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## The Understanding of Rationalism in C.S. Lewis and Michael Oakeshott: Tradition, Experience, and the Reading of Old Books

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I—Introduction

This essay aims to examine in what ways C.S. Lewis’s understanding of tradition, and its rival, rationalism (see Callahan and Trepanier, 2018),[[1]](#endnote-1) are similar to that of his near contemporary, the philosopher Michael Oakeshott. At first blush, it is not obvious that Lewis, the scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literature and children’s writer, and Oakeshott, the idealist philosopher and political theorist, had much in common. Lewis became famous for his literary endeavors, most prominently *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his “space trilogy”, and for his philosophical defense of elements of the Christian faith in books like *Mere* *Christianity* and *Miracles*. Oakeshott never wrote fiction, and the main defense he forwarded of Christianity was oblique: he noted that any scientific criticism of religion was an *ignoratio elenchi*, a failure to recognize that the conclusions of science were modally distinct from, and therefore irrelevant to, any religious questions.

Nevertheless, both Lewis and Oakeshott thought that tradition and experience were a better guide to conduct than theoretical considerations, and both of them were highly critical of the abstract conception of human reason that holds that true rationality only arises by beginning with a *tabula rasa*.

Furthermore, at almost the same time that Lewis was penning his fictional takedown of the attempt to “engineer” society in his novel *That Hideous Strength*, Oakeshott was writing his famous rationalism essays. So, we suggest, it may be fruitful to explore the differences and similarities in their understanding of rationalism.

II—Comparing Lewis's and Oakeshott's View of Rationalism

C.S. Lewis wrote in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, that he began as a rationalist and accordingly rejected the values of the past in what he called “chronological snobbery”, the belief that ideas that dominate the present are better because they come later in time.[[2]](#endnote-2) Embedded in Lewis’s young mind was a progressive historical premise: everything that comes later is better. But he had “a dawning realization that the study of the past helps us to appreciate that the ideas and values of our own age are just as provisional and transient as those of bygone ages.”[[3]](#endnote-3) This realization led Lewis to a greater respect for the past and a more skeptical attitude towards present enthusiasms. However, he did not simple-mindedly replace his former progressive premise with a new reactionary premise, which would have been just a reversed form of chronological snobbery. Rather, he realized that the present age is just as prone to mistakes as were past ages. Progressive chronological snobbery arises because the mistakes of the past are obvious to us now, while our own are not as clearly limned. It can be cured by realizing that many of the errors we are embracing at present will not only be obvious to our descendants, but also would have been clear to our ancestors!

Oakeshott, on the other hand, came to his anti-rationalism from his study of idealism, specifically of Hegel, and of British Idealists such as Bradley, Bosanquet, and McTaggart (who were sometimes known as “British Hegelians”). (The idealist strand of thought is not absent in Lewis: he credited his reading of Berkeley as playing a role in his conversion to Christianity.[[4]](#endnote-4) While some of his early writings explicitly defend Christianity,[[5]](#endnote-5) from the time of *Experience and Its Modes* on, he deals with religion in only the most general terms, for example, when he argues that “religion is the consummation of practice.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Before we conclude, we will ask how these differing attitudes towards religion affected these two thinkers' critique of rationalism.

Now, let us look at several ways in which Lewis criticized rationalism, and compare them to Oakeshott's approach to similar themes. The first is Lewis’s differentiating *looking* *at* versus *longing along*. In doing so, Lewis is noting the epistemic value of experience in understanding the world, in a way that, as we will see, resembles Oakeshott’s argument that practice is prior to theory; as he wrote, “It is activity itself which defines the [theoretical] questions as well as the manner in which they are answered.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The second is Lewis’s concern that rationalism, rather than enthroning some sort of “pure reason”, in fact enables the rule of the appetites.[[8]](#endnote-8) Oakeshott sees this same development leading to “the politics of the felt need.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Thirdly is Lewis’s case against modern education: he says it is not only inadequately rigorous, but also inadequately imaginative, and that modern education fails to build the mind or the heart. Lewis’s appraisal bears a resemblance to Oakeshott’s description of rationalist education as education in mere technique.[[10]](#endnote-10) Lastly, we will examine Lewis's critique of social engineering, and notice its many similarities to Oakeshott’s arguments against the same.

III—Looking at/Looking along

In his short essay, “Meditations in a Tool Shed”, Lewis describes the difference between “looking at” something and “looking along” it.[[11]](#endnote-11) These are two orthogonal ways of perceiving. The first corresponds to a more abstract view of that thing, the second to a more concrete view of it. (The theme of the pre-eminence of the concrete over the abstract was central to British Idealism.[[12]](#endnote-12)) Lewis begins the essay by describing himself standing in a toolshed. He beholds a shaft of light coming through the crack above the door. When “looking at” the beam, he sees specks of dust floating through it and he sees where it illuminates a spot on the floor. When he steps into the beam, he “looks along” the shaft of light. The specks of dust disappear and he can see the world outside, the blue sky, leaves on the trees, and the sun. While Lewis does not discount the first means of perception, he holds the second as primary and sees it as at least equal to the first in generating understanding about reality and superior in the sense that it is the primary experience of reality.

To explain the difference between these two types of cognition Lewis provides several examples. One is of a young man who has fallen in love. He delights in merely thinking about the girl he admires. He is “looking along” the experience of being in love. The psychologist looks at the smitten young man and says that he is acting and feeling thusly only because of his genetic response to the need to reproduce. The scientist is “looking at” the experience of being in love. Another example is of a mathematician solving a problem. While the mathematician thinks he is contemplating numerical truths, a neuroscientist examines his brain and claims that when the mathematician believes he is thinking about mathematical truths he is in fact simply experiencing electrical impulses in the brain.[[13]](#endnote-13) But Lewis posits that actually both the mathematician and the neuroscientist are right, in that both are perceiving reality in *some* way. There really are impulses in the mathematician’s brain while he solves a problem, but that doesn’t mean his work is not also conveying truths about reality independent of electrical impulses in the mathematician’s gray matter--otherwise, it would be ridiculous to claim that what he is doing involves "truth" at all! The young man’s genes really are playing a role in his sexual desire, but that doesn’t mean that he is not in love and that being in love is not a meaningful experience of reality irreducible to genes and hormones alone.

That said, for Lewis, the first type of thinking, the first way of perceiving reality, is the primary experience. The neuroscientist only looks at the mathematician’s brain because the mathematician has already made use of it; he has already created a proof of some mathematical theorem. In fact, the neuroscientist only knows about the brain from primary, concrete experience in the first place. The psychologist only studies the young man because the young man has purportedly fallen in love. “Looking at” something is only useful as a way of analyzing the experience of “looking along” something. If there were no knowledge to be gained by “looking along” something, then there would be nothing to “look at”: there would be nothing to theorize about. As Oakeshott puts it, “the power of considering abstract propositions about conduct… is not something that can exist in advance of conduct: it is the result of reflection upon conduct.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

There is another issue lurking in Lewis’s essay: Which of these two is the more comprehensive type of knowledge? For Lewis, both are valid. And in varying circumstances one or the other may be more accurate. The young man may be in love with an unlovely person and the mathematician may be led by a malfunctioning brain to produce fallacious proofs. But the important point is that experience is the essential way of knowing. “Looking at” the experience may aid us in making the experience more comprehensible, but it can never replace the fundamental experience of “looking along.”

Elsewhere Lewis takes this line of thought further. In his essay, "Transposition”, Lewis argues that the explanation of spiritual experiences is made difficult by the fact that the rational faculty operates on a sort of lower level with a more limited vocabulary that cannot adequately capture the truths of spiritual experiences. He writes, “The transposition of the richer into the poorer must, so to speak, be algebraical, not arithmetical. If you are to translate from a language which has a large vocabulary into a language that has a small vocabulary, then you must be allowed to use several words in more than once sense.”[[15]](#endnote-15) For example, he cites from *Pepys’s Diary* a passage where Pepys compares seeing a wonderful play that affected him so much that he likens it to nausea and falling in love with his wife. The experience of an unsettled diaphragm happens both in nausea and in intensely pleasurable emotional or aesthetic experiences. The experience of an unsettled diaphragm must be used to express both unpleasant and pleasant experiences. It is difficult to describe very pleasurable experiences (such as being in love) without some reference to a bodily feeling that is also used in describing unpleasant experiences (such a seasickness). The attempt to transpose a pleasurable experience of seeing a wonderful play must use the physical terms that are also used to describe other experiences, such as falling in love and even falling ill. Physical experiences have a more limited “vocabulary” than do the sort of aesthetic and emotional experiences Pepys describes. If we are to describe spiritual experiences, we will have to transpose them into the more limited medium that does not capture the totality of the original experience.

One who knows music well will know what Pepys is talking about. Such a person can understand the transposition that Pepys executes without confusion. But a person who has never heard beautiful music would fail to appreciate Pepys’s metaphor. They probably have been sick, but would be confused on how seeing a play could be compared to such seemingly disparate experiences as illness and falling in love. Such a man would be approaching the subject from below. He would believe that Pepys had only experienced sickness and not aesthetic delight in a truly extraordinary work of musical composition and execution. In other words, only a person with the experience of the higher reality would be able to discern the transposition of that reality into the lower that is communicated through *Pepys’s Diary*. This is similar to Oakeshott’s contention, cited above, that experience is prior to theory. Understanding of experiences requires, first of all, not theoretical explication but having had the experience itself.

A major parallel to Lewis in this regard occurs in *On Human Conduct*, published in 1975. There Oakeshott presents a dichotomy between the practitioner and the theorist. Oakeshott opens this work with a lengthy meditation on the nature of theorizing. As he finishes, he segues into a discussion of the practice/theory distinction by noting his debt to Plato’s examination of the same topic, especially to the myth of the cave presented in *The Republic*. In light of the similarity of their views, Oakeshott continued, “it may be instructive to notice [our] divergencies.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

As Oakeshott understood Plato, the cave dwellers are people whose mental world is confined to practical affairs. Plato sees that such individuals fail to recognize the conditional nature of practical understanding, and instead mistake it as the only possible mode of comprehending experience. The result is that, however clever and adept they become at practical matters, they have, in effect, imprisoned themselves within their confines. And Plato also was perceptive in regarding the understanding of the theorist, in that it represents a recognition of those limitations, as being, in a sense, a higher form of knowledge than that gained by the solely practical thinker.

However, Oakeshott argued, “distracted by his exclusive concern with the engagement of theoretical understanding and with the manifest shortcomings of [the cave-dwellers’ world] . . . [Plato] is disposed to write [the latter] off as nescience. This, I think, is a mistake.”[[17]](#endnote-17) The practical world may offer only a conditional form of knowledge, but what it offers is nevertheless knowledge. Moreover, quite crucially for Oakeshott, the abstract superiority of theory over its practical counterpart in no way means that the former can replace the latter in dealing with the practical world, which is, after all, precisely the conditional realm for which practical understanding is the appropriate species of knowledge. While it is true that discovering that “a platform of understanding is conditional and to become acquainted with its proximate conditions is a notable step in the engagement of understanding,” such a discovery “is not like exposing a fraud [, since] shadows are not forgeries.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

IV—Politics of the Felt Need

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis discusses what he takes to be a problem with subjectivism, namely, the rejection of objective values.[[19]](#endnote-19) Is Lewis’s view here at odds with Oakeshott’s understanding of morality as embedded in the practical mode of experience, and thus inextricably tied to concrete situations? (It is useful to compare Lewis here to Oakeshott’s comments on rationalistic morality in “The Tower of Babel”.[[20]](#endnote-20)) We suggest it is not, once we trace the genesis of their ideas back to Aristotle, who clearly formulated[[21]](#endnote-21) the idea that phronesis, or practical wisdom, consisted in determining how universal propositions, such as the moral precepts “Thou shall not kill”, should actually be applied in concrete situations. Once we have absorbed Wittgenstein’s insights on following a rule[[22]](#endnote-22) we realize that no rule can possibly provide its own interpretation. Oakeshott’s stress on practical knowledge is not a “rejection” of objective values: rather, it is the recognition that such admitted values must always be realized in complex, concrete situations that do not permit an algorithmic resolution.

What Lewis is noting in *Abolition of Man* is that a shallow rationalism driven by appetite has hijacked human reasoning.[[23]](#endnote-23) The rationalism of modernity is not the “reason” of the ancients. When Plato spoke of reason governing the soul he spoke in the context of a tripartite conception in which reason, the faculty that grasped reality, ruled the appetites through the chest, the seat of magnanimity and properly formed sentiment. But the rationalist rejects the role of well-formed sentiment, the chest, for a rationalism that supposedly governs all. The result of prioritizing rationalism is that the appetite rules.[[24]](#endnote-24) Without a properly formed “chest”, which relies upon proper training and habitually adopted ethics, which includes willing submission to traditional values, the intellect cannot properly rule. It becomes subject to the whims of appetite. Lewis writes, “It still remains true that no justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Emotions are trained by habit to accord with ethical principles and it is emotions so trained that enable reason to rule.

This requires habituation and practice. A person that is steeped in the ancient wisdom of his society, what Lewis calls the *Tao*, the ethical center of humane thought expressed in the best traditions of his civilization, is not ruled by the whim of his appetites. He rules his appetites through self-discipline. Lewis writes, “The Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between the cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.”[[26]](#endnote-26) The problem with rationalists is that they ignore this truth. They believe they are more rational than healthy men with well-formed sentiments. As Lewis puts it, “It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so.”[[27]](#endnote-27) An atrophied chest leaves the rational faculty subject to the appetites. The rational faculty is reduced to providing post hoc justifications for what the appetite demands.

The “chest” Lewis is describing as the seat of sentiments and trained emotion contains the faculties that Irving Babbitt and Claes Ryn have described as the imagination and the will. For both Lewis and Babbitt, imagination is the faculty that *conceives* the world as one experiences it and gives it meaning.[[28]](#endnote-28) It provides the lens through which reason perceives the world as well as provides the choices between which the will chooses.[[29]](#endnote-29) The will may be what Babbitt called “lower”, surrendering to the rule of the appetites. Or it may be “higher”, restrained by an ethical imagination to abide by what Lewis called the Tao. The higher will chooses against the whim of appetite and thus permits reason to have its say. The rationalist thinks he is escaping irrational emotionalism by rejecting the role of the Chest. But “a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”[[30]](#endnote-30) To *know* the right thing is inadequate. One must be *willing* to do it. The imagination, properly trained by appropriate symbols, inspires the will to choose to suppress its appetites and follow its reason. A corrupted will gives in to the appetites, and utilizes its reason to justify that decision.

This relates to Oakeshott’s preference for the moral life driven by “habit of affection and behavior” rather than “by the reflective application of a moral criterion.”[[31]](#endnote-31) He argued that a morality that was the “selfconscious [sic] pursuit of moral ideals” would do little to actually encourage moral behavior. One acquires moral habits through habituation, in the same way that one acquires language through speaking with others using the same language. Most societies have a mixture of the habitual and reflective morality. But Oakeshott argues that habitual morality ought to take precedence, with the reflective component devoted to illuminating the habitual. If the reflective component is dominant, then people will most likely cling to a particular moral ideal, pluck it from its broader moral context and thus deform its true moral character. In such a way, particular moral ideals can become idols, obsessions that warp the moral character of the moral idealist.

This would seem to be in tension with Lewis’s creedal Christianity, which Oakeshott would have considered a set of moral ideals. Lewis did believe in the Christian code of morals derived from Christian doctrine, but he also believed that people were generally moral because they were raised to be so. Each person’s “chest” was developed and shaped by proper moral training. He muses, “I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite sceptical of ethics, but bred to believe ‘a gentleman does not cheat’, than against a irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

Like Oakeshott, Lewis saw the danger of tearing a tenet of the moral order from its part in whole. He argued that ideologies are just this sort of clinging to “fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation.”[[33]](#endnote-33) For Lewis it is beneficial to study the Tao, the moral order of the universe. But to do so, one must be inside it, one must already accept its authority, by which he means one must have been trained to abide by it. Like Oakeshott, Lewis believed that the study of the Tao must take place in the context of its acceptance at the level of habit, in the heart, so to speak. Reflection in this context follows after obedience. The application of reason is to understand better the requirements of the underlying code of behavior. Only those habitually inclined to be moral will recognize the rationality of the system. Lewis writes, “[We must not] postpone obedience to a precept until its credentials have been examined. Only those who are practising the Tao will understand it. It is the well-nurtured man, the *cuor gentil*, and he alone, who can recognize Reason when it comes.”[[34]](#endnote-34)

In the realm of politics and policy this means rejection of the idea of transcendent guidance for policy. Afterall, a rationalist who rejects the *Tao* has no well-grounded reason to prefer one policy over another. There is nothing in his being that drives him to conform to the thousands of years of civilizational agreement upon certain traditional obligations, such as those embedded in laws of special and general beneficence, obligations to parents and children, and the like. Lewis concludes *The Abolition of Man* with an appendix that codifies what he sees as the essentials of the *Tao*. Most of his examples are expressed concretely in the wisdom literature of various civilizations. He draws from a wide variety of sources: the Old and New Testaments, the Egyptian “Book of the Dead”, texts from the Old Norse, Old Anglo Saxon, Native American, and Babylonian traditions as well as Roman and Greek writers such as Cicero, Juvenal, and Plato. His point is that the traditional understandings of morality and social order can be found across human civilizations. These truths were not arrived at through reason, but through the experience of human societies, and are maintained by habit. A society that rejects them is not long for this world.[[35]](#endnote-35) These values are the bedrock upon which a society must be based, but they must be embraced first as habits, givens of behavior, and only then as precepts.

Even in politics, without the Tao there is only appetite, rule by the lowest part of man, the part that is associated with the animals. Lewis writes, “[T]hose who stand outside all judgements of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except the emotional strength of that impulse.”[[36]](#endnote-36) It is the politics of what Oakeshott called the “felt need.” Oakeshott writes:

Rationalist politics, I have said, are the politics of the felt need, the felt need not qualified by a genuine, concrete knowledge of the permanent interests and direction of movement of a society, but interpreted by ‘reason’ and satisfied according to the technique of an ideology: they are the politics of the books.[[37]](#endnote-37)

A rationalist, with a large head and shallow chest, cannot take the long view of what is necessary for his society or what is good for it in accord with the traditional way of understanding moral norms. Rather, he can only react according to his felt need, his appetites (or, if a politician, the felt need of his constituents and their appetites). He may give rational explanations for what he desires, but he is still being led ultimately by his base desires with nothing else to found them upon. The rationalist is not in charge of himself. Lewis writes, the rationalist is “not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite.”[[38]](#endnote-38) He is the slave of his (or his constituents) passions, of the “felt need” of the moment. As Oakeshott writes:

[This understanding] suggests that a morality of the pursuit of moral ideals, or a morality in which this is dominant, is not what it appears at first sight to be, is not something that can stand on its own feet. In such a morality, that which has power to rescue from superstition is given the task of generating human behavior--a task which, in fact, it cannot perform.[[39]](#endnote-39)

V—Education

The educational endeavor that Lewis sees as so problematic in *The Abolition of Man* is similar to what Oakeshott criticizes in rationalist education: the abandonment of training in traditional values and accumulated knowledge, which meant acquiring proper taste for what is good and grand, and replacing it with technique. Augustine had referred to the result of this traditional education as properly ordered affections, Plato and Aristotle as proper likes and dislikes.[[40]](#endnote-40) Lewis writes,

For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious.[[41]](#endnote-41)

The training in mere technique to the abandonment of inculcation of traditional values results in an amoral practice of rationalist technique. Not only is such training immoral, but it leaves those so-schooled helpless when confronted with moral quandaries. In *That Hideous Strength*, the third installment of Lewis’s science fiction Ransom Trilogy published just two years after *Abolition*, Lewis describes the mind of one of the main characters, the sociologist Mark Studdock, as bereft of any good or useful thing by receiving a “modern education”, by which Lewis means one animated merely by shallow rationalism. He writes,

[I]n Mark’s mind hardly one rag of noble thought, either Christian or Pagan, had a secure lodging. His education had been neither scientific nor classical—merely “Modern.” The severities both of abstraction and of high human tradition had passed him by: and he had neither peasant shrewdness nor aristocratic honour to help him.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Mark lacked both the humane values of traditional education and the rigor of scientific education, as such, he was helpless before the great moral challenges he faces in the book.

Similarly, Oakshott writes that the rational mind is “well-trained rather than well-educated.” The rationalist has “cut himself off from the traditional knowledge of his society, and denied the value of any education more extensive than a training in a technique of analysis.”[[43]](#endnote-43) This is essentially the problem Lewis describes in the hapless character in *That Hideous Strength*. His training in the social sciences was merely modern and not scientific: the latter would have at least been severe in its rigor while simultaneously incorporating the student into a tradition and practice that is not reducible to modern rationalism. As Oakeshott writes, “A science . . . is concrete knowledge and consequently neither its conclusions, nor the means by which they were reached, can ever, as a whole, be written down in a book.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Scientific education requires entering into a tradition and a set of practices different from, but similar to, the humane education of the classical humanities. Oakeshott continues, “Neither an art nor a science can be imparted in a set of directions; to acquire a mastery in either is to acquire an appropriate connoisseurship.”[[45]](#endnote-45) A rationalist cannot attain this through education because he rejects the very idea of tradition and can neither attain nor appreciate the education of the scientist and the humanist. As a result, Oakeshott writes, “[T]he Rationalist is essentially ineducable; and he could be educated out of his Rationalism only by an inspiration which he regards as the great enemy of mankind.” The inspiration needed, would be, of course, from his traditions.

Oakeshott is critical of book study when it is considered the primary means of knowledge. But Lewis sees book study as critical to acquiring the accumulated knowledge of a civilization and to guard against modernist ways of thinking, to free oneself from a narrow rationalism. In his essay “On the Reading of Old Books”, Lewis writes, “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.”[[46]](#endnote-46) The reason for this, Lewis argues, is that “[e]very age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period.”[[47]](#endnote-47) By reading old books one can inoculate oneself against the errors of one’s own age. There is little danger of falling for the errors of the past because our own modern circumstances provide an abundance of contrary arguments. For Lewis, it is important to remember that people in the past are no cleverer than we. They made mistakes. But they often did not make the same mistakes.[[48]](#endnote-48) In the struggle against being purely a man of one’s times, “[t]he only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books.”[[49]](#endnote-49) To the extent the human mind can transcend its historical circumstances it is not by a rationalism that rejects that past, but by immersing oneself in books from a variety of ages.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Another reason that Lewis gives for reading old books is to absorb the historical Christian tradition, so that one begins to discern the fundamental unity of that tradition. By reading them one sees where, despite their differences, Bunyan, Hooker, and Dante are all of a piece. In this way, one is initiated into the tradition of which one is a part. His insight here is not restricted to religious education and it bears a similarity to what Oakeshott says about political education. Oakeshott writes that education ought to be “an initiation into the moral and intellectual habits and achievements of his society, an entry into the partnership between present and past, a sharing of concrete knowledge.”[[51]](#endnote-51) This is what Lewis is talking about in his recommendation to read old books in the Christian tradition and this is precisely what rationalist education fails to be by being merely a training in technique and one that is specifically designed to avoid the encumbrances of the past by avoiding concrete knowledge of the past. Instead, Lewis and Oakeshott would have an education that is “heavy with its past”, [[52]](#endnote-52) leavened by tradition.

VI—Social Engineering

Lewis addressed the attempt to “rationally” plan a society extensively in his novel *That Hideous Strength*. The parallels in that work to Oakeshott's critique of “rationalism in politics” are striking. The novel was written at the same time as *The Abolition of Man* and published two years later in 1945, Lewis takes aim at a science of society that seeks to plan a better, more perfect world than the messy one that actually exists, mired in tradition and custom, folk habits and prejudice. The title of the book, drawn from Sir David Lyndsay’s poem “Ane Dialog”, is a reference to the Tower of Babel, the Old Testament symbol for the desire to dethrone God and establish, based upon rational planning, the supremacy of man.

In the book, the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments (N.I.C.E.) acquires property in a small town. It forms an alliance with the local college and begins to plan its takeover of British society. One character describes the work of the N.I.C.E., “This is going to put science itself on a scientific basis.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Rather than the haphazard development of science as it has been conducted heretofore, relying upon a variety of insights in a decentralized and unsystematic way, it will be conducted in a purely rational manner under the centralized direction of the N.I.C.E. Especially important is that “we're going to get science applied to social problems and backed by the whole force of the state.”[[54]](#endnote-54) For the N.I.C.E., this is the goal of science. Rather than the pursuit of humane knowledge that adds to humanity’s general store, the science advocated by the N.I.C.E. exists to reform society on a rational basis. This means, by definition, the rejection of tradition and custom, even those associated with the practice of science. For the rational science of the N.I.C.E., the goal is a complete reconstruction of society. There is no value in traditional society or the social forms it has produced. As one character explains, “If Science is now given a free hand it can now take over the human race and re-condition it: make man a really efficient animal.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

An important point at the center of a rational society is that there has to be certain people who decide for the rest what a rational society is. (Jane Jacobs and F.A. Hayek both stress this point.)[[56]](#endnote-56) Since the people in charge are rational, according to rationalism’s conceit, they rule by reason and not by will and they need not be subject to notions of due process or checks and balances. Lewis reveals that there is no escape from the obvious point that under such a scheme some men are in charge of others. “Man has got to take charge of Man. That means, remember, that some men have got to take charge of the rest . . . You and I want to be the people who do the taking charge . . .”[[57]](#endnote-57)

A telling portrait of Lewis’s critique of this sort of rational reconstruction of society is in a conversation between Mark, who we have discussed already, and William Hingest, an internationally renowned chemist at Bracton College. Mark defends the N.I.C.E.’s ambitions to reconstruct society based upon his own studies in the social sciences, to which Hingest responds,

I should want to pull [human reality, if I had studied it the way you have] to bits and put something else in its place. Of course. That's what happens when you study men . . . I happen to believe that you can't study men: you can only get to know them, which is quite a different thing.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Hingest points at dangers inherent in “looking at” men, rather than “looking along” them. For Hingest, science as he practiced it in chemistry could not be applied to human society in the complexities of its humane traditions. Hingest is clear on the destruction such a social reconstruction would bring. He pointedly says to Mark, “You . . . want to take away from [the common man] everything which makes life worth living and not only from them but from everyone except a parcel of prigs and professors.”[[59]](#endnote-59) In T*he Abolition of Man*, Lewis writes that “What we call Man’s power is, in reality, a power possessed by some men which they may, or may not, allow other men to profit by.”[[60]](#endnote-60)

But for Mark and others under the grip of the rationalist mindset, concrete persons were more abstract than the social science that they used to describe them. Lewis writes,

For [Mark Studdock's] education had the curious effect of making things that he read and wrote more real to him than things that he saw. Statistics about agricultural labourers were the substance; any real ditcher, ploughman, or farmer's boy, was the shadow . . . . [He] had a great reluctance, in his work, ever to use such words as ‘man’ or ‘woman.’ . . . for, in his own way, he believed as firmly as any mystic in the superior reality of the things that are not seen.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Lewis’s concern with this rationalist mindset applied to social engineering is the sheer power it placed in the hands of the manipulating generation. It isn’t just a power that limits the influence of past generations, but power that diminishes the options of future generations as well. The rejection of tradition by an entire generation is an exercise of power over not only its predecessors, but its successors. By “modif[ying] the environment bequeathed to it and rebel[ling] against tradition” the presiding generation limits the influence of the first while also limiting the reservoir of knowledge from which future generations may draw sustenance.[[62]](#endnote-62) If Oakeshott and Lewis are right in contending that there is wisdom embedded in tradition, then generations that follow the rationalists lose whatever good may have been in that tradition. By freeing future generations from the “dead hand of the past”, rationalists are simultaneously subjecting them to alternatives dictated by themselves. Lewis points out that each succeeding generation, especially insofar as the previous generation rejects tradition, is at the mercy of those who have come before. Lewis writes, “[I]f any one age really attains, by eugenics and scientific education, the power to make its descendants what it pleases, all men who live after it are the patients of that power. They are weaker, not stronger: for though we may have put wonderful machines in their hands we have preordained how they are to use them.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

Oakeshott notes in critiquing the rationalists, like Lewis’s character Mark, “to cure is not to transform, it is not to turn the patient into a different sort of being; it is to restore to him such health as he is naturally capable of enjoying.”[[64]](#endnote-64) The application of rationalism is always mechanical and universal. The rationalist does not take into account the particularity of even the application of its subject matter. The technique of the rationalist is to develop a set of rules that apply mechanically and universally everywhere.[[65]](#endnote-65) Lewis’s emphasis on Mark’s discomfort with describing “men” and “women” in his work is because he preferred abstract categories such as “elements”, “classes”, and “populations” to concrete things, like persons. Such categories the rationalist can concoct in his study, whereas actual men and women do not fit easily into the categories the rationalist constructs nor do the strictures of his method permit accurate descriptions of them. As Oakeshott explains, rationalism did not fail because of its recognition of technical knowledge, but “its failure to recognize any other [type of knowledge].”[[66]](#endnote-66)

Oakeshott defended practical knowledge against the rationalist assault on the grounds that it is a legitimate means of knowing in its own right with its own means of transmission. Furthermore, it is superior in some sense to technical knowledge in that it is connected intimately with its object. Oakeshott’s warning against the abstract nature of technical knowledge is demonstrated by Mark’s reluctance to connect the technical knowledge he thought he was acquiring to the practical lives of the persons he studied. Such training in technical knowledge required by rationalism would, Oakeshott warned, produce a legion of Marks.

VII—The Genesis of the Lewis/Oakeshott Similarities, and the Genealogy of Their Differences

Oakeshott and Lewis had some common influences. Both studied Plato with great interest (e.g., see the analysis of the cave metaphor by Oakeshott cited above), and both were influenced by idealist thinkers, although Lewis chiefly by the idealism of Berkeley:

The books that impressed Lewis the most between the years 1917 and 1919 were George Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* and Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo* and *Republic*. Lewis studied the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, John Locke, and David Hume in this period, but Berkeley, Bergson, and Plato exercised the greatest influence on his thinking, and resonated with his keen interest in myth and the occult at this time.[[67]](#endnote-67)

There is a similarity between Oakeshott and Lewis in the turns of phrase they use, the rhythm of their language when they are describing similar things. For example, in describing the rationalist educator, Oakeshott writes, “First he turns out the light and then complains that he cannot see.”[[68]](#endnote-68) Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man*, “[W]e continue to clamour for those qualities we are rendering impossible . . . in a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”[[69]](#endnote-69) In a similar vein, Oakeshott writes, “We do our best to destroy parental authority . . . then we sentimentally deplore the scarcity of ‘good homes’, and we end by creating substitutes which complete the work of destruction.”[[70]](#endnote-70)

As noted previously in this paper, while Lewis became a devout Christian, Oakeshott’s attitude towards religion grew into a rather diffuse defense of the general concept of religious practice, with no particular Christian emphasis. It would seem that such a fundamental difference in orientation must have impacted their response to rationalism, but in what manner?

It is our suggestion that the difference appears most saliently not in the two thinkers’ dismissal of rationalism, but in their proffered alternative, or lack thereof. Oakeshott, while obviously rejecting rationalism, is reluctant to offer an alternative approach to political life other than, “Well, don’t be a rationalist.” Lewis never set out to articulate a political program, nor does he claim to be a political philosopher. But political insights can be gleaned from various writings that demonstrate how religion impacts his understanding of politics.

Lewis explicitly rejected the idea of a Christian political party.[[71]](#endnote-71) He was concerned that it would be splintered into subsets of Christians, left and right, since Christians disagreed on the application of their religious principles and values to practical policy prescriptions. Furthermore, it may damage the faith to reduce the supreme importance of the Christian doctrines of salvation and redemption to a political program. But he did articulate a vague application of Christian principles to political life, while stressing that the relationship between religious teaching and political life was unclear and uncertain.

Two principles are key in Lewis’s thought: the fallenness of man and the historical contingency of human affairs. His political thought follows from these two principles. Lewis advocated for something like the English classical liberal tradition of negative liberty, including a sense of Lockean social contract and constitutional government. The government protects property and restrains violence and we obey its commands.[[72]](#endnote-72)

But whether this constitutional order should be monarchical or democratic is historically contingent, both have their benefits and drawbacks. A rather important point for Lewis is that the desirable political order is one that is possible in our particular historical circumstances and one that takes account of human frailty. In the present circumstances, liberal democracy is really the only regime the western peoples will tolerate. But it must be a democracy based upon an understanding of human fallenness and not human goodness. Lewis writes, “I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason.”[[73]](#endnote-73) He is especially critical of Rousseau’s influence upon modern political ideas. Rousseau rejected the fallenness of man and believed democracy desirable because of the undeniable goodness of all human beings. Lewis advocates for political equality, not because equality is true and hierarchies unnatural, but because men are fallen and abuse their place in the hierarchy.[[74]](#endnote-74)

The political order Lewis sought to avoid was the threat that he thought most likely. Although religious, he hated theocracy because he thought it akin to blasphemy, falsely claiming that political commands, which are only ever contingent on circumstances, are the Word of God. But theocracy is unlikely to gain a foothold in the modern West. However, the proposal of “government in the name of science” has a great many advocates and, given that it coheres with the tenor of the age, it has a good chance of success. The dangers of such a planned society are legion. First, it empowers fallible human beings with illimitable power. He writes, “[E]very Government consists of mere men and is, strictly viewed, a makeshift.”[[75]](#endnote-75) Increase of political power in the name of science will only mean that some men have more power over other men.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Lewis’s classical liberalism is especially relevant for what he saw as the “good life”. He writes, “To live his life in his own way, to call his house his castle, to enjoy the fruits of his own labour, to educate his children as his conscience directs, to save for their prosperity after his death” are the desires deeply stamped on western peoples.[[77]](#endnote-77) The government does best when it allows persons to pursue these goods on their own. This requires a place for the natural hierarchies to exist in the social plane. Again, for Lewis, equality is a legal fiction, not a normative social value. Families and churches should still instantiate natural hierarchies as they are necessary to the goods that family and religion bestow. “Artificial equality is necessary in the life of the State, but . . . in the Church we strip off this disguise, we recover our real inequalities, and are thereby refreshed and quickened.”[[78]](#endnote-78)

X—Conclusion

C.S. Lewis and Michael Oakeshott are seldom . . . perhaps never? . . . mentioned together as paradigms of some common school of thought. Nevertheless, this essay has sought to demonstrate that in many respects their critiques of rationalism dovetail quite nicely.

For Lewis, the rational faculty can access truth, but it does so in a less sophisticated way than the imagination. Furthermore, the truth that it is capable of grasping is never the whole picture. It is always necessarily “looking at” rather than “looking along”. The imagination provides the context in which the rational faculty operates. Furthermore, the rational faculty is limited by will. It does not choose, but merely perceives and describes. It is the will, the chest, the emotional and rational drive, that chooses, that makes moral decisions. The rational faculty may perceive and describe a moral alternative, but it requires the will to pursue that end. Oakeshott likewise understands the rational faculty as accessing truth. The problem he has with rationalism is that it is irrational. It ignores other ways of knowing, preferring knowledge of technique to knowledge of practice, and book learning to learning through experience.

The most crucial distinction between the two thinkers, regarding the rationalist project, is the possibility of revelation: Oakeshott, nowhere in his works, even considers the possibility that divine revelation may offer us guidance, above and beyond any tradition in which we find ourselves, as to how we ought to behave. Thus, for him, only existing traditions, and the possibility of rationalist criticism of traditional practices, can offer moral guidance. For Lewis, of course, revelation is an essential source of moral guidance, and the interplay between customary behavior and rationalist analysis of that behavior must be evaluated in terms of revealed truth. Lewis held not only to customary Christian revelation, but also the natural law, the revelation of God’s moral requirements written into the hearts and minds of people. Lewis does see tradition and custom as a means to get to the natural law, but he also believes that it is accessible through reason and that some moral prescriptions are evident through revelation in Scripture.

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