Rationalism and Irrationalism: Aurel Kolnai and Michael Oakeshott

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ABSTRACT

Both thinkers agree that human experience preempts rational thinking, and that rational reflection is always embedded in an encounter with reality where sensual perception, emotional reactions, memories and images play the more fundamental role. They also agree that the various sorts of human activities, shaped in practices which constitute the praxis, are often more habitual than reflective. Kolnai adds that they usually bear the mark of non-moral goodness. The customary objection is that such a view of human life where reason has such a subordinated, ancillary function threatens with relativism, immoralism, idleness, and political disinterestedness, even apathy. 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 solutions. Whereas Oakeshott emphasizes the rationality of reasoning as a practice as well as the constrained but real rationality of traditions, Kolnai thought that the early Husserlian objectivist phenomenology was the solid ground to defend reason against the onslaught of irrationalism of the 1930ies. Further, whereas Oakeshott asserts that even in moral matters it is our habitual moral thinking that wins in the end, Kolnai argues that the presence of moral conflicts and moral evil makes a philosophical defense of objective moral order necessary. He thinks that although the standard versions of rationalist moralism (Kantianism, utilitarianism, even Aristotelianism) are defective, moral subjectivism or irrationalism can also be shown to be fallacious.

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It is a remarkable fact of history that the Austro-Hungarian Empire produced so many fine minds during its brief flourishing, including philosophers, scientists, novelists and other artists. Even after its dissolution by the Paris Treaties, the Monarchy continued to influence the next generation, many members of which were born in the early 20th century. That was also the golden age of modern Hungary, too. In particular, conservative thinking (broadly understood) owes a lot to this exceptionally fruitful period of the empire. Within this context, thinkers such as the late Michael Polanyi, Thomas Molnar, Aurel Kolnai, as well as the still active John Lukacs and John Kekes represent the Hungarian-born (regretfully but understandably, emigrant) wing. Trivially, their thoughts and ideas are different in many ways but it remains true that they all reject modern utopianism, progressivism, the absolutization of primary principles and values, the belief in unconstrained democracy, and grand-scale social constructivism. In this essay I wish to focus on Aurel Kolnai and his views on rationalism and rationality, comparing them to Michael Oakeshott’s ideas.

Since Kolnai’s philosophy is much lesser known than Oakeshott’s thought, though his works have been published and republished in recent years, it seems to be appropriate to say a few words on his intellectual career. Born in Budapest, he was member of the radical youth group ’Galilei Circle.’ The Chrysanthemum (or October) Revolution of 1918 disappointed him and the Bolshevik takeover made him leave Hungary. He studied in Vienna, soon relinquishing his Freudist illusions, and converting to Catholicism in 1925. His main philosophical love was, and remained so 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* [henceforth: WAW], a phenomenological analysis of Nazism, even today possibly unsurpassed in profundity and richness in details.[[1]](#endnote-1) His later years in the US, Canada, and England were marked by a more and more conservative social philosophy and 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 the Western civilization to which Kolnai was deeply committed.

WAW is an ample text for starting to explore Kolnai’s views on rationalism and irrationalism. Being notorious for its self-avowedly and unabashedly 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. Now since the critique of reason, especially in the role of an idol, has ever been a point of agreement between moderate and radical conservatives, it is unsurprising that some of the latter gave in to the robust lure of Nazi thinking, or converted to some obscure or esoteric ideologies, based on the cult of something – anything – that is *not* reason. Steering clear of both such seductions and the naïve and unfounded Settembrinian humanism and 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. A rejection of the passionate and totalitarian irrationalism of Nazism combined with a rejection of the progressive belief in reason was not, and had not been since, an easy task.[[3]](#endnote-3) Kolnai found the necessary support in phenomenological objectivism. However, WAW is not an exposition of it. It is a critical work that was written in a style and in the hope that a wider audience would read it (which did in fact happen), and it does not contain elaborated philosophical concepts and distinctions. There is, nonetheless, an important reason why the book is an ample point of departure also in respect of philosophical subtlety. The reason is the *experience* of Nazism as it presents or presented itself to Reason.

*Objectivity and its Denial: the Challenge of Nazi Thought*

Kolnai discusses several Nazi and proto-Nazi authors, long forgotten today, yet very influential thinkers of their own day. Houston S. Chamberlain, for one, was an English forerunner of Nazism. His attack on objectivity, or the spirit thereof, on a belief in the possibility of objective standards of 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) is a peculiarly German achievement, an expression of German creativity. Technical achievements and successes are not evidences of the capabilities of human reason but of racial superiority, shining through natural science. 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. Now *that* is unacceptable. Objectivity so understood is triumphantly replaced by a notion of strong, self-assertive subjectivity (the collective, racial reason) as the only objective reality.

As Lukacs does not, Kolnai has some understanding towards 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 are eliminated: ‘science’ is never neutral, and bourgeois rationality is a distortion of reason.) He 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 objective reality and truth 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 movement 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 path of 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 any sound philosophy. The right use of reason is neither a simple belief in reason as a human faculty to know the world as God does, nor its degradation to a faculty of the 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, the sovereignty of the object;[[5]](#endnote-5) and it 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 WAW itself. On the one hand, it is an autonomous attempt to reveal the truth of Nazism and to capture its essence. On the other hand, this is not performed by some preconceived ideology or scientific truth but through letting the ‘object’ speak for itself. Kolnai was a practical phenomenologist (unlike the speculative and obscure Heidegger whom he despised), a connoisseur of topics among philosophers, selecting out objects for rational analysis that emerged from reality, from the various urges of the day, from the very depths of human life, for no ‘rational’ but for their own ‘reason.’ Nazism was there for being studied not because it was a logical possibility, an ideological position that no one has canvassed so far, as 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 highly 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 we 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. Rather, reason begins its work of understanding and penetrating reality because it finds something interesting, in this case, something that strikes us as disgusting. Having written about disgust (also on hatred and pride),[[6]](#endnote-6) Kolnai was especially capable of coping with the greatest intellectually and morally disgusting thing as an object, namely, with Nazism. For Nazi ideology was to him a disgusting yet for that very reason alone an ‘interesting’ object, where the emotion (disgust), as the appropriate reaction or reactive attitude, does not distort, even help the intellect to do its job.

The job is to get as close to objective truth as possible. That is a job of man, not only the job of the human intellect or reason. Disgust tells *me* something about *reality* but I do not just happen to be disgusted by something, it is not merely my senses that are alerted, nor is it a curious existential experience. My reason is also alerted.[[7]](#endnote-7) Reality forces me to think, reflect, and explore. Hence, philosophy, the highest sort of reflection, is but one, though in one sense the most important, mode of coming close to truth. That sense is negative, similar to but not identical with the Popperian idea of falsification. Philosophy should serve as a tool of reason to disclose every type of false knowledge in the first place, beginning with subjectivism, the arch-enemy of objective truth. Its more constructive part, that of describing objective truth, is always more tentative, and often less reliable and less persuasive that the knowledge arts or common sense, indeed, man as intellect, spirit, and soul yields 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*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Knowledge belongs, thus, to man, and not to reason. 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 the race) and that reason is merely an expression of strength and will is false. This is simply nonsense and self-defective for the obvious reason: if reason is merely an expression of the will or racial strength or identity or whatever else, then it is indistinguishable from them and ceases to be reason.

How can Nazism be understood and reasonably rejected? Negative philosophy, the method of refutations, pointing out the self-defective consequences, valuable as it can be, is usually not enough. However, we should not give in to the temptation of purely emotional and summary reactions, either. Nazism is a formidable part of reality because it also speaks to man. Though Kolnai dismissed the concept of *Gestalt*,[[9]](#endnote-9) the idea that reality is understood in terms of shapes, types, forms because of the irrationalist abuse of the concept, yet his own exposition of Nazism is in a strong sense nothing more and nothing less but suggesting 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 close 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 does have a certain intellectual and spiritual *Gestalt*, notwithstanding Kolnai’s 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 find Nazism to be 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 necessary emotions of finding it detestable and of appreciating Western civilization and its achievements. Thus, we can conclude, if objectivity or a belief in objectivity is a target of Nazi irrationalism, then it can and needs to be confronted by not a belief in Pure Reason but by a unique combination of common sense, moral sobriety, good taste, and finely educated passions.

*Conservatism and Relativism*

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.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The concept of experience looks congenial to Kolnai’s emotional presentation. In Oakeshott’s view, experience is not something that finds us ready to be impressed by. 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 acting 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, once we do it 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 extreme form, Oakeshott suggests that Hobbes 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.[[11]](#endnote-11)

On Oakeshott’s interpretation, Hobbes is by no means the founder or the first architect of political science as we used to understand 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 way of persuading ourselves that government is possible and desirable provided that we do not ignore the political context and the political experiences with civil war. Such speculations are embedded in experience. A successful and reasonable reasoning needs a variety of 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.[[12]](#endnote-12)

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 patter recognition ability, rather than an explicit inferential capacity.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Similarly, conservative thinking is basically an experience and a reflection thereon, rather than a conception or 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.”[[14]](#endnote-14) “Design” and “construction” look a bit constructivist and rationalist concepts but the point is rather to explore an experience with 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, in both cases, despite the one being about rejection, the other about embracement, we have the same philosophical attitude of keeping distance to the object and being immersed in it almost to the point of identification. These are truly fine and memorable examples of philosophical inquiry. Such an inquiry starts always from the context and not from the solitary self. 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 in the first case (rank barbarism in the midst of high civilization), strikingly natural in the second case (conservatism is against progress, yet progress is inevitable), that we may interpret as experiences or phenomena that engage reflective reason.[[15]](#endnote-15) Nazi thinking is interesting because it is found to be both highly intelligent yet barbaric, persuasive yet absurd. Conservatism is interesting because it seats more deeply in human nature than most (then contemporary) political philosophers would be or would have been willing to admit and perhaps be capable of retrieving for a nicely constructed theory. And both are felicitously complex so that neither allows for a rationalist treatment.

Caution is, nonetheless, in order. Kolnai wrote a review of Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics* which he held in high esteem, yet 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 of the job to do, inasmuch as no serious conservative is only a conservative, that is, a man having 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 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) And he recalls his former battles fought with his former 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 of 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. Despite the colorful and often meandering style, Oakeshott makes usually a straightforward and single major point and follows and either/or approach. On the contrary, 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 of approach and style or there is a more substantial disagreement here.

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, he argues implicitly, a reason to be conservative. Conservatism is more than a matter of personal liking or preference, yet it is not a demonstrable political conception, either. 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 is a perfect match between soup and mouth, so to speak; and there is no conceivable conception of eating in our culture that can dispose of 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 thus a more self-evident position than any speculative principle or ‘self-evident truth,’ however majestically proclaimed because it is more consistent with the way people live and wish to live in their own world. This sounds 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 on the futility of speculations on human nature, as well as on “the world in general” and on “human conduct in general.” Thus, when he writes that the appetite precedes eating and cuisine, he does not want to say that a general and scientific theory of the appetite is *necessary* to provide 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*, rather than the true human nature. This order would for instance prohibit cannibalism (though it is not part of our culture) and would hardly approve of a cuisine of Hannibal Lecter’s style (not part of our culture – as yet?). Not science but morality is for Kolnai 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. The general theory or perhaps 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.

*Forms of Morality and the Nature of Moral Order*

No doubt, conservatism rejects a moral order that consists in a prefixed system of axioms and maxims. Moral rationalism is as suspect as is 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 at it reads in *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 morality. Not that this second type would not be a well-known and widely applied type of activity, in either of its varieties. Moral education consists, among others, in teaching codes and rules, the examination of conscience, or encouraging moral persons to follow moral paragons. There is nothing wrong with this but much of our moral life is de facto 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 with their special organs much like human beings are guided reliably by their moral sense. It seems that this form of morality is almost an automatism of living socially and that reason and rationality are entirely 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 intersubjectivity, 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 a continuous communication with others, and it is essentially connected with our self-esteem, with our identity. The Oakeshottian argument seems to imply 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 to do. There may be no other rational explanation behind a prohibition but that an action hurts other people, clashes with the law or the order, or even that it harms the subject and his or her own interests. These are not necessarily lofty reasons yet they are reasons nonetheless, appealing implicitly to some universal 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 usually essential to learn a language. Doing so, many people try to understand the ‘logic’ of the language. This is surely there but it turns out very often that the logic is best captured by the exceptions, by the creative, surprising, unpredictable turns of the language to be learned. Reason (the 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 the children and ladies should be saved first are impermissible. And yet they exist and generally approved of. However, it would be 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 to everybody. Reflection is often necessary but, Oakeshott suggests, 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 do that because 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 that they practically cannot sin or cannot do any serious wrong, they too must face moral conflicts within their own human networks. A large part of the corpus of moral philosophy has been on the problem of moral conflicts. Not everyone believes that an ultimate principle, a golden rule, or some overriding value will ever be found. However, the second form of morality is obviously more than an activity pursued by some people for its own sake or a sort of a passion. It grows quite naturally out of the first form, though not necessarily resulting in a choice of some moral ideal, nor in a reflective observance of moral rules but in a constant alertness to moral conflicts (within oneself and in the big moral world constituted by all morally relevant persons and collectives) and to the presence of moral evil.

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, rational and moral relativism threatens. 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 on a charitable reading even the habitual and unreflective form of it can be shown to be more than a mere automatism. Moral habits and customs are different from personal likings and reflexes inasmuch as they are constantly challenged and 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 human affairs and practices. However, the second form of morality, which appears to be at variance with conservatism, is not as neatly distinguishable from the first form as it might seem to be. Moral conflicts force us to reflect on the rules of moral conduct, though probably not on a daily basis. However, one single but serious conflict is sufficient 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.

Grounded in phenomenological objectivism, Kolnai developed a more elaborate yet by no means rationalist conception of morality.[[23]](#endnote-23) As was pointed out, he was critical not only of the utilitarian and Kantian, but even of the Aristotelian ethical theory (although this version enjoys considerable popularity within conservative circles). Further, much as Oakeshott did, he also put a great emphasis on the significance of praxis or practice, the everyday businesses moral persons go about, and the various inherent purposes of these practices. Here he is in full agreement with Oakeshott who also wrote often about practice and practical life. As E. C. Corey sums it up, for him 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 goodness, generally understood. In other words, whatever people do, especially activities that they like to do or are fond of doing, are in some way good. This is a very bold statement but it is, like Oakeshott’s first type of morality, quite realistic, tolerant, and coherent with the Biblical view of creation as bearing the property of goodness. Goodness is not the fruit of rightness, and it is not an added value to right ethical inferences.

Practical life, and this is again Oakeshott’s fundamental point, always has the upper hand. Corey calls this his “most fundamental insight into the nature of morality and politics.”[[25]](#endnote-25) But morality is not merely a practice, in either of its Oakeshottian form. Morality, or rather, the moral concern emerges in two ways. First, as Kolnai’s objectivist phenomenology suggests, there is a hierarchy of things, activities and values in terms of goodness. Inequality and hierarchy are as much natural as is goodness in its most abstract aspect. It does not follow, however, that moral goodness is an absolute one, in the sense that we are morally required to promote absolute goodness or the greatest goodness for the greatest number. No such propositions or principles ensue from the realization that goodness resides in the objective world. It is the context, the circumstances, those who happen to be present with us and for us, and of course, the moral conflicts that demand, though does not command, us to respond to. This is not a rationalist understanding of the objective moral order, yet it allows for a more reflective and human activity that consists of a submission to the moral order and at the same time of evaluating the moral demands of a (potentially conflictual) situation in a dignified way. As in philosophy or in doing philosophy, submission and autonomy are also both present in moral thinking and in moral practice.

The second way morality enter our life is the emergence of evil. Explicit prohibitions such as the Decalogue and other ‘don’ts’ and ‘shall nots’ are actually not inferences of some higher and more abstract principles but responses and reactions to the appearance and reality of evil. As was argued, we used to respond to evil with prohibitions that, if necessary, we would justify by referring to some general principles. Nonetheless, these principles are often hard to be integrated into a grand conceptions of morality, or to be subsumed under an ultimate rule of morality, be that the categorical imperative, the Golden Rule, the universal respect for persons or whatever else. Thus, in a fundamental sense, evil and our reactions to it precede ethical theories.

This is trivial enough but it has far-reaching consequences for moral philosophy because ethical theories may themselves be wrong, misleading, miscalculations, precisely due to their speculative and rationalistic nature and this may enhance, rather than reduce, evil. Here again it is Oakeshott’s point about moral theorizing as a practice that comes to mind: notwithstanding the inevitability and necessity of this practice, it bears the risk of becoming a tyrannical attitude. Kolnai was concerned especially with the utopian consequences of such theories. He went even farther than Oakeshott insofar as he found that these consequences entail that the final and ultimate rationalist 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 that (human-caused) evil persists. In that case, morality itself becomes unnecessary.

*From Moral Rationalism to Utopian Totalitarianism*

The objective reality of evil, however, does not vanish by the non-fiat of the theorist. It even becomes greater and graver. Hence, the reality of evil provokes reason more than the reality of goodness does. It is evil about which the rationalist approach to morality confronts the common moral sense. Rationalism, and in particular moral rationalism is prone to end up with an ultimate political solution to the problem of evil. Even the most innocent-looking philosophical convictions, say, about equality, fraternity and liberty grounded in human rationality may then rapidly turn from arguments into weapons. As early as in the WAW, Kolnai senses the utopian danger:

some points in Nazi criticism of the inclination to utopian optimism displayed by the forces of the Left deserve rather careful consideration than wholesale dismissal.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The utopian lure of the belief in reason and science was to Kolnai a political experience that he had the fortune to have in 1918. The mad and dizzy days of the October Revolution in Budapest made a lifelong impression on him. Its intellectual leaders – if they were leaders at all – proved to be utterly incapable of defending their humanistic ideals against Communism which seemed even to them to be the ‘logical’ consequence of radicalism and the triumph of Reason against Tradition and the ancient regime. In political reality, intellectualism and the belief in the power of reason often prepares the way for unconstrained, totalitarian radicalism. Hence, even the worst kind of anti-intellectualism has at least a political point, after all. This does not diminish the moral evil it presents us with, yet the obvious evil inherent to racism and subjectivism, to the idea the morality is race-bound and it is an expression of will and life, may make our moral sense silent and dull when it comes to the evil inherent in grandiose moral theories and the political utopia they often serve.

Here, at last, we can return to rationalism and irrationalism in general. For once utopia is reached, the human race is fully safe. The narrower, social focus of utopian thinking is about the cessation of conflicts and disharmony. However, since the gravest conflicts we experience are rooted in moral and ideological controversies, the greatest benefit utopian thinking promises is the elimination of the roots themselves. Moral rationalism promises to put an end to moral conflicts by perfecting mankind and making the distinction between good and evil superfluous. Rationalism in general promises to prove that controversies are caused by false beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes, misconceptions that are all forms of irrationalism. Purifying the world of irrationalism is an intellectual, moral, and political duty. At the final stage, when reason is penetrates everything, the distinction between reason and unreason will be eliminated. In that state, reason ceases to be a human faculty and becomes a mechanical function of a new species that knows no more reasoning. Knowledge has no more personal aspect, there is only the knowledge of *the* race. Strange as it may sound, the utopian vision of rationalism is not different from what the most prominent Nazi ideologists thought about knowledge.[[27]](#endnote-27) The Nazi conception of racial reason was, thus, an inversion of intellectualism. The exaltation and celebration of anti-intellectualism was as unconstrained and unlimited as was the belief in the Supreme Being of Reason. Both seem to be discredited today. However, political and moral rationalism as well as utopian thinking are still flourishing. Tribal rationalism is hardly palatable to the contemporary Wester mind; yet racial rationalism where reason belongs to the human *race* as a collective subject looks not at all alien. A utopian desire for a perfect match between reality and racially universal reason that does not admit of personal knowledge, of autonomous thinking and reasoning, does not seem to be any weaker than ever.

ENDNOTES

1. Kolnai, Aurel. 1937. *The War Against the West*. London: Gollancz. [henceforth: WAW] [↑](#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. He considered him first too friendly toward an unacceptable criticism of intellectualism. In WAW 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 an unintended testimony of 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 preys to anti-Christian revolutions, is a recurrent theme of his book as well. Despite the critique of Voegelin on these pages, there is clear agreement between the two authors to the point that 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. WAW 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, F. and Klug, B. eds. Indianapolis: Hackett: 23-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Kolnai, Aurel. 1998. „The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust and Hatred.” *Mind*, 107: 581-95. Kolnai, Aurel. 2004. *On Disgust.* Smith, Barry and Korsmeyer, Carolyn eds. Chicago: Open Court [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. There is hardly a more accomplished book on intellectual disgust than *Gulliver’s Travels*, especially the Fourth Travel. 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 praises of the rationality of the 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 absolutely dull. 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 felt against himself, his being confronted with the reality of his own nature that moves his reason and turns it towards the perfection of the horse society. It is another issue whether Swift wanted to present it as a rationalist utopia or a rationalist dystopia. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kolnai, *The Sovereignty of the Object*, p. 27 (original italics). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. „*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’!” (WAW, p. 36). Notice Kolnai’s style: the extensive use of quotation marks, 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 the Intellect, rather than to the Reason. To fully understand Nazism, one has to be capable of receiving the full sway of Nazi argumentation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. *Experience and Its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Michael Oakeshott. 1991. „Introduction to Leviathan” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Liberty Press: Indianapolis: 221-94, p 239. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 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-13)
14. Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. „On Being Conservative” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Liberty Press: Indianapolis: 407-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Edmund Burke’s classic reflections on the French revolution constitute another famous example of reason being led to thoughtful and right conclusions from an existential and political crisis experienced in England, from a political agony felt about recent developments having taken a radical and lethal turn. [↑](#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. Michael Oakeshott. 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, F. and Klug, B. eds. 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. WAW, p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Kolnai cites F. Haiser’s obscure, yet menacing statement: Knowledge and truth are peculiarities originating in definite forms of consciousness, and hence attuned exclusively to the specific essence of their mother-consciousness.” WAW, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)