

A REPLY TO LIDDINGTON

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OUR paper argued that Oakeshott separates philosophy and practice because he accepts two distinct but related and complementary theses: first, that the circumstances of practical life exclude the general reflection and questioning characteristic of philosophy; and, second, that philosophy transcends the presuppositions of practical life. Liddington's defence of Oakeshott collapses the first thesis into the second by denying that Oakeshott ever understood practical life in the way we suggest.

Now our interpretation of Oakeshott on the changeable circumstances of practical life may appear inconsistent with his other view that practical reasoning is the 'pursuit of intimations' within an established tradition; for, how, it may be asked, can practical reasoning be circumscribed by the urgencies of the moment and at the same time be involved in the making of a coherent and stable way of life? Yet the idea of 'tradition', we argued, does not provide a sustainable alternative understanding of practice because Oakeshott presents the images of the past (the 'practical pasts') appealed to by practical men as always projections of their present beliefs and preoccupations, as mere persuasive or legitimizing offspring of a retrospective present. So there is nothing to displace the idea of the changing present from its central place in Oakeshott's view of practical life.¹

Liddington's denial that for Oakeshott the changing circumstances of practice exclude philosophy neglects the evidence of *Experience and Its Modes*. Oakeshott writes that, 'Practical life comprises the attempts we make to alter existence or maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change ... In either case it is not merely a programme for action but action itself.'² In our paper, we saw that such a characterization of practice, as a world of 'action and

¹ See OIPP, p. 165. To the objection that in an important sense all fact is present (e.g., that the historian's past is the creation of evidence that exists in the present) Oakeshott replies: 'But practical fact beside being present, consists in what is present as such ... Scientific and historical experience presuppose a world of fact which does not change or move; practical activity assumes a world of facts which is not merely susceptible of alteration, but which has change and instability as the very principle of existence.' While history assumes a world of unchanging past fact, the practical past is no less changeable than the present for it is but an imaginative shadow of the present (*EM*, pp. 262-3). This view of the inconstancy of past practical facts is related of course to Oakeshott's claim that practical judgement does not exclude inconsistency. It may be that, while it is no part of Oakeshott's intentions to impugn the rationality of practical men, such a view of the practical past would make difficult if not impossible any notion of practical reasoning. We are concerned, however, not with his intentions but with the implications of his argument.

² *EM*, p. 256.

change' which is 'without a critical conception of reality',³ is relevant to the philosophy–practice separation only if it is taken to imply that practical life is 'categorical' or urgent or inconsistent. For a world of action and change excludes philosophy only if it is conceived as *either* a series of 'categorical' (unrepeatable) and/or urgent moments which, once past, are unsusceptible to further (practical) reflection *or* a world in which thought cannot achieve and should not seek complete consistency. Oakeshott, of course, reasons in just this way. In the context of his general case that practical life is a matter of *doing* whereas philosophy is pure *enquiry* for its own sake,⁴ he appeals to the specific features we identified. Saying that philosophy is a mood which cannot be sustained in the face of the urgent necessities of practical life,⁵ he declares that philosophy is 'inimical to life', is 'useless to men of business and troublesome to men of pleasure'.⁶ Although Liddington dismisses the idea of urgency on the grounds that Oakeshott does not think that in practical life we are always ringing the changes, he unwittingly refutes himself: for he quotes Oakeshott as saying that 'No sooner is [coherence] realized at one point in the world of practical existence, than a new discord springs up elsewhere, demanding a new resolution'.⁷

To clarify Oakeshott's conception of the practical world of action and change, we introduced a 'categorical–hypothetical' distinction to express the idea that practical reasoning is limited to a determinate and temporary context implying action (not just a 'programme for action but action itself')⁸ that is strictly unrepeatable, whereas philosophical reflection contributes to an essentially open-ended enquiry. Liddington objects that Oakeshott has called philosophy 'categorical' not 'hypothetical', but his point is only verbal. Our use of 'categorical' as a technical term differs from Oakeshott's, and we do not deny what he affirms. We never denied that philosophers ground presuppositions in a more coherent and comprehensive view of the world, but meant only that their conclusions are subject in their turn to criticism and examination. This sense of 'hypothetical' does not distort Oakeshott's case but expresses his claims that practice is 'without a critical conception of reality' and that ideas change their characters when translated from their proper contexts.

Liddington's objections to our suggestion that for Oakeshott practice excludes philosophy because our practical affairs cannot or should not aim at complete consistency are also misplaced. Certainly, Oakeshott insists that practical life is the pursuit of coherence—but the coherence to be achieved is always but the removal of specific incongruities or anomalies and cannot be general. It is not only that practical coherence is momentary (as Liddington suggests), but that it is never fully realized in our thinking. Of a single question, we may hold several incompatible beliefs, for 'these beliefs, in so far as they are normative, are not self-consistent; they often pull in different directions, they compete with one another and cannot all be satisfied at the

³ *EM*, p. 268.

⁴ *EM*, especially pp. 1–4, 82–5, 320–1, 338–47 and 354–6 (for philosophy); and Ch. V (for practice).

⁵ *EM*, especially pp. 2–3, 257, 290–1, 320 and 350.

⁶ *EM*, p. 355.

⁷ *EM*, p. 291. Cf. pp. 303–4.

⁸ *EM*, p. 256.

same time'.⁹ In this context, our main argument against Oakeshott was that even given that practice cannot achieve final consistency, this fails to exclude particular philosophical arguments having relevance to our practical principles.

We also objected that Oakeshott puts philosophy and practice into a false antithesis because he believes that philosophy is logically capable of a single exhaustive account of reality. We said that philosophers, like practical men, change their minds, and not all of them accept the idea of an exhaustive philosophical truth. On the first point, Liddington responds that the manner of change is different in philosophy and practice; in one there is discovery and in the other a change in circumstances [*sic*]. Such a reply, though, begs the very question at issue, in just assuming that philosophical criticism of our practical beliefs and principles cannot lead us to understand and then appraise them differently. On the second point, Liddington never argues for his belief that philosophy can achieve a single exhaustive truth, but just says its denial involves relativism. This is false: to say that more than one account of *x* is cogent is not to say that no accounts are more cogent than others.

On what he calls the fourth immunizing property, value, Liddington has little to say besides reminding one that Oakeshott rejects the usual fact-value dichotomy. Our own paper acknowledged the point by describing how Oakeshott bridges the dichotomy by his notion of the pursuit of intimations within a tradition of behaviour. But Liddington misses the point that the connection of fact and value obtains only within the sphere of practice. Our point was that the separation of philosophy from practice remains a version of the fact-value dichotomy in so far as the defining feature of practice is value; having considered and rejected other *differentia* of philosophy-practice, we concluded that the only remaining candidate was the value element of practice. Liddington protests that there is no basis for such a distinction in *EM*, but Oakeshott explicitly argues that moral and political philosophy as traditionally conceived is an impossible combination of evaluative recommendation and conceptual analysis.¹⁰

In connection with our final *differentia*, namely, the different attitudes of philosophy and practice to the presuppositions of practice, Liddington has three main charges. They concern the exclusivity of presuppositions; the partiality of modes of experience; and the idea of questioning presuppositions. Let us take them in that order. First, he thinks we misunderstand Oakeshott in attributing to him the view that presuppositions essential to practice can have no place in philosophy and vice versa on the grounds of the exclusivity of essential presuppositions. He thinks in Oakeshott's view 'philosophy unavoidably rejects practice as a whole ... however [it] does not reject all the presuppositions of practice ... (e.g., the presupposition which involves the idea

⁹ 'Rationalism in Politics: A Reply to Professor Raphael', *Political Studies*, 13 (1965), p. 90. Cf. *EM*, p. 270. Note, too, that despite Liddington's doubts, Oakeshott thinks the pursuit of complete consistency in practical affairs invites moral disaster (*Rationalism*, pp. 74, 79, 89, 93-4 and 106-7).

¹⁰ *EM*, pp. 334-46, especially pp. 338-9. The only critical as opposed to interpretative point Liddington makes here—in connection with our suggestion that philosophy is a form of recommendation in virtue of its logical character—is simply a bare argument from Oakeshott's authority.

'coherence').¹¹ However, though Oakeshott holds that worlds of ideas *as worlds* are 'exclusive of one another', he also explicitly holds that 'an idea cannot serve two worlds', that 'what belongs to one such world would necessarily disrupt the homogeneity of every other'.¹² And he holds this despite his belief that all modes of experience do share something in common with each other and with philosophy, namely, the pursuit of coherence. For coherence, is not so much a presupposition as the relation of systematicity between any set of judgements, concepts, and categories. Different sets of judgements possess different kinds of coherence and thus exclude each other; it makes no sense to say as Liddington does that coherence is one of the presuppositions that philosophy shares with practice because, divorced from all distinctively practical concepts such as value, the coherence of practice is not a portable presupposition but a bare abstraction devoid of all (practical) character.¹³ Coherence, for Oakeshott, is a universal feature of all thinking, but it is not on the level of shared presuppositions which would destroy the exclusivity of different ways of thinking.

Liddington's next objection is that 'the reason why Oakeshott thinks philosophy rejects practice is not that practice is only one among a number of possible ways of thinking [as we had supposed], but that it is an abstract way of thinking'.¹⁴ Such a disjunction, however, must be wrong for incompleteness, partiality, and thinking of the world within a particular set of categories instead of another specifiable set of categories are repeatedly used by Oakeshott as descriptions of the defect of a world of ideas and, indeed, are often used as synonyms for abstractness. For him a mode of experience is 'experience shackled by partiality and presupposition',¹⁵ its partiality makes it possible for it to be cohesive enough to be a world with a distinctive identity and yet also leads to its defect of aspiring to be the world as a whole even while remaining partial and exclusive. Philosophy must reject a world such as practice because its character as a world is not that of *the* world. Our point was that philosophy can reveal the 'incompleteness' of practical life, destroy its world as a closed system of thought claiming to be the whole of experience, and yet still connect with specific practical arguments.

Liddington does not unfortunately state what he takes Oakeshott to understand by 'an abstract way of thinking', but his objection has led us to realize that Oakeshott has a further specification of the defectiveness of the modes: besides being partial or not comprehensive, they are also in a sense 'self-contradictory' or dualistic. Philosophy, he insists, is necessarily monistic while the central categories of a mode involve a dualism. History incoherently tries to think in terms of the past while it must necessarily reflect on what is in the present, namely the evidence; similarly, practice needs both the category of 'is' and 'ought' and though it consists in constantly attempting to remove the discrepancy between a specific 'is' and a specific 'ought' it cannot fully synthesize these two opposed categories into a single coherent idea or world.¹⁶

¹¹ Liddington, p. 180.

¹² *EM*, p. 327. We quoted from this paragraph on p. 168 of OIPP.

¹³ *EM*, p. 325.

¹⁴ Liddington, p. 181.

¹⁵ *EM*, p. 74.

¹⁶ *EM*, pp. 303-5.

The idea of a world presupposes total conceptual integration and only when there are no categorial obstacles to such absolute unity can we be said to have transcended the level of abstractions and achieved concrete experience.

We also argued that practical men can reflect upon the central concepts and presuppositions of practice, such as agency, self, freedom, and value, because such notions have no single determinate content and are not isolable from the less general and more value-specific notions of particular moral and political doctrines. The self may be a universal postulate without which practical life would be impossible, but we denied that there is a single morally neutral presupposition of self which belongs to practical life *qua* practical; rather, different moral and political viewpoints presuppose rival notions of the self. Mill's view of liberty, for example, presupposes an understanding of the self which both philosophers and practical men may question. Liddington objects that this denies Oakeshott's view of presuppositions, for he thinks that Oakeshott correctly identifies some of those postulates which comprehend all varieties of practical lives and viewpoints such that they exclude no specific commitments and are, therefore, morally neutral. Liddington refers to two of Oakeshott's postulates as having this character, namely 'value' and the attempt 'to alter existence or to maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change'. However, as they stand, such terms are without content because they identify no particular idea or theory of, say, 'value'. Were such a theory developed, it could not regard all moralities as having equally adequate understandings of value. Consider two further examples of Oakeshott's presuppositions. In *EM* he finishes his analysis of the presupposition of practical truth by saying that, 'we are forced by the nature of practical experience to religion, and there is no point at which an arrest in the process can be justified'—that is, a practical man finds his fullest achievement in religion.¹⁷ Is this a presupposition which all practical men must accept? Similarly, in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott defines the freedom which is a necessary postulate of human conduct as the ability to choose between substantive alternatives while subscribing to certain formal conditions (e.g. deciding where to travel while observing the rules of the highway). It is only on the basis of this presupposition that he can condemn a compulsory association like the state as a moral enormity if substantive purposes and goals are collectively and not individually chosen—if, that is, it becomes an 'enterprise association'. However, there are different views of what freedom consists in. For freedom may also be understood as the absence of obligations or as self-development; such conceptions may constitute our ideas of agency, and, while remaining presuppositions of practical life, they may be ambiguous and controversial enough to evoke general reflection. Further, the anarchist or teleological notions of freedom imply other political arrangements than those envisaged by Oakeshott. For example, a teleological view would justify, indeed require, the pursuit of certain social and economic goals by the state where the creation of those conditions is considered to further the development of a group of individuals by their participation in a certain kind of social life.

¹⁷ *EM*, p. 295. That Oakeshott allows anything, if valued sufficiently, regardless of its content, to count as 'religion' is itself a sceptical view of practical truth with unsettling implications for believers, ordinarily understood.

In short, then, we believe Liddington fails to sustain his criticisms and we see no reason to revise our argument against Oakeshott. More generally, our objection to Liddington is that he appeals too often to Oakeshott as an authority, without refuting our case with argument.