

Two Bases of Oakeshott's Political Philosophy

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Keywords: Political philosophy, Practice, Behavior.

Abstract. Oakeshott's viewpoint of the relation of philosophy and practice is the basis of his critique of rationalism in politics. The relative separation between philosophy and practice is Oakeshott's consistent viewpoint. He denotes that modern philosophy is stuck in rationalism. His critique of rationalism in politics is to let philosophy and practice abide by one's own duty. Rationalism, which is now excessively in close relation with politics, must be stripped from it.

Introduction

Technological rationalism plays an important role in promoting the advancement of society as one of the dominant cultural spirit of modern industrial civilization. Oakeshott acknowledges the necessity of technical knowledge, but he argues that it is insufficient. Politics of rationalism converts political activities into generalized abstractions. Oakeshott shows the limits of different modes of experience since all of them are abstractions of the whole of experience. Politics of rationalism creates the illusion of certainty, and then leads people to believe that all problems can be solved. Since it misconceives the relation of philosophy and practice, and so to the relation of philosophy and politics, it has a harmful effect on political society.

Rationalism aims at bringing the behavior into clear frame, which made the tradition of politics cut apart incoherently. It wants to prove its own correctness in theory and practice. Oakeshott's criticism is resulted from his reflection to the modern philosophy. This paper attempts to discover the theoretical foundation of Oakeshott's political philosophy while dealing with two key concepts about it.

Philosophy and Practice as Modes of Experience

Oakeshott insists that philosophy should avoid becoming tool of ideological and political propaganda. Philosophy should adhere to the attitude of "radical subversion". Nevertheless, his attitude of subversion is not shown in a kind of theory which would bring about political revolution, but in his view of "experience as a whole". Oakeshott does not offer this view with the mysterious veil. He just denotes that we would receive more consistent understanding about world in the mode of "whole experience". According to Oakeshott, the dualism about the relation of "experience" and "the object of experience" would have less acceptability than the doctrine such as "there is only an experience world as whole" [1].

There is no other work expressing philosophy of Oakeshott more directly than experience and their mode. This early work is mainly benefited from thoughts of Bradley and Hegel. It learns from Plato, Aristotle and Spinoza too. In fact, Oakeshott played an important role in the research community of British Neo-Hegelian at the beginning of 20th century. In this book, he tries hard to show there is no essential difference between "experience of the world" and "the world itself". Modes of science, history and practice are all different visual angles in understanding experience. Each mode of experience tries hard to proceed from its own assumption

and acquires total understanding of experience. Meanwhile, every kind of mode is abstract understanding of the sole world. Due to the contradictories between various modes, people should not endorse any certain mode and deny another one absolutely.

Certainly, it is impossible for us to survey the theory of modes of experience completely. So this paper must expressly consider the view of “the separation between philosophy and practice “. In experience and mode, Oakeshott denotes that philosophy should not criticize in an external way. Philosophy and practice may be two different fields which discriminated against each other. Then the former should not aim at repelling the latter. Philosophy must not be interfered fundamentally by instruction from practice, and similarly practice needs not subject to the guidance of philosophy principally.

Philosophy should not be any system which consists of extrinsic concepts. Any extrinsic concept cannot define philosophy, and philosophy needs not to introduce any external concepts. Therefore, philosophy would not allow the scope and standard of itself to be provided by practice. People must keep philosophy from disturbance of feel and effect which is brought forth in practice. Except itself, philosophy can acknowledge any other authority.

However, the purpose of rationalism in philosophy is to replace all of other modes of experience and then secure a systematical understanding of the world. But the experience of the world is unique. Practice has its external features while philosophy contends with it through critique. But the strength of critique of philosophy does not give itself right of replacing practice. Philosophy won't be able to provide any specific instruction for practice.

According to Oakeshott, philosophy is relevant to actual life, but the relation of them should not be elevated artificially. In other words, philosophy can't fundamentally control practice. Just as Franco reviews, rationalism in politics results in ruin of practice, but the latter is the inviolable fountain of politics [2].

Practice as “Behavior in Change”

Oakeshott argues that philosophy had no absolute relation with practice, because he believes the concrete situation in actual life can't be considered by philosophy. According to Oakeshott, practice is defined as the behavior in change, unable to obtain absolute consistency [3]. Practice is formed by behavior. It is action itself and total behavioral. People always try to change their life momentarily. Action should be understood as thing in a kind of transition in this world. People always ask “what the world is”, but the world is unstable, transient and variable indeed. This is the key to understand the concept of practice correctly. Oakeshott thinks that we should expect neither eternal truth which contained in a system of concept, nor any consistent theory which keeps up with behavior. Truth always cannot catch up on behavior. Any endeavor of constructing system of philosophy to exercise control over behavior would be futile eventually.

Oakeshott has pointed out the key characteristic of practice which is composed of changing behaviors in the world. Through emphasizing practice as a behavioral field, Oakeshott wants to show that we are always demanded to take action in specific environment. Thought can be assumed, suspected, criticized and regained, but the behavior is transient and final once it has been done. It is irrevocable, unable to be cancelled. This hints that practice always submits to the sense of urgency, because problem must have been solved before it slips away.

Practice includes assumption, and has no doubt about its authenticity. There is

certain tension between “ought to be” and “be in fact”. Philosopher hopes their thought has unified system, but behavior in reality is always linked to change. Attempting to dispel all contradiction and difference of practice, rational philosophy will cause disasters. We have no adequate reason to change the contradiction in present practice. Contradiction and difference can be tolerated. Furthermore, they are necessary for us to behave effectively.

Practice and philosophy are very different in eyes of Oakeshott. Practice is in the change, and is restrained by an urgent matter. It needs not the stabilization as in the system of philosophy, but it must have the ability to make a decision in the changing situation. In other words, it is inappropriate for practice to be command by philosophy. Practice is in the world filled with value. It attempts to define such concepts as “good”, “right” and “ought”. Philosophy should not construct any system of value or principle of correct behaviors, but try to understand them.

Conclusion

The relative separation between philosophy and practice shows that Oakeshott keeps at a distance with a complete system of philosophy, which is feature of rationalism. As known by all, rationalism is the most remarkable fashion of modern philosophy. but what is wrong with rationalism? Oakeshott acknowledges the necessity of systematic knowledge, but he argues that it is insufficient for practice. Thus he primarily contends against rationalism in politics. Oakeshott thinks of politics as practical activities. But rationalism in politics tries to convert political activities into abstractions. It creates the illusion of certainty, and then leads people to believe that all problems can be solved certainly. Since it misconceives the relation of philosophy and practice, and so misconceives the relation of philosophy and politics too, it has harmful effects on political activities. Oakeshott tries to promote the politics of civil association. He seeks to have us cultivate our characters. Individual’s independence would not be product of rational political system, but his own ability to understand the hints in tradition.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by “the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities” (2014B22414), Philosophy and Social Science Foundation of Jiangsu Province (13ZXD016) and Major projects of philosophy and Social Sciences in Jiangsu Province(14ZD002)

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