

# OAKESHOTT AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL POLITICS

DALE HALL and TARIQ MODOOD

*University College, Swansea    Queen's University, Belfast*

*Abstract.* Oakeshott offers a radical version of the thesis that philosophy cannot evaluate or recommend political ideas. We criticize each stage of his argument that practical life excludes philosophy's desire for ultimate truth and demands a distinctive form of reasoning. Believing that practice is not susceptible to philosophical guidance because it is composed of actions, subject to change and necessarily inconsistent and uncritical of assumptions, he exaggerates its contrast with theory. Moreover, he wrongly supposes that philosophy has no practical aspect, arguing that while all practical thought must be in terms of certain concepts, philosophy transcends those which it analyses. We contend that the distinctiveness of philosophy and practice does not imply they are separate; rather philosophy is a necessary part of any reasoned evaluation of political concepts.

## I

ARE philosophy and politics worlds apart? Do they nowhere meet except by chance or error? Can philosophy make no recommendations about our practical beliefs and principles? The view that philosophy and politics are not just distinct but separate is characteristic of British philosophy in the twentieth century, running through all the major schools of logical atomism,<sup>1</sup> logical positivism,<sup>2</sup> and linguistic analysis,<sup>3</sup> and has tended to dominate political studies. Parallel to the fact/value disjunction, there is commonly held to be a separation between philosophy and political and ethical appraisal, between philosophical theory and practical recommendation. Although linguistic philosophy dismisses positivism's verification principles as the only criterion of meaning and rejects its implied emotivist theory of ethics, it still divorces philosophy from morality and politics by identifying philosophy with conceptual analysis while insisting that practical recommendation is a quite separate activity. However, whereas positivism contrasted philosophy, understood as rational, with ethics, seen as a sphere of non-rational feelings, linguistic philosophy contrasts conceptual analysis and practical thinking as two different (and unrelated) forms of rationality. The implications of this view

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (London, Longmans, Green, 1917, reprinted 1921), pp. 29–30, 97–8 and 107–9, and *Sceptical Essays* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1928), pp. 69–79. (Russell later changed his views radically. For example, in *Philosophy and Politics* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1947) he argued that 'the only philosophy that affords a theoretical justification of democracy in its temper of mind is empiricist' (p. 20).)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd edn (London, Victor Gollancz, 1946), pp. 103–4.

<sup>3</sup> Exemplified in the writings of Wittgenstein, Wisdom, Ryle, Austin and Hare.

for political argument were partly spelled out by Weldon in *The Vocabulary of Politics*.<sup>4</sup>

Weldon's general strategy was to argue that philosophy can provide no incorrigible theoretical foundations for political principles, for it can discover no timeless moral standards but only clarify the meanings which political expressions bear in different contexts. But in arguing thus, he explicitly rejected the idea that all moral and political evaluations are simply arbitrary on the grounds that there can still be 'sound reasons for approving of some political institutions and disapproving of others'.<sup>5</sup> He explained the notion of 'sound reasons' by reference to how we evaluate rival candidates for a post<sup>6</sup> or the success of an artist at his painting,<sup>7</sup> that is, by showing that the standard of reasonable judgement in such matters is immanent within the relevant tradition or form of activity. So justification in politics always proceeds by relating a proposal or principle to a way of life which is itself accepted as a customary pattern of behaviour.<sup>8</sup> A way of life is 'a complicated pattern of different but interlocking activities',<sup>9</sup> so our principles will have only limited application and may be mutually inconsistent. As Greenleaf has shown,<sup>10</sup> Weldon's notion of practical reasoning finds better expression in Michael Oakeshott's writings where it is characterized as 'the pursuit of intimations' within an idiom of practice.<sup>11</sup> Rational practical activity consists for Oakeshott is knowing how to detect and remove defects and incongruities from an established tradition of behaviour along lines of development suggested by the tradition itself so that a more satisfactory condition may result. Such activity is neither personal caprice nor the implementation of standards or principles premeditated by us independently of our familiarity with the tradition or form of life in question; instead, it is the unending pursuit of improvement and coherence within a complex tradition in ways intimated by that tradition, but with no expectation that we shall necessarily detect a single direction in which to move, for traditions contain competing intimations between which we have to choose.

For both Oakeshott and Weldon there is a radical difference between such philosophical reflection and such practical evaluation; but whereas the latter sees the contrast as between second-order clarification of concepts and practical commitment, Oakeshott offers a fuller and more complex account of philosophy and practical life. He contrasts theoretical and practical reason by

<sup>4</sup> T. D. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics* (London, Penguin, 1953).

<sup>5</sup> Weldon, *Vocabulary of Politics*, p. 14. Cf. p. 15 and Chs. 5 and 6.

<sup>6</sup> Weldon, *Vocabulary of Politics*, pp. 151–6.

<sup>7</sup> Weldon, *Vocabulary of Politics*, pp. 166–70.

<sup>8</sup> Weldon, 'The Justification of Political Attitudes', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, xxix (1955), pp. 119–20.

<sup>9</sup> Weldon, 'The Justification of Political Attitudes', pp. 119–20.

<sup>10</sup> W. H. Greenleaf, 'Idealism, Modern Philosophy and Politics', in *Politics and Experience. Essays Presented to Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of his Retirement*, edited by P. King and B. C. Parekh (London, Cambridge University Press, 1968), especially pp. 100–5.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London, Methuen, 1962)—hereafter referred to as *RP*—pp. 124–5, 133–6 and more generally pp. 1–36 and pp. 80–136. Without using the phrase 'pursuit of intimations', Oakeshott also examined the practical mode of experience in *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1933 and reprinted 1966 and 1978)—hereafter referred to as *EM*—Ch. 5.

arguing that the circumstances of practical life necessarily exclude philosophical reflection and that philosophy supersedes practical concerns. His case is the more interesting to political studies because it has a certain grandeur of vision not commonly found in British political thought of this century. We shall consider his radical and provocative thesis here.<sup>12</sup>

## II

Oakeshott's separation of philosophy and practice must be understood in relation to this general theory that we perceive and understand the world under several logically separate modes of experience. This theory received its fullest expression in *Experience and Its Modes* when Oakeshott distinguished history, science and practice as different forms of thought; *Rationalism in Politics* added poetry (or art) to the list, though without making the list exhaustive for he has always claimed that the number of such modes is in principle limitless. His latest book, *On Human Conduct*,<sup>13</sup> reaffirms the separateness of the modes, albeit in a sometimes varied vocabulary, referring to them as 'platforms of conditional understanding'<sup>14</sup> or 'mores of utterance'.<sup>15</sup> His view is that no experience is possible without a system of concepts unified by some central presuppositions which, without themselves being challengeable, determine what is and is not intelligible within that way of thinking.<sup>16</sup> Each mode of experience is such a system of concepts, or world of ideas, and as such creates its own version of reality. As closed systems of internally coherent ideas, the modes are but partial accounts of reality; more importantly, though, they are distinct versions of reality only because they each exclude everything that belongs to another. Each is a mode of experience because its concepts form a coherent system, but each possesses a distinctive coherence only because it is a world organized on principles peculiar to itself. The scientific mode is concerned only with theories and generalizations about the quantifiable; whatever cannot be so considered cannot be scientifically understood.<sup>17</sup> Thus it can make no sense of and therefore is incompatible with the historian's concern to understand the past without anachronism, with the poet's delight in enchanting images, and with the desires and fears of the practical man, expressible, for example, in terms of prudence, morality, politics, and religion. All concepts belong to one of these worlds and to only one, for the company they keep determines their identity; to uproot them from one mode to another is to transform their identities utterly. Practice may borrow an idea like tradition from history, but in so doing it makes unhistorical what it takes.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a recent separation of philosophy and practice, which is indebted to Oakeshott, see Gordon Graham, 'Practical Politics and Philosophical Inquiry', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 28 (1978), pp. 234-41. See, too, John Liddington, 'Graham on Politics and Philosophy' and Graham, 'Reply to Liddington', both in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 29 (1979), pp. 153-6 and 157 respectively; and Dale Hall and Tariq Modood, 'A Note on "Practical Politics and Philosophical Inquiry"', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 29 (1979), pp. 340-4.

<sup>13</sup> *On Human Conduct* (London, Oxford University Press, 1975). Hereafter *HC*.

<sup>14</sup> *HC*, pp. 6-12.

<sup>15</sup> *HC*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Philosophical experience is the exception. See below.

<sup>17</sup> *EM*, Ch. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *EM*, Ch. 3 and 'The Activity of Being an Historian' in *RP*, pp. 137-67.

To confuse the concepts and principles of one mode with another's is to fall victim to the 'most insidious and crippling of all forms of error'.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond the modes is philosophy, which is not a mode of experience but it shares with them an essential exclusivity; just as the modes' limited worlds are mutually exclusive with no overlap of interests or common forms of reasoning, so philosophy excludes their particular concerns in freeing itself from their partiality.<sup>20</sup> Philosophy is pure enquiry without assumptions, and thus in its attempt to formulate an absolutely consistent account of the diversity of experience, to view the totality of experience, it must supersede the presuppositions and preoccupations of every mode. Oakeshott's own enterprise of distinguishing and clarifying the separate modes is one example of what he takes philosophy to be. Philosophy in this sense is interested, for example, neither in nature nor practical projects as such but only in the coherence of the concepts of science and practical life. And, conversely, the transcendental character of philosophy makes it remote from the limited worlds of the modes so that it is at best an irrelevance and at worst a distraction for those engaged in them. In brief, Oakeshott believes that if philosophy is distinct from, say, practice, it must be altogether separate, for he believes generally that it is only the separateness of the forms of understanding which makes them distinct.

We have not space to criticize the whole doctrine of the modes, but it must be considered in a discussion of Oakeshott's separation of philosophy and practice. In particular, we shall examine his grounds for two crucial assertions. The first is his claim that the 'practical consciousness ... is secure in the knowledge that philosophical thought can make no relevant contribution to the [distinctive] coherence of its world of experience'<sup>21</sup> because philosophy and practice are alleged to be 'different and exclusive worlds of ideas'.<sup>22</sup> The second is that philosophy is 'perverted' or 'false to its own character' when it considers practical issues.<sup>23</sup> To consider these claims we shall discuss in the next section Oakeshott's characterization of practical life and then in the following sections we shall cast doubt on his general theory of the separateness of the forms of understanding in order to criticize his account of philosophy as pure critical thought which can countenance no practical commitment.

### III

We should begin by being clear that the gulf between philosophy and practice is, in Oakeshott's view, total. He denies not only that philosophy can establish specific positive conclusions about what is practicable or desirable in political life, but also that it can ever undermine our beliefs or actions in even a negative way by showing that they are incoherent, inconsistent or without justification. No practical recommendations, neither positive nor negative, may

<sup>19</sup> *EM*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> For differences between *RP* and *EM* regarding Oakeshott's view of philosophy, see Tariq Modood, 'Oakeshott's Conceptions of Philosophy', *History of Political Thought*, 1 (1980).

<sup>21</sup> *EM*, pp. 320–1. Cf. pp. 1–2, 319, 327, 329, 332, 335, 338–9 and 354–5. Cf., too, *RP*, pp. 124 and 134.

<sup>22</sup> *EM*, p. 338. Cf. pp. 265, 290 and 320.

<sup>23</sup> *EM*, p. 297. Cf. pp. 265, 320, 327, 335, 339, 347 and 355.

follow as the conclusion of a philosophical argument. Consider an example.<sup>24</sup> If someone opposes proposed legislation making the possession of pornography an offence because he believes that there is an important distinction to be observed between self-regarding and other-regarding actions, we might think that a successful philosophical criticism of the alleged distinction, showing that it is confused, would constitute a good reason for revising his opinion of the bill. If we can show agents that their beliefs and actions are groundless or without justification in that they rest on philosophically untenable notions, we seem to have offered an argument that has at least the important negative implication that they cannot do *this* for *those* reasons. Yet this is precisely what Oakeshott denies. Because he believes that philosophical reflection is an irrelevant interference in practical life, and that considerations logically compelling in philosophy will not satisfy practical men, Oakeshott is committed to the conclusion that there is no necessary relation between following a philosophical criticism and reconsidering our political beliefs, whatever they may be. He obviously has to allow that a man may happen to act in the light of an apparently philosophical discourse, but he explains this by saying that either the discourse was only a disguised form of rhetoric, and so not philosophical, or the agent failed to perceive its irrelevance!<sup>25</sup> *Qua* philosophy, then, philosophy cannot lever the world of practice.

Oakeshott asserts that philosophy is irrelevant to practice because he believes that the circumstances of practical life exclude philosophical reflection and make other standards of reasoning appropriate. Arguing that the nature of practical reason is defined by the essential characteristics of practical life, he concludes that it must divest itself of irrelevant preoccupation if it is to remain practical:

Practical experience is practical in virtue of being limited to a world of experience of a certain character; it neither has use for nor recognizes judgements which are not themselves specifically practical. If thinking is to issue in valid practical conclusions it must be exclusively practical thinking and must on one side all interests and arguments not determined by the categories of practical experience.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, then, much depends upon Oakeshott's characterization of practice and practical reason. He understands practice as a world of action and change which is without a critical character and cannot achieve complete consistency. Practice comprises everything belonging to 'the conduct of life as such', it is a world of human doings and deeds; it is 'action itself', the 'totality of ... actions' through which we attempt to 'alter existence or to maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change'.<sup>27</sup> In practical life, will and evaluation are combined in actions which attempt to transform 'what is' into 'what ought to be' 'by means of specific change'.<sup>28</sup> This world of ceaseless activity is always to be understood under the category or concept of change. It is a world of what is 'here and now, of what is present as such',<sup>29</sup> but it is a

<sup>24</sup> The example was offered by Gordon Graham when defending the Oakeshottian thesis in 'Practical Politics and Philosophical Inquiry'.

<sup>25</sup> *RP*, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> *EM*, p. 338.

<sup>27</sup> *EM*, p. 256. Cf. pp. 260–1. See, too, *HC*, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> *EM*, p. 290. Cf. *HC*, pp. 43–50.

<sup>29</sup> *EM*, p. 273. Cf. pp. 262–3.

'mortal world'<sup>30</sup> which is 'mutable', 'unstable' and 'transient'.<sup>31</sup> Men's pressing problems and urgent actions comprise only a world of the particular moment, for they have but a fleeting currency before time passes and they form the past.<sup>32</sup> The notion that practical life is action in the midst of change leads Oakeshott to insist that it is 'without a critical conception of reality',<sup>33</sup> by which he means that it is not essentially reflexive. Of course, practical men reflect and criticize each other, but *qua* practical, they cannot question their presuppositions systematically, because the urgencies of the moment are too pressing and the concept of action presupposes that certain concepts are taken for granted. All that is important to us as agents is that things be 'designated' or identified, 'not defined'.<sup>34</sup> That is, in action we just presuppose 'a world of discrete realities' such as societies, communities, and individuals without questioning their adequacy from a philosophical standpoint: we recognize men as individuals, 'appreciate [their] separateness', without ever analysing the concept of an individual.<sup>35</sup> Again, the omnipresence of change convinces Oakeshott that the final differentia of practical reason is that it should not aspire to any notion of timeless truth, nor even attempt consistency in action, for in the practical world 'what was true yesterday [can] be false today'.<sup>36</sup> It is only 'rationalists' who insist upon consistency in action because they believe that virtue and success are to be achieved through applying abstract principles uniformly in practical life.<sup>37</sup> They make the epistemological error of supposing that by reflection we can free ourselves from the inconsistencies we find in the world by constructing a consistent ethic by which to live, whereas in fact reflection, if it is to be practical, must be rooted in the prejudices of its time and can only abridge an already existing way of living. Moreover, a completely consistent system of ethics must be irrelevant at all times because circumstances constantly change and defy reduction to a single rational system.

Taken together, then, the four allegedly defining features of practice, that it is a world of action and change which is necessarily uncritical and inconsistent, are supposed to separate practical from philosophical reason. While seemingly diverse, they participate in a common form, for they all rely on a contrast of pure thought and action.<sup>38</sup> Oakeshott's essential idea is that practice differs from all the other modes of experience in that they are unhurried and able to revise or rethink their ideas. It is further still from philosophy, for philosophy is the only perfectly theoretical discipline in that its differentia as pure thought is its critical, questioning character which takes nothing for granted in searching for a consistent account of experience.<sup>39</sup> In emphasizing that practice is a realm of action, Oakeshott wants to bring out that situations often require us to act decisively even when all policies are beset by uncertainty and

<sup>30</sup> *EM*, pp. 258 and 273.

<sup>31</sup> *EM*, pp. 262–3, 267, 273 and 306.

<sup>32</sup> Graham follows Oakeshott in this view of practice.

<sup>33</sup> *EM*, p. 268.

<sup>34</sup> *EM*, p. 268.

<sup>35</sup> *EM*, p. 269.

<sup>36</sup> *EM*, p. 267. Cf. pp. 262–3.

<sup>37</sup> *RP*, Chs. 1 and 5.

<sup>38</sup> He nowhere states this explicitly; but he is committed to it and it is the most plausible possible presentation of his case.

<sup>39</sup> *EM*, p. 227.

objections, and, more importantly and generally, that to act is to commit oneself and render further consideration and enquiry irrelevant as no longer practical. His stress on temporal change confirms the same idea that actions are categorical whereas it is the nature of philosophy to be hypothetical. Whereas thoughts can be postulated, questioned, criticized, and retracted, actions are both fleeting and final because, once done, they cannot be undone. We can correct our thoughts, or return to unresolved problems, but we cannot take back our actions, for they make a mark on the world which cannot be erased because we cannot live again a moment in time. Besides confirming the idea that actions are irreversible categorical doings, the notion of change implies that practical reason is always subject to a sense of urgency because it must resolve pressing questions of the moment conclusively before they pass away to be replaced by others.<sup>40</sup> Because time passes and things change, practical reason must exclude many things from consideration and ask only the always limited question of what we should do in particular contingent circumstances. Unlike philosophy, it cannot be open-ended in the sense of following wherever the argument leads for the argument's sake alone but is circumscribed by considerations of the moment. The same contrast of practical reason and pure thought is implicit in Oakeshott's third characteristic of practice, namely his idea that practice is without an essentially critical conception of reality. Of course, urgent circumstances preclude indefinite reflection, but the more important notion is that the very concept of action would be unintelligible unless practical men accept certain presuppositions. In action we seem not only to exclude questioning the adequacy of, say, the presupposition that there are individuals, but to treat such a presupposition as a truth whose validity could not possibly be questioned. The fourth aspect of Oakeshott's case about practice rests on the same contrast of pure thought and action. In saying that practical life must embrace inconsistency he means that whereas the philosopher may want all his ideas to harmonize in a systematic rational whole, the practical man's actions are always tied to changing circumstances and standards which preclude uniformity of judgements. To try to eliminate all inconsistency and discrepancy from our practices would be to court moral disaster. A simple inconsistency between two or more of our practical judgements, so the argument goes, is no reason to change any of them, for inconsistency is not just tolerable but necessary. For example, we might think that in occupational recruitment women should be treated equally with men without having also to believe that, say, their age of retirement should be increased or they should serve as front-line troops. Therefore, all four aspects of Oakeshott's characterization of practice rely upon a contrast between pure thought and action. The unifying idea is that practical reason is not pure thought: it is bound to action, restricted by the urgency of the moment, and can be neither critical nor consistent but must content itself with determining only what should be done in particular shifting circumstances.

A further characteristic distinguishing practical reason from the pure theory of philosophy is not separately mentioned when Oakeshott discusses the

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Graham who in 'Practical Politics and Philosophical Inquiry' says that 'actions must be taken in time' (p. 238) and that the conclusions of practical reason are 'fixed and final' so that further reflection about the past cannot be practical (p. 239).

practical mode, but it is clearly implicit in his view that philosophy is the attempt to give an absolute—that is, complete—account of what is presupposed in the modes. Although he is explicit that the idea of such an absolutely coherent world of ideas is not a substantive end but a criterion presupposed in critical thought, not a destination, more a star by which we navigate, it has considerable force in his thought.<sup>41</sup> For with this idea of a single and complete truth as the *telos* of rational enquiry, he contrasts the uncertainties and inevitable imperfection of practical life, seeing an eternal realm of harmony and order as the object of intellectual enquiry and a shifting world of circumstance and contingency as the locus of practical reason. With philosophy's world of coherent and unchanging theorems he contrasts the necessarily inconsistent and temporary maxims of practical life, and so the separation of philosophy and practice is understood as the contrast of an eternal truth with the temporal world of change and action. In the end, then, the contrast of pure thought and action is seen as a contrast of one truth and many actions.

However, this understanding of the contrast between philosophy and practice is unsatisfactory. Oakeshott assumes without argument that there is a definitive truth which all philosophers would recognize were they sufficiently rational, and, conversely, that a plurality of practices and faiths is a necessary characteristic of practice. But argument is necessary here, for Oakeshott is not just reporting what is the case. In fact, not all philosophers accept the idea of a single true philosophy as even a criterion of thought, and not all practical men tolerate diversity. They may be wrong, but it has to be shown that divergent philosophies are ultimately reconcilable whereas the faiths of practical men are not. Moreover, his contrast involves a distorting asymmetry. He contrasts practice, understood as men's diverse attempts to live as they ought, with the idea of a single, final philosophical account of reality. But the comparison should be not with the *idea* of a definitive account, but with the actual variety of attempts by philosophers to express what they understand the truth to be; not the ideal of philosophy with the actuality of practice, but either the ideal or actual of both. Thus we should compare not one supposed eternal truth with manifold action, but thinking with acting; not a final philosophical account with ephemeral actions, but critical enquiry with practical action.

Nor do the other features to which Oakeshott appeals in characterizing practical life offer satisfactory grounds for believing that philosophy and practice are radically separate. The idea that actions are categorical because they cannot be undone cannot separate the two realms. The obvious and formal truth that we cannot erase the past applies to thoughts no less than to actions, for if we cannot alter our past vote on the anti-pornography bill nor can we erase the fact that we once had certain philosophical views about the idea of liberty. We can no more delete from the past that we once thought something than we can erase that we did something. The notion that

<sup>41</sup> Although the notion of an absolute or concrete whole of experience has frequently been taken to suggest a determinate conclusion to which rational thought aspires, Oakeshott rejects such a notion. He sees philosophy as an endless journey of criticism which is 'perpetually *en voyage*' towards a prospect of absolute truth which is never achieved but always beckons (see especially *EM*, p. 35, and *HC*, p. 11).



philosophical conclusions are entertained only hypothetically cannot help Oakeshott here, for the fact that we may change our minds about a problem does not mean that we can be said not to have made up our minds at all. To believe that a philosophical distinction is coherent or otherwise is to be committed to a conclusion on the basis of the relevant arguments. But Oakeshott might believe that the very notion of changing one's mind about a past action is misleading because any change of mind can make no practical difference. True, a change of mind cannot undo the past (but that, as we have seen, is true of thoughts, too), but equally obviously further reflection about the past may convince us that we should act differently. Our conduct is as much backward-looking as forward-looking, and for the moral agent, our past actions are matters of concern and reflection, in themselves and as examples and precedents, successes and failures.

Oakeshott does not deny that practical reflection can be backward-looking with the past as its object. He insists, however, that such a past cannot be the object of a genuine enquiry about what happened but must necessarily share the characteristic common to all practical thought, namely the concern for the present. He distinguishes between the historical past, which is a creation of critical enquiry about what happened, from what he calls the 'practical past', which is a kind of persuasive or legitimizing 'fiction', merely an image of the past invoked by practical men to serve their interests in the present.<sup>42</sup> The two are alleged to be quite separate in that one is a concern with what is over and finished, regardless of any relevance to the present, and the other is a concern with the past only in so far as it is relevant to our present preoccupations. Oakeshott's notion of a practical past might appear to offer a dimension which can free us from the narrow present, from the world of 'what is here and now, of what is present as such'—as his notion of tradition, for example, appears to do; but this is an illusion, for the practical past is circumscribed by the same considerations as all practical reasoning, namely those of the present moment. It is alleged that because practical men appeal to the past from the standpoint of their present concerns, the past to which they refer must be nothing more than reflection of those concerns, a kind of retrospective present lacking historical veracity. But this is implausible. First, because he collapses the practical past into the present, Oakeshott provides no sense in which action is other than momentary. Second, his stipulations about the character of the practical past are unjustified. When moral agents reflect about the past, that their interest is not just historical enquiry for its own sake does not imply they are unconcerned with the accuracy of their accounts in the face of possible criticism. They are concerned with something more than historical fact, but the facts of what happened are essential to their arguments, and nothing short of a reliable account of the past will satisfy them. Indeed, to say that their accounts may be more or less accurate means they are not simply the expressions of practical preoccupations in the present. In short, if the historical and practical modes of experience are not separate, the notion of a practical past cannot exclude the possibility that genuine enquiry and changes of mind about past actions will make a practical difference to our lives. And we have so far found no reason why philosophy should be said to have no part in such reflection.

<sup>42</sup> *EM*, pp. 103–5 and 157–8, and *RP*, pp. 146–59.

The second characteristic of practical life that Oakeshott emphasizes is change. Its omnipresence is alleged to restrict practical reason to urgent, pressing questions of the moment thereby precluding general reflection. However, such restrictions of scope are neither peculiar to practical reason nor a point of contrast with philosophy. For, in one sense, all arguments exclude some things from explicit consideration, the appropriateness or otherwise of their exclusions being determined by the character and purpose of the argument in question. On the other hand, it is not the case that the urgent, changing character of practical life always narrows reflection by excluding many issues from consideration. The deliberations of, say, the Wolfenden Committee when considering what recommendations to make about homosexual law reform were certainly practical, but consisted in reconciling and seeing the limits of different principles, rather than eliminating factors from consideration in order that the question in hand may be settled. Practical reasoning is not simply a matter of urgently inviting or forbidding particular prospective actions, but often of attempting to change the way a moral agent stands to the world, interprets his life. Thus, it is concerned as much with men's beliefs, feelings, attitudes, judgements, and evaluations as with their immediate actions.

If practice is not exhausted by urgent, irreversible action, then Oakeshott's third differentia fails, for there is nothing to prevent practical men being critical of their presuppositions. Even if philosophy is defined as an enquiry into the presuppositions of what we say and the ways we think, that cannot be a distinguishing characteristic which separates it from, say, morality unless there are some presuppositions which cannot be questioned in morality.<sup>43</sup> Of course, in order to question some presuppositions practical men must rest on others, but this is true of all modes of argument and cannot distinguish practical from philosophical reasoning. To say that there are no presuppositions that philosophy cannot question is not to say that a particular act of questioning does not depend on presuppositions. Once more there is an asymmetry in Oakeshott's comparison of philosophy, understood as a general category of enquiry which can question everything at some time in its quest, with practice, understood as particular practical arguments which do not in themselves question everything. For the contrast disappears if we remove the asymmetry and conceive of practice, too, not as diverse specific arguments but as an all-embracing genus comprising all such possible arguments, for then, like philosophy, it can also question anything. To say that particular practical arguments cannot question everything at once is not to say that there are some things that practice cannot question.

The fourth aspect of Oakeshott's case seems no more satisfactory. The idea that only in pure thought do we aspire to consistency because in practical life standards change and we must respond to different circumstances suffers because it is an all-or-nothing argument. Believing that philosophy alone aims at absolute and complete consistency in systematic thought, Oakeshott puts practice in an extreme and false antithesis by supposing that it is uninterested in consistency. To undermine such an extreme thesis and show that philosophy and practice have some standards in common we need not establish that

<sup>43</sup> We shall return to this question in Section IV of the paper.

practical men are always consistent, nor that there are not considerations which may constitute good reasons for acting inconsistently; we need only show that consistency is one criterion in terms of which our actions can be assessed. It need not always be compelling in the face of good reasons to the contrary, but must only be one desideratum on the basis of which we may be criticized. Conversely, the mere fact that some men are inconsistent cannot establish Oakeshott's thesis, for he wants to say that in practical affairs the search for consistency is inappropriate. Yet this extreme thesis seems plainly false. Perhaps the most plausible kind of case that might be invoked to demonstrate that practical life is uninterested in consistency concerns the difficulty we would have defining, say, offensive weapons. Any general specification would be absurd or inadequate if it ruled that, for example, umbrellas were always or never offensive weapons regardless of the circumstances in which they were carried. So it might seem that in practice we have to be inconsistent with respect to umbrellas, treating them differently in different times and places. Yet the example fails to make Oakeshott's case, for the point is not that we treat the same action differently in sometimes forbidding and other times allowing umbrellas to be carried, but that we are aware that carrying an umbrella can constitute different kinds of action. We are not being inconsistent but responding appropriately to genuine differences in the actions. In the same way, when we favour the equal treatment of women in most occupational recruitment but do not argue that they should serve as front-line troops, it is not necessarily the case that we are being straightforwardly inconsistent, for we may feel we are responding again to genuine and important differences in cases. In fact, the importance of consistency is evident in many of our practices. The minimal formal requirement of justice is that we treat like cases alike, and in judicial reasoning and practical life generally there is always a strong *prima facie* case for deciding and acting consistently. When we do depart from precedent we expect the change to be non-arbitrary, to be founded on good reasons. Even where our reasons are not based upon the differences between cases, but, say, on changing moral standards, consistency need not count for nothing. There could be no practical life which did not regard consistency as *a* good even if not *the* good. Moreover, the fact that we change our ideas for good reasons cannot separate philosophy and practice, for, obviously, we change our philosophical theories, too.

#### IV

So none of the four characteristics that Oakeshott attributes to practice can separate practice and philosophy. In particular, his characterization of practice gives no grounds for believing that philosophical argument is an irrelevant interference in practical life and can do nothing to undermine our principles. However, we have not yet considered his whole case, for the separation of philosophy and practice depends also on his view of philosophy as conceptual reflection about presuppositions within the context of his theory that forms of understanding are distinct only when separate. The view of philosophy as pure critical thought without assumptions leads him to hold that it must be free from the presuppositions of any mode of experience; combining this with the general assumption that no thought can be of practical relevance unless it

adopts the central concepts of practice, he concludes that philosophy and politics are worlds apart. His view is that it is contrary to the character of philosophy to make practical recommendations because any such engagement requires philosophy to abandon its own character and share uncritically the assumptions of practical men. Such a view of conceptual reflection follows from the idea that modes of experience are discrete worlds of experience defined by their own concepts and categories.

For Oakeshott, practice assumes or takes for granted certain ideas, like change, individuals and obligation, which are necessary conditions present in all practical thinking and acting. As the ideas around which practice is organized, they constitute its identity and distinguish it from other modes of thinking. Without them there could be no world of practice, for to think practically is necessarily to think in terms of these presuppositions, and hence to see and understand everything from a point of view constituted by such concepts. To appreciate that the world has any other character, for example, that it can be seen without the notion of change or explained in terms of quantitative regularities, we have to see the world through a different system of concepts, such as science, or history, or art. These systems present the world in different ways because each is organized around its own concepts and presuppositions, so just as practice sees everything in terms of acting in the midst of change, science, for example, is the 'elucidation of the world *sub specie quantitatis*'.<sup>44</sup> Because all the modes take for granted certain fixed presuppositions which they cannot question without losing their modal character, they give only partial and abstract views of the world for none can appreciate everything the world has to offer but only what each can make intelligible through its organizing concepts. Nor can the modes even appreciate their own partiality, for by definition they can only think in terms of their own concepts and so can recognize no alternative to themselves; only what can be thought within the terms of a mode exists for it. Even if any mode could recognize its inherent partiality it could not overcome it, for it could have no independent grounds to criticize the concepts that constitute it: for example, practical thinking could not question the idea of agency because practical thinking is only possible when the notion of agency is presupposed and not questioned. Moreover, the modes cannot mutually free each other from their respective presuppositions, say, by science questioning the presuppositions of practice and practice examining the assumptions of science, for, Oakeshott argues, notions such as agency cannot be translated into the quantitative world of correlation that is science. In that world agency has no reality, it is unthinkable, and so *a fortiori* cannot be questioned; similarly, the notions of science have no reality within the mode of practice. For Oakeshott, the fact that two ways of looking at the world are 'distinguished by different explicit principles of homogeneity indicates that they are arrests in experience at different points and that they are consequently exclusive of one another.'<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *EM*, p. 227.

<sup>45</sup> *EM*, p. 327. It is as if such ways of looking at the world occupy different points on a scale and are as exclusive of each other as the numbers three and four. They are placed on this scale by philosophy in accordance with their degree of coherence and comprehensiveness, though it is not necessary for philosophy to determine the exact degree (p. 84). In *HC*, the modes or platforms of

According to Oakeshott, only philosophy can appreciate the abstractness, partiality and essentially uncritical character of the modes of experience, for philosophy is an examination of their presuppositions but is not itself organized under any system of concepts. No particular concepts are essential to define its identity and there are none which it is necessary to adopt in order to do philosophy. Its freedom from presupposition enables it to appreciate both the diversity and the dependent character of the various forms of experience. Indeed, philosophy is the recognition of the abstract character of the modes, it is the desire to escape from such partialities and half-truths and appreciate their character when seen from the concrete whole of experience. Therefore, philosophy questions and criticizes what the modes merely assume without question, for its concreteness lies in its critical independence from all presuppositions. It is because philosophy must be true to its character of endless criticism by remaining free to question everything that its contact with any of the modes is sharply limited. For this reason, philosophy cannot allow its scope of enquiry and standards to be dictated by considerations of practice. It follows from the 'necessity of keeping philosophy unencumbered with the mood and postulates of practical experience' that 'it is meaningless alike either to accept or reject a philosophical proposition for a practical reason.'<sup>46</sup> Philosophy can neither recognize nor compromise with any authority other than itself, for 'who serves two masters serves none.'<sup>47</sup> Conversely, and most importantly for Oakeshott, the critical power of philosophy gives it no authority to rule over practical experience or displace it; indeed, 'so long as [practice] remains faithful to its own explicit character even [philosophy] cannot compete with it upon its own ground'.<sup>48</sup> By questioning the presuppositions unquestioned in practical life, philosophy frees itself from their partiality and supersedes them, but it can offer practice no guidance because, being free of presuppositions, it has no message that can be expressed in terms of abstractions such as 'what ought to be'.<sup>49</sup> Philosophy's only purpose is to supersede all abstractions in order to achieve 'a completely coherent world of

---

conditional understanding, are still arrests of thought (e.g., p. 8) which are exclusive of each other (e.g., p. 56) and form a scale in which each is more critical, more capable of 'a recognition of the unconditional adventure of theorizing' (p. 11), than the mode below it.

<sup>46</sup> *EM*, p. 320.

<sup>47</sup> *EM*, p. 339.

<sup>48</sup> *EM*, p. 332.

<sup>49</sup> 'The world of concrete reality must, indeed, supersede the world of practical experience, but can never take its place' (*EM*, p. 321). Oakeshott's view of supersession is in deliberate contrast to the traditional view in which the superseded form of understanding is substituted by or taken under the control of a superior form, which is itself a synthesis of inferior forms, as in G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and R. G. Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford, 1924). In *HC*, Oakeshott moves further from such idealism by dropping the notions of concrete whole and totality of experience, but still thinks of philosophy as thought aspiring to be free from all presuppositions. He argues that a platform of conditional understanding, e.g., practical life, is constituted by postulates it cannot question because such postulates 'cannot be both used and interrogated at the same time' (p. 25). Such a platform of understanding is a 'prison' because its inhabitants are not only ignorant of its conditionality but do not recognize it as such (p. 27). The questioning of postulates, according to Oakeshott, necessarily lifts one on to an intellectually superior platform of understanding and points to yet higher platforms, but is necessarily indifferent to practical engagements. This progress of understanding cannot be turned back to guide practice.

ideas [which] is absolute and unqualified';<sup>50</sup> and hence its only interest in practice is to examine its assumptions, placing them within a coherent and comprehensive map of the modes of experience. This takes the general form of a recognition that practice is only an abstract world, whereas its particular form is an 'attempt to *define* notions of "value", of "good", of "right" and of "ought"'.<sup>51</sup> 'Philosophy is not the construction of a world of values'<sup>52</sup> or 'a criterion of right action'<sup>53</sup> but the discovery of the 'ultimate character of moral and practical concepts',<sup>54</sup> because the attempt to view practical experience from the standpoint of the totality of experience excludes viewing it in terms of what ought to be.

Now, it is true that philosophy and practice are certainly distinct in that they cannot be substituted for or reduced to each other, but Oakeshott is wrong to suppose that an appeal to the critical nature of philosophy and to the distinctive identities of philosophy and practice is sufficient to prove that the two are mutually exclusive. At its simplest, Oakeshott's principle of mutual exclusion seems to be that philosophy can only supersede the partiality of a mode of experience by refusing to share any of its presuppositions. Therefore, as concern with what ought to be is a presupposition of practice, a critical philosophy of practice can have no concern with what ought to be but must either set such concern aside or deny it.<sup>55</sup> Now, even if Oakeshott's conclusion was true this argument does not establish it. For that something is an essential feature of practice cannot be a sufficient reason to deny that the same characteristic is essential to, or is logically related to philosophy. Formal validity and consistency, for example, are essential features of practical reasoning as they are of any thinking, for valid inferences and consistency of judgements in like cases are desiderata within any form of thinking. It does not follow, however, that philosophy must free itself of these requirements. That philosophy cannot be dictated to by practice without losing its character does not imply there are no common features which may be essential to or shared by both. If formal validity and consistency can be essential features of more than one form of thinking then any argument which separates philosophy from practice on the ground that what is essential to one is necessarily irrelevant to the other is invalid. The possibility that philosophy is recommendatory cannot be excluded simply because recommendation is essential to practice. More generally, if essential features of forms of understanding are not mutually exclusive in every case, it is possible that the distinctiveness of forms of understanding does not require of them a separateness which denies the possibility of any common ground or shared relevance.

Let us stay, however, with the specific separation of philosophy and practice while recognizing that the difficulties in this separation will not be peculiar to it but will in part be difficulties inherent in the idea of totally separate modes of experience. The crux of Oakeshott's difficulty in the former lies in this: if to

<sup>50</sup> *EM*, p. 82.

<sup>51</sup> *EM*, p. 337.

<sup>52</sup> *EM*, p. 337.

<sup>53</sup> *EM*, p. 337.

<sup>54</sup> *EM*, p. 340.

<sup>55</sup> Suspension of interest and denial are not, of course, identical attitudes, but Oakeshott uses the expressions interchangeably (e.g., *EM*, p. 355).

think practically is to think within a particular set of concepts, then to recognize this is at once to transcend or supersede them and cease to think practically. However, to transcend concepts such as agency by recognizing their partiality can mean two things: either a refusal to share the illusion that such concepts are the only ones possible, or a refusal to think in terms of them at all, to reject them entirely. Nevertheless, Oakeshott's whole view depends on the assumption that only the latter alternative is possible. He assumes that thought cannot be practical once it is recognized that practice is not the only way of thinking. But why cannot philosophy continue to think in ways of practical significance while recognizing that practice is not the only possible mode? Why must a recognition of the partiality of practice destroy altogether our practical standpoint? In one sense, Oakeshott's answer is that it does not destroy practice because the recognition of partiality is a fleeting mood that cannot be sustained because of the nature of the human condition;<sup>56</sup> but beyond this, he insists that we cannot act or think practically whilst we are victims to the desire for free and critical thought. Yet it is unnecessarily restrictive to suppose that practice returns only when philosophy withdraws because they cannot coexist. To recognize that practice does not exhaust the whole of reality entails only that philosophy, in seeking a wider system of concepts, will be no more concerned with practice than with any other mode. But to say that it will be no more concerned does not mean it will be unconcerned. Philosophy must renounce, not the demands of practice, but the exclusivity of those demands, not the world of practice as such but the world seen only in terms of practice.

Moreover, if this is what recognition of partiality means, then practice as well as philosophy must acknowledge that there are other forms of thinking. Just as the recognition of partiality does not exclude the philosopher from practice, so practical men can remain practical while accepting that practice is only one mode among others. Once we deny Oakeshott's view that one can use a presupposition only within a system of concepts that claims to be exhaustive, there is nothing inherent in the character of practice which necessarily denies that there are other modes of experience. Indeed, contrary to Oakeshott, the presupposition of practice is not that there is no alternative way of conceiving the world, but that practice is one of the ways whether or not there are others. Because practice is constituted by notions such as agency, it is not committed to the view that, for example, scientific explanations without the notion of agency are impossible. No mode of experience must believe that it is the only one possible, so each can recognize its own partiality without threatening its own existence.

Not only must practice accept its philosophical status as partial, but, even more significantly, it cannot ignore philosophical arguments on specific issues either. In examining our concepts philosophically we may conclude that the concepts of agency and responsibility cannot be applied to the behaviour of the insane or the drugged, and so have to revise our moral and legal practice accordingly. Oakeshott cannot allow that the recognition that our practical concepts are partial or not as coherent as we thought can have practical

<sup>56</sup> *EM*, pp. 2-3.

implications because of his belief that practice is constituted by presuppositions which it cannot question. For him, therefore, no change of attitude to the presuppositions is possible within practice. However, such a view would only be plausible if the presuppositions of practice were self-evident and axiomatic, were always and everywhere the same. But that is not the case. No central concepts and categories of practical life have a fixed and given identity which cannot be questioned and changed. Notions like self, agency, responsibility are an important matter of debate *within* practical life and have no single correct version which all men must accept *qua* practical men. For example, one can agree that the idea of self is a presupposition of practice without believing that it cannot be questioned, for there are competing notions of the self which have different implications for how we should live. The concept is central to practical life not because it cannot be questioned, but because so many other concepts and issues like responsibility, individuality, rights, and collective identity, are so systematically involved with it that the disagreement about these notions necessarily implies different conceptions of the self. Our beliefs about the freedoms men can or should enjoy depend upon what we take man to be. A belief in negative liberty, for example, involves a certain view of the self, of what are its essential features from which flow the rights and obligations it is conceivable and just to demand. Any attempt to show that the demands of negative liberty are unjust or confused will necessarily involve reflection on the nature of the self and its relation to the society of which it is a part; indeed, the more fundamental the objection to negative liberty the greater the necessity of reconsidering our presuppositions critically. It is because practical beliefs have different presuppositions that there is no single set of presuppositions that all practical men *qua* practical have to accept. And if practical beliefs involve different presuppositions, such as different conceptions of the self, then they can be criticized or improved by philosophy. Philosophical arguments which establish that certain conceptions of the self are incoherent will necessarily have implications for practical men.

Besides the argument from the critical nature of philosophy and the partiality of the modes, Oakeshott has another argument based on his view of presuppositions for separating practice and philosophy. On the strength of his view that all practical men share a single set of presuppositions which it is the concern of philosophy to investigate, he supposes that philosophy only inquires into the necessary and universal features of human experience as such and its specific modes. Morality and politics, on the other hand, always have contingent features because they are shaped by the circumstances which they have to tackle and are determined by particular historical contexts produced by specific traditions. Because traditions and circumstances vary, different moralities and political views emerge. For example, Oakeshott would say that philosophy cannot recommend any substantive view of justice because philosophy only clarifies what is common to all such views, namely the idea of proportional equality. To know that 'like cases should be treated alike and different cases in proportion to their differences' commits us to no particular criterion of comparative worth. While it is evident that the formal definition of justice endorses no single criterion of comparison, Oakeshott does not restrict his case to this truth: for he says that our enquiry into the universal necessary condition of the concept justice excludes any involvement with particular



principles of justice.<sup>57</sup> However, this argument overstates philosophy's concern with universal features; much moral and political philosophy relates to what is particular and contingent as it studies concepts like need, effort, ability, and guilt, which form the identities of specific traditions of justice. Such terms are logically related to the cases that instantiate or give content to them. Although many of the particular cases of a concept of justice may be hypothetical, some may be actual. Thus there is an important sense in which philosophy establishes the facts in relation to specific traditions. Discussion of whether a particular programme or set of arrangements is just may well be philosophical, and the discussion may establish not just the meaning of a concept but the facts before us. Even when philosophy considers categorial terms understood as necessary conditions of a mode of discourse, like that of agent or individual within the realm of practice, it does not follow that nothing may be inferred about specific situations. Clarification of such concepts can establish that, say, racial discrimination is unjust because it is unrelated to differences in cases. It gives point to the demand that discrimination must be justified.

# V

What is at issue, then, is not whether universal conditions can be separated from their instantiations in practical life but whether they can be separated from recommendations concerning those instantiations. Everything, then, must hang on the distinction between fact and value, or, rather, its parallel, philosophy and value. Such distinctions imply that questions about the consistency or meaning of beliefs are logically unconnected with problems of justification and recommendation. However, this account neglects that logic is a form of recommendation in its own right: if you think this, you cannot think that, or must think that, or may think that. In this way, logic may recommend or disparage different concepts of justice; to force us to choose between incompatibles it requires only that we have some beliefs or reasons for our actions on which it can bear. It is important to note that logic connects not just with propositions, but with actions, and its mode of criticism is not to reveal only verbal inconsistency. Logic is not concerned simply with what it is possible to think or say without contradiction, but affects our actions themselves profoundly. Consider an analogy: someone who drives through a traffic barrier when the lights are red cannot, if he knows the meaning of the signs, be said to do the same action as another who crosses when the lights are green. He cannot just say, 'I proceeded as normal with right of way', but must at least amend the description of his action to 'I took a chance' or some such. Although he can do the 'same thing' in a (misleading) sense, he must understand that he is doing something different. In the same way, someone who learns that his political beliefs are groundless cannot describe or understand them as before. Oakeshott thinks that to establish the necessary

<sup>57</sup> In philosophy, he says, 'it will be a matter of complete indifference to us what in particular we (in our practical mood) consider to be good and bad, right and wrong', for philosophy must concern itself 'not with a particular world of value-judgements, but ... valuation itself' (*EM*, p. 339). Cf. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 103-4, and Liddington, 'Graham on Politics and Philosophy', p. 156.

conditions of a concept gives no reason for doing anything, say, for acting in accordance with a particular concept of justice. But if we suppose that a man refuses to observe certain principles of justice because, say, 'justice is the interest of the stronger' then to show him that his account is not coherent would be to demolish his reason for dissent. Here it may be objected that philosophy might refute such a man's arguments but still not prevent him from continuing with the same course of action. However, that the man can continue with his dissidence does not mean that philosophical arguments are defective or irrelevant in such a case, for no argument, moral, political, or any other can guarantee that the agent addressed will not have reasons for his actions other than those criticized, or even guarantee that he will act rationally at all.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, if he continues with his dissidence it must be for other reasons and hence his dissidence must (logically must) be of a different character. Having understood our arguments, he can no longer just carry on as before. Therefore, we cannot know *a priori* that philosophy can never make us revise our beliefs and act differently, for everything depends upon our reasons for holding the beliefs we do. The extent of the role that philosophy can play depends on the kinds and sophistication of the reasons that agents have for their actions.

But the coherence that philosophy brings to political ideas is not limited to detecting logical inconsistencies, for such detection marks the most minimal involvement of philosophy with politics—as can be seen if we briefly consider what it would be to explain, say, negative liberty. We should obviously refer to self-regarding and other-regarding actions because this distinction makes the concept intelligible and constitutes a criterion of what it is appropriate to pursue and what are good reasons for interfering with liberty. Beyond these terms, our account would examine rights and obligations, the notion of self-development, the nature of social life, and the identity of the self. All these philosophical questions would be involved in an explanation of negative liberty. Now, what would a justification of negative liberty be like? Surely there could be neither justification nor criticism which did not involve these kinds of questions; rather than philosophy being unable to recommend notions like negative liberty, nothing without philosophy could count as the justification of such complex notions. The point is that justification and explanation, evaluation and philosophy, are not separate. Of course, if we are concerned merely with the practicality of a legislative proposal philosophical reflection may be ignored, but it is always relevant if we are concerned with values like negative liberty.

However, even if there is nothing about the practical world and the critical nature of philosophy which prevents the latter criticizing and influencing men's political beliefs, and even if philosophy is necessarily involved in evaluating complex political concepts, it may still seem that justification is not an essential feature of philosophy. Even if philosophy can recommend, is a concern with 'what ought to be' a necessary part of philosophy? Such a question gains force from two separate possible lines of reasoning. The first supposes that

<sup>58</sup> Even an appeal to self-interest in the practical maxim that smoking damages one's health is not sure to be taken seriously. However, an agent's refusal to accept or act on certain conclusions does not show that they are not recommended by an argument.

philosophical arguments can recommend only when mediated by non-philosophical values or commitments. The idea is that only if we make a commitment to the importance in our lives of philosophical coherence, or adopt some moral practice, can philosophy recommend by revealing our inconsistencies or relating to values to which we subscribe on independent grounds. So philosophy's practical character appears inessential and merely contingent upon commitments philosophy cannot supply but which practical men may happen to make. However, initially plausible though this reasoning seems, it is spurious. The suggestion that practical men must have made a prior commitment to the importance of philosophy for philosophy to recommend involves an infinite regress. For if the compellingness of a philosophical argument lies in a prior commitment, wherein lies the compellingness of that commitment? If we need a commitment to philosophy to take its arguments seriously, what is it about this commitment to philosophy that it requires no commitment itself? If philosophical argument needs a support, what is to support the support? If the compellingness of an argument resides not in the mode of argument itself, then we shall always demand a further premise to bind us to its conclusion—as did the Tortoise from Achilles.<sup>59</sup> The point is that if someone understands a philosophical argument then they cannot forswear its canons of agency: to understand the argument is to see its bindingness. Similarly the view that philosophy recommends only to those already committed to the beliefs under discussion is either false or reduces to vacuity. It is false if interpreted as a requirement that the agents addressed by a philosophical argument must already accept or believe in the concepts of the argument for it to be relevant, for, manifestly, moral argument is possible between those of different persuasions. For such argument to be possible there must be common ground between the participants in that they must have some familiarity with the concepts constituting the discussion; but this requires no special commitment. That there must be common ground between participants is part of the meaning of discussion—it is true of all modes of argument and a defect of none. To put it slightly differently: in order to understand the relevance of philosophical argument to our moral beliefs we need only be able to understand the moral concepts; but far from being a special commitment to make philosophy relevant, this is only the minimal condition of being a moral agent. Philosophy's relevance to practice, then, stands in need of no mediation; wherever men can both understand philosophical argument and act morally, philosophy is relevant.

The second line of reasoning suggesting that recommendation is no part of philosophy makes an unwarranted inference from the insight that since not all philosophical arguments have practical significance such significance is not a necessary condition for an argument being philosophical. Although it is obviously invalid to infer that because some philosophical arguments are not recommendatory none can be so, Oakeshott's essentialist view of philosophy leads him to such a conclusion. Because he expects all philosophical arguments to share a single form, he believes that what is not common to all instances is no part of the essential identity, that is, does not belong to philosophy *qua*

<sup>59</sup> See Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 55–7.

philosophy. And what *is* common to all philosophical arguments, namely criticism, is special to philosophy and can be found nowhere else. Conversely, recommendation is special to practice and no part of any other identity. It is on this essentialism that Oakeshott's belief that philosophy and practice are perverted from their true characters unless separated depends. However, if our previous arguments are sound, such reasoning and conclusions amount only to arbitrary stipulations which by distorting the nature of political philosophy unnecessarily restrict its scope.

The important issue of to what extent philosophers *qua* philosophers should concern themselves with practical political problems remains an open moral question. Oakeshott's arguments would foreclose the matter with a stipulative prohibition which answers a moral question with—ironically—a philosophical argument.