

Identity and Conservation

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The twenty-first century, particularly throughout its second decade and continuing into its third, has seen the notion of ‘identity’ in the Western World come to the forefront of many social and political conversations. What precisely is meant by this concept, however, often remains unclear or even contradictory. One of the more common discussions in which we hear this term is in connection with what is often called ‘identity politics’ wherein various aspects of people’s identities are considered within a given social context and political implications are drawn forth from those claims; in the case of North America, this most often presents itself as issues surrounding a conflict between different ethnicities, between the sexes, or between various forms of sexual identities. Strict categories are drawn and then a conflict between the categories is problematized. On the other hand, however, there is striving to posit and construct identities in a way that suggests nothing more than that identity is that which someone *wills*. There is no solid foundation in this conception, which posits that the volition of individuals is all that is constitutive of identity.

Of course, day-to-day discourse on these subjects is often quite simplistic and quickly demonstrated to have internal inconsistencies that cannot be sustained, but to say that these views are only held vaguely by a few people would be misleading. This confusion is also seen within academic discourse: the most salient example which comes to mind is that of Judith Butler and her view of gender identity as ‘performative.’ Over three decades ago, Butler argued that gender was nothing more than a performance, akin to that of actors upon a theatrical stage, which becomes concretized in social taboos and norms which become oppressive and contrary to freedom. This view has, needless to say, many perplexing dimensions. The first is that she desires to dismantle what we mean by ‘man’ and ‘woman’ by showing that such notions of gender are historically situated and therefore not intrinsic, but then simultaneously seeks to maintain those labels for her theory—a tension she seemingly notes herself but never addresses. The second and, in my view, more distressing aspect of her argument is that she provides no understanding of what identity is in itself; she provides no consideration of its purpose, the context in which it emerges, or why identities do need to be concretized in some manner. The closest she comes is acknowledging that people are historically conditioned, but never explains why that history would emerge other than vaguely gesturing towards oppression and power.

The prevalence of this topic and its subsequent confusions has led me to desire a more substantial and thorough investigation of what precisely identity is and

what it means to possess one. Where do our identities come from? Why are they important? How does one maintain his identity? These concerns led to the reading of a perhaps unlikely source: the English philosopher and political theorist, Michael Oakeshott. Though identity is surely not something which Oakeshott spends a considerable amount of time discussing in detail, we can gain a complex and thoughtful understanding of what identity is through reading both his original philosophic text, *Experience and Its Modes*, and his essay entitled, “On being conservative.” In his former work, he established the milieu in which men act out their lives; in the latter, he establishes the need for identity and how we come to have our various identities. As opposed to a notion of identity as something which is merely immutable as it is in identity politics or as something which is merely *willed* as suggested by those who believe we can construct ourselves however we please, Oakeshott offers a much simpler and grounded view. *Oakeshott understands identity as a learned manner of living that allows for an enacted constancy within the flux of an ever-changing world; it is, therefore, a conserved practice that allows us to find a home and continuity despite the dynamic cosmos we inhabit.* He is aware that the world is contingent and subject to change, both due to human volition and from changes beyond human volition, but he also understands that this flux is precisely why identity cannot be merely treated as something to be flippantly cast-off, based on what we may will in one moment then another.

To consider his view, we must first understand what Oakeshott calls the ‘practical mode’ of experience within which he believes human beings pass their lives; practice begins to take shape from this description of the human condition and the needs of the active human being come into focus. From within the practical mode, Oakeshott then establishes why the human condition calls for a steady identity, not as something merely posited or eternally immutable, but as a continuous string of contingencies that allow for people to get along agreeably within the vast and fluctuating cosmos. He does not prescribe particulars as he is sensitive to the plurality of the human condition and the many shapes it may take, but he nevertheless provides an explanation of the attitude necessary for identity to take shape: a conservative disposition. It is only from such a mindset that one may come to love his world and want to maintain it, despite that he understands that it is not ultimately true or perfect in any manner suggestive of eternal truth. His love is for that which is familiar, conserved due to its already-being-known, allowing for the world to become not a chaos of terror or dread but a place where we are allowed to get on well enough to find joy and delight.

To understand the purpose and place of identity in Oakeshott’s thought, a preliminary exploration of his modal conception of experience must be considered. In his view, identity is something restricted to what he calls the ‘practical mode’ of experience, but this view cannot be understood without touching upon Oakeshott’s philosophy as elucidated in his seminal text, *Experience and Its Modes*. His philosophical approach is quite radical, to the point that its viability could even be questioned, but it nevertheless provides insight into how Oakeshott understands truth and other lesser forms of experience such as practice. For Oakeshott, philosophy pursues an understanding of experience in its totality and is ultimately the only way to substantiate truth in an absolute manner; however, he believes that there are ‘modes’ present within experience that, being lesser than philosophy, provide a modified form of experience that is less demanding to navigate. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on disentangling philosophy and the practical mode, as the latter is the mode that Oakeshott believes is most common to man as well as the mode in which we find our need for identity.

Oakeshott’s philosophy, though not reducible to its time and place, emerges from a specific historical context that deeply influenced his approach. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were dominated by philosophies that could be described as fundamentally “historicistic,” “scientific,” or “pragmatic.” Each of these three positions holds that the totality of experience can be explained from a single vantage point: that of history, science, or practice, respectively. *Experience and Its Modes* is, at its core, a repudiation of these views. Oakeshott’s express aim is to explain why history, science, and practice are insufficient explanations for the whole of reality as they cannot substantiate their own activity, though they are legitimate forms of activity and should not be dismissed. To do this, he provides a rough sketch of what

he considers to be the character of philosophic experience before using this view to reject the alternative “philosophies” he is considering.

Oakeshott’s philosophical enquiry, directed toward understanding experience without any modifications, presuppositions, or divisions, begins by analyzing what he understands as “experience” in its totality. What this term signifies is not merely the subjective experience of an individual agent within experience, but all that *could* be within experience in a *holistic* manner. What Oakeshott outlines is not a sense of personal experience trying to take in the whole of ‘external’ or ‘objective’ reality. Like other idealist philosophers, Oakeshott is instead interested in collapsing such notions as the ‘subject’ and the ‘object,’ or the ‘experiencer’ and the ‘experienced.’ The notion of experience, which he argues philosophy aims to achieve, breaks down all such binaries, leaving nothing outside of the coherence produced; this creates what many idealists have referred to as the “concrete whole” of experience of which there is nothing outside or left unconsidered.

Oakeshott’s philosophical view, therefore, provides no possibility of understanding something in total abstraction from the rest of experience. The mere perception of a book does not qualify such as an absolute truth claim, and instead, such a truth claim requires the perception to be qualified within the whole of experience in which the identification of the book is made. This is the simplest definition of how Oakeshott understands philosophic truth: *holistic coherence*. For Oakeshott, truth is the whole of experience being reconciled to itself; “truth...is correlative to experience. It is the world of experience itself in so far as that world is satisfactory in itself.” This means that particular claims always must be considered in light of the whole world to which they contribute, and the whole world must be understood as comprising many interlocking parts—to leave this behind is to leave behind an aspect of experience which is always counter-productive to the philosophic desire for holistic coherence.

This leads to Oakeshott’s view that truth is based on the interdependent relationships of various parts which comprise a whole. Within the whole of experience, “particular ideas may perhaps be said to be known in experience as the products of analysis and abstraction.” Oakeshott’s phrasing here is important: what is perceived as particular is a *product* that is born of *analysis and abstraction*, meaning that a certain kind of thought must modify what is present in experience. Though it may appear that experience begins with particularized observations, Oakeshott argues that “we begin...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.” At first, the given whole is mysterious and unexamined—but it is nonetheless whole. As aspects of this mysterious whole are then analyzed and abstracted, the nature of the whole is gradually revealed, becoming more consciously concrete: “to modify the system as a whole is to cause every constituent to take on a new character; to modify any of the constituents is to alter the system as a whole.” These subtle reformulations of the subject at hand, both in its totality and its details, continuously allows for a more complete understanding. The mysteriousness of the world as initially encountered gives way to a more concrete world. This is the continuous effort of the philosophic impulse.

Oakeshott’s notion of philosophy thus summarized indicates what he believes the core focus of philosophy to be; however, there is a secondary aspect to philosophy which is that it is also the voice within which one speaks when he elucidates the frameworks that are present in other modes of experience—the most prevalent being, in Oakeshott’s view: practice, science, history, and poetry. This is curious as his conception of philosophy as a form of total experience seems to eliminate the possibility for other kinds of experience or knowing—if it encapsulates everything, what else could be known? Oakeshott acknowledges, however, that “diversity no less than unity appears in experience.” He is able to maintain this claim and his theory of philosophy by arguing that the modes are not altogether separate from philosophy or separate from one another in the sense of them being some sort of ‘nonoverlapping magisteria.’ Instead, the modes are modifications of that holistic and coherent notion of philosophic activity, meaning that they are forms of experience that assume various presuppositions that are not justified by the modes themselves, but which grant them a relatively independent form of experience. These other modes of experience, therefore,

maintain the key aspects of truth as defined by philosophy: coherence and completeness, insofar as those are possible despite the modifications that each mode presupposes.

As stated above, I only explore this notion of modality through consideration of the practical mode for the purposes of my present discussion. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that there are three other modes besides practice that Oakeshott considers at length: science, history, and poetry. Oakeshott sees each of those three modes as excursions; they are intellectual achievements that have little bearing on the day-to-day life of men and are therefore rarely ventured into—perhaps never ventured into by some people. They are not excursions, however, from philosophy—they are only modifications of philosophy. The other modes are only considered excursions from the standpoint of the practical world of ideas, as Oakeshott believes it is the most common to man; in some sense, it is the mode of living as humanity knows it, and “unless we make some conscious effort to step outside, it is within this world that we pass our lives.” It is, therefore, considered the concrete form of experience by many thinkers—as if to be practical is to experience reality as it truly is. Given Oakeshott’s view of philosophy, however, we may expect that he will reject such a position of practical truth being synonymous with philosophical truth. In reviewing his definition of practical activity, Oakeshott’s view of it as merely a mode of experience becomes self-evident.

At the broadest level, Oakeshott describes practical activity as experience in which “the alteration of existence is undertaken. Practical life comprises the attempts we make to alter existence or to maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change.” Oakeshott does not shy away from the fact that this notion of practice has wide implications; what Oakeshott is discussing here is not merely a set of moral rules, nor those things which are typically viewed as significant aspects of life such as family, jobs, and finances. “Practice comprises everything which belongs to the conduct of life as such,” as it must be maintained as a coherent world of ideas in which all particulars affect one another and the whole world to which they contribute. A set of moral dictates or the highlights of what we are concerned with in day-to-day life are not exhaustive of our experiences, as there are many micro-happenings perpetually at play in our lives that are necessary for what may concern us self-consciously. Practice, as Oakeshott considers it, is the definitive form of experience for us human beings—stumbling around in a cosmos far greater than ourselves in an effort to understand what it means to live at all.

This is indicative of the first presupposition that is inherent to the world of practical activity: individual volition. Oakeshott refers to practical experience as “*sub specie voluntatis*,” or ‘under the form of will.’ This necessitates that there be at least one self—though there are always presumably more—within the world of practice who possesses volition and causes changes within the world he inhabits and is, in some sense, distinct from said world. It is important to note that such “individuals are designated, not defined,” meaning that this notion of the individual is presupposed and cannot be justified internally by the practical mode. Oakeshott points out that for the volitional individual to question his own legitimacy as a being who possesses a will would contradict the very foundation of practical experience; in so doing, he has left the world of practice and must engage in a different sort of experience, most likely that of philosophy. The individual must consider his own will as self-evident if he is to act practically. Having established the necessity of volition for practice, it must be asked how this agent engages in practical activity: what is necessarily implied by a world of change?

Oakeshott argues that the existence of volition, of an individual who can change his world from within, necessitates two other presuppositions: the world of ‘what is’ and the world of ‘what ought to be.’ The volitional individual must consider both his world as it is and the world as he desires it to be, and these two conceptions must have a relative degree of autonomy; he first considers the world as it presently exists in order to find his place in it and must then consider his world as he wants it to become. Now, though Oakeshott does refer to both of these concepts as worlds, I believe it is more effective to consider them as ‘sub-worlds.’ The reason I make this distinction is that the realm of practical experience is itself a single world comprised of these two sub-worlds: “Practice is the alteration of one given world so as to make it agree with another given world. And it is, therefore, qualified and governed at every step by the character of the two worlds it presupposes and the character of the alteration it attempts.” Conversely, the two sub-

worlds of ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ become nothing more than “vicious” abstractions in the absence of one another. The practical world allows for a dynamic interplay between the two sub-worlds to create a coherent and relatively complete world of activity; each sub-world, however, cannot be made sense of without the invocation of the other—the world of ‘what is’ stagnates when taken on its own and the world of ‘what ought to be’ has no foundation from which to begin if taken by itself.

These three presuppositions—designated volition, the world of ‘what is,’ and the world of ‘what ought to be’—comprise the character of the world of practice. If any one of these three presuppositions collapses, the other two must go as well. In the absence of a volitional individual, there is no agent to consider the present and how it may change; without the world of ‘what is,’ there is no basis from which the volitional individual may incite change; and, without the world of ‘what ought to be,’ the present must be taken as the whole of experience and volition becomes impossible. What is considered true within the world of practice is, therefore, the maintenance of a relatively coherent and holistic manner of living that the volitional individual maintains between the world as it is and the world as it could be. Now, in some sense, to have identified this balanced trio of presuppositions is to have understood the character of practical activity in Oakeshott’s view. I believe, however, that there are two further points that can be drawn out from these observations that help elucidate Oakeshott’s connection between identity and conservation: the observation of a beginning and end for each volitional individual and the malleability of what is ‘true’ for each individual as he passes from birth to death.

Oakeshott argues that practical life is something naturally thrust upon mortal humanity and thus the circumstance of human life is defined by change; aging and death are inevitable though their precise movements and details are, to some degree, malleable by human volition. The human condition is thus one of seeking reconciliation of the self with the inevitability of change. Insofar as a volitional individual can maintain an understanding of his world as it is alongside the world as he would like it to be, he continues to live in a manner that can be called practically ‘true.’ The truth can, therefore, change for a man from one moment to another without outright invalidating how he once lived. What is true for a man in his twenties may not be precisely true for the same man in his seventies; his younger self may have not hesitated when anticipating the sixty-hour workweek, while his older self could handle little more than resting in a chair and reading a book. What holds perpetual for this form of experience, however, is that there is always the world of what ought to be; and “so long as the future is an essential element of practical appraisal, coherence has eluded us; we are never without unrealized ideas.”

Oakeshott foresees that this is a view many people will find difficult to accept; people tend to understand what is factual in a static manner, as in the way that “scientific and historical experience presuppose a world of fact which does not change or move.” The fact that the molecular structure of water is understood as H₂O must always remain true or it must be overturned and deemed to have only ever been mistakenly thought of as true; though we think that President Lincoln was shot and killed by John Wilkes Booth, if this was proven untrue it means that we were once simply in error about that fact. If something is deemed to be scientifically or historically untrue presently, it is also asserted that it was always untrue, and we were only mistaken about the factual nature of a given idea. Practice, on the other hand, does not function in this manner. Invoking his understanding of truth once more, Oakeshott argues that truth is found in particulars when they are in accord with the world of ideas to which they contribute; in other words, “what is [a] fact in practical experience is, in the end, the world of practical experience as a coherent whole.” The particularity of the young man may not accord in its details with his life of retirement to come, but the manner in which he traverses that journey from youth to wisdom can be considered greater or lesser insofar as it is a coherent continuation of experience.

This means that, for Oakeshott, there can be no static ‘answer’ to the questions of practical life. It is a world characterized by change, but it is not a sort of change that has a destination. Unlike the worlds of science and history, practice does not seek to generate a ‘factual’ world that is, theoretically, static and immortal. To seek a sort of truth in practice that is akin to the truths of history or science is to confuse what is being pursued in the first place—a confusion which Oakeshott believes plagues the “modern mind.”

The volitional individual, the sub-world of ‘what is,’ and the sub-world of ‘what ought to be’ are always necessary for the world of practical ideas. As soon as a desirable ‘what is’ is realized, “a new discord springs up elsewhere, demanding new resolution, a fresh qualification of ‘what is here and now’ by ‘what ought to be.’” It is these characteristics that make the nature of practical experience ultimately unsatisfactory as, in Oakeshott’s view, its necessary trio of presuppositions—the self, the world as it is, and the world of what ought to be—are never able to be utterly reconciled to one another to allow for ultimate coherence. Nevertheless, Oakeshott maintains that it is the mode in which we move from birth to death, containing all we do, hopefully with as much grace as possible.

Having considered this distinction between philosophy and practice in Oakeshott’s view, we can return to our main concept under consideration: identity. For all philosophers, the notion of identity must ultimately be the same: to be one with the absolute whole of experience. For a philosopher to be explicitly identified with anything else—meaning something within the whole of experience—would *ipso facto* cause him to pursue something lesser than the whole and no longer follow his philosophic impulse in full. Every philosopher, therefore, has but one identity which, I believe, we have been aware of since the teachings of Plato: a lover of wisdom. But to only ever love wisdom is not the way in which man lives his life, as “a man cannot be a philosopher and nothing else; to be so were either more or less than human.” To live philosophically is to leave the cave, to find oneself in direct confrontation with the source of all light and Being; but to do this also destroys the particularity that we find relevant to the human condition, and it is only in practical life that man learns to be himself—to discover an identity that transforms the vicissitudes of this life from a prison-sentence into a joyful delight.

Experience and Its Modes is, fundamentally, a philosophic text. It is written from the standpoint of philosophy and therefore does not discuss *how* one acts practically in detail, but rather elucidates the *why* in considering the presuppositions that undergird practical activity. This does, perhaps, mark Oakeshott as somewhat anomalous within Western thought, as he believes that “philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life, and that it has never offered its true followers anything which could be mistaken for a gospel.” What he is acknowledging is that the much simpler and contingent nature of human goings-on do not have the same eternal status, solidity, and reality as do philosophical claims: man is no god, and man must therefore live in accord with principles not predicated directly upon eternal truth, though he may be informed by such truth. Regardless of whether we agree with this claim, it is essential to note that Oakeshott takes this distinction seriously and his thought follows accordingly. When we turn to *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, we find that Oakeshott is no longer speaking in his philosophic voice but has instead shifted into a practical idiom as he considers political activity, education, and the day-to-day life of human beings. He writes, therefore, not as someone attempting to establish foundational claims about experience but is instead interested in how we deal with our contingent reality and its various implications for living well.

In the former section, through reviewing Oakeshott’s notion of practical experience from a philosophical perspective, I argued that the main mode of experience human beings exist within is a world characterized by change; however, there are three critical claims that he provides in “On being conservative” that further flesh out the world of practice from within that modified form of experience. The first is that the world of practice contains many conditions that we are obligated to contend with as we are born into a context where a rich complexity of happenstances is already in motion; no one is responsible for all that is given in our immediate world of practice, but it is also one in which we all engage and to which we all contribute. The identities we develop are thus outcomes of and reactions toward the world in which we exist—they cannot simply be dreamt up, nor will they have something of an eternal status, though they can be more or less enduring. The second, which emerges from the first, is that much of practical life is not exactly ‘chosen’ in any decisive sense, but is better thought of as ‘given’—we simply adopt the given and adapt to it, doing so in ways we may consider conservative or innovative. Men are within a continuum of contingencies, bound together and chronologically conditioned though not determined; identity is that

which we appropriate and subsequently develop to surf this wave of contingencies with some semblance of grace, perhaps even doing so in a way which provides a similar even keel for those around us.

The third claim, which is perhaps Oakeshott's most enlightening in the essay, is a distinction that he makes between "change and innovation: change denoting alterations we have to suffer and innovation those we design and execute." In this sense, innovation is a form of change, but it is those forms of change that are generated directly by human volition—albeit, this is not restricted to what is self-consciously intended. On the other hand, there are many aspects of the human condition which are not the direct outcomes of any human act. This more fundamental notion of change is understood by Oakeshott as those aspects of life which are, by and large, beyond our control; if no person were to act, such changes would go on of their own accord. No one escapes aging, the sun sets and rises each day, and the grass will continue to grow—we might even say that "changing—themselves and their world—is what human beings *are*." Though it is true that people may take care of themselves to slow aging, invent their own notions of time so as to not be entirely ruled by the sun, or they can mow their lawn to keep it pristine, the changes beyond humanity's control are nevertheless accepted, and people will only ever abate the ramifications of such inevitable occurrences. Change is thus, in some sense, inevitable; whereas innovation, though highly likely and often even warranted, is not something that is constant within practice.

Considering how dynamic and fluid this understanding of practical life is, Oakeshott believes that human beings require a sense of stability that allows them to navigate the world: in short, men need a continuous identity. What is meant by 'continuous' is not the invocation of any transcendent principle or an appeal to some notion of 'human nature.' Instead, Oakeshott argues that "a man's identity (or that of a community) is nothing more than an unbroken rehearsal of contingencies, each at the mercy of circumstances and each significant in proportion to its familiarity." What he means by 'identity,' therefore, is something which has been *practiced* so as to make the experience of life itself less confusing and more enjoyable. As humans encounter the circumstances they were born into, made up of series of treasures and contradictions given to them by their forebearers, they develop ways of navigating the world that are certainly not immutable but which also undoubtedly work to stabilize their particular circumstances. This notion of identity, therefore, has less to do with evaluating one's experiences based on some external criterion such as 'truth' or by positing some felt need or ideal, but with a familiar set of given customs and manners that allow for engagement with the world in the first place.

The development of such an identity is then predicated upon a fundamental need to conserve that which we have continuously adopted in our actions and which, therefore, comprise aspects of our identity. The desire to protect our habits and customs is not to claim that they are eternally true or far better than any other, but simply to acknowledge that they are the one's that we are presently acquainted with and therefore reliant upon: "not, *Verweile doch, du bist so schön*, but, *Stay with me because I am attached to you*." This is, for Oakeshott, the core of why we must understand what it means to be conservative of our habituated and enduring practices, so that we may continue to navigate the complexities of our contingent goings-on; in fact, without an identity to calm the storms of daily life, it would be nearly impossible to adequately grasp or evaluate anything we do in the world.

An excellent example, perhaps *the most* enlightening, is that of language, as it is something which no man chooses explicitly but which we all enjoy, maintain, and pass on. We might imagine a man who prefers his native tongue of German over any other language: he is hardly making this judgement based on German being 'truer' or 'better' than other languages, but rather on account of his capacity to express himself most fully in German due to his familiarity with the language. For him to find out that he is the last German speaker alive would be a tragedy, not on account of German being the best language he could possibly know or that there are no other languages for him to eventually learn, but because our *deutscher Freund* may never again find someone to whom he can best convey himself. This example of German falling out of usage may seem impossible for now but, by incremental and contingent changes, may eventually be a reality as fewer people learn the language. This would not necessarily happen because someone was attempting to eradicate the language or kill off the German people but would come about due

to the changes that slowly and inevitably occur within practical life—no differently than the loss of Latin. The German speaker *identifies* with his own language because it was given to him to help navigate the world, and he has learned how to find comfort through maintaining his capacity to engage in life through his native tongue.

Without the desire to conserve, every practice we have would be considered no more crucial than any other, but that endangers our capacity to even think in the world—indeed, to even consider such a possibility requires that I rely on a variety of practices such as my native tongue and common customs. Instead, man must be protective of what he has grown accustomed to, not in a manner that is closed off to possibility, but which understands that new possibilities could not even be comprehended without relying on what is possessed presently. This is what Oakeshott means when he says that to be conservative is “to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery ... the near to the distant ... the convenient to the perfect.” This is a *preference*—and hardly an irrational one—which emerges from the recognition that people rely on what they already know in order to move beyond to what they may not know yet. If I were learning a new language, I would not attempt to grasp it as if I had never encountered any language before; rather, I, as an Anglophone, would rely on my mother tongue as I worked through the intricacies of French, German, or whatever other language I may pursue. The adoption of new practices and aspects of my identity does not come through the destruction of my prior self-understanding but emerges only from within that extant identity. To do otherwise is impossible, as I cannot know what I do not yet know, nor can I come to know what is presently unknown without transitioning from what is presently known. Even when someone reaches beyond his bounds, he will inevitably rely on what he already has in order to make sense of the new boundaries he is breaking. Men ought always, then, to be careful that they conserve that which allows them to tread further into what is not yet known.

Now, some critics of Oakeshott have objected to him on the grounds that not everyone has an identity worth conserving, nor does Oakeshott, supposedly, “allow the possibility that change might also enhance or develop the self, that change is opportunity, that a self without challenges must either invent some or atrophy.” The first claim is, in my view, simply self-defeating; it must be granted that, even if someone had absolutely nothing worth conserving, his desire for innovation would not be for its own sake—rather, he would be doing so in the hopes of eventually having an identity worth conserving, which reinforces the claim that the conservative impulse has on the human condition. This brings us to the other objection: in my view, this second claim against Oakeshott only makes sense if he argues that the conservative disposition is the only legitimate approach to life—but he does not. It is, in fact, “not part of Oakeshott’s purpose to recommend, simply and equivocally, this conservative disposition.” He is a thinker who is supremely aware of the dynamic and pluralistic manner of life to which we are accustomed, but he believes that a dynamic system must ultimately have a continuous identity in something which can act as its foundation.

Oakeshott is perfectly cognizant of situations in which someone may believe innovation is necessary given the circumstances in which he finds himself. It is easy to imagine examples of people stumbling upon situations to which they object and consequently desire to change. Oakeshott provides an innocuous one: “a customer who finds a shopkeeper unable to supply his wants either persuades him to enlarge his stock or goes elsewhere; and a shopkeeper unable to meet the desires of a customer tries to impose upon him others which he can satisfy.” We may think of many other situations such as a child persuading his mother that he deserves a new toy or an employee bartering with a co-worker to get a certain day off. These circumstances may not *feel* particularly innovative, but they nonetheless involve an agent actively attempting to modify the way things are as opposed to what would happen if he or she made no such effort. What is evident, however, is that in each of these circumstances the identities of each party involved are largely maintained and it is merely the details of their dynamics that shift slightly: the customer and shopkeeper both acknowledge the art of bartering; the child recognizes his continued dependence upon his mother for his needs and desires; and the co-workers understand a relationship of mutual support.

These examples, elucidated by Oakeshott's argument, in fact overturn a common misunderstanding about the relationship between innovation and conservation that was succinctly stated over sixty years ago by Neal Wood: "without innovation there is nothing to conserve, and with conservation there is the continual need for innovation." Such a statement implies that innovation, 'progression' forward, is the status quo for human beings—an absurdity as this implies that 'innovation' is the 'conserved' practice of men—and that conservation is merely an unnatural halting or slowing down of that movement. What Oakeshott reminds us of is that, in distinguishing innovation from change, it is not in fact innovation that is integral to practical life; it is change that fundamentally distinguishes practical life, but man must have a conserved identity that allows him to navigate that change. Innovation is therefore reliant on the conservation of a known and hospitable form of conduct from which it can then leap; without the conservation of our identities, we cannot begin to consider how to make a change for the better.

In answering a challenge put to Oakeshott by Stephen Turner, I believe the complexity of this issue is further clarified. Turner argues that a possible problem that could be leveled against Oakeshott's view is that of providing evidence for his claims about this balancing act between what is presently had and what may be gained. As Stephen Turner aptly identifies, Oakeshott's aversion to risk seems to imply that he has a knowledge of the effects an innovation will entail. Yet, if this is true, innovation should not be an issue because then even Oakeshott is conceding that he knows the outcome of said innovation and can simply evaluate if it is worthwhile. If he denies this knowledge, on the other hand, the critic may then argue that Oakeshott's knowledge of the future is as uncertain as the innovator's. The innovator, therefore, presents no more of a risk than the conservative.

Despite the merit of this critique, it misunderstands the relationships between the world as it is found presently and the world as it could be. These are not two distinct notions that exist independently of one another but are instead mutually revelatory and require each other to be understood. A man cannot act in the world if he has no vision of how the world might eventually be; he also cannot disregard the world as it is if he would like to arrive at some desired world that is not yet. There is, nevertheless, a privilege afforded to the world as it is over the world as it ought to be due to it being actual and practiced—one's identity is far more defined by what is than what could be. By acting conservatively, an identity may be found through habituation that is sustained and known; if anything, it is as close as one can come to a continuous conception of the world as it is and will be—any radical shift would need to come from change beyond the scope of human control, and this is nevertheless better dealt with when one possesses a familiar manner of living. The innovator, on the other hand, incites the change that can cause instability as he "generates not only the 'improvement' sought, but a new and complex situation of which this is only one of the components." Additionally, having shaken his identity which was tied to his former practices, there is now the added confusion of not fully understanding how to deal with whatever changes may emerge from beyond the influence of human intentions. This means that, though the specifics of the circumstance may not be known, there is a general risk ever-present when a man decides he is going to incite some form of innovation that will threaten how he has learned to deal with the challenges of human life.

With these tensions between the conservative and innovative viewpoints in mind, Oakeshott does not seek to merely dismiss the role of innovation in human affairs. Instead, he argues that what is often sought by the conservative disposition is something of a middle ground with an innovative spirit. Despite concerns about the costs and benefits of innovation, there are moments when the conservative temperament must give way to innovation regarding a specific defect in one's manner of life; however, in such an instance, the innovation in question emerges slowly from within his present identity, allowing him to adapt to it more easily. Oakeshott's concern, however, is that such a middle ground is not being pursued. He believes that the people of his own time and place have become disconnected from any sense of the conservative disposition, always "ready to drop the bone we have for its reflection magnified in the mirror of the future," instead of enjoying the delights of life with which they are presently familiar.

This leads Oakeshott to worry about the possible ramifications of an all-consuming desire to innovate. Innovation is, as noted above, actively attempting to change the world as we find it so that it might accord

with a vision of what it could be—it is antithetical to a sustained identity. If this disposition is pushed to an extreme, it could eventually call for the total overhaul of the world as presently experienced. The conservative disposition ought to be the counterbalance to this innovative impulse, but it is impossible to gain equilibrium when the innovative spirit is drowning out the cry of its conservative counterpart. Each disposition plays a role in the human condition, and one cannot merely overcome the other. Their relationship should be understood not as a boxing match with a single victor but as a dance in which each partner moves with the other to create a sense of delight for all involved. No doubt, this also means that the conservative disposition cannot exist apart from its innovative counterpart, and to perpetually conserve is as unlikely as perpetually innovating. Oakeshott's concern is that if people do not recognize the importance of the conservative disposition in sustaining their identities, they will continue to tear apart these stable foundations upon which they rely to navigate the world. He therefore outlines two sorts of activity that he believes demonstrate how the conservative disposition is integral to the formation of identity: activities done for their own sake and activities that require the use of tools to be executed effectively. In looking at these aspects of practical experience, we gain a clearer picture of how our identities emerge and why we would desire to sustain them through reflecting upon aspects of practical life that most strongly call upon the conservative disposition.

Oakeshott remarks that, given the present proclivity toward innovation in all manner of life, “the disposition to be conservative...might be expected to end, with the man in whom this disposition is strong last seen swimming against the tide, disregarded not because of what he has to say is necessarily false, but because it has become irrelevant.” As so succinctly put by Neal Wood, there is a present assumption that men must reach beyond what they presently have, for “time does not stop. Men deserve more than poignancy and old port.” Yet, it seems more likely to Oakeshott that the conservative disposition is seen as *passé* only due to a lack of understanding; conservation in action persists throughout the human circumstance, and to not recognize this will only cause further confusion and turmoil. Indeed, Oakeshott argues it is not difficult to see that “there are many occasions when this disposition remains not only appropriate but supreme.” In looking to aspects of practical life that are emblematic of this disposition, people may begin to see how various aspects of their own lives are better understood by considering themselves from a conservative standpoint.

Oakeshott argues that all activities and relationships “which are engaged in for their own sake and enjoyed for what they are and not for what they provide” are thoroughly conservative—indeed, they are the emblem of what it means to conserve. Oakeshott's often used example is that of friendship, a theme he returns to throughout his works. To hold someone as a true friend is not to obtain anything other than the experience of having someone who is familiar and comprises a part of what one considers his ‘world,’ what he considers *home*. With other relationships, this may not be so: “to go on changing one's butcher until one gets the meat one likes...is conduct not inappropriate to the relationship concerned; but to discard friends because they do not behave as we expected and refuse to be educated to our requirements is the conduct of a man who has altogether mistaken the character of friendship.” In a friend, one may find a confidant, a counselor, or a jokester; though he may be appreciated for all these qualities, the love that a friend has for him will not be reducible to any of those singular aspects. It is no wonder that friendships often develop when people are traversing great challenges in life, be that in grade school, traveling, or war. For, in those moments, friends discover themselves together, their mutual journey acting as a continuous reminder to each friend of who they are in themselves. The identity of my friend, as separate and uncontrolled by me, can provide me with a reminder of who I was, how I came to be as I am, and what I shall become; to force my friend to be what he is not will crush the identity which I possess through him being an external and continuous pillar of my own self-realization.

In brief, to enjoy something for its own sake is not to engage in the endeavour for some other end to come, but rather to engage in the activity because it approximates an end in itself. As Oakeshott sees it, life is a delight when engaged in this sort of activity, but human beings—as finite creatures that must always be conscious of change—often must work to provide for their needs through activities that derive some

external end, such as labours for a wage to put food on the table. Such activities that are done for the sake of an end to come always cause a separation of the world as presently engaged compared with the world as it is desired to be. In performing any activity for its own sake, however, the separation between the world as it is and the world as it is desired to be is abated for a moment—whether that is in enjoying a walk through a flowering meadow, reading T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, or enjoying the company of one’s husband or wife. It is in such experiences that the conservative disposition has taken hold, as the enjoyer of such activities desires to stay in that moment of delight for as long as humanly possible.

A seemingly strong objection, however, could be made against this desire for activities pursued as ends in themselves: do these not make up just a fraction of the human experience, and are we not much more often engrossed in activities that require the separation of the world as presently engaged and the world as it could be? This is a question that cannot go unaddressed—fortunately, Oakeshott is well equipped to anticipate such objections. He recognizes that human affairs so often entail the emergence of unforeseen circumstances, and it should therefore be expected that any activity pursued for its own sake cannot sustain itself perpetually. This is a perfectly valid point, which is why Oakeshott is no less receptive to actions pursued for the sake of an extrinsic end; he is not, however, willing to grant that these activities are beyond the scope of the conservative disposition.

Oakeshott points out that, even among activities that are the means to an end, most “projects are often provoked and governed by the tools available.” What he is pointing out is that, even if an activity has radical or varied ends that it pursues, the means with which that activity is performed will likely remain constant. Now, this topic can become muddled in certain details, particularly the fact that the end produced by one man may become the tools of another; for example, some time ago, a woodworker would have used his carpentry tools to perfectly cut and shape pieces of wood into a hockey stick—the end of the woodworker’s activity—which would then become the tool used by a professional hockey player to try and score goals to win games. Notwithstanding that this distinction between means and ends may be somewhat relative in certain instances, it is still helpful for understanding situations in which someone may be conservative despite the activity in question not being an end in itself.

Oakeshott argues that “tools are less subject to innovation than projects because, except on rare occasions, tools are not designed to fit a particular project and then thrown aside, they are designed to fit a whole class of projects.” Familiarity with a tool is necessary for it to be used effectively. A man who has never touched a chisel—let alone taken the time to figure out which chisels are best for him and his work—will have a tough time doing even the simplest stone sculpting. Any tradesman will acknowledge that “tools call for skill in use and skill is inseparable from practice and familiarity.” It would not be a stretch to say that tools—when discussed in the context of certain roles, be that a trowel to a mason, a saw to a carpenter, or a wrench to a plumber—eventually become an extension of the tool-user and are critical to his identity, and the tools are valued insofar as they relate to a conserved practice of using them.

Now, though tradesmen are helpful for understanding this point, as they use readily recognizable tools such as trowels and shovels, the conservative implications of tool-using extend beyond to other professions or activities that may appear less obvious. For example, a professor of English will likely have a copy of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, complete with his substantial underlining, highlighting, and marginalia. If I were to steal his copy and replace it with an identical edition, save for the various page markings he had inserted over the years, his next lecture about the play would likely be far less organized and informative; perhaps he would be no longer remember the exact line in which he believes Lady Macbeth shows herself as the true mastermind behind the plot, or this professor will no longer recall precisely how he wished to describe the influence of the witches’ prophecies upon Macbeth himself. The professor has lost his bearings as an educator—an aspect of his identity—through the loss of his text which had become something of a map for him in traversing the intellectual landscape of Shakespeare. What is clear is that, in both the case of a tradesman using a literal tool or an intellectual using his own annotated copy of a text to organize his thoughts, “familiarity is the essence of tool using; and in so far as man is a tool using animal he is disposed to be conservative.”

Oakeshott's final move in his analysis of tools is to expand the conception of what is generally meant by a 'tool.' He wants to move beyond the idea of a physical object—be that a drill, a saw, or even a book—that is designed to help with some task and instead consider “a certain kind of tool in common use, namely, general rules of conduct.” This may not seem to follow, but what Oakeshott is here acknowledging is that there is an aspect of relativity about our social customs—what is important about them is not that they are immutable but that they are useful, just like any other tools. It is true that people's mother tongues are largely a product of chance, no one chooses where he or she will be born, and our customs emerge spontaneously through local interactions of different peoples. Yet neither language, nor geography, nor custom precisely dictates what people ought to do substantially. Rather, they act as guidelines, conduits to help people more easily engage with the world and provide common spaces within which they can express themselves and seek a sense of delight. They constitute something of a routine for all involved; but, whether on the scale of a community or just one person, a routine does not go from non-existence to perfect order overnight. A man must begin with simply *a* routine which is often more important than the substance of the routine, and one can only generate a good or better routine by first establishing a routine at all. This is the sense in which customs, routines, or habits are *social tools*, as they make the social interactions of humans more manageable through practice. Just as having a shovel makes digging a hole much easier than doing so within one's bare hands, so it is that having a common language, familiar routines, and habituated customs makes human interaction much easier to navigate—thereby making them worthy of conservation.

Oakeshott acknowledges that human customs “are the product of reflection and choice, there is nothing sacrosanct about them, they are susceptible of change and improvement; but if our disposition in respect of them were not, generally speaking, conservative, if we were disposed to argue about them and change them on every occasion, they would rapidly lose their value.” Oakeshott, as stated, acknowledges that there is a relative aspect to much of the human condition; the customs used by a people have a sense of arbitrariness in that we could imagine that they could have been otherwise. What does not follow from this line of thinking, despite the protestations that may emerge from many contemporary readers, is that these social tools and customs should therefore be thrown away. The fact that something exists does not make it sacred, but it certainly implies that it informs the manner in which a person or a people presently live—especially if it is a long-enduring practice. To simply dispense with a certain custom because it is not explicitly understood is as foolish as saying that a word is meaningless because *I* do not know what it means.

In short, the conservative disposition is most obviously present in situations when an activity is being performed for its own sake or in relation to the tools people use to perform certain tasks. In both cases, the reason for conservation is never justified on the grounds that the specific activity or tool is ‘naturally’ or ‘metaphysically’ necessary. Rather, through practice of a specific activity that is its own end or the habituated use of a tool that makes a certain sort of task easier, people will begin to consider those things as aspects of their identity in the world. It is not that this developed identity is immutable or that there is no other manner of living and acting that we could imagine, but that this identity *is developed* and therefore governs present ways of living. The claim of the conservative disposition is never truth or goodness, but familiarity and practice. In Oakeshott's view, identity is thus not something which I dream up or contrive, but it is rather a series of learned responses to the world in which one lives so as to stabilize the difficulties inherent in the contingent and fluctuating world of practice.

In reading through Michael Oakeshott's writings, we see someone who evidently has a great sense of and appreciation for style and wit—we may even call him an aesthete in the best sense—but we also find a man who is very careful not to say too much. He is doubtful of his capacity to make a fundamental claim about the human condition, typically preferring to be critical of those who claim to have all the answers. Though it may annoy us that he provides no concrete alternative, I do not think this emerges from ignorance or stupidity but rather from a great respect of the complexity of human affairs. If anything, he is more com-

fortable making grand philosophical claims, yet in his own view that provides no explicit direction for the day-to-day actions of men engaged in mere practice.

This leads Oakeshott to a seemingly peculiar view to emerge during the modern era. He does not agree with any sort of foundationalism to be found in the human condition, as the contingent nature of humanity does not allow such a solid ground to even be sought. What this implies is not that there is nothing to be found of value in our practices; rather, due to his insistence upon the fundamentally contingent nature of human goings-on, Oakeshott is keen enough to see that we must maintain our manners and customs which comprise our identity, for without such practices our worlds become so chaotic and uninterpretable that life ceases to be worth living. Identity is thus the closest we come to a stable ground that allows for a better path through the turbulence of human existence. We are men at sea on a mere raft, and to believe the raft is harmful and poorly made requires that we jump into the wide-open waters—a decision which we will undoubtedly regret when we no longer have the energy to tread the ever-moving seas of the world.

Identity for Oakeshott cannot, then, be understood as something merely posited or willed; to merely impose an identity is to constrain oneself to a sort of living that may have nothing to do with the world that we find ourselves in. Such a view of identity also often confuses us about ourselves, as identifying with something often means rationalistically imposing a form of self-understanding that may obscure the problems one faces in the world at present. Identity is predicated upon what we do in the world, most notably in those activities to which we perpetually return for their own sake and those activities in which a learned and sustained set of tools and customs are continuously called upon. These activities comprise much of the human condition, and there is nowhere else to place one's identity that may be made sense of. For someone to posit an identity that is rationally constructed without reference to his daily life is not to find a better manner of life than he presently has, but simply to alienate himself from the world in which he finds himself. In understanding Oakeshott's defense of identity and its connection with a conservative temperament, we may learn not precisely how the world works, but rather how we can get by agreeably alongside it.

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