

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

---

1-1992

### Review of Michael Oakeshott, rationalism in politics and other essays, and Paul Franco, The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott

Chandran KUKATHAS

Singapore Management University, kukathas@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research)



Part of the [Political Theory Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

KUKATHAS, Chandran.(1992). Review of Michael Oakeshott, rationalism in politics and other essays, and Paul Franco, The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott. *Political Theory*, , 339-343.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research/3027](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3027)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylds@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylds@smu.edu.sg).

*RATIONALISM IN POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS* by Michael Oakeshott. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 1991. Pp. xxvi, 556. \$24.00 (cloth), \$7.50 (paper).

*THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF MICHAEL OAKESHOTT* by Paul Franco. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991. Pp. 227. \$30.00.

Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) was a political philosopher associated for most of his academic career with Caius and Gonville College as Official Fellow and Lecturer in History and later with the London School of Economics as Professor of Political Science. His name is sometimes mentioned with those of two other famous thinkers associated with the LSE—Karl Popper and F. A. Hayek—and like them he has had a notable influence on contemporary political thought. Yet whereas Hayek and Popper wrote a great deal on a variety of topics and were often at the center of academic controversy, Oakeshott wrote little, was not much given to academic disputation (with the exception of a reply to critics in a 1975 symposium in the pages of this journal) and, for many, remains an enigma.

On what does his growing reputation rest? At least in part, it rests on a volume of essays first published in 1962. *Rationalism in Politics* (now handsomely reprinted by Liberty Press, with the inclusion of six of Oakeshott's less accessible essays) was the second book he published, following *Experience and Its Modes* in 1933. The essays in it touched on a number of separate topics, from the activity of being a historian to the moral life in the writings of Thomas Hobbes to the errors of rationalism. Yet among the various essays certain common themes emerge, and a distinctively "Oakeshottian" disposition is revealed. Most obviously there is the disdain for "rationalism," particularly rationalism in politics.

Rationalism, for Oakeshott, identifies that attitude or cast of mind that elevates the intellect or reason above tradition or practice. In politics, the rationalist seeks perfection, or at least is guided by such a conception, and favors uniformity. At the heart of rationalism is a theory of human knowledge that views all knowledge as technical in character. In politics, the rationalist temper reduces traditions to ideology, habits of behavior to comparatively rigid systems of abstract ideas. And the modern world is indeed infected by rationalism—so much so that even those trying to resist it have been overcome. Thus of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* Oakeshott comments that the significance lies not in the cogency of its doctrine but in the fact that it is a doctrine:

A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics. And only in a society already deeply infected with Rationalism will the conversion of the traditional resources to resistance to tyranny of Rationalism into a self-conscious ideology be considered a strengthening of those resources.

Oakeshott's resistance to rationalist tendencies is offered in his open reflections on rationalism and the ideal of rational conduct. It also comes through very clearly in his interpretation of Hobbes, whom he judges to have seen, more clearly than most, the nature of the individual as, above all, a passionate creature, the resolution of whose predicament is not religious or intellectual but emotional. Such a resolution requires the removal of obstacles to the pursuit of Felicity, and this is to be found in that condition of peace called civil association. It is in his discussion of this point in his justly famous "Introduction" to *Leviathan* that Oakeshott makes plain how much his own political philosophy both contributes to and takes off from this interpretation of Hobbes. Politics, he writes there (in a passage mysteriously omitted in the Liberty Press reprint),

is a second-rate form of human activity, neither an art nor a science, at once corrupting to the soul and fatiguing to the mind, the activity of those who cannot live without the illusion of affairs or those so fearful of being ruled by others that they will pay away their lives to prevent it. And a political philosophy which represented the gift of politics to mankind as the gift of salvation itself would be at once suspect if not already convicted of exaggeration and error.

The great political philosophers, he thinks, recognized that politics is "contributory to the fulfillment of an end which it cannot itself bring about"; and while it is not to be despised, neither is it to be overrated.

For Oakeshott, the political dimension of experience is only one among many. A large part of his concern is to resist those who regard it as preeminent. His broader concern, however, is to say that there are many ways in which human life is conducted and many aspects under which that conduct might be understood and to argue that attempts to account for human experience under a single rubric—such as science or philosophy or practice, for example—are fundamentally in error. This is the theme of one of his most interesting—albeit elusive—essays: "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind."

Anyone wishing to discover what Oakeshott has to offer would do best to begin with *Rationalism in Politics*, and with the Liberty Press volume in particular. The essays have been usefully arranged in thematic order, and the additional essays on "Political Discourse," "The New Bentham," "Logos and

Telos,” “The Masses in Representative Democracy,” and “Talking Politics,” along with his “Introduction to *Leviathan*,” help to extend our understanding of Oakeshott’s thought.

Yet for all the merits of the volume, its study will still leave many unanswered questions, for the essays remain only a part of Oakeshott’s work as a political philosopher. And Oakeshott was very much, and self-consciously, a political *philosopher*. To come to terms with his political philosophy, and particularly with his theory of the state, it is necessary to look at his major work, *On Human Conduct*. For guidance in understanding that political philosophy, in its development and in its culmination in that work, one could not do better than to read Paul Franco’s *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*.

Franco’s book maintains that three aspects of Oakeshott’s work deserve serious consideration. The first is his view of the nature of philosophy and of political philosophy in particular. The second is his critique of rationalism, along with his own account of practical rationality. The third, and according to Franco the most important, is his contribution to liberal theory, for Oakeshott is held to have offered “the most sophisticated and satisfying contemporary statement of liberalism to date,” having done “more than any other thinker to purge liberalism of the economism and materialism which have often appeared to constitute its moral ideal and rendered it vulnerable to attacks from both the Right and Left” (p. 2).

Franco’s method is one of textual exposition, going in roughly chronological order, beginning with *Experience and Its Modes* and concluding with *On Human Conduct*. The most important feature of this exposition, however, is the central importance it attaches to Oakeshott’s analysis of the major forms of experience of knowledge—philosophy, history, science, and practice—in *Experience and Its Modes*. This is to correct the mistaken view of Oakeshott, which sometimes emerges out of an exclusive reading of *Rationalism in Politics*, as a kind of Burkean conservative. Franco tries to show that Oakeshott’s political philosophy has its roots in a view of philosophy that rejects not only positivism and historicism but also “pragmatism” or the view that philosophy must be governed by the demands of practical life. In *Experience and Its Modes*, this philosophy is expounded in a theory of knowledge that rejects the separation in traditional logic of universal and particular, maintaining that universality and particularity are united in the notion of the concrete universal. This philosophical approach has its roots in Hegel, in Oakeshott’s case reached via the thought of F. H. Bradley. Franco’s thesis is that the essays in *Rationalism in Politics* are best read in the light of this “concrete logic” elaborated in *Experience and Its Modes*.

This is important for Franco's later arguments, for it is on the basis of this reading of Oakeshott that he hopes to show the strength of the theory of civil association that forms the heart of his liberalism. Indeed, Franco argues that it helps us to see how the Hobbesian and Hegelian elements in Oakeshott's thought do not reflect any tension between his "libertarian" individualism and his traditionalism. What we find in Oakeshott, particularly in the work in which his political thought is brought to a culmination, is a synthesis of the Hobbesian and Hegelian strands of historical outlook. Understanding this, Franco suggests, would give us not only a better grasp of Oakeshott's thought but also a clearer appreciation of liberalism.

Franco's work gives us the most thorough study we have to date of Oakeshott's thought; it is also an impressive contribution. The subject matter is undeniably difficult, for, however elegant his prose, Oakeshott's philosophical writing is dense and elusive—and at times downright obscure. Franco is tireless in unraveling the complexities and explaining the consistency underlying the philosopher's apparent contradictions. His exposition, if uncritical, makes Oakeshott clearer and more comprehensible.

The slightly unsatisfactory character of Franco's study, however, stems from the fact that the author deliberately eschewed critical analysis for exposition on the grounds that interpretation was a necessary first step that had to precede criticism. In many ways the exposition would have been strengthened by some critical analysis—it is often best to show how something is supposed to work by showing what is wrong with it. It would also have helped to make greater use of comparisons with other thinkers. For example, the discussion of Oakeshott's conception of science would have been improved by a comparison with Popper and especially Hayek. Oakeshott conceives of science as a form of inquiry *sub specie quantitatis*; Hayek, however, insists that measurement and quantification are not essential to scientific investigation and are hindrances to progress in the social sciences. This difference may reflect a deeper distinction between two different *meanings* of science: a distinction that a fuller *comparative* analysis might bring out.

The same point might be made *a fortiori* with respect to Franco's important discussion of Oakeshott's view of the nature of political philosophy. There is an interesting comparison to be drawn here with Rawls's view—expressed largely in his essays of the 1980s—of the task of normative political philosophy as fundamentally a *practical* task. This contrasts sharply with Oakeshott's view that philosophical definition can do nothing to further the aims of practice. Comparison between Rawls and Oakeshott at this point could be very illuminating, as both acknowledge a certain debt to Hegel. Rawls, however, appears to take his Hegel from John Dewey, whereas

Oakeshott views Hegel through the British Idealists, and through Bradley in particular. It is also worth noting that Rawls differs from Oakeshott in insisting on the independence of political philosophy from philosophy.

A fuller comparison with Rawls would also have been welcome because of Franco's professed concern to shed some light on the so-called liberal-communitarian debate, and on the debate about liberalism more generally. The six pages on this subject form the least satisfactory part of the book, largely because Franco allows himself only the space to make a few suggestive observations and does not pursue the analysis to any great depth. Perhaps it is because it is difficult to go deeper without exposition becoming embroiled in critical analysis. Yet had a scholar of Franco's considerable talents chosen to take this path, we might have enjoyed an even finer study of Oakeshott's thought.

—*Chandran Kukathas*