WHAT’S TRUTH GOT TO DO WITH IT? JOHN DEWEY AND MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ON NON-FOUNDATIONAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT NIHILISM

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By

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, philosophers were searching to find their role in an uncertain political world. Scant one hundred years after the universal aspirations of Enlightenment-era ethics, Nietzsche declared that moral ideals took their vitality from the stirrings—and strength—of the human will. Humans, in other words, are free—and able—to construct their own moral ideals on their own terms. How should politics be conducted in a world where certainty has been fundamentally shaken? Or, alternatively, if philosophy can no longer credibly offer substantive, fixed truths, what remains for it do? John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott both took these questions very seriously. Importantly, each argued that modern liberal pluralism could be defended without making recourse to metaphysically grounded absolutes. In their view, Western philosophers were in dire need of better reflection on the commitments implied by their particular historical traditions. In subsequent decades, many Western philosophers responded to the same theoretical conditions in a variety of ways. These can largely be grouped into two rough categories: 1) those who seek to reestablish monism and ethical consensus, and 2) those who celebrate epistemological uncertainty to such a degree that their work culminates in nihilism. I argue that Dewey and Oakeshott’s response to this situation represents a significant improvement on the last century of political philosophy.
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INTRODUCTION

This project begins with a philosophical breakdown in the waning years of the nineteenth century, and thus, it begins with William James. Few early-twentieth century intellectuals were more thoroughly concerned with the state of philosophy than James. At the end of 1906, he gave a lecture at Boston’s Lowell Institute, where he spoke of a sort of crisis within the field:

“Believing in philosophy myself devoutly, and believing also that a kind of new dawn is breaking upon us philosophers, I feel impelled, per fas aut nefas, to try to impart to you some news of the situation.” He went on to describe a fractured discipline, with warring camps separated by a wide, substantive gulf. “Empiricists” and “Rationalists” (or “Idealists”) were separated, he thought, by more than just casual philosophical differences—they disagreed as a matter of core epistemological principles. They posited radically distinct starting places for philosophical reflection and adopted mutually exclusive sets of postulates. This polarization hardly conduced to profitable debates within the field.¹

James was hardly the only philosopher to recognize that philosophy arrived in the twentieth century in uncertain condition. John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott both took epistemology extremely seriously—each argued that modern liberal pluralism could be defended without making recourse to metaphysically grounded absolutes. In their view, Western philosophers were in dire need of better reflection on the strengths and commitments of their historical tradition. In subsequent decades, many Western philosophers responded to the same

¹ William James, Pragmatism in Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 10, 13. Cf. 29, 97: In the rest of that introductory lecture, James set out to demonstrate that this situation was as unprofitable as it was unnecessary. “Tough-minded” empiricists were right to insist on the importance of facts, just as “tender-minded” rationalists were right to build their philosophical systems around principles—the problem lay in assuming that these options were truly binary. In ensuing lectures, he argued that our ideals consisted of whatever “conceivable effects of a practical kind” they implied. He demanded to know “What concrete difference will [a principle’s] being true make in anyone’s actual life?”
theoretical conditions in a variety of ways. These can largely be grouped into two rough categories: 1) those who seek to reestablish monism and ethical consensus, and 2) those who celebrate epistemological uncertainty to such a degree that their work culminates in a sort of subjectivistic nihilism. In the ensuing chapters, I argue that Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s response to this situation represents a significant improvement on the last century of epistemologically-driven political philosophy. This introduction is designed to give some context to the broader historical, political, and theoretical narratives that inform my argument.

Both John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott began their careers during a period of shaky political and philosophical certainty. In the United States, this uncertainty took many forms, but it was most clearly marked by the outbreak of the Civil War. As Louis Menand put it,

For the generation that lived through it, the Civil War was a terrible and traumatic experience. It tore a hole in their lives. To some of them, the war seemed not just a failure of democracy, but a failure of culture, a failure of ideas. As traumatic wars do...the Civil War discredited the beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it. Those beliefs had not prevented the country from going to war; they had not prepared it for the astonishing violence the war unleashed; they seemed absurdly obsolete in the new, postwar world. The Civil War swept away the slave civilization of the South, but it swept away almost the whole intellectual culture of the North along with it. It took nearly half a century for the United States to develop a culture to replace it, to find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life.\(^2\)

The United States had fought other wars, but the Civil War conclusively disabused American pretensions about the stability of the principles at the nation’s core. It was a thorough intrusion of practical, prudential calculations upon territory once supposed to be ruled by principle. In terms of culture, the end of the war settled little. The culmination of hostilities only set the stage for debates over what, precisely, had been won. In his Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln

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promised that the war’s end would eventually signify “a new birth of freedom”—it remained to be seen what that would mean.³

Post-war changes only exacerbated the situation. Rapid technological development drove corresponding economic shifts and astonishing new political problems. Equally rapid industrialization and corresponding demographic and cultural trends proved equally challenging. For instance, new national (and international) economic forces challenged political institutions designed for a nation made up of largely self-sufficient agrarian communities. Railroad mileage increased ninefold from 1860 to 1920. Many growing industries consolidated into several corporations by taking advantage of outdated legal structures regulating their behavior. In 1894, American journalist Henry Demarest Lloyd wrote that insular corporate interests “assert the right, for their private profit, to regulate the consumption by the people of the necessaries of life, and to control production, not by the needs of humanity, but by the desires of a few for dividends.” He worried that existing moral language was being pressed into the service of new masters and for inegalitarian ends. Cornell West, meanwhile, saw “a confused populace caught in the whirlwinds of societal crisis, the cross fires of ideological polemics, and the storms of class, racial, and gender conflicts.”⁴

Some critics insisted that the new American situation proved that the relationship between individual economic behavior and shared prosperity was not as simple as customarily considered. Journalist Herbert Croly put it this way: “The fault in the vision of our national future…[consists] in the expectation that the familiar benefits will continue to accumulate

Americans were accustomed to thinking of political economy in terms of an established meritocracy. In a large country with abundant resources on a still-settling frontier, it was easy to imagine that a citizen’s hard work led to appropriate honors for individual and community alike. In other words, individual liberty and democratic equality seemed to be harmonious political goods. American industrialization and its corresponding concentration of wealth raised serious questions about the easygoing compatibility of the two. Croly argued that Americans risked failing their own founding principles if they continued to permit the existence of economic slavery, if they grind the face of the poor, if they exploit the weak and distribute wealth unjustly, if they allow monopolies to prevail and laws to be unequal, if they are disgracefully ignorant, politically corrupt, commercially unscrupulous, socially snobbish, vulgarly boastful, and morally coarse.6

If Americans were accustomed to thinking of their country as a land of opportunity, a place where hard work yielded both material rewards and a modicum of human dignity, they could not continue to tolerate the income and resource stratification that characterized the late nineteenth century. If they were accustomed to thinking of the United States as the shining example of egalitarian political institutions, they had to face the ugly reality of systematic racism at all levels of government. To paraphrase the title of Croly’s most famous work, this gap between American liberal democratic principles and the reality of American life was evidence that the nation was not living up to its core political and economic promise.7

Most worrisome of all, perhaps, were the ensuing critiques that flowed from this juxtaposition. Within decades of the Civil War, various totalitarian political movements—

Marxists and fascists the most conspicuous among them—responded with (competing) promises to make sense of the ensuing political chaos. Through ballots, bullets, and otherwise, they took power in countries across Europe and Asia and made impressive gains in popularity in Britain and the United States.⁸

Thus, on the eve of World War II, journalist Walter Lippman worried that liberal democracy lacked an adequate practical or philosophical response to the totalitarian alternatives.

I began writing, impelled by the need to make more intelligible to myself the alarming failure of the Western liberal democracies to cope with the realities of this century…[T]here was no denying, it seemed to me, that there is a deep disorder in our society which comes not from the machinations of our enemies and from the adversities of the human condition but from within ourselves…[T]he liberals became habituated to the notion that in a free and progressive society it is a good thing that the government should be weak.⁹

While liberal democratic regimes had always been messier than their less-representative counterparts, their past success was, in Lippmann’s words, “a daydream during a brief spell of exceptionally fine weather.” It was far from clear, at that moment, whether the West’s liberal democracies were prepared to answer the totalitarians’ challenge (at home or abroad).¹⁰

At this moment—and only partially because of the political challenges of the day—political philosophers were struggling with their own crisis of certainty, what Sheldon Wolin called “the subversion of belief.” The intellectual roots of this trend were many; while many researchers recognize a substantial shift in political philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century, there is considerably less agreement about its specific causes and contours. Was it caused solely by fumbling political responses to economic pressures? Was it due to the supposed

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¹⁰ Lippmann, The Public Philosophy, 16.
march of secularization in Western politics? Scientific advances that implicitly undermined the
grounds of natural law theology? Increased immigration and a new emphasis on theorizing
pluralism? Reinterpretation of individual rights that formerly served to exclude some humans
from citizenship on racial or sexual grounds? The experience of radical moral evil perpetrated by
absolutist regimes? All of the above?¹¹ John Patrick Diggins writes that “the crises of liberalism
of the late nineteenth century” showed that the “main currents of early American political culture
had run dry.” As it turned out,

a Protestant ethic that had emphasized hard work, duty, and moral striving had
given way to a sensate culture of wealth, leisure, and opportunity…Man, once
regarded as a rational creature capable of intellectual and moral progress, was
now conceived as little more than a ‘feeble atom or molecule’ at the mercy of
unconscious drives and infinite mechanisms.¹²

This crisis also represented fragmentation of the nation’s Enlightenment foundation. The latter,
“with its tenuous balance of reason and passion and its faith in ‘self-evident’ truths, had
succumbed to new discoveries of the irrational forces within man and the deterministic forces
within nature and history.”¹³

Though we need not immerse ourselves too extensively into historical debates over the
details, it suffices to note that philosophers at the turn of the century were searching to find their
appropriate role in an uncertain political world. Scant one hundred years after the universal
aspirations of Enlightenment-era ethics, Nietzsche declared that moral ideals took their vitality
from the stirrings—and strength—of the human will. Humans, in other words, are free—and

accounts of modernity’s epistemological crisis, Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre
Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 1–5, 11–15; Charles Taylor, A Secular Age
¹² John Patrick Diggins, The Promise of Pragmatism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1994), 23.
¹³ Diggins, The Promise of Pragmatism, 23.
able—to construct their own moral ideals, on their own terms. Over the next few decades, a host of political philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic began to wrestle with that possibility. If true, did this mean that their forays into metaphysics were better understood in terms of the will, rather than human reason?\textsuperscript{14}

Let’s consider the foregoing in broader terms. For centuries, philosophers staked claims to knowledge of moral laws that stood over and above humans. In the early twentieth century, philosophers took Nietzsche’s insight as an opening to newly subjective moral philosophy. G.E. Moore argued that “personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments include all the greatest, and by far the greatest, goods we can imagine.” If humans determine the meaning of the world themselves, then it follows that that which they enjoy must be equivalent to “the good.” Much of the ensuing century of political philosophy has been a debate orbiting this point. Does this sort of skepticism undercut philosophy’s ability to prescribe moral principles to humans? Can political philosophy exist without metaphysics?\textsuperscript{15}

Indeed, the last several decades of political theorizing have been shot through with a sense that philosophy made a wrong turn sometime early in the twentieth century. This is a common enough trope; various philosophers have identified Christ’s death, the Reformation, Hobbes’ (or Machiavelli’s) works, the American Constitution, the French Revolution, Darwin’s \textit{On the Origin of Species}, and countless other historical points as the new Fall. Leaving aside the validity of any of these specific worries, the latest round of introspection is different. While most of the aforementioned consist of supposed crises of content (with the possible exception of Hobbes’ work), these troubles stemmed from a crisis of the structure of knowledge. This was an

epistemological crisis. After many years under siege, the metaphysical foundations underlying Western political life have been considerably diminished.

During the last century, political thinkers have alternately raged against or acquiesced to this fact. Within these two camps, of course, political philosophers have responded in any number of different ways. For all of them, the core questions go something like this: How should politics be conducted in a world where certainty has been fundamentally shaken? Or, alternatively, if philosophy can no longer credibly offer substantive, fixed truths, what remains for it do?

Much of the last half-century of political theorizing represents an attempt to wrestle with a specific subset of this broader anti-metaphysical current. This subset goes by any number of names, each of which carries a slightly different set of connotations. Some refer to it as “anti-foundational” or “non-foundational” or “post-metaphysical” political thought. Nearly all of these are encompassed by that theoretical catchall: “post-modernism.” Hans Joas provides a good jumping-off point for setting the contours of this group—post-moderns are those who see “the road leading back to the Enlightenment vision of the rational self or to the Romantic vision of the expressive self as closed forever.”¹⁶ At its most extreme, post-modern thought has led to paralyzing skepticism. For example, Foucault argued that political compulsion was hardly limited to traditional political institutions. At his most bitter, he saw intolerance, coercion, and brutality in social norms, linguistic patterns and any number of other indeterminate sources. In other words, Foucault argued that moral prescriptions lurk even behind traditional liberalism’s best efforts to extend public tolerance. If we accept that language itself is a cage of constricting

limits, it becomes difficult to articulate (using words, after all) an emancipatory alternative. One does not build freedom from oppression’s blocks.\footnote{See, for example: Michel Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison}, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), esp. 183.}

Fortunately, a survey of recent post-modern and non-foundationalist literature reveals a more complicated picture. A number of theorists who share some of post-modernism’s epistemological convictions have made an effort to step back from its most radical political possibilities. Thinkers like Joas and Stephen K. White have argued that skepticism about knowledge does not necessarily collapse into full-scale nihilism. Even post-modern hero Richard Rorty resisted the pull of complete epistemological skepticism in his later works.\footnote{Stephen K. White, \textit{Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Joas, \textit{The Genesis of Values}; Peter Augustine Lawler, \textit{Postmodernism Rightly Understood} (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 1999). See Lawler’s early remarks clarifying the postmodernism he aims to defend (2): “Properly understood, postmodernism is not antifoundationalism or a celebration of endless self-creation out of nothing. Antifoundationalism, the assertion of the groundlessness of human existence, is really hypermodernism, or the exaggeration to the point of caricature of the modern impulse to self-creation.”; Cf. Richard Rorty, \textit{Achieving Our Country} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).}

Each of these thinkers admits that centuries of critiques of natural law, natural rights, and other strong epistemological foundations cannot be easily dismissed. While tacking back from the Scylla of overweening skepticism, they resist the Charybdis of returning to those foundations. Rorty described the distinction as follows:

\begin{quote}
[There are] people who think there are such things as intrinsic human dignity, intrinsic human rights, and an ahistorical distinction between the demands of morality and those of prudence…They are opposed by people who say that ‘humanity’ is a biological rather than a moral notion, that there is no human dignity that is not derivative from the dignity of some specific community, and no appeal beyond the relative merits of various actual or proposed communities to impartial criteria which will help us weigh those merits.\footnote{Richard Rorty, \textit{Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197.}
\end{quote}
Many political theorists are refusing to choose between feudal political certainty and post-modern nihilism. Instead of simply asking how politics should be conducted in a world where certainty has been fundamentally shaken, they ask how modern skepticism and tolerance might be preserved without altogether eliminating public judgment and limits to tolerance. White, for instance, seeks an epistemological middle ground “between strong ontology and bald assertions of my perspective.”

It is at this stage in the West’s long-running philosophical debate that John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott are enjoying a considerable renaissance. This should not be surprising. Though they share very few specific political positions, both took the anti-metaphysical thrust of modern political theory seriously. At a moment when many find the past’s warmed-over ethical consensuses and the limitless uncertainties of a post-modern future equally unsatisfying, Dewey and Oakeshott each represent an intriguing alternative. It is fitting, and perhaps even fortunate, that they are largely political opponents. If—to borrow Oakeshott’s most famous metaphor—the West’s political conversation is to remain robust, all ideological tribes will need to find new ways to hold up their end of the bargain.

The shape of this “renaissance” is telling. Recent scholarship eschews the secular, quasi-Marxist, overly optimistic rationalism that early commentators pinned on Dewey. Melvin Rogers has persuasively argued that Dewey’s fallibilism precludes him from sunny-minded overestimation of human capacities. Meanwhile, recent work on Oakeshott has liberated him from the “Burkean traditionalist” caricature advanced by less cautious analysts. Paul Franco warned against this mistake several decades ago, but his argument has been considerably

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20 White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 16.

It is high time for me to introduce the structure of the project. It takes the following form: I begin with a chapter analyzing Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s views of the state of political philosophy in their day. This chapter also introduces core elements of their approaches to epistemology. The second chapter of the project considers Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s views of procedural and methodological attempts to provide bulwarks against uncertainty—especially the scientific method. The third chapter considers Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s accounts of history’s place in political philosophy.

In the fourth (and final) chapter, I analyze several recent attempts to balance epistemological skepticism and political conviction. I argue that many recent theorists’ efforts to find a middle ground between absolutism and nihilism actually turn out to be updated versions of Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s own answers to these questions. I argue that their answers are especially relevant for our own struggles. Recent political challenges have their roots in the epistemological crisis that animated Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s work. The collapse of Western ethical consensus on a number of live political matters gave birth to a tolerant pluralism that has since flowered into rigid polarization. Last century’s epistemological crisis represented a fracturing of ethical foundations. Its effects extended into the world of political facts. Today’s political opponents ground their arguments in competing, and incompatible, moral foundations—but they also construct worlds of data that do not overlap. Indeed, many political theorists have
realized the degree to which the West’s plural, liberal democratic politics require epistemological foundations that provide stability without rigidity. In their own ways, Dewey and Oakeshott understood this better than anyone else.
CHAPTER 1

ABSOLUTE OR NOTHING: THE SEARCH FOR NEW MODERN POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

I. Introduction

As we saw in the Introduction, the rapid pace of political change at the end of the nineteenth century prompted rethinking of philosophy’s place in modernity. To that end, it is critical that we establish Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s own assessments of the intellectual situation in which they found themselves. What did they see as the defining philosophical struggles of their time? In this chapter, we see that Dewey and Oakeshott believed that contemporary philosophy’s troubles were primarily epistemological (though neither thought that this meant that philosophers needed more complex epistemologies). Insofar as they outline a similar set of theoretical challenges for philosophy, this goes a long way towards establishing what their projects have in common. This chapter lays a foundation for later discussion of their more fully political arguments by establishing their views on epistemology and philosophy as a human endeavor.

Dewey believed that recent leaps in human knowledge suggested the need for serious revision of a number of traditional Western philosophical positions. Above all, he argued that recent newly refined investigations of human cognitive processes were extremely problematic for correspondence theories of truth. He also thought that Darwin’s work showed that life is best understood in terms of development and flux—not stasis. These shifts in human knowledge suggested new opportunities for philosophical advancement.

In his Logic and The Quest for Certainty, Dewey mapped a set of new potential avenues for philosophical analysis while insisting that other cherished philosophical cottage industries were no longer profitable areas of research. No amount of theoretically-fueled nostalgia could
restore the value of discredited *a priori* truths about human nature. Why should philosophers close themselves off from tilling newly discovered theoretical fields? There were ample new questions for investigation: “The effect of modern science has, it is notorious, set the main problems for modern philosophy. How is science to be accepted and yet the realm of values to be conserved?” New developments in human knowledge revealed philosophical foundations to be considerably less stable than commonly thought. If traditional problematics needed revising, this meant that related political debates would also need adjustment. If research revealed the material world to be less “objectively” or “universally” rational than simply chaotic, surely philosophical theories that claimed to discern universally rational (or natural) political principles warranted reexamination.22

Modernity needed serious theoretical analysis of the implications of intellectual changes, and Dewey believed that this was a project every bit as noble and worthwhile as past philosophical inquiries. Unlike his fellow pragmatist, William James, Dewey saw little reason for humans to be troubled by the process of rethinking their core ideals and values. Unwarranted attachment to discredited principles simply led to stultified, unworkable thinking. New uncertainties offered philosophers the opportunity to suggest new ways of thinking about problems philosophical and political. Why, Dewey wondered, should this worry anyone?23

In a comparison of Dewey and Oakeshott, Terry Nardin gets it right when he notes that “Oakeshott’s conception of philosophy took shape during a period in which philosophers were

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especially concerned with rethinking its proper aims.” Like Dewey, Oakeshott also believed that epistemological uncertainty is central to modern philosophy. He resisted philosophical claims to possess knowledge of fundamental or natural principles. Oakeshott argued that knowledge is a product of various partial, conditional projects—science, history, and practical life—and that philosophy takes these as the subject of its inquiries. If human experience is a “conversation” between conditional modes of knowledge, then philosophy is the “parasitic” study of “the quality and style of each voice.” Philosophy seeks to make sense of the various claims made on behalf of each of these modes. In other words, philosophy is an indeterminate “adventure” that pursues, but never reaches an “unconditional or definitive understanding” of all experience. For Oakeshott, philosophy consisted of (endless) reflection on unexamined conditions for knowledge—not fixed, certain conclusions about the ultimate nature of Being or various beings. He frequently praised Hobbes, Hegel, and Augustine for their resistance to preemptively ending the work of theorizing. Philosophy, Oakeshott wrote, was “radically subversive,” and “a reflective enterprise which [has] the precise purpose of avoiding all such fixed points of reference, one designed to remain fluid, one for which no presupposition [is] sacred.” Later in the same essay, he wrote, “In philosophy, to be hot for certainty is always a mistake.”

Nonetheless, Oakeshott was less convinced than Dewey that philosophy was fundamentally changed by developments in scientific knowledge. He would never credit Darwin or Galileo or any single thinker with some world-shattering insight revealing the contingent, uncertain character of human experience. He was too thoroughly skeptical for that. Rather, he

recognized modern epistemological uncertainty as an historical development worthy of philosophical reflection—indeed, he believed that it demanded such attention.

Oakeshott thought that twentieth century totalitarianism was simply the most obvious indicator of a broader, more dangerous current within the modern world. Despite their pluralist, liberal intellectual inheritance, Western citizens were tempted by easier, more settled political life. Oakeshott worried that absolutist politics was the outgrowth of an absolutist approach to philosophy, so he insisted on celebrating partial, incomplete, and uncertain human experience—and his epistemological writings reflected this predilection. Like Dewey—and also, unlike James—Oakeshott believed that humans needed considerably less stability in their politics than many analysts usually assumed. They might grow to seek it if they were taught to, but this was not an inherent, inbuilt quality. Surely Western philosophers could articulate a new defense of plural, uncertain politics that took into account the epistemological skepticism that Oakeshott (and many of his colleagues) found persuasive.25

In other words, both Dewey and Oakeshott understood modern political uncertainty as a prime target for philosophical reflection. Both believed substantive political fixity was antithetical to the Western liberal tradition—and both recognized that the nineteenth century’s attacks on traditional epistemology (and metaphysics more generally) posed problems for existing philosophical defenses of liberalism. As such, both made serious attempts to establish epistemological approaches that 1) were compatible with contemporary skepticism and 2) outlined a new, constructive role for philosophy in modern politics.

In this chapter, we see that their conclusions in these matters are strikingly similar. Both Dewey and Oakeshott believed that the world’s meaning stems from humans—there is no other, separate, objective world of true meaning detached from experience. Humans do not discover meaning in the world; they create it. In other words, both believed that truth is not a matter of discerning the match between ideal forms and the beliefs we hold regarding the particulars of experience. Truth is not a matter of corresponding to a world of transcendent meaning; rather, we measure truth by how well our beliefs cohere together within the world of human experience. Finally, both Dewey and Oakeshott took uncertainty to be a fortunate fact of human life. Both believed that philosophical absolutism was a betrayal of the modern West’s philosophical and political traditions. Finally, both Dewey and Oakeshott spent considerable time with these questions, and so must we if we would make sense of the more thoroughly political sections of their work.26

II. Dewey on Epistemology27

Dewey’s thoughts on Darwinian biology framed many of his answers to these questions. He believed that Darwin’s *Origin of Species* had enormous consequences for humans’ political, social, and cultural life. To put a finer point on it, Dewey thought that Darwin’s work revealed

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27 Robert Westbrook, in his seminal intellectual biography, suggests that Dewey was hostile to epistemology. This is true insofar as Dewey believed that dusty philosophical debates over the structure of human knowing threatened to sideline philosophy from real human problems, but it is hardly true in any broader sense. Dewey worked out definite, detailed positions on any number of epistemological questions. Westbrook here appears to be mistaking Dewey’s disdain for traditional epistemological positions (and related debates) with a wholesale dismissal of the subject. Dewey worked on epistemology; he simply had no patience for those who despaired of working on anything else. Cf. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 140–1.
not only the relationship between—but also some shared ground of—political and biological existence (not to mention social, cultural, and economic life). Dewey’s view was that separating these into distinct realms obscured the profundity of Darwin’s thought. Indeed, he believed that the “theological clamor” over *The Origin of Species* distracted from the broader thrust of its argument. Darwin’s work introduced a new “mode of thinking” about certainty. It was a mistake to think of it as simply a challenge to religious or cultural convictions. Rather, Darwin challenged the previously unquestioned status of “fixity” as a fundamental principle of human experience, and thus contained implications for all fields of study.\(^\text{28}\)

Above all, Darwin’s theory of evolution released a number of philosophical debates from the “quest for certainty,” particularly in terms of so-called natural laws or rights. It certainly sent traditional ontological and cosmological views spinning. Darwin showed that organisms’ natures are not fixed. If whole categories of creatures adapt and adjust over time, it seems strange to insist that there is a static and permanent order in the kingdom of living things. How can changing, developing categories of organisms be defined by an inflexible, natural purpose? Dewey doubted that it was still meaningful to think of humans in terms of natural law or teleology. Weren’t we, after all, only a few million years removed from our lower primate ancestors? If humans as we now know them represent but one stage in a prolonged process of development, we have little grounds to claim that our current nature has any substantial permanence, let alone privileged ontological status. If the material form of an organism changes over long periods of time, foundational claims linking this form to supposedly natural ethical

ends make little sense. Yet much philosophy was (and still is) mired in arguments over theories linking purportedly immutable ethical principles with the fundamental nature of humans.

Absolutist theories of epistemology also needed updating. In “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” Dewey explained that Western philosophy had long been infected by classical views of the material world. The Greeks, led by Aristotle, looked to the living world and saw ordered development that

does not cease till there is achieved a true final form, a τελευταίον, a completed, perfected end…From the casual drift of daily weather, through the uneven recurrence of seasons and unequal return of seed time and harvest, up to the majestic sweep of the heavens—the image of eternity in time—and from this to the unchanging pure and contemplative intelligence beyond nature lies one unbroken fulfillment of ends.29

Thinkers in this vein generally concluded that intelligence consisted in discerning the “completed, perfected end” suggested within the partial, inchoate appearance of the perceived world. Their view of nature colored their epistemology: “Change as change is mere flux and lapse; it insults intelligence. Genuinely to know is to grasp a permanent end that realizes itself through changes, holding them thereby within the metes and bounds of fixed truth.” While Western philosophers left most of the content of ancient thought behind, they largely retained the Greeks’ faith in an essential, ideal, or rational order detectable in the world of messy human experience.30

30 Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” 5–6, 9; For more on the continuing influence of classical epistemology, see Dewey, The Quest For Certainty, 33–34:

If the conditions of the possibility of knowledge can be shown to be of an ideal and rational character, then, so it has been thought, the loss of an idealistic cosmology in physics can be readily borne. The physical world can be surrendered to matter and mechanism, since we are assured that matter and mechanism have their foundation in immaterial mind. Such has been the characteristic course of modern spiritualistic philosophies since the time of Kant.
Dewey believed that Darwin’s work revealed change to be the determinative fact about life. The epistemological extension follows: if the matter of the world is always in flux, then knowledge about it will inevitably be contingent and mutable. Though we strenuously insist upon sanctifying specific knowledge as “natural” or “transcendent” or “universal,” Darwin’s work suggested that the natural world is insufficiently stable to yield such knowledge. There are no firm epistemological foundations upon which to build immutable principles (ethical or otherwise). Like the Greeks, Dewey argued that the character of the material world suggests critical insights into the structure of knowledge. He simply thought that Darwin had conclusively shown that the Greek view of the material world was wrong (which also left their epistemology suspect).31

But what of scientific truth? Surely Dewey granted it privileged status over and above other knowledge. Scholars—like Christopher Lasch and Patrick Deneen—determined to read Dewey as a cartoonishly scientistic thinker have ignored that he extended his skepticism to the practice of science. Dewey’s faith in science’s capacity for discovering fixed truths was just as measured: “the natural sciences have developed a technique for achieving a high degree of probability and for measuring, within assignable limits, the amount of probability which attaches in particular cases to conclusions.” As we will see in the next chapter, Dewey resisted treating the scientific method as a new pathway to fixed truth.

What’s more, a number of scientific discoveries during his lifetime called mechanistic causal scientific theories into question—a fact which did not escape Dewey’s notice. He

Throughout Quest, Dewey argues that many modern philosophers have pared away central elements of Greek thought, they have retained the broader structure.31 Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” 7–8. Note, however, that Dewey did not see Darwin’s account as a singular event. He traced the roots of Darwin’s challenge to philosophy in Galileo and others who similarly built their work around “flux” in place of “essence.”
recognized Werner Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle as evidence that human knowledge was contingent and indeterminate. Heisenberg showed that human knowledge depends, at a fundamental level, upon the perspective and perception of humans. Context brings forth and rules out particular elements in observation, to the degree that the pursuit of knowledge affects the content of what we know.\textsuperscript{32}

Similarly, Dewey believed that Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity “substitutes for the neat, smooth, well-ordered world of Newton a world which is full of puckers and skews.” Niels Bohr’s work on quantum mechanics suggested a still “freer view of a world that has man as an active component within it.” Despite substantive differences, Newton’s world resembles the world of medieval natural law thinkers in one critical way: both are governed by fixed and preexisting rules that hold true regardless of the position of observers testing them. Einstein and Bohr’s work challenged this view, root and branch. Their work showed that the content of human knowing was tightly intertwined with the circumstances of observation; even the non-living material world has less of a fixed structure than usually believed. In sum, Dewey believed that science was roughly indicating the contours and structure of how humans know the world.\textsuperscript{33}

Dewey’s epistemological positions drew upon more than Darwinian biology and contemporary developments in theoretical physics. He believed that new psychological studies provided additional evidence to challenge traditional philosophical theories of truth and
knowledge. If advances in theoretical physics revealed a world of “puckers and skews,” these studies went further. They demonstrated that uncertainty stemmed from the processes of human knowing—not simply from the vagaries of the world of matter. These arguments are widespread in Dewey’s works, but nowhere are they clearer than in “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology.”

In “Reflex Arc,” Dewey argued that thoughts about experience are inseparable from active engagement with experience. He believed that recent psychological research had conclusively demonstrated that the world of experience (the environment) is always permeated by the knowing mind, and vice versa. In other words, the perceived content of an experience is inextricably linked to the act of perceiving it. Knowledge of the world’s content is built upon the “process of undergoing: a process of standing something; of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words.” Experience is an engaged, holistic event, not mere reflection upon recent engagements with an alien world. Nor, by the way, is experience reducible to the brute data of these engagements themselves.34

Yet traditional theories of cognition and perception maintain a sharp distinction between knowing subjects and known objects. They posit a world of material whose content is fully separate from human knowing. On this view, human beliefs are more or less true according to how well they correspond to the fixed content of the perceptible world. From this it follows that humans discover this content by interacting with the world and subsequently reflecting upon it. This “external” world of stimuli provokes a variety of “internal” responses in human beings.

Truths, then, can be defined as those thoughts, beliefs, utterances, propositions, and so forth that accurately bridge the gap between the “internal” self and an “external” world.

Dewey’s example in “Reflex Arc” clarifies the traditional position and prepares the foundation for his alternative. The traditional epistemological understanding goes as follows: if an individual happens to touch a candle’s flame (a stimulus), she pulls back and perhaps complains at the pain (possible responses). On this model, humans act in the world, perceive resulting sensory stimuli, reflect upon these, and think about potential next actions. This theory of human knowing lay behind a host of common philosophical dichotomies: subjects and objects, internal responses and external stimuli, thoughts and actions, knowing mind and known environment, and so on and so forth. Whatever conceptual slippage exists between these various distinctions, each posits a clear division of human cognition and experience.  

Dewey argued that there was little evidence that these dichotomies capture the reality of how human cognitive and perceptive processes work. Human physical and mental processes are not so easily separated. Consider the flame example again. Looking at the candle is not a passive act. It is a choice to narrow her field of sensory focus. It is a response to observed light as well as a stimulus to further action—the individual reaches for the flame. It requires a slew of physical and cognitive processes from “the movement of body, head and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced” to comparative, contextual reflection on plausible interpretations of the experience. In other words, “seeing” is both action and perception. No one moment is solely definable as stimulus or response. No single element is distinguishable as purely thought or action. Human experience is a fluid process where these supposedly discrete elements blend

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into one another. It is a “circuit” where stimulus and response, thought and action, the knowing agent and the known world, are all “correlative and contemporaneous” with each other. The entire process is shot through with interpretation. Mind permeates environment and vice versa. To obsess over the particular placement of some supposed demarcation between them is futile. It is, Dewey thought, to ask the wrong question.  

Without such a demarcation, Dewey could conceive of no way that humans might begin to prove that there was some fuller, truer world lying just beyond the perceptible world. If the world of experience cannot be neatly divorced from processes of human perception, then human judgment cannot be abstracted away from sensory experience. The two bleed into one another. There is no avoiding the frustrating partial goods of human experience, no matter how badly philosophers might wish to do so. Though we may develop strategies for making our knowledge of various experiences more reliable, this is different from asserting the permanence of our knowledge. That which we perceive as our environment is always conditioned by the interpretive work of our minds.  

Let’s consider some consequences of Dewey’s approach. Humans never experience without mediating conceptual frameworks. When we attempt to identify a pile of material, we begin with a set of anticipated, projected ways of understanding what we’re experiencing: Is it wood? Is the object a table? A chair? Where is it? At a desk? In a hospital? On a tennis court? In a rickshaw? Indeed, by the time we are consciously asking ourselves such questions, we have already applied a number of schemes for understanding what we perceive. Or, to put it another way, brute sensory data (often thought of as raw experiential “content”) does not exist. It is always and already structured by mind’s organizational schemes. In terms of the candle example  

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mentioned above, pain is experienced and interpreted in terms of past experiences. We never come to perception, let alone judgment, without cognitive resources. We always project understandings from our past experience onto unknown or unsettled situations. Our mind always imposes something of its character onto the unfamiliar. We draw upon lessons from the settled past to resolve the troubled present.

Of course, if mind cannot be separated from environment, if the known is always shot through with the projected expectations of the knower, there is no point to testing the truth of knowledge by its supposed correspondence to a perspective-less world beyond perception. Truth is not a matter of understanding “objects” independent of “subjects.” Dewey doubts that such a world exists, and he is confident that no such world can be demonstrated to exist. Such a proof would require us to posit an ontological realm separate from human experience—while simultaneously insisting that knowledge of this realm is of enormous importance for evaluating human experience. Alan Ryan put it this way: “[Dewey] observed that if philosophers insist on evacuating all meaning from the world, they have no resources available to pump it back in, from which it follows that we would do better not to start down that philosophical track.” Dewey had no interest in this sort of theoretical jujitsu.37

The challenges that Dewey’s approach poses to the epistemology underlying many theories of Western ethics should be obvious. These generally follow this chain of reasoning: The external world of action is messy, but human cognition can hover “above” it, insulated from trouble. It purportedly follows that ethical principles necessarily float above the messy particularities of worldly experience. This is why efforts to construct supra-experiential platforms for evaluating the world—veils of ignorance, Archimedean Points, and the like—so

often terminate with a restatement of the moment’s existing biases. When philosophers flee the world’s messiness in search of firmer, purer knowledge, they become blind to the ways that these biases intrude upon their theorizing. Dewey believed that philosophers had long overestimated the special status of such abstract thought experiments. If what we know is so thoroughly contingent upon experience, it’s hard to imagine the worth of theories of a sharp distinction between subject and object or knower and known. Absent evidence that humans had cognitive access to an unchanging, supra-experiential world, he saw no reason that we should bother inventing one as a place to search for ethical principles.

In an important sense, then, Robert Westbrook is correct when he argues that Dewey does not have a “theory of epistemology.” Insofar as he theorized the processes of human knowledge, he argued that there was no need for theoretical justification that knowledge-from-experience is adequate for human purposes. Knowledge was not, as Richard Rorty would later put it, “a ‘problem’ about which we ought to have a ‘theory.’” In other words, human knowing only becomes a philosophical conundrum if we assume that it requires theoretical sustenance from beyond its own borders.38

If all of this is so, however, it indicates a major fault in the foundations of much of Western philosophy. If truth is not a matter of correspondence to a fixed, stable realm, how can we measure our beliefs? What is the alternative? Philosophers since the Greeks have promised access to permanent truths beyond the daily flux of human things. Without these, is philosophy worth pursuing at all? What distinguishes it from other pursuits? Dewey laid out his answers in *The Quest for Certainty*.

Dewey scholars often bypass *Quest* in favor of his *Logic* or *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. This is a mistake. No other single work of his so clearly presents his critique of traditional metaphysics and epistemology while also highlighting philosophical paths forward. In *Quest*, Dewey’s primary concern is to suggest ways to move philosophy beyond some of its usual stumbling blocks. The broader theoretical project of seeking “a purely cognitive certification…of the antecedent immutable reality of truth, beauty and goodness” had run into a dead end.\(^{39}\)

In *Quest*, Dewey offers an alternative philosophical approach. If physics reveals the flexible indeterminacy of the world and psychology shows our role in shaping the content of what we know, then philosophy can build on these by theorizing more coherent frameworks of human experience. Instead of promising abstract, immutable principles beyond experience, philosophy could work to discern order within it.\(^{40}\) To philosophize now was “to facilitate the fruitful interaction of our cognitive beliefs, our beliefs resting upon the most dependable methods of inquiry, with our practical beliefs about the values, the ends and purposes, that should control human action in the things of large and liberal human import.” In other words, this version of philosophy aims at clarification. It seeks inconsistencies and hypocrisy in the way that our professed beliefs hang together with the ideas and actions to which they commit us.\(^{41}\) Dewey put it this way:

Anything that may be called knowledge, or a known object, marks a question answered, a difficulty disposed of, a confusion cleared up, an inconsistency reduced to coherence, a perplexity mastered. Without reference to this mediating element, what is called knowledge is but direct and unswerving action or else a

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\(^{39}\) Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 35.

\(^{40}\) It is worth noting that Dewey believed that this was actually the purpose of Greek teleology. The problem, as discussed above, was that the approach’s universal pretensions were difficult to excise from later philosophy.

possessive enjoyment. Similarly, thinking is the actual transition from the problematic to the secure, as far as that is intentionally guided. There is no separate “mind” gifted in and of itself with a faculty of thought; such a conception of thought ends in postulating the mystery of a power outside of nature and yet able to intervene within it. Thinking is objectively discoverable as that mode of serial responsive behavior to a problematic situation in which transition to the relatively settled and clear is effected.42

What can philosophy do? It can improve the ways that humans respond and give meaning to the current of uncertainty that characterizes experience. It can make our thinking clearer. It can link beliefs to the consequences of holding them. Throughout the course of a lifetime, humans accumulate knowledge—provisional answers to various questions prompted by experience—by testing the explanatory capacity of various beliefs. Philosophy can help refine these beliefs and tie them together into consistent frameworks.

This identifies Dewey as a verificationist; for him, knowledge consists of a set of wagers about the consequences of countless actions. We improve, reconsider, and readjust these as we test them over a period of time. For instance, our experience may indicate that bright, flickering lights are painful to touch. After further (cautious) experience, we may recognize that although bright, flickering lights can be painful to touch, they can also be evidence of pending entertainment or distraction or some other familiar outcome. We adjust our various beliefs as we test how well they fit the host of experiences available to us. We also test their coherence vis-à-vis other related claims during the verification process. How well does a belief explain and settle uncertainty? How well does a set of beliefs allow us to predict and control similar situations to those which prompted their formulation? Human knowledge accumulates as we test our beliefs against new and more complicated experiences.

As we accrete a standing stock of knowledge, we also reflect upon how constituent beliefs within this stock “hang together.” Do new beliefs square with other provisionally verified knowledge? New information is always an invitation for humans to consider whether their beliefs about experience can be honestly maintained without undue tension. We do not simply test our knowledge of bright, flickering lights against various experiences of such lights. We also attempt to maintain a degree of consistency between our understanding of such experiences and our broader frameworks of understanding. We recognize that certain understandings of such lights are related to our beliefs about hunger or courage or decorum or traffic or thermodynamics and a host of other innumerable things. In sum, we verify against present experience and the other commitments we hold.43

Dewey believed that a reconstruction of philosophy along these lines might save it from current stultification. Philosophers had long argued that the truth of a belief was measured according to how well it matched with an unchanging set of metaphysical truths. On this account, human beliefs are more or less true insofar as they fit harmoniously within a set of natural laws or correspond to the contours of an ideal form of experience. It generally required philosophers to arrogate to humans “a faculty that had the power of direct apprehension of ‘truths’ that were axiomatic in the sense of being self-evidence, or self-verifying, and self-contained, as the necessary grounds of all demonstrative reasoning.” This approach is at the heart of attempts to discern “a priori first principles” that supposedly govern material and ethical understanding.44

In contrast, Dewey proposed to measure truth in terms of “warranted assertability.” When humans first propose an explanation of their experiences—“the sun orbits the Earth,” “she does not love me like she says,” etc—they have only just begun the work of determining its standing regarding truth. Humans test such explanations in search of a reliable account of experience: “Doubt is uneasy; it is tension that finds expression and outlet in the processes of inquiry. Inquiry terminates in reaching that which is settled. This settled condition is a demarcating characteristic of genuine belief.” Humans reflect on whether their assertion of a particular belief is adequately warranted by its ability to allay their doubts. In sum, true beliefs are those that stand up well enough under observation to be relied upon for our purposes. Consider, for example, the rise and fall of geocentric theories of the universe. These could initially account for some basic experiences of celestial motion, but additional observations made them increasingly implausible. Proponents were forced to develop a number of additional (and dubious) beliefs—an invisible and rigid luminous ether, etc—to sustain their broader theory. The mounting evidence steadily revealed belief in geocentrism to be unwarranted. Above all, each of these additional beliefs proved unequal to the challenge of predicting the locations of various celestial bodies. Heliocentrism, meanwhile, produced steadily more reliable and helpful information, even as measurements became more refined.\footnote{Dewey, Logic, 15.}

This is but one example. Dewey’s treatment of truth and belief has far more interesting implications for the process of discovering and sustaining truth in more quotidian matters. Daily existence does not involve wholesale interrogation of every element of every belief, nor does it require \textit{a priori} certification that beliefs are truly in conformity with the nature of things. Quite the contrary! Human life entails a great deal of testing and wagering. It requires prudential
evaluation of options and outcomes, given the variety of beliefs we bring to bear on experience. We do not need fixed truths so much as generally reliable notions about a variety of experiences. Perfect consistency is hardly a primary concern for going about the business of most humans’ routines. Very few of us need to ensure that our beliefs about the world form a fully coherent whole before we get out of bed each morning. We pass through the vast majority of experiences—we eat, we work, we play—without substantial conscious reevaluation. We develop cognitive shortcuts that help us to avoid constant reflection.

In a word, we develop habits. A sufficiently-tested belief that repeatedly serves to make sense of experience eventually calcifies beyond reflection into a habit of thought or action: “The strength, solidity of a habit is not its own possession but is due to reinforcement by the force of other habits which it absorbs into itself.” Habits are those beliefs, those actions, those manners of thinking that we generally take as givens when assessing new situations. They make it possible to add nuance and complexity to our knowledge without necessarily bothering to reflectively consider how each adjustment affects the full picture of the beliefs to which we are committed. Lived human experience does not demand constant, self-conscious adjustment of knowledge. We do not need to develop and subsequently assert a specific new principle of bright, flickering objects in order to treat them differently. We do not need to consciously pick a side in debates over celestial motion in order to complete the overwhelming majority of daily tasks (though our reliance upon satellites may indicate that we implicitly assent to heliocentrism). Much of this work goes on without active, conscious attention, which helps explain why—and how—all humans get by despite maintaining some level of inconsistency in what they believe.46

The work of clarifying inconsistencies in human experience is appropriate for philosophers. Dewey believed that philosophical reflection could suggest ways that our everyday thinking had become “stale.” Philosophy could take up the task of examining our habits. Indeed, philosophers can help with “the difficulty with which mankind throws off beliefs that have become habitual. The test of ideas, of thinking generally, is found in the consequences to which the ideas lead, that is in the new arrangements of things which are brought into existence.”

Philosophers are well-suited for the work of interrogating and evaluating the cogency of arguments. Rigorous reflection has always been their business. If they bend themselves to the task, they can demonstrate that some of our common beliefs do not, in fact, sit well with others.\footnote{Dewey, Quest For Certainty, 109.}

For example, is it coherent to simultaneously profess to believe in the political equality of all humans while denying some citizens rights generally extended to others? What changes would be necessary to bring our common stock of beliefs into a more coherent whole? Presumably we would need to abandon one of the two positions. If all humans are not created equal for the purpose of politics, we remove such language from our common discourse and maintain our restrictions on access to political participation. If political equality is something we would maintain, we need to find ways to adjust our political institutions and policies to be consistent with that principle’s intimations. Philosophers prompt these questions by calling our attention to rough patches in our accounts of what we believe. Furthermore, once inconsistencies have been identified, philosophers can also propose creative ways to resolve them.\footnote{John Dewey, How We Think, in The Later Works of John Dewey, 8:17, 1933, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 141. Cf. John Dewey, Ethics, in The Middle Works of John Dewey, 5:15, 1908, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 80–101.}
For instance, philosophers can provide theoretical machinery to bridge gaps between seemingly inconsistent beliefs. What sort of equality do we mean in this case? Who counts as part of our community? But surely various philosophers will provide differing accounts of how to join such beliefs—how are we to settle such disputes? Does this amount to surrendering philosophy’s privileged disciplinary status? In the absence of a sanctified, universal adjudicatory principle, such disputes can only be settled against the standard of coherence. How well do the competing philosophical explanations fit with the rest of our beliefs? Our definitions of equality and citizenship, inchoate and fuzzy though they may be, must be at least minimally compatible together. There is no guarantee that appeals to coherence will conclusively settle all such disputes—but then again, the same is true for traditional metaphysics. The \textit{a priori} truths that are self-evident to one philosopher have rarely commanded the intuitive assent of all other philosophers. In the absence of unequivocal revelation, philosophy has always been stuck with dissent and discourse. No projected standard for measuring a view’s truth will change that.

Thus, philosophers arguing over the relative coherence of competing attempts to smooth over inconsistencies in our beliefs need not be tempted to attach metaphysical significance to their work. The fact that they are capable of discerning a semblance of coherent principles within experience is not, after all, evidence of correspondence with a fixed “natural” order. As a pragmatist, Dewey demanded to know what difference it would make whether we apply such labels or not. What, in William James’ famous phrase, is the “cash value” of declaring a particular principle to be “universal” or “natural” or “self-evident” or any other such thing? Do such labels meaningfully affect the behavior of humans or the problems of politics—or do they simply serve to preemptively close off discussion? As Richard Rorty put it years later, “It would be nice if philosophers could give us assurance that the principles which we approve of…are
‘rational’ in a way that the principles of [our opponents] are not”—but there is little evidence that they can. No amount of wishing counts as actual proof that philosophy can provide such assurances.\textsuperscript{49}

Dewey was well aware that this would not appeal to the sensibilities of philosophers accustomed to a lofty perch above human experience. Many, he expected, would argue that the questions entailed by such projects lacked

the dignity that is attached to the traditional questions of philosophy. They are proximate questions, not ultimate. They do not concern Being and Knowledge ‘in themselves’ and at large, but the state of existence at specified times and places and the state of affection, plans and purposes under concrete circumstances.\textsuperscript{50}

What was philosophy without the quest for certainty on ultimate questions? Dewey answered: it was relevant. It was conversational. It was open-ended. It was helpful. It was important. It was interesting. So if philosophers were ready to “make another start,” they would do better to begin with “Desires, affections, preferences, needs and interests,” since these “at least exist in human experience.” Dewey thought that further deliberation about the plausibility of Cartesian epistemology or calcified natural law(s) was unlikely to improve philosophical discourse in any serious way. Absolutist pretensions in philosophy were proving more enervating than enlivening. Meanwhile, there was ample evidence in the early twentieth century that democracy and liberalism (and perhaps even capitalism?) were not living up to their promise. There was more than enough inconsistency for philosophers to explore.\textsuperscript{51}

It’s worth noting that the course of twentieth century philosophy bears out Dewey’s position. Analytic philosophers spent decades spinning themselves into increasingly remote,

\textsuperscript{50} Dewey, \textit{Quest for Certainty}, 36.
\textsuperscript{51} Dewey, \textit{Quest for Certainty}, 36.
disconnected theoretical dead ends. In their hands, Plato’s deeply phenomenological account of reason and appetites in human experience becomes a desiccated “mind-body problem.” Philosophers’ insistence on pursuing epistemological purity by abstracting away from the messiness of particular human problems eventually culminated in answers that were wholly irrelevant for humans struggling with actual lived problems. If philosophers would construct worlds beyond human experience, they thereby sacrificed their chance to speak compellingly about problems of human experience.\(^{52}\)

### III. Oakeshott on Epistemology

Oakeshott also recognized the early twentieth century as a moment besieged by yearnings for epistemological certainty. Humans in the West had spent centuries developing a tradition of (and corresponding political and economic institutions for) maintaining common stability without unduly closing off questions about ultimate ends. Like Dewey, Oakeshott worried that erosion of some of the tradition’s longstanding metaphysical foundations would imperil its outworkings. As we will see below, Oakeshott was sympathetic to contemporary critiques of supra-experiential metaphysics; he believed that modern liberal regimes could be justified without making recourse to the old metaphysics.

It is true that the West faced a host of political temptations early in the twentieth century. Some—politicians and philosophers alike—sought to end modern plural uncertainty by imposing ethical consensus. Ironically enough, Oakeshott noted, a *plurality of universalistic* political theories abounded across the West. In a volume analyzing the various political “doctrines” regnant in Europe early in the twentieth century, he wrote:

Contemporary Europe presents the spectator with a remarkable variety of social and political doctrines; indeed it is improbable that this collection of communities has ever before shown such fertility of invention in this field. Of course it is some centuries now since Western Europe could be said to subscribe to and live under a single and universal conception of man, society and government...Moreover, this variety of social and political doctrine is not to be explained as merely the product of a fashion which has become a craze. It denotes a deep and natural dissatisfaction with the social and political doctrine, broadly to be called Liberalism.  

Enthusiastic Marxists looked forward to the imminent subsumption of national and cultural plurality into a cosmopolitan unity. Nationalists of various stripes clamored for political and cultural renovation to cleanse the future of “impurities.” Carl Schmitt argued that liberal individualism was a sort of anti-politics which “makes of the state a compromise and of its institutions a ventilating system.” He thought that “all good observers” of liberal politics would “[despair] of trying to find here a political principle or an intellectually consistent idea.” He decried, among other things, liberalism’s un-romantic and “demilitarized” character. Indeed, Schmitt embraced the National Socialists’ early twentieth century efforts to revitalize German politics. Others dissatisfied with modern liberalism sought to reduce uncertainty to a series of technical problems. In this, if little else, the highly institutional writings of Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek shared company with his Marxist opponents.

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Oakeshott recognized liberalism’s present precariousness. In the same volume just cited, he noted:

To call Representative Democracy into our debate will appear to some to be calling in a Rip van Winkle of social and political doctrine who cannot understand what the others are saying and who has not the wit to learn, and whose sleep has been all the more profound because it has been the waking slumber of dogmatic repose. Moreover, the characteristic simple-mindedness of the Representative Democratic doctrine makes it appear in the modern world as a fool among knaves.

Too enthusiastic a pursuit of certainty would close off much of what was best in Western political life. Thus, much of his career was devoted to outlining the philosophical reasons that this sort of political certainty was impossible—due to the structure of human knowing—and what’s more, that it was undesirable within the ethical wagers of the West’s political tradition. If we hope to understand his more specifically political arguments, we must first make sense of his treatments of epistemology and truth.

Oakeshott’s concern with epistemology spanned the full course of his academic career. Before he could theorize human pursuit of political certainty, he needed a comprehensive philosophical account of how humans know the world. Thus, in his first major work, *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott set out to show that philosophy pursues a coherent account of all experience—and that experience is always a world of ideas. Broadly speaking, knowledge and experience are inextricably tied together; they are indistinguishably one. This is why he explains (in the book’s introduction) that *Experience* “derives all that is valuable in it from its affinity to what is known by the somewhat ambiguous name of Idealism, and that the works from which I am conscious of having learnt most are Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and Bradley’s

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Appearance and Reality.” In the book, he stakes out a fully Idealist epistemology and a coherence theory of truth.⁵⁶

All of the arguments within Experience rest upon one fundamental position: humans can only access the world by means of experience, and they can only make sense of experience by means of thought. What’s more, Oakeshott repeatedly stresses that thought is coterminous with experience. It is experience. Human consciousness has no way of experiencing the world without inadvertently using judgment to order it. In Oakeshott’s terms, this means that experience is always “a world of ideas.” Paul Franco summarizes this particularly well:

In experience, on Oakeshott’s view, we do not begin with absolute data or fixed facts (frequently conceived in terms of the “immediate” facts of perception). Rather, we begin with a world of ideas, a world in which the so-called “facts” are only half-known, a world in which nothing is fixed, solid, or absolute. As our knowledge advances, Oakeshott argues, the initial datum itself changes. The given facts are not fixed and inviolable; they are completely dependent on the whole world to which they belong. Any chance in this world necessarily involves a transformation of the “facts” themselves. For Oakeshott, fact and world—fact and interpretation, fact and theory—are inseparable.⁵⁷

It is perhaps worth cautioning that it is difficult to explain Oakeshott’s position without occasionally slipping into unnecessarily dualistic language. Let me be as clear as possible: Oakeshott does not believe that ideas are identifiably separate schemes which humans impose upon the otherwise untouched content of experience. He strenuously avoids a distinction between empirical facts and evaluative schemes: “Facts are never merely observed, remembered, or combined; they are always made.” Ideas are indistinguishable from experience; they are

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⁵⁷ Franco, The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, 31, 36, emphasis added.
experience (and vice versa). As we have no resources to escape our own perception, consciousness (along with judgment) cannot be demarcated neatly from experience.\footnote{Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 9–11, 42.}

Let’s consider this in more detail. Oakeshott maintains that experience is always colored by the intervention of human thought. There is no possibility for pure, immediate experience—our judgment always engages the content we perceive. But this does not mean that judgment wrangles otherwise untouched pieces of human sensory data into an “experience.” Even the most basic, fundamental elements of experience are categorized and shaped by consciousness (because they consist of consciousness). Indeed, to speak of “coloring” or “shaping” is to subtly misrepresent Oakeshott’s view. It implicitly suggests that pure content exists to be molded. It does not.

Like Dewey, in “Reflex Arc,” Oakeshott goes so far as to argue that basic sensation is incomprehensible without judgment. In language that echoes the “Sense Certainty” section in Hegel’s Phenomenology, Oakeshott argues that “separation of sensation from judgment implies, in the first place, that the given in sensation must be isolated…nothing more than a bare ‘this is,’ in which the ‘this’ is utterly indeterminate, without name or character, and the ‘is’ is limited to merely ‘here’ and ‘now.’”\footnote{Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 13. G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit. ed. and trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013-forthcoming), ¶¶91–92. Compare with the following passage from Hegel:}

For its part, consciousness only exists in this certainty as the pure I; or, within that certainty, the I exists merely as a pure this, and the object likewise exists merely as a pure this. I, as This, am certain of this item not because I, as consciousness, have thereby set myself into development and have variously set my thoughts into motion. It is also the case that I am certain of this item not for the reason that the item of which I am certain would exist in terms of a rich relation of diverse states in itself or because it would be related in multifarious ways to others. Both have nothing to do with the truth of sense-certainty; in that certainty, neither I nor the
as identifiable elements of experience, human judgment is already engaged. Indeed, just as Dewey argued in his candle example in “Reflex Arc,” Oakeshott writes, “To be conscious of something is, in some degree, to recognize it; and recognition involves us at once in judgment, in inference, in reflection, in thought.” Perception and judgment bleed into each other. Experience without judgment’s intervention is, he believes, quite literally unthinkable. It is impossible to conceive of any actual thing without shaping it into ideas, without categorizing and evaluating it.60

Truth, in Oakeshott’s view, runs through the ideas which make up human experience. It is “the condition of the world of experience in which that world is satisfactory to itself.” Truth is the coherent unity of experience, a full understanding of experience that fits together on its own terms, without unexamined assumptions. This coherence is measured in terms of the “world or system” of ideas that make up experience. Of course, this means that particular human experiences are always part of a broader world of connected experiences. No single element ever

item mean “a manifold of mediation”; “I” does not mean “a manifold of diverse activities of representing and thinking,” nor does the item mean “a manifold of diverse states”; rather, the item is, and it is merely because it is. For sense-certainty this is what is essential, and this pure being, that is, this simple immediacy constitutes its truth. Likewise, as a relation, certainty is an immediate, pure relation. Consciousness is I, nothing further, a pure this, and the individual knows a pure this, that is, he knows the individual...However, if we take a look at it, there is on the sidelines a good deal more in play in this pure being which constitutes the essence of this certainty and which declares it to be its truth. An actual sense-certainty is not merely this pure immediacy but also an example of it. Among all the countless distinctions thereby popping up, we find in every case the chief distinction, namely, that in that certainty both of the already noted “this’s,” namely, a this as an I and a this as an object, precipitate all at once out of pure being. If we reflect on this distinction, it turns out that neither the one nor the other exists merely immediately within sense-certainty; rather, both are mediated.

60 Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 14. Cf. 29: “The primary datum in experience, as such, is never solid, fixed and inviolable, never merely to be accepted, never absolute or capable of maintaining itself, never satisfactory.” Cf. Nardin, The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, 6–7.
stands as “absolutely isolated and without relations.” Seemingly separate and particular experiences are always connected to others.\footnote{Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 27–28.}

Just what does he mean by “a world of experience,” however? First of all, Oakeshott believes that every experience is already partially coherent within some broader context. An experience that is fully disconnected is not an experience at all, but a wholly hypothetical and incomprehensible impossibility. A fully isolated experience—presuming that such a thing could exist at all—would be as meaningless as it would be inexplicable. Every instance of experience is linked to others; it is part of a broader world.

Suppose, for instance, that we experience the sight of a man wearing a helmet. Beyond the already implicit ideas—What are helmets? How are they worn?—we can only make further sense of this experience in the context of a broader world of ideas. If he is wearing a matching shirt with a number, and is standing on a marked field, we may place this experience within the worlds of “American football,” “sport,” “American entertainment,” or a handful of others. If, however, the man is on an airplane, carrying a bulky backpack and rifle, we may place him within other worlds of experience and come to quite different understandings of the experience. The relevance of these examples to Oakeshott’s point should be clear: we make sense of facts of particular experiences by establishing them within a coherent world of experience. We begin with partial coherence and move towards fuller understanding as we situate the particular moment within increasingly more comprehensive and coherent frames.\footnote{Note that we are not yet exploring the “modes” of experience. See, for example, Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 32:}

\begin{quote}
Unity, then, is what differentiates a world; and a greater degree of unity is what differentiates the world of ideas achieved from the world of ideas given in experience. But when we come to consider in detail the character of this unity it
Second of all, every partial world of experience is part of the full world of experience. Partially coherent understandings of experience invite further reflection and consideration in pursuit of still more coherent and unconditional understandings—even these inchoate understandings present an “organization of the whole of experience from a partial and defective point of view.” While humans may discern sufficient coherence within a given context to make sense of that which they currently face, this partial understanding is “an arrest…to some extent incoherent or irrational.” If, once again, truth is “the condition of the world of experience in which that world is satisfactory to itself,” these arrests in experience fall short of truth’s ultimate character. While our helmeted man may be provisionally understood as “athlete” or “entertainer” or “soldier,” no one would seriously claim that such categories capture the full truth about the man or the experiences within which he participates. He may well be also understood as a “husband,” “son,” “father,” “murderer,” “hero,” or any number of other possible categorizations. In short, though we make sense of particular elements of experience within the context of a coherent world of experience, these attempts at understanding do not provide comprehensive, complete understanding. Instead, the full meaning of experience (indeed, of any experience) can only be measured in the context of an absolutely coherent account of the unity of all experience.\footnote{Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 36, 79.}

\footnote{will be found necessary to distinguish it from the unity which belongs to a class, from that which involves mere essences, and from that which has its seat in a ‘principle,’ called for this purpose a unifying principle.}

There is a degree of continuity between inchoate attempts to understand an experience and the modes themselves—but we should not confuse the process of pursuing coherence with the specific modes that Oakeshott analyzes in detail in \textit{Experience and its Modes}. In this context, it bears mentioning that Oakeshott notes that there is “no theoretical limit to the number of such worlds” (75).
If there is no other, truer world of content beyond mind and experience, if these thoroughly permeate one another, Oakeshott could see no way to go beyond (or “above,” or “below,” or “behind,” etc) them—“experience is reality.” If there is no possibility of getting beyond consciousness to find the immediate, absolute data of experience, we should not measure the truth of any belief by how well it corresponds to such a projected world. Instead, Oakeshott believes that true knowledge is that which results when we are able to discern coherence in experience.

For the moment, however, let’s focus on Oakeshott’s view of experience. He spilled considerable ink explaining this point—and for good reason. Much like Dewey’s argument in *Quest For Certainty*, Oakeshott’s position resolves a host of (supposed) philosophical paradoxes at a stroke. Without a sharp line to divide knower from known or reason from existence, etc, epistemology becomes much less problematic. Most of these supposed problems were simply products of the assumption that the rational mind and the world of experience lie on opposing sides of a sharp divide. Many philosophers posit this gap and then spend their careers trying to close it. They fret over finding some way of assuring themselves that the world they perceive is, in fact, the world as it “truly” is. They fret, in other words, over how to know the world without the mediating interpretation. Others, meanwhile, follow Descartes and maintain that the truest knowledge is built by pure reason, unsullied by the distractions of human experience. They despair of knowing *anything* in experience, so they settle for detachment. Their view underwrote an approach to philosophy that treated reason as an antiseptic, quarantined faculty that had epistemological primacy over other faculties permeated by contingency. Reason, on this view, is

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64 Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 17. Cf. 29, emphasis added: “We begin, then, with a world of ideas; the given is neither a collection, nor a series of ideas, but a complex, significant whole. *Behind this there is nothing at all.*”
the reliable foundation of knowledge by virtue of its separation from experience. In *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott asks if perhaps these problems are caused by a faulty starting point. If knowledge consists in matching our views of experience with a supra-experiential realm, Oakeshott asks, “By what criterion are we judge the satisfactoriness of this [other] world?” If philosophers cease assuming the existence of a “truer” world of content beyond the content that humans actually perceive, they can do away with most of their self-caused theoretical troubles.65

If “knowledge is always a coherent system of ideas,” and if ideas are coterminous with experience, then Oakeshott’s view of philosophy cannot follow this model. In his view, philosophy pursues the extension of knowledge to provide an account of the whole of experience. This whole—the Ideal—is the implied goal of any philosophical work. It is “what is satisfactory in experience:” an encompassing, coherent unity that does not rely upon unexplained conditions or postulates. The philosopher pursues a full understanding of reality, which is “nothing but experience.” So, when she approaches a position within experience, the philosopher first identifies the framework of interpretation which gives it meaning. Which worlds of experience does it inhabit? She then interrogates the various premises necessary to sustain these frameworks, and so on and so forth. Oakeshottian philosophy is a resolutely critical affair in pursuit of coherent knowledge of the whole of experience—without any assumed assumptions. The endeavor is never perfectly satisfied, but its practice still suggests the activity’s contours. Philosophy winnows away abstractions, even if it never arrives at a fully concrete account of experience.66

Philosophy is thus “a mood” characterized by the pursuit of “experience for its own sake.” It is not for those who would stop their theorizing in order to wield it for narrow, abstract

ends. Since they pursue comprehensive and satisfactory experience—in place of the partial and abstract—true philosophers cannot stop interrogating the premises of their knowledge.

Philosophers retreat from other concerns because these are unsatisfactory. This means that they pursue coherence at the expense of “all extraneous interests…philosophy consists, not in persuading others, but in making our own minds clear.” There is something idiosyncratic about their obsession. Philosophy is an adventurous undertaking requiring unique devotion, but Oakeshott still maintains that in this “incurably abstract life of ours,” the philosophic mood “must frequently be put off,” even by its most committed practitioners. Daily human existence does not require fully satisfactory knowledge. Daily existence requires conditional knowledge. It pulls us in innumerable competing directions. It requires us to settle for partially coherent knowledge of worlds of experience—lest we accomplish nothing at all.67

Let’s examine this in more detail: just what does Oakeshott mean by calling life “incurably abstract?” He argues that humans generally approach the world of experience through a number of different “modes.” Every mode is an attempt to make sense of the whole of experience according to a specific, projected standard for that which counts as knowledge. All modes apply different standards, which “not only govern, [but] also limit and modify” their accounts of experience. Critically, each mode’s standard implies a set of unexamined assumptions that serve as shortcuts for making sense of human experience. These assumptions truncate critical reflection about experience by closing off interrogation that would question these assumptions themselves. This means that the modes can serve as shortcuts for understanding, and each implies certain wagers about the structure of experience. These artificial limits on critical reflection help humans pursue other, often worthy, projects. Though a scientific

67 Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 2, 3, 72, 83, 323.
understanding of experience is partial and incoherent, its delimiters are what make it functional and productive—rather than relentlessly critical (à la philosophy).\textsuperscript{68}

In \textit{Experience and its Modes}, Oakeshott identifies three major modes of human experience: science, history, and practical experience. Let’s take these in order. Science adopts “absolute communicability” as its standard for comprehending experience. As such, it attempts to offer a coherent account of experience by accepting only knowledge which can be formulated and transmitted without reference to specific observational perspectives. History, meanwhile, aims to understand experience by arranging brute data from the past. Historians define knowledge as that data which can be shaped into coherent narratives. Finally, practical experience takes “the alteration of existence” as the constitutive sorting standard for knowledge. It tries to make experience fully coherent by measuring knowledge against “the alteration of existence.” Oakeshott works out the contours of the modes and their logical implications to show that each fails to deliver a fully coherent account of all experience—even on its own terms. \textit{This} is what Oakeshott means when he calls the modes “abstract.” Their self-imposed standards place artificial limits upon knowledge. Once again: they are sufficiently coherent for some human purposes, but inadequately investigated to be avenues to truth.\textsuperscript{69}

Let us not forget that our task here is to interrogate Oakeshott’s view of philosophical work. He suggests that the modes demonstrate (by contrast) the distinct objective of those who pursue a complete understanding of experience. These are the philosophers, who pursue a comprehensive understanding of all experience by investigating the conditions of understanding. They consider the coherence of frameworks for making sense of experience but they also

\textsuperscript{68} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 214.
\textsuperscript{69} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 92–98, 170, 256.
critically examine these frameworks’ postulates. Where they encounter assumptions or incoherence, they make a critical appraisal of the premises necessary for the framework to stand.

This is not to suggest that philosophers construct knowledge by combining the partial truths gleaned from the various modes of experience. Philosophy is not a master art or a master science that seeks to harmonize the modes. Rather, it interrogates and refuses the conditions of all modes. Philosophy is not “the scientia scientiarum” governing all other aspects of human knowledge; it is “experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification. Philosophical knowledge is knowledge which carries with it the evidence of its own completeness.” Philosophy approaches the modes only with an eye to exposing their inadequacy.70

This should prompt a question. Philosophy thus conceived is an exclusively critical activity. It dissolves existing attempts at making sense of experience and the postulates which sustain them—even when these attempts are useful for other, non-philosophic purposes. If the philosopher aims at fully coherent knowledge of the world of all experience, she thus abandons any hope of using her knowledge to practically adjust the world of experience. What is philosophy for? Why pursue such a dilettantish activity? Does the critical philosophical eye eventually serve a purpose beyond clarifying our ideas?

Perhaps not. Oakeshott excoriates certain philosophers distracted by practicality as “theoreticians.” Instead of critically evaluating their own assertions of knowledge, these “deplorable” characters turn a blind eye to truth so as to present themselves as experts in the world of practical engagement. They abandon philosophy’s critical stance to present themselves as authorities on other matters. Theoreticians believe, to use an example of Oakeshott’s, that a

“profound understanding of the nature of horses” is superior to the knowledge of “a more expert horseman, horse-chandler, or stable boy.”\textsuperscript{71} By contrast, a proper philosopher recognizes that such “profound understanding” may be more complete, satisfactory, and coherent than the alternatives, but none of this is equivalent to being more adept at the business of riding or caring for a horse. Theoreticians privilege sophistication over familiarity with particular things because they believe that philosophy can be used to supersede other forms of knowing. Oakeshott’s philosopher will have none of this. Philosophy is more complete and coherent than modes of experience, but this does not equate to exclusive dominion within the world of any particular mode of experience.

What is farthest from our needs is that kings should be philosophers. The victims of thought, those [philosophers] who are intent upon what is unlimitedly satisfactory in experience, are self-confessed betrayers of life, and must pursue their way without the encouragement of the practical consciousness, which is secure in the knowledge that philosophical thought can make no relevant contribution to the coherence of its world of experience. The world of concrete reality must, indeed, supersede the world of practical experience, but can never take its place.\textsuperscript{72}

Philosophers are no more suited to be kings than they are suited to be knights or stable boys. In other words, just as philosophy avoids the shortcuts that make modes of experience abstract, it cannot hope to supersede the modes within their limited approaches to experience. A philosopher disdains the success of a scientist, historian, or stable boy—she has other quarry in mind. True philosophers eschew such partial knowledge (especially if it is otherwise useful) in pursuit of the Ideal.\textsuperscript{73}

In the wake of twentieth century arguments between post-modernists and philosophical absolutists, Oakeshott’s Ideal seems very strange. How could it be that a coherent account of

\textsuperscript{71} Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 26, 30.
\textsuperscript{72} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 321.
\textsuperscript{73} Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 30.
human experience—an account of the Truth, at that—could be irrelevant or inappropriate for conducting politics? To begin with, Oakeshott is too thoroughgoing a skeptic to accept that humans (and particularly) philosophers know enough of the Ideal to apply it to political life. Furthermore, the Ideal is a logical necessity, but one that is never actually attained: “the notion of an unconditional or definitive understanding may hover in the background, but it has no part in the adventure [of philosophy].”74 Such over-confidence is the province of the theoretician. This should not be particularly surprising, as Oakeshott was a proximate witness to the twentieth century’s most fearsome experiments with political absolutism. In addition, Oakeshott casts doubt on the relationship between truth and politics: concrete philosophical truth, even if possessed, is not politically actionable truth. To put it another way: all true things do not go together.

If knowledge of the Ideal is—by the structure of Oakeshott’s argument—irrelevant for practical experience, can such knowledge matter for the practice of politics? Oakeshott seems to be threatening his own professional existence as a philosopher interested in providing a theoretical understanding of politics. If philosophers are relentlessly critical of any and all incoherence in experience, how might they ever constructively theorize the partial, particular world of politics? Wouldn’t they risk descending to the level of the theoretician, who “mistakes” her investigations into the “postulates” of experience “for principles from which ‘correct’ performances may be deduced?” If philosophical investigations do not yield a superior understanding of practical politics, what can they possibly offer? More importantly, while we

74 Oakeshott, Human Conduct, 3.
may not worry overmuch about keeping philosophers out of politics, might we be concerned to hear that the Ideal is irrelevant to practical and political life?\textsuperscript{75}

The answer to these questions lies in the strange place the modes of experience inhabit within his thought. Reducing experience to a projected standard for knowledge will always close off investigation and yield incomplete, conditional answers. Again, however, these “incomplete” answers may still be useful, even critical, for the practical project of living. We frequently need experiential shorthand: “Unless we make some conscious effort to step outside, it is within [the practical] world that we pass our lives…Practice is activity, the activity inseparable from the conduct of life and from the necessity of which no living man can relieve himself.” Philosopher, scientist, historian, or stable boy—no human can escape the exigencies of practical life. It may help to frame this point in relief. Though the modes are epistemologically inadequate for philosophy’s purposes, this does not render them irrelevant for the pursuit of their particular projects. Even if viewing experience strictly through a practical lens does not provide us with complete coherence or theoretical certainty, humans frequently need to adopt this lens. Even if science cannot be mistaken for an adequate pursuit of what is ultimately satisfactory in experience, it may yet have a place in other parts of human life. Even if history is not an unambiguous, coherent whole, it may yet give mooring to our lives beyond the philosophy seminar room.\textsuperscript{76}

This position—modes of experience are theoretically incomplete but unavoidably important—nicely captures Oakeshott’s approach to uncertainty. Humans live with the tension between various incoherent accounts of experience. They live, in other words, amidst uncertainty about a number of fundamental facts of their existence. They live by means of various types of

\textsuperscript{75} Oakeshott, \textit{Human Conduct}, 26.
\textsuperscript{76} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 248, 257.
shorthand. Fortunately or unfortunately, philosophy cannot conclusively settle almost any of the questions about human moral foundations. It is the pursuit of unconditional, fully concrete knowledge—but life is wholly conditional. As it turns out, Oakeshott thought, “Reputable political behavior is not dependent upon sound or even coherent philosophy.” Politics cannot supplant philosophy, but it also means that philosophy cannot provide certainty for politics.\(^{77}\)

If this view of philosophy seems counterintuitive, that is mostly due to Oakeshott’s view of the relationship between truth and modern politics. He argues that the latter is heavily prudential. In modern Western nations, politics has become akin to sailing a ship on “a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel.” It is not an activity undertaken in search of truth. To treat politics as if it were capable of yielding such fruits is to misunderstand both politics and philosophy as activities.\(^{78}\)

As Oakeshott sees it, this is because philosophy’s pursuit of truth does not yield anything like a positive project for action.

The process of philosophical definition may be regarded, from one point of view, as a process of getting rid of, or of resolving, the presuppositions and reservations contained in whatever concepts are presented for examination. This is sometimes thought of as a process of laying, or discovering, foundations; but it is, I think, misleading to think of it in this way. For when these presuppositions have been revealed and \textit{a fortiori}, when they have been resolved, the originally presented concept has been entirely transformed and superseded.\(^{79}\)

The pursuit of truth is a pursuit of clarity—not a promise of political power. It is a common, but unfounded, conceit that clarity and truth and political efficacy must all necessarily travel


together. Philosophers are intent upon challenging the certainty of generally-assumed postulates underwriting various understandings of experience. This does not translate into a clear-minded political project.

Oakeshott was well aware that this view of the relationship between truth, certainty, and politics was a novel one. Indeed, he consciously presented it as such. As we will see in later chapters, he stressed that uncertain, open-ended politics were a product of a unique history common only to certain Western countries. Citizens who shared in this history were specially pulled towards an understanding of politics that resisted public authority fixing the ends of human activity. Politics understood in this way would resist the certainty of immutable philosophical truths. Whatever philosophers might conclude about an epistemological “Ideal,” Oakeshott doubted that its forcible establishment could succeed on its own terms. Consciously imposing the “Ideal” upon human experience would require making conditional adjustments to the unconditional Absolute. Practical life’s abstraction comes with real costs.

As we will have more to say about this subject in Chapter 3, let’s close the discussion here with a more concrete example from the history of political thought. Oakeshott believed that no philosopher theorized the problems and challenges of modern politics better than Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes’ genius was to recognize the emerging modern temperament within the tradition and to give it voice in a comprehensive, systematic way. Whereas some aimed to reestablish thick bonds between “the authority of medieval Christianity” and political practice, incipient

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80 Oakeshott’s treatment of truth’s place in political life has points of confluence with Hannah Arendt’s view of the same, especially in her essay, “Truth and Politics.” In particular, both thinkers entertain the possibility that philosophical truth may not have any special relevance to politics. That said, they are not ultimately addressing the same phenomena. Arendt is concerned with the state of facts in a world without authoritative foundations. Oakeshott is concerned with truth’s epistemological status in a general, abstract sense. Cf. Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in Between Past and Future, 227–64.
rationalists sought to establish the clear, well-lit paths visible to pure human Reason. As Oakeshott understood it, Hobbes eschewed both these paths, instead arguing for the establishment of a

[C]ivil religion, not the construction of reason but of authority, concerned not with belief but with practice, aiming not at undeniable truth but at peace....For him, religion was actual religious beliefs, was Christianity. He was not concerned to reform those beliefs in the interest of some universal, rational truth about God and the world to come, but to remove from them the power to disrupt society.\(^81\)

Though Hobbes is often read simply as an “apostle of absolutism,” his insistence on uniting civil and religious powers is only part of the relevant story. He presents politics as an activity concerned with establishing stable peace for consenting individuals—nothing more or less. He recognized peace as a prerequisite, as “the removal of some of the circumstances that, if they are not removed, must frustrate the enjoyment of Felicity. It is a negative gift, merely making not impossible that which is sought.” Hobbes understood politics as an activity that establishes the basic conditions for constructing a life. Politics aims at providing sufficient stability and predictability that men can begin to move amongst one another without facing constant terror. In other words, politics is not an activity that promises to provide humans with salvation beyond civil life. It offers humans the foundation upon which they might seek their own “felicity” within experience. Hobbes endorses civil religion for explicitly civil reasons, “concerned not with belief but with practice.” Like Oakeshott, Hobbes thought that metaphysical truth claims from beyond perceptive experience were dangerous to the practice of stable politics.\(^82\)

Hobbes’ work exemplified the understanding that Oakeshott believed was at the core of this tradition within modern politics. Philosophers who would theorize politics in this tradition

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\(^82\) Oakeshott, “Introduction to *Leviathan*,” 293.
would do well to recognize its resistance to political projects seeking to establish more comprehensive and certain goals for citizens. Of course, they would also do well to remember that peace is a fickle, fragile goal. As systematic and logically rigorous as Hobbes was, he deduces few principles about the specific policies that a ruler must pursue to guarantee peace in a commonwealth. In other words, when he turns to the daily practice of politics, Hobbes resists strong truth claims. Instead, he turns to fuzzy prudential considerations. Oakeshott is no different; he offers little by way of principled recommendations for political practice. The political project, once more, “is to keep afloat on an even keel”—nothing more nor less.  

IV. A New Role for Philosophy?

Dewey and Oakeshott both viewed epistemology as the primary challenge for twentieth century political philosophy in the West. Both diagnosed a crisis in the West’s longstanding epistemological foundations as the source of many political problems. This alone is not notable. Many thinkers—philosophers and non-philosophers alike—recognized that traditional metaphysical foundations arrived in the twentieth century in a shabby state, and many insisted upon attempting to resuscitate them. Leo Strauss, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and many others saw modern uncertainty as a problem to be addressed, instead of an opportunity to be enjoyed. Indeed, Arendt argued that nothing plagued modern man so much as the erosion of these traditional sites of authority:

The crisis, apparent since the inception of the century, is political in origin and nature. The rise of political movements intent upon replacing the party system, and the development of a new totalitarian system of government, took place against a background of a more or less general, more or less dramatic breakdown of all traditional authorities.  

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84 Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future*, 91.
The valence of Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s response is worth noting. Arendt’s “crisis” was their opportunity. They viewed the collapse of traditional philosophical and ethical “authorities” as a chance for humans to take a greater role in defining and choosing the ends they would make central to their lives. It represented a crucial opening to a more plural politics.

Dewey and Oakeshott thinkers resisted attempts to conclusively settle political questions by means of philosophical absolutism. Both celebrate the general modern liberal project as (in Dewey’s words) “committed to an end that is at once enduring and flexible: the liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of their life.” Unlike many of their peers, neither Dewey nor Oakeshott believed that this project required metaphysically-grounded justification.  

This is not to suggest that Dewey and Oakeshott were fully sanguine about the opportunity before them. Indeed, Oakeshott worried that the tradition of understanding politics that he admired had become uniquely vulnerable. Dewey argued that many Americans were becoming especially dogmatic in their thinking about politics—especially where it intersected with economic life. For these—and other—reasons, both argued that philosophers needed to rethink their work and its relationship to political life.

But we are straying into the subject matter of ensuing chapters. For now it suffices to reiterate that Dewey and Oakeshott shared a common view of epistemology—there is no way to separate human consciousness from perception or sensory data or judgment or values. Both also wished that philosophers would abandon the project of sneaking beyond experience in hopes of finding a clearer, truer realm to provide support for their judgment. For both, however, this was

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just a first step, a critique that prepared the way for the rest of their careers. If stable values did not lie beyond experience—how should philosophers go about better interrogating experience? Were philosophers chasing this new task nothing more than scientists in different garb? This is the matter for our next chapter.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD, SCIENCE, AND POLITICS: DEWEYAN DISCOURSE AND OAKESHOTTIAN CONVERSATION

I. Introduction

When John Dewey was born in 1859, the United States was an agrarian country on the verge of collapsing into civil war. By the time Michael Oakeshott passed away in 1990, the country was a global superpower just years from an internet-fueled economic boom. The rapid pace of scientific discovery during these 130 years was unprecedented. Philosophers took notice. The appropriate relationship of scientific inquiry and politics became an especially pressing issue during the period. In 1878, Charles Saunders Peirce asked, “Who can be sure of what we shall not know in a few hundred years? Who can guess what would be the result of continuing the pursuit of science for ten thousand years, with the activity of the last hundred?” Scientific optimism was in the air. To many, science seemed to be just the tool for settling a variety of modernity’s most difficult questions. From canals to steamships to railroads to the automobile to airplanes to geosynchronous satellites, scientific inquiry remade human life the world over. It followed, perhaps, that modern philosophy could stabilize its own work by means of a structured, scientific approach. What did science’s increased esteem mean for politics, if anything? Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s answers to this question could not seem more different.86

Dewey believed that the development of scientific inquiry represented a unique change in human history. It gave humans a structured tool for extending their already-evolved capacities for verifying knowledge. In other words, humans already judge the world through a process that is similar to the scientific method, but the method’s formalization substantially expands their

abilities. It is an advanced tool for proposing, testing, clarifying, and verifying prospective truths. Dewey spent much of his career outlining precisely how scientific inquiry could improve philosophy (and politics) along these lines. Though the specific contours of political inquiry would surely differ from those used for biology, all fields could be improved by more attention to formal methods.

Meanwhile, Oakeshott believed that a certain form of political science lay behind various forms of twentieth century political thought. Science appeared to be resoundingly successful at increasing human control over nature, and many were tempted to place politics under its domain. He feared that a new disposition—political “Rationalism”—was contributing to a new affinity for technocratic politics. The Rationalist believes that political debates can be overcome by means of purely technical knowledge. Oakeshott identifies this overconfidence as the source of the twentieth century’s attraction to utopian political ideologies. He spent a large part of his life exposing the pathologies of this way of thinking about politics. Oakeshott’s arguments on science begin with his epistemological positions in Experience and Its Modes. In that work, he argues that science is inadequate for explaining all of human experience. It is, in his terminology, simply one of many “modes” of human experience, akin to history or practical experience. There may be room for science in modern political life, but there can be no single reliable method for resolving political disputes. How could he possibly be more distant from Dewey?

While Dewey is unquestionably more optimistic about the fruits of scientific labors, he circumscribes science’s public role far more than is usually noticed. While Oakeshott’s scorn for political Rationalism is well-covered turf, the specific contours of the limits he suggests for

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science in politics are rarely taken as seriously. He is a strenuous defender of the pluralism of voices—including science—that modernity includes in public conversation.

Ultimately, Dewey and Oakeshott understand that politics is irreducible to a strict method, scientific or otherwise. This latter point is important, since both theorize science as a means of illuminating broader discussions of the philosophical value of methodology. Even on this broader ground, both theorists conclude that strict methods cannot provide an escape from modern epistemological uncertainty. In this chapter, I show the strengths of this position, as well as how it indicates the need for both thinkers to look beyond methodology for epistemological stability.

II. Deweyan Inquiry

Dewey was an enthusiastic proponent of modern natural and political science. As we saw in Chapter 1, he incorporated contemporary scientific breakthroughs into his work. Dewey argued that the procedures used in the natural sciences necessarily altered human existence beyond the laboratory, particularly in the Western world. At times this seemed a personal obsession. He could not comprehend why citizens of modern, industrial nations appreciated science as a tool for pursuing material goods, but for inexplicable (or unfair, or illogical, etc) reasons, would not apply the same methods to pursuit of other ends. Dewey insisted that philosophers could only address the problems of a modern, scientific age by adjusting to the methods of what he called “inquiry.” As we will see below, just how he proposed that they do so is a matter of some dispute. But first, we must begin at the beginning. What does Deweyan “inquiry” look like? It is capacious enough a category to include the scientific method, but he
believed that it could include a good deal more. Did Dewey believe that science could replace the stability of the modern West’s eroding epistemological foundations?

Dewey took a (loosely) Darwinian view of scientific inquiry. Though inquiry progresses by means of consciousness and reflection (not genetic shifts) its progress seems generally analogous to species’ advances by biological success. In both cases, success is measured in reference to experienced conditions, not a separate realm of ideals detached from existence. The success of various genetic mutations is measured by the organism’s survival—not conformity with any higher purpose. Scientific progress is gauged by its capacity to explain phenomena—not correspondence to a preordained order. In fact, Dewey believed that scientific inquiry itself was an historical development. It yields information needed for actual, specific, experienced uncertainties, not in order to access objective, ahistorical certainty. In short, it eschews metaphysics for present human experience. This new methodological approach “enormously refines, expands and liberates” human problem-solving capacity by means of the information it makes available.

Why? Inquiry fits a messy, fluid world. It is reflective; when scientists develop a hypothesis, they test and modify it by means of observation. On one hand, this is simply a test of the content of the world—i.e. Does the hypothesis fit the experience we perceive?—but on the other, it is self-referential—i.e. Does the hypothesis fit existing frameworks for understanding the world? Inquiry is uniquely self-critical. It refuses to measure a hypothesis’ “fit” solely in terms of observed content or the theoretical coherence of hypothetical schemes. It requires both. If a hypothesis cannot account for substantial observations, it is suspended. If a hypothesis does

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88 This account of inquiry also has affinities with Hegel’s accounts of wissenschat and “Absolute Knowledge” in his Phenomenology of Spirit.
89 Dewey, Logic, 71.
not fit existing frameworks for understanding the world, this demands a restoration of theoretical coherence.

Humans have long tested their behavior against the content of experience, but scientific inquiry allows them to reflectively evaluate the schemes they use to make sense of a situation in order to work out their objectives and the best means of reaching them.\(^{90}\) Dewey argues that this is an enormous methodological improvement for a material world recently revealed to be in flux. Inquiry does not aim at elemental, fixed truth about the natures of beings or objects. Its success is measured in reference to the uncertain, mutable situations at hand. For these reasons, Dewey believed that inquiry marked a dawn of new human potential. The next step was to find its place in other realms of human activity.

Although Darwin was a substantial influence on his work, Dewey’s thoughts on Darwinism only provide the broad outline of his views on scientific inquiry’s potential. He offers his own substantial accounts of: 1) scientific inquiry’s relationship to the structure of human perception, and 2) what this means for modern politics. The remainder of this section takes these up in turn.

Dewey argues that humans experience biological needs as “disequilibrations” in their situation. At this basic level, *reflection* is largely unnecessary. As Hans Joas puts it, these are “pre-reflective correspondences between the organism’s needs and the particular environmental situations which it encounters.”\(^{91}\) In the wild, a hungry human’s calculations for finding food are

\(^{90}\) Note that Dewey avoids a sharp distinction between scheme and content. This does not mean, however, that he conflates the two, only that he argues for a more porous division between them. For example, he writes that “words mean what they mean in connection with conjoint activities that effect a common, or mutually participated in, consequence.” The point seems to be that content has no meaning without a scheme, and that no scheme can exist without content with which to work. Dewey, *Logic*, 59.

\(^{91}\) Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, 106.
largely unmediated by any other intruding calculations. The organism is hungry, so it seeks food.

These rudimentary decision-making processes are the seeds from which formal inquiry grows. They are the spring animating human conduct. 92 Though humans at this basic level are little more than cause and effect machines which feel needs and quieting them, inquiry both grows from, and improves upon, this “pattern of life-activities.” 93

Human responses to these basic “disequilibrations” largely take the form of trial and error. Any behavioral modification rested upon individual memories and the development of habits, for “habits are the basis of organic learning…habit-formation can mean only the increasing fixation of certain ways of behavior through repetition, and an attendant weakening of other behavioral activities.” 94 Even without reflective inquiry, this is a rudimentary mechanism for improving effectiveness at satisfying human needs. Habits are, in Dewey’s account of human agency, accumulated information about the workability of certain past paths of action that indicate ways in which an individual might act in similar future situations. They are behavioral shortcuts built upon successful past experiences. 95 Substantial refinement and improvement of patterns of behavior remain largely beyond reach. Nonetheless, this “foreshadows learning and discovery, with the consequent outgrowth of new needs and new problematic situations.” 96 At their most basic, humans are problem-solving animals. The development of habits is the first step towards a more rigorous and formal approach to surmounting the challenges they face.

94 Dewey, *Logic*, 38. The phrase “organic learning” is particularly important here for distinguishing it from inquiry-driven, modern knowledge.
How do humans move beyond reliance upon habits? Dewey believed that language was the key. Inquiry helps humans hypostatize possible, but as yet untried, paths of action, but it can only perform this function within the context (and confines) of language. The development of language opens the door to developing more sophisticated forms of problem solving. It permits of retention and comparison of past experiences hitherto impossible. Language makes it possible to categorize experience in more refined ways and to approach various “disequilibrations” more strategically. It opens the realm of structured hypothetical reflection. Once experiences can be stored, compared, discussed, and interpreted in words, the stage is set for increasingly formal methods for manipulating this new font of information.

This is why Dewey presents the birth of language as the key to effecting the transformation from “organic learning” to reflective inquiry. Language adds a further level of meaning to human problems, which makes reflection possible. Absent language, human problems are considerably less complex, and human capacities are considerably limited. With language, interpretation of meaning becomes increasingly important in human life. This further highlights the idiosyncrasy of Dewey’s view of inquiry. While many (including Oakeshott, as we will see below) believe that science seeks to go beyond interpretation and language in its search for neutral and purportedly objective “facts,” Dewey argues that inquiry is built upon language.97

It may help to consider the relationship between inquiry and language in additional detail. For Dewey, language marks the beginning of the benefits and problems of intersubjectivity. Indeed, he views “language as the necessary, and in the end, sufficient condition of the existence and transmission of non-purely organic activities.”98 It differentiates them from the rest of biological life, frees them from brute trial and error, and represents the birth of culture. Language

makes representational thought possible, which leads to frameworks of meaning that are not directly related to biological needs. As individuals share common symbols for objects, these symbols take on additional meanings that reflect their usage in communication—not simply their correspondence to elements within the material world. Dewey writes that “Words as representatives are part of an inclusive code” within a community.\textsuperscript{99} The language “code” is porous to systematic and material influences. The characteristics of that which we call a tree adjust with development of language \textit{as well as} with shifts in observed sensory experience. For example, we may develop more nuanced ways of discussing light, combustion, or other relevant characteristics. Within the scheme, symbols must have \textit{some} degree of fit and coherence. Of course, meanings also shift as experiences with the material world permeate the linguistic frameworks and suggest adjustments.\textsuperscript{100}

Language thus becomes the transmitter of shared experience, a sort of community memory, which makes generalized, abstract thought possible. This eventually allows humans to communicate thoughts in terms of possibility, which, by extension, makes discourse and argument possible. Eventually, language makes culture, deliberation, planning, and extended recollection (through recorded experience) possible, each of which adds significant new potential meanings to human biological existence. Language is a prerequisite for formally conceptualizing conditional (“if-then”) and hypothetical (“maybe”) actions. In short, it permits for storage and transmission of information beyond individual memories. Humans with the capacity to communicate with their fellows can cooperate on more ambitious projects, which helps them to know the world more extensively. Individuals interacting with (and acting upon) objects in

\textsuperscript{99} Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 55.
\textsuperscript{100} Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 55 & 59–60. See especially p. 60: “Without the intervention of a specific kind of existential operation they cannot indicate or discriminate the \textit{objects} to which they refer.” See also Dewey, \textit{Quest for Certainty}, 81.
different and more complicated ways will in many cases observe new and different reactions from these objects.\textsuperscript{101}

This is why language is so critical for Dewey. Language builds the meaning of its signs on the values surging from community usage. The particular symbols of language are representative of meaning in the existent world, not detached reasoning. They have a past, which conditions and limits their usage: “while all language or symbol-meanings are what they are as parts of a system, it does not follow that they have been determined on the basis of their fitness to be such members of a system; much less on the basis of their membership in a comprehensive system.” Languages are not consciously designed for optimum performance. Each is originally governed by empirical uncertainty, by existential conditions, not systematic workability. It grows organically. Fortunately, it is not always and permanently limited by its provenance—inquiry is especially useful for rethinking frameworks of meaning.\textsuperscript{102}

This new layer of meaning makes scientific inquiry and hypothetical consideration possible, which makes the successes and failures of past trials increasingly relevant to new uses in other situations. Originally, humans are only able to refine their practice through failed interactions and the consequence development of habits. Memory is limited to individual experience. Language expands these capacities somewhat, but inquiry makes it possible to work with language symbols, terms, and concepts in a much more powerful way. This allows the pursuit of internal coherence within a system for understanding experience. Do the various elements of our understanding of thermodynamics hang together? Are there inexplicable points of incoherence?

\textsuperscript{101} Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 58 & 62–64.  
\textsuperscript{102} Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 55.
In addition, it becomes possible to interrogate the ways that language restrains and limits human understanding. This further expands humans’ capacity to imagine consequences and manipulate past understandings to make future decisions. Dewey bases this argument on knowledge of cutting edge science of his day; Einstein and Heisenberg (on Dewey’s view) finished Darwin’s work by further eroding the conception of any absolute, fixed meaning in matter. Indeed, whereas the Newtonian understanding of the world claimed that all reality and understandings of reality must be based upon a fixed substance (the atom, or some smaller particle, for example) and ruled by fixed, predictable, physical laws, theories of relativity showed that even physical characteristics of matter are relative to the perspective from which they are being examined. The frameworks that humans use affect the sorts of understanding that they get. Inquiry does not provide an ever-closer approximation of a final, complete truth of matter—it provides information for the pursuit of human purposes (In this regard, Dewey anticipates Thomas Kuhn’s work). Scientific frameworks (Kuhn’s “paradigms”) are as historically contingent as the humans who helped to formulate them.103

Is inquiry-driven knowledge different from “organic” or “biological” knowledge? It is clear from Dewey’s particular brand of Darwinism that inquiry cannot yield knowledge of a higher metaphysical standard. There must be some continuity between the two. Still, Dewey clearly believed that inquiry would radically change human knowledge. Its centrality to his thought is due in some degree to the capaciousness of his definition. Just what did he mean by “inquiry?” He defines it as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.” Inquiry is structured, conscious

reflection about experienced situations and the tools we use to investigate them. In addition, Dewey distinguishes inquiry by what it makes possible. It allows humans to build and communicate conceptual frameworks heretofore impossible to construct. In short, inquiry permits humans to generalize what they experience in testable and structured ways. But why hasn’t this always been possible? What does inquiry add to human capacities? How does it go beyond pre-inquiry reflection?\textsuperscript{104}

Inquiry’s genesis is crucial for Dewey because, as suggested above, he maintains that there is a measure of “continuity” between it and fundamental human biological capacities: “although biological operations and structures are not sufficient conditions of inquiry, they are necessary conditions…[B]iological functions and structures prepare the way for deliberate inquiry and…foreshadow its pattern.” This does not amount to an \textit{a priori} ontological claim about humans. This is considerably humbler. Dewey, following Hegel, notes that humans have refined certain always-and-already-there cognitive capacities into the method of inquiry, but he does not reify this growth as a permanent source for human ethics at all points in history. Inquiry grows out of existing human faculties, along with innumerable other such progressive refinements.\textsuperscript{105}

Now we are getting into a position to answer the questions we posed at the outset of this section. Once it develops, what does inquiry mean for human life? Among other things, it allows humans to build linguistic and cultural structures more consciously. These are originally constructed piecemeal, with various elements springing up to serve various purposes. Inquiry grants humans more agency in constructing and coordinating the various elements within these structures. Dewey writes that originally “the system is one in a practical and institutional sense


\textsuperscript{105} Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 30.
rather than in an intellectual one…The ideal of scientific-language is construction of a system in which meanings are related to one another in inference and discourse and where the symbols are such as to indicate the relation.” Reflective inquiry helps to build clarity throughout linguistic systems.  

Dewey illustrates the difference with a terminological shift of his own. While biological or organic needs are framed in terms of “equilibrium,” reflective inquiry is either “open” or “closed.” The latter indicate the increased freedom that inquiry brings to human behavior. Instead of satisfying imbalanced appetites according to specific needs, inquiry closes “open” questions by any one of an infinite number of available responses.

For Dewey, this suggests a number of things about philosophy’s approach to epistemological questions. As we saw in Chapter 1, philosophers have long sought supra-experiential principles to anchor the meaning of things in the world. Dewey believes that this mistakes the character of both perception and truth. He argues that any sharp distinction between the content of experience and the frameworks used to make sense of it is artificial. Subject and object necessarily bleed into each other. The presuppositions of a knower shape the perceived content of the known. The framework used to make sense of an object affects which characteristics surge forth in any observation. Perhaps an example will help make this clear. A knower considering a tree’s aesthetic qualities will perceive it differently than one considering its thermodynamic potential. Different characteristics will appear more or less prominently in light of the scheme applied. This is why Dewey believes that inquiry is so important. As it is self-critical, it allows past experiences to be re-evaluated in light of a variety of available

106 Dewey, Logic, 56.
frameworks, which makes the compilation of a variety of available schemes possible. This in turn facilitates the progressive development of richer, fuller accounts of objects in the world.\textsuperscript{108}

What scientific inquiry does for language and concepts, it can also do for social and political institutions. Whereas a specific form of organization of political institutions may have been well-suited to a particular era when they were developed, this specific form of organization may not be ideal for all nations at all times. Ours is a world of changing conditions—not stasis. Inquiry allows humans to reflectively alter the frameworks they apply to the sensory content they face, even as they utilize these frameworks. For example, experiments that test a material’s combustibility also test (and refine) human understandings of thermodynamics. Scientific inquiry offers the opportunity to test an experiment’s results, methods, and premises. Consider a more overtly political example: in a community that prioritizes individual liberty, “organized society must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty.”\textsuperscript{109} In the political community just described, then, we would simultaneously evaluate whether current institutions encourage individual liberty

\textsuperscript{108} Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 55–57, 62–64, & esp. 71. For example, the geocentric view of the universe went through convulsive revisions before it became clear that it did not \textit{fit} the objects it attempted to describe. Retrograde motion and other such observed phenomena made it increasingly difficult to maintain this account. For purposes of navigation (and understanding the gravitational relations between objects on and beyond the earth), the heliocentric model eventually showed its better workability and effectiveness.

\textsuperscript{109} John Dewey, \textit{Liberalism and Social Action}, 21. Dewey continues: “They define their liberalism in the concrete in terms of a program of measures moving toward this end. They believe that the conception of the state which limits the activities of the latter to keeping order as between individuals and to securing redress for one person when another person infringes the liberty existing law has given him, is in effect simply a justification of the brutalities and inequalities of the existing order.” \textit{Liberalism and Social Action} and \textit{The Public and Its Problems} are both heavily concerned with showing that public institutions are not justified by their longevity, but by their effectiveness and fit with the needs of the political community. Cf. Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 96–7; “When eternal essences and species are banished from scientific subject-matter, the forms that are appropriate to them have nothing left to which they apply; of necessity they are merely formal. They remain in \textit{historic} fact as monuments of a culture and science that have disappeared, while in \textit{logic} they remain as barren formalities to be formally manipulated.”
while also considering the degree to which it remains a guiding ideal. Is liberty still at the core of our political life? Are our institutions still delivering on liberty’s promise? Has our definition of liberty changed?  

Let’s consider scientific inquiry’s political implications more fully. Dewey notes that economic, industrial, and material relationships have been altered to match the shift in human capacities intimated by inquiry’s development. Scientific breakthroughs dramatically adjust the material situations within which humans find themselves. At the same time, reassessment of our philosophical, political, and ethical frameworks lags; “The habit of derogating from present meanings and uses prevents our looking the facts of experience in the face; it prevents serious acknowledgments of the evils they present and serious concern with the goods they promise but do not as yet fulfill.” Dewey was convinced that institutional frameworks from the eighteenth century (or before) were not working as successfully in a twentieth century economy. He thought it no surprise that the uneven incorporation of the methods of inquiry in some spheres and not others was at the root of these challenges. Addressing these incoherencies would require a new, inquiry-informed assessment of our philosophical and political situations.

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110 Whether or not the methodology of inquiry could be considered as fully historically-determined as well seems to me an open question, and not one that Dewey would take especially seriously. That is to say, it might be protested that the perceived reflective qualities of inquiry-driven analysis are really just historically-skewed results that are guided by the particular needs and wants of a moment. Charles Taylor and others have noted the conceptual shift from of cyclical to linear time in human schemes, which is only one example of the sort of shift which would indicate that the scientific approach to human problems is less reflective analysis than it is historically-conditioned. My hunch is that Dewey would be troubled by the implicit “quest for certainty” in this argument. His claim is not that the scientific method steps out of history, only that it permits humans to consider their choices in terms of a reflective perspective.


112 This is a common theme in Dewey’s writings, but for one example, see: John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 55–60; Dewey, *Logic*, 56.
Many commentators have taken this to be an endorsement of subjecting philosophy and politics to scientific methodology. These writers warn that technocracy lurks behind Dewey’s arguments. Christopher Lasch lauded Dewey’s defense of democracy against elitist criticism, but worried that “Dewey could not explain…just how loyalty and responsibility would thrive in a world dominated by large-scale production and mass communications.” John Patrick Diggins thought Dewey conflated material and ethical problems. He writes that Dewey believed “the empirical system of investigation provides the means for resolving conflicts that arise when people hold different beliefs…[thus] cooperative scientific inquiry became the only recourse for the attainment of reliable knowledge.” Meanwhile, Patrick Deneen sees Dewey surrendering to one of his most substantial theoretical opponents: “Dewey was persuaded by Walter Lippmann that contemporary citizens evinced too little democratic capability…[though] democracy was a condition that could yet be achieved through a combination of purposive human action in the areas of education and social engineering.” In their hands, Dewey becomes a positivist who delineates facts from values at an epistemological level only to blur them at the level of political practice. Perhaps stranger still, Dewey also becomes a skeptic of democracy, a thinker who would blithely dissolve intransigent ethical conflicts in bureaucratic management.  

This line of criticism substantially misrepresents what Dewey actually wrote. Dewey does not believe that the application of inquiry to politics will reduce the latter to pure materialism. Rather, he believes that inquiry connects our professed principles to their practical effects—material and otherwise. Nor does Dewey expect that inquiry will eliminate profound value conflicts or democratic debate. To the contrary, he believes that inquiry can make public

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debate more open and honest. It requires that reasons for political positions be given (and explained)—and that hypotheses be tested and refined. It requires verification that, given current circumstances, our beliefs can practically deliver what they promise. Critically, this means that inquiry-as-a-method does not endorse any specific political program; it simply connects specific policies to their consequences. Thus, the effects of various policies can be hypothesized, tested, and selected for their desirability—political leadership is about prudential choices between likely outcomes. Dewey believes that inquiry makes it possible for communities to reliably consider what the outcome of a political choice would be and judge whether or not this outcome is preferable to other available outcomes. In a word, inquiry makes human decision-making clearer.

This has prompted many critics to pose something like the following question: “‘clearer’ or more ‘preferable’ in reference to what, exactly? What are the standards for measuring political judgments?” Dewey is determined to show that the characteristics and relative weights of political goods vary for diverse and different political communities; “The notion of an inherent universality in the associative force at once breaks against the obvious fact of a plurality of states, each localized, with its boundaries, limitations, its indifference and even hostility to other states.”

Political communities consider the effects of their choices in the context of their particular needs, values, and situations. They settle the value of particular experiences in terms

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114 John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 2:17, 1925–7*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 260. It should be noted that Dewey goes on to say the following: “The best that metaphysical monistic philosophies of politics can do with this fact is to ignore it. Or, as in the case of Hegel and his followers, a mythical philosophy of history is constructed to eke out the deficiencies of a mythical doctrine of statehood. The universal spirit seizes upon one temporal and local nation after another as the vehicle for its objectification of reason and will.” Indeed, whatever Dewey takes from Hegel, he rejects a literal read of his work. Dewey accepts the Hegelian account of history’s movement through justification its refinement, but rejects the universality of absolute spirit. He takes Hegel in a much more allegorical way.
comprehensible to their past and worthwhile for their futures. No single principle can illuminate any and all decisions for all political communities. Politics is much harder than that. Communities evaluate the clarity or relative worth of their available options according to standards built out of their common tradition. Once they determine which ends they hope to prioritize at a particular moment, they can work out a path to pursue them. Inquiry helps to clarify the consequences of prioritizing various ends and helps test the viability of various means for pursuing them. It helps to indicate precisely where the points of disagreement may lie.115

Let’s consider this in more detail. Meaning cannot be detached from the actual, existential conditions from which language develops. That is, language originates within the “actual spatial-temporal context,” where objects are sensed, perceived, and assessed in terms of their potential for satisfying needs.116 The foundations of culture are built upon the empirical world of organic life, but the converse is also true: cultural commitments inevitably affect the apparent content of sense perception.117 The value of a shiny piece of yellow metal varies with its cultural context. The great fallacy of many philosophers has often been to suppose that there is a sharp distinction between “empirical knowledge and practice on one hand and rational knowledge and pure activity on the other.”118 This divide takes innumerable forms in the history of philosophy. It is at the root of attempts to construct a sharp dividing line between knower and known, subject and object, or facts and values, etc. Dewey follows Hegel (and anticipates

115 This is particularly the account offered in Dewey’s The Public and its Problems. “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for;” John Dewey, The Public and its Problems, 245–46.
116 Dewey, Logic, 58.
117 Dewey shares this with Hegel. See Hegel’s “Sense Certainty” and “Perception,” in his Phenomenology of Spirit.
Heidegger) in arguing that this line is much fuzzier than usually understood. Human knowing always projects a scheme for understanding onto the content of perception. Meanwhile, this content is never wholly determined by a particular scheme. Experience blurs any such dualism, and reason (and logic, and ethics, etc) can never be wholly divorced from this messiness.

There is no option to return to a pre-modern, pre-inquiry moment—the task now is to work out the intimations of this shift in capacities. Inquiry permits humans to critically assess their situation, though not in the abstract way that Western philosophy has often promised. Science is resolutely not abstract. It helps humans to analyze the various schemes they might apply in a situation and to evaluate these options in terms of the ends they set for themselves. Dewey believes that scientific inquiry is always driven by its historical frame. Recall the aforementioned distinction Dewey makes between questions of equilibrium (biological needs and their fulfillment) and questions of open or closed situations (situations evaluated and interpreted through inquiry’s lens). Inquiry need not claim to yield certainty or objectivity; it needs only to indicate ways of “closing” the as-yet uncertain situation.

How, then, might inquiry pertain to the practice of modern politics? Like democracy, inquiry takes human concerns as its markers for success. More importantly, Dewey thought inquiry a good fit for the sort of individual participation characteristic of democratic institutions. Its transparency and openness to reflection bring more information to political decision-making.

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119 That is, we cannot somehow return to ignorance of what has come to pass. No amount of wishing will restore humans to medieval ethical consensus. Whatever else may be said of them, post-modernists deserve credit for taking this challenge seriously. If there is a way to resolve modernity’s problems, it consists in building upon (and beyond) modernity’s resources.
In other words, Dewey believed that inquiry and democracy alike worked much better with more input, rather than less.\(^{121}\)

Finally Dewey suggests that democracy and inquiry are appropriate matches for the times in which we live. He writes:

> The current has set steadily in one direction: toward democratic forms. That government exists to serve its community, and that this purpose cannot be achieved unless the community itself shares in selecting its governors and determining their policies, are a deposit of fact left, as far as we can see, permanently in the wake of doctrines and forms, however transitory the latter...Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.\(^{122}\)

To use Hegelian language, democracy is a form of *consciousness* which matches the particular form of *being* that characterizes modern life. It is suited to our historical moment, even if it


> Therefore the gradual progress of equality is something fated. The main features of this progress are the following: it is universal and permanent, it is daily passing beyond human control, and every event and every man helps it along. Is it wise to suppose that a movement which has been so long in train could be halted by one generation? Does anyone imagine that democracy, which has destroyed the feudal system and vanquished kings, will fall back before the middle classes and the rich? Will it stop now, when it has grown so strong and its adversaries so weak? Whither, then, are we going? No one can tell...But it is just that to which we give least attention. Carried away by a rapid current, we obstinately keep our eyes fixed on the ruins still in sight on the bank, while the stream whirls us backward—facing toward the abyss.
cannot be justified on any failsafe universal grounds. It allows for programs to be publicly presented, vetted, discussed, and debated—just as they are when being considered from inquiry’s standpoint. The application of reflective thought to human affairs is a past event, a bell not to be unrung (as if this were possible). Dewey suggests that if we are to live in the world we actually experience, we ought to take advantage of the method of inquiry to address that world’s uncertainty. In plain terms, he is suggesting that we might improve our politics by starting with our needs. What, after all, could be controversial about that?\footnote{It has always seemed to me that Dewey’s occasional exasperation with some of his interlocutors depends on this point. What, after all, is so controversial about arguing that we should sort through our options cautiously, but with an open mind? Whether or not this is really what Dewey’s project entailed is perhaps open to debate, but I believe that this is what he thought himself to be suggesting.}

III. Oakeshott and the Scientific Mode of Experience

Though Oakeshott began his academic career in the final decades of Dewey’s, he also wrote in the wake of massive scientific and technological changes. He touched on the relationship between science and politics throughout his life. Oakeshott began his career with a substantial disquisition on science in \textit{Experience and its Modes}. Our discussion in this section begins with that argument, before engaging his later arguments in \textit{On Human Conduct} and \textit{Rationalism in Politics}.

In Chapter 1, we saw that Oakeshott relegates science to the status of a “mode” of human experience. It is abstract and incomplete—a conditional project that relies upon taking certain premises about experience for granted. Thus, an Oakeshottian analysis of science begins by investigating the implicit assumptions that make scientific understanding possible. Why does
science fail to provide a complete account of the whole of experience? Begin with the specific standard that science projects onto experience:

Scientific experience…is a world of ideas free from the personal idiosyncrasies of particular experiants. Science is an attempt to discover and elucidate a world of ideas before all else stable, common, and communicable. And this general end involves science in, and confines it to, the elucidation of a world of quantitative conceptions. Whatever cannot be conceived quantitatively cannot belong to scientific knowledge.¹²⁴

The scientific mode of experience takes “absolute communicability” as its standard for what counts as knowing. It seeks to “discover methods of measurement less and less at the mercy of a particular observer and his situation.” To that end, science abstracts particular knowledge into general, quantifiable terms. This permits science to pursue structured, perspective-free models for understanding events. A scientific understanding of the world explains experience in impersonal and objective language that could theoretically be spoken and understood by any individual agent.¹²⁵

So what’s the trouble? Oakeshott argues that this standard for evaluating knowledge prevents scientists from providing a fully satisfying account of the whole of experience. In the pursuit of absolute communicability, science seeks to go beyond (or “beneath,” or “behind,” or “deeper within”) perception. It is “based upon a rejection of merely human testimony; its master-conception is stability.” General, abstract, quantified attempts at understanding necessarily go beyond the flux and diversity of the whole of experience. To do so, scientists must posit a world that can be fully comprehended as an association of statistical relationships. Carried to their logical implications, these relationships form static conceptual frameworks that form “a world of

¹²⁴ Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 221
¹²⁵ Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 170–71 & 176.
experience upon which universal agreement is possible.” In other words, quantification improves the communicability (and stability) of experience, but this comes at a cost.\footnote{Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 169, 171.}

The pursuit of absolute communicability abandons experience-as-perceived by particular humans. Science rejects perceived experience in pursuit of generalized relationships that can be abstracted from particular perspectives: “The aim of scientific thought is to explain not \textit{this} observation, but any instance of this observation; and an explanation which takes account of the mere thisness of an observation is useless in science.” In other words: \textit{this} particular sheep, or \textit{this} fault line, or \textit{this} electron is each irrelevant to the scientist. Each exists as an element in a subset of available observations. Each only stands in as one particular example of a static concept—and science neglects the former in favor of the latter’s superior communicability. In doing so, scientists necessarily close off broad sections of experience from their theorizing and—often without knowing or acknowledging it—insert significant blind spots into their results.\footnote{Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 179.}

Oakeshott has been frequently misunderstood on this point. He does not comprehensively dismiss or disparage science. He is only concerned to show that science cannot deliver a fully satisfying account of experience. Even if it is not adequate to this task (philosophy’s task) science may yet be useful for the business of living this “incurably abstract life of ours.” Science does not need to provide a fully coherent account of all experiences of bacteria in order for some of its (admittedly abstract) theories to be put to use to develop penicillin. Science does not need a fully coherent account of all experience to provide insights into political economy. Human life is “incurably abstract.” The modes are abstract. Full, concrete coherence is a uniquely philosophical concern. Oakeshott argues that science’s limits stem from the standard that it (as a
mode of experience) projects onto knowledge, rather than the ontological status of the material it takes as an object of study.\textsuperscript{128}

This is a significant departure from other twentieth century accounts of science’s potential. Martin Heidegger, for example, argued that the scientific method is inadequate for studying humans. Oakeshott’s account is constitutively different. In \textit{Experience and its Modes}, after showing the epistemological limits of scientific inquiry, he provides a defense of social and human science (suitably limited, of course). In contrast, Heidegger holds that human behavior is an inappropriate subject-matter for science, and further argues that science should be limited to the world of non-human things.

Heidegger argues that \textit{Dasein} is not ontologically suitable for scientific study. Humans exist in a different way than the world’s material “equipment”—\textit{Dasein}’s mode of being transcends categorization, since it is the source of categories (and their interpretation). It is appropriately treated as an individual source of meaning, not as an element to be sorted among other elements. In contrast, Oakeshott argues instead that science has structural limits built into its assumptions about the nature of experience, regardless of subject matter. These limits are epistemological, not ontological.\textsuperscript{130}

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\textsuperscript{130} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 191–92.
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Though he largely leaves detailed consideration of the relationship between science and political philosophy for later works, he makes one critical epistemological distinction in *Experience and its Modes* that is germane to these discussions. Oakeshott distinguishes between science-as-pursuit-of-knowledge and science-as-harnessed-to-practical-ends. He argues that when science is directed towards a practical goal beyond theory-building, it ceases to pursue absolute communicability or a fully coherent explanation of experience. This tincture of practical concern “hinders the full development of scientific thought…for this interest serves only to discourage science from passing into the world of abstractions in which alone it can fully satisfy itself. Practice is not concerned with absolute communicability.” Practice is concerned with changing our present situation with any eye to the future; it is indifferent to the scientific project undertaken for its own sake.\(^{131}\)

This shouldn’t be surprising. Clearly science’s structural limits will shift insofar as the projected standard for coherence shifts. In scientific inquiries limited by practical concerns, such as technological pursuits with specific ends in mind, the pursuit of a fully coherent scientific account of experience fades into the background (or disappears entirely). When science ventures into practical grounds, it takes on the characteristics of the practical mode of experience. Oakeshott argues that practical life projects its own standard for organizing the world of experience. This standard is not identical to science’s objective (“absolute communicability”), by definition. Rather, the modes are *primarily* differentiated by the standard each projects upon knowledge. Practical life is “the totality” of all “attempts we make to alter existence or maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change…Practice comprises everything which belongs to the conduct of life as such.” When science enters into the service of practical ends, it relinquishes

\(^{131}\) Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 171.
its own claims and standards for knowledge. It enters into the business of living and acting, and leaves behind the pursuit of full coherence in the world of scientific experience. This move hardly redeems it from its failure to meet philosophy’s standard for knowing, but it does show that science may have an appropriate (by Oakeshott’s lights) place in human life beyond the cloistered laboratories of white-coated experts.\textsuperscript{132}

Though science and practical life are simply modes of experience, Oakeshott does not mean to banish them from human existence. He repeatedly stresses that humans live in a practical world by default, incoherent and incomplete though it may be. After all, “life…can be conducted only at the expense of an arrest in experience.” As a mode of experience, science represents one such arrest. It is not equivalent to philosophy or equal to philosophy’s task, but it undoubtedly serves the conduct of life.\textsuperscript{133} Oakeshott is clear on this point; he will not “encumber” philosophy with political, practical, or scientific concerns, for

It is not the clear-sighted, not those who are fashioned for thought and the ardours of thought, who can lead the world. Great achievements are accomplished in the mental fog of practical experience. What is farthest from our needs is that kings should be philosophers. The victims of thought, those who are intent upon what is unlimitedly satisfactory in experience, are self-confessed betrayers of life, and must pursue their way without the encouragement of the practical consciousness, which is secure in the knowledge that philosophical thought can make no relevant contribution to the coherence of its world of experience. The world of concrete reality must, indeed, supersede the world of practical experience, but can never take its place.\textsuperscript{134}

Philosophers are “self-confessed betrayers of life” in service of truth. They trade daily relevance for the pursuit of concrete philosophical truth. But is politics simply the daily push-and-pull of practical concerns? Is it nothing more than “the conduct of life” elevated to the community level? These questions will be explored below. Since our ultimate interest is with Oakeshott’s

\textsuperscript{132} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 256.
\textsuperscript{133} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 320.
\textsuperscript{134} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 320–1.
political thought, it is sufficient for now to note that he does not set up a bright and shining theoretical line between politics and science. For a clearer view of the practical consequences of his epistemological positions, we must look to his later, less purely philosophical works.\footnote{Much ink has been spilled over precisely what Oakeshott believed philosophy’s appropriate domain to be. While this is not central to the argument here, I explore Oakeshott’s various positions on the possibility of a political philosophy in later chapters.}

Where, then, does science fit in Oakeshott’s view of politics? He repeatedly returned to the topic over the ensuing six decades. For instance, he frequently compared Marxism’s political disposition with various strains of Western liberalism. Oakeshott saw the former as a dangerous collectivism that promised to solve the messiness of political life along scientific lines. Marxists offered a universal, “cosmopolitan” set of solutions that promised to work under a set of prescribed conditions—regardless of differences in various national “perspectives.” They offered, in other words, a political platform “upon which universal agreement is possible.” They were political “scientists” of a particularly pernicious variety.\footnote{Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes, 169.}

But many of Oakeshott’s critiques of Marxism aimed to challenge a far-broader set of theoretical opponents. Marx was not the only European to conceive of human community institutions (often, though not always, the state) as existing to provide substantive succor to suffering individual humans. Oakeshott criticized Marxism as a prime example of a broader theoretical conflict within the constellation of Western political thought: the rise of political “Rationalism.” While “Marx and Engels…are the authors of the most stupendous of our political rationalisms,” Oakeshott recognized that “European politics without these writers would still have been deeply involved in Rationalism.” Marxists may be one of the gaudiest flowers to spring from Rationalism’s roots, but they are hardly its only blooms. These roots, Oakeshott
thought, were at least as old as medieval European regimes, so it was natural that they had given life to multiple modern political progeny.  

*Rationalism in Politics*’ eponymous first essay takes up the matter of science’s proper place in political life. Oakeshott follows Aristotle by arguing that human knowledge is bifurcated: it is either “technical” or “practical.” In other words, some knowledge is bound up in communicable rules and methods, while some cannot be communicated or transferred propositionally. Nearly all human activity—including science—requires possession of both. Trouble follows, according to Oakeshott, when either is neglected in favor of the other. In this essay, Oakeshott suggests that Europe’s increasingly “Rationalist” politics risk making just this mistake by over-privileging technical knowledge.

Again, “Rationalism” is far more conceptually capacious than is generally believed. This oft-missed point is worth restating: Rationalism is a political disposition, not a particular ideology. Conservative, liberal, collectivist, and libertarian Rationalists all exist. Indeed, Oakeshott believed the American Founding was a Rationalist triumph:

> The early history of the United States of America is an instructive chapter in the history of the politics of Rationalism…The founders of American independence had both a tradition of European thought and a native political habit and experience to draw upon. But, as it happened, the intellectual gifts of Europe to America (both in philosophy and religion) had, from the beginning been predominantly rationalistic: and the native political habit, the product of the circumstances of colonisation, was what may be called a kind of natural and unsophisticated rationalism.

Fortunately, though Rationalism spans the ideological field, it still permits of definition. So what is it? Who is the Rationalist?

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As the name suggests, the Rationalist reifies (a particular sort of) reason above any other faculty, and assumes that all things rational hang together. This reduces politics to a set of problems to be solved, and Rationalism offers a set of universal rules for their resolution. These rules necessarily take the form of technical knowledge: it “can be learned from a book; it can be learned in a correspondence course...The sovereignty of ‘reason,’ for the Rationalist, means the sovereignty of technique.” Oakeshott believes that this intellectual move has roots in the Baconian and Cartesian tradition of formalizing science into a specific set of knowledge-bestowing methods. Thinkers in this vein argue that “genuine knowledge must begin with a purge of the mind, because it must begin as well as end in certainty and must be complete in itself...research begins with an intellectual purge.” As we saw above, the scientific mode eschews the particularities of individual perspective. Similarly, the Rationalist believes in erasing all givens and biases from consciousness before attempting to understand experience. She begins with the certainty of full-scale ignorance and ends with the faux-certainty of methodological certification. Hers is a thoroughgoing faith in “the sovereignty of technique.” Rationalism is the reduction of politics to a set of rules. It is the politics of static doctrine and technical solutions. It is, in other words, Peirce’s faith that—given ample time to work—the scientific method can conclusively settle any conflict.139

Rationalism gained a great deal of its current prestige from its supposedly easy relationship with the sciences. For “the knowledge involved in a science is always more than technical knowledge.” In short, the knowledge involved in science is more than technical knowledge, though the knowledge produced by scientific inquiry is largely technical. Actual scientific investigation is much more nuanced than the Rationalist’s version. As noted above,

Oakeshott believes that the *practice* of science requires both types of knowledge. Though science pursues technical, communicable knowledge, the scientist requires practical, intuitive understandings of scientific traditions to conduct her work. Her practice is better than the premises of her theory.  

Surely the same is true for the “scientific” study of politics. Thus, the Rationalist’s critical misunderstanding “is not its recognition of technical knowledge, but its failure to recognize any other.” This is especially problematic because political life is a distinct mode of experience. Like science, it includes technical knowledge, but it is not exhausted by it. Science may discover information relevant to the conduct of politics, but it cannot solve political problems by means of formal inquiry. This is because Western “politics is not the science of setting up a permanently impregnable society, it is the art of knowing where to go next in the exploration of an already existing traditional kind of society.” It isn’t a problem to be solved, but a process to be continued. It is too particular, too diverse, too heterogeneous for scientific completion. Most importantly, this politics relies heavily upon practical knowledge and prudential judgments. It is a matter of “intimating” what is appropriate at a given moment, for a particular community that shares a common tradition. Science’s quantifiable generalizations

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140 Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 27. Cf. 34–35:

That the influence of the genuine natural scientist is not necessarily on the side of Rationalism follows from the view I have taken of the character of any kind of concrete knowledge. No doubt there are scientists deeply involved in the rationalist attitude, but they are mistaken when they think that the rationalist and the scientific points of view necessarily coincide. The trouble is that when the scientist steps outside his own field he often carries with him only his technique, and this at once allies him with the forces of Rationalism. In short, I think that the great prestige of the natural sciences has, in fact, been used to fasten the rationalist disposition of mind more firmly upon us, but that this is the work, not of the genuine scientist as such, but of the scientist who is a Rationalist in spite of his science.
have a limited place in a mode of experience (for politics is also a mode) that is so ineradicably tied to particulars.\(^{141}\)

In sum, to apply scientific standards to political life is to commit an epistemological error that Oakeshott terms an “ignoratio elenchi.” If science develops an extensive framework for understanding the world by means of a shortcut—quantifying the world and generalizing the observational standpoint—it is a mistake to apply the results of this strategy to other modes of experience. It can contribute to making the world of scientific experience more coherent, but it is not necessarily relevant or appropriate for other elements of experience. If humans living practically develop an extensive framework for understanding the world by means of another shortcut—looking to alteration of conditions of existence—it is equally a mistake to expect that this will shed light on the coherence of other worlds of experience. Such information may prove worthwhile, but it has no special standing beyond its own world of experience. Each mode is

\(^{141}\) Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 25; Oakeshott, “The Political Economy of Freedom,” 406; Oakeshott, “Political Education,” 56–57. It is worth noting that the development of political science in the twentieth century has pretty nearly failed along the lines that Oakeshott predicted. While early attempts to study political behavior scientifically sought broad “covering laws” for all human politics, these paradigms largely collapsed in a matter of decades. For example, general theories predicting that countries’ secularization or democratization or modernization (or any number of other deep-seated Enlightenment dreams) along with their economic development were soon superseded by more particularistic research paradigms. Such ambitious secularization stories were mugged—indeed, robbed blind—by intransigent reality. By the end of the century, political scientists were increasingly certain that their field could offer insights beyond the context of specific, historical institutions at specific, limited moments. In Oakeshott’s view, this surrender is predictable, given science’s structural limitations (though not, as noted above, as a result of any unique ontological limits surrounding the study of human behavior). Cf. Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East (London: Macmillan, 1958); Guillermo O’Donnell, Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach (Boston: Little and Brown, 1966); Daniel H. Levine, “Paradigm Lost: Dependency to Democracy,” review of Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy, eds. Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, World Politics, no. 2 (April 1988): 377-94; March, J.G. and J.P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life" American Political Science Review 78: 734-49.
limited to its own world because of the unique standards it applies to make sense of experience. This is why science-as-technological-development is distinct from science-as-pursuit-of-knowledge. While science may contribute to practical experience through technological improvement, it has no special standing in that mode. It is no longer science-as-such, but one among many available tools for pursuing practical ends.\textsuperscript{142}

Since each mode posits a standard of understanding and projects a corresponding world of experience, each mode’s conclusions are circumscribed within that particular world. This is why Oakeshott can insist that experience is “a world of ideas” and “a form of thought” that is “a single whole,” while also claiming that it may be divided into modes, or distinct forms of knowledge. “Modifications may be distinguished” within experience because of these posited standards for achieving coherence, but these are ultimately abstracted distinctions imposed upon experience. If scientific breakthroughs are to be incorporated into the practical mode of experience, they must be judged on practical grounds.\textsuperscript{143}

Oakeshott is concerned that the West’s “conversation” has become “engrossed by two voices, the voice of practical activity and the voice of ‘science.’” Both may be “conversable” voices, both may belong in the West’s public debates, but no mode can conclusively settle these debates on its own terms. While he denies science a privileged place in politics, this need not consign it to political irrelevance. Political discussion clearly has room for the technical knowledge that science excels at providing. Though science cannot settle questions of political ends, it can provide the limited technical illumination within its purview. It is important to note that no single mode of experience is self-sufficiently capable of resolving problems within the world of politics; science is not uniquely inadequate: “the voices [in this conversation] are not

\textsuperscript{142} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 5, 256.
\textsuperscript{143} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and its Modes}, 10–11, 56.
divergencies from some ideal, non-idiomatic manner of speaking, they diverge only from one another.” Western politics cannot be reduced to science alone, but neither can it be reduced to practicality or art or history. It draws upon the conversation between a variety of modes. As we will see in the next chapter, Oakeshott believes that it is dangerous to think of politics as an activity that can be “reduced” or “solved” or concluded on any grounds, scientific or otherwise.144

IV. Dewey and Oakeshott on Science and Method

Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s views of the appropriate relationship between science and politics could not seem more distinct. Near the end of Experience and its Modes, Oakeshott argues, “The notion, for example, that philosophy has anything to learn from the methods of scientific thought, or that the conclusions of philosophy ‘must be in harmony with the results of the special sciences,’ is altogether false.” It seems impossible for this to be compatible—on any practical or theoretical level—with Dewey’s complaint, in Individualism Old and New, that “We use scientific method in directing physical but not human energies.” What’s more, Dewey argues that the scientific method refines existing processes of human knowing, while Oakeshott takes science to be a conditional, abstract mode for approaching the world of experience. Clearly their views are not perfectly coincident.145

However, as I suggested at the chapter’s outset, the divergent accounts examined above illuminate much more than Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s views of the scientific method. They

suggest each thinker’s approach to the possibility of a political method, an area in which their thought is surprisingly similar. Faced with the uncertainty of twentieth-century plural politics, neither Dewey nor Oakeshott seeks to restore epistemological stability by methodological means. Instead, both suggest that there is no strict method for solving political problems once and for all. Rather, they attempt to insulate political practice from pursuit of fixedness and certainty. It is the work of the rest of this chapter to consider this surprising confluence.

Begin with Dewey. His work is peppered with references to the problems and potential that method poses for epistemology. Indeed, his *Quest for Certainty* includes a chapter titled “The Supremacy of Method.” After lengthy criticism of philosophers’ obsession with certainty, he presents “the scientific attitude” in salutary contrast:

A disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic, and cherishes it until a way is found that approves itself upon examination. The questionable becomes an active questioning, a search; desire for the emotion of certitude gives place to quest for the objects by which the obscure and unsettled may be developed into the stable and clear. The scientific attitude may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful; scientific method is, in one aspect, a technique for making a productive use of doubt by converting it into operations of definite inquiry. No one gets far intellectually who does not “love to think,” and no one loves to think who does not have an interest in problems as such. Being on the alert for problems signifies that mere organic curiosity, the restless disposition to meddle and reach out, has become a truly intellectual curiosity, one that protects a person from hurrying to a conclusion and that induces him to undertake active search for new facts and ideas. Skepticism that is not such a search is as much a personal emotional indulgence as is dogmatism.  

Clearly, Dewey does not believe any method to be sufficiently “supreme” to close questions beyond further interrogation. The scientific method is no exception—quite the opposite. It permits for the sustaining of skepticism without collapsing into epistemological paralysis. It should be noted that this cheerful, fallibilistic treatment of uncertainty seriously undermines the above critiques labelling Dewey as a technocratic scientific absolutist. Indeed, the method of

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146 Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 182.
scientific inquiry is less important here than the skeptical, questioning disposition of mind that is necessary to practice it well.\(^{147}\)

Dewey sustains this view of method throughout his work. He repeatedly argues that democratic commitment to discourse and argument is what grants democracy the larger part of its value. This “forces a recognition that there are common interests, even though the recognition of what they are is confused,” and helps to create “public spirit.” In another fortuitously-titled chapter (this time in *The Public and its Problems*), “The Problem of Method,” he prescribes *more* political access and *less* institutional rigidity, “The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public.” He goes on to circumscribe the role of “technical experts” to “discovering and making known the facts upon which [policies] depend.” This is not quite positivism’s sharp facts-values distinction enshrined in democratic institutions, but it does considerably limit science’s role in politics. Deweyan scientism could perhaps sustain a healthy defense of the United States’ Congressional Budget Office (CBO), but it hardly supports more substantial technocratic projects. Put another way, Dewey believes that science might provide us with additional information about open political questions, while still leaving wide space for debate over the specifics of what should be done (and which ideals deserve primacy at the particular moment).\(^ {148}\)

This should provoke a question. Above we saw that Dewey believes that science does not approach the world from a position of ahistorical neutrality. Is that position compatible with this formulation? If science is about solving particular problems, can it be used to offer information

\(^{147}\) For more on this, see: Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 86–87.

without subtly imposing values? These questions conflate two of Dewey’s separate projects. In the sections above, we traced his structural account of how science works; in this section, our concern is with science’s place in democratic political life. Dewey does not believe that a sharp distinction between values and facts (or scheme and content, etc) is sustainable. These always bleed into each other. This hardly means that we ought to ban scientific information-gathering tools from political life altogether. After all, we are under no compulsion to accept the premise behind this question—that only normatively detached information can contribute to our public debate. If a particular method appears to offer skewed or incomplete or biased information for the purposes of democratic debate, this can (and ought to) be suitably noted.

To that end, Dewey offers no fixed rules for determining the contours of science’s domain in politics. He offers the rough-and-ready endorsement of democratic judgment offered above. While the scientific method can clarify consequences and identify likely outcomes—not unlike the CBO—it cannot solve political problems. That remains the province of democratic political institutions. Political science is nothing more than a scorekeeper for political data. Political judgment in a democracy begins “at home, and its home is the neighborly community.” Scientific research may be esoteric and highly refined, but it cannot substitute for democratic decision-making.149

Even in passages like the one just cited, where he denies scientific aspirations to universal certainty, Dewey is often mistaken for treating human experience as a never-ending succession of material problems to be solved. This is a large part of why his views on science have been so frequently and so fundamentally misunderstood. In Oakeshottian terms, Dewey

seems to approach knowledge strictly through the lens of practical experience, but he comes bearing only technical solutions. Is politics really nothing more than resource allocation? Isn’t this evidence that Dewey was amenable to treating politics as nothing more than a series of research projects?\(^{150}\)

This is a serious, but common, misreading of Dewey’s thought. His version of pragmatism takes a more complicated view of political problems that goes beyond brute material concerns. In the same chapter of *The Public and its Problems* mentioned above, he approvingly cites Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of the “educative” effect of democratic governance. While democratic institutions *are* valuable for practical reasons—they “involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles”—this is hardly the extent of their worth. With Tocqueville, Dewey argues that democratic participation enlightens and ennobles a citizenry. Like many of his contemporaries, Dewey recognized discourse and language’s central role in the construction of values. Hans Joas writes, “[Dewey] regards communication not only as a functional agency for co-ordinating the action of different people, but as an event which can open up individual human beings to others; in doing so, it itself makes possible the experience in which value commitment arises.” Values surge forth from discourse as secondary, unintended, indirect effects. Democratic discourse has worth beyond any measure of efficiency. It is undertaken for the intrinsic goods it provides, in addition to its particular advantages for solving

\(^{150}\) To be sure, Oakeshott believes that political life includes a great deal of practical experience—and that it has become humankind’s default view of experience—but he provides a considerably wider range for political experience. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 247–48:

But anyone who, at any time, comes forward with the suggestion that the world of practical experience is itself what is absolutely and finally satisfactory in experience; that it belongs to the character of thought to be for the sake of action, is assured in advance of the concurrence of the majority of mankind.
problems (as compared to other forms of governance). In sum, his version of pragmatism cannot be reduced to that which is materially efficient or technically effective. Political considerations are far more complicated than that.  

Let’s consider how this position resembles Oakeshott’s. Recall Oakeshott’s definition cited above: “politics is not the science of setting up a permanently impregnable society, it is the art of knowing where to go next in the exploration of an already existing traditional kind of society.” In short, modern Western politics are about balancing the various ideals of a given society in light of its current situation. Oakeshott offers other metaphoric glosses on this definition of politics. For example, he also describes politics as “sail[ing] a boundless and bottomless sea… the enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel.” Most famously of all, however, Oakeshott compared political experience to a conversation: “The politics of our society are a conversation in which past, present and future each has a voice; and though one or other of them may on occasion properly prevail, none permanently dominates, and on this account we are free.” Modern pluralism is a sine qua non for modern freedom; it is in choosing between available voices that we demonstrate our liberty. Much of Oakeshott’s political writing is concerned to defend the prerogative of those participants in the conversation that are on the verge of being crowded out by dominant voices or dispositions.

Though there is a certain courage in Oakeshott’s and Dewey’s refusal to resolve ethical uncertainty by means of method, it leaves the unique challenge of modern pluralist politics unaddressed. After all—as noted above—both recognize that this uncertainty leaves humans

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yearning for greater political stability. Methodological foundations would have provided stability and a measure of certainty. They offer the sort of reassurance that could allow us to defend desirability of a particular choice (to use a Deweyan phrase). With a reliable method, we would have some grounds for asserting that we do truly know what we claim to know. Without the old metaphysical groundings, without a new methodological foundation, what can assuage twentieth-century epistemological uncertainty?

Thus far, Oakeshott seems to answer that the best response is to manfully and prudentially resist temptations to reduce or solve our plural politics. Western politics is “a boundless…sea;” to yearn otherwise is to misunderstand their character. Dewey’s supposed political “methodology” also resists simplifying politics into easy solutions. In fact, aside from clarifying the facts at issue in public discourse, he offers little more than praise for democracy’s salutary messiness. If anything, Dewey believes that the scientific disposition can imbue democratic institutions with a cheerful “delight in the problematic.” In sum, both Dewey and Oakeshott argue that the indeterminacy of pluralism is a unique opportunity to be enjoyed, but they avoid justifying it on scientific (or other methodological) grounds.

But this cannot be the whole response. Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s resistance to methodological rigidity is not adequate on its own. It offers little epistemological fixity to replace the old philosophical foundations. In other words, if rigorous methodology—especially science’s—cannot provide stability for twentieth century political philosophy, Dewey and Oakeshott must provide some other standard for grounding political arguments. If the twentieth century revealed liberal pluralism to be a precarious state of affairs, it is hardly sufficient for philosophers to insist that it is enjoyable. The alternative is Foucault’s determined epistemological nihilism, where every political utterance, regardless of form or quality, is no
more than arbitrary (quasi-violent) constraint. Perhaps worse still, the alternative may be Richard Rorty’s attempt to collapse any distinction between rhetoric, performance, politics and poetry.

Fortunately, Dewey and Oakeshott provide another answer, a political delimiter appropriate to their times. Both follow Hegel in this regard, turning to a community’s history for a political anchor. This will take some explanation, since most hyper-skeptical post-modern thinkers also take historical contingency to be a fact of life (political or otherwise). As we will see in the following chapter, however, there are many ways to found political arguments in history.
CHAPTER 3

A CONTINGENT, EARTHY ANCHOR: TURNING TO HISTORY FOR POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

I. Introduction

In the previous chapter we saw that Dewey and Oakeshott resist reducing politics to a formal method. Philosophers who seek stability in the wake of the field’s epistemological crisis ought not seek it in the scientific—or any other—method. This is all well and good for professional political philosophers, but it hardly answers the more fundamental challenge we (with the help of William James) outlined at the project’s outset. It’s one thing to write absolute truths out of academic projects and quite another to sustain political life without them. The challenge is to discover whether or not humans can live together without these sorts of philosophically-endorsed beliefs, not whether or not they could develop theories to explain why such beliefs are fundamentally impossible.

After all, we only looked to methodological foundations because we saw in the first chapter that Dewey and Oakeshott doubted that the old metaphysical foundations were salvageable. Without metaphysics or method, political philosophy risks falling into wholesale disorientation. If Dewey and Oakeshott argue that philosophy’s former lodestars are no longer operative, they must offer us some path forward for a new way of philosophically informing politics. Both thinkers admit that human politics requires some ethical stability. Both argued that longstanding epistemological foundations were in shabby philosophical condition—and that this was a root cause of contemporary political instability.

So if Dewey and Oakeshott’s methodological fuzziness is suited to the parameters of a liberal plural era, it is still an incomplete answer to the core philosophical challenge of that era. If metaphysics can no longer reliably underwrite our political foundations, if method cannot
protect us from epistemological doubts, new foundations must come from elsewhere. Both Dewey and Oakeshott turn, if in different ways, to history.

Many philosophers are unimpressed by this move. Some, like Leo Strauss, believe that the field’s future must necessarily involve recapturing former philosophical views of ahistorical things like Natural Right. Strauss thought it folly to seek anything fundamental in our past. History contains “no objective norms,” and any attempts to ground human values there were doomed: “Historicism culminated in nihilism. The attempt to make man absolutely at home in this world ended in man’s becoming absolutely homeless.” History may periodically offer us practical instruction, but it contains no principles sufficiently stable to guide the conduct of politics.153

Others, like Michel Foucault, object on different grounds. They admit that history is (at least in metaphysical terms) meaningless, but fear that appeals to tradition—usually resting upon established “norms”—are subtle covers for discipline, repression, or oppression. Foucault takes twentieth century humans to be a product of “a military dream of society” that entailed subtle disciplinary control of an increasingly “docile [and] useful” populace. At best, it is only by overcoming (all of) the power dynamics implicit in our past that we can actualize free individual self-construction.154

Dewey and Oakeshott seek to establish and defend a middle ground on the slippery slope between certainty and wholesale skepticism. They each retain something of their erstwhile

154 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 168–69.
Hegelianism. Second, both understand that history’s interference in human knowing has substantial consequences for political foundations. If humans make sense of how the world is in historically-contingent terms, their arguments about how the world ought to be will necessarily make use of the same materials. In other words, if human perception is fundamentally affected by history, we should not expect that human communication, judgment, ethics, or politics can be simply insulated.155

We should not overemphasize their points of agreement. When their arguments turn more directly to politics, critical differences become clear. Dewey believes that historical shifts are opportunities to unlock human potential. In a word, he takes a progressive view of history. Oakeshott is less sanguine about the consequences of historical change. He viewed rapid historical movement as potentially destructive of traditional goods worth retaining. As we will see below, Oakeshott famously defended a conservative historical disposition.

To some degree, Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s apparent political differences are a matter of temperament and emphasis. After all, Oakeshott celebrated the modern West as an historical outcome, the product of changes both organic and radical. His own skepticism always prevented him from declaring that the West’s brand of civil association was a final perfected solution to the full array of human political troubles anywhere on the globe. Dewey also energetically defended the Western tradition as an historical success. His own political projects were almost always aimed at fulfilling the promise of existing elements within this tradition—not going beyond it. Even where there are real divergences in their response to metaphysical uncertainty, these are frequently on prudential grounds, rather than oppositions of theoretical principle.

Whatever the specific loci of their points of confluence and contrast, Dewey and Oakeshott carve out a unique and powerful view of history’s place in political philosophy. They accept the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ forceful critiques of ahistorical epistemology, but they argue that philosophy’s permeation by history need not reduce to relativism or—still worse—utter nihilism. Furthermore, they recognize that liberation from history’s coercive embeddedness is an impotent hope—there is no escape from norms-in-general, though it is within our power to change specific iterations.

This chapter outlines each thinker’s account of history and indicates points of divergence. It concludes by showing how they both settle on a moderate position that attempts to answer the core question at the heart of the modern epistemological crisis: How might we get along politically without philosophical absolutes? Their approach to historical political foundations provides some epistemological stability to their political arguments without requiring wholesale metaphysical absolutism. As both flux and fixity, uncertainty and certainty, history is perfectly suited to their projects—and the needs of a pluralist world.

II. Dewey and History

In this chapter, we will see that some of the deeply theoretical positions sketched in Chapter One are in fact crucial to Dewey’s understanding of history in political life. This is evident in two particular ways: 1) his lifelong appreciation of Hegel’s work, and 2) his account of American history. I take these up in turn below.

Hegel was unquestionably a major influence on Dewey’s work. Dewey rarely self-analyzed, but when he did, most notably in “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” he noted Hegel’s importance for his work. Later commentators seeking to elaborate on this relationship
generally refer to at least one of several comments, including Dewey’s claim that Hegel “left a permanent deposit” in his thought, or his reflection that “I jumped through Hegel, I should say, not just out of him. I took some of the hoop…with me, and also carried away considerable of the paper the hoop was filled with.” Biographical accounts usually note that Dewey began his academic career as a fellow-traveler of the St. Louis Hegelians, and his philosophical Idealism continued to develop at Johns Hopkins under George Sylvester Morris.156

Even in his later years, Dewey still considered Hegel to be of critical importance. When describing his fall from unalloyed Hegelianism, Dewey remarked:

Hegel's idea of cultural institutions as an “objective mind” upon which individuals were dependent in the formation of their mental life fell in with the influence of Comte and of Condorcet and Bacon. The metaphysical idea that an absolute mind is manifested in social institutions dropped out; the idea upon an empirical basis, of the power exercised by cultural environment in shaping the ideas, beliefs, and intellectual attitudes of individuals remained. It was a factor in producing my belief that the not uncommon assumption in both psychology and philosophy of a ready-made mind over against a physical world as an object has no empirical support.157


Even if Dewey found Hegel’s metaphysics unsuitable, he still found his historical epistemology fundamentally sound. There was sufficient empirical evidence that historical circumstances affected the structure of human reason that it was unnecessary to also defend the transcendent significance of historical events. History interferes with “the ideas, beliefs, and intellectual attitudes of individuals” whether or not we believe in the existence of “an absolute mind” or a world historical spirit or any such thing.\textsuperscript{158}

Let’s examine the form that this Hegelian insight took in Dewey’s work. As we saw in the first chapter, Dewey understands human perception in holistic terms. In “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” and elsewhere, he argues that distinctions between subject and object or mind and world are practically meaningless. Since we have no means to go beyond our own perceptive faculties to prove the existence of a purely objective world of experience, we cannot demonstrate that the world exists apart from our faculty to know it. This is not solipsism or radical subjectivism; these terms beg the question. These charges require us to posit—\textit{ex nihilo}—an unperceived world of forms or moral laws or material to-be-sensed. There is no conflict between subject and object without such a projected world. In contrast, Dewey’s account of knowing rests upon continuity between mind and environment. Similarly, Hegel argued that “nothing is \textit{known} that is not in \textit{experience}.” Human knowing always builds upon the experiences we have; there is no ethereal means of moving beyond these resources to posit another world for judging knowledge.\textsuperscript{159}

These matters may seem to be the exclusive province of professors of epistemology, but—as we saw in Chapter One—they have critical consequences for our project. Most

\textsuperscript{158} Cf. Diggins, \textit{The Promise of Pragmatism}, 218–19.
\textsuperscript{159} G.W.F Hegel, \textit{The Phenomenology of Spirit}, ¶804; Dewey, \textit{Logic}, 42, 48–52.
importantly: if mind and environment are inseparable, this suggests that the particularities of various perspectives influence how humans know the world. That which is recognized as free or just or beautiful under a particular set of circumstances may readily be denounced as oppressive or unjust or hideous under others. Once again, as we saw in preceding discussions, Dewey believed that Darwin and others had revealed human existence and human knowing to be fundamentally characterized by flux, not stasis. Furthermore, Heisenberg and others had shown that what we know of objects depends upon our “positions” as subjects. History, Dewey thought, formed a critical part of any individual’s “position” vis-à-vis the world of experience.

However, as sketched thus far, Dewey’s (and Hegel’s) collapse of the subject-object distinction threatens to reduce all knowing to an atomistic, particularistic affair. If each individual mind projects understanding onto experience, it would seem that common understanding of experience could become a rarity. It is in answering this concern that Dewey owes his greatest debt to Hegel. In his Phenomenology, Hegel made it clear that history moves as individual humans seek grounds upon which to validate their status as rational and reasonable creatures. He traces the variety of ways in which humans have attempted to construct systems to establish and justify their rationality to one another. In a word, they seek “recognition” from other individual minds. When an individual communicates with another, she can only do so in recognizable, comprehensible terms. Human pursuit of recognition makes individual atomism unsatisfying.

To explain this better, we’ll need a brief tour of some of the key elements of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. Consider his famous analysis of the “master-servant” relationship. Hegel argues that masters seek to be recognized as reasonable and rational creatures by exacting obedience from slaves or servants. He then argues that this proves ultimately insufficient, as the
“master” becomes aware that the servility of the enslaved self-consciousness reduces the worth of its recognition of the master’s rationality. The esteem of a weak, dominated consciousness hardly offers the sustenance the master craves.\textsuperscript{160}

Meanwhile, the servant discovers that through his work for the master, he grants meaning to objects. He becomes a talented user of tools: an artisan. The servant’s newfound competence allows him a measure of confidence in knowing the world and his role in constructing this knowledge. By serving the whims of the master and acquiescing to the master’s determinations of value and meaning, the servant inadvertently builds space for independent subjectivity of his own. This leads the servant to realize the arbitrariness of the master’s position. In other words, recognition and confirmation of perceptive judgment cannot be rationally satisfied by force.\textsuperscript{161}

If arbitrary force cannot justify human knowing and judgment, what might fill that role? After showing the myriad ways that attempts to organize methods of authorization and recognition fail, Hegel concludes that humans are self-sufficient, self-determining ethical agents living in communities of shared meaning. More specifically, Hegel argues that humans can only find recognition through participation in a set of community beliefs loosely identifiable as an ethical tradition (\textit{sittlichkeit}). These shared ethical commitments make it possible to discuss disputes and build further common frameworks for understanding. As a \textit{sittlichkeit} develops, it allows for arguments to be advanced and justified against these common standards. Thus, recognition consists of another individual freely choosing to affirm a peer’s judgment in these

\textsuperscript{160} Hegel, \textit{The Phenomenology of Spirit}, ¶¶190–92. “However, it is clear that this object does not correspond to its concept. Rather, the object in which the master has achieved his mastery has become, in the master’s own eyes, something entirely different from a self-sufficient consciousness. It is not a self-sufficient consciousness which exists for him, but above all a non-self-sufficient consciousness.”

\textsuperscript{161} Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology}, ¶¶193–96, especially ¶195.
terms. In short, we only get recognition by communicating with others who share enough of a history with us to understand us.\textsuperscript{162}

Acknowledgment of these facts marks the conclusion of human history, the outcome of history “working itself out” over millennia. Terry Pinkard writes, “Spirit—\textit{Geist}—is a self-conscious form of life—that is, it is a form of life that has developed various social practices for reflecting on what it takes to be authoritative for itself in terms of whether these practices live up to their own claims and achieve the aims that they set for themselves.” In other words, spirit works towards a buttressing foundation for perceptual and ethical claims. Hegel shows how this is problematic across many stages of history until it (spirit) recognizes itself as authoritative and self-sufficient within a \textit{Sittlichkeit}. Individual humans realize that they need no independent authority to confirm the rationality of their perceptions or judgment—they are capable of making and affirming their own judgments within the context of their community’s frame of meaning.\textsuperscript{163}

This is not to abstract humans from empirical and material existence, but to indicate that they are rational, free creatures only within their cultural and social lives. Hegel rejects the notion that human reason and modern freedoms are pure or detachable from history. Instead, he suggests that these develop within a particular context and goals, and that this context and these goals are only comprehensible within a \textit{Sittlichkeit} of a community. James Good notes that, for both Hegel and Dewey, “Concrete freedom, on the other hand, is realized not by fleeing from the other but by relating to it in such a way that the other becomes integrated into one’s projects.”

\textsuperscript{162} Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology}, ¶¶800–6.
\textsuperscript{163} Terry Pinkard, \textit{Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8–9. See also Jean Hyppolite, \textit{Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit}, trans. Samuel Cherniak & John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1974), 322; “Spirit is a ‘we’…Spirit is history: it becomes what it is only through a historical development because each of its moments, in making itself essence, must realize itself as an original world, and because its being is not distinct from the action through which it poses itself.”
Recognition is only possible when other individuals are held to be self-sufficient as well, even in their disagreements. That is, reciprocity is revealed to be the key to solving the problem of recognition, which makes modern freedom possible to actualize, and reciprocity is only possible within an ethical community.\textsuperscript{164}

So much for our Hegelian tour. What does this mean for Dewey? Hegel’s account of the modern world’s genesis served as Dewey’s point of departure for addressing the challenge of finding flexibility and fixity in twentieth century politics. Although the absolutist metaphysics of the past were exhausted, humans still needed something stable by which they could orient their political lives. They needed a source of meaning compatible with their highly skeptical age. Dewey believed that humans have always been self-sufficient creators of meaning. It is the genius of modern political institutions to recognize and institutionalize this fact. We are each capable of giving meaning to the world of experience as we understand and interpret it. Liberalism takes this to be a constitutive problem of modern political life, and thus permits broad leeway for individuals to construct their lives.\textsuperscript{165}

So far, so good—and uncontroversial. However, many—Strauss, classical liberals, and others—argue that this “broad leeway” requires a natural or universal or divine or absolutely Rational defense of individual rights. They worry that individual autonomy will be constrained without support from ahistorical foundations. Since these derive their authority from beyond the messy particulars of human history, they are safe from selfish interference. Jim Ceaser, for

\textsuperscript{164} Good, \textit{A Search for Unity in Diversity}, 36.
\textsuperscript{165} Paul Franco, \textit{Hegel’s Philosophy of Freedom} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 125, 156. Cf. John Dewey, “Why I Am Not a Communist,” in \textit{The Later Works of John Dewey}, 9:17, 1933–4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 94: “Fair-play, elementary honesty in the representation of facts and especially of the opinions of others, are something more than “bourgeois virtues." They are traits that have been won only after long struggle.”
instance, believes that natural rights safely established “political conclusions that made the protection of rights a central aim of government and that placed limits and checks on political power,” while shifts towards historical foundations for individual rights “had the consequence of adding to the power of the state.” Following the Enlightenment, such thinkers worry that a community’s cultural, religious, and political past limits individual autonomy. More recently, meanwhile, Martha Nussbaum has stressed that community traditions are nothing sacred—just one “accident” among many forming and framing a human life.166

Dewey, following Hegel, believes that this position misunderstands the character and worth of the modern project. Modernity is not valuable for enshrining abstract and ahistorical freedom; its real triumph is more concrete. Modern political institutions allow individuals to reliably demonstrate their status as creative beings by communicating with others. Such creative communication is only possible, it is true, in the absence of inflexible restraints which close off individual interpretation of most of the bulk of the world of experience. But it is a mistake to think of this as a product of nature (or philosophical arguments about the “naturalness” of human rights). Dewey argued that modern individualism was an historical development.

Do traditions fundamentally constrain human liberty? Yes, though not in the final calculation. Historical commonality may even be a more secure grounding for liberty than the realm of acultural Nature, since self-disclosing communication requires a large degree of similitude among individuals. Individuals that share nothing—no language, no history, and no ethical commitments—are completely incomprehensible to each other. Such aliens may be

perfectly at liberty from pressure from their companion, but their freedom is still considerably lessened by their solitude. Shared understanding is necessary for individuals to make sense of one another. Effective modern liberty and individualism depend upon a community’s historical and cultural commitments. We cannot separate reason or liberty or autonomy from the cultural context in which they arise, since a shared past makes the fruits of liberty accessible. Without this prerequisite, human liberty would be without content. Arguments that see liberty as a natural endowment left free from political interference are prompted by legitimate concerns, but they still offer an incomplete view. Individual liberty in the West has specific, historically developed contours; it consists of creative interpretation of experience as part of a self-determining life in a community of intelligent, roughly equal individuals. At this level of theoretical analysis, at least, the West’s tradition is a foundation for liberty—not a source of constraint.

At this point in the argument, it may seem tempting to enshrine human freedom (to interpret and create meaning) as a substantive universal truth. While Dewey and Hegel argue that human creativity is a constant and ineradicable part of modern politics, they do not treat it as a unified first principle. The so-called “end of history” is hardly univocal. Recognition of human self-sufficiency can take any number of forms. As Pinkard notes, there are any number of ways that states can be organized to be “a coherent form of modern life.” In other words, individual liberty (or indeed, pluralism) can be fostered under various theoretical and institutional constellations.\footnote{Pinkard, \textit{Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason}, 331. Cf. 337:}

\footnote{Pinkard, \textit{Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason}, 331. Cf. 337:}

For a Hegelian, there is one clear sense in which history, however, cannot be said to have come to an end. The Hegelian cannot rule out that future developments in political and social life may be such as to prompt some future Hegelianesque philosophers to find in \textit{their} retrospective surmise of the world’s events a different teleology to be at work in the history of the world. For that to happen, though,
Whatever else of his Hegelianism he jettisoned, Dewey held fast to this insight. Late in his life, he wrote: “Assured and integrated individuality is the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions.” Shifts in a community’s structure (political, cultural, economic, etc) affect the political ideals involved. This means that the content of these ideals also shifts over time. To take this position, though, Dewey needed to work out an understanding of how these shifts in meaning happen.168

As a pragmatist, Dewey believed that the content of political principles was defined by their specific consequences for human activity. William James famously put it this way, “Grant an idea or belief to be true…what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”

Take a controversial example from Dewey’s lifetime: Americans were once accustomed to defending property and contract rights as nearly absolute. Defending these was the full, original meaning of defending individual freedom. By the late nineteenth century, this interpretation of human economic activity was used to protect extensive usage of child industrial laborers. Dewey argued that this meant that absolute property and contract rights included child exploitation as part of their meaning. If Americans believed child labor to be part and parcel of economic “freedom,” that was their business, but he suggested that they should acknowledge that they were


either rationality itself would have to change in ways that show our current schemes of rationality to be only partial—that is, to be something to be completed by some future development in their social practices of criticism; or the practices that orient themselves around the central norm of modern life, freedom, would have to be shown to be self-undermining in such a way that they required some other set of practices that supported and expressed some different norm that made possible a form of rational self-consciousness for its participants.
redefining “freedom” that way. If they were unwilling to accept this new meaning of “freedom,” Americans needed to develop ways to prevent the term from being used to protect such behavior.169

This is clearer in Dewey’s specifically political works. Above all, he aimed at a revitalization of the American political project for a new historical moment. He believed that communities take their ethical cues from longstanding, stable traditions: “morals mean customs, folkways, established collective habits…They are the pattern into which individual activity must weave itself.” Simply put, communities look back to their past for the ethical materials to make sense of their present. History is a source of epistemological, ethical, and political stability. Thus, in the face of industrialization’s challenges, Dewey did “not believe that Americans living in the tradition of Jefferson and Lincoln will weaken and give up without a whole-hearted effort to make democracy a living reality.” Problems like these were prompts to rebuild and enrich the American democratic tradition. They were not evidence that it was inadequate.170

However, Dewey repeatedly argued that shifts in technological, economic, and cultural realities were rapidly eroding critical elements of American democratic institutions. History is also fluid. Dewey believed that the inter-war decades in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were perjuring the American dream. As Christopher Lasch would later put it, “The energies released by the Civil War proved almost wholly commercial and rapacious—the old Yankee shrewdness without its Puritan scruples or even the rustic simplicity that once served as a partial check on the appetite of wealth.” Rapid industrialization and urbanization provoked massive changes in the American community and put new strains on political institutions. We

need only look to the chapter headings of some of Dewey’s political works to get a feel for his take on industrialization. In Individualism Old and New, Dewey argued that self-sufficient American individualism had lost its former meaning. Chapter 4 bemoans “The Lost Individual,” while Chapter 5 moves “Toward a New Individualism.” In Liberalism and Social Action, he argued that liberalism needed adjusting to keep pace with new economic realities. Thus, we go from liberalism’s “History” and “Crisis” (Chapters 1 and 2) to search for “Renascent Liberalism” (Chapter 3). Throughout his work, Dewey argued that American political ideals were not wrong or evil or rotten at their core; they simply needed to be rehabilitated for a new and different moment. For Dewey, American liberal democracy was not something to be overcome—it served as the animating inspiration for his political writing.¹⁷¹

As we will see below, this view of history’s relation to politics provides a balanced solution to the epistemological troubles we outlined at this project’s outset. A community’s tradition offers a stable base for justifying political positions without requiring fealty to a set of absolute metaphysical standards. As we have been insisting, communities conduct their political life within the confines of a shared tradition, and this tradition changes organically over time. Let’s consider these two prongs in turn.

First: history can act as a stable ground for justifying political positions. Thinkers worry that it shifts too rapidly to serve this purpose. Many of this ilk have too eagerly labeled Dewey a hopeless optimist by emphasizing his supposed arch-progressivism. Their Dewey believed that democracy’s ills were caused by persistent parochialism. Henry Edmondson accuses Dewey of harboring a deep “hostility to tradition” in favor of a hyper-rationalistic scientific method. Edmondson’s Dewey supposedly believed in jettisoning the American past in favor of a bright

¹⁷¹ Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 280.
new (and implicitly un-American) future. In Edmondson’s hands, Dewey becomes a traitor to the Founders’ cause. It is difficult to reconcile this caricature with the Dewey who thought Americans ought to be “amazed as well as grateful, at the spectacle of the intellectual and moral calibre of the men who took a hand in shaping the American political tradition.” Or less still with the man who repeatedly praised the “moral—not technical, abstract, narrowly political nor materially utilitarian” American political tradition, a tradition built upon “faith in the ability of human nature to achieve freedom for individuals accompanied with respect and regard for other persons and with social stability built on cohesion instead of coercion.” Edmondson may plausibly disagree with Dewey’s view of the American tradition, but it is nonsense to claim that he was “hostile” to it—or to tradition in general. In this case, Edmondson defines the American tradition as a particular sort of Christianity. After doing this sort of violence to a diverse historical, political, and cultural tradition, Edmondson finds it easy to use an egregiously simplified version of Dewey’s humanism as evidence for a broad theoretical “hostility to tradition.” As we have seen above, Dewey believed that a common past (recall the Hegelian term: “sittlichkeit”) was a sine qua non for human knowledge. As we will see below, his devotion to his own moral, political, and cultural tradition was robust.  

Other critics accuse Dewey of scientistic optimism as regards history’s potential. They often echo Strauss’ concern cited above: an historical view of meaning overestimates the potential of human control and generally hides amoral selfishness. Patrick Deneen finds Dewey’s “hopeful optimism” inadequately attuned to “human infirmity.” His Dewey aims at “human

transformation” in history by bringing “democracy and science wholly under human control.” There is no denying some of this charge. Dewey clearly believed that human control of conditions conduced to greater creativity, expansion of human potential, and much more. The scientific method, as we saw in the preceding chapter, is perhaps the most powerful tool in the service of these ends. What’s more, Dewey argued that democracy was culturally and politically suited to recognizing individual human creativity. The question, as I see it, is whether Dewey’s views fit the particular adjectives Deneen hangs on them. Is Dewey excessively hopeful about human capacities? Is his “faith” in human control really untrammeled? Is Dewey concerned to “transform” the United States? We have already seen evidence to the contrary in preceding chapters. What’s more, Deneen offers counter-evidence of his own. In the same chapter cited above, Deneen notes that Dewey’s skepticism prevents him from promising a perfected end to democratic and scientific progress. While Deweyan doubt is not fully equivalent to the Christian acknowledgement of “human infirmity” that Deneen prefers, the distance between these is hardly the gulf he presents here. Others, most notably Steven Rockefeller, have argued that Dewey was thoroughly aware of human limitations. Finally, it is far from clear that all of Deneen’s intellectual villains travel together. Enthusiasm for the scientific method and an historicized view of human knowledge need not lead to attempts at transforming humans.\(^\text{173}\)

While it’s true that the Hegelianism sketched above includes a progressive view of history, and while it’s also true that Dewey was unquestionably American progressivism’s leading intellect, to dismiss him as un-American or overconfident regarding science significantly misstates his arguments. He was much more interested in recapturing the lost promise of the

American democratic experiment. He believed that he was simply taking up the Founders’ mantle—especially Thomas Jefferson’s. Indeed, Jefferson once wrote:

Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.  

For Jefferson, Dewey wrote, “it was the ends of democracy, the rights of man—not of men in the plural—which are unchangeable. It was not the forms and mechanisms through which inherent moral claims are realized that are to persist without change.”  

Like Dewey, the sage of Monticello believed in maintaining circumstances such that the country continued to consist of self-sufficient individuals who participated in democracy. There was nothing sacred about the specific outlines of the political institutions currently in place. Such individuals were a goal to be pursued, a political good to be valued, and a reality to be nurtured by political change, if necessary. These “ends of democracy” animated both men’s thought, not the formal institutional arrangements of a rose-tinged, only partially-existent past. What’s more, both men recognized that democracy’s genius consists of empowering individuals to converse together and determine the meaning and course of their common lives.

Dewey and Jefferson were concerned with the purposes of American democratic institutions, rather than sanctifying any particular constellation of institutions. These purposes were the anchors around which American politics coalesced. The American Constitution was ratified to “form a more perfect Union, establish Justice…promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty” for all Americans. Dewey took pains to remind his

contemporaries that the Constitution was not established in order to form a fully fixed institutional order or to establish a specific economic program. If the document was being used to exploit children and prohibit the full citizenship of African-Americans, women, and others, then the time was ripe for revision. He wrote that the Preamble declared these “social ends…to be the object of government,” and these translated “almost automatically into terms of a flexible political program. No commitment to dogma or fixed doctrine is necessary.” This meant that going interpretations of property rights were no more inflexibly sacred than original constitutional provisions protecting slavery or marginalizing women from political life.

Let’s consider this a bit more specifically. Citizens once held the Preamble’s shining ideals and the consequent liberties dear. By Dewey’s time, things were considerably muddled. In court cases such as *Lochner v. New York*, the Constitution was used to diminish the liberty of countless individuals. American democratic institutions had come to work *against* the many for the good of the few. How could this be, in a nation founded on the supposedly self-evident rights of all men? Dewey claimed that the Founding’s Jeffersonian ideals—individual self-determination, popular political representation, equality before the law, etc—were its true historical legacy. In an era when American political institutions struggled to keep pace with shifts in American economic and cultural realities, Dewey could see no reason why they couldn’t (or shouldn’t) be altered. Why should women continue to be barred from voting? Why should workers be prevented from organizing with their fellows? Dewey argued that such updates were nothing new. In his view, Lincoln’s defense of the Declaration of Independence was an attempt to “translate” its “opening words” so that they would be meaningful for a new and different time. Dewey aimed to continue the work of updating Jefferson’s promise for an industrial time. American historical commitments illuminated the need for contemporary political reforms. Even
if new historical conditions made it difficult to sustain American democratic ideals, this was no excuse for abandoning them entirely.\textsuperscript{176}

Here’s another way of putting this: Dewey argued that the spirit of the American Founding was increasingly threatened by antiquated interpretations of the letter of the American Constitution. He believed that the former could only be recovered by reforming the latter:

Obviously the real constitution is certain basic relationships among the activities of the citizens of the country; it is a property or phase of these processes, so connected with them as to influence their rate and direction of change. But by literalists it is often conceived of as something external to them; in itself fixed, a rigid framework to which all changes must accommodate themselves.\textsuperscript{177}

In short, the Constitution wasn’t valuable as a document that reflected the otherwise-lost intentions of a group of wise ancestors. Rather, it was valuable as a document that supported a particular vision of political life. The health of the American democratic wager depended upon steady, continuous pursuit of the Founding’s ideals. With these principles in mind, American history provided stable grounds for indictment of “rapacious Yankees” and (more surprisingly) recalcitrant racists.

Let’s now consider the flexible element of history as a political foundation. If history provided stable ethical materials for the twentieth century American political community, it also threatened to leave that community behind. History could orient political life, but it was also clearly disruptive. Though Dewey believed deeply in the Founding’s democratic promise, he was no nostalgist. The problems of the future would require new solutions illuminated by the past’s promise. He refused to believe that this necessitated an abdication of animating American


political principles. Most citizens remained enthusiastic proponents of these core ideals, even if their “cash value” in ordinary experience was greatly diminished. Indeed, Dewey argued that there were “obvious contradictions between our institutions and practice on one hand, and our creeds and theories on the other.” Americans who valued equality before the law, who espoused versions of Jefferson’s civic republicanism, and trusted in the governance of democratic institutions owed it to themselves to restore some modicum of coherence between what they professed to believe and the practical consequences of this belief. In other words, pursuing the Founding’s ideals in the twentieth century entailed making use of twentieth century solutions. As historian Michael Kazin puts it, in a summary of turn of the century politics, this was a matter of expanding “the power of the state only in order to restore the glories of an earlier day.” If new economic forces overwhelmed old political institutions, Americans needed to update their politics to match these new needs.  

Consider this in terms of an example: Dewey’s writings on individualism. In his view, meaningful individualism implies both agency and volition. The “cash value” of choice depends on the ability to both choose and meaningfully will that decision. Freedom without ability to will is conceptually empty and practically meaningless. Of what good, Dewey asks, is an individual’s right to amass property if he or she is effectively barred from acquiring any? Of what value is an individual right to speech if many individuals have no means of acquiring a public hearing? Effective liberty isn’t simply a matter of being formally left alone by political institutions—it requires a baseline of public security, predictable and reliable legal institutions, access to economic activity, and much more.

In other words, Dewey follows Hobbes, Hegel, and a slew of other thinkers in arguing that public institutions serve as prerequisites for political freedoms. These thinkers argued that there is no serious individual freedom outside civil society (or political life). The government (or “Leviathan,” as the case may be) exists to protect the viability of existence within a community. Absent the predictability of public law founded upon community custom, human freedom is actually limited. Humans outside civil society are—as Hobbes repeatedly insisted—constrained by scarcity, uncertainty, and violence. Their range of choices greatly increases as a result of civil society’s safety and the economic development that it makes possible.¹⁷⁹

What does this view mean for Americans? Dewey argued that political institutions and power make approximations of American democratic ideals possible. If a community—like ours—takes egalitarianism seriously as part of its way of life, the work of politics is to adjust institutions to extend civil society’s benefits to all citizens. In the early twentieth century, new American economic obstacles to individual freedom were every bit as real and problematic as formal political barriers or the threat of violence. Given the American commitment to equality, this showed that reforms needed to target concentrations of economic wealth that could too easily convert into political power. These reforms were not an alteration or perjuring of the American democratic tradition. It was nonsense to pretend that the Preamble’s aims were a natural, self-sustaining promise—they were projected standards for the community to pursue. They had become core, constitutive elements of the American political tradition. Americans were faced with a choice: they could reform their politics in order to rehabilitate a more robust individualism, or they could abandon their traditional commitment to individual self-determination. Dewey clearly preferred the former.

Obviously, if historical changes required updated American strategies for pursuing the community’s traditionally cherished ideals, they also could prompt reexamination of the ideals and tradition itself. Dewey believed that this was a hermeneutic affair; rethinking any particular American democratic ideal requires consideration of how all such ideals hang together. In other words, the American tradition is not univocal—it consists of a number of elements that fit with varying degrees of coherence. Changes in how we understand one element necessarily lead to reevaluations of others. For example, a changed definition of individual liberty would implicitly interrogate current definitions of the appropriate scope of equality or citizenship or justice and so on and so forth. Extending full political membership to former slaves after the Civil War required a serious rethinking of American understandings of citizenship, liberty, equality, and much more.\footnote{Cf. John Dewey to Horace Kallen, March 31, 1915, Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.}

Here we must proceed cautiously, since we have been warned that these sorts of redefinitions will necessarily set us on a path to nihilism. If core political meanings aren’t fixed, how can they bind us to right conduct? What, in this case, protects against the sudden onset of selfish amorality? Dewey argued that the total coherence of the community’s tradition would always act as a bulwark against sudden, radical redefinitions of critical beliefs—despite their flexibility. Traditions are too “sticky” for rapid redefinition. Shifts in meaning of a particular ideal take place in the context of other principles. This means that some redefinitions will be out-of-bounds so long as the tradition’s other principles remain active. We cannot imagine a new meaning for political equality without also adjusting the meaning of justice or liberty or citizenship or any number of other active variables. Dewey thought that this buttressed against too much flexibility in politics’ historical foundations. For example: an increasingly rigid class
structure leading to circumscribed political participation for broad segments of the citizenry is incompatible with democratic egalitarianism. We could attempt to define democracy as “rule by the wealthy and powerful,” but redefining democracy in this way—as Walter Lippmann attempted to do in *The Phantom Public*—requires an abandonment of most of its core elements. Even conscious human efforts cannot dramatically redefine an entire tradition too quickly. Metaphysics are not the only means of protecting political stability.\(^{181}\)

A tradition’s meaning is malleable—and even hospitable to contradictory interpretations—though not to an infinite degree. The trouble, of course, is that as with the interpretation of texts, there is no hard and fast rule for determining when an interpretation of a particular element moves from redefinition to wholesale departure. Dewey does not pretend to offer any metaphysical standards that could settle such questions. All we have is the cautious balancing act between our various political principles. This may not be emotionally satisfying, but it is the best we can expect from the pluralist modern political world. It is impossible to recover the unquestioned hegemony of holistic ethical givens from the past. Once these have fragmented, once they are no longer taken for granted—our political solutions must entail balancing the various available principles according to our own lights. We discuss, we argue, and we work out enough agreement to proceed.\(^{182}\)

Perhaps a further example will help make this clear. Early in the nation’s history, only white men of a certain property qualification were self-evidently “endowed” with some of the Declaration of Independence’s “inalienable rights.” As historical circumstances changed—political, economic, technological, military, etc—this interpretation of American individual

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liberties became untenable. Eventually all male and female adult citizens of all races were understood to be part of the broader democratic community and were thus afforded the protections thereof. The specific source of these changes in understanding is disputed (and outside the scope of our concerns here); but whether they were the result of the increased economic and cultural importance of American women, the Union’s strategic concerns during the Civil War, Lincoln’s unique genius as a statesman, the legacy of Jacksonian democracy, etc, the shifts themselves are beyond question.

The key point: even though American political liberty originally only signified freedom for a specific demographic within the community, extending it to others did not change the fundamental structure of the ideal itself. Furthermore, none of these extensions demolished the meaning of the rest of the American democratic tradition. In each case, Americans were committed to meaningful individual liberty, but they were also committed to democratic egalitarianism. New circumstances made it incoherent for them to maintain existing understandings of both. Women’s and minorities’ increased public prominence made it increasingly difficult to withhold citizenship on the grounds of sex or race. This required updates to political institutions, certainly, but it also required slight redefinitions of some of the political ideals at the core of the American tradition. In this way, Dewey called for a rehabilitation of America’s democratic ideals by means of broadening their original meaning.

III. Oakeshott and History

As we noted in Chapter One, Oakeshott acknowledged his debt to Hegel in the opening pages of *Experience and Its Modes*. Though his published works include a number of similar references to Hegel—Hobbes is the only other member of the Western canon who appears as
frequently—Oakeshott’s unpublished writings are still more revealing. In notes on Hegel’s works, he explained that any apparent differences between his thought and Hegel’s are (largely) terminological: “I call these modes of thought ‘abstract’ meaning to imply (i) that they are thinking, and therefore one with truth and reality, but (ii) in a way defective as far as their results are concerned. Hegel calls them defective; but ‘abstract’ is better; for it emphasizes the point that however defective they may be, still they are modes of thinking.” There’s no doubt that Oakeshott’s Idealism takes a great deal from Hegel’s Phenomenology. In this section, I compare their analyses of history’s place in modern political arguments.¹⁸³

History appears in Oakeshott’s work in two critical ways. First, Oakeshott agreed with Hegel that historical changes informed philosophical progress, even though he also held that philosophy aimed at knowledge of the Absolute. Second, Oakeshott viewed political modernity as a uniquely valuable Western historical achievement. I take up these claims in turn.

Oakeshott’s Idealism can seem problematic in light of his thoroughgoing skepticism. As we saw in the foregoing chapters, he argues that human knowing is frequently hamstrung by the necessities of practical living—or the limits built into various modes of experience. We also saw that the political philosopher reflects on the whole of what Hegel called a community’s “sittlichkeit” in her pursuit of coherence. She recognizes how the tradition has stumbled into incoherence, and attempts “the intellectual restoration of a unity.” She reflects on the common past and suggests ways to make the present political framework more consistent. While the (deplored and despised) theoretician deals in abstract, supposedly supra-experiential political counsel, Oakeshott’s political theorist works at discerning the ideals implicit in a community’s

tradition. This form of philosophy is congenial to Oakeshott’s particular brand of skepticism, but it appears so idiosyncratic as to be impossible. What would this look like? Does it resemble political philosophy or simply intellectual history?\textsuperscript{184}

Oakeshott understood political theorizing to be considerably different from full-blown philosophy. The political philosopher suspends her pursuit of the Ideal to reflect upon the coherence of a community’s tradition and practices. In other words, she abandons the pursuit of Truth for the work of clarification. She accepts the community’s historical experience as the political material to be theorized. Every community develops accounts of what their common experience means (and meant), and these accounts have a certain organic coherence to them. It is the work of the political philosopher to interrogate these accounts of meaning, to clarify them in light of new or overlooked experiences, and to identify ways that they might hang together better. She identifies the implicit logical commitments of the community and subsequently shows how they might interfere with other elements. Oakeshott once outlined the limits, perils, and promise of this work as follows:

There is, however, one danger that the intellectual critic of political doctrines should avoid. He is apt to think that the value of a regime or of a condition or an ideal of society depends upon the coherence with which the doctrine associated with it is expressed. He observes a system of reasons adduced to explain the practice of a regime, and he is apt to conclude that because it leaves something to be desired the regime itself stands condemned…And this tendency may lead him astray. The value of a regime, fortunately, does not depend upon the intellectual competence of its apologists; indeed, in most cases, practice is more coherent than doctrine and its superiority should be recognized. Nevertheless, when a regime chooses to rationalize its practice, chooses to issue an official statement of the social and political doctrine upon which it relies—and this is so with most of the regimes of contemporary Europe—the coherence of such a statement becomes a matter of importance; and if it can be convicted of intellectual confusion, that is not a fault to be brushed aside as insignificant. What the intellectual critic of a

\textsuperscript{184} Oakeshott, “Introduction to \textit{Leviathan},” 225.
doctrine has to say is certainly relevant, though it is not all that can be said and is unlikely to affect the course of affairs.\textsuperscript{185}

To evoke Oakeshott’s more famous formulation from “On Being Conservative,” the philosopher seeks to show what changes are “intimated” in the community’s existing traditions. These offer at a more complete, more coherent version of the community’s self-understanding. The pursuit of coherence in political theorizing is similar to philosophy’s work, but it is limited to provide a still-abstract account of the world—an account that fits the community in question.\textsuperscript{186}

Note, however, that the political philosopher still walks a fine line. In an essay entitled “Political Philosophy,” Oakeshott insists that “reflection which is to provide principles or rules (or indeed anything at all) relevant to politics must share the limitations of [practical activity]’s character.” In “genuine philosophy there can be no guidance” or “recommendations about the arrangements of society.” Insofar as the philosopher engages in philosophy \textit{qua} philosophy, it has nothing to offer practical political concerns. He repeats this account in his best known essay, “Rationalism in Politics.” Near the end of that relatively lengthy essay critiquing the Rationalist disposition, he repeats that “genuinely philosophical writing about politics…is not to recommend conduct but to explain it.” As we saw in Chapter 1, the genuine philosopher interrogates all experience without arrest, including—and perhaps especially—practical considerations. The Rationalist offers “technique” and “the bogus eternity of an ideology.” The author of “Rationalism in Politics” is at once less comprehensive than the “genuine” philosopher and less practically ambitious than the ideological Rationalist. Alternatively, as we will see below, when

\textsuperscript{185} Oakeshott, \textit{The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe}, xv.
he descends to arrest his theorizing of politics within the European context, Oakeshott offers something less than ideology, but more than apolitical explanation.\textsuperscript{187}

Appearances aside, this is not an overly narrow account of political philosophy. The political philosopher is not simply reflecting on “the single world of political activity, and…the internal coherence of that world” within the community’s tradition. She is working the community’s broader cultural fields: “Political philosophy…occurs when this movement of reflection takes a certain direction and achieves a certain level, its characteristic being the relation of political life, and the values and purposes pertaining to it, to \textit{the entire conception of the world} that belongs to a civilization.”\textsuperscript{188} Oakeshott’s latent Hegelianism should be evident in this position: religious, cultural, and economic activities are all of critical importance to making sense of any community’s political life. No serious Idealist can maintain a sharp distinction between politics and other elements of human experience: “Any man who holds in his mind the conceptions of the natural world, of God, of human activity and human destiny which belong to his civilization, will scarcely be able to prevent an endeavour to assimilate these to the ideas that distinguish the political order in which he lives.” In other words, political activity is still activity, and political experience is still experience. We cannot fully hive politics off from the rest of human experience. This is true even in the most liberal of modern regimes. Witness the repeated failure of formal institutional barriers designed to keep religious or other cultural traditions from interfering with politics. Despite the most earnest, serious efforts, these latter always significantly influence the community’s political framework—as well as the ends individuals pursue.\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{187} Oakeshott, “Political Philosophy,” 154–55; Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 34.
\textsuperscript{188} Oakeshott, “Introduction to \textit{Leviathan},” 224, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{189} Oakeshott, “Introduction to \textit{Leviathan},” 224.
We need look no further than *On Human Conduct* for a model of this type of political theorizing. Oakeshott structures the work to present a history of the ideas underlying the European political community before suggesting reforms. Thus, the first two sections are largely descriptive, rather than prescriptive. He begins by analyzing the challenges of theorizing human conduct. What sort of creatures are modern Europeans? He argues that “an agent is one who is recognized to have an understanding of himself in terms of his wants and his powers and an understanding of the components of the world he inhabits; and action is recognized as an illustrative example of this understanding.” In other words, humans have not necessarily been this way at all times, but Europeans have come to (largely) define humans as agents. Oakeshott accepts Hegel’s position here: modern Western humans are unique in this degree of self-understanding.  

The second section of *On Human Conduct* is an attempt to theorize the “civil condition.” This is the condition of being governed by rules for behavior, rather than commands. What sort of politics best corresponds to a community of these individuals-as-agents? Oakeshott argues that such agents need predictable, reliable rules that help define the realm of action:

> Civil association is a moral condition; it is not concerned with the satisfaction of wants and with substantive outcomes but with the terms upon which the satisfaction of wants may be sought. And politics is concerned with determining the desirable norms of civil conduct and with the approval or disapproval of civil rules which, because they qualify the pursuit of purposes, cannot be inferred from the purposes pursued.  

Since they are self-understanding, self-judging creatures, these agents do not need prescriptive commands, nor do they need the ends of their behavior dictated to them. At issue in civil life are the “desirable norms of civil conduct,” not the ends of such conduct. Agents need “adverbial”

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rules built from sets of “considerations, manners, uses, observances, customs, standards, canons, maxims, principles, rules, and offices” that can be discerned in the practices that constitute their community’s tradition. Put simply, these rules evaluate various choices and types of behavior in a variety of situations—but they do not command any specific decisions. These rules provide guidance to agents by describing what the community holds to be just, unjust, warranted, and so forth. These serve as the underlying fabric making civil society possible. They decrease uncertainty by providing information about the likely public consequences of a variety of actions. Throughout these first two sections, Oakeshott does not offer any recommendations that are even vaguely actionable; these sections simply map out the contours of a political tradition.  

Only in On Human Conduct’s final section, “On the Character of a Modern European State,” does Oakeshott fully immerse himself in the form of political philosophizing just outlined. Here he steps more explicitly into the world (and context, and history, etc) of European history to evaluate its coherence at a much greater level of specificity. He argues that the European disposition for understanding politics is bifurcated. Some living within this tradition understand the state as a maker and enforcer of rules to provide predictable grounds for behavior. If we understand individuals as agents who construct their lives and disclose their identities through their choices, we’ll require such a state to maximize individual options by lessening uncertainty. This is, in Oakeshott’s terms, to understand the state as “civil association.” Meanwhile, others within this tradition understand the state as a cooperative organization oriented towards the achievement of substantive goals that may be individual or communal in character. If we understand humans as creatures that seek and require meaning from a collective

193 Oakeshott, On Human Conduct, 55.
effort with an overriding purpose, we’ll require a state with sufficient coercive power and organizing capacity to coordinate resources to serve that end. This, alternatively, is to understand the state as an “enterprise association.”\textsuperscript{194}

Every European is pulled towards these two poles, and no European political regime purely reflects only one or the other. Oakeshott writes, “In short, my contention is that the modern European political consciousness is a polarized consciousness, that \textit{these} are its poles and that all other tensions…are insignificant compared with this.” Some regimes in this political tradition lean towards one or the other, but all are drawn to both. They have been transmitted through the practices of political behavior over many generations, and without being consciously designed by any single intervening architect.\textsuperscript{195}

As a political theorist—rather than a theoretician—Oakeshott attempts to show what is gained and lost by pushing political life towards one or the other understanding of politics. He believes that those who understand the state as a cooperative enterprise have enjoyed a great deal of recent success, such that the political goods derived from understanding the state as a civil association may be at risk. When he warns against this trend, Oakeshott makes no recourse to metaphysical laws or absolute human ends. Instead, he argues that the European tradition includes civil association and enterprise association as available and competing ideals. These “human inventions” are the product of a long history, and not always-and-already available to every human community at every moment in time: “Human individuality is an historical emergence, as ‘artificial’ and as ‘natural’ as the landscape.” Modern Europeans are concerned with individualism, agency, and their political trappings because these are part of their community’s long-established practices. Oakeshott argues that the understanding of politics as

\textsuperscript{194} Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 112–18.
\textsuperscript{195} Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 320.
civil association is at risk of being hollowed out in favor of enterprise association, and that revitalizing the former is necessary if the European political tradition is to remain even minimally coherent. This is how Oakeshott envisions historical analysis as part of political theorizing. This model is also recognizably political philosophy in the Hegelian mode.¹⁹⁶

Nonetheless, a critical clarification is in order: if Oakeshott is a Hegelian political theorist of some sort, he still resists the (supposedly) Hegelian impulse to celebrate new advancements towards political coherence as evidence of metaphysical achievement, doesn’t he? Yes, to a degree. While Oakeshott understands a political theorist’s work to be the interrogation of a particular tradition to indicate how a tradition has become incoherent and might be made more consistent, he is not interested in celebrating all changes as progress towards a projected Ideal. Still, the difference is not nearly as complete as it seems.¹⁹⁷

Let’s examine this in more detail. The critical difference between Hegel and Oakeshott involves their views of historical teleology. Hegel famously believed that philosophical theorizing was a post hoc activity. As we saw in our discussion of Dewey, this renders it impossible to declare any and all innovation completed, even at history’s supposed “end.” Still, it’s impossible to completely expunge notions of developmental culmination from his work. He is convinced that history works itself out along rational, logical lines—and thus, that the appropriate political course of action involves working in harmony with history’s dialectical march. For Oakeshott, political change is simply change; it has no inbuilt, transcendent meaning. Citizens of modern European states have come to understand themselves as agents, even though

¹⁹⁷ Oakeshott, “The Political Economy of Freedom,” 396. It’s worth noting that whether or not this forward leaning “impulse” is true to Hegel’s account of the “end of history” is dubious, though many commentators take something like this interpretation as received wisdom.
they are periodically tempted to understand themselves as “a partner with others in a common enterprise and as a sharer in a common stock of resources and a common stock of talents with which to exploit it.” These self-understandings have been developed over a long period of time, and they are the only standards members of this tradition have for judging new political changes. As time passes, certain voices within a tradition may emerge or be submerged, but this is not indicative of an ultimate historical purpose, or dialectical pattern.  

This is perhaps why, in his own account of Hegel’s work, Oakeshott diminishes any notion of historical completion. Oakeshott suggests that Hegel’s “der wirkende Geist” indicates “an adventure, not a teleological process.” In Oakeshott’s hands, Hegel’s Geist “working itself out” in the historical dialectic becomes an open-ended affair. The accuracy of his interpretation is not important to our project—though modern Hegel scholars echo his reading—the crucial fact is that Oakeshott sought to read Hegel this way. For Oakeshott’s Hegel, the “end of history” comes when Geist realizes that it is the source of meaning in the world. Individual humans know themselves to be creative, evaluating creatures with sufficient authority to make judgments on their own authority. This is why Oakeshott believed that Hegel was amongst the first philosophers to seek out the “conditions” behind modern individualism.

To put this another way, Oakeshott (along with his particular Hegel) understands that the individualism characteristic of a modern European state is a product of previous historical occurrences. Indeed, that individualism is privileged is proof that Europeans now live in

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something like Hegel’s “end of history.” Thus, though he doubts the existence and desirability of \textit{inevitable} historical progress, Oakeshott takes historical flux to be a fact of political life. Even if European modernity is not a theoretically sacrosanct completion of an historical project, it is an historical moment with enough stability to be studied and theorized in terms of its coherence.\footnote{Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 257. Cf. 256–63.}

This is still not quite the whole story. Though Oakeshott recognized European political modernity to be contingent upon historical development, he sought to defend it on the same grounds. Though he will not claim it as the final stage of civilization or refinement, Oakeshott believes that modernity can be justified on its own terms. While “enterprise association” is a tempting lens through which to view government, Oakeshott writes that “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.” In other words, this “inheritance” is, and has been, central to how Europeans understand themselves in political life. A defense of European modernity must work from within that framework of political understanding. What do citizens appreciate most about modern individualism? Which encroachments might they have overlooked?\footnote{Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 321.}

Oakeshott argues in this manner because—as we saw in Chapter 1—he doubts that there are worthwhile political foundations beyond (or “above,” or “behind,” etc) a community’s experience that can meaningfully confirm the tradition’s goodness or truth or righteousness. His Europeans judge “civil association” in terms of their own shared experiences and understanding of what it (and “enterprise association”) means. They deem it worthwhile because they find the self-determining, self-willing, self-creating life that characterizes “civil association” worth defending.
Oakeshott believed that internal validation was all that was necessary. Europeans require European terms to make sense of European problems. They only need their own “lights” to orient their politics—not abstracted, bright-shining notions of human nature. Put another way, the world of politics largely falls within the practical mode of human experience, and justifications for practical conduct must be framed in terms of changing conditions in the world. The practical mode requires conditional, *a posteriori* reasoning—not *a priori* formulas to which right politics should correspond. Oakeshott, like Hegel, believed that humans ineradicably take their epistemological and ethical bearings from their community’s traditional practices. As such, they evaluate the current state of their political existence within this epistemological and ethical framework.

Why, Oakeshott wondered, would we bother seeking a context-free foundation to justify our particular political context? His lifelong concern was to reawaken European attention to lost elements of their political “inheritance.” In the years following World War II, the understanding of the state as a civil association lost ground against those who would understand it as an enterprise association. As a veteran of that war, Oakeshott was hardly blind to the exigencies of that particular historical moment: “the unavoidable (and exceedingly uneconomical) collectivism which sprang up in libertarian societies engaged in a war of survival is recognized as an evil not without compensation.” It may have been briefly necessary to use the coercive resources of European civil states to marshal an effective response to fascism.\(^\text{202}\)

Nonetheless, Oakeshott believed that it was high time for Europeans to recall the “desirability of civil association.” He argued that tilting the state too far towards an enterprise association threatened the breadth of experience for European individuals. If European states

engage in purposive, collective crusades—against religious opponents, in pursuit of substantive cultural achievements, etc—they require a state that can issue prescriptive commands. Oakeshott believed that this threatened to narrow the realm for individuals to live the life of free, self-enacting agents. He expects that Europeans would miss this life if it were completely lost. To abandon it now would be to reject the fruits of a long, robust historical tradition. Since they still take individualism seriously, their political tradition risks falling into incoherence. If they do not recapture their appreciation of “civil association” and the pluralism, individualism, and freedom involved in it, Europeans may lose the entire slate. In a certain way, this collapse would represent a return to coherence also, though Oakeshott believes that it would be an abdication of centuries of organic development. Once again, his argument is conditional: If Europeans value life as self-disclosing individuals, then they need to restore balance in their politics by rethinking the state as a civil association. If they do not value such a life, then they will lose it as well as their custom of treating it as valuable. The (currently) disjointed European political tradition looks set to return to coherence one way or another. This is the sort of argument that Oakeshott believes political philosophy can offer, and it is the logical structure of most of the arguments in his most political works.

This leaves us one lingering epistemological question. Does the Ideal behind Oakeshott’s philosophical Idealism matter for politics? In short: No. Oakeshott believes that it is a necessary logical component of coherence theories of truth, but he argues that it is solely the province of philosophers. The Ideal is concrete knowledge without postulates or conditions, but human experience is abstract. Indeed, Oakeshott frequently notes that the postulates, conditions, and shortcuts sustaining human life are what give it much of its diversity and charm. The “human conversation” takes sustenance from the interplay between various modes of experience—each
of which depends upon a distinct set of postulates. Individualism is enjoyable because the abstraction of human experience makes it unpredictable and uncertain. Concrete, ideal-type knowledge is not just inappropriate for human experience; as Oakeshott understands it, it would be completely paralyzing. In short, a full account of experience would close down conversation. He doubts that we’d want to act on such knowledge, even if it were somehow accessible to human capacities or minimally actionable.\textsuperscript{203}

Does this mean that Oakeshott believes that philosophy has nothing to offer to the understanding of political life? Again, the answer is no. He warns against the false supra-experiential distillates of pseudo-philosophical theoreticians, but he also endorses (and engages in) a different form of political philosophy. Oakeshott argues that the responsible political philosopher immerses herself in a community’s history in search of the tradition’s coherence. This is not the pure philosopher’s absolute coherence of all experience without postulates; Oakeshott believes that proper political philosophers take the community’s “entire conception of the world” as a starting set of conditions. They examine ways that the elements of that conception have fallen into incoherence and propose an “intellectual restoration.” To echo language used above, they seek to rehabilitate and rethink the community’s intellectual resources when they have shifted in meaning.

IV. Dewey and Oakeshott on Political History

Now that we’ve sketched out the two thinkers’ views of history, it’s high time to engage in a bit of comparison. Both Dewey and Oakeshott argue that a community’s sittlichkeit provides

the ethical material for modern political life. Modern liberalism eroded natural and religious foundations to the point where they were no longer politically operative (though the latter retained significant explanatory power). Both agree that humans know the world in terms of the historically-contingent framework in which they live. History affects human frames of meaning, as well as the basic processes of human perception and rationality. Both found the critical theoretical foundation for their understanding of epistemology and ethics in Hegel’s work. Both believe that political philosophy aims at the rehabilitation and renovation of a community’s tradition. On their model, theorists identify ways that the community’s core ideas fit together, especially after circumstances have changed.

This philosophical shift came with political outworkings. In the West, modern pluralism decisively triumphed over ethical absolutism and holistic, univocal politics. Modern plural institutions are largely now beyond serious question across the West. Both Dewey and Oakeshott believed that historical defenses of liberal individualism better recognized individuals’ creative role in determining the meaning of the world for themselves—instead of acceding to the authority of supposed pre-social truths. Meaning does not come to us ready-made from the world; humans put it there through engaging with and interpreting the world of experience.204

204 Cf. Deneen, Democratic Faith, xvi. In the early pages of his pessimistic assessment of democracy, Deneen describes modernity’s hegemony as follows [emphasis added]:

Democracy—that ancient combination of ancient words meaning “power of the people”—is almost universally acknowledged to be the sole legitimate form of governance remaining in the world today. After centuries of rejection by thinkers in antiquity, vilification by the medieval schoolman, suspicion during the humanistic period of the Renaissance, scorn by the Enlightenment “founders” of that oldest continuous regime that we call democratic—America—democracy is, almost against all odds, the only regime most living humans now deem worthy of serious consideration, exploration, clarification, articulation, exportation, importation, and finally, faith. In the wake of the horrific encounter with twentieth-century forms of secular utopian totalitarianism that resulted in the
Early liberals grounded their work in natural, pre-political individual rights. This was a stable consensus for most Westerners well into the twentieth century. The “man in the street” wielded his rights along these very lines and (implicitly, at least) with nature’s backing against infringing government power.

As we noted in this project’s introduction, any general consensus on these rights and their grounding was in shabby condition by the end of the nineteenth century. As a witness to some of the worst excesses of economic exploitation, Dewey spent many pages arguing that it was profoundly illiberal to wield individual rights in defense of a status quo that gave the few control over the “means of productive labor on the part of the many.”205 Though liberal political economy once represented an enormous liberation from the natural law or feudal tradition, it is less clear that it remains a force for individual freedom. Dewey explained:

The earlier liberals lacked historic sense and interest. For a while this lack had an immediate pragmatic value. It gave liberals a powerful weapon in their fight with reactionaries. For it enabled them to undercut the appeal to origin, precedent and past history by which opponents of social change gave sacrosanct quality to existing inequities and abuses. But disregard of history took its revenge. It blinded the eyes of liberals to the fact that their own special interpretations of liberty, individuality, and intelligence were themselves historically conditioned, and were relevant only to their own time…[By the middle of the nineteenth century] the economic and political changes for which they strove were so largely accomplished that they had become in turn the vested interest, and their doctrines, especially in the form of laissez faire liberalism, now provided the intellectual justification of the status quo.206

murder of millions of people in the name of perfection in politics, democracy has risen supreme as that one form of government that eschews any claims to perfection on earth, that avoids any claims to fundamental knowledge of truth in politics, that permits most widely the proliferation of distinctive lifestyles and life paths while still governing in the name of the common weal.

205 Dewey, Liberalism and Social Action, 29.
As liberalism became regnant in the West, it became clear that its view of individual rights had more to do with history than pre-political reason. Instead of freeing individuals from the constraints which bound them to subservience, natural rights arguments were often used to defend relatively arbitrary privileges of existing wealth.

I emphasize this here because the early twenty-first century has seen social and economic mobility decrease even as economic inequalities have rapidly increased. There is less agreement on the supposedly natural or rational character of classical foundations for liberal arguments than ever before. As a result, it is less clear now than ever that further rebalancing of classical liberal theories is the most productive way to address our situation.207

As Dewey notes above, this was essential for critics of traditional privilege; if liberals were able to establish that all humans have natural (or rational, or divine) claims to particular political goods, they could undercut policies and institutions that took their epistemological justifications from longstanding parochial practices. This means, among other things, that intolerance of various faiths is a betrayal of all humans’ pre-political claims to the right of conscience. If all humans, by nature, have equal standing in their political communities, then ancestral privileges or exclusionary policies are unnatural. The logic of the liberal argument worked similarly across various spheres of human activity, undermining traditional roles played

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by specific religions, political institutions, and the like. It assailed tradition from a securely abstract perch.

But this supposedly ahistorical attack on tradition proved to have a history of its own. As liberalism transitioned from protest to protective, time revealed the “naturalness” of early liberals’ arguments to be less self-evidently true than rhetorically useful. Many political theorists (and historians) have noticed that the pre-political justifications offered for liberal individual rights were far less important than the presence of longstanding, organic traditions that already intimated the recognition and protection of these rights. Rather than a pre-political, pre-social, acultural challenge to community traditions, they were an outgrowth of specific elements of the Western tradition. This meant that classical liberal arguments were every bit as contingent, arbitrary, and organic as the traditions they had subverted.

Oakeshott argued that this was precisely the case: systematic metaphysical justifications for the liberal project are just the faintest echoes of the Owl of Minerva’s wings at dusk. The early liberals were simply recognizing and formally codifying strains already present in their own tradition. Indeed, in the American case, Oakeshott believed

> [t]he early history of the United States of America is an instructive chapter in the politics of Rationalism…The founders of American independence had both a tradition of European thought and a native political habit and experience to draw upon. But, as it happened, the intellectual gifts of Europe to America (both in philosophy and religion) had, from the beginning, been predominantly rationalistic…For the inspiration of Jefferson and the other founders of American independence was the ideology which Locke had distilled from the European political tradition. They were disposed to believe, and they believed more fully than was possible for an inhabitant of the Old World, that the proper organization of a society and the conduct of its affairs were based upon abstract principles, and not upon a tradition which, as Hamilton said, had ‘to be rummaged for among old parchments and musty records.’ These principles were not the product of civilization; they were natural, ‘written in the whole volume of human nature.’

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In other words, Jefferson hadn’t deduced or discerned “certain unalienable rights” given to men at birth by a divine Creator. He’d simply noticed core political goods in the English political tradition and backed them with more powerful metaphysical rhetoric.

Though these early liberals may have grounded their arguments in a long-lost State of Nature, Oakeshott believed that they needed look no further than their own (relatively) recent history. Oakeshott, Dewey, and many others saw that liberalism was the product of an historical tradition of its own, and believed that attempts to deny its pedigree in favor of natural, ahistorical philosophical principles put the entire liberal project at risk. At the advent of the twentieth century, the natural-ness of liberalism was in doubt—Dewey and Oakeshott believed that saving its fruits required flexibility and historically savvy theoretical foundations.

Recent modernization theories bear out the historical argument. Though researchers disagree about the specific reasons that the liberal project has taken so long to bear fruit in many areas of the developing world, most agree that certain elements of the Western cultural tradition are (at the very least) catalysts that can speed modernization, and may even be necessary elements for the transition. Liberal, plural modernity appears to be a fruit that developed under reasonably circumscribed historical conditions. It may be that these conditions can be replicated or substituted in other ways, but we should not ignore their existence if we would advocate for increasing liberalization and democratization across the world. Even more importantly, treating liberal claims as universally rational or pre-political threatens to obscure the very real historical preconditions that make them relatively easier or harder to sustain in regimes where they have already been established.\footnote{See, for example: Howard J. Wiarda, “Toward a Framework for the Study of Political Change in the Iberic-Latin Tradition: The Corporative Model,” \textit{World Politics} 25, no. 2 (January 1973): 206–35. Wiarda argues that many researchers misunderstand Latin American (and Iberian...}
So: liberal pluralism requires tolerance, which requires a degree of public ambivalence regarding moral ends. It only demands that we hold the conviction that all (or at least *most*) convictions should be allowed a public hearing. Dewey and Oakeshott recognized that liberalism’s legacy was well worth defending, but argued that twentieth century liberal defenses need different epistemological grounding. As we will see in the final chapter of this project, many twenty-first century thinkers are now realizing that there are other ways to make the case for this legacy.

There are important differences between Dewey and Oakeshott, of course. It is true that Dewey hews closer to a progressive, dialectical understanding of history, while Oakeshott reads Hegel somewhat idiosyncratically to evade that position. It is also true that Oakeshott believed that a universal Absolute is a logical necessity for philosophy, even if it is irrelevant to politics, while Dewey abandoned his Idealism after only a brief period.

Allow me—briefly, for the time being—to offer some concluding remarks. In the face of modern epistemological skepticism, Dewey and Oakeshott saw no path back to past philosophical unities. Both adopted a fallibilistic, skeptical attitude towards philosophical and political certainty. Crucially, however, they still refused to abandon the project of political philosophy. They argued that the collapse of traditional metaphysics did not bar philosophers from making important contributions to political arguments. Rather, they sought a new role for philosophy that would permit its survival in an uncertain, modern world. Instead of seeking Peninsula’s) struggles to modernize because they ignore its community-minded Catholic cultural heritage. He argues, somewhat unconvincingly, that these countries’ progress towards modernity looks considerably more substantial if liberal modernity is understood in a less Protestant manner. In other words, if researchers would only redefine modernity, seemingly less modern countries would then be included in the category. This seems to me a strange muddying of the definitions involved that would impede modernization research, but it highlights at least one way that various historical traditions can impede the development of modern, liberal regimes (using these terms in the customary, limited sense, that is).
“vertical” solutions to uncertainty—digging for the firm metaphysical realm beneath human mutability or looking above for substantive guidance from the heavens—philosophers ought to urge citizens to look “horizontally” to each other. Dewey and Oakeshott believed that politics could be circumscribed, if not “grounded” in the traditional sense, within the boundaries of discussions about a shared tradition.  

If this seems sensible now, it has hardly been a common position over the last century of theorizing. Rather, post-modern thinkers were frequently willing to dismiss the legitimacy of any substantial, coherent philosophical projects. Foucault, Derrida, and others argued that politics was no more than a series of Thrasymachean battles of brute self-interest. Philosophy could offer nothing more than an aesthetic or therapeutic salve for the viciousness of political life. Some post-modern thinkers have confirmed the veracity of the absolutists’ critique by enshrining this newfound freedom from metaphysics as an absolute of its own. Richard Rorty writes:

[These] people who think there are such things as intrinsic human dignity, intrinsic human rights, and an ahistorical distinction between the demands of morality and those of prudence…are opposed by people who say that ‘humanity’ is a biological rather than a moral notion, that there is no human dignity that is not derivative from the dignity of some specific community, and no appeal beyond the relative merits of various actual or proposed communities to impartial criteria which will help us weigh those merits.

Rorty is in the latter camp. If we sweep away the “intrinsic” and “ahistorical,” we are freer to experiment with our lives than before. Without such constraints, individuals can take up the business of constructing their own lives as they like. Most importantly, for Rorty, we are then able to live beyond the strictures of coherence. Not only are we free from natural laws; we are also free from retaining even a bare minimum of consistency in our actions and beliefs. In other

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210 For a similar, though I think not quite identical, use of “vertical” and “horizontal” groundings of Oakeshott’s thought, see: Botwinick, Michael Oakeshott’s Skepticism, 118–19.
211 Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, 197.
words, Rorty accepts the story of modern political theory as drafted by Strauss and other philosophical absolutists (even if he’s untroubled by the consequences of their account). The erosion of natural right *did* in fact culminate in radical subjectivism—what’s the concern?

Dewey and Oakeshott understood that this sort of radical subjectivism ignores the historical element of human knowing. Post-modern thinkers who would escape from historical givens come strangely close to absolutist philosophers who seek ahistorical truths free of historical constraints. In contrast, Dewey and Oakeshott believe that philosophers can offer critical and constructive analyses of a community’s political tradition from within the tradition itself.

One other objection merits consideration. How might philosophers thus embedded find hermeneutic space to criticize the tradition itself? If there are no absolute truths beyond a community’s history, what resources does the community have to alter its course for the future? Without universal truths—human rights come to mind—how are we to respond to tyrants who claim to be fulfilling the community’s ideals? Are there no universal political principles available that critics (internal or external) can draw upon to indict the tradition itself?

As we saw above, Dewey and Oakeshott believe that these questions rest upon a misunderstanding of the character of historical traditions. No community’s past is completely univocal, so no political change is ever an intellectual dead end. Dewey insisted that American political life always tacked back and forth between the legacies of Hamilton and Jefferson. For his part, Oakeshott believed that the European political tradition was divided between the poles of civil association and enterprise association. No one tradition is unitary enough to prevent dissent or to lock in biases forever. There is a great deal of intellectual leeway within any
tradition—certain elements can be used to indict others, and vice versa. Criticism never withers away completely.

For example, as of 1860, the American political tradition included strains that could viably be used to justify the emancipation and enfranchisement of Southern slaves. Simultaneously, however, Abraham Lincoln repeatedly used the egalitarian promise of the Declaration of Independence to indict American slavery. On the other hand, the American tradition also included materials that could justify local resistance to federal intervention into the practice of slavery. Of course, this doesn’t mean that each of these positions was equally compatible with other critical elements of the American tradition. Most of us now reflect on the freeing and enfranchisement of American slaves as a fuller completion of Jefferson’s vision in the Declaration. Relying upon history as a foundation for political theorizing does not necessarily close off the status quo from disagreement, criticism, or further changes. The Union’s victory in the Civil War hardly settled the question of African-American citizenship in the United States once and for all. Those who opposed including African-Americans in political life found new justifications to restrict their participation, while those who supported full membership developed new ways of making their case. The argument continued well after Appomattox.  

So where does this leave us? History provides humans with sufficient guidance to ground the daily conduct of political life and protect those political goods we value, but it also allows flexibility for reinterpretation and adjustment as circumstances dictate. We are immersed in our community’s tradition, and we use our language and meaningful past to communicate and argue as we create new meanings and conduct political life. Our common history is an ever-present, 

ineradicable part of our politics. Meanwhile, the complexity and breadth of community traditions make it inevitable that the meaning of various historical foundations changes over time. The meanings of individual liberty, political equality, and private property (to take just several examples) shift, and it is the work of political philosophers to indicate and analyze these developments. They determine how past understandings have changed, and attempt to explain how these changes can be made consistent.

While all of this is perhaps of interest to academics with a professional stake in the appropriate interpretation, characterization, and categorization of canonical political philosophers, it’s not the most interesting conclusion available from the argument above. Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s treatment of history suggests a moderate alternative to philosophical absolutism and nihilistic post-modernism. They articulate the epistemological and metaphysical outlines for pluralist political philosophy. In the twenty-first century, their position may well be a more profitable starting point for debates than endless arguments between those nostalgic for an enchanted past and those yearning for a completely untethered future. In this project’s final chapter and its conclusion, we see that their view of political philosophy is especially valuable for several reasons: 1) it presages philosophical arguments that have recently become fashionable once more, and 2) offers a more productive starting place for political discussions in a highly-polarized political age when epistemological skepticism has flowered well beyond its late-nineteenth century high-water mark.
CHAPTER 4

BALANCING UNCERTAINTY ACROSS THEORETICAL BOUNDARIES

I. Introduction

94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.\(^{213}\)

-Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

As we saw in the first chapter, both men recognized the breakdown of traditional metaphysics as an opportunity for philosophy—and a necessary consequence of liberal democratic modernization. Both recognized that the old Natural, divine, and “universally” rational groundings for epistemology were lost beyond theoretical repair, no matter how dearly we might yearn for the ethical ideals they sustained. Pluralism cannot be so easily wished away. However, as we saw in the second chapter, Dewey and Oakeshott also resisted the temptation to resolve the new uncertainty by methodological means. Each admired scientific inquiry as a highly refined technique for testing beliefs, but both resisted efforts to make it the standard for political governance. In chapter three, we explored why this was the case. Dewey and Oakeshott each argued that knowledge is produced within a context of many other beliefs that hang together as part of a community’s tradition. Politics, both argued, is a matter of attending to incoherencies within this constellation of beliefs. Both Dewey and Oakeshott argued that their own political traditions responded to pluralism’s promise and challenges by looking

“horizontally,” rather than “vertically,” for ethical foundations. Instead of searching beneath human things for a metaphysical fundament, instead of seeking guidance from above, citizens looked to reasoned engagement with each other. Both suggested that philosophers could help identify points of incoherence and contextualize them within a broader historical tradition.

This concluding chapter serves two purposes. First, I compare several recent theoretical arguments with the positions that Dewey and Oakeshott put forth many decades ago. I argue that much recent political philosophy is spurred by the same epistemological concerns that animated Dewey and Oakeshott. We will see that efforts along these lines have scarcely superseded their own work. However, I have repeatedly insisted that it is not enough to have our intellectual history in proper order.

Thus, the second half of this chapter is concerned with the political implications of the philosophical narrative offered in this project. The contemporary state of modern Western politics provides ample evidence that the fragmented last century of political philosophy has not adequately balanced between epistemological flexibility and political conviction. Decades of analytical abstraction, critical deconstruction, and corrosive skepticism have taken their toll on the worlds of practice and theory alike. Nostalgia for holistic ethical consensus has largely proven impotent to reestablish homogeneity. Polarization and fragmentation are increasingly the rule, rather than exceptions—opposing political partisans agree on less now than ever before. They are every bit as certain as their pre-modern forebears, but they are no longer alone on the political field. Conservatives and leftists alike have found stable convictions, but they’ve found them in their respective bunkers. While oppositional certainty may satisfy the yearnings of various individuals, it’s insufficient for the common practice of modern politics. Democratic pluralism requires discursive politics, and discursive politics require common convictions that
allow opponents to understand their points of disagreement against a shared ethical backdrop.
The second half of this chapter connects current political polarization to the epistemological fragmentation described in this project—and suggests how Dewey and Oakeshott’s approach might lead to more productive discourse.

II. In Dewey and Oakeshott’s Wake

It is possible to understand much of the last century’s major trends in political philosophy as responses to epistemological uncertainty. Like absolutist nostalgia, post-modern thought can similarly be understood as a reaction, though of a different valence, to the newly untethered, non-foundational state of modern political philosophy. Many twenty-first century philosophers find these two poles equally unsatisfying. These thinkers have recently begun to search for ways to escape these old arguments. Many have concluded that human yearnings for philosophical stability cannot simply be wished (or willed) away, even though the old foundations are beyond rehabilitation. As a result, they have gone in search of philosophical foundations sufficiently stable to fill this need without unduly closing off modern political pluralism. They have attempted to find philosophical compromises that provide theoretical structure without the shackles of resuscitated absolutism and flexibility without the paralysis of nihilism. Most of this recent work seeks to find something—a variable, a system, particular principles, a sphere of human behavior, etc—to stabilize liberal politics and salve modern anxiety. Some philosophers locate this in particular types of theology, others argue for new ontological foundations, and still others believe that better attention to historical processes will yield reliable political and ethical ideals. In this section, we’ll examine several examples of such theorizing in the context of Dewey and Oakeshott’s epistemologies. The degree of similarity between this recent work and
theirs suggests that we ought to take Dewey and Oakeshott’s answers to these theoretical questions particularly seriously.

These thinkers seek new moorings upon which to ground a renovation of political theory. For example:

- In search of limits to post-modern uncertainty, Charles Taylor and Hans Joas have investigated the sociological processes by which humans develop and articulate values.  
  
- Meanwhile, some political philosophers, like Jeffrey Stout and Richard Rorty (at times), have looked for political stability in longstanding American cultural narratives.

- Still others, like Stephen K. White, argue that epistemological renovation is not nearly substantive enough—new political foundations suited to modern pluralism will necessarily require ontological investigation.

- Finally, in recent years, some political philosophers and political scientists have sought to re-establish certainty by applying natural scientific research to social and political problems. They wonder if neuroscience and evolutionary biology can settle some of humans’ thornier social and political problems.

It seems, then, that Rorty was right when he insisted that Dewey was “not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but [is] waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.” In order to demonstrate that today’s theorists are wrestling with the very crisis that animated Dewey and Oakeshott, this chapter will briefly consider each of the approaches listed above (with the exception of the neuroscientific option). In the end, we will see that much of this recent analysis simply reopens theoretical ground that Dewey and Oakeshott explored many decades earlier. Both were

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216 White, *Sustaining Affirmation.*
strenuously concerned to validate modern philosophical (and political) pluralism while acknowledging the unique challenges it poses for fretful humans. They consciously, explicitly, and specifically identified solutions that are only recently beginning to interest political theorists once more.²¹⁸

It is no coincidence that this new theoretical focus has coincided with a burst of discussion of Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s work in the secondary literature. After his death, Dewey fell out of intellectual fashion for the better part of fifty years, supplanted by democratic realists, analytical philosophers, post-modern thinkers, and so on and so forth. Oakeshott’s career spanned that half-century period, though he rarely received due attention during his lifetime. Both men, however, have enjoyed a renaissance in the last ten to fifteen years—precisely as political theory has sought to address the epistemological challenges outlined above. At first, this new wave of Dewey scholars claimed him as a progenitor of various wings within existing field debates (liberalism, communitarianism, etc). Eventually, work by Robert Westbrook, Alan Ryan, Cornell West, and others made it clear that his thought was better understood as a profitable escape from many of these arguments.

Meanwhile, Oakeshott was first revived to lend support to pre-modern views of philosophy, the existence of Natural Right, libertarian political economy, certain forms of post-modernism, and a host of other incompatibilities. Recent scholarship has recognized that Oakeshott—like Dewey—showed little interest in most of the aforementioned fault lines. Both philosophers were interested in a different sort of debate, one that happens to be precisely at the

²¹⁸ Richard Rorty, The Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xviii.

Again: my concern is to show that a number of going political arguments over the appropriate scope of government intervention in economic, cultural, and religious life have roots in the epistemological crisis that Dewey and Oakeshott addressed decades ago. Dewey and Oakeshott are newly critical to us today because their responses to our theoretical paralysis also appear suited to our corresponding political problems. Much recent theorizing has sought new ways to dissolve this theoretical and political stagnation—which has led many theorists to arguments resembling Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s.

This paralysis is why I’ve framed the foregoing in terms of epistemological uncertainty. As both Dewey and Oakeshott understood, modern pluralism requires a specific sort of fixed conviction. Not every type of ethical certainty will do. For humans to sustain a flexible, organic, and discursive form of modern politics, they need shared convictions across the community that yet permit flexibility and revision. Absent substantive agreement robust enough to span political divisions, pluralism risks degenerating into self-assured, unyielding, warring factions. As Bryan Garsten notes in Saving Persuasion, for political and ethical discussions to be peaceful and wide-
ranging, humans need enough in common that there exists a possibility of persuading their opponents without sharing so much that there is no debate to be had:

**Persuasion** in the strict sense identifies a way of influencing that is neither manipulating nor pandering. The speaker who manipulates his audience so as to bring them to a belief or action without their consent, as Kant thought orators moved men “like machines,” has not persuaded but coerced. In contrast, the speaker who merely finds out where his audience itches and then scratches there, as Plato thought pandering Athenian orators did, has not managed to change his listeners’ minds at all. To truly persuade people is to induce them to change their own beliefs and desires in light of what has been said. Though we speak of “being persuaded” in the passive voice, we recognize the difference between being persuaded and being indoctrinated or brainwashed; the difference lies in the active independence that is preserved when we are persuaded.220

Persuasion requires sharing enough with our conversation partners that we can be understood, but not so much that there is no friction to address. Contemporary political philosophers have become increasingly concerned to explore (and renovate) the epistemological foundations of plural politics—whether or not they acknowledge it.221

Recent debates between liberals and communitarians responded to this insight (if in diverging ways). Political philosophers on each side customarily discovered, highlighted, and then rigorously maintained a sharp distinction between individuals and their political communities. Once this theoretical brush-clearing was complete, it remained only to choose a side to prioritize—individuals or communities. The artificiality of most of these arguments has since become apparent.

In an indication of the incompleteness of the distinction between liberals and communitarians, Dewey and Oakeshott are each claimed by partisans on both sides of these debates. Each resists attempts to reduce human politics to the interplay between individuals or to

221 For an earlier view of this tension, see: De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 47.
the maintenance of thick cultural traditions. Their theoretical holism leads them to resist
imposing the artificial distinctions upon the whole of human experience, which makes it possible
for interpreters to selectively emphasize and ignore elements of their arguments. For example, as
we saw above, Oakeshott’s supposed libertarianism is strictly prudential, not principled. He
draws no theoretical line between individuals and their community—quite the contrary.
Oakeshott believed that such distinctions hide more than they reveal.\footnote{222}

A look at liberal and communitarian debates reveals echoes of positions that Dewey and
Oakeshott articulated many decades earlier. This work is prompted by similar concerns about the
epistemological foundations of political philosophy and responds with similar recommendations.
For instance, in \textit{Democracy’s Discontent}, Michael Sandel argues that liberal individualism is
inattentive to community’s role in modern political life. He writes that by viewing individuals in
isolation from their political communities, liberalism

makes it difficult to account for civic obligations and other moral and political ties
that we commonly recognize. It fails to capture those loyalties and responsibilities
whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable
from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are—as members of
this family or city or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this
republic.\footnote{223}

A worthy point in its own right, though it is far from clear that all liberals are as blind to these
considerations as Sandel alleges. Nonetheless, compare it with Dewey’s view of the crisis faced
by American individuals in the early-twentieth century:

\footnote{222} Christopher Lasch sees Dewey as an Enlightenment-type defender of individuals over
community. Rorty and West see Dewey as communitarian. Meanwhile, Oakeshott’s critique of
Rationalism wins him points with community-minded thinkers suspicious of modernity, while
his “Political Economy of Freedom” (and other libertarian-leaning arguments) makes him
congenial to liberal individualists.
\footnote{223} Michael Sandel, \textit{Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy}
The significant thing is that the loyalties which once held individuals, which gave them support, direction, and unity of outlook on life, have well-nigh disappeared...Stability of individuality is dependent upon stable objects to which allegiance firmly attaches itself...Assured and integrated individuality is the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions.\textsuperscript{224}

Dewey anticipates Sandel by arguing that individualism detached from a broader political, cultural, and economic community is as politically meaningless as it is theoretically destructive. Individualism only takes a meaningful form within particular community contexts—and thus, these contexts deserve a prominent place in any philosophical conversation about individualism’s proper boundaries.\textsuperscript{225}

Oakeshott also understood Western individualism in this way. In Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, he wrote,

> The “private individual” as I understand him is an institution, a social, indeed for the most part, a legal, creation, whose desires, emotions, ideas and intelligence are social in their constitution...the individual would collapse, like a body placed in a vacuum if he were removed from the “external” social world which is the condition of his existence.\textsuperscript{226}

His concern—like Sandel’s and Dewey’s—was to show that the West’s “assured and integrated individuality” had disintegrated as a result of (relatively recent) historical developments.\textsuperscript{227}

\textsuperscript{225} See also Dewey, \textit{Ethics}, 323:

> Human beings are generated only by union of individuals; the human infant is so feeble in his powers as to be dependent upon the care and protection of others; his mind is nourished by contact with others and by intercommunication; as soon as the individual graduates from family life he finds himself taken into other associations, neighborhood, school, village, professional, or business associates. Apart from the ties which bind him to others, he is nothing.

\textsuperscript{226} Michael Oakeshott, review of J.D. Mabbott, \textit{The State and the Citizen}, \textit{Mind} 57 (1949), 388–89.  
\textsuperscript{227} Oakeshott, “The Masses in Representative Democracy,” 370.
Sandel’s communitarianism recalls Dewey and Oakeshott in other ways as well. He follows them in arguing that political philosophers work to uncover the ideals implied by a community’s tradition. Sandel put it thus:

*By public philosophy I mean the political theory implicit in our practice, the assumptions about citizenship and freedom that inform our public life. The inability of contemporary American politics to speak convincingly about self-government and community has something to do with the public philosophy by which we live. A public philosophy is an elusive thing, for it is constantly before our eyes. It forms the often unreflective background to our political discourse and pursuits.*

Obviously, this passage also recalls Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s view of the political philosopher’s work. Like Sandel, Oakeshott argues that political philosophy aims to interrogate the conditions of our political “practices.” Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter 3, he argues that modern individualism is sustained only in a particular sort of community, with specific presuppositions and inclinations. Dewey similarly argues that political philosophy should take a community’s organic “habits” as the material to be theorized.

When Sandel’s primary opponent at the time, John Rawls, wrote *Political Liberalism*, he adopted a similar position. In that work, Rawls reformulates “justice as fairness” as a “liberal political conception of justice.” Whereas in *A Theory of Justice* he was concerned to offer a largely ahistorical view of justice, in *Political Liberalism* he instead aims at articulating a compelling account of justice suited specifically to the West’s political liberalism. Even Rawls found it necessary to historicize and contextualize his treatment of justice.

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228 Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 4, emphasis added.

First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his
As I’ve already noted, it is a mistake to conscript either Dewey or Oakeshott into the (now largely dormant) battles between late-twentieth century liberals and communitarians. They eschew many of the key distinctions that usually serve as sorting standards for distinguishing between these two camps. Like liberals, Dewey and Oakeshott are committed to individualism’s fruits. They thoroughly appreciate modern pluralism and cultural tolerance (nearly to the point of libertinism, in both men’s cases), free and competitive global markets, and secular political institutions. Like communitarians, they recognize that political institutions and ideals take their substance from their historical background. As noted at the outset of this section, I raise these debates here only to show that political philosophy has begun to circle around to Dewey and Oakeshott’s concerns.

Other, more recent arguments in the field corroborate my thesis. As debates between liberals and communitarians became increasingly rancorous, many philosophers (and others) sought to step back from the terminology and frameworks driving these arguments. Here we consider several examples of such work that illustrate how much this recent theorizing relies upon the epistemological paths blazed by Dewey and Oakeshott.

Some of this has taken place at the ontological level. In his *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, Stephen K. White faces the uncertainty challenge squarely. He argues that we “late modern” liberals are now reaping the fruits of too-abstract individualism. Liberals, he charges, theorize individuals as “Teflon subject[s]” without a conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism. More than this, I assume that the parties do not know the particular circumstances of their own society. That is, they do not know its economic or political situation, or the level of civilization and culture it has been able to achieve. The persons in the original position have no information as to which generation they belong.
given tradition or a surrounding community. White argues that recent post-modern thinkers have compellingly demonstrated that the grounding of modern individualism is considerably more contingent and arbitrary than originally thought. Yet he maintains that there is no escape from implicit ontological groundings of one form or another.\textsuperscript{230}

In other words, White would have us reconsider the choice between philosophical absolutism and full-blown skepticism. Though the former may be lost for good, he believes that the latter is politically unsustainable. White argues that—like other ontologies—modern liberalism claims to rest upon strong foundations, “ontologies that claim to show us ‘the way the world is’ or how God’s being stands to human being, or what human nature is.” As we’ve seen throughout this project, these sorts of strong ontological claims have come in for sustained criticism over the last century. In this regard, White surprisingly shares the concern of many philosophical absolutists: we need stronger foundations, for “it is by reference to this external ground that ethical and political life gain their sense of what is right; moreover, this foundation’s validity is unchanging and of universal reach.” In other words, the true, good, and right are measured by correspondence to this “external ground.” Every political regime needs a compelling theoretical framework that can make recourse to these sorts of reliable, given principles. On this view, philosophical skepticism—now largely harbored under post-modernism’s standard—cuts away at the shared certainty humans need to justify their public institutions.\textsuperscript{231}

But White also recognizes that the skepticism that has eroded these foundations advanced on its merits. It hasn’t just won the broader argument; it has won in a way that resists reversal. If previously strong ontologies have collapsed, there’s little to be gained in seeking to recapture

\textsuperscript{230} White, \textit{Sustaining Affirmation}, 4.
\textsuperscript{231} White, \textit{Sustaining Affirmation}, 6.
them. As Hegel and others have shown, once a community’s ontological presuppositions have been credibly called into question, their “unchanging” and “universal” status cannot be recaptured. So-called “givens” rest upon unquestioned authority, which, once lost, becomes irretrievable. The self-evident nature of self-evident truths cannot be established by extensive argument—justification undermines their supposed intuitiveness.

To that end, White proposes reconsidering these fundamental presuppositions as “weak ontologies.” These ontologies respond to two pressing concerns. First, there is the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of the self, other, and world are contestable. Second, there is the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life.232

White argues that the contestability of weak ontologies is not always evident up front, but rather becomes evident in light of the human capacity for constructing meaning. For instance, insofar as we think of ourselves as “Teflon subjects,” we limit our ability to build an ontological framework that knits together the facts and fortunes of our lives. This is not (necessarily) cause for alarm, since all humans implicitly come to some conclusions about how fundamental human concerns—e.g. “language, finitude, [and] natality.” White argues that philosophers can skeptically attend to the contestability of various ontologies (and their limits) while also accepting the inevitability of choosing and inhabiting an ontology of their own. Weak ontologies represent concerted, reflective attempts to hold these conclusions together in a relatively coherent framework. Ontological skepticism is healthy, but White aims to provide it with a constructive, compatible theoretical counterpart.233

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232 White, Sustaining Affirmation, 8.
233 White, Sustaining Affirmation, 8–9.
Clearly something has gone awry in post-modern theorizing if sympathetic theorists like White are constructively reengaging with—and even defending—ontological theorizing. But White’s is hardly the only recent effort along these lines.

Consider Hans Joas’ recent work. If White is concerned to demonstrate that humans are at once constrained by history and capable of transcending it to construct their own meaning, Joas attempts to explain the details of how the process functions. In his *Genesis of Values*, Joas traces the last century’s various theoretical attempts to discern the source of ideals, since “In all Western societies today, serious discussions are now taking place about the shift in, and loss of, values, the opportunities and dangers which such processes present, and the necessity of either reviving old values or searching for new ones.” In chapters on William James, Émile Durkheim, Dewey, Charles Taylor, and others, Joas explores the course of theories of value since Nietzsche’s dismissal of traditional foundations in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.  

Throughout the argument, Joas insists that today’s philosophers of value are struggling with epistemological challenges from the late-nineteenth century. Like Dewey and Oakeshott, Joas argues that modernity is plagued by “the discrepancy between widespread subjective value-certainty and… modern uncertainty about the foundation of values.” Under conditions of modern pluralism, a million value-laden flowers bloom—the challenge is to maintain (and perhaps forge?) common values sufficient to sustain these conditions. In an era when given epistemological foundations have been sundered by the pluralism they birthed, philosophers must develop new means of justifying values to support public life.  

Like White, Joas concludes that “conception[s] of the good and the right” in our skeptical age must be discursive, creative, and subject to revision under the same conditions that first gave

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them life. Unlike Dewey, he maintains that universal notions of value lurk beyond the world of human experience—they may appear knowable under analysis abstracted from particular situations. He argues that such values are—at best—filtered into particular situations by means of a host of factors. Purportedly universal principles are integrated “partly” with “cultural values,” but their place in common life is ultimately “the upshot of a reflective equilibrium between the co-operating agents reflecting on their collaboration and the cultural interpretations.” The right-ness of competing conceptions of the Good may be conclusively established outside the world of human action, but this offers nothing conclusive for the variety of considerations impinging themselves upon real, experienced situations. Put still another (and very Oakeshottian) way, we may recognize norms of behavior that verge upon universal status, but this tells us very little about the appropriate weighting of these norms when translated into specific community values. Theory and practice are constitutively different activities.236

Other theorists have made arguments like Joas’ without linking particular values to universal principles. They have sought further epistemological certainty in their own communities’ traditions. For instance, in Achieving Our Country, Rorty attempts to distinguish various ethical threads within the American tradition and provide a rousing defense of a broadly optimistic patriotism. What does it mean to be an American? What is our national identity? By answering these sorts of questions, Rorty aims to provide continuity with our past along with evidence of a common identity that can act as a foundation for our political future. In other words, “We raise questions about our individual or national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will try to do next, what we will try to become…Stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to

forge a moral identity.” The country we choose to become is shaped by the country we once were—our national community’s future is limited by the particulars of its existence.\(^{237}\)

Though Rorty argues that modern Americans glean epistemological stability from their past, he argues that their tradition yet leaves them significantly free to elect a future from various possibilities. Though the United States of America is defined by its sins, it is also defined by its heroic efforts to overcome them. America is a country that perpetuated a systematic genocide of the New World’s native inhabitants. It is a country that enshrined and enforced the brutal marginalization of hundreds of millions of human beings on the basis of their race, sex, and ethnicity. Rorty insists that these things are real and inexpugnable, but they hardly exhaust the fullness of the country. America is also a country that repeatedly chose to redeem its sins through tortuous, and often bloody, national conflicts. It is also the country of Lincoln and Jane Addams and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is, in other words, a country that can be brought to prioritize justice over convenience or comfort.

Clearly it is no simple affair to ground Americans’ self-identity in their common history. Rorty understands that this human community—like all communities—does not offer forth an easy, uncontested identity. America, like any conflicted whole, is subject to interpretation. Nonetheless, competing interpretations stand and fall according to their coherence, persuasive force, grounding in available evidence, acknowledgement of inconvenient facts, and much more. Whether or not America is best understood along Rorty’s own lines or others’ depends upon how well each available interpretation hangs together. Ultimately the range of available interpretations is limited by the historical material at hand. Rorty argues that democratic institutions are ultimately designed to provide “a discursive practice suitable for…social

construction.” They act as a forum for debate over various interpretations of which sort of country (or society, in the above quote) Americans believe theirs to be.  

Stephen K. White recognizes that skepticism’s advance comes with challenges that threaten its successes. He proposes to fill the epistemological void with “weak ontologies,” self-chosen frameworks consisting of fundamental presuppositions about what characterizes human existence. Though these anchor humans in an uncertain age, they are contestable—particularly by those subscribing to alternate, conflicting ontologies. In other words, these are chosen on conditional grounds: they are evaluated and ultimately chosen in terms of the constraints they impose and the possibilities they imply. If we understand ourselves to be in this way (as opposed to that), then we accept these limits and constructive opportunities (as opposed to those).

Consider how White’s weak ontologies resembles Dewey and Oakeshott’s view of modern philosophy’s relationship to ontology. Dewey and Oakeshott recognized that community traditions and public institutions unavoidably imply the existence (and prominence) of certain inchoate “conceptualizations” of the structure of being. Both drew upon Hegel to insist that these given elements of community traditions are simultaneously “fundamental” and “contestable.” Humans embedded in a common sittllichkeit are sufficiently constrained by it to orient their lives—but they are also capable of recognizing their capacity to create and build further meaning. These are what Dewey termed “the loyalties which once held individuals,” what Oakeshott called “a coherent, self-sustaining understanding of the world in which a single formal character is imposed upon everything that receives attention.”

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239 Dewey, Individualism Old and New, 66–67; Michael Oakeshott, On History and Other Essays (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 22. Note that Oakeshott uses this terminology to refer to a self-understanding imposed upon the world for the purpose of practical engagement. His treatment of ontological reflection in other texts varies according to his purpose. For our
Meanwhile, while Hans Joas’ view of the genesis and grounding of modern values differs somewhat from Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s, his analysis still supports this chapter’s argument. After tracing various efforts to reground theories of value in science, revelation, community, individual self-development, and a host of other isolated variables, he concludes that the last century’s theorizing has largely failed to improve on early twentieth century solutions. He writes, with some exasperation, that these latter have “been neglected to such a large extent that contemporary writers, even if they are more or less concerned with the question...tend to be so without recalling the answers which have been put forward ever since Nietzsche.” As I have argued above, this is as good a reason as any to reopen consideration of Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s treatment of epistemological uncertainty. Joas’ work is an attempt to link these first salvos to more recent theorizing. Indeed, he argues that “Half a century later and without allusion to any of these predecessors, we again find similar thoughts in the work of Charles Taylor.” Earlier in *Genesis*, Joas wonders why Taylor ignores pragmatism, “a school of thought which could offer support, indeed inspiration, for his arguments,” and concludes that “it is certainly to his detriment.” Joas takes Taylor’s work to be among the best recent theorizing of skepticism, uncertainty, and moral foundations—but he ultimately concludes that its deficiencies are almost entirely due to inattention to earlier thinkers whose work preceded it.

purposes, however, it suffices that his view of the practical mode of experience mirrors White’s, as White is concerned with ontology’s practical function. As we noted in Chapter 3, Oakeshott acknowledged that politics is largely—though not entirely—the domain of the practical mode of experience. Within the domain of philosophy *qua* philosophy, obviously, no “formal standard” (ontological or otherwise) can be imposed upon experience without interrogation as to its presupposed conditions.

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241 Joas, *Genesis*, 143, 163. Indeed, Joas believes that Taylor’s theory fails only insofar as it departs from several of American pragmatism’s critical insights. Cf. 143:
One final point on Joas: his solution to the challenges of modern epistemological pluralism is largely compatible with Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s own. Dewey and Oakeshott—in keeping with most of the thinkers Joas surveys and endorses in *Genesis*—are concerned with “transcendent,” rather than “universal,” values. This prompts them to ask different questions that better address modern uncertainty. Dewey and Oakeshott (and certainly James and Nietzsche) aim to theorize the values that pull upon citizens’ heartstrings—and why these remain compelling (or don’t). What, in other words, constitutes the transcendent moral core of a community’s cultural and political life? They are considerably less interested in discovering universal or rational grounding for these values.

Rorty asks similar questions. His approach is historical, phenomenological, and similarly concerned with exploring the values that transcend his community’s political life. Unlike Dewey and Oakeshott, however, Rorty believes that this gives today’s theorists license to transform the community. Though Dewey and Oakeshott envisioned pluralist political philosophy along the lines that Rorty follows, they were far less confident that theory could emerge from historical

There is indeed such a problematic. We find it where Taylor allows himself to be carried beyond his claim that, by undertaking a phenomenology of morality, we can ascertain an experience of captivation, and speaks of the good in essentialist terms that are not covered by his argument and not reconcilable with his declared intention—that is, where Taylor loses sight of the fundamental pragmatist principle of referring all concepts to action...[A]fter we have lost a metaphysical grounding of the good, even what is valuable in itself, admirable or lovable is only accessible to us from the perspective of our actions—the actions in which it is constituted and operative for us. This is precisely what pragmatist ethic and the pragmatist theory of religion and value were driving at: there is a good, but it is necessarily a good-for-us. It seems to me that Taylor sees the matter in like manner in those sections of his work in which he discusses the ‘subtler languages’ of modernity (Part V)—and yet, in his critique of action-related moral philosophy, he goes too far and then goes astray when he not only finds fault with its reduction of the good to desires or obligations, but also wishes to transcend the good’s action-relatedness in general.
immersion with a transformative agenda. As we saw in Chapter 3, Dewey believed that his era’s so-called “progressivism” was actually a restorative project. It sought to adjust existing institutions and policies to reanimate old values. Dewey’s “new” individualism was the Founding’s “old” individualism given new institutional expression in an industrializing era. Oakeshott similarly argued that modern Europe suffered from an imbalance in its bifurcated political history. He believed that historically savvy philosophy could remind communities of the value of goods they once took seriously. In other words, his “conservatism” consisted in a profound appreciation for the Western liberal tradition (if not its Rationalist distillates). Neither Dewey nor Oakeshott believed that historicized theory was conducive to transforming community values. Instead, both thought that attending to these traditions would help to make clear the ways that political practice was now inadequate to these values.\textsuperscript{242}

\section*{III. Epistemological Fragmentation and Political Polarization}

In many of the preceding chapters, I have argued that Dewey and Oakeshott are best understood as forging a stable, flexible response to the twentieth century’s epistemological crisis. I am hardly the first to notice that the West’s political paralysis is grounded in theoretical paralysis. As we’ve seen above, the advent of modern pluralism eventually challenged the

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\item This distinction is as good a marker as any for distinguishing neo-pragmatists like Rorty from their pragmatist forebears. Cf. Rorty, \textit{Achieving Our Country}, 101. Rorty is at times more cautious, using the language of “renewal” instead of “transformation,” but he still couches these arguments in terms of dreams and alterations:

But you cannot urge national political renewal on the basis of descriptions of fact. You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.
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homogeneity of Western metaphysics. As I noted above, the fracturing of Christendom was only a first step along these lines (and thinkers like Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre take it to be a singularly fateful wrong turn). The Western epistemological consensus is fractured along many, many lines.\(^{243}\)

But I have also noted throughout that political theory must be more than intellectual category shuffling. One need not be a pragmatist to agree with William James that it is incumbent upon theory to show the “concrete difference…its being true [will] make in anyone’s actual life.” Surely all of this exegesis and categorization has something to offer we twenty-first century humans living in our own uncertain times. Surely it has some cash value! In what follows, I briefly sketch the contours of what I believe to be the Deweyan and Oakeshottian approach to: 1) current political polarization in general and 2) the specific challenges posed by today’s political left and right.\(^{244}\)

Twenty-first century political practice suffers from the consequences of the epistemological crisis that prompted William James’ early-twentieth century lectures. If leaders in modern liberal democracies have proven themselves adequate to the task of adjusting institutions and moderating the purity of certain political ideals, political philosophers have made little corresponding progress. To paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr, our theory still lags far behind


\(^{244}\) James, *Pragmatism*, 97.
our political practice—a dynamic that is not without its benefits, but which also poses ample challenges.\textsuperscript{245}

One of the most grievous consequences of political philosophers’ inattention to changing circumstances is the continued epistemological fracturing of political debates. What began a century ago with the breakdown of longstanding philosophical absolutes has since flowered into a fragmentation of our common reality. Political observers refer to this dynamic as “epistemic closure”; the term signifies the moment when pluralism crosses from epistemology and ethics to \textit{empirics}. There is growing evidence that warring interpretations of political experience now diverge to such a degree that they no longer share enough to constitute a common view of the world. As Dewey and Oakeshott insisted, the \textit{facts} of our political debate are always a function of the interpretations we impose upon experience. But in an era of epistemic closure, competing interpretations share too little in common to sustain political conversation. Citizens no longer

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\item Today the success of America in world politics depends upon its ability to establish community with many nations, despite the hazards created by pride of power on the one hand and the envy of the weak on the other. This success requires a modest awareness of the contingent elements in the values and ideals of our devotion, even when they appear to us to be universally valid; and a generous appreciate of the valid elements in the practices and institutions of other nations though they deviate from our own. In other words, our success in world politics necessitates a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream, and a recognition of the values and virtues which enter into history in unpredictable ways and which defy the logic which either liberal or Marxist planners had conceived for it. This American experience is a refutation in parable of the whole effort to bring the vast forces of history under the control of any particular will, informed by a particular ideal.
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simply view the world through the lens of their beliefs—they construct a world out of whole cloth.\textsuperscript{246}

While American politics has long been divisive, there are data suggesting that epistemic divides in the United States are getting worse. Nowhere is this clearer than in debates over climate change. Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz report truly astonishing gaps between Americans who believe that anthropogenic climate change is a serious policy concern (“the Alarmed” in their study) and those who do not (“the Dismissive”). It is not especially surprising, of course, to see that the two camps are nearly perfect polar opposites in the content and intensity of their belief in the existence of anthropogenic climate change. That sort of symmetry is common on difficult political issues. But that hardly all the data show.\textsuperscript{247}

More surprisingly, McCright and Dunlap’s survey of climate change polling suggests that public opinion on climate change has polarized significantly over the last decade. In 2001, there was a gap of 18 percentage points “between the percentage of liberals (67.1 percent) and the percent of conservatives (49.4 percent) who believe global warming has already begun.” By 2010, the gap stood at 44 percentage points (“74.8 percent for liberals and 30.2 percent for


conservatives”). The gap between Democrats and Republicans also grew “from 11 percent to 41 percent over the decade.” Strangely enough, the political divide sharpened even as consensus on the empirical data relevant to anthropogenic climate change became stronger.\textsuperscript{248}

Most worrying of all: the data even show polarization of American trust of various sources of climate change information. Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz found that nearly ninety percent of the Alarmed expressed trust in climate scientists “as a source of information about global warming,” while only twenty-nine percent of the Dismissive said the same (down approximately twenty percentage points from a similar survey they conducted in 2009). In other words, these particular political opponents are currently insulated from any common, authoritative source of information about the phenomena they are debating. We should hardly be surprised that they lack the common baseline of agreement that Garsten identifies as a prerequisite to democratic discourse—they cannot agree on the empirical contours of the issue they are debating.\textsuperscript{249}

This sort of epistemic closure exacerbates two very serious problems for twenty-first century politics. First, it further sharpens differences between disagreeing political camps. The differences between opponents are no longer measurable in small degrees—they are wholly incompatible views of the world of experience before them. They are no longer just political opponents—they are alien to each other. Second, it has a “clumping” effect; when political


camps fashion internally coherent worlds of evidence that do not overlap with their opponents’,
they close off the possibility of building moderate camps that borrow evidence from many sides.
The Left becomes wholly incompatible with conservatism on a bundle of issues (and vice versa).
Once thus separated, they soon despair of engagement with those they do not understand. They
narrow their political conversations to the confines of those who share their world—a dynamic
that only amplifies their convictions. Under these circumstances, political discourse
unsurprisingly collapses into ever more strident and apocalyptic rhetoric. What can warring
camps possibly say to persuade one another?250

This is, at least in part, a result of many decades of unproductive, unhelpful political
theorizing. It borrows from post-modern solipsism and marries it to absolutist conviction. Like
post-moderns, these partisans recognize that they have a role in creating “truths,” so they—
consciously or otherwise—build their own beliefs upon a world of information of their own
choosing. Yet they simultaneously eschew post-modernism’s skeptical, critical disposition in
favor of the fervent certainty of ethical absolutism. In the pattern of White’s weak ontologies,
they recognize that they have it within their grasp to construct and choose the fundamental
postulates that anchor their lives—but they lose sight of the contestability of the principles they
ultimately choose. They are simultaneously skeptics and true believers.

Consider the climate change example offered above. Rhetoric on climate change matches
the polling data. Americans who believe that climate change is a serious, human-caused problem

250 On this point, see: Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” esp. 249–59. The echo chamber effect has
recently proven to be a particularly pernicious challenge for American conservatism. For a
comprehensive chronicle of the dynamics of the conservative echo chamber from Phyllis
Schafly’s “silent majority” to recent struggles at the Conservative Political Action Conference,
see: Geoffrey Kabaservice, Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of
the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party (New York: Oxford University Press,
2012).
emphasize climate scientists’ direst predictions. Their opponents are unmoved, as they do not recognize these scientists as a reliable source of epistemological authority. As these “debates” continue, each amplifies their arguments without ever trying to persuade. One side strenuously insists that the science is sufficiently compelling and authoritative to close political debate over the nature of the problem, while the other refuses to acknowledge that science can demonstrate that such a problem may exist. Each is wholly, epistemically closed off from the other.

What do Dewey and Oakeshott offer in response? What should philosophers have been doing? What should they do now? Most importantly, how do they recommend that we tack between absolute conviction and radical skepticism? How do we manage uncertainty in a world without stable metaphysical foundations?

Dewey and Oakeshott recognized this sort of unthinking rigidity as a symptom of a core misunderstanding of modern politics (and epistemology). Those who see climate change as a crisis behave as though science—as a pre- or supra-political authority—is sufficient to close down political debate. They, in Oakeshottian terms, mistake the voice of a single mode for the entirety of humanity’s conversation. Their opponents, meanwhile, too often preclude the scientific voice from discourse instead of engaging it. Both make the mistake of circumscribing debate on the basis of unquestioned allegiance to narrow bases of epistemological authority. In other words, it’s a mistake to offer an epistemological foundation (e.g. science) as conclusive beyond conversation and interpretation.

For Dewey and Oakeshott, there would be no question that scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate change belongs in public debates—but both would recognize these as political, not scientific, debates. The epistemological foundations of our political arguments should not close off conversation—they should be included in it. To treat modern science as a
conclusive source of knowledge for politics is (surprisingly) to ape the pre-modern view of politics and epistemology. Political conversation is an invitation for participants to engage and interpret experience on their own terms, without the imposition of epistemological standards insulated from interrogation. Unquestioning endorsement—or denial—of scientific conclusions related to political problems bears a structural resemblance to dogmatic assertions of *a priori* metaphysical conclusions about the nature of human beings.

In place of this model—coming to debate armed with firmly-established foundational conclusions—Dewey and Oakeshott endorsed indeterminate, interpretive political discourse. Despite their general agreement in this regard, each understood discourse differently. Deweyan discussion is indeterminate because politics consists of an endless web of problems. Every solution opens the door to new, incomplete political situations. What’s more, he argues for radically egalitarian institutions that extend participation to such a level that discourse captures wide-ranging views. In sum, Dewey backs indeterminacy in the name of exploration and experimentation. He believes that it leads to a politics characterized by frequent institutional tinkering.

In contrast, Oakeshott treats public debates as indeterminate because he doubts that political problems have “solutions,” as such. Even the proximate political future resists confident forecasting. To that end, then, discourse ought to be as indeterminate as possible so as to include a broad range of considerations. He is less reflexively egalitarian than Dewey, however, so this “range” has more to do with the plurality of modes of experience than with political institutions that incorporate as many human beings as possible into political decision-making. Oakeshott
backs indeterminacy in the name of caution. He believes that it leads to a politics characterized by slow, patient, and organic growth.\textsuperscript{251}

At one level, this can be seen as a neat exemplification of their own traditions. In response to growing uncertainty, the American philosopher looks to renovate the community’s political institutions. Meanwhile, the British philosopher argues that institutional planning is so much window-dressing. He argues that effective political change comes as a result of slow, cautious, organic growths built upon precedents within the tradition.

At another level, similarities between their conclusions should be taken as evidence that discursive politics are not \emph{ipso facto} hostile to most recent political movements. There is nothing about this approach that rules out today’s conservatism or progressivism from discursive engagement. It only requires that they keep talking with—and listening to—each other while giving reasons justifying their particular view of the community’s identity. With this in mind, I close the project with some final thoughts on how Dewey and Oakeshott might remake today’s left and right.\textsuperscript{252}

Given that the Alarmed and the Dismissive largely correspond to liberal and conservative political camps, I submit that the climate change debate is indicative of broader (and still more dangerous) political patterns. The American left is often tempted to transcend political divisions by means of technical expertise. The American right frequently denies the mutability of political

\textsuperscript{251} Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind.”

\textsuperscript{252} If this sounds like warmed-over Rawls or Habermas, note that Dewey and Oakeshott place no \emph{a priori} restrictions upon those who may justifiably enter into public conversations. Believers may bring their faiths just as scientists may bring their facts. None are compelled to reformulate their arguments to fit within the contours of public reason or the principles of justice, at least not for any philosophical reasons. Neither thinker abstracts from the discourse of particular communities to build formal theories of discourse itself—or of the political ideals involved. Put another way, Dewey and Oakeshott apply no \emph{external} standards to political discourse. They trust that such standards can be derived from the community’s internal resources—what Oakeshott terms “practices.”
problems, preferring instead to speak as though policy solutions generally involve recapturing past harmony—or corresponding to natural principles. I suggest that a Deweyan left and an Oakeshottian right are precisely what each camp—and the broader polity—needs.\textsuperscript{253}

Our contemporary discourse is strung between competing certainties. If Dewey and Oakeshott have any guidance to offer our current situation, perhaps it consists in their alternative views of what constitutes progressivism and conservatism, respectively. What if we replaced the current camps with a “Deweyan left” and an “Oakeshottian right?”\textsuperscript{254}

First consider today’s left. It suffers from twin perils: it is at once emotive and technical. Leftists feel inequalities and injustices with righteous empathy. They take these feelings as sufficient moral (and rhetorical, and political, etc) justification for crafting new political projects. In this regard, they are truly the heirs of post-modernism. Meanwhile, leftists do not lack for policy solutions to choose from, for the left is also beset by politically desiccated wonks. Too many leftists believe that intransigent political problems can be transcended by simply increasing the sophistication of their policy tools. In this, they are analytic philosophy’s true heirs. Taken together, these two inclinations lead leftists to dismiss their opponents as both ignorant and unfeeling. How, they wonder, can anyone with a heart and a head fail to see the crises they see—as well as the noble efficacy of their proposed solutions?

A Deweyan left would recognize that democratic political projects must pull upon the heartstrings to gain a hearing. Thus, it would also insist that there is no technocratic shortcut for avoiding difficult arguments and would be more attentive to the inevitable disharmony between

\textsuperscript{253} For data showing links between climate change attitudes and party identification, see Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Hmielowski, “Global Warming’s ‘Six Americas’: An audience segmentation,” (2012), 44.
\textsuperscript{254} Please note: as with any discussion of broad trends, numerous exceptions will come to any attentive reader’s mind. Clearly there are leftists and conservatives who do not fit the molds I present in this section. Their presence ought to give us hope—but they are still exceptions.
competing, incommensurable political goods. They would, for instance, consistently match their righteous concern for the climate with attention to the very real consequences that policy responses will impose upon industry, investors, and others. In addition, they would eschew talk of narrow limits for how all rational actors ought to behave. They would aim at Dewey’s goal: egalitarian, participatory, and experimental democratic institutions that were “educative as other modes of political regulation are not.” More specifically, they would recognize that democracy’s task is to sustain and improve the practice of egalitarian self-government, *not* to pursue equality for its own sake. In pursuit of that end, Deweyan leftists would take the best of skeptical scientific reflection without excluding all knowledge beyond the scientific method.²⁵⁵

Finally, Deweyan leftists would commit themselves to building a country better in step with its own promises. They would eschew the use of transformational and cosmopolitan rhetoric for the purposes of marginalizing opponents, choosing instead to speak the language of a shared tradition. They would build their country with an eye to improving it on its own terms.

Today’s right, meanwhile, suffers from a surfeit of conviction. Too many conservatives wield their certainties in order to purify their movement and the country’s politics. This takes a number of varying forms; social conservatives rely upon biblical literalism and Catholic natural law to justify legislating sexual mores, while a new breed of libertarians argues that a small canon of economists have essentially solved the question of the appropriate scope and size of government. Today’s conservatives frequently give themselves over to wistfulness for times gone by—if leftists believe that political problems are just one sophisticated policy implementation from solution, then conservatives frequently behave as though political perfection lies in one of several mythical preexisting moments. They hark back to Reagan or

Goldwater or Hoover or Calhoun or Washington as if politics consists simply of recovering lost convictions. In this, they are truly the heirs of nostalgic philosophical absolutists. Taken together, these tendencies lead them to see their opponents as ignorant usurpers and libertine nihilists.

An Oakeshottian right would emphasize exceptional strains within a tradition, instead of insisting that national salvation requires returning to a particular moment in the past. It would recognize that the success of American liberal democracy has little to do with the metaphysical foundations of the American Founders’ “self-evident truths.” Rather, it was the result of the pre-Revolutionary political habits they had developed over many years living as participants in a liberal political tradition. The Founding’s rhetoric was less a break from the past than new language confirming a familiar tradition.

An Oakeshottian right would also privilege the goods of the present over an uncertain future, but it would do so on grounds of familiarity, not oppositional scorn, political purity, or metaphysical certainty. Indeed, Oakeshottian conservatives would eschew any attempts to reify a singular moment in human history as a political lodestar. Rather, they would insist that a tradition’s political practices can only be tended in the present—and with an eye to the uncertain future. They would also argue that Western political communities ought to be less concerned with implementing moral or economic projects than with providing the predictability that makes it possible for human individuals to enact their own lives. Oakeshottian conservatives would aim to retain the best elements of the individualist tradition in order to maintain its overall coherence with a minimum of disruption, but would not cower before the future’s diverse novelties. In short, they would appreciate the past and revel in the growth of present pluralism.

There are, of course, significant structural and rhetorical barriers to the emergence of a Deweyan left and an Oakeshottian right. Pure, absolutist rhetoric plays to human yearnings for
harmony and simplicity. Paradoxically, thoroughgoing nihilism satisfies the same inclination. Both possess reductionism’s appealing simplicity. Dewey and Oakeshott’s approach (laudably) resists this impulse. If their work fell into abeyance during this period, this seems to suggest that it lacks a certain moral (or rhetorical) appeal. After all, philosophers spent much of the last century pursuing other projects. The measured convictions built of “intimations” from a tradition cannot kindle human souls like Divine Truth or the Dictates of Reason. Dewey’s pleadings aside, most philosophers are accustomed to thinking of their work as a “quest for certainty,” even if the only certainty they discover is full-blown nihilism. What’s more, and what’s worst, most citizens expect philosophers to deliver on the certainty they seek. Compared to the radical poles, Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s project can seem a failure of nerve.

Indeed, the twentieth century provides ample evidence that moderate, cautious, and uncertain politics are always at risk for supersession by radical projects that promise to solve politics at a single stroke. Oakeshott feared Rationalism because it possesses a certain appeal that messy political discourse cannot offer. Dewey spent so many pages inveighing against unthinking reliance upon old laissez-faire liberal “truths” because he recognized that these had been elevated beyond political question—even when they could be implicated in current troubles. Demagogues rely upon compelling certainties—not epistemological caution. In other words: even if we acknowledge that we’d prefer the sort of political discourse that a Deweyan left and Oakeshottian right would produce, shouldn’t we also admit that this is still idle fancy?

IV. Sustaining the Plural Disposition

Dewey and Oakeshott’s approach to plural uncertainty would seem to be closed off by the exigencies of political survival in a democratic political regime. While this is undoubtedly a
real challenge, it is yet surmountable. In the final sections of this project, I argue that Dewey and Oakeshott’s political projects require a specific sort of disposition on the part of citizens.

Oakeshott described it beautifully in *On Human Conduct*:

> I have said something to display this as a historic European character notable in modern times: the disposition to cultivate the ‘freedom’ inherent in agency, to recognize its exercise as the chief ingredient of human dignity, to enjoy it at almost any cost, and to concede virtue to personal autonomy acquired in self-understanding: the disposition characterized by de Tocqueville and theorized by Hegel.\(^\text{256}\)

Can this be sustained in the face of absolutist rhetoric promising to resolve pluralist tensions?

Dewey and Oakeshott were both concerned to animate their fellows’ passions for plural, provisional politics. Both believed that this disposition was only tangentially political, so they attended to cultural and religious factors that could act as supplements. Dewey believed that American political practice was no longer adequate to the American community’s deepest ideals. At one level, as discussed above, this was a functional problem. Were American individuals able to live free, self-determining lives? If not, institutions were no longer equal to the great American political wager. But at another level, Dewey thought that the ideals needed revivification. Dewey believed that the crisis in American democracy was more spiritual than material. Troubling as the new inequalities were, he believed them to be symptoms of the tradition’s moral exhaustion.

In nearly all of his work, Dewey sought to show how Americans might once again make their tradition not just coherent, but *compelling*. He repeatedly demonstrated ways that worthy ideals had lost their ability to explain and inspire—how, in a word, they had gone hollow. In *Liberalism and Social Action* and *Individualism Old and New*, he argued that old creeds needed

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\(^{256}\) Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 274.
updating to make sense of massive changes in political economy. Similarly, in *A Common Faith*, he argued that new civilizational challenges required matching spiritual renovations.

There is a strong reaction in some religious circles today against the idea of mere individual salvation of individual souls. There is also a reaction in politics and economics against the idea of *laissez faire*. Both of these movements reflect a common tendency. Both of them are signs of the growing awareness of the emptiness of individuality in isolation.  

Similarly, in *Art as Experience*, he argued that advances in aesthetics pointed towards new ways of having “consummatory” experiences that might help make sense of going political problems. In these works—and others—he argued that it was within human power to make a world more congenial to living out the free, self-determining wager at the heart of the American tradition.  

In other words, like his fellow pragmatist William James, Dewey held that humans could create beliefs of their own volition. They could recognize the threadbare patches in their political tradition and consciously fix them. Dewey thought that

[b]reaks and incompatibilities occur in collective culture as well as in individual life. Modern science, modern industry and politics, have presented us with an immense amount of material foreign to, often inconsistent with, the most prized intellectual and moral heritage of the western world. This is the cause of our modern intellectual perplexities and confusions. It sets the especial problem for philosophy today and for many days to come. Every significant philosophy is an attempt to deal with it; those theories to which this statement seems to apply least are attempts to bridge the gulf by seeking an escape or refuge.

With this in mind, Dewey argued that community ideals can be—indeed, *must be*—consciously fostered through political engagement. Ideals that truly have a “hold” on individuals’ passions and “loyalties” are less susceptible to subversion in the name of political purity or absolutism. He

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thought that philosophers could do worse than to explicitly connect these ideals to the actual, empirical consequences citizens currently face. Such a method, he admitted,

does not “save;” it is not an insurance device nor a mechanical antiseptic. But it inspires the mind with courage and vitality to create new ideals and values in the face of the perplexities of a new world.\footnote{260 \textit{Dewey, Experience and Nature}, 4.}

In sum, Dewey hoped to revivify democratic philosophy by religiously, culturally, and aesthetically adorning the practice of democracy itself. This would require philosophical engagement with political life as citizens commonly experienced—not reliance on distant abstractions. These latter had been discredited by their empirical bankruptcy; any pragmatic, provisional philosophy that would replace them needed to trade in working (if provisional) solutions to experienced challenges.

Oakeshott’s answer to the problem of human yearnings for ethical certainty is less obvious. He lacks Dewey’s enthusiasm for consciously reenergizing a political tradition. Indeed, in most of his political work, Oakeshott is at his best when he is at his most fully pessimistic. For instance, in \textit{On Human Conduct}, he presents the rise of threats to modern pluralism as almost dialectically inevitable. At times, it seems that we can only hope that the “inheritance of moral understanding” built into the tradition proves inflexible to absolutist manipulation. Philosophers may be able to point out incoherencies in a tradition, but they ought not give specific recommendations, nor should they expect that their work will prove especially conclusive.\footnote{261 Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 321. On Oakeshott’s pessimism, see especially: Michael Oakeshott, “The Claims of Politics,” in \textit{Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 91–96, and Oakeshott, \textit{On Human Conduct}, 275–78.}

Despite this seeming disinterest, Oakeshott offers another option for soothing discomfort with plural uncertainty. Like Dewey, he believes that faith can stabilize the human heart. Religion, Oakeshott argues, acts as a brake upon the human tendency to treat all experience in
terms of practical knowledge. “And in knowledge, in place of an ideal of steady acquisition for some ulterior end in which, perhaps, he can never share, [the religious man] will follow one which values it solely by its worth to present insight. And he will maintain a kind of candid detachment in the face of the very highest actual achievement.”\textsuperscript{262}

This is a familiar claim, an argument as old as Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of American religion. Religion (of a certain sort) binds humans’ moral expectations in order to domesticate them to for good behavior amidst political uncertainty.\textsuperscript{263} Given this understanding of religion as a moral limiter, we might expect Oakeshott to view religious experience less capaciously than Dewey, but he continues after the passage just cited:

Religion, then, is not, as some would persuade us, an interest attached to life, a subsidiary activity; nor is it a power which governs life from the outside with a, no doubt divine, but certainly incomprehensible, sanction for its authority. It is simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present, not merely in the past or the future, that if we lose ourselves we lose all.\textsuperscript{264}

In this essay and elsewhere, Oakeshott argues that religion is appropriately understood as that which encourages humans to focus on present opportunities and to beware their calculations for shaping the future. Humans of this sort are resistant to absolutists’ grand dreams, for they have more proximate experiences to enjoy. At this level, his view is similar to Dewey’s—absent any optimism about its prospects.\textsuperscript{265}

A number of commentators have noticed that poetry eventually comes to serve a similar function in Oakeshott’s thought. In “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” he defines poetic experiences as those reflectively enjoyed in and of themselves, without an eye to

\textsuperscript{263} De Tocqueville, \textit{Democracy in America}, 542–46.
\textsuperscript{264} Oakeshott, “Religion and the World,” 34.
\textsuperscript{265} Note, however, that Oakeshott does not join Dewey in suggesting that the religious disposition can be consciously fostered.
utility. Though he resists attempts to theorize a specific function that poetry ought to serve, he describes it much as he describes religious experience: “In poetry, then, a self which desires and suffers, which knows and contrives, is superseded by a self which contemplates, and every backward glance is an infidelity at once difficult to avoid and fatal in its consequences.” Like religion, poetry serves to restrict human horizons in order to allow the mind to range freely within reflection’s possibilities. He also notes that praxis and poetry may not be wholly separate: love and friendship suggest “intimations” within practical activity that are amenable to poetic reflection. These provide some evidence that practical needs can be periodically dulled by the invitation to enjoy experience for its own sake. “To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment. And perhaps, obliquely, it is to enjoy something more. Having an ear ready for the voice of poetry is to be disposed to choose delight rather than pleasure or virtue or knowledge.” This last bit is key to connecting poetry to the problem of sustaining the plural political disposition. Citizens inclined to delight in the project of constructing their lives are less prone to set this aside in pursuit of other political goods.

Notwithstanding their differences, Dewey’s and Oakeshott’s treatments of the modern plural disposition share an important similarity. Each adopts a view of humans as creatures that both partake in and transcend history. We create meaning in the world as historically-situated

266 Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” 535. Compare with Dewey, Art as Experience, 278:

Had not the term “pure” been so often abused in philosophic literature, had it not been so often employed to suggest that there is something alloyed, impure in the very nature of experience and to denote something beyond experience, we might say that esthetic experience is pure experience. For it is experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself.

members of our political community, but we are also constrained by the ethical materials the
tradition bequeaths us. If Oakeshott is more pessimistic than Dewey that this disposition can be
consciously fostered, it is still clear that their views share some epistemological roots.

Their counsels would be welcome adjustments to today’s left and right. Dewey’s
attempts to rehabilitate existing political ideals require engaging citizens’ passions for their
community in a way that is foreign to many twenty-first century leftists. It requires attention to
what is stable in the long-running threads of the tradition as well as a passionate identification
with that tradition. Oakeshott’s pessimism is also recognizable as healthy conservative
skepticism for human practical capacities—and is alien to twenty-first century conservatives who
seek to solve the future by returning to discrete moments in the past. What’s more, his libertine
approach to religion and poetry is a salutary reminder that conservatism is capable of celebrating
the plural goods suggested by human experience.

V. Conclusion

Dewey and Oakeshott argue that philosophy’s obsession with epistemological
foundations does not serve our going political concerns. Both recognize that humans cannot
establish metaphysical foundations to replace those they’ve lost. Both also recognize that the
collapse of the old metaphysics does not necessarily culminate in a nihilism that equates all
moral claims on the basis of their historical contingency. In other words, they resist the post-
modern reduction of all belief to the function of power. Instead, they argue that humans create
meaning—but only within a context. Our position within a common tradition does not “mediate”
otherwise pure or objective (etc) knowledge. Rather, it serves as leverage for developing
knowledge. We cannot will meaning into the world from a void. To put it another way, Dewey
and Oakeshott side with Hegel over Nietzsche. Humans create the world they inhabit, but only within the materials they already have. Values cannot be transvalued from nothing (or nowhere).

With all of this in mind, Dewey and Oakeshott argue that modern pluralism needs a common framework of meaning to sustain it. Rather than gallivanting about in search of rational principles of Justice or digging for the violence lurking in daily language, philosophers ought to examine how their community’s tradition can be made more coherent in order to take current troubles into account. They ought to, in other words, make that common framework the primary object of their theorizing. As we saw in earlier sections, a number of theorists have recently begun thinking about political philosophy in this way. Encouraging as their interest is, it would be a serious mistake to overlook Dewey and Oakeshott’s own answers to modern pluralism’s epistemological crisis.

Dewey and Oakeshott are sensitive to the fact that modern philosophical skepticism is as problematic as it is irrevocable. Both recognized liberal pluralism as a tradition well worth defending, whether or not some of its original epistemological foundations were sound. Put another way, both distinguished between its core ideals and the specific philosophical systems originally advanced to justify them. This allowed Dewey and Oakeshott to advance historicized defenses of modern individualism and pluralism—defenses that could stand up to corrosive skepticism or too-confident absolutism. This was particularly useful at the dawning of a heavily skeptical era in Western political thought, and it remains so today. While this doesn’t fundamentally solve plural political philosophy’s challenges, that is hardly their intention. Rather, both believed that their approach would help us to have better, more interesting political conversations—a moderate goal well worth pursuing in a skeptical era.
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