

## When Philosophies Collide: Dewey and Oakeshott on Politics and Education

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When two philosophers reach irreconcilable conclusions regarding important issues, must one be right and the other wrong? Is there a way to think about their contrasting positions that permits us to learn from both? I believe there is. This essay has the dual aim of articulating that way of thinking and of applying it to two significant twentieth century philosophers who wrote extensively about both education and politics — John Dewey and Michael Oakeshott.

I begin by illustrating their divergent conclusions regarding the arts and sciences, identifying a master contrast, then showing how it plays out in the realms of education and politics. I claim that the contrasting positions are grounded in fundamentally antithetical *orientations* to the social world, orientations that I liken to *cartographers' projections*. I borrow the cartographic analogy in order to show the way each author illuminates a different aspect of the contemporary educational terrain. Finally, I trace the opposing orientations to each author's psychology and conjecture what this means for philosophy.

John Dewey (1859–1952) was America's foremost philosophic spokesman for social democracy in the twentieth century. Skeptical about both democracy and socialism, Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) was the twentieth century's most significant conservative theorist in the United Kingdom. Each philosopher today has a coterie of zealous disciples who believe that their respective masters provided the only philosophic map anyone will ever need.

Although their positions diverge on many issues, Dewey and Oakeshott also share commitments resulting from their initiation into philosophy at a moment when G.W.F. Hegel cast a very large shadow. Trained by disciples of Hegel, each shares Hegel's understanding that social reality remains unintelligible until its historical, evolutionary character is foregrounded. But my focus here is on the divergences between the two, not on their commonalities.

### THE CONTRAST IN THE ARTS AND THE SCIENCES

Both Dewey and Oakeshott contend that ancient objects whose beauty now beguiles us were crafted to serve instrumental purposes, whether practical, political, or religious; only centuries later did they become objects designated for aesthetic contemplation alone.<sup>1</sup> Dewey *deplores* this “compartmentalization” of art, its divorce from the rest of human experience. Speaking of buildings designed solely for viewing art works, that is of museums, he writes:

These things reflect and establish superior cultural status, while their segregation from the common life reflects the fact that they are not part of a native and spontaneous culture. They are a kind of counterpart of a holier-than-thou attitude, exhibited not toward persons as such but toward the interest and occupations that absorb most of the community's time and energy.<sup>2</sup>

Oakeshott, by contrast, considers the setting apart of objects for the sheer delight of contemplating them to have been an *advance* in our civilization, an “emancipation from the authority of practical (particularly religious) imagining.”<sup>3</sup> Twenty-five years after writing *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott adopted a different terminology, preferring the trope of a human conversation among different “voices” focusing once again on those of practice, science, and art. As he notes, the voice of poetry (poetry here standing in for all the fine arts), is apt to be dominated by the other voices, especially that of practice, but it “brings to the conversation a unique utterance, not to be assimilated to any other.... To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment.”<sup>4</sup>

The contrast between the two emerges once again in their very different understandings of the relationships between the sciences and technology. Throughout his long life, Dewey expressed his veneration for the dispositions and institutions ushered in by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. A characteristic statement can be found in one of the last works he wrote, at the age of eighty-nine, a new introduction to *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

Here, then, lies the reconstructive work to be done by philosophy. It must undertake to do for the development of inquiry into human affairs and hence into morals what the philosophers of the last few centuries did for promotion of scientific inquiry in physical and physiological conditions and aspects of human life.<sup>5</sup>

Dewey is unequivocal about the beneficial impact of the scientific revolution, and he understands its basis, “The very things that make the nature of the mechanical-physical scientist esthetically blank and dull are the things which render nature amenable to human control.”<sup>6</sup> For Dewey, one of the prophets of the progressive transformation is Francis Bacon: “Ever-renewed progress is to Bacon the test as well as the aim of genuine logic.... A true logic or technique of inquiry would make advance in the industrial, agricultural and medical arts continuous, cumulative and deliberately systematic.”<sup>7</sup> For Oakeshott, the introduction of the natural sciences into the liberal arts curriculum was hampered by two *impediments*: (1) “the disposition to value themselves in terms of the use which may be made of the conclusions of their inquiries.” And (2) the “absurd claims made by others on their behalf ... that they constitute the model of all valid human understanding — a claim which has disastrous consequences elsewhere.”<sup>8</sup> For Oakeshott, Bacon is also a harbinger, but a harbinger of the *narrowing* rather than broadening of human possibilities. Commenting on Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, he writes that its doctrine may be summarized by “the assertion that technique and some material for it to work upon are all that matters.”<sup>9</sup>

#### THE MASTER CONTRAST IN EDUCATION AND POLITICS

I believe there is a master contrast underlying each of the specific contrasts I have highlighted. It resides in the two philosophers’ diametrically opposed responses to the tendency to compartmentalize diverse modes of human experience and endeavor. Whether the topic is the relationship of the fine to the practical arts, or of the sciences to technology, Dewey wants us to break down the walls that separate the first from the second in each pair; Oakeshott, on the other hand, seeks

to alert us to the perils of conflating what, for him, needs to be kept separate. Dewey never tired of calling attention to the regrettable consequences that result from our supposing that the dualisms built into our language are built into the reality they designate. For his part, Oakeshott contended throughout his lifetime — though using different tropes — that practical, esthetic, or scientific engagements represent diverse “modes” of experience, which are “*wholly irrelevant* to one another.”<sup>10</sup>

How do these antithetical attitudes toward connection and separation play out in the realms of education and politics?<sup>11</sup> Dewey and Oakeshott promote quite different visions of the school and of its relation to the broader society beyond it. Dewey laments the *lack* of connection and believes, “there should be a natural connection of the everyday life of the child with the business environment about him, and it is the affair of the school to clarify and liberalize this connection, to bring it to consciousness.”<sup>12</sup> Oakeshott believes, to the contrary, that school ought to be “‘monastic’ in respect of being *a place apart* where excellences may be heard because the din of worldly laxities and partialities is silenced or abated.”<sup>13</sup> Neither would dispute the need for schools to create what Dewey calls “a purified medium of action;” but whereas Dewey urges schools to discard, “dead wood from the past,” for Oakeshott, it is precisely what may appear to the busy practical man to be mere “dead wood” that needs to be restored.<sup>14</sup> Consistent with their respective visions, Dewey asks the educator to capitalize on the interests children bring to the classroom; this is the stance Oakeshott warns educators to *eschew*. He writes that in school, “the learner is animated, not by the inclinations he brings with him, but by intimations of excellence and aspirations he has never yet dreamed of.”<sup>15</sup>

How does the master contrast play out in the realm of politics? If, for Dewey, compartmentalization of experience rooted in dualistic metaphysics is the root of all evils in the modern world, the way forward lies in overcoming it and democracy is the name of that project carried into the social realm. As he wrote in *Democracy and Education*, democracy designates more than a mode of government: “it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”<sup>16</sup> He succinctly identifies the criteria by which to judge the degree of a society’s attainment of the democratic ideal: “The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the erosion of barriers is at the heart of the democratic project. The connection between Oakeshott’s distrust of democratic rule and his aversion to collapsing or blurring boundaries is not as obvious, but clear nevertheless. In his discussion of teaching and learning, Oakeshott emphasizes that the mastery of any activity can be acquired only through apprenticeship with a master, not via explicit, direct instruction. This is based on a fundamental distinction Oakeshott draws between two kinds of knowledge, technical and practical. In his most famous essay, “Rationalism in Politics,” Oakeshott draws the distinction like this:

Technical knowledge ... is susceptible of formulation in rules, principles, directions, maxims — comprehensively, in propositions.... And it may be observed that this character of being susceptible of precise formulation gives to technical knowledge at least the

appearance of certainty: . . . On the other hand, it is characteristic of practical knowledge that it is not susceptible of formulation of this kind. Its normal expression is in a customary or traditional way of doing things, or, simply, in practice. And this gives it the appearance of imprecision. . . . It is, indeed, a knowledge that is expressed in taste or connoisseurship, lacking rigidity and ready for the impress of the mind of the learner.<sup>18</sup>

Now, continuing the argument, each activity can be performed well only by those with the requisite *practical* knowledge. The connoisseurship of the shoemaker does *not* transfer to that of the poet, or the philosopher. But what is true of shoemaking, poetry, and philosophy, is no less true of *ruling*. This is why Oakeshott claims, “The well-established hereditary ruler, educated in a tradition and heir to a long family experience, seemed to be well enough equipped for the position he occupied; his politics might be improved by a correspondence course in technique, but in general he knew how to behave.”<sup>19</sup> This is in contrast to the

new and politically inexperienced social classes which, during the last four centuries, have risen to the exercise of political initiative and authority. . . . None of these classes had time to acquire a political education before it came to power; each needed a crib, a political doctrine, to take the place of a habit of political behaviour. These are . . . abridgements of a tradition, rationalizations purporting to elicit the “truth” of a tradition and to exhibit it in a set of abstract principles, but from which, nevertheless, the full significance of the tradition *inevitably escapes*.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the prince, growing up in the palace, learned how to rule almost by osmosis, whereas the son of the shoemaker learns only to make shoes, not laws. Moreover, for Oakeshott, the shoemaker is likely to focus his political energies on securing or improving his economic position in society, thereby confusing the goals of politics and economics. Because of his lack of practical knowledge, the shoemaker, according to Oakeshott, take his cues to action from manifestos and slogans, with disastrous results. For Dewey the apprentice shoemaker, insofar as he is absorbing the practices and attitudes of master shoemakers is thereby developing the dispositions needed by problem solvers in any domain, including legislating. Of course, practice in the habits and procedures of democratic governance should begin in school. Oakeshott would, on the other hand, view any delegation of authority to students as pandering to children’s immediate desires.

Dewey would, of course, be the first to admit that the shoemaker-citizen needs substantive knowledge of the issues before her if she is to take a position on them. The point is that the pattern of problem solving as well as the judicious and discerning attitude learned in one setting carry over into others. Oakeshott would deny both that the two activities (shoemaking and governing) share a common pattern of intelligent problem solving, and, even more importantly, that the two activities share the same *telos* or end on which thinking is focused.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATIONS

We are wont to think that a philosophical text, unlike a poem for example, is a rational edifice, which rests, entirely on arguments; and that these, in turn, rest on either factual or normative premises and assumptions that either are or can be made explicit. But it is difficult to assimilate Dewey’s proclivity for undermining compartmentalization and Oakeshott’s penchant for preserving it into this schema. Certainly, neither philosopher offers a formal, general argument regarding the value

or disvalue of keeping human endeavors compartmentalized. Each would rightly reject the notion that some factual or normative proposition regarding the goodness or badness of compartmentalization, tout court, is either a premise or a tacit assumption underlying their respective texts. Neither philosopher has any use for the abstract, analytical style of philosophizing. Their normative stances emerge from distinct historical narratives. In Dewey's narrative, an original unity, torn asunder, must be restored. In Oakeshott's narrative, the progressive differentiation from an original unity constitutes progress. For both of them, problems divorced from their real-life contexts become academic in the pejorative sense of the term.

Let me propose that their respective attitudes are aspects of fundamentally opposed *orientations* to the human world in which the factual and normative are thoroughly intertwined. They are ways of perceiving that world rather than formulable propositions undergirding abstract arguments about it. Let me liken such orientations to the *projections* of the cartographer. A projection is a method of representing the surface of a sphere on a two-dimensional plane. All maps require projections, and any projection that accurately represents some properties on the sphere (for example, area, shape, distance, and so forth) will necessarily distort others. Whether the distortion is acceptable depends entirely on the intended uses of the map. In the same way, I argue, philosophers who theorize about the human world necessarily exhibit an orientation to it — whether chosen consciously or unconsciously — an orientation that in the process of illuminating certain relationships necessarily distorts or obscures others. The philosopher is successful if, given his or her purposes, the properties he or she wishes to highlight are accurately represented.

The idea that a theorist always adopts one among many possible points of view is not new. But I want to emphasize a corollary that obtains when the theorist's object of analysis is human nature or society, namely that the orientation facilitates not simply understanding that object but *acting on* it in some ways rather than in others. And this is so, I maintain, whether social action is part of the theorist's intention or not. Suppose a philosopher wants to simply understand a phenomenon, the source of morality, for example, with no interest in changing anything. If she adopts one orientation, she will highlight what humans share with other primates; if she adopts another she will highlight discontinuities. In either case, her orientation has implications for moral education, whether intended or not.<sup>21</sup>

But why should the philosopher who theorizes about human nature or society have to adopt any particular orientation toward it? Why can't she simply try get at the truth regarding a vexing problem or concept, period? Of course philosophers try to do just that; my claim is that in doing so, they (like the cartographer selecting a projection) necessarily adopt one among many possible orientations. Analytic philosophers focused on one or more concepts frozen in time are especially likely to obscure the way that concepts evolve over time. Philosophers trying to capture the sweep of history are similarly likely to obscure the detailed logical relations among propositions that the analytic philosopher delights in highlighting. Each will bring to the fore different opportunities for social action, invitations to either jettison traditional practices or to restore them.

Turning back now to Dewey and Oakeshott, I think we can see quite clearly the way their antithetical orientations *are*, indeed, intended to provide at the same time an intellectual grasp as well as a template for social action. Both philosophers were living in and responding to periods of social disruption. For Dewey, the huge changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, brought with them the opportunity for his nation to collectively exercise intelligent guidance, enabling people to “move on from the worse and into, not just towards the better,” rather than being simply swept along by events.<sup>22</sup> Oakeshott, skeptical of the apostles of progress, was sensitive to modes of experience that he perceived to be imperiled by the disruptions he witnessed after the Second World War, both in the United Kingdom and in Eastern Europe. He hoped to warn those in authority, urging them to realize that in working to build a social-democratic society in postwar England, they were deserting what was best in their own traditions of governance. To employ the geographical metaphor again, Dewey hoped his map would facilitate the ship’s sailing to a new world; Oakeshott hoped his map would show the ship’s pilot the way home.<sup>23</sup>

#### LEARNING FROM DEWEY AND OAKESHOTT

Orientations do *not* contradict each other; therefore, an open-minded reader may learn from opposing orientations in a way she can’t learn from contradictory propositions. Indeed, I think we who focus on education can learn from both Dewey and Oakeshott today. I do not think that this audience needs to be reminded of the benefits that derive from a proclivity to see social boundaries as barriers to be overcome. Think, for example, of the barriers to women’s full participation in education, the polity and the economy, barriers that have been brought down in our lifetimes. Think of the energy that this breakdown of centuries-old boundaries liberated, the opportunities for individual women and men to rethink how they wanted to live once they were no longer locked into their roles. The benefits of this liberation are evident to all of us who attend meetings or read journals in philosophy of education. And were not the barriers to women’s full participation here and elsewhere maintained in part by a spurious, socially enforced dualism between male and female essences, themselves created by centuries of patriarchal social arrangements, just as Dewey would have recognized? Let this example stand for the myriad movements for equality that tore down walls of exclusion based on ideologies denying the full humanity of some segment of the population.

Yet, I daresay Oakeshott’s penchant for alerting us to the dangers of eroding barriers is not without its relevance for our own time. Let me give two illustrations, each related to education. The first is the spilling over of the commercial or economic point of view into every sphere, which is something all of us have observed and most of us decry. In education, the incursion has three facets. First, there is the growth and acceptance of “accountability systems,” in which quantitative “performance indicators,” primarily test scores, become the universal currency. Second, the expansion of opportunities for parental choice of schools, evident on both sides of the Atlantic and not in itself a bad thing, is inevitably accompanied by the publication of “league tables” or their equivalent, in which schools are ranked according to their “bottom

lines” for the benefit of parents, home buyers, and realtors. Third, the scarcity of public funds invites the entry of profit-seeking businesses willing to provide a variety of “inputs” in exchange for the opportunity of exposing schoolchildren to their products, turning public schools into temples of consumerism.

Not entirely unrelated to the foregoing is a trend first identified for the literate public in 1982 by the late social critic Neil Postman: the gradual blurring of the lines separating children from adults. This is the second illustration of eroding barriers. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Postman pointed to a variety of signs indicating the erosion of that boundary.<sup>24</sup> Let me mention a few: the way adult styles in food, clothing, and media entertainment have been pushed down to ever younger ages; the replacement of spontaneous play by organized sports and intensive training for athletic excellence that begins ever earlier; the sexual awareness deriving from the media and now the Internet leading to ever earlier sexual activity. The rise of the “adultified” child, Postman claimed, was paralleled by the rise of the “childified” adult.

I have little doubt that Dewey would have railed against all of these recent developments, but must it not be admitted with respect to the first set of trends, that a more “monastic” ideal of schooling would be less vulnerable to these intrusions from the sphere of commerce? And would it not also have to be admitted with respect to the second set, that we are paying a cost for our too ready transfer of the rhetoric of liberty and rights from its legitimate role in the political sphere to its much more ambiguous role in the domestic sphere.

Is not this very blurring of the boundary between the “everyday life of the child” and the “business environment about him” one of the major sources of disaffection from the public schools? Is it not one of the reasons that it is so difficult to erect any barriers between suggestible children and the corporate interests looking for untapped markets? It is no accident, perhaps, that the parents and the schools that are most successful in standing up to this swarm of pernicious tendencies are those run by religious institutions that try to build “walls of separation” (Thomas Jefferson’s phrase) between their membership and mainstream culture.

Not all may agree, but I hope I’ve made good on my claim that Oakeshott’s orientation, his angle of vision, permits us to see phenomena obscured by Dewey’s. The two theories or “maps” these social philosophers provide offer clear but competing understandings and templates for action. Which orientation is more veridical? On my view, this question, itself, is inadmissible, for just as there is no map without a projection and no projection without a distortion, so there is no place from which to survey the history of the twentieth century and read its meaning without an orientation. Dewey’s map will open the eyes of those needing to be sensitized to the evils of compartmentalization; Oakeshott’s map will alert readers to the perils resulting from heedless attempts to erode or eliminate all barriers. We can identify highly intelligent, knowledgeable, passionate men and women of good will who identify themselves completely with the orientation of one or the other philosopher. Each of us must be our own judge as to which philosopher’s orientation best permits us to identify the itinerary we, ourselves, wish to travel from our current

location. Both Dewey and Oakeshott would agree that to expect more from philosophy is naïve if not dangerous.

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Where do these contrasting orientations come from and what does this tell us about philosophy. They appear to have their source in deep needs in their respective authors' personalities. Dewey said as much in recounting the chief influences on his thought: "There were also 'subjective' reasons for the appeal that Hegel's thought made to me; it supplied a demand for unification that was doubtless an intense emotional craving, and yet was a hunger that only an intellectualized subject-matter could satisfy."<sup>25</sup>

Oakeshott has not, to my knowledge, written anything this revealing, but his biographer Robert Grant has. According to Grant,

Oakeshott was a private person not merely by disposition, but partly because his romantic bohemianism obliged him to keep his life in separate compartments.... At least three people who knew him better than I have said to me, in those exact words. "He kept his life in separate compartments."<sup>26</sup>

We rightly shrink from allowing our knowledge of or speculation about the author's motivation to play any role in the evaluation of his or her philosophical text, but the fact that highly cerebral discourse can have its source in emotional needs or proclivities may tell us something important about philosophy, especially when directed to the human world. A philosophical text is an argument, to be sure, one amenable to rational evaluation. But when we read the text, we hear the author's voice and we may ask: what about that "voice" has the capacity to electrify us or to leave us cold? My conjecture is that this often has little to do with the cognitive properties of the argument. Rather, it may depend on whether or not the author's orientation matches our own. That, in turn, may depend on whether the emotional needs or impulses that give rise to the author's orientation are needs or impulses that we, ourselves, identify with.

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1. See Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 530–32; and John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 6–10.

2. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 9.

3. Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry," 530.

4. *Ibid.*, 539–40.

5. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), xxiii.

6. *Ibid.*, 71.

7. *Ibid.*, 34–35.

8. Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 33.

9. Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 20–21.

10. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 327.



11. Even in education the two philosophers share commitments, for example, regarding education as good in itself.
12. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), 90–91.
13. Michael Oakeshott, “Education: The Engagement and its Frustration,” in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller, 69 (emphasis added).
14. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916) (New York: Macmillan 1930), 24.
15. Oakeshott, “Education,” 69.
16. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 101.
17. *Ibid.*, 115.
18. Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 14–15.
19. *Ibid.*, 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 30 (emphasis added).
21. See, for example, the essays by Frans de Waal (1-82) and Christine Korsgaard (98-119) in *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, eds. Stephen Macedo and Josiah Ober (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).
22. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Modern Library, 1922), 260.
23. I owe the analogy to my friend Yi-Fu Tuan.
24. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
25. John Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” in *John Dewey: Later Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 153.
26. Robert Grant, “On Writing Michael Oakeshott’s Biography,” (unpublished manuscript, 2003), 1–2, [www.michael-oakeshott-association.org](http://www.michael-oakeshott-association.org).

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