency in order to respect the integrity of the whole of tradition. Therefore, the parts that make up tradition do not all change at the same time and what change does occur is always potential within it. However, it must be pointed out, that although everything is temporary, tradition is not for that reason arbitrary. All of tradition's parts and components have to find their place within the whole (Oakeshott, 1991: 61). With the definition Oakeshott provides of tradition, he manages to protect himself against accusations of relativism. Clearly Oakeshott does not believe that every choice is equally good or equally bad since they must find their place and make sense within the whole of tradition. Although he does admit that, "[...] the doctrine deprives us of a model laid up in heaven to which we should approximate our behaviour [...]" (Oakeshott, 1991: 60). Therefore, Oakeshott's understanding of ideology and politics go a great way in defining his position in on going philosophical debates. We can conclude that he defends an anti-foundationalist as well as an anti-relativist position when it comes to debates dealing with the foundation of society.

Such a position as Oakeshott's is paradoxical and highly unusual in contemporary political philosophy debates. It is more common for authors to defend either a foundationalist and anti-relativist position or an anti-foundationalist and relativist position. This is so because of the coherence of the argument. Founding a society implies

founding it on abstract universal principles such as Justice for instance. This implies that a foundationalist position will recognize certain ideas and concepts regarding how we are to conceive of human beings and how they are to live together, as being superior or simply better than others. In this case, it is thought that a just society is better than a society based on privilege for instance. This implies that a foundationalist position is usually anti-relativist, relativism being understood as all ideas being of the same value and importance. Consequently, a foundationalist, in order to found society on certain ideals and principles more often than not, will defend an anti-relativist position. One principle has to be better than the others in order for it to be sensible to found society on this principle. On the other hand, a relativist argues just the opposite. He defends the idea that all principles and ideas regarding human beings and politics have the same value. There is no way of understanding humans and society that is better than another. It therefore becomes difficult to determine on which idea to found society if all ideas are of equal value. Therefore, a relativist is not very likely to defend foundationalism. Consequently, Oakeshott's position is at odds with the usual categories of the debate concerning relativism and foundationalism. He is clearly anti-foundationalist because he does not believe that society ought to be founded on an ideal principle. Yet, he does not believe that all ideas are of equal value. As we saw, he does not claim that change is purely arbitrary and that society should be in accordance with just any idea that presents itself. It has to be coherent with the whole that is the tradition of political behaviour. Consequently, Oakeshott defends an anti-relativist position. In this sense, if we consider the usual categories of debate as regards foundationalism and relativism, Oakeshott

defends a paradoxical position that contributes to his originality as a political philosopher.

To sum up, Oakeshott opposes what he calls rationalist politics and its tool ideology because of the certainty and sovereignty it attributes to technique. Finally, he denounces rationalism's main effect on politics, that is the idea that political conduct has to be self-conscious (Oakeshott, 1991: 25).

2.5 The Role of the Theorist

We briefly broached the conception Oakeshott has of the legitimate role of the theorist in relation to practice and politics when we discussed his conception of theory. However that understanding was much too restrained as Oakeshott wrote substantially on the matter and defended a unique position. The core of Oakeshott's argument regarding the role of the theorist is to be found in the first essay of *On Human Conduct* "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct". Here he reverts to Plato's allegory of the cave in order to illustrate his argument. Oakeshott believes that the knowledge and understanding of the cave, which itself represents society, is partial or conditional knowledge. The cave-dwellers function as best they can in this environment, which according to Oakeshott is very well indeed since they are capable of posing verdicts and diagnoses and of determining what they like and do not like. However, this platform of conditional understanding constitutes a prison because the cave-dwellers are unable to recognize the conditionality of their knowledge or understanding (Oakeshott, 1975: 27).

At this point the theorist enters the picture. The legitimate theorist will be frustrated and unsatisfied with this level of conditional understanding and will seek to escape the cave or conditional understanding. He gradually manages to escape the cave or surpass conditional understanding. This act of escape or of theorizing follows the model elaborated earlier on. The theorist begins with conditional knowledge and gradually, step by step arrives at unconditional knowledge. Through this process of theorisation he comes to realise that the understanding of the cave is conditional (Oakeshott, 1975: 27-28). However, Oakeshott insists that although the understanding the cave-dwellers possess is conditional it is in no way useless or invaluable (Oakeshott, 1975: 27). What Oakeshott argues is that conditional understanding is required for practical living and no other form of knowledge can take its place. This was made clear earlier on when the relationship between practice and philosophy was discussed. As was pointed out then, for Oakeshott, philosophical thought cannot replace practical reflection nor can it constitute a gospel for practical living. Oakeshott reaffirms this point when he broaches the question of how the theorist is to behave upon his return to the cave. Whereas Plato as Oakeshott puts it, “[...] would have expected even this interim report to have a shattering effect upon the cave-dwellers [...]” (Oakeshott, 1975: 28), he himself does not believe this to be the case. Oakeshott claims that Plato sets up his argument in such a way that the conditional thinking of the cave appears to be fraudulent. In Plato’s scenario, the theorist returns to expose the fraud. Oakeshott, on the other hand, maintains that the cave-dwellers conditional understanding is valuable and would not all of a sudden become nonsensical. He argues that Plato conceives, correctly, that the theorist ultimately achieves, “[...] definitive understanding, in which the world acquires unconditional

intelligibility in being understood in terms of the ultimate postulate, 'the Good'" (Oakeshott, 1975: 29). Furthermore, Oakeshott does not disagree with Plato's argument that an unconditional understanding of the world is superior to the conditional knowledge of the cave. Where Oakeshott disagrees with Plato's analysis is with the idea that unconditional understanding is more than simply superior. Following Plato's argument, the unconditional knowledge of the theorist is considered to be a complete substitute for the conditional knowledge of the cave (Oakeshott, 1975: 29). This, if we recall Oakeshott's conception of philosophy and of the mode of practice, is confusing two entirely different worlds of experience and forms of understanding the whole of experience. Philosophy or theory is able to view and understand the whole of experience, whereas the mode of practice can only apprehend and understand the whole from a limited and partial standpoint. In other words, the cave-dwellers are fully equipped to deal with life in the cave or in the practical mode. When the theorist returns to the cave with his understanding of the whole of experience, therefore of the world, the cave-dwellers do in fact recognise his intellectual superiority. And this is acceptable for Oakeshott. He does not dispute the theorist's right to discuss the true nature of the horse for example. What he does dispute and oppose is the claim made by certain theorists and philosophers that because they understand the true nature of the horse this somehow makes them expert horsemen. The problem according to Oakeshott being that quite often they cannot tell one end of the horse from the other (Oakeshott, 1975: 29-30). Therefore, if we translate this analogy into social terms, Oakeshott argues that although theorists and philosophers alike may have a superior and unconditional understanding of the world of experience, this in no way makes them more able interlocutors in political activity.

Therefore, to sum up, just as was the case with philosophy and political philosophy, the relationship that may legitimately exist between theorists and politics is an extremely limited one. Just as is the case with political philosophy, theorists and philosophers cannot tell us how to be successful in politics. It is not a theorist's business to distinguish between good and bad political projects, nor is it his role to, "[...] guide or to direct us in the enterprise of pursuing the intimations of our tradition" (Oakeshott, 1991: 65). The theorist pursues an explanatory activity and the minute he goes any further and provides normative guidance or suggests a principle which society should pursue, he is no longer theorizing but has fallen into ideological activity.

To briefly conclude this chapter concerning Oakeshott's conceptions of experience, modes, practice, politics, philosophy, political philosophy, ideology and the legitimate role of the theorist in relation to active politics, it is safe to say that Oakeshott strenuously argues in favour of a very limited role for philosophy as well as for a severely restrained relationship between philosophy and politics as his conceptions of political philosophy and the role of the theorist make clear. Oakeshott clearly believes that if any more leeway were given to philosophy in relation to politics, that political philosophy would deviate and fall into ideology and rationalism.

Chapter 3 : The State, Politics, Agency and Morality

3.1 “The Tower of Babel”

We will begin chapter 3 and our exploration of Oakeshott’s theorization of the state, politics, agency and morality by rendering an account of a story written by Oakeshott entitled “The Tower of Babel” which is included in the collection of essays *On History and other essays*. This tale is not to be confused with an earlier essay with the same title which is included in *Rationalism in Politics*. In this reworked telling of the biblical tale, Oakeshott provides us with a fictional account of his theory concerning active politics, the state and agency. This tale, written towards the end of his life is a fascinating, original and creative manner of exposing the basic tenets of his political theory.

In his recounting of the biblical tale, Oakeshott portrays the city of Babel as, “[...] a city full of the bustle of getting and spending. A vast variety of enterprises is afoot; there is an endless proliferation of wants and satisfactions” (Oakeshott, 1999: 191). He concludes his description of Babel with the following statement, “It is indeed a City of Freedom: the home of every imaginable lib” (Oakeshott, 1999: 191). As for the government of Babel, the city was ruled by the young duke Nimrod, who, like his people, wished for his wants and desires to be satisfied as quickly and efficiently as possible. Nimrod was determined that his every want and desire should be satisfied immediately, and in order for this to be so, he decided to organize the activities of his people in such a

way that they may contribute to satisfying his own limitless needs (Oakeshott, 1999: 192). For this reason, Nimrod came up with an idea for a joint enterprise that would satisfy both his people's wants as well as his own. How was this to be managed? How could all wants be so simply satisfied? By having direct and unlimited access to the riches of heaven, which the Babelians believed to be, "[...] an estate of unimaginable wealth, reputed to contain all that was desirable in limitless profusion [...] All that could be asked for was in instant and unlimited supply" (Oakeshott, 1999: 193). But what about God in all of this? After all, heaven is His estate. Following the tale, Babelians generally accepted that God was, "[...] a close-fisted benefactor, the author of all their enjoyments but also of all their privations" (Oakeshott, 1999: 193). Therefore, the notion that heaven was overflowing with riches and goods combined with the idea that a close-fisted God was preventing their access to this bounty, lead Nimrod and the Babelians to institute a revolution in their way of life (Oakeshott, 1999: 193). One day, Nimrod made a fiery speech to the general population in which he expounded the fact that Babelians were, "[...] the innocent victims of a cosmic conspiracy [...] Or, if not this, then at least of a criminal distributive injustice [...]" (Oakeshott, 1999: 194). Nimrod went on to explain how he had come up with a cunning plan that would satisfy the wants and desires of all Babelians for the rest of eternity. He had decided to attack and invade heaven and dislodge God in order for Babelians to enjoy, "[...] the limitless profusion of paradise" (Oakeshott, 1999: 195). How was this ingenuous plan to be executed? By building a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. The majority of the citizens of Babel were disposed to agree with Nimrod's plan and accepted to enter into the enterprise. The Babelians had, "[...] at last found a purpose in life to contain their waywardness and had

raised themselves to the status of priests of an ideal” (Oakeshott, 1999: 196). Therefore, having found their purpose, they set off to accomplish it. However, the Babelians were well aware of the fact that they had given themselves a lofty goal to accomplish, and, this being the case, it could not be realized without a great deal of effort, and would certainly not be achieved overnight (Oakeshott, 1999: 196).

The cunning plan having been accepted by a majority of Babelians, work on the Tower began immediately. However, problems soon arose. In order to make room for the Tower, land had been cleared and various shops and businesses and other private property was destroyed or damaged. The livid proprietors had recourse to various judicial bodies, but were told that, “[...] when great works were afoot designed to increase the prosperity of all, private convenience must yield to public good” (Oakeshott, 1999: 197). The very instant private property was no longer respected, was the moment that the, “[...] sovereignty of the *utilitas publica* terminated the civil history of Babel” (Oakeshott, 1999: 197). Slowly but surely then, as the enterprise of building the Tower progressed, Babel, the City of Freedom became a community and its inhabitants acquired a new communal identity, “[...] in place of their former distinct individualities” (Oakeshott, 1999: 197).

As for the government, it began to put out what can only be termed as propaganda. An example of which would be postage stamps depicting a tower, coins depicting a tower etc... The obsession of the enterprise quickly took hold of the entire population. Plastic towers, toys and bumper stickers with the caption “Take the Waiting out of Wanting” were soon everywhere and could not be avoided. The obsession soon took unreal proportions when cookies were produced in the shape of towers and chefs

starting putting “Steak à la Tour” on their menus. The most popular names for children were Turita for a girl and Tar for a boy. Quickly then, the people of Babel’s only focus was the enterprise of building the Tower and all other activities were effectively abandoned (Oakeshott, 1999: 198).

The obsession with the Tower even extended to the domain of education where the curriculum was soon transformed. Children were no longer exposed to general culture. Instead, because of the new “social purpose”, the newly minted education system was, “[...] designed to impart (as a famous report put it) ‘the skills and versatilities called for by the current engagement of the people of Babel’” (Oakeshott, 1999: 198). Therefore, children had to take such courses as “Tower Technology” for instance, but a course encouraging broad thinking and analytical skills was nowhere to be found (Oakeshott, 1999: 198).

All of this had devastating consequences, primarily for imagination and language which soon became impoverished. What is meant by this, quite simply, is that because the only subject of conversation was the Tower, and all conduct was related to the enterprise, words such as “good”, “bad”, “just” and “unjust” acquired restricted meanings closely related to the circumstances (Oakeshott, 1999: 199). Various other problems also arose, such as new psychological troubles, like, for instance, *melancholia turita*, the symptoms of which included hallucinations of towers, believing one was being raped or devoured by towers or being transformed into a tower (Oakeshott, 1999: 200).

As for knowledge and research, all efforts were obviously concentrated on the enterprise of building the Tower. The results were somewhat strange, since what was being investigated were, “[...] the opinions, the motives, the hopes and fears of the

inhabitants of the city” (Oakeshott, 1999: 201). Babel turned into a city of polls and questionnaires the results of which, such as, for example, the fact that 43% of girls between the ages of 16 and 18 preferred bricklayers to masons, was considered to be of the utmost importance (Oakeshott, 1999: 201). Consequently, “[...] the social purpose of the Babelians was under continuous uncritical scrutiny. Even the least enthusiastic citizen could hardly complain that the project was not being ‘well researched’” (Oakeshott, 1999: 201). Therefore, endless uncritical research was being carried out on the enterprise.

Years went by, and the Tower was still being built and its completion was not in sight. More and greater problems continued to appear. Building materials began to run short. With no other viable alternative, the buildings of the city were demolished in order to be used as building supplies. This meant that, “[...] Babel became a place of tents and caravans, of cave-dwellers and inhabitants of holes in the ground” (Oakeshott, 1999: 203). Other difficulties included the fact that the top of the tower was now out of sight and because of this, its construction required fewer workers, meaning that the unemployment level rose sharply. People continued adamantly to believe that a new life was near and that the goal of the enterprise would soon be accomplished (Oakeshott, 1999: 204). However, this positive outlook soon became mixed with gnawing doubt. As the number of unemployed citizens increased, a growing number of people began to doubt and grow increasingly suspicious of the whole business. Could they, they wondered, be, “[...] the credulous victims of an illusion?” (Oakeshott, 1999: 206). Nimrod had the habit of visiting the top of the tower each day. One night however, he failed to return at his usual hour. The Babelians were immediately aware of this, and, suspecting they had been duped by the duke and been left for fools, proceeded to charge

the Tower. Needless to say the result was disastrous, the entire Tower collapsed and nothing was left of Babel, formerly the City of Freedom (Oakeshott, 1999: 207-210).

3.2 The State : Civil Association Versus Enterprise Association

This sorry tale is indicative of Oakeshott's position and heart felt beliefs concerning the individual, the state and politics. What can we gather from this tale? Most importantly, it suggests if not outright conflict, then at least tension between what Oakeshott obviously considers an inappropriate form of association, the one described in the "Tower of Babel", and the best form of association available to human beings which we can partly deduce from this story. Although on the surface, there may seem to be a simple, yet radical and forceful tension between what Oakeshott considers to be a good mode of association and an incorrect mode of association, the opposition Oakeshott theorized between the two is in fact more profound and much more complex. In order to understand what Oakeshott terms "human conduct" which encompasses individuality, modes of association and politics, he argues that it is necessary to develop instruments of theoretical inquiry, namely "ideal characters". Consequently, in his effort to identify and theorize the civil condition, itself an ideal character, Oakeshott identifies two further ideal characters or instruments of inquiry. Oakeshott defines the civil condition as, "[...] an understood relationship of intelligent agents" (Oakeshott, 1975: 112). The task of the theorist, following Oakeshott, is simply to, "[...] understand the civil condition in terms of its postulates" (Oakeshott, 1975: 111). For Oakeshott, there are two possibilities or

ideal characters: enterprise association and civil association, enterprise association having been caricatured in the tale of Babel (Oakeshott, 1975: 112). The opposition between the two ideal characters is more profound than simply good versus bad, because of what Oakeshott argues in all of his writings. Oakeshott's main thesis, the one that defines all of his published works, is that throughout the history of modern Europe, politics and the state have been marked by tension between these two poles or ideal characters. In other words, the state and politics in modern Europe or more inclusively, the West, have fluctuated between a mode of association as enterprise association and civil association (Oakeshott, 1975: 323-326; 1996: 16-19; 117-118). Furthermore, Oakeshott argues that modern day politics finds itself in a terrible predicament, because they are dominated by enterprise association. As Oakeshott's sad story of Babel demonstrates, why is enterprise association intolerable and civil association commendable? Why does Oakeshott argue for the need to increase the weight of civil association in present day politics? In order to answer these questions, we will begin by probing Oakeshott's understanding of enterprise association and civil association.

First of all, it is important to understand Oakeshott's methodological approach to his understanding of enterprise association and civil association. As was stated earlier, these are ideal characters. As such, they are investigative instruments used by Oakeshott to understand, "[...] what has been thought about the character of a modern European state and about the office of its government [...]" (Oakeshott, 1975: 189). Oakeshott in *On Human Conduct* contends that, "[...] the features of a state which evoked these understandings of its character were inherited from the realms and principalities of medieval Europe" (Oakeshott, 1975: 206). These features either resembling the ideal

character of enterprise association or civil association. What are these features and the ideal characters they relate to? We will begin with civil association. “Civil associates are persons (*cives*) related to one another [...] in terms of the common acknowledgement of the authority of civil (not instrumental) laws specifying conditions to be subscribed to in making choices and in performing self-chosen actions” (Oakeshott, 1975: 313). Put another way, a society is made up of human beings who all have wants and desires as we saw in the tale of Babel. However, when human beings attempt to satisfy these wants or when they are simply making choices in their everyday lives, it is not uncommon for collisions to occur or for conflict to arise between them (Oakeshott, 1993b: 48). Which is why Oakeshott believes government is needed, it is required in order and only in order to act as an umpire between conflicting human beings and thus ensure that the law or rules of the civil association are respected, and, if need be, amend the rules of the association and in the case where the law is broken, impose a penalty or punish the guilty party (Oakeshott, 1993b: 49; 1975: 313). This, in short, is what Oakeshott terms a civil association. This understanding of civil association implies that it constitutes a system of law and its jurisdiction (Oakeshott, 1975: 313). In Oakeshottian terms, this means that the business of the office of government is

[...] to be the custodian of a *respublica* composing a system of civil law, to adjudicate disputes about the meanings of its component laws in contingent situations, to give recognition to actions and utterances performed in adequate subscription to them, to penalize inadequate subscription and to redress injury arising from it, and to authorize amendments to this *respublica* (Oakeshott, 1975: 313).

All this implies then, that as regards civil association, the mode of association is formal and that the sole concern *cives* (members of a civil association) have, is to act justly. This

of course means respecting and abiding by the rules of the civil association when they make choices and act. Finally, not only is the association formal, it is also compulsory. This means that the associates or *cives* acknowledge the authority of civil association and never give their approval as to the rules and conditions of behaviour they respect. However, Oakeshott argues that this is a contingent fact and that civil association could be based on agreement of the *cives* to recognize the authority of the association, but this is simply not the case historically (Oakeshott, 1975: 313-314).

This then, is how Oakeshott understands civil association. This type of association does have its advantages. For instance, since the role of government is minimal, *cives* do have the possibility to make innumerable choices. This leaves a lot of room for diversity and a plurality of conceptions about the good life for example. However, although civil association, with its minimalist role for the public sphere, and its extended role for the private sphere, leaves a great deal of room for diversity and pluralism, it is questionable how it can effectively sustain any type of social cohesion. It seems the question of social cohesion escapes Oakeshott's attention entirely or is perceived as being negative. How can a political society remain coherent if its members are extremely individualistic and all the government can do is maintain order? In short then, civil association is the type of political association which first existed in Babel, when it was known as the City of Freedom.

The second ideal character Oakeshott identifies as being a reading of the character of the modern European state is enterprise association. Oakeshott understands enterprise association as being composed of human beings, "[...] related in terms of a specified common purpose or interest and who recognize one another in terms of their common

engagement to pursue or to promote it” (Oakeshott, 1975: 315). This implies that human beings who are members of an enterprise association recognize themselves as being the servants of the purpose being pursued. Furthermore, as for the rules of enterprise association, they are instrumental to the pursuit of the common purpose. In other words, they are not merely formal rules, they are instrumental rules. Finally, in this type of association, the mere recognition or acknowledgement of the purpose or goal being pursued by the members of the association, is simply not enough. This is the case because a purpose can only be pursued in the performance of substantive actions. Therefore, associates are also cooperators related in the performance of actions which are contributing to the realization of the common purpose. Consequently, enterprise association is a substantive mode of association as opposed to formal in the case of civil association (Oakeshott, 1975: 315). As for the role of government in an enterprise association, it is to specify and interpret the sovereign common purpose and to manage its pursuit (Oakeshott, 1975: 315). In other words, as was seen in the “Tower of Babel”, Nimrod specified that the common purpose was to attack heaven in order to dislodge God and that it would be done by the construction of a tower. He managed the construction of the Tower, by determining where and how it would be built and by shaping society to appreciate and care solely for the Tower.

It is interesting to note the close relationship that exists between enterprise association and rationalism. In fact, the rationalism that Oakeshott denounces is more often than not to be found in enterprise association since it imposes a predetermined abstract ideal upon society and it becomes the instrument by which all activities are measured to determine if they meet the requirements to achieve the common goal.

Rationalism determines which ideas are acceptable, which activities are permissible and how the end is to be reached. Finally, as enterprise association is related with sudden and great change, rationalism is what determines and encourages this change designed to conform to an ideal, rather than slow adaptation to the present circumstances.

As was stated before, Oakeshott is highly critical of this type of association. One of his severest criticisms relates to the “freedom” to be found in enterprise association. He argues that, “[...] this ‘freedom’ inherent in such a state is the condition of being released from every care in the world save one; namely, the care not to be idle in fulfilling one’s role in the enterprise [...]” (Oakeshott, 1975: 317). This implies that in return for fulfilling his role in the enterprise, the associate enjoys assured benefits, instead of having to satisfy his wants himself through action and choice (Oakeshott, 1975: 317). The associate’s “freedom” is, “[...] warm, compensated servility” (Oakeshott, 1975: 317).

Although Oakeshott’s understanding of enterprise association gives a more important role to the public sphere and the government, and most importantly, because the joint purpose or common good is most likely an excellent instrument for social cohesion, in this case, we encounter the problem of the limited role attributed to the private sphere and to the associate. The problem that arises is that the associate has very little opportunity or occasion to choose and act for himself. Because society is pursuing a common purpose, he has to set his personal or private enterprises aside since the good of society always has preeminence over personal satisfaction or realization. This point was illustrated by Oakeshott, albeit exaggeratedly in “Tower of Babel”. All private enterprises are set aside for the benefit of building the Tower. Moreover, private property is damaged

and outright expropriated in order to ensure the construction of the Tower or what in fact is a representation of the common good, the ascension to heaven. This lack of opportunity for the associate to act and the willingness to set aside private property and initiative is probably why Oakeshott does not consider enterprise association favourably. However, this point will be discussed in greater detail later on when we broach the subject of agency.

Oakeshott pursues his investigation of the character of the modern European state by positing the thesis exposed earlier on, that the history of modern Europe has been marked by a polarized understanding of the state. The first of these poles is enterprise association and the second is civil association. He argues that no one state can be said to be or have been either an enterprise or civil association as these are ideal characters or an ideal understanding of the contingent evolution of the state (Oakeshott, 1975: 313). He contends that, “[...] the modern European political consciousness is a polarized consciousness, that *these* are its poles [...]” (Oakeshott, 1975: 320). His thesis is to say that the modern European state has fluctuated between these two poles (Oakeshott, 1975: 320; 323). To this end he states, “[...] my contention is that they are both characteristics of a state [...] because they have become contingently joined by the choices of human beings in the character of a modern European state” (Oakeshott, 1975: 323). It is sometimes more enterprise association and less civil association and vice versa. It is important to note that these ideal characters are theoretical understandings of the state, one being a formal understanding (civil association), the other a substantive understanding (enterprise association). Although his main thesis is to say that the modern state fluctuates between these two poles, he does not remain neutral as towards which

pole the state should tend. His position is made clear by statements of which the following is an example, “[...] no European alive to his inheritance of moral understanding has ever found it possible to deny the superior desirability of civil association without a profound feeling of guilt” (Oakeshott, 1975: 321). Furthermore, Oakeshott believes that the modern state is dominated by enterprise association, “[...] the voice of civil association has, here and there, sunk to a whisper, but nowhere has it been totally silenced” (Oakeshott, 1975: 313). Because of this fact, he argues that the characteristics and features of civil association ought to be given more importance and weight in modern political associations (Oakeshott, 1975: 321; 1996: 132).

However, one problem with Oakeshott’s radical division between civil and enterprise association, is that it has a tendency to mask the fact that civil association shares some of enterprise association’s more (according to Oakeshott) problematic characteristics. Most importantly, civil association cannot avoid imposing an abstract ideal upon society. Civil association imposes a specific understanding of how society is to be organized. Associates are to pursue their own, unlimited personal enterprises and avoid collisions with others. As this is impossible, it becomes the role of government to ensure the rules of the association are respected and if not, to impose sanctions and punishment. But organizing a society as such in the first place, and, moreover, maintaining it constitutes an enterprise. All associates are joined together to ensure the realization of the common good, in this case, a procedural and formal society and government. Society is working towards the realization of this one goal, which, according to Oakeshott, is akin to perfection as it is the best and only morally tolerable mode of compulsory association available (Oakeshott, 1991: 460).

3.3 Politics: The Politics of Faith Versus the Politics of Scepticism

Clearly then, Oakeshott establishes a dichotomy between the two poles which are enterprise association and civil association, and it is a dichotomy which he will extend to all his concepts, a case in point being active politics. A mode of association or a state entails the existence of a tradition of political behaviour and, following Oakeshott, political behaviour fluctuates between two extremes, the first being the politics of faith and the second the politics of scepticism (Oakeshott, 1996: 16-17). The politics of faith being linked to enterprise association and politics of scepticism to civil association. We will examine the abstract principles which constitute each concept.

We will begin by determining what Oakeshott understands to be the constitutive abstract principles of the ideal character that is the politics of faith. The most important determinant principle is the idea that the politics of faith are the politics of perfection (Oakeshott, 1996: 23). If we recall the story of the "Tower of Babel", that particular society was aiming towards a form of perfection. The idea was to enter heaven and dislodge God in order to have immediate access to a limitless bounty that would satisfy all human wants for eternity. However, this description of perfection is grossly caricatured and Oakeshott explains that what is meant by perfection, is the perfection of humankind. What this implies is that human perfection is being sought because it is not present (Oakeshott, 1996: 23). However, as the story of Babel demonstrates, human perfection is not to be sought through the means of divine intervention or, in other words, with the help of "[...] divine providence [...]"(Oakeshott, 1996: 23). As was the case with the citizens of Babel, human perfection can only be attained by human effort.

Consequently, the politics of faith have tremendous confidence in humanity (Oakeshott, 1996: 23). The idea that the perfection of humankind depends entirely on human beings themselves for its realization entails the idea that perfection can be achieved in history (Oakeshott, 1996: 23). By contrast, if perfection were linked to divinity, its realization would in no way have to be achieved on earth, but could, and has traditionally been reserved for a divine afterworld. Therefore, if the perfection of humankind can be achieved in history, the question that arises is how is it to be attained? This is where the politics of faith's understanding of the role of government enters into play according to Oakeshott. He claims that proponents of the politics of faith believe that, "[...] the chief agent of the improvement [...] is government" (Oakeshott, 1996: 24). Moreover, not only is government the chief agent of the improvement, it is also the, "[...] chief inspirer and sole director of the pursuit" (Oakeshott, 1996: 25). This was clearly the case in the story of Babel, where Nimrod came up with the idea of overtaking heaven and devised the plan to attain this lofty goal. In short then, Oakeshott argues that, "[...] the activity of governing is understood as the control and organization of human activity for the purpose of achieving human perfection" (Oakeshott, 1996: 24). Clearly, the politics of faith understands governing to be the organization of human activity in order that the perfection of humankind may be achieved. If the government is to play its role and attain the ultimate goal of perfection, it obviously requires a tremendous amount of power. As Oakeshott puts it, "The politics of faith understands governing as an 'unlimited' activity; government is omniscient" (Oakeshott, 1996: 27). By unlimited and omniscient, Oakeshott means that the government integrates and directs all the activities of its subjects in order to coordinate them for the achievement of perfection.

Therefore, there is very little room for choice and personal and private action, if at all. Finally, Oakeshott makes an original argument regarding the politics of faith and political vocabulary. He claims that, in the politics of faith, “[...] each word and expression will be given its largest and most extended meaning: it goes always to the limit, and (by means of adjectives) sometimes beyond the limit, of what the vocabulary will tolerate without becoming meaningless” (Oakeshott, 1996: 28). He explains that this tendency to extend the meaning of words is due to the pursuit of perfection which is central to the politics of faith. This idea is interesting, but unfortunately Oakeshott does not expand on it further, nor does he offer any concrete examples. This difficulty is most likely due to the fact that the book, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* was an incomplete manuscript published several years after Oakeshott’s death. To sum up then, the politics of faith are understood as politics in pursuit of the perfection of humankind. Because this perfection can be achieved in history, government comes to play an imposing role in society as it is seen as the chief agent and sole inspirer and director of the pursuit. Consequently, it has at its disposal tremendous power.

As for the politics of scepticism, their appearance on the historical scene of modern Europe is coeval to that of the politics of faith (Oakeshott, 1996: 30). Oakeshott argues that these two forms of politics are in fact opposite reactions to the possibility of accrued and concentrated power made available to governments towards the end of the Middle Ages (Oakeshott, 1996: 45-46; 74-75). As we have just seen, the politics of faith are to some extent the politics of concentrated and unlimited power. As for the politics of scepticism, it is just the opposite, and its goal of making the most economical use of

power is partly responsible for the coining of the term “sceptic” in this specific sense (Oakeshott, 1996: 33). To expand briefly on the point that these two forms of politics are coeval and opposite understandings of the use to be made of power, Oakeshott argues that the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism, “[...] compose our complex and ambivalent manner of governing and our complex and ambiguous understanding of what is proper to the office of government” (Oakeshott, 1996: 30-31). What Oakeshott means by this, is because the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism constitute two abstract extremes or poles, and that, just as was the case with enterprise association and civil association, modern politics fluctuates between the two, this has the effect of creating a complex and ambiguous manner of governing as well as of understanding the role of government. We therefore need to understand the abstract principles that constitute the politics of scepticism in order to appreciate the complexity and ambiguity Oakeshott perceives in modern politics. As was stated before, the politics of scepticism understands governing as an activity which makes an economic use of power. Consequently, governing is understood as a specific, rather than an unlimited activity. In order for the politics of scepticism to be a specific activity and to limit its use of power, it must set aside any idea of pursuing the perfection of humankind (Oakeshott, 1996: 31). The idea of attaining human perfection having been abandoned, the politics of scepticism limits itself to a very basic understanding of the role of government. What the proponents of this form of politics observe is that human beings live in proximity of one another, and that consequently, occasional conflicts and collisions are inevitable (Oakeshott, 1996: 32). Based on this understanding of human nature, the politics of scepticism understands the role of government to be, “[...] to lessen the severity of human conflict by reducing

the occasions of it" (Oakeshott, 1996: 32). Government's role is reduced and limited to one of ensuring that there aren't too many occasions for conflict among human beings pursuing their own interests. To defend this restricted conception of the role of government, Oakeshott concedes that, "This superficial order may seem insignificant [...] and to preserve it may seem a menial occupation" (Oakeshott, 1996: 32), but that, although this may seem menial and insignificant, the sceptic understands, "[...] order as a great and difficult achievement never beyond the reach of decay and dissolution" (Oakeshott, 1996: 32). Therefore, the politics of scepticism have a very minimalist approach and view of government. Its role is to maintain order with as little power as is possible. Although the main purpose of government in sceptical politics is to maintain order, its activity, according to Oakeshott, can extend as far as improving the system of rights and duties, as well as the system of redress which are the two elements that constitute the basic order (Oakeshott, 1996: 34). Oakeshott stresses the fact that what is being improved are not human beings, but the system of rights and duties. Furthermore, all government in this case is doing is making the necessary adjustments in order to reflect the permanent changes that have taken place within society (Oakeshott, 1996: 34). In other words, improvement or change is not an independent activity, it is simply the, "[...] maintenance of an appropriate order" (Oakeshott, 1996: 34). This order following Oakeshott is eternally and internally in a state of disequilibrium as it was never designed as a whole. The coherence it does possess is the product of the, "[...] constant readjustment of its parts to one another" (Oakeshott, 1996: 35). This suggests then that order can always be made more coherent and government's role is limited to this function. That is, "To meditate upon this system and by replying to its intimations to

make it more coherent is a manner of improving it which belongs (as the sceptic understands it) to the office of government [...]" (Oakeshott, 1996: 35). In short then, the role of government in the politics of scepticism is restricted to maintaining order. The only form of change or improvement this conception of government allows for are for changes that reflect the intimations of the order. In other words, government can implement modifications to the order that reflect changes that have occurred in society. The role of government is solely to keep the order coherent. Oakeshott expresses quite clearly in the following quotation the general sentiment provided by the politics of scepticism when he says that, "[...] the activity of governing is manifestly nothing to be enthusiastic about, and it does not demand enthusiasm for its services" (Oakeshott, 1996: 38). Accordingly, the politics of scepticism are austere. In sum, the politics of scepticism are the politics of limited government, restricted power and limited initiative and change. It is because the politics of scepticism poses these abstract principles that Oakeshott makes the following claim, "As a rule, it has enjoyed a higher degree of self-discipline and self-knowledge than the politics of faith, and has rarely fallen to representing itself as more significant than it is" (Oakeshott, 1996: 85). Consequently, Oakeshott appears to appreciate the politics of scepticism's self-discipline in relation to the use of power.

As was explained earlier, the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism according to Oakeshott are two ideal poles or extremes between which modern politics fluctuate. This is the hypothesis Oakeshott offers to explain certain problems he perceives to exist within the practice of modern politics. Most importantly, he claims that the ambiguity of both modern politics and its accompanying political vocabulary are caused by this very polarization. Oakeshott explains that in, "[...] every heterogeneous and

complex activity of governing there are extremes” (Oakeshott, 1996: 11). The ambiguity arises when the activity of governing is pushed in one direction or towards one extreme for an extended period of time (Oakeshott, 1996: 11). When this happens, Oakeshott argues that, “[...] we cease to exploit its manifold character and come [...] to settle upon an extreme and to recognize only extremes” (Oakeshott, 1996: 12). In other words, once we stop exploiting the rich possibilities for governing to be found between the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism, and, furthermore, when we recognize only these two extremes as possible manners of governing and understanding governing, political activity becomes ambiguous. The evidence that modern politics have become ambiguous according to Oakeshott is the fact that political vocabulary has become ambiguous (Oakeshott, 1996: 13). On this point he claims that, “[...] the ambiguity of our current political vocabulary is perhaps its most obvious characteristic: it would be difficult to find a single word that is not double-tongued or a single conception which is not double-edged” (Oakeshott, 1996: 13). Oakeshott then is quite clear, the ambiguity of modern political vocabulary lies in the fact that modern politics recognizes only extremes and these extremes use the same political vocabulary to express their conceptions of governing and politics. An example of this is the word “democracy”. According to Oakeshott,

It is a manifold word, referring to two sets of ideas. It stands for a certain view of the authorization or constitution of government: it is an answer to the problem of the ‘tenure of magistrates’; it means a manner of collecting the power to be at the disposal of government and a manner of controlling the activity of governing. And in this respect it is connected with various ‘institutions’, styled ‘popular’, such as elected parliaments and accountable ministers. But, in common parlance, the word means

something else as well: it stands for the activity of governing turned in a certain direction. And here it may mean either government turned in the direction of faith, or government turned in the direction of scepticism: both the current styles of governing have appropriated the word. And they are able to do so because the 'popular' institutions connected with a so-called 'democratic' authorization of government are eligible for interpretation in either of these directions (Oakeshott, 1996: 130-131).

Why is it that both forms of politics use the same political language? Here Oakeshott relies on an historicist type argument to defend his point. He states that the language of politics is, "[...] a living, popular language, at the mercy of use and circumstance in which each expression is susceptible of many interpretations, none of which is without force and significance" (Oakeshott, 1996: 9). Therefore, political vocabulary is ambiguous because it is a living language and because of this is used in many different manners in order to express different ideas and realities. Politics then are ambiguous when only extremes are recognized and when these extremes use the same political vocabulary, political language necessarily becomes ambiguous.

However, although this fluctuation of politics between extremes does lead to ambivalence and ambiguity, Oakeshott argues that settling upon one extreme is not an action that ought to be envisaged. Instead, because modern politics are complex, Oakeshott proposes that the principle of the mean in action ought to be adopted and respected (Oakeshott, 1996: 123). By this Oakeshott means, "[...] the virtue of exploiting the middle range of our political opportunities, the faculty of not taking the words of our political vocabulary in their utmost extent" (Oakeshott, 1996: 123). In other words, politics should attempt to exploit and occupy the middle region of political opportunities rather than attempting to impose one of the two extremes. However, Oakeshott stresses

that the middle region is not a central point of repose, but rather a region within which politics should be in continuous movement (Oakeshott, 1996: 121). What is important for politics following Oakeshott, is that they should not be overwhelmed by either the politics of faith nor the politics of scepticism (Oakeshott, 1996: 125). On a final note, Oakeshott argues that modern day politics are overwhelmed by the politics of faith and that political activity ought to move further towards the middle region in the direction of the politics of scepticism in order to be able to benefit from the positive aspects both forms of politics have to offer. In this sense Oakeshott makes the following statement, “What we are really considering is what chances there are of sceptical style of politics recovering its vitality and restoring to our institutions and manner of government their obscured complexity and lost mobility” (Oakeshott, 1996: 132). Therefore, as was the case with enterprise association and civil association, Oakeshott argues that one of the two poles, namely the politics of faith and its acolyte enterprise association are dominating modern politics to its detriment rather than to its benefit.

3.4 Agency: The Individual Versus The Anti-Individual

Because Oakeshott defends an historicist position, the question all this raises is why do the two modes of association and their corresponding mode of politics appear in the first place? What are the historic circumstances that allow him to derive or extrapolate these ideal characters? The answer as one might expect involves yet more dichotomous ideal characters. In this case, it involves two understandings of agency. Obviously, a

conception of the activity of governing and of politics postulates the existence of a type of human being or individual. That is, civil association and enterprise association necessarily correspond to a particular conception of agency and individuality. In this sense, Oakeshott argues that the last five hundred years has seen the emergence of two moral dispositions which explain the appearance and development of enterprise and civil association (Oakeshott, 1975: 275). Oakeshott begins by explaining that towards the end of the Middle Ages, the dominant moral disposition was the morality of communal ties (Oakeshott, 1993b: 19). In *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, Oakeshott describes the morality of communal ties as, “[...] the existence of a community, membership of which is not a matter of choice, a community not recognized as an association composed of individuals who have made a decision to form it” (Oakeshott, 1993b:19). The morality of communal ties is then a community whose members have never made the decision to join it or to form it. This type of community implies very little room for moral change and progress (Oakeshott, 1993b: 19). In this sense, the good is the equivalent of the common good of the community. As for the duties and role attributed to the members of the community, they are derived from the person’s status in the community and the opportunity for movement in the social sphere is virtually non-existent. As for the understanding of the activity of governing, it is perceived as being a local activity responsible for the administration of the laws and customs of the community. The ruler is understood to be the custodian of the laws and customs of the community and he is responsible for maintaining order and ruliness (Oakeshott, 1993b: 19-20). This in sum is how Oakeshott defines the morality of communal ties. According to Oakeshott, the

moralties that follow it are modifications of it and elements of the morality of communal ties are to be found in each (Oakeshott, 1993b: 20).

He argues that, starting from the 12th century, because of conditions so favourable to it, a new moral disposition begins to emerge and can be identified. He terms this moral disposition the morality of individuality (Oakeshott, 1993b: 20). This morality is marked most especially by

[...] the disposition to make choices for oneself to the maximum possible extent, choices concerning activities, occupations, beliefs, opinions, duties and responsibilities. And further, to approve of this sort of conduct – self-determined conduct- as conduct proper to a human being [...] (Oakeshott, 1993b: 20-21).

Individuality then is characterized as self-determined conduct, that is conduct chosen and acted out by an individual human being. This understanding of individuality becomes a moral one to the extent where it is determined and approved that this is how human beings ought to live. Therefore, human beings must seek the conditions that permit them to enjoy individuality and if they where ever to be deprived of it, this must be understood as a diminution of their moral stature (Oakeshott, 1993b: 21). To sum up, Oakeshott provides a definitive definition of the individual in *On Human Conduct*, “[...] an intelligent agent understanding (or misunderstanding) his situation and responding to it in terms of wants and choices of actions and related to others in bargaining for satisfactions [...]” (Oakeshott, 1975: 234). If we wish to relate this understanding of individuality to the story of Babel, the inhabitants of Babel would have been individuals before the imposition of the joint enterprise of constructing the Tower, when Babel was known as

the City of Freedom and Babelians could make choices in order to satisfy their various wants.

How then did human beings go from living in communities deprived of choice and opportunity to full-fledged individuality? Here again, Oakeshott makes a historicist argument in order to defend his idea. He claims that these changes are the result of human choices and do not result from men following an abstract ideal principle of how human beings ought to live (Oakeshott, 1993b: 20). To this end, Oakeshott claims that

[...] choice working upon chance, over a period of many centuries, promoted conditions of human circumstance favourable to individuality in almost every field of human activity and enterprise. These conditions sprang from small modifications of the conditions appropriate to a morality of communal ties (Oakeshott, 1993b: 23).

Clearly then, Oakeshott argues that the emergence of the morality of individuality is conditional and contingent. However, be this as it may, Oakeshott argues that, “The emergence of this disposition to be an individual is the pre-eminent event in modern European history” (Oakeshott, 1991: 370).

The main observation that can be made regarding the morality of individuality is that it allows for societies to be understood as associations of individuals (Oakeshott, 1993b: 23). The mode of association that is associated with the individual is civil association. If we recall, civil association understands the activity of governing as resolving conflicts that may arise between associates following their particular enterprises, assuring that the rights, duties and the law (the rules of association) are respected and applying sanctions if necessary and finally, modifying the law to reflect social change. This mode of association necessarily postulates a self-determined individual willing and able to make choices in order to satisfy his wants. What Oakeshott

argues, is that it was in response to the demands made by the newly minted individuals that governments changed and civil association appeared. To this end, he argues that, “[...] the demand of current individuality was for a manner of government capable of transforming the interests of individuality into a system of rights common to all subjects” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 51). Therefore, sovereign governments were claimed and they made their appearance (Oakeshott, 1993b: 51). Clearly then, the individual and civil association are partners.

However, there exists a tenuous relationship in Oakeshott’s political thought between the individual and society. If society is to be understood as an association of individuals, this raises serious questions about individual identity. As we saw with Bradley, society is responsible to a great extent for the development of the individual’s identity. As we also saw in the previous chapter, Oakeshott owes a great debt to Bradley in regards to his philosophy. It might be expected that Oakeshott would be as clearly idealist when it comes to his understanding of the individual and his identity, but this is not the case. Oakeshott uses the term “social inheritance” for what he calls, “[...] an accumulation of human understandings”, which is, “ composed of the moral and prudential achievements of numberless individuals expressed in terms of the rules and conditions which specify a multiplicity of particular practices. It is a collected, not a ‘collective’ achievement” (Oakeshott, 1975: 86-87). Therefore, social inheritance is not a collective achievement. It results from the achievements and understandings of numerous individuals and it constitutes a collection. Furthermore, for an individual to be able to enjoy this collection of understandings, he must learn them (Oakeshott, 1975: 87). How does an individual go about learning the content of social inheritance? Contrary to a

common idea that it is the community and an abstract social corpus that sustains and transmits the social inheritance to the individual members of the society, Oakeshott argues that only an initiated individual can educate another individual about the content of social inheritance (Oakeshott, 1975: 87). To this end, Oakeshott argues that, "It is not Man who relieves the ills of an invalid, nor is it some abstraction called 'medical science'; the healer is a specific practitioner who has learned his art, not from Society, but from particular teachers" (Oakeshott, 1975: 87). Oakeshott pushes his argument and his position even further when he states that, "[...] Society has no moral or intellectual worth. In short, the arts of agency are nowhere and never to be found save in the understandings of adepts" (Oakeshott, 1975: 87). Consequently, an individual has to learn how to become an individual and agent, and these arts can only be learned through close association with an adept or an initiate, just as would be the case for learning medicine or how to bake. It is only once having learned the understandings and practices that compose the social inheritance that an individual is able to disclose and enact himself (Oakeshott, 1975: 87). Furthermore, according to Oakeshott, human conduct can only be deemed 'social', "[...] in virtue of the manners in which 'free' agents are actually associated; that is, in respect of their being associated in a multiplicity of practices of various dimensions and complexities, degrees of independence, and differences of status" (Oakeshott, 1975: 88). Therefore, human conduct is social in so far as agents enter into various types of associations. However, Oakeshott stresses that this does not mean that these associations make up a society. Rather, they only constitute a moral practice (Oakeshott, 1975: 88). Finally, Oakeshott concludes his argument by claiming that there can only be a social consciousness that is also the consciousness of the associate. This

means, that the associate is conscious of being associated with others like him. All associates recognize that they are associated in that they respect the rules of association and respect each others' right to pursue their interests freely (Oakeshott, 1975: 88). Consequently, following all this, since individuals forge their identity not through communal or social identity, but by learning the content of social inheritance from other individuals, Oakeshott cannot be said to defend a communitarian position. Social inheritance is a collection not a collective and as such, Oakeshott's position is quite different from Bradley's, who perceived the individual as being dependent on the community for his identity.

The morality of individuality is one of two modifications of the morality of communal ties identified by Oakeshott, the second being what he terms the morality of "solidarity" or "equality" (Oakeshott, 1993b: 25). The understanding this moral disposition has of human beings is closely linked to that of the morality of individuality. They are linked in so far as they develop completely opposite, and to some extent, confrontational understandings of agency. Furthermore, it is important to note that they are both the product of the dissolution of communal ties (Oakeshott, 1991: 371). Whereas the morality of individuality perceives the individual as making choices for himself and pursuing his own personal and private enterprises, the morality of equality emerges in reaction to this extensive freedom and liberty. Oakeshott believes that the morality of equality derives from the inability of certain persons to respond to the invitation to be an individual (Oakeshott, 1993b: 24). Therefore, the morality of equality understands human beings as largely failing to respond to the invitation to be an individual. Oakeshott adds to this and goes even further by stating that, "The man frustrated by his failure to live up to

the invitation of the times became a man disposed to assimilate the world to himself by deposing the individual and destroying the moral prestige he had acquired: he became the militant ‘anti-individual’” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 24). Consequently, not only does the human being in the morality of equality fail at becoming an individual, he radically opposes it and militates in favour of a form of agency Oakeshott terms the “anti-individual”. Just as was the case for the individual, the anti-individual makes demands on the government to govern in a certain way. In this case, the mode of association and the activity of government that corresponds to the anti-individual is enterprise association. Oakeshott claims that the anti-individual is responsible for the emergence of enterprise association because he looks to the, “[...] government to protect him from the necessity of being an individual, to make the choices on his behalf which he was unable to make for himself” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 25). It becomes the role of government to organize and determine the activity of each member of the association. However, in order to be standing on firm moral ground, more is required than simply being radically opposed to the morality of individuality. That is why, following Oakeshott, the morality of equality developed a new morality of which the central or key concept was the idea of a substantive “common good” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 25-26), which, as he understands it, “[...] was understood not to be composed of the various goods that might be chosen by individuals, but to replace these” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 26). Society, or the “collectivity” in this case, is constructed or shaped around the “common good” being collectively pursued. As we saw with enterprise association and in the “Tower of Babel”, it is the role of government to organize the activity of the association in function of the common good, be it the building of a Tower to get to heaven, or another goal. If we recall the story of

Babel, Nimrod and the government as well as the judicial bodies disposed individuals of their property and houses, transformed the education system in order that it might reflect the “social purpose” and began publishing all sorts of reports and various research in order to support the “common good”. As the story of Babel also reflects, the morality of equality or of the anti-individual as Oakeshott also terms it, conceives of the associates as being radically egalitarian. All the citizens of Babel are equal and anonymous units when it comes to the functioning of society (Oakeshott, 1993b: 26-27). All are equal in relation to the common good and caricaturally, all must work towards the achievement of the common pursuit; multiple private enterprises are not permissible as this would be working against the social purpose.

One question all of this begs is how, in certain cases, do enterprise associations and the anti-individual come to dominate the political landscape? In the story of Babel, the joint enterprise would not have been adopted had it not been agreed upon by a majority of the citizens. This is where Oakeshott identifies a major problem that he considers to be an important flaw of the morality of the anti-individual. He claims that this moral disposition is responsible for the emergence of the “mass-man”. The “masses” are composed not of individuals, but rather, are made up of anti-individuals, “[...] united in a revulsion from individuality” (Oakeshott, 1991: 373). Like the anti-individual, the mass-man wishes to be governed by a government who will make the choices he is unable to make and ensure that his right to live in a social protectorate, relieved of all the burdens of self-determination is respected (Oakeshott, 1991: 377; 378). This implies that, together, united in masses, the mass-man does dispose of a great deal of power and influence over political institutions. According to Oakeshott, it is this very influence and

power that lead to the establishment of universal adult suffrage, a change which he argues was not intimated by the tradition of political behaviour (Oakeshott, 1991: 379). The effect of the mass-man has been twofold according to Oakeshott. First, the power of the masses is in fact nothing more than the authority of mere numbers, and this authority has been confirmed by universal suffrage. This then leads to governments having greatly increased power, as they are responsible for the anti-individuals or mass-men who make up the masses (Oakeshott, 1991: 379). Therefore, the disposition of the mass-man, “[...] is to endow government with power and authority such as it has never before enjoyed [...]” (Oakeshott, 1991: 381). Consequently, as the story of Babel illustrates, the dispossessed private owners and others were not interested in having their City of Freedom transformed into an enterprise association. What decided the fate of Babel was the desire of a mass of anti-individuals who longed to have all their decisions made for by the government and their activities organized by the same body. The common good being pursued in this case being direct access to heaven and its riches, if it were accomplished, the anti-individuals would never have to make a choice or decide how to satisfy their wants as they would be immediately satisfied. Clearly then, enterprise association postulates the existence of the anti-individual. Oakeshott defines the anti-individual as follows in *On Human Conduct*, “What is being referred to is [...]their incapacity to sustain an individual life and their longing for the shelter of a community [...] The character we are concerned with is that of those who, for whatever reason, are disposed to prefer substantive satisfactions to the adventure and risk of self-enactment” (Oakeshott, 1975: 276).

One problem that may be identified with Oakeshott's understanding of the anti-individual, is the extent to which the anti-individual in fact displays characteristics of individuality. Oakeshott stresses that what defines the individual is his capacity to make choices and determine himself and his life. It may be argued that the anti-individual does just that. He chooses to reject the individual life and finds something to replace it with, the morality of equality, which he chooses to embrace. Furthermore, Oakeshott speaks of the militant anti-individual. If the anti-individual is in such a dire and desperate situation as Oakeshott makes him out to be, that is, in a situation of constant failure, how can he then decide to become a militant anti-individual? Here again we have a case of the anti-individual making a lucid choice and choosing to engage in a political mode of association that will best answer his needs and wants as he perceives them to be. Oakeshott attempts to portray the anti-individual as a nostalgic entity attempting to regain the assured life he once lead. However, the internal contradictions in his definition lead us to believe that the anti-individual needs to embody certain characteristics of individuality if he is to survive in modern Europe. Consequently, the stark division Oakeshott attempts to make between the individual and the anti-individual is questionable.

However, what Oakeshott's stark and radical division between the individual and the anti-individual does provide is an understanding or explanation of why Oakeshott believes civil association to be a superior mode of association. The fact that Oakeshott believes that civil association is the best possible mode of association is made clear in the essay "Talking Politics", part of *Rationalism in Politics*. In it, he states that civil association is the least burdensome in terms of the obligations associates have to

subscribe to and it is the only type of association that does not exclude other modes of association (Oakeshott, 1991: 460). This is why Oakeshott claims that, “[...] it is particularly appropriate to a state because it is the only morally tolerable form of compulsory association” (Oakeshott, 1991: 460). Why does Oakeshott make this claim? Why does Oakeshott denounce enterprise association so forcefully? Why does he want to see more weight given to civil association and political scepticism in the fluctuation that exists between the ideal poles that are civil and enterprise association? Essentially, because civil association, quite evidently, is the only form of association appropriate for an Oakeshottian individual. Only civil association respects the dignity and autonomy of the individual. The latter is self-determined through the choices he makes. Civil association is the form of association that maximizes the possibility for choice and the pursuit of personal enterprises. The only limits put on the individual is respect of the rules of association or the law which basically amounts to not conflicting with other individuals who are pursuing their enterprises. It is a minimalist and procedural vision of the activity of governing. Whereas enterprise association determines the common good and basically dictates how each associate will contribute to the realization of the social goal. Consequently, civil association is the only morally acceptable form of association to the extent that it allows the individual to express as well as self-enact himself.

3.5 Morality: The Morality of a Habit of Behaviour Versus the Morality of the Pursuit of Ideals

A final aspect of the morality question is the question of the moral life itself. An interesting discussion on the topic is to be found in “The Tower of Babel” part of the

collection *Rationalism in Politics*. This work is not to be confused with the essay of the same title, discussed previously and which can be found in *On History and Other Essays*. This essay reinforces Oakeshott's position concerning morally acceptable traditions of behaviour. Here again, Oakeshott pursues the dichotomy between extremes and offers a dichotomous understanding of what is meant by morality. He identifies two distinct and opposing ideal extremes of morality in modern Europe. As may be expected, one corresponds to civil association, while the second corresponds to enterprise association. As may also be expected, Oakeshott claims that modern European morality is a mixture of both forms of morality, dominated by one of the two ideal extremes. Oakeshott describes the first of the ideal extremes as being the morality of habit of affection and behaviour, and it may safely be associated with civil association (Oakeshott, 1991: 467). By this he means that, "The current situations of a normal life are met [...] by acting in accordance with a certain habit of behaviour" (Oakeshott, 1991: 467). Consequently, there exists a tradition of conduct in which all individuals have been brought up and which they respect and follow throughout their lives (Oakeshott, 1991: 468). In other words, individuals acquire habits of conduct by living with people who behave in a certain way (Oakeshott, 1991: 468). Oakeshott opposes the morality of habit of affection and behaviour to the morality of the pursuit of moral ideals. With this moral disposition, activity is determined, "[...] by *the reflective application of a moral criterion*" (Oakeshott, 1991: 472). The principle characteristic of this morality is the special value that is attributed to self-consciousness, both individual and social (Oakeshott, 1991: 473). What is meant by this, is that the ideal is a product of reflective thought and moreover, the application of the ideal is also a reflective activity. The normal procedure in this form

of morality is for the ideal to be determined first and in the abstract. Following this, the ideal will be translated into behaviour and applied to a current situation (Oakeshott, 1991: 473). Here, we are able to notice that this form of morality shares a lot with Oakeshott's definition of rationalism understood as an independently predetermined abstract principle to be applied to a given situation. As was the case with rationalism, Oakeshott identifies numerous problems with this type of morality. He states that, "[...] when the guide of conduct is a moral ideal we are never suffered to escape from perfection. Constantly, indeed on all occasions, the society is called upon to seek virtue as the crow flies" (Oakeshott, 1991: 475). We can see how this form of morality is related to enterprise association and the politics of faith. What is being pursued is the perfection of humankind through the use of rationalism and ideology. An ideal is independently pre-determined to be applied to a specific end. Moreover, it is important to note that the excessive pursuit of one ideal leads to the exclusion of all others, in which case society has become an enterprise association (Oakeshott, 1991: 476). For Oakeshott then, "[...] this is a form of the moral life which is dangerous in an individual and disastrous in a society [...] for a society it is mere folly" (Oakeshott, 1991: 476-477). Oakeshott apparently dislikes this form of morality. As was the case for civil association, enterprise association, the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism, Oakeshott claims that modern morality is a mixture of both these extreme ideals, although strongly dominated by the morality of the pursuit of ideals (Oakeshott, 1991: 481; 482). This is problematic for Oakeshott seeing as he believes that the morality of ideals, "[...] breeds nothing but distraction and moral instability" (Oakeshott, 1991: 481). Because morality is dominated by this particular disposition, Oakeshott claims that, "[...] our moral life consequently suffers the internal

tension inherent in this form” (Oakeshott, 1991: 482). However, Oakeshott identifies a further problem, this being the fact that, not only is this moral disposition generally thought to be better and superior to the morality of a habit of behaviour, but that it is also identified with moral enlightenment (Oakeshott, 1991: 486). Therefore, Oakeshott concludes that Western morality find itself in a difficult predicament. First of all, because it is dominated by the morality of the pursuit of ideals and this dominance is ruinous to the morality of habit of behaviour; and finally because this dominance is thought of as an achievement (Oakeshott, 1999: 486-487).

The idea of a self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals raises questions about change. All dichotomies surveyed so far deal with the question of change. As the story of Babel clearly demonstrates, the problems all begin when Nimrod is overcome by his abstract, independently premeditated notion of building a Tower up to heaven. As the story clearly demonstrates, Nimrod is guilty of what Oakeshott terms “social engineering”. He identifies a problem: how to best satisfy his immediate wants, and through a rational process comes up with the idea of the Tower, which is nothing but an abstract, ideal principle. He pursues his enterprise by imposing what can only be termed his self-consciously predetermined abstract ideal on society, with the clear intent of provoking change. This is the gist of the problem concerning change in Oakeshott’s political thought. Change in society cannot come from an abstract, rationally predetermined end imposed upon society. The idea of imposing any form of ideology, such as “Liberalism” or “Equality” upon society is completely unacceptable as it is sustaining it through ideological practices. The only suitable or acceptable mode of change is the highly idealist tainted one Oakeshott promotes throughout all his writings. According to this

conception of change, the political tradition of behaviour is a whole. The goal of political activity is to keep the whole coherent. In order to achieve this, active politics must be continually examining the intimations of the tradition of political behaviour to see if any tensions or modifications can be perceived. If so, then and only then, can society and the political association be changed. Under no other circumstances can change be considered to be legitimate. Oakeshott's position is made clear in two essays from *Rationalism in Politics*, "On Being Conservative" and "The Tower of Babel" . In the important essay "On Being Conservative", Oakeshott states that, "[...] modification of the rules should always reflect, and never impose, a change in the activities and beliefs of those who are subject to them, and should never on any occasion be so great as to destroy the *ensemble*" (Oakeshott, 1991: 431). This implies that modification of the rules of a political association should never impose change but merely reflect change that has already taken place within society. Furthermore, Oakeshott believes that change ought to be delayed until it is certain, "[...] that the change of circumstances it is designed to reflect has come to stay for a while [...]" (Oakeshott, 1991: 431). Not only should change never be imposed, but modifications should not be made until the perceived change in the tradition of behaviour has been shown to be long lasting. The advantage of this approach to change according to Oakeshott is that it offers stability because of, "[...] its elasticity and its ability to suffer change without disruption [...] there is nothing in it that is absolutely fixed" (Oakeshott, 1991: 470). Furthermore, he claims that although the change a tradition of political behaviour admits is never great nor sudden, it is nevertheless undergoing continuous change. Whereas revolutionary change will only be observed in societies that have an aversion to change or that have few internal resources for change.

(Oakeshott, 1991: 471) Consequently, Oakeshott argues that, “[...] the appearance of changelessness in a morality of traditional behaviour is an illusion which springs from the erroneous belief that the only significant change is that which is either induced by self-conscious activity or is, observed on the occasion” (Oakeshott, 1991: 471). Clearly then, Oakeshott argues in favour of continuous, slow, incremental change as opposed to great, sudden and revolutionary change.

3.6 Oakeshott’s Conception of Political Philosophy Versus His Theorization of the Political: Tensions and Difficulties

The story of the “Tower of Babel” makes clear how Oakeshott conceptualizes the state, politics, agency, morality and change as well as his feelings towards civil association and enterprise association. Although he argues that modern political history is the history of continuous fluctuation between two poles, enterprise association and civil association and he makes claims of remaining descriptive, it is possible to wonder if he is able to remain thus, or if he does not in fact become prescriptive. This question arises for several reasons.

If we recall briefly the definition of political philosophy established in the previous chapter, it was made clear that Oakeshott believes that political philosophy is the attempt to understand political activity as it permanently is and how it relates to the complete world of experience. It was also shown that Oakeshott believes that political philosophy must remain descriptive or else risk falling into ideology and rationalism. However, with what we have just seen regarding Oakeshott’s conception of the state,

clearly when someone makes statements suggesting that civil association is the only morally tolerable mode of association, or that enterprise association and its accompanying morality can only lead to disaster, surely it becomes obvious that one of the two modes is his preferred mode of association. Therefore, the repeated preference for civil association and the continual denigration of enterprise association and its accompanying form of politics, agency and morality make it clear that Oakeshott believes that civil association is the best possible mode of association. This preference for civil association can also be implicitly derived from his conception of agency. It is unfathomable that after the description he gives of the individual and of the anti-individual, which cannot be considered to be anything but an inferior form of agency, that he would not state his preference for the individual. Consequently, when it comes to the mode of association which best suits the individual, defined as autonomous and able to make choices, clearly, only civil association can be considered the best possible mode of association. Therefore, here again, Oakeshott appears unable to respect the role of political philosophy, which is to understand politics on the map of human experience.

But stating a preference is not the same as stating that civil association should be the mode of association of society. Although Oakeshott never explicitly states that civil association should be imposed as the mode of association of a society, because the criteria he has set up in regards to theory clearly restricts him from making such a move, the implicit sense to his writings and arguments suggest something quite different. This becomes apparent in relation to his arguments concerning ideal characters.

It may be argued that enterprise association and civil association are simply ideal characters, whose sole purpose is to be an investigative tool. Which would therefore

mean that arguing that they in fact constitute a concrete mode of association is unacceptable. This argument, that enterprise and civil association are ideal characters, raises a difficulty which takes us beyond mere definitional argument between the two characters and leads us to the core of the problem with Oakeshott's political theory. Not only does Oakeshott's conception of philosophy forbid him from prescribing and stating a preference for one or the other, if we refer to his definition of rationalism and ideology, he cannot develop and make use of an independently predetermined, premeditated, abstract ideal other than for a very limited use in a philosophical inquiry. They cannot be used in relation to practice, nor in relation to its modulation, politics. It appears, on the surface, that Oakeshott is able to respect the criterion. After all, he clearly states in *On Human Conduct* that in a philosophical investigation an ideal character is to be understood in terms of its postulates: "[...] its postulates must be distinguished and exposed and each must be held up to careful inspection" (Oakeshott, 1975: 36). Oakeshott does this with both enterprise and civil association. The civil condition is an ideal character, it is an understood relationship of intelligent agents. It is the theorist's business to discern the mode of intelligent relationship it postulates and Oakeshott goes about this seriously. He identifies both civil and enterprise associations' core postulate, the individual and the anti-individual. Furthermore, if we look at Oakeshott's main thesis regarding the constant fluctuation of modern politics between two extreme ideal poles, he appears to be well within the limits of the criteria. However, the use Oakeshott makes of ideal characters goes beyond mere philosophical investigation and understanding them in terms of their postulates. He states that enterprise association and civil association are two poles and that the modern European state fluctuates between them. Where Oakeshott

goes too far and steps over the boundary, is when he claims that contemporary politics is dominated by enterprise association and its counterparts, the politics of faith and the morality of the pursuit of an ideal and that therefore, more weight and importance ought to be given to civil association and its counterpart the politics of scepticism. In this sense he states, first that modern politics is dominated by enterprise association:

It is, of course, true that the path marked *universitas : dominium* [another Oakeshottian term for enterprise association] has been, in recent times, the more crowded with travellers. It has been trodden not only by genuine intellectual explorers but also by large conducted parties of the helpless and the bewildered led by half-men usually devoid of respect for their followers. [...] [T]hose who are disposed to take the other path are, perhaps, fewer and are often denigrated as frivolous individuals merely out for the walk [...]" (Oakeshott, 1975: 321).

Perhaps more clearly, Oakeshott states that, "[...] the form of our morality is that of a mixture in which the morality of the selfconscious pursuit of moral ideals is dominant" (Oakeshott, 1991: 481). The fact that politics is overwhelmed by one pole has dire consequences according to Oakeshott. Enterprise association

[...] is an understanding of the character of a state which has bitten deep into the civil institutions of modern Europe; it has compromised its civil law and corrupted the vocabulary of civil discourse. Among its outcomes have been Parliaments [...] laws degraded into instruments of managerial policy; and words [...] devalued by being infected with equivocation (Oakeshott, 1975: 312).

For Oakeshott, then, there is clearly a need to push the pendulum towards the ideal extreme that is civil association. For this reason, he states, "What we are really considering is what chances there are of the sceptical style of politics recovering its vitality and restoring to our institutions and manner of government their obscured

complexity and lost mobility” (Oakeshott, 1996: 132). Clearly, we are no longer dealing with descriptive declarations, but openly prescriptive declarations or prescriptive declarations masking as denigrating comments. But, more importantly, the idea that more weight ought to be given to one ideal character is an ideological declaration following Oakeshott’s definition. Here we have an independently premeditated and predetermined abstract ideal character meant only to be used for intellectual pursuits being used in a practical mode, namely the modulation of politics. Here Oakeshott is imposing an abstract ideal upon society in order to provoke political change: the organization of society along the lines of civil association. Here Oakeshott falls into ideological territory. Civil association is an abstract ideal character that has been independently premeditated and is not derived from a tradition of behaviour. Oakeshott’s desire for it to have more importance and for society to change according to its abstract principles is classic ideology following Oakeshott’s definition. The same can also be said about the politics of scepticism and the morality of a tradition of behaviour. Therefore, Oakeshott appears unable to avoid ideology. Which leads us to the core problem of Oakeshott’s theory: he is unable to respect the criteria he has set up for the correct relationship that is to exist between theory and practice.

Oakeshott’s apparent desire for change in regards to modern politics brings us to the whole question of change, which in fact, appears to be a dilemma for Oakeshott. He explicitly prones slow, incremental change in order to preserve the coherence of the whole that is a tradition of political behaviour. But, as has been suggested, Oakeshott needs more than this. He attempts to respect the criteria established in regards to the proper relationship that ought to exist between theory and practice, but for the necessity

of his own theoretical and practical needs, he needs to expand the limits of the relationship between theory and practice in order to allow for change to be based on an abstract ideal. This is a problem for Oakeshott.

But, his conception of change raises further problems and questions. As we saw, Oakeshott conceives of the individual as an autonomous agent capable of making choices for himself in order to be self-determined. He prones civil association as the best possible association for the individual, because he has the possibility of choosing among unlimited private pursuits and enterprises. It would seem then that the individual has unlimited possibilities for choice. But this is simply an illusion. Oakeshott's definition of proper politics and governance excludes several major choices. For instance, individuals cannot choose to impose a self-consciously predetermined abstract ideal upon society and thus provoke political change, nor can they opt for revolution or great and sudden change as a legitimate political choice. Revolution and abstract ideals are choices like any others, but Oakeshott's restricted view of politics and agency forbid these choices. This implies that individuals are not fully autonomous because the options they are able to choose from are severely limited. This contradicts Oakeshott's understanding of agency and poses a serious problem for the dignity and legitimacy of individuality such as he defines it.

There are more problems to be found in relation to Oakeshott's conception of change. For instance, what if a society's tradition of political behaviour is constant revolutionary change? Oakeshott's understanding of change leaves no room for this possibility. Furthermore, what if, for whatever reason, society becomes so unbalanced or lacks such coherence, that the only option is great and sudden change? The most common

cause of such an imbalance would probably be the time it takes for change to take place following Oakeshott's conception of it. Examples of this would be the access of the lower classes to political power and the attribution of equal political rights to women. Although it cannot be denied that society was slowly changing and gradually recognizing equal rights for women, it nevertheless required added pressure, namely the suffragette movement, put on political institutions in order to have the laws of the political association modified in consequence. Although Oakeshott claims that change in this case was slow and gradual, the lack of any change at the level of political institutions when this change became obvious, lead to what can only be called sudden and great change, the attribution of the vote to women. Moreover, although Oakeshott denies it, the change was largely based on the abstract ideal principle that women and men are equals and therefore should have the same rights. A further example of this, is Oakeshott's strong belief that it takes several centuries for a given social class to become acclimatized with political power (Oakeshott, 1991: 36). This leads to a lack of upward mobility and social change. Although Oakeshott does not deny the possibility for the lower classes to have access to power; it can always be done in a slow and gradual manner, it becomes virtually impossible for them to enter the sphere of political power. It is this imbalance that lead to the radical change Oakeshott describes in relation to the masses. It is because change is slow that society became unbalanced to the point where the masses began demanding universal adult suffrage which was based on the abstract principle that all men are equal. Although Oakeshott blames the masses and the arrival of the lower classes to power for the evils that are rationalism in politics and universal suffrage, there was nevertheless change underway, but the process of recognizing that change and modifying the

institutions accordingly was so slow that it led to such a great imbalance that only drastic change could redress the situation. This leads to a third difficulty. It appears as though Oakeshott as well as certain political associations, are not prepared to recognize all changes underway, regardless of what they may be as his conception of change seems to suggest, and this is what leads to imbalance and the need for radical change. The problem is that this conception of change does not avoid the problem of having to recognize change one might not agree with. This is illustrated with the issue of the masses and universal suffrage. The fact that individuality was now recognized led to certain necessary changes in society and politics. Oakeshott may not like the fact that the masses have the right to vote, but the change society was undergoing was respecting his criterion for slow, gradual change. The failure of political institutions to recognize this change led to great change. This problem points to the fact that although changes may be underway in society, this does not imply or mean that the political association is ready to change the law in consequence. What this opens up is the question of what is good change and what is bad change and Oakeshott's idea of wait and see is insufficient to deal with this. Therefore, Oakeshott's conception of change raises several questions and difficulties.

More importantly, although the question of change raises difficulties with the coherence of Oakeshott's thought, it also appears to raise a serious difficulty in relation to the question of human dignity. It is a problem created by Oakeshott himself. This is the case, because he elaborates a clear ideal about individuality, which he clearly believes to be the morally superior mode of agency. However, both his conceptions of change and the role of the theorist forbid him to go any further than describing what he understands

the individual to be. Stating that he thinks the individual is a better form of agency than the anti-individual, and that this is how human beings should behave, is inappropriate in that it is prescriptive and no longer descriptive. Nevertheless, he does say that individuality is better than anti-individuality. This being said, a problem arises whether he makes such a statement or not. Oakeshott's conception of political philosophy prevents him from using the ideal character that is his conception of the individual in order to provoke sudden and radical political change. This implies that Oakeshott has tremendous faith in the tradition of political behaviour and other contingent factors, because it is the only manner in which individuality can legitimately come to be the form of agency of a society. That is, there need to be the right conditions in place for individuality to be intimated by the political tradition of behaviour. Furthermore, because it is based on tradition, history and conditionality, it is in no way certain that any given society requires it to remain coherent. As for the theorist, he is prevented from making any prescriptive remarks about the best form of agency, because political philosophy would come to be mixed with politics. Therefore, following Oakeshott, a theorist can have a morally superior understanding of agency, but because he is prevented from entering the political sphere, a degrading conception of agency and humanity can still be widely accepted and exploited, but nothing could be done, because society cannot change in order to comply with an abstract principle such as equality. This means that, although, for example, there may have been abstract ideals circulating for centuries about women being the equals of men, no change could be implemented until the change was intimated by the tradition of political behaviour. Respect for human dignity is doubtful if change that would improve the lot of humans is prevented from occurring because it is based on

an abstract, ideological principle. This means that Oakeshott would not and cannot militate in favour of his conception of individuality. A change for the best cannot be made. Again, Oakeshott has tremendous confidence that the change will occur at some point in historicist development. However, if it arose contingently, because of the historical context, it could just as easily disappear. Does this make any difference to Oakeshott? Clearly the answer would be that it does make a difference. He does support the individual. This example tends to demonstrate the inherent difficulties with Oakeshott's position. Although it is interesting to have a strict division between theory and practice, on a certain level it would appear that such a strict division is problematic. It does appear necessary to provoke change based on an abstract ideal at times as Oakeshott's position tends to demonstrate. Therefore, despite his best attempts to maintain the strict division between the mode of practice and philosophy, Oakeshott is either unable to do so, or his attempts impede the natural and necessary development of his thought.

To briefly conclude the chapter, we saw that the main thesis Oakeshott defends is that modernity is marked by a tension and fluctuation between two poles and its constituent parts: enterprise association, the politics of faith, the anti-individual and the morality of the pursuit of ideals opposed to civil association, the politics of scepticism, the individual and the morality of a habit of behaviour. Although Oakeshott clearly defends his main thesis strongly and originally, another tension rose to the surface. Oakeshott's argumentation and discussion of these concepts, made all the more apparent by the story of Babel, seems to point to a tension between what he claims to be the proper role of political philosophy and the manner in which he himself theorizes. In other words,

Oakeshott appears to be unable to respect the criteria he set up regarding how and what political philosophers should do and what he himself does when he is theorizing the state, politics, agency and morality. He has a marked preference for civil association which prevents him from remaining purely descriptive. Furthermore, not only is Oakeshott prescriptive, but his attempts to remain descriptive prevent his theory from developing naturally and logically and, as we have seen, put him at times in untenable positions. Consequently, it would appear that Oakeshott needs to expand the role of political philosophy, by extending the proper relationship that can exist between it and politics.

Conclusion

Michael Oakeshott, although controversial and at times unfashionable, must certainly be considered one of the most eclectic and iconoclastic thinkers of the 20th century. We started off the thesis by stating that he has been labeled as being a conservative, idealist, liberal, political sceptic, and communitarian only to name a few. Although he has been tagged as defending various types of political philosophy, what is certain is that he does not fit easily into any of the moulds of contemporary theoretical debates. Therefore, Oakeshott is an original thinker, especially in the anglo-american tradition. Although in recent debates it has often been claimed that Oakeshott is a liberal theorist (see Coats 1985), this seems at odds with the complex position he defends. It can be convincingly argued that Oakeshott defends a liberal vision of the state, understood as a minimal institution of government allowing for great private initiative. This corresponds to liberal conceptions of the state defended by such thinkers as Robert Nozick. However, although Oakeshott clearly defends a state that can arguably be considered liberal, he opposes a major tenet of liberal thought, universal abstract principles such as freedom and human rights, because they are in fact rationalistic and ideological. Consequently, Oakeshott does not fit into the liberal mould. Nor does he for that matter clearly fit the profile of other contemporary debates in political philosophy. For instance, because of the importance he gives to traditions of behaviour, it may be argued that Oakeshott defends a communitarian position. Communitarians largely argue in favour of protecting communities by giving them certain rights and recognizing the important role they play in developing an individual's identity through tradition and

language. However, as we saw, Oakeshott clearly opposes such an argument. He believes in the importance of maintaining a tradition of behaviour, but this social inheritance is to be understood as a collection and not a collective as the communitarians would have it. This means that the individual is largely responsible for the retention and passing on of the tradition of behaviour through close contact with other individuals. The abstract notion of community and society is completely set aside by Oakeshott. This position is somewhat surprising for a thinker with such a strong idealist influence. As we saw in regards to his metaphysics, Oakeshott has assimilated and incorporated some of Bradley's ideas from *Appearance and Reality* into the system he develops in *Experience and its Modes*. One would expect Bradley's ideas from "My Station and its Duties" to have had more of an effect on Oakeshott's conception of how the individual's identity develops through the intense play between the individual and community or the particular and the whole. Bradley defends a position in which the individual gains, not only his identity, but his position and role in the social structure from society. This is not the case with Oakeshott. Again, although Oakeshott defends the importance of tradition and what he calls a common language of morality, the individual does not derive his identity from them. His identity is forged over a long period of time through contact with other individuals who have assimilated these values through contact with others. The abstract concept of community or society does not play a part in this. Here again, although Oakeshott at times defends idealist principles, especially in his earlier works, he does not quite fit the idealist mould. Furthermore, as regards change, the historicist elements of Oakeshott's position cannot be ignored. He states on many occasions that change is contingent and conditional as it depends on such conditions as the social context and

historical factors. However, once more, Oakeshott's position is ambiguous and not straightforwardly historicist. Although change is slow, incremental, and conditional, it is also an attempt at keeping the whole or tradition of behaviour coherent. Therefore, change cannot be just anything. It has to respect the integrity and coherence of the whole that is the current tradition of behaviour. Consequently, Oakeshott defends yet another complex position. On the surface, his conception of change appears to be merely historicist, however further analysis reveals that his conception is also strongly idealist. Moreover, a final contradiction that marks his thought is his view concerning foundationalism and relativism. As we just pointed out, Oakeshott is anti-relativist, meaning that although he does not believe in universal principles such as "Justice", he does not for that reason believe that all ideas or principles are equally good. One might expect a thinker who defends an anti-relativist position to defend a foundationalist position, meaning that society ought to be founded on certain principles and ideas. However, as we saw in chapter two and as we have just stated, Oakeshott does not believe that political societies are founded, especially not on universal abstract principles. Societies already have a tradition before any principle can be deduced from it. If a given condition does exist within a society it is due merely to circumstance and to certain arrangements society has made. Here again then, Oakeshott defends a paradoxical position and cannot be said to fit into any particular mould. It is the paradoxical nature of his thought that makes Oakeshott one of the most original thinkers of contemporary political philosophy.

The paradoxical nature of Oakeshott's thought certainly makes for its originality and creativity. Nevertheless, this paradoxical quality does cause certain difficulties for his

thought which are serious in nature. The thesis discussed the main philosophical influences of Oakeshott's thought, Oakeshott's conception of philosophy, political philosophy, practice, politics as well as his conception of rationalism, ideology and the role of the theorist. This was followed by an exploration of Oakeshott's theorization of the state, politics, agency and morality. By examining what Oakeshott says about political philosophy and how he goes about it himself, in relation most particularly to the mode of association, it becomes evident that there exists a manifest tension between what he says and what he actually does.

In order to recall Oakeshott's position regarding the role of political philosophy, it is interesting to turn to one of his posthumously published works, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*. In the first chapter of the book, Oakeshott differentiates among different manners of reflecting in relation to the political. He argues that wherever government has been reflected upon two main topics have been considered. The first are thoughts and expectations about the constitution, composition and authorization of the governing authority. The second are thoughts and expectations about the engagements, pursuits or activities of the governing authority (Oakeshott, 1993b: 9). Furthermore, in relation to these considerations, reflection has either been concerned, "[...] with elucidating and understanding the constitution or the office of government, or with determining the proper constitution or the proper office of government: it has been either descriptive or prescriptive" (Oakeshott, 1993b: 9). Therefore, political philosophy is either of a descriptive or prescriptive nature, although they can be mixed at times, however, in this case, the results have never been positive according to Oakeshott,

“[...] when these two attitudes have been mixed, which has not been seldom in the literature of political reflection, the result has been an unhappy but often significant muddle” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 9). If this is what political reflection is concerned with, Oakeshott identifies different manners in which to reflect about politics. One of these manners is ideology. Oakeshott defines this type of political reflection as follows, “The main object at this level is to make sense of political conduct by understanding it in terms of general principles” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 13). The products of such reflection are principles such as “Liberalism”, “Democracy” and “Republicanism” for example and in each, “[...] a complex and intricate manner of behaving is reduced to a generality” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 14). It is important to note that this is not political philosophy. As Oakeshott explains it, the historian of political thought will be the one to deal with this level of reflection in order to understand why these principles came to be constructed, to understand what forms of behaviour they represent as well as to recognize the part that they play (Oakeshott, 1993b: 14). What Oakeshott identifies as political philosophy is the consideration of the place of government and political activity on the map of human activity in general. It is the business of political philosophy to broach questions such as, “[...] what are we really doing when we are engaged in political activity? what really is this activity called ‘governing’?” (Oakeshott, 1993b: 14). This definition of political philosophy clearly implies that it is a purely descriptive activity. Prescription belongs to ideology. The question that arises is, throughout his theorization of the state, politics, agency and morality, does Oakeshott remain descriptive? In other words, is he only concerned with questions such as what really is the activity of governing? Or does he fall into prescription, that is, arguing in favour of one mode of governing or association rather

than another? In other words, Oakeshott establishes strict criteria as to what constitutes political philosophy as well as what constitutes politics, and he establishes a strict division between the two. It is a constricted view of the relationship that is to exist between political philosophy and politics which is to be found throughout all his writings.

As was argued in chapter three, Oakeshott has difficulty respecting his own criteria regarding what constitutes proper philosophical activity. In this sense, we argued that Oakeshott is unable to remain descriptive because he has a marked preference for civil association which he makes explicitly clear throughout many texts. However, this is not the same as stating that civil association should be imposed as the mode of association of a society. However, we argued that Oakeshott does make the claim and therefore transgresses the limits of legitimate political philosophy. Oakeshott therefore contradicts himself when theorizing the character of the modern state. He does not respect his own conception of theory and political activity as the discrepancies discerned demonstrate. This is not to say that Oakeshott's ideas concerning the character of the modern state are not interesting, legitimate or maybe even justified. The problem arises when the author has spent such a great deal of time denouncing ideology and rationalism in *Rationalism and Politics* and promoting what appears to be some form of historicism, all the while establishing concepts and ideas about the state which are considerably removed from historicism and are dangerously close to rationalism and ideology. That is to say, Oakeshott clearly makes an ideal principle out of civil association, which is only meant to be an ideal character. Consequently, this leaves him in a difficult position. He develops an ideal, but he cannot promote it or defend it as the best form of state organization as this might provoke unnatural change in society. He seems to maintain the

idea that society ought to be left to its own devices and change slowly and incrementally. However, his own historical study of the European state clearly demonstrates that slow change is not likely to result in a civil association. All of this seems to point to the fact that Oakeshott, in order for his own theoretical activity to be complete and fruitful, needs to be prescriptive. This illustrates the general dilemma found in Oakeshott's thought. Is the "civil theorist's" role simply to theorize and work out how political activity fits on the map of human activity? Or should the theorist be actively involved in the transformation and modification of society? This dilemma becomes all the more apparent in relation to the question of change. By refusing any change based on an ideal abstract principle, Oakeshott finds himself in a difficult position. He himself has developed what he believes to be the best form of agency, the morality of individuality. However, because it is an ideal character and because it is a prescriptive move, Oakeshott cannot argue in favour of, nor claim that this is how humans should be understood to be. This is a difficult position to defend when humans are conceived of in a degrading manner. Because change is largely based on contingent circumstances, there is no guarantee humans would eventually be better off. Therefore, it appears imperative that Oakeshott extend his definition of the role of the theorist and of political philosophy in relation to society, in order that change which would benefit human dignity be permitted. Although Oakeshott claims that these principles are within a tradition of behaviour, he also claims that civil association is an abstract character that has never existed as such in history. Consequently, civil association is probably more of an ideal than it ever was tradition, and in order for change to occur, it does not appear to be sufficient to refer to the intimations of a tradition of behaviour. Oakeshott must expand his understandings both of

politics and political philosophy in order for change to be based on abstract, ideal principles. This move must be made because the coherence of his own thought demands it. Had Oakeshott argued that ideology ought to be avoided and had he not developed ideas about the ideal type of association in which to realize freedom, there would not be a problem. However, Oakeshott seems unable to respect his own criteria. Finally, the fact that he does develop an ideal tends to demonstrate that he needs to make an ideological move. Or else, as he actually does, he does everything but explicitly state that civil association ought to be imposed on society.

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