

Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott: Common Ground, Uncommon Foundations

Mark T. Mitchell

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This paper examines the work of Michael Oakeshott in relation to that of Polanyi. While there are important similarities that Oakeshott himself recognized, their fundamentally different conceptions of reality—Polanyi's realism and Oakeshott's idealism—ultimately serve to highlight important distinctions between these two thinkers.

Introduction

Both Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott were concerned with philosophy and political theory, but they approached the subjects from distinctly different perspectives. Polanyi was a successful research chemist whose personal contact with twentieth-century totalitarianism gradually drew his attention to philosophy. Oakeshott, on the other hand, was trained as a historian and taught both history and political theory. Nevertheless, both men were concerned with many of the same issues, and, in fact, Oakeshott for one, believed that he and Polanyi were in agreement at important points in their respective theories of knowledge. Furthermore, both believed that a society's approach to knowledge provides an important key for understanding the politics of that society. In this paper I will first summarize Oakeshott's philosophical project after which I will lay out some of the agreements as well as disagreements between Polanyi and Oakeshott. While there is significant common ground, both philosophically and politically, their respective theories diverge sharply at the foundations: Oakeshott is an idealist, while Polanyi is a realist. It is at this fundamental level, and the implications that arise from it, that the most important differences emerge.

Oakeshott's Idealism

Oakeshott's first book, *Experience and its Modes*, was published in 1933 when Oakeshott was a mere thirty-one years old.¹ In a review, the British historian R.G. Collingwood could barely contain his enthusiasm: "Mr. Oakeshott's thesis...is so original, so important, and so profound that criticism must be silent until his meaning has been long pondered....I can, in this brief notice, only say that it is the most penetrating analysis of historical thought that has ever been written."²

Oakeshott, like Collingwood, belonged to the school of British Idealists who saw themselves carrying on in the tradition of Bradley and Hegel. In fact, in his introduction to *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott admits that the two books from which he learned the most are Hegel's *Phanomenologie des Geistes* and Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*.³ Oakeshott's idealism becomes apparent in his definition of experience. "Experience," he writes, "stands for the concrete whole which analysis divides into 'experiencing' and 'what is experienced'."⁴ Oakeshott develops the point further:

Experience is a world of ideas. And the condition of a world of ideas satisfactory in experience is a condition of coherence, of unity and completeness. Further, the world of experience is the real world; there is no reality outside experience. Reality is the world of experience in so far as it is satisfactory, in so far as it is coherent.⁵

Thus, since the world of experience is the real world, and experience is a world of ideas, we can see that for Oakeshott, the real world is a world of ideas. The criterion for judging this world of ideas is not the degree to which it makes contact with an external reality (as claimed by Polanyi) but the internal coherence of that world.⁶ Oakeshott's idealism is ultimately monistic, for although experience can be glimpsed from a variety of standpoints, which may give the impression of a multiplicity of realities, he reminds his readers that "it is important to understand that there is, in the end, only one experience."⁷ This one experience is what we call truth, for "what is true and all that is true is a coherent world of ideas."⁸

But humans desire to comprehend experience and thereby engage experience by means of various modes. Oakeshott identifies four modes of experience, which he understands as self-contained worlds: history, science, practice, and poetry.⁹ He admits that there is "no theoretical limit to the number of such worlds, and the choice of which we are to consider in detail must, to some extent, be arbitrary."¹⁰ But, the selection is not entirely arbitrary, for "these seem to me to represent the main arrests or modifications in experience, the main abstract worlds of ideas. Moreover, they may be said to be established modes of experience; and each is a sufficiently well-organized and developed world of ideas to present material for analysis."¹¹

Modes of experience represent "arrests in experience" whereby one standpoint is used as a point of reference. Thus, "a mode of experience is experience with reservation, it is experience shackled by partiality and presupposition."¹² It is important to understand, though, that these arrests in experience are not parts of a whole, but "the whole from a limited standpoint."¹³ Each mode is comprehended as a coherent, self-contained world. There can be no communication between these various worlds, and attempts to effect such communication result in the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*, or irrelevance.¹⁴ Thus, what is true in one world is neither true nor false in another; instead, it is meaningless. For example, in the world of science, we might state that a particular geometric theorem is true, but to inquire whether or not the statement is morally true is meaningless.¹⁵ Or again, inquiring whether or not a moral truth is historically true is merely to create a confusion, to commit the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*.

Briefly, the modes are distinguished by the following characteristics: History, or the mode of historical experience, is limited to that which can be comprehended as a succession, as a series. Scientific experience "is a world of purely quantitative experience...[it] involves the assertion of reality under the category of quantity."¹⁶ Thus, "whatever cannot be conceived quantitatively cannot belong to scientific knowledge."¹⁷ Oakeshott uses the term 'poetry' to cover all artistic endeavors including painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, literary and musical composition, etc. In Oakeshott's conception, the poetic mode is uniquely characterized by "contemplating" and "delighting."¹⁸

The mode of practical experience differs from the others in that it is the world in which we typically dwell, and we only get outside this mode if we intentionally choose to step out of it. As Oakeshott puts it,

“Practical experience is the most familiar form of experience. We depart from it but rarely, and such departures are always excursions into a foreign country.”¹⁹ Practical experience is distinctive, for in this mode “a coherent world of experience is achieved by means of action, by the introduction of actual change into existence. And the aspect of mind involved is the will. Practice is the exercise of the will; practical thought is volition; practical experience is the world *sub specie voluntatis*.”²⁰ The mode of practical experience includes such things as the “moral life,” the “religious life,” and “beauty.” In short, practical experience is the mode that involves “a life directed by an idea of fact, of system and of coherence.”²¹ Practical experience is “an attempt to alter ‘what is here and now’ so as to agree with ‘what ought to be.’”²² But for this very reason the world of practical experience enjoys no ultimate satisfaction, for “no sooner is [satisfaction] realized at one point in the world of practical existence, than a new discord springs up elsewhere, demanding a new resolution, a fresh qualification of ‘what is here and now’ by ‘what ought to be.’”²³ Thus, like the other modes, practical experience represents an arrest and is therefore defective. The implications of this claim are significant, and Oakeshott is quite aware of this. There are those, he notes, who hold that ultimate truth lies in morality and religion, but if these are merely modes of experience, then they too are defective arrests and cannot be taken for the totality of reality.²⁴

Yet humans do, in fact, seek to understand the whole. This, for Oakeshott, is philosophy. Oakeshott’s intention is first to identify the main modifications or arrests of experience; then show how each represents a coherent world; and ultimately to show their inadequacies by considering each from the perspective of philosophy.²⁵ Philosophy “means experience without reservation or presupposition, 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.”²⁶ This is not to suggest that the various modes are avoidable, for “in experience what is incomplete cannot avoid asserting itself as complete; and when it asserts itself as complete, it cannot avoid the destructive force of the criticism of what actually is complete.”²⁷ Thus, philosophy is a never-ending attempt to grasp the totality of experience as a complete and coherent world of ideas. But at the same time, philosophy cannot simply replace the modes of experience. As mentioned above, the vast majority of our lives are spent in the mode of practical experience. It would be impossible as well as undesirable completely to abandon this mode. Thus, “philosophy can and must supersede practical experience; but it cannot take its place.”²⁸

Much of Oakeshott’s later work is devoted to political philosophy, and this raises an important question: is political philosophy a mode or is it philosophy? The answer to this question will provide the context by which we read Oakeshott’s political writings. Oakeshott classifies morality and religion as part of practical experience.²⁹ Presumably politics would fall here as well. But in the conclusion of *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott introduces an important concept: pseudo-philosophy. If when seeking to comprehend the whole “there is both a failure to achieve complete coherence and failure also to achieve a specific world of experience, the result is incompleteness, abstraction, deficiency, but without homogeneity or determinate character.” These indeterminate arrests in experience (the modes are determinate) are “pseudo-philosophical experience.”³⁰ Pseudo-philosophical experience is not “abstraction as a special process, but abstraction as a mere inadvertence.” It is a “mere falling short” of the whole rather than a determinate arrest.³¹ In an important footnote, Oakeshott identifies moral philosophy, theology, and political philosophy as examples of pseudo-philosophy.³² This provides an important differentiation in Oakeshott’s account. Religion, ethics, and politics, because they involve an exercise of the will in pursuit of action, fall within the practical mode. On the other hand, theology, moral philosophy, and political philosophy seek to comprehend the whole of experience—that is, they attempt to be philosophical—but because they inadvert-

ently fail to comprehend the whole, they are pseudo-philosophical.

Paul Franco points out that in Oakeshott's later work he abandons the notion of pseudo-philosophy.³³ In his last major work, *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott admits that the attempt to engage the whole "may be arrested without being denied."³⁴ Thus, the political philosopher, what Oakeshott terms the "self-consciously conditional theorist" indeed engages in philosophy (not pseudo-philosophy), for such a person realizes that the conditional nature of the enterprise necessarily puts it "between heaven and earth"; thus, the political philosopher "has a heavenly home, but he is in no hurry to reach it. If he is concerned to theorize moral conduct or civil association he must forswear metaphysics."³⁵ In other words, the conditional nature of political and moral philosophy necessitates an arrest that precludes other elements of philosophy such as metaphysics. The political philosopher, then, moves on an "intermediate level of understanding...and should learn to enjoy its liberties and submit to its servitudes as he goes along."³⁶

Two posthumously published essays, "Political Philosophy" and "The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics," shed further light on the subject of political philosophy.³⁷ These essays are especially useful for furthering our understanding of Oakeshott's most widely read political essays published under the title *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, for according to Timothy Fuller, the editor of both collections, the above mentioned essays were written at about the same time as the essays in *Rationalism in Politics*.³⁸ Thus, the view of political philosophy expressed in these essays serves to make explicit what is largely implicit in *Rationalism in Politics*. Although the concept of pseudo-philosophy has disappeared, Oakeshott's conception of philosophy remains essentially unchanged:

Philosophical thought and knowledge is simply thought and knowledge without reservation or presupposition. 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.³⁹

A specifically political philosophy, then, is "an explanation or view of political life and activity from the standpoint of the totality of experience."⁴⁰ But despite Oakeshott's claim that philosophy consists in thoroughly defining concepts, he recognizes (with Polanyi) that "it is not possible or desirable that every aspect of a concept should be indicated explicitly in a philosophical definition; but if the definition is to be philosophically satisfactory it must be possible to show how it has implicitly included and superseded all other views. A philosophical concept is categorical because it is complete."⁴¹ Complete does not imply explicitly articulated; rather, philosophy in general, and political philosophy in particular, is philosophical when it defines all that can be defined leaving implicit or undefined that which does not admit of such articulation.

In his essay "Political Philosophy" Oakeshott distinguishes between reflection on politics for the purpose of policy; reflection on politics for the purpose of constructing a political doctrine; and political philosophy, which is "a genuine, unhindered impulse of reflection." As such, "political philosophy can provide no principles to be 'followed', no rules of political conduct to be observed, no ideals of policy or arrangements to be pursued."⁴² In short, political philosophy, like all philosophy, has no connection to action or will or volition, which characterize the practical mode. Thus, for the later Oakeshott, political philosophy is properly philosophical—though relegated to an "intermediate level of understanding"—and when we engage his political essays, we must bear this in mind.

Oakeshott's Review of *Personal Knowledge*

Oakeshott, born in 1901, was ten years Polanyi's junior. Although Polanyi was born and educated on the continent, both spent the majority of their professional lives in England. As far as I can discern Polanyi never refers to Oakeshott in print; although, he must have been aware of his work. Oakeshott, on the other hand, mentions Polanyi on several occasions. His only sustained discussion of Polanyi comes in a review of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*.⁴³ Widely regarded as a superior stylist, Oakeshott criticizes Polanyi's presentation:

It is a book full of side-glances into other matters; it is disordered, repetitive, digressive, and often obscure; as a work of art it leaves much to be desired....Professor Polanyi's ambition to let nothing go by default, to surround his argument with an embroidery, not of qualification but of elaboration, and to follow his theme into every variation that suggests itself, make the book like a jungle through which the reader must hack his way.⁴⁴

Yet, despite the stylistic shortcomings, Oakeshott finds much to appreciate. He notes with favor Polanyi's critique of empiricism, his denial of the moral neutrality of scientific investigation, and Polanyi's insistence on the personal element in all knowing. Oakeshott agrees that scientific knowing is an acquired skill, which is obtained through practice and includes an unspecifiable element that cannot be reduced to specific rules.

Oakeshott, though, does detect a possible problem in Polanyi's theory of knowledge, for once absolute objectivity is denied, the danger of a slide into subjectivism becomes acute. Although Polanyi goes to great lengths to avoid this conclusion, Oakeshott is unsure of Polanyi's ultimate success, for he rightly understands that Polanyi's theory of knowledge escapes subjectivism only if Polanyi's realism is true. Thus, Oakeshott writes, "in the end a belief that our thoughts are moved by 'an innate affinity for making contact with reality' seems to be the only premiss, properly speaking, of scientific enquiry and the means by which it transcends merely personal conviction."⁴⁵ Oakeshott, a self-proclaimed sceptic,⁴⁶ muses that this assumption seems to rest on excessive belief, for Polanyi's theory of knowledge "is as little sceptical as it is positivistic...[and]...Professor Polanyi doesn't do as much scepticism for himself as might have been hoped and as the occasion seems to demand."⁴⁷ Oakeshott goes on to suggest that Polanyi's lack of a sceptical demeanor indicates that "at the edges of his argument there is a suspicion of philosophical innocence."⁴⁸ This criticism should not surprise us given the fact that Oakeshott once wrote that "it is always more difficult to doubt radically and intelligently than to believe."⁴⁹ Here, at the very foundations of their respective theories of knowledge, a two-fold disagreement emerges that, in large measure, sums up their differences: Oakeshott's idealism and Polanyi's realism; Oakeshott's scepticism and Polanyi's a-critical philosophy. A key difference between idealism and realism is their different standards for verifying truth: for the idealist, coherence is the sole criterion; for Polanyi the realist, truth consists in making contact with an external reality.

Common Ground

While Oakeshott disagrees with Polanyi on the question of the primacy of belief and on the assumption of an external reality with which we strive to make contact, there is much in Polanyi's writings with

which Oakeshott agrees. In his seminal essay, “Rationalism in Politics,” Oakeshott discusses two types of knowledge—practical and technical—and remarks in a footnote that “some excellent observations on this topic are to be found in M. Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*.”⁵⁰ In another essay, Oakeshott points the reader’s attention to the same work by Polanyi and calls it “brilliant.”⁵¹ Oakeshott obviously found much common ground between his emphasis on practical, unformulatable knowledge and Polanyi’s discussion in *Science, Faith and Society* of the fact that scientific investigation cannot proceed on the basis of rules alone. In Polanyi’s words, “the rules of research cannot be usefully codified at all. Like the rules of all other high arts, they are embodied in practice alone” (*SFS*, 33). For both, knowledge embodied in practice cannot be acquired except through a personal relationship between a master and an apprentice in which the apprentice submits himself to the authority of the master and in so doing acquires the skills necessary to master the particular field of inquiry. Such practical, unformulatable knowledge exists only in traditions which exercise authority by requiring a degree of submission by those who seek to become full practicing members.⁵² Thus, Oakeshott’s practical knowledge is quite similar to the unformulatable knowledge of which Polanyi speaks. Oakeshott insists that the modern rationalist relies excessively on technical knowledge while denying practical knowledge. This maps onto the philosophical disposition Polanyi calls “objectivism.”⁵³ Finally, both believe that a central problem with modern politics is an erroneous theory of knowledge. In Oakeshott’s understanding, the modern rationalist, in his zealous quest for rational certainty, denies any knowledge that is not technical, that cannot be formulated into explicit rules.⁵⁴ Similarly, Polanyi argues that the ideal of doubt in combination with the demand for strict verification destroys any possibility of knowledge of those ideals we hold most dear. It creates the erroneous ideal of rational detachment, which, it is believed, will produce universally certain knowledge.⁵⁵ In short, both Oakeshott and Polanyi believe that an error in epistemology, which denies the possibility of any knowledge that is not explicit, is the root cause of much that has gone amiss in modern political theory as well as practice.⁵⁶

It is important to point out that while Oakeshott here does speak in the idiom of practical knowledge, he is not engaging the practical mode. Rather, he is theorizing political activity—doing political philosophy—and arguing that a part of any skilled knowing is not fully articulable. In short, he is arguing that any body of knowledge includes elements that are fully susceptible of explicit articulation and elements that are not. As we have already seen, Oakeshott believes that “it is not possible or desirable that every aspect of a concept should be indicated explicitly in a philosophical definition.”⁵⁷

Both Polanyi and Oakeshott employ the concept of tradition, and argue that a wholesale rejection of tradition is detrimental to knowing. Engaging fully in a tradition requires submission to an authority in the form of a master to an apprentice. Knowing is an art that requires skill. The skill necessary to know requires a relationship with a master whereby one can learn the unspecifiable elements of any skill and thus eventually become a connoisseur. All skills are comprised of two types of knowledge—in Oakeshott’s terms, technical and practical, and in Polanyi’s idiom, the tacit and the explicit. Since all skills contain elements that are unspecifiable, they cannot be acquired apart from practice, which entails submitting oneself to the authority of a master who is himself working within a tradition. Thus, all skillful knowing requires the presence of a tradition, an individual who has mastered the unspecifiable elements of the skill, and a willingness to submit by the student to the authority of the master in order to engage the tradition and thereby acquire its unspecifiable skills.⁵⁸

Subject/Object Dualism

Both Polanyi and Oakeshott seek to reconceptualize the so-called subject-object dualism that is so commonly assumed in modern philosophy, but due to their radically different starting points—idealism and realism—their respective solutions are quite different. For Oakeshott, the subject-object dualism is a product of an erroneous theory of mind that holds that in order to achieve a properly rational conclusion the mind must be emptied of all presuppositions.⁵⁹ It must become completely detached from that which it seeks to know, free from any prejudice that might influence it, a neutral instrument exercising nothing other than purely rational judgement.⁶⁰ But, for Oakeshott, there is no mind other than the ideas of which it is composed. There is no neutral instrument that can be applied to a subject. Instead, for him “experience is a world of ideas” and “there is no reality outside experience.”⁶¹ Thus, reality is the whole of experience, and the mind is part of that experience. There is no objective reality independent of the mind, for there is no mind that is independent of experience. Seeking understanding is to seek a greater coherence of the whole of which our ideas are a part. For Oakeshott, then, the subject-object dualism is a reflection of an incorrect theory of mind and reality, and Oakeshott’s theory of mind simply denies the duality.

Polanyi, on the other hand, believes that there exists a mind-independent reality that is knowable although only imperfectly and provisionally. Humans have an innate desire to comprehend this reality, and in so comprehending we can bring greater coherence to our understanding of it.⁶² But such understanding only comes through effort the fruits of which reveal themselves—often in unexpected ways—when we make contact with reality.⁶³ Since reality is independent of the knower, Polanyi’s position countenances a dualism between that which is knowable and that which knows. This, at face value, appears to be an affirmation of the subject-object dichotomy. But Polanyi does not seek to deny the dichotomy as does Oakeshott, but to reconceptualize it. In Polanyi’s view, the objectivist mistakenly affirms the theoretical ideal of a virgin mind completely unencumbered by traditional knowledge, prejudice, or untested presuppositions.⁶⁴ This ideal is virtually identical to Oakeshott’s rationalist. But instead of denying the duality between the subject and the object as does Oakeshott, Polanyi takes a different tack—one that Oakeshott would find wholly unsatisfactory. Rather than claiming that the objectivist has an errant view of mind, as does Oakeshott, Polanyi argues that the objectivist has an errant view of knowledge, and only a partially incorrect view of mind. In other words, Polanyi agrees with Oakeshott that it is absurd to imagine that it is possible completely to separate one’s mind from the traditions, prejudices, and a-critical presuppositions that serve in significant ways to constitute that mind. For example, Polanyi believes that one must submit to a tradition embodied in a particular language in order to think critically.⁶⁵ But, as a realist, Polanyi does not reject a mind-independent reality. There is, he claims, an objective reality that we strive to know. But because all knowing includes a personal element and depends on a fiduciary framework based on an a-critical commitment, the subjective is overcome by the personal.⁶⁶ Because the knower embraces the objects of this knowledge with universal intent, his freedom to believe anything is, as Polanyi puts it, constrained by the responsibility to do as he must, for each is limited by the reality that he seeks to know and comprehend.⁶⁷ The concept of commitment to a vision of reality with universal intent is what elevates the merely subjective to the personal. Thus, for Polanyi, the subject-object dualism is not denied but transcended by a personal commitment to responsibly pursue an ever-deepening vision of reality.

Rationalism and Objectivism, Morality and Politics

It should be clear by now that the essential differences between Polanyi and Oakeshott can be traced back to their differences regarding the nature of reality and the manner in which the human mind relates to that reality. Despite this fundamental difference, though, both agree that an incorrect view of knowledge has significant implications for political philosophy. Both believe that modern theories of knowledge, which seek an ideal of purely explicit knowledge grasped by neutral minds, are mistaken. And although they disagree about the ultimate remedy—one grounded in a sceptical idealism, the other in an a-critical realism—they share much agreement as to the proximal causes of the modern problem.

As we have seen, Oakeshott characterizes the mistaken view of knowledge as “modern rationalism”; Polanyi finds the modern errors in what he terms “objectivism.” The rationalist and the objectivist share some striking similarities which we do well to understand, for the amount of congruence on this point indicates the important ways Polanyi and Oakeshott are similar despite their fundamental differences. First, the rationalist rejects all appeals to tradition. All appeals to authority are rejected save the authority of one’s own neutral mind engaging the facts in a purely detached fashion.⁶⁸ Second, the rationalist is committed to the goal of perfectionism, for since the rationalist is committed to finding rational solutions, he cannot settle for solutions that are imperfect. Finally, the rationalist seeks uniformity, and this is a direct product of the rationalist’s perfectionism, for the perfect rational solution must necessarily be equally perfect for all rational people.⁶⁹ The rationalist believes that all differences caused by the particularities of culture, tradition, language, and history, must be transcended in the process of directly engaging universal truths unmediated by particulars. But in Oakeshott’s words, “a scheme which does not recognize circumstances can have no place for variety.”⁷⁰ Thus, the rationalist rejects the authority of tradition and habit and pursues his ideal of perfect uniformity employing only the resources of his unencumbered rationality in the process. But because it is impossible completely to throw off the particularities in which one is embedded, the rationalist ideal necessarily causes an internal incoherence and disarray in the rationalist’s understanding of morality and politics. As a result, the rationalist knows less and less about how properly to behave.

Oakeshott argues that the moral perfectionism of the west finds its roots in the early Christian centuries. The morality of the early Christian church emphasized habits and affections of behavior motivated by faith, hope, and charity. There were no formal moral ideals; instead, “the morality of these communities was a custom of behaviour appropriate to the character of the faith and to the nature of the expectation.”⁷¹ Over the course of the first several Christian centuries, though, a change occurred. Christian morality began to become formalized in a collection of abstract ideals. Oakeshott suggests that this change may have been brought about in the process of attempting to package Christianity for audiences who lacked the traditions out of which Christianity was born. In other words, the message of Christianity had to be abridged in order to make it accessible to other cultural traditions. In the process though, “the urge to speculate, to abstract and to define, which overtook Christianity as a religion, infected also Christianity as a way of moral life.”⁷² But this abridgement of Christian habits and customs into a creed that could be translated across cultural and linguistic boundaries produced a morality corresponding to this change. Rather than emphasizing habits and customs rooted in a tradition, moral ideals were abstracted from the original traditional behavior. The new emphasis on moral ideals signaled a shift toward modern rationalism that fully emerged in early modernity with its three-fold emphasis on perfection, uniformity, and a wholesale rejection of tradition.

Polanyi's account closely parallels Oakeshott's; although, he goes into far more detail describing the damaging consequences produced by the erroneous theory of knowledge. First, like the rationalist, Polanyi's objectivist rejects the authority of tradition and seeks to acquire a virginal mind, detached from any personal commitments or prejudice. This is accomplished by subjecting all opinions and prejudices to a universal and methodological doubt as exemplified by Descartes.⁷³ Second, universal and systematic doubt severely reduces the possible range of inquiry. This is especially so due to the caustic work of doubt on any beliefs that are not totally susceptible of rational deduction or empirical verification. Thus, religious belief quickly went the way of tradition, with which it was closely tied. When the possibility of knowing was reduced to only that which could be known with explicit certainty, the false ideal of scientific detachment and doubt was hailed as the standard for real knowing. Thus, the modern rejection of the authority of tradition, coupled with the elevation of doubt as the ideal epistemological starting point, produced a scepticism about all that could not be determined using scientific methodology. Morality, along with religion and aesthetics, fell into this category. The rise of science and the denigration of all other fields of inquiry produced a uniform methodology by which all knowledge could be judged. The fact-value barrier was raised, and morality, along with all other non-scientific pursuits, was relegated to the ignominious realm of subjective value. On the other hand, the exact sciences, it was believed, dealt only with objective facts; therefore, science was thought to proceed purely on the basis of a uniformly applicable and explicitly articulable methodology. Here we see the modern emphasis on uniformity emerging in Polanyi's account just as it does in Oakeshott's.

Like Oakeshott, Polanyi recognizes that Christianity has significantly influenced the development of morality in the west. But while the radical scepticism born of the early modern period rendered Christianity untenable, the transcendent perfectionism embodied in Christianity, rather than being abandoned, was merely replaced by a purely immanentized perfectionism that denied the reality of any moral ideals. This impulse toward moral perfectionism, combined with a rational scepticism that denied any real status to moral ideals, created a volatile tension within the western psyche. This ironic combination of mutually exclusive forces is what Polanyi calls moral inversion.⁷⁴ This state of affairs manifests itself as individual nihilism and political totalitarianism, whereby those under its spell release their moral passions (the reality of which they must ultimately deny) in the service of utopian ends (the real goodness of which they cannot admit). And because moral scepticism lies at the heart of this view, any means necessary are justifiable to achieve the desired ends.

Conclusion

Both Polanyi and Oakeshott believed that a mistaken theory of knowledge produces harmful moral and political results. They differ, though, on the proper remedy. Oakeshott offers his idealism with its accompanying theory of mind that denies the subject-object dualism and seeks only to pursue intimations in an effort to achieve greater coherence. Polanyi, on the other hand, affirms the existence of an external and independent reality with which we strive to make contact. He denies the objectivist ideal of detachment and doubt and instead formulates his post-critical epistemology, which is rooted in commitment, belief, and the tacit. In the end, then, the differences between Polanyi and Oakeshott can only be adequately addressed when we consider the viability of their respective understanding of the nature of reality, and it is at this point that Polanyi's realism appears superior. Oakeshott's theory of knowledge does not seem able to avoid sliding into a form of moral relativism. This is due to that fact that coherence alone as a test for truth is inadequate. Polanyi puts it this way: "Coherence as the criterion of truth is only a criterion of stability. It may equally stabilize an erroneous or a true view of the universe" (*PK*, 294).⁷⁵ In other words, coherence itself is not a good, for

it is conceivable that a coherent tradition is at the same time an immoral tradition, unless, of course, one assumes (as does Polanyi) that reality, itself, is both a coherent whole and morally good. In this case, the goal of coherence makes moral sense, for in seeking coherence, a tradition is attempting to fashion itself according to a moral reality. But at this point it becomes obvious that we are no longer relying completely upon a coherence test of truth, for we have introduced the concept of moral reality—we have inadvertently slipped into a realist mode of thought. In short, without an independent reality that is knowable—albeit imperfectly and provisionally—there is no way to evaluate which of two stable moral traditions is preferable.⁷⁶ Without such a standard, however imperfect, we are left with, at best, a relativism between apparently stable traditions.⁷⁷ Polanyi's commitment to realism allows him to avoid this problem. Thus, if avoiding moral and political relativism is desirable, it appears that Polanyi's realism is preferable to Oakeshott's idealism.

In the end, both Polanyi and Oakeshott agree that a source of the modern problem is an errant conception of knowledge. To some extent they agree on the solution, for against the modern rationalist/objectivist both argue for the recovery of such notions as tradition, practice, commitment, submission, apprenticeship, and inarticulate truths. But at the very roots of their respective philosophical accounts they diverge, and it is at this point that Polanyi's realism appears preferable to Oakeshott's idealism. But as Oakeshott points out, and as Polanyi would agree, such a position requires a step of faith—a commitment to a conception of reality that ultimately does not admit of definite proof. Such, Polanyi acknowledges, is the case with all of our most deeply held beliefs. Such, it seems, is the essence of the human condition.

Endnotes

¹There is some debate as to whether or not Oakeshott's views are consistent throughout his career. Paul Franco and W.H. Greenleaf emphasize the continuity in Oakeshott's thought. See W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1996) and Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Others have argued that Oakeshott's thought is characterized by a degree of discontinuity. See, for example, Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism: Politics and Doctrine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) and Steven Anthony Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

²R.G. Collingwood, "Review of Experience and its Modes by Michael Oakeshott," *The Cambridge Review* 55 (1934):249-50.

³*Experience and its Modes* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1933) 6. Hereafter, *EM*.

⁴*EM*, 9.

⁵*EM*, 69.

⁶Oakeshott writes: "It seems that philosophers (and others) have considered reality so important that to conceive of it as situated within experience appeared to offer it an affront. Consequently it has become almost a tradition to begin by postulating a gulf between experience and reality, a gulf which many have declared impassible, but which some have believed themselves to have bridged. Such a point of departure, however, appears to me misconceived, and I must beg to be allowed another from which to consider this subject. Instead of constructing a view of experience on the basis of a conception of reality, I propose to derive my view of the character of reality from what I conceive to be the character of experience. And what I have first to suggest is that reality is experience" (*EM*, 49).

⁷*EM*, 81.

⁸*EM*, 49.

⁹Only the first three modes are discussed in *Experience and its Modes*. Oakeshott adds poetry in an essay published in 1959 titled "Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind," published in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991).

¹⁰*EM*, 75.

¹¹*EM*, 84.

¹²*EM*, 74.

¹³ *EM*, 74.

¹⁴ *EM*, 76. “All abstract worlds of experience are wholly independent of one another. Between them there can be no passage of argument whatever without the grossest fallacy”(*EM*, 311).

¹⁵ This view has significant implications for the modern dominance of science. Oakeshott realizes this and thrusts hard against so-called scientism: “We have too long been accustomed to the notions that science is a guide to life, that science is the only true guide to life, and that the world of practical experience (and particularly moral and religious ideas) must submit themselves to the criticism of scientific thought, for any other view not to appear false or reactionary or both. But there is little in the history of folly to which one may compare the infatuation which the modern mind has conceived for ‘science’”(*EM*, 312).

¹⁶ *EM*, 172.

¹⁷ *EM*, 221.

¹⁸ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 44. Hereafter, *RP*.

¹⁹ *EM*, 296.

²⁰ *EM*, 258.

²¹ *EM*, 296.

²² *EM*, 289.

²³ *EM*, 291.

²⁴ *EM*, 308-11.

²⁵ *EM*, 84-5.

²⁶ *EM*, 82.

²⁷ *EM*, 330.

²⁸ *EM*, 354.

²⁹ *EM*, 309.

³⁰ *EM*, 332.

³¹ *EM*, 331.

³² *EM*, 335 n1.

³³ Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 244n1.

³⁴ *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 11.

³⁵ *On Human Conduct*, 25. Cf. “The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics,” in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 133.

³⁶ *On Human Conduct*, 33.

³⁷ *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

³⁸ *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, 119, 138.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, “The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics,” 127.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, “The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics,” 126.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, “The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics,” 130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, “Political Philosophy” 153, 154.

⁴³ Michael Oakeshott, “The Human Coefficient,” *Encounter* 11 (1958): 77-80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77. While this seems primarily a stylistic point, Oakeshott, who held that the purpose of philosophy is to define clearly all pertinent concepts, would find Polanyi’s work substantively problematic as well. Cf. Marjorie Grene’s comments on the relationship between Polanyi’s style and his philosophical project in “Tacit Knowing” *Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy*,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 8.3 (1977): 167-8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁶ *RP*, 509.

⁴⁷ Michael Oakeshott, “The Human Coefficient,” 79.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁹ Michael Oakeshott, “John Locke,” *The Cambridge Review* 54 (1932-3): 72.

⁵⁰ Oakeshott, *RP*, 13n4.

⁵¹ Michael Oakeshott, “Science and Society,” *The Cambridge Journal* 1 (1947-8): 692n1.

⁵² See Oakeshott, *RP*, 5-42 *passim* and Polanyi, *SFS*, *passim*.

⁵³ *PK*, vii, 3, 264-8, 269-98, 381.

⁵⁴ Oakeshott, *RP*, 15.

⁵⁵ *PK*, 269ff.

⁵⁶ It should be pointed out that in the two notes in which Oakeshott refers to the parallels between his concepts of practical and technical knowledge and Polanyi's discussion of similar concepts, he is referring exclusively to Polanyi's early *Science, Faith and Society*. In that work Polanyi does not develop his theory of tacit knowing with the distinction between the focal and subsidiary elements. Thus, while Oakeshott is quite correct to see the similarities between his work and Polanyi's at this stage, Polanyi develops this area of his thought much more thoroughly than Oakeshott; thus, while the similarities are always unmistakable, Polanyi's later work is significantly more complex and supercedes Oakeshott's conception by virtue of that more complex development.

⁵⁷ "The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics," 130.

⁵⁸ Oakeshott, *RP*, 29, 39, 123, 466; Polanyi, *PK*, 31, 49-65; *TD*, 61-2; *KB*, 41.

⁵⁹ The phrase "emptied of all presuppositions" hearkens to Oakeshott's definition of philosophy. But to theorize about a practice—to do political philosophy—one must, as we have seen, occupy an intermediate level along with its attendant presuppositions. The rationalist seeks to make all theory purely philosophical (in Oakeshott's sense) but in so doing renders practice incoherent.

⁶⁰ Oakeshott, *RP*, 101-6.

⁶¹ *EM*, 69.

⁶² *PK*, 301; *KB*, 314, 316.

⁶³ *PK*, vii, 5, 64, 104, 106, 311; *KB*, 133-4, 168. Polanyi frequently speaks of "intimations of coherence," but unlike Oakeshott, he is referring to contact with an external reality and not the to internal coherence of a world of experience.

⁶⁴ *PK*, 295.

⁶⁵ *PK*, 376; *KB*, 41, 160.

⁶⁶ *PK*, 266, 300, 403.

⁶⁷ *PK*, 303, 309, 311, 313, 316, 324; *TD*, 78.

⁶⁸ Oakeshott, *RP*, 6-9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 484.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 484.

⁷³ *PK*, 269-72, 294-98.

⁷⁴ *PK*, 231-5; *TD*, 4, 57, 85-6; *KB*, 14-18, 21-2, 44-5; *Meaning*, 17-18, 28; LL (Liberty Fund ed.) 131; *Michael Polanyi, Society, Economics, and Philosophy: Selected Papers*, ed. R.T. Allen (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 83-93, 95-105, 113-15.

⁷⁵ Italics in original. Cf. *PK*, 288-94.

⁷⁶ There is an on-going debate among Polanyi scholars regarding Polanyi's view of the status of moral, religious, and artistic reality. This topic comes up with some regularity in the journal *Tradition & Discovery*. See, for example, the issue devoted exclusively to Polanyi's realism, 26.3 (1999-2000). For perhaps the most thorough discussion of Polanyi's realism see Esther Lightcap Meek, *Contact With Reality: An Examination of Realism in the Work of Michael Polanyi*, unpublished dissertation, Temple University, 1983.

⁷⁷ Paul Franco attempts to show how Oakeshott's position does not lead to a "featureless relativism," but because coherence is the only criterion that Oakeshott allows, the ensuing relativism may not be featureless (for it is indeed internally coherent), but it does appear to be a form of relativism nonetheless. See Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 132-3, 138-9.