Rationalism and Irrationalism: Aurel Kolnai and Michael Oakeshott

Zoltan Balazs

Corvinus University, Budapest; Hungarian Academy of Sciences

ABSTRACT

Kolnai and Oakeshotts agree that the sound philosophy of reason begins with experience, and that rational reflection is always embedded in an encounter with reality where sensual perception, emotional reactions, memories and images – in short, experiences – play the fundamental role as opposed to pure, speculative reasoning. They also agree that the various sorts of human activities which constitute praxis or practice are often more habitual than reflective. Kolnai adds that they usually bear the mark of non-moral goodness.

The customary objection is that this view of human life, in which reason has an ancillary function, opens up the gates to relativism and immoralism. This essay seeks to show how this objection can be positively met; that is, how a mere critique of rationalism can be amended with a philosophically persuasive view of non-abstract, non-utopian rationality.

Oakeshott and Kolnai have different approaches. Oakeshott emphasizes the rationality of reasoning as a practice, the constrained but real rationality of traditions, and the superiority of habitual moral thinking over formalism and reliance on the power of moral principles. Kolnai thinks that this is insufficient, especially when we are confronted with moral conflicts and rank evil. He argues instead that there is an objective world of values which calls us to reflect on and helps us make ethically right choices.

\*\*\*

Since Aurel Kolnai’s philosophy is much less well known than Oakeshott’s, although the former’s works have been published and republished in recent years, it seems appropriate to say a few words about his intellectual career. Born in Budapest, he was a member of the radical youth group the ‘Galilei Circle.’ The Chrysanthemum (or October) Revolution of 1918 disappointed him, and the Bolshevik takeover made him leave Hungary. He studied in Vienna and became a member of Freud’s circle, but gave this up after a short while. He converted to Catholicism in 1925. His main philosophical love was (and remained throughout his life) analytic phenomenology and value theory, inspired by E. Husserl, M. Scheler, and N. Hartmann. His first English book was *The War Against the West*, a phenomenological analysis of Nazism, even today possibly unsurpassed in profundity and richness of detail.[[1]](#endnote-1) His later years in the US, Canada, and England saw him turn to a more conservative social philosophy and pursue a relentless critique of the ‘three riders of the Apocalypse’ (Nazism, Communism, and Liberal Democracy) as the quintessentially modernist, secularist, utopian, totalitarian and suicidal endeavors of Western civilization, the latter to which Kolnai was deeply committed.

For a number of reasons that will unfold presently, *The War Against the West* is an appropriate reference point for starting to explore Kolnai’s views on rationalism and irrationalism. Notorious for its self-avowed and unabashed irrationalist tenets and its willful provocation of rationalism, Nazi thinking was an obvious enemy of the humanistic and rationalist world view. A classic illustration of this clash is Settembrini’s and Naphta’s war over Hans Castorp’s soul. Since the critique of reason, especially when idolized, has ever been a point of agreement between moderate and radical conservatives, it is unsurprising that some of the latter gave in to the strong lure of Nazi thinking, or converted to obscure or esoteric ideologies based on the cult of something – anything – that is *not* reason. Steering clear of such seductions, the naïve, in many respects shallow Settembrinian humanism, as well as the Marxist antidote – in fact, ‘anti-gift’ – (such as Georg Lukacs’ criticism of German Idealism and Nietzschean thinking along the usual Marxist lines of historical materialist argumentation[[2]](#endnote-2)), requires solid philosophical ground. Rejection of the passionate and totalitarian irrationalism of Nazism combined with a rejection of progressive beliefs in reason or history was not, and has not been since, an easy task.[[3]](#endnote-3) Kolnai found the necessary support in phenomenological objectivism. However, *The War Against the West* is not an exposition of this position. It is a critical work that was written in a style and in the hope that a wider audience would read it (as it did), and it does not contain elaborate philosophical concepts and distinctions. There is, nonetheless, an important reason why the book is an appropriate point of departure in respect of philosophical subtlety. This reason concerns the *experience* of Nazism as it presents or presented itself to Reason.

*Experiencing Nazi thought*

Kolnai discusses several Nazi and proto-Nazi authors, long forgotten today, yet very influential thinkers in their own time. Houston S. Chamberlain, for one, was an English forerunner of Nazism. His attack on objectivity or its spirit (a belief in the possibility of objective standards for science) is paradigmatic. In his view, whatever ‘science’ actually involves is the manifestation of the capabilities of a race. As a matter of fact, ‘science’ in its modern form (and here Kolnai cites Alfred Rosenberg, the chief party ideologist) is a peculiarly German achievement, an expression of German creativity. Technical achievements and successes are not evidence of the capabilities of human reason, but of racial superiority. In Nazi ideology, Kolnai argues, reason and rationality are concepts that have two meanings or types. There is the weak, universal, unproductive, abstract reason; and there is the strong, vital, productive kind of reason. The weak form of reason begins with objective truth and a belief in objectivity. According to Nazi ideologists, this amounts to an acceptance of something stronger than Reason itself, and *this* is, in their eyes, unacceptable. They replace, therefore, objectivity so understood with a notion of strong, self-assertive subjectivity (collective, racial reason) qua the only objective reality.

While Lukacs does not, Kolnai has some understanding of distinctions of this kind. (As a matter of fact, we may add, communist ideology also held that technical progress would go on in an unhampered way once capitalist forces were eliminated: ‘science’ is never neutral, and bourgeois rationality is a distortion of reason.) Kolnai writes that

Now, although I myself think that they [the Nazi theories] are to some extent absurd, I cannot emphasize strongly enough the danger in underestimating the intellectual level or the political significance of the doctrines involved. A grave misunderstanding may arise from the undeniable fact that they attack reason, laugh at ‘abstract’ intellect, and defy belief in objective truth. This is firmly established, and to my mind is also proof of the ultimate falsity of these theories. But it would be ridiculous to infer that they lack sense or intellectual subtlety (…) *Those who thus assiduously combat reason have their reason for doing so.* [[4]](#endnote-4)

However false the creed of irrationalism is, it may contain aspects of truth – indeed, some essential truths. Therefore, a positivist, Settembrinian belief in the power of enlightened reason is not the only and certainly not the right alternative to subjectivism and relativism (Marxist dogmatism is, of course, even worse). Kolnai was very much aware that philosophy had a broader perspective than this rather naïve and simplistic philosophy. Grasping reality is a more intricate and complex process than a single act of Reason (the direct conceiving of the *Ding an sich*); or a Cartesian process that starts from a solitary reflection on thinking; or a Baconian method of systematically assembling facts and observations from which laws can be derived; or any positivist conception of inferring true propositions from unshakable axioms. There is no idealistic and perfect correspondence between reality and reason, yet reason is indispensable in and for sound philosophy. The right use of reason is neither a simple belief in reason as a human faculty for ‘knowing the world as God does’, nor its degradation to a faculty of race. Rather, since reason is being *used*, it needs to be guided, informed by virtues, particularly by the virtue of intellectual humility. This virtue entails the *acknowledgment* of the limits of reason and the sovereignty of the object[[5]](#endnote-5) and protects the subject from despair (‘the world cannot be known’) and from pride (‘only the self, the subject is relevant’).

This virtuous usage of reason is implicitly demonstrated by *The War Against the West* itself. On the one hand, it is a philosophical but very personal attempt to explore and reveal the truth of Nazism and to capture its essence. On the other hand, the attempt is not made with the help of some preconceived ideology or scientifically established method but through allowing the ‘object’ to speak for itself. Kolnai was a practical phenomenologist (he did not regard himself capable of surpassing, for instance, Husserl’s *Erfahrung und Urteil* [[6]](#endnote-6) in terms of abstraction and philosophical depth; yet he also thought that Heidegger’s existential phenomenology was basically a corruption of Husserl’s objective phenomenology). He was a connoisseur of topics among philosophers, selecting out objects for rational analysis that emerged from reality, from the various issues and demands of the day, from the very depths of human life, for no other rationale but for their own ‘reason.’ Nazism was there to be studied not because it was a logical possibility, an ideological position that no one had canvassed so far, or some terra incognita of social science and philosophy, but because it suggested and presented itself not only with its obvious practical urgency but also with real theoretical interest. The example of Nazism demonstrates that reason does not ‘discover’ its own objects; rather, it is confronted with objective reality that it must accept, but then it works autonomously, guided by the virtue of intellectual humility.

It is significant that Kolnai was the first philosopher to write a treatise on disgust (prior to writing his analysis of Nazism). The phenomenon of disgust, he argued, was particularly interesting because it was a perfect case study of how subject and object are unified without either being absorbed by the other. Emotional (re)presentation (of what we find disgusting) is nicely balanced, if one may say so, by intentionality (a keen awareness and even ‘interest’ in the object). The object presents itself to the mind or the intellect emotionally and in that sense irrationally, yet without overcoming and fully arresting reason. Reason, in fact, *my reason,* begins its work of understanding and penetrating reality because *I* find something interesting – in this case, something that strikes *me* as disgusting. Having written about disgust (also on hatred and pride),[[7]](#endnote-7) Kolnai was in a sense well-prepared to wage war on Nazism as a false, even vicious, philosophy. *He* personally found it to be an object disgusting both intellectually and morally, but for that very reason also interesting and attractive. Emotion (disgust), as the appropriate reaction or reactive attitude, does not distort but even helps the intellect do its job.

The task is to get as close to objective truth as possible. However, that is a job for concrete, living persons embedded in various political, moral, personal situations, and not the job of *the* human intellect or reason. Disgust tells *me* something about *reality* but often I do not just happen to be disgusted by something, for it is not only my senses that are alerted but my reason, too. Thus, disgust is often a curious experience.[[8]](#endnote-8) Through my diverse experiences reality forces me to think about, reflect on, and explore it. Hence philosophy, the highest sort of reflection, is but one (though the principal) mode of getting closer to truth. Philosophy should serve as a mode of thinking that discloses false knowledge, illusions, wishful thinking, and in the first place subjectivism, the arch-enemy of objective truth. The constructive part of philosophy (namely, describing objective truth) is always more tentative, often less reliable and less persuasive than the knowledge that arts or simple common sense convey to us. Kolnai writes that

[h]e who philosophizes must keep in as close as possible touch with the world of his ordinary experience – simple and complex, particular and general, outward and inward, speculative and effective. Roughly, this corresponds to what the Scholastics have called *reductio ad sensum*.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Knowledge belongs to man and not to reason as an abstract, philosophically construed faculty. In that sense, many Nazi and proto-Nazi thinkers were right; yet the implication that truth is incommunicable, wholly subjective (in Nazi thinking, the subject is race) and that reason is merely an expression of strength and will is false. This is simply nonsense, being defective reasoning: if reason is merely an expression of will, racial strength or identity – or whatever else –, then it is indistinguishable from them and ceases to be reason as commonsense knows it and as we experience it.

How, then, can Nazism be understood and reasonably rejected? Negative philosophy: the method of refutation, pointing out fallacious consequences, valuable as it can be, is usually not enough. However, we should not give in to the temptation of purely emotional and instinctive reactions either. Nazism is a formidable part of reality because it also speaks to man. On the grounds of the irrationalist abuse of the concept of *Gestalt*,[[10]](#endnote-10) the idea that reality is understood in terms of shapes, types, or forms, Kolnai dismisses, yet his own exposition of Nazism is in a strong sense nothing more and nothing less but a suggestion that it is a powerful *form* of thinking and acting. Nazism is a totalistic ideology because it *is* emotionally, intellectually, and even spiritually convincing: it is closed yet broad, homogeneous yet all-encompassing. It cannot be derived from history; neither is it a logical consequence of some purely intellectual errors; nor is it causally determined in any scientific sense. Of course, it is related to history, European and German; to false philosophies, to social and other developments, yet it has its own essence. It possesses a certain intellectual and spiritual *Gestalt*, notwithstanding Kolnai’s formal rejection of the concept, the capturing of which presupposes a certain point of view; namely, that of reason embedded in, and bred by, the best traditions of Western civilization. It is not enough to sit in an armchair and declare Nazism a false ideology, an erroneous way of understanding reality, a series of intellectual mistakes and heresies, and then close the file. To fully grasp it, one needs to have the emotion necessary to find it personally detestable, and of personally appreciating Western civilization and its achievements which, then, prompts one to act: in Kolnai’s case, to write a book. Thus, we can conclude that if objectivity or a belief in objectivity is a target of Nazi irrationalism, then it can and needs to be confronted not by a belief in Pure Reason but by a unique combination of common sense, moral sobriety, good taste, experience-informed and philosophically honest and humble reason.

*Experiencing conservatism*

Arguably, there is a great deal of similarity between the early Husserlian phenomenological approach to objectivity that Kolnai so enthusiastically endorses and Oakeshott’s approach to his favorite philosophical objects. In *Experience and its Modes* he writes that

[s]ensation, then, as a form of experience independent of thought or judgment, must be pronounced self-contradictory. This absolute separation of sensation and thought is false: to claim release from the despotism of thought is to claim a place altogether outside possible experience.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The concept of experience looks congenial to Kolnai’s emotional presentation. In Oakeshott’s view, experience is not something that is somehow out there waiting for us to be found. The self (‘the man’) is not a passive subject of experience; there is a sense of own-ness, propriety, coming-to-home in every experience which involves or may involve active thinking, the deployment of the intellect. Reason is present in all sorts of experiences. Even though these sorts or modes are not interchangeable, they are expressive of the same subject who is thinking and reflecting on his or her experiences.

Political experience is not different either. Doing political theory in and for a particular political context is basically just another type of doing politics. Political theorizing can be a genuine political experience. Writing about Hobbes, who has traditionally been held to be a founder of political theory in its almost extremely rationalist, scientific form, Oakeshott suggests that Hobbes in fact made an implicit distinction between philosophy and science. Philosophy is a form of knowledge arising from our sensations, and

the question he asks himself is, what must the world be like for us to have the sensations we undoubtedly experience? His enquiry is into the cause of the sensation, an enquiry to be conducted, not by means of observation, but by means of reasoning.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In Oakeshott’s interpretation, Hobbes is by no means the founder or the first architect of political science as we are used to understanding it. Whatever we learn from man as a political animal, we learn it from our own experience that we have by living politically; that is, collectively. Fear, vainglory, trust and the like are sensed and experienced; and experiences of this sort are stored in our memories. They can be recollected when reasoning makes it necessary. There is no problem with speculating about the origins of society and the possible ways of persuading ourselves that government is possible and desirable, provided that we do not ignore the political context and political experiences with civil war. Such speculations are embedded in experience. Successful and reasonable reasoning needs and presupposes the operation of various human faculties such as memories and imagination, as well as some virtues such as prudence and wisdom (to this Kolnai’s emphasis on bowing to the sovereignty of the object may be added). Thus,

[a] full well-recollected experience gives the ‘foresight’ and ‘wisdom’ that belong to the prudent man, a wisdom that springs from the appreciation of those causes and effects that time and not reason teaches us.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Like Kolnai, Oakeshott also thinks that it is reality and not the inner force of reason that moves us in the first place:

intentionality (and understanding) (…) emerges from the infinite richness of experience, a kind of pattern recognition ability, rather than an explicit inferential capacity.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Similarly, conservative thinking basically involves reflection on certain experiences of (or with) the political and social world, rather than a conception or a theory. In his famous essay on the conservative disposition, Oakeshott writes that “my design here is to construe this disposition as it appears in contemporary character, rather than transpose it into the idiom of general principles.”[[15]](#endnote-15) “Design” and “construction” look a bit like constructivist and rationalist concepts, but the point is rather to explore an experience through a phenomenon of the contemporary world and its description. How does this happen?

Kolnai was fascinated with Nazism as a powerful experience, a disposition of mind and character, and Oakeshott is no less fascinated with the conservative mind. Whereas Kolnai’s fascination took the form of disgust, the Oakeshottian attitude or disposition towards conservatism is certainly a sort of delight, a typical combination of serious, almost artistic reflection and gentle mischievousness. Remarkably, despite one being about rejection, the other about embracement, we find the same philosophical attitude of keeping a distance from the object and being immersed in it almost to the point of identification in both cases. These are truly fine and memorable examples of philosophical inquiry. Such inquiries always start out from the context and with some particular experiences and not from the solitary self and its meditations. Although the historical contexts were dramatically different, the important thing is that it was this contrast between political and social reality as Kolnai and Oakeshott experienced it that made them reflect on their subject, with the full capacity of *their* minds and philosophical fortitude. Nazism was on the rise, conservatism decaying. It is just such changes, spectacularly unnatural at first glance (rank barbarism in the midst of high civilization), but strikingly natural on reflection (conservatism is against progress, yet progress is inevitable) that we may interpret as experiences or phenomena that engage reflective reason. Nazi thinking is interesting because it is found to be both highly intelligent yet barbaric, persuasive yet absurd. Conservatism is interesting because it is sited more deeply in human nature than most political philosophers (then or now) would be willing to admit or perhaps be capable of retrieving for treatment with a nicely constructed theory. And both are felicitously complex, so that neither allow for rationalist treatment.

*The menace of relativism*

Nonetheless, caution is recommended. Kolnai wrote a review of Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics* which he held in high esteem, yet he did not hide his reservations about it. Specifically about the essay on conservatism, Kolnai makes the remark that writing about the conservative disposition is fine but only half the job, inasmuch as no serious conservative is only a conservative; that is, a person with conservative inclinations. Being a conservative does not amount to practicing whatever we like to practice, doing anything for its own sake because we happen to like it. “Cookery, to take one of [Oakeshott’s] favourite examples, certainly reacts on [sic] the shaping of our appetites for food, but the appetite is prior to cookery rather than the other way around.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Practices do not justify themselves, and Kolnai seems to have thought that the conceptual role of skills and practices is overstressed in Oakeshott’s thinking.[[17]](#endnote-17) Moreover, he recalls his former battles with his Nazi ideological adversaries, writing that

[i]n a way somewhat reminiscent of the various irrationalist currents rampant in Europe especially between the two wars, though indeed without any trace of a morbid delight in barbarism, [Oakeshott] would trust ‘life’ *as its own test* and is inclined to underestimate the inherent spiritual stature o[f man and the intellectual claims it implies. Thus, he treats rationalism as a kind of disease peculiar to post-Renaissance Europe and Baconian and, particularly, Cartesian inspiration (…): he is right in insisting on the (comparative) non-reflective presuppositions of formal rationality but in his turn overlooks the vast rational presuppositions of ‘tradition,’ its close dependence on the works of reflective and analytical thought.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Kolnai is not the first and hardly the last reader to express some reservations about the Oakeshottian rejection of rationalism. However, it would be difficult to assess Oakeshott’s *conception* of rationality and irrationality solely on account of his essay on conservatism or, for that matter, on the basis of the essay on rationalism in politics. In spite of his colorful and often meandering style, Oakeshott usually makes a straightforward and single major point and follows an either/or approach. In contrast, Kolnai is typically very circumspect and almost never misses an occasion to point out that this or that may look different from another angle, or that whatever is asserted first needs to be immediately amended, qualified, and specified. Still, we need to ask the question whether these are differences in terms of approach and style, or if there is a more substantial disagreement between them.

Consider the issue of conservatism once more. Oakeshott does concede the point that modernity is at odds with conservatism in general, yet he maintains that without conservatism even modern (Western) life becomes unbearable, even unthinkable. There is thus, he argues implicitly, a reason to be conservative. Conservatism is more than a matter of personal liking or preference, yet neither is it a political conception derived from scientific axioms and moral principles. Being a conservative, especially when it comes to political (or reflective) conservatism, means thinking that there is a kind of natural appropriateness about it. A spoon, to use a very simple example, is an eternal tool that cannot be perfected since it represents a perfect match between soup and mouth, so to speak – there is no conceivable conception of eating in our culture that can ignore this simple fact. In that sense, political conservatism is merely a way of pointing out a match between government and human nature or human behavior as it appears in a given society.[[19]](#endnote-19) Political conservatism is not a political conception but a political experience in the first place. It is a more self-evident position than any speculative principle or ‘self-evident truth,’ however authoritatively proclaimed, because it is more consistent with the way people live and wish to live in their own world. This sounds like a pretty relativist position, and Oakeshott does not hesitate to repeat the point:

(…) as I understand it, a disposition to be conservative in politics does not entail either that we should hold these beliefs to be true or even that we should suppose them to be true. Indeed, I do not think it is necessarily connected with any particular beliefs about the universe, about the world in general or about human conduct in general. What it is tied to is certain beliefs about the activity of governing and the instruments of government (…).[[20]](#endnote-20)

Kolnai would certainly agree with Oakeshott about the futility of speculations about human nature, as well as on “the world in general” and on “human conduct in general.” Thus, when he writes that appetite precedes eating and cuisine, he does not want to say that a general and scientific theory of appetite is *necessary* for providing for the right diet of man (a tenet of our age). That would be the wrong sort of rationalism. What he might have referred to here is the *objective moral order*, or the *objective dimension* of morality, rather than true human nature. This order or dimension would prohibit cannibalism and would hardly approve of Hannibal Lecter’s style of cuisine. For Kolnai, not science but morality is the ultimate authority, though not in its Aristotelian (egoistically happiness-centered), nor in its Kantian (rule and duty-obsessive), nor in its utilitarian (the tyranny of goodness) version (and fallacy). Human nature or human conduct is indeed fluid enough, but the moral order is not. General theory or perhaps the method of objectivism that helps us avoid both rationalism and irrationalism must be applied to moral life and practice, and by implication, to political practice. Our reflections on our experiences need a compass.

*Forms of morality*

Conservatism rejects a moral order that consists of a prefixed system of axioms and maxims. Moral rationalism is as suspect as political rationalism. But this is only one and a very crude assessment of the conservative position on morality. First, let us focus on Oakeshott’s consummate assessment of moral theory in his essay *The Tower of Babel.* Here he writes that morality comes in two basic forms. The first is a “*habit of affection and behaviour*, not a habit of reflective *thought,* but a habit of *affection* and *conduct*.” In the second form, morality is an activity that “is determined, not by a habit of behaviour, but by *the reflective application of a moral criterion*. It appears in two common varieties: as the *self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals*, and as *the reflective observance of moral rules*.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Oakeshott makes no secret of his preference for the first type of morality as an activity, again, not in the sense that it is rationally superior or truer than the second type, but in the sense that it is closer to our common experience of moral life. Of course, this second type is also a familiar kind of activity, in both of its varieties. Moral education consists of teaching codes and rules, of the examination of the conscience of moral persons, and encouraging the latter to follow moral paragons, etc. There is nothing wrong with this. However, our moral life is very different. It is guided and governed mostly by habits and customs which are, according to Oakeshott, nonetheless not irrational or amoral. Customs may be thought to be blind, but only in the sense bats are blind. They can fly and hunt very efficiently by help of their special organs, much like human beings are guided reliably by their moral sense. This form of morality is almost an automatism of living socially. Speculative rationality is absent from it.

Oakeshott does not argue, however, that our moral sense is formed completely unconsciously and that we are literally *Gewohnheitstiere*. His leading metaphor in this essay is language. The appropriation and mastering of the mother tongue is a process that begins and goes on in an unreflective way but there is a strong element of interpersonality, playfulness, self-learning and a lot more in how we learn to speak. Similarly, our moral character is a special human feature. It is a product of interactions and of continuous communication with others, and is essentially connected with our self-esteem, with our identity. Oakeshott’s argument implies that even this form of morality and moral life cannot be entirely alien to rationality. Those who are never taught the Decalogue explicitly will learn some of the rules of morality by being told not to do this or that because it is wrong, bad, or simply forbidden. There may be no other justification behind a prohibition but that an action hurts other people, clashes with the law or order, or that it harms the subject and their interests. Sometimes the justification of a prohibition is nothing else but telling the other that what they intend to do or did is nasty or ugly. These are not reasons inferred from unshakable principles, yet they are reasons nonetheless, appealing implicitly or vaguely to some value or principle that the subject is expected to recognize as his or her own.

A “reflective observance of moral rules” may now be contrasted with this tacit yet not automatic habit of conduct. By extending the metaphor of language, we may think of the ‘activity’ of learning a foreign language. Following grammatical rules consciously is often essential for learning a language. In doing so many people try to understand the logic of the language. However, they should then realize that, very often, the logic is best captured by the exceptions, by the creative, surprising, unpredictable turns of the language under study. Reason (conscious rule-following) is constantly deceived and sometimes dumbfounded. Similarly, a very strict moral principle may be overturned by a custom. A general rule may be suspended, say, for reasons of courtesy. If every human being has the same right to life, prescriptions such as ‘women and children first’ are impermissible. And yet they exist and are generally approved of. However, it would be equally absurd to deny that ethical rules also exist. Even native speakers of a language must sometimes reflect on the grammar. Grammars in general are sensible and useful, though not always, everywhere, and for everybody. Reflection is often necessary, but Oakeshott suggests that it is the exception, sanctified by customs and habits, that has the upper hand.

However, one should be careful about metaphors. Language and morality are distinct phenomena, after all. As John Kekes writes,

(…) the overwhelming majority of humanity has to struggle with contrary native dispositions, confused and confusing upbringing, and a social context in which injustice, insecurity, deep moral divisions, and far-reaching changes continually pose difficult problems coping with which demand reflection and judgment.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Most people rarely consult grammar books and the reason is simple: they do not need to; during speaking and writing conflicts of precepts, rules and principles seldom occur. Morality can be, and sometimes is, dramatically different. What Oakeshott seems to overlook here is the experience of conflicts in ordinary moral life, which is surely closer to Kekes’ description. Even if certain persons are so pure or morally perfect that they practically cannot sin or cannot do any serious wrong, they too must face moral conflicts within their own human networks. The problem of moral conflicts is in some way constitutive of moral philosophy. True, not everyone believes that an ultimate principle, a golden rule, or some overriding value will ever be discovered or determined. However, the second form of morality, especially its rule-observance variety, is more than an activity pursued by some people for its own sake or as a passion. It grows naturally out of the first form. It is not the pursuit of a single principle but, if necessary, involves reflection on the relevance of strict moral rules and their application to solving real moral conflicts.

It has been argued that conservatism is known for its wariness of large-scale and abstract moral theories. The problem is that without some anchor in moral righteousness, goodness or any other solid foundation, the threat of rational and moral relativism arises. Oakeshott’s essay on the two forms of morality is certainly valuable as it sheds light on moral life as most people live it, and in a charitable reading even its habitual and unreflective forms can be shown to be more than mere automatism. Moral habits and customs are different from personal likings and reflexes inasmuch as they are constantly challenged by the reality of conflicts and they need to be justified, however crudely and roughly. The core of this form of morality is indeed not a doctrine, but neither is it an ad hoc assemblage of various practices. Moral conflicts force us to reflect on the rules of moral conduct, though probably not on a daily basis. However, a single but serious conflict is enough to undermine conservative moral thinking unless conservatism can embrace a more consciously and deliberately reflective – and on that account more rational – form of morality which nonetheless remains distinct from the grand and grandiose theories of ethical rationalism. The mere distinction between forms of morality seems to be insufficient to prevent moral relativism or create the non-rationalist authority or compass without which our manifold experiences can lead us astray.

*Forms of goodness*

Grounded in phenomenological objectivism, Kolnai developed a non-rationalist conception of morality.[[23]](#endnote-23) As earlier pointed out, he was critical not only of utilitarian and Kantian, but even of Aristotelian ethical theory (although this version enjoys considerable popularity within conservative circles). Further, much as Oakeshott did, Kolnai put great emphasis on the significance of praxis or practice, the everyday business that moral persons go about, and the various inherent purposes of these practices. Here he is in full agreement with Oakeshott. As E. C. Corey summarizes, for Oakeshott practical life

is the life of interest, desire, and aversion. It is concerned not merely with personal advancement and physical survival but also with friendships and alliances, the nurture of children, and all moral activity. (…) Practice is (…) a mode of experience where individuals pursue happiness…[[24]](#endnote-24)

Kolnai adds that practical life so conceived is marked by a strong component of goodness. Whatever people do, especially activities that they are fond of doing, is in some way good. Kolnai uses the term “goodness” in a non-moral (or not-yet-moral) sense, of course. The point is that our experience of goodness is typically not connected to rightness – it is not a value which supervenes the ethical rightness of our actions. Practical life thus has the upper hand. Again, this is Oakeshott’s major point as well, and one which Corey calls his “most fundamental insight into the nature of morality and politics.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

However, morality is not merely a practice, in either of the forms expounded by Oakeshott. Morality, or rather moral concern, emerges in two ways. First, as already noted, moral conflicts undoubtedly exist. How could and should we choose morally, yet without trying to find out the ultimate ethical solution, as moral rationalism suggests? Kolnai’s objectivist phenomenology proposes that there is a loose hierarchy of things, activities and values in terms of goodness. Why should we think that moral rightness constitutes the highest good? No doubt, moral goodness conceived of in terms of rightness (for instance) is indeed highly valuable, but it may have its rivals. The context of a conflict, circumstances, and those who happen to be present with us make demands on us and we are called to respond to them by evaluating the various forms of goodness as they appear within the conflict. We are indeed ‘required’ to choose the greatest value, the highest good, yet in what this consists depends on the conflict itself. Goodness is objective, but it does not impose itself upon us in an absolutist manner but allows for reflection and evaluation. We must accept the objectivity of goodness and be attentive to ethical principles but we are called to evaluate all the normative demands of a (potentially conflictual) situation. It is possible that moral goodness (perhaps in the form of ethical rightness, as commanded by some rule) prevails, but not always and not unconditionally.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The second way morality enters our life is the emergence of evil. Explicit prohibitions such as the Decalogue and other ‘do nots’ and ‘shall nots’ are actually not inferences from some higher and more abstract principles, but responses and reactions to the appearance and reality of evil. As was earlier argued, we are used to responding to evil with prohibitions that, if necessary, we justify by a reference to some general principle. Nonetheless, such principles are often hard to integrate into grand conceptions of morality or subsume under an ultimate rule of morality, be that the categorical imperative, the Golden Rule, universal respect for persons, or whatever else. In a fundamental sense, evil and our reactions to it precede ethical theories. Kolnai calls this the thematic primacy of evil: in practical moral life (see Oakeshott’s first form of morality) we fight or resist moral evil by saying simply ‘no’ to it, and saying this ‘no’ is, in fact, *the* ethical or moral aspect of the situation.

Ethical theories can be themselves wrong, misleading, miscalculating, precisely due to their speculative and rationalistic nature, and this may enhance, rather than reduce, evil. Here again Oakeshott’s point about moral theorizing as a practice is relevant: despite the necessity and inevitability of this practice, it bears the risk of morphing into a tyrannical attitude. Kolnai was especially concerned with the utopian consequences of such theories, and went even farther than Oakeshott. The former thought that these consequences entail that the final and ultimate rationalistic solution to evil is the philosophically and politically accomplished elimination of the distinction between good and evil. If everything, especially social relations are construed perfectly, then they are de facto morally good and right, and then it is impossible for (human-caused) evil to persist. In this case, morality itself becomes unnecessary. Paradoxically as it may sound, there is no such thing as ‘the final battle with evil’, as moral rationalism is inclined to predict, for this is itself an evil that we should resist and combat.

For Kolnai, morality is firmly rooted in the objective world in the sense that we are able to discover and experience it, usually in the form of encountering evil. This is the compass that we need. Although it is difficult to tell what moral goodness consists of because goodness has so many faces, it is much easier to tell what moral evil consists of, because evil is, ultimately, what awakens and alerts our conscience – that is, our moral self.

*Conclusion*

Both Oakeshott and Kolnai were conservatives. They shared the critique of rationalism in politics and morality. At the core of their philosophies we find a robust concept of experience; the idea that reason untied from life, practice, history, tradition, customs and habits is doomed to useless and potentially dangerous speculation; and that reasoning is always embedded in practice and provoked by experiences. For Kolnai, the experience of Nazism (and previously, the experience of Communism in 1918 in Hungary) was a formative influence: the intellectual and even moral robustness and formidable power of Nazi ideology intruded, so to speak, through the experience of disgust, into his thinking, prompting him to react by writing one of the greatest books written about and against Nazism. Oakeshott’s essay on conservatism has been even more influential and inspiring. The point is, again, that conservatism is portrayed mainly as a political experience, or an attitude that grows out of various experiences, including political ones and that flows into politics as a world of experiences again.

However, the two thinkers differ in their responses to the old objection that points out the relativism inherent to any philosophy which denounces reason as the ultimate authority in every matter. What is especially worrying is moral relativism in politics, hence I have compared the authors’ accounts of morality here. Oakeshott seems to be content with making a distinction between two forms of morality, and announcing his preference for the first form. However, moral conflicts and the presence and prevalence of evil render this form insufficient or deficient in practice more often than not, making the second, rationalist form appear to be an attractive and, actually, inevitable alternative. Kolnai takes up this challenge. He was a lifelong follower of Husserl and his objectivist phenomenology that he thought was a true and worthy heir to medieval Scholasticism at its best. Grounded in this philosophical tradition, he defends the objective dimension of morality, especially of values. He argues that values represent different degrees of goodness, and that moral goodness is not necessarily the highest possible value. Moral agents are called to respond to the call of various values, not in the sense of choosing between them fully autonomously, but in the sense of evaluating them in terms of their urgency and degree of goodness. This is a way of managing conflicts without resorting to some overarching principle or rule derived from philosophical speculation. Finally, Kolnai argues that the ethical theme emerges mainly as a response to the presence of evil by way of our conscience alerting us to prohibitions, rather than to some fully-fledged ethical ideals. The more moral philosophy entangles itself by elaborating such ideals, the more it will be inclined to substitute them for our conscience and the objective reality of morality, and hence to become another source of evil.

ENDNOTES

1. Kolnai, Aurel. 1937. *The War Against the West*. London: Gollancz. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lukacs, Georg. 1980. *The Destruction of Reason*. London: Merlin Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. That it is indeed not easy to navigate between the Scylla of rationalism and the Charybdis of irrationalism is clear from Kolnai’s assessment of E. Voegelin’s position, who he considered at first to be too friendly toward an unacceptable criticism of intellectualism. In *The War Against The West* he calls Voegelin’s exposition of “Georgian neo-Platonism” a “‘sublimized’ racial ideology, but of a more scientific turn and with a corresponding note of personal reserve” (p. 187). However, he cites Voegelin’s views on the secularization of Christianity and especially on the problems of “dogmatic and rationalist, conservative and democratic Christianity” (ibid) with some sympathy, especially because Voegelin stresses the demonic side of German anti-Christian and Neo-Pagan movements. To Kolnai, this is unintended testimony to the truly dark side of anti-intellectualism; yet again, the idea that the Germans never appropriated the real and reasonable form of Christianity and hence ever remained easy prey to anti-Christian revolutions is a recurrent theme in his book. Despite the critique of Voegelin on these pages, there are many points of agreement between the two authors. In fact, Kolnai later recants his former judgment, writing that Voegelin, whom he often met in Vienna in the Georg Fleisher Circle, “had the gift which I value above everything: that of interpreting tangible single facts in a wide philosophical perspective. (…) In a discreet high level manner, he was devoting an attention to the spiritual aspects of Fascism and Racialism which, for all his objectivity and independence of mind, was less critical than the view he was taking of democracy. Therefore, without attaint to my appreciation of his intellectual stature, I judged him – I fear – somewhat one-sidedly (…). Kolnai, Aurel. *Political Memoirs*. 1999. Murphy, F. ed. Lanham, etc.: Lexington Books, p. 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kolnai, *The War Against the West*, p. 57-58, original italics. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kolnai, Aurel. 1978. “The Sovereignty of the Object” in *Ethics, Value and Reality*, in *Ethics, Value and Reality.* Dunlop, Francis and Brian Klug ed. Indianapolis: Hackett: 23-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Husserl, Edmund. 1973. *Experience and Judgment. Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kolnai, Aurel. 1998. “The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust and Hatred.” *Mind*, 107: 581-95. Kolnai, Aurel. 2004. *On Disgust.* Smith, Barry and Carolyn Korsmeyer ed. Chicago: Open Court. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. There is hardly a more accomplished book on intellectual disgust than *Gulliver’s Travels*, especially the fourth journey. The Yahoos stand for anything and everything that is vicious, abominable and nasty about mankind. The horses have these reactions, too, and yet they are nonplussed about the very possibility of such creatures, and hence they are *interested* in them. Although Gulliver sings endless praise about the rationality of horse society, the only object that challenges reason there is the existence and behavior of the Yahoos. Without the existence of the Yahoos, the perfection of the horses would be absolutely dulled. It is literally their disgust of the Yahoos that makes *them*, in turn, also interesting. Further, as far as Gulliver is concerned, he of course knows that he has more in common with them than he would like to admit, and therefore he is not really curious about the Yahoos. In his case, it is again the deep aversion and disgust he feels towards himself, his being confronted with the reality of his own nature that moves his reason and turns it towards the perfection of horse society. It is another issue whether Swift wanted to present this as a rationalist utopia or a rationalist dystopia. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Kolnai, *The Sovereignty of the Object*, p. 27 (original italics). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “*Gestalt*, that war-cry of modern German thought, reaching far beyond the bounds of nationalism, reaction and politics! *Gestalt*, the blind-alley of a swollen, mystagogic ‘culture,’ despising ‘commonplace’ constructive design, but infused with the spirit of miraculous, mysterious, forceful ‘Life’!” (*The War Against The West*, p. 36). Notice Kolnai’s style: the extensive use of inverted commas, the many adjectives, metaphors – these are the marks of an intellectual approach that wants to bring home an idea in a way that appeals to Intellect rather than Reason. To fully understand Nazism, one has to be capable of receiving the full weight of Nazi argumentation. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. *Experience and Its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. “Introduction to Leviathan” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Liberty Press: Indianapolis: 221-94, p 239. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Marsh, Leslie. 2010. “Ryle and Oakeshott on the ‘Knowing-How/Knowing-That’ Distinction” in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism.* Abel, C. ed. Exeter: Imprint Academic: 143-160, p. 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. “On Being Conservative” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Liberty Press: Indianapolis: 407-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kolnai, Aurel. 1999. “Conservatism and the Natural Order of Things: A Review of Michael Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics*” in *Privilege and Liberty and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*. Mahoney, D. J. ed. Lanham etc.: Lexington Books: 167-72, p. 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. On the significance of the concept of practice in Oakeshott’s thinking, see Nardin, Terry. 2001. *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott.* University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kolnai, *Conservatism and the Natural Order of Things*, p. 168 (original italics). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Oakeshott writes that “[m]y purpose is (…) to point out that there is another quite different understanding of government, and that it is no less intelligible and in some respects perhaps more appropriate to our circumstances. The spring of this other disposition in respect of governing and the instruments of government – a conservative disposition – is to be found in the acceptance of the current condition of human circumstances as I have described it…” *On Being Conservative*, p. 426. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, p. 423. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. “The Tower of Babel” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Liberty Press: Indianapolis: 465-87; pp. 467, 472. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Kekes, John. 2006. *The Enlargement of Life. Moral Imagination at Work.* Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, p. 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Kolnai, Aurel. 1978. “Morality and Practice I-II” In *Ethics, Value and Reality. Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai.* Dunlop, Francis and Brian Klug ed. Indianapolis, Hackett: 63-94; 95-122. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Corey, Elisabeth Campbell. 2006. *Michael Oakeshott On Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics.* Columbia, London: University of Missouri Press, pp. 53-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See on this Bessemans, Chris. 2012. *Ethics and value reality. Aurel Kolnai’s legacy: an analytic ethic based on the phenomenology of value-consciousness and moral awareness.* Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)