

**The Significance of Michael Oakeshott and Michael Polanyi to the Study of Politics**

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## **Abstract**

### **The Significance of Michael Oakeshott and Michael Polanyi to the Study of Politics**

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The epistemologies of Michael Oakeshott and Michael Polanyi are significant to the study of politics in that they justify a revision of the underlying positivist assumptions of mainstream social science methodological approaches. In this comparative analysis of these two philosophers' work, the epistemological concepts of tacit knowledge and practical knowledge are examined in order to explain why it is that a fundamentally positivist understanding of knowledge is illusory. This analysis points to a post-modernist approach to social phenomena, with a more holistic understanding of such phenomena as well as of knowledge.

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*For Elizabeth*

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## Introduction

The prevailing methodological approach to the study of politics in academia stems from the assumptions of logical positivism, which rest mainly on the principle of verificationism. What this refers to is the notion that only tautologies and the propositions that are verifiable by concrete, observable data are scientifically meaningful. The positivists assumed that “the methods used in the mathematizing sciences of the external world were possessed of some inherent virtue and that all other sciences would achieve comparable success if they followed the example and accepted these methods as their model.”<sup>1</sup> Secondly, they assumed that “the methods of the natural sciences were a criterion for theoretical relevance in general.”<sup>2</sup> The emergence of this positivist approach preceded by several decades the behaviouralist revolution in the social sciences in the 1950s, and stemmed from a concern amongst some scholars about a lack of legitimacy and neutrality in the study of politics. It may also have alleviated the psychic anxiety engendered in the minds of those for whom metaphysical concepts were experientially not comprehensible. The underlying philosophical assumptions of positivism, however, hark back to the thought of continental European philosophers of science such as Nicholas de Condorcet, Auguste Comte, and St. Simon in the 1820s approximately, and more recently to members of the Vienna Circle who gathered in the 1920s and 30s in order to elaborate the positivist program.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, though, these assumptions were borne of the gnostic illusion that laws of human progress were as real and discernible as

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See Friedrich von Hayek, “The Counter-Revolution of Science,” in *Economica*, New Series, Vol. 8, No. 29 to 31 (Feb. to Aug. 1941), pp. 9-36, 119-150, and 281-320.

the laws governing natural phenomena and of the transference of the Christian spiritual trinity to human history and knowledge, which engendered the familiar three-stage modern conceptualization of time.<sup>4</sup>

The study of politics in academia as we know it today in North America emerged from a historical and legal approach and eventually adopted its positivist cloak when concerns were expressed as to the lack of a more systematic approach that could generate more assurance in the predictive capacities of its results. When European political scholars who were escaping the Second World War were granted refuge and professional positions in American universities, a reform occurred in the field. These scholars brought with them a vision of social studies greatly influenced by continental proponents of a positivist approach to social questions, e.g. Condorcet and Saint Simon. In their attempt to mold American political studies to their understanding of a proper, more scientific approach, they infused the original departments with logical positivism as the epistemological backbone of social sciences. The 1950s are referred to as the behavioural revolution in these fields, the premise being the study of social conduct as governed by natural laws. The term “behave” points to conduct that is predetermined by laws already existing, the quest for political science being to discover these laws that govern political behaviour. At its core however, the positivist ideology was a reactionary negation of all things metaphysical. In Rudolf Carnap's words, “Metaphysical statements are all those propositions which claim to represent knowledge about something which is over or beyond all experience, e.g., about the real essence of things in themselves, the

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<sup>4</sup> See Eric Voegelin's chapter on gnosticism in his *New Science of Politics*, 107.

Absolute, and such like.”<sup>5</sup> For the positivist, experience is reduced to sense experience, and all metaphysically related concepts are but imaginary frivolities. Consequently, any notion of ethics is reduced to the pain/pleasure dimension of feeling, and the *episteme politike* is lost.

Eventually, the positivist influence gave way to criticism of its main tenets and it lost many adherents, but the positivist attitude still informs the current methodologies used in the field, and its assumptions are seldom addressed. While the influence of logical positivism has waned in the field of the philosophy of science, its assumptions still guide the study of politics. What is problematic yet understandable about this situation is that, once the student of politics or the political scientist has adopted a given methodology, its underlying assumptions are seldom questioned from an epistemological perspective. This is understandable because questions of epistemology are not necessarily of interest to the political scientist. What is problematic is that epistemology is fundamental to all cognitive endeavours. Implied in the underlying philosophy of social science to which political scientists explicitly or implicitly adhere, are assumptions about the way in which cognition works and what constitutes knowledge. If assumptions about the way in which we come to know something go unquestioned, methodological assumptions are left unchallenged.

In light of this, a comparative study of Michael Oakeshott’s (1901-1990) and Michael Polanyi’s (1891-1976) respective epistemological perspectives may offer a

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<sup>5</sup> Dante Germino quoting Rudolf Carnap, “The Revival of Political Theory”, in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1963, p. 451, f. 24.

richer conception of the study of politics. They are comparable on the grounds that each offers a perspective that criticizes and rejects the positivist approach to the study of politics. The research questions that guide this thesis are: a) what are Oakeshott's and Polanyi's respective philosophies of science and epistemological perspectives; b) what is the import of their philosophies for the study of politics; and c) whose perspective is more appropriate and/or significant for the study of politics? Although their epistemologies stem from different philosophical schools, Polanyi being a realist, and Oakeshott an idealist, they both offer a similar critique of the current positivist approach to the study of politics. Polanyi's concept of personal knowledge and Oakeshott's notion of 'practical' knowledge undermine the ideal of exact, neutral and value-free knowledge. Their epistemologies oppose the reductionist aspect of positivism that inherently neglects and shuns the personal and subsidiary dimensions of cognition. It will be argued that: a) each of their concepts of practical and subsidiary knowledge achieve the necessary correction to our misconceived ideal of disincarnate and rationalist knowledge, even if, in my view, Polanyi's explanation of subsidiarity achieves this more successfully; b) while Polanyi's realism is a much needed correction to relativism, Oakeshott's idealism is more comprehensive; c) because Polanyi's fiduciary programme is untenable, Oakeshott's experiential framework, however omniscient it may seem to some, is more attuned to our present experience; and yet, d) Polanyi's elucidation of the cognitive powers of the mind brings us closer to a restorative endeavour in the science of politics.

This comparative study is structured so as to offer a description of both philosophers' thought in parts I and II, and then to engage them critically and

comparatively in the third and final part. Parts I and II begin with an explanation of the epistemological premise of each philosopher, followed by the key concepts permeating these philosophers' respective epistemology, and finally offer an explanation of the import of these philosophers' epistemology to the study of politics. Accordingly, Part I, on Michael Oakeshott, consists of a preliminary description of idealism as the philosophical backdrop to Oakeshott's epistemology, then engages Oakeshott's concept of experience from which he derives his understanding of practical and technical knowledge, the explanation of which follows. Finally, his understanding of what the study of politics should consist of is considered.

In part II, Michael Polanyi's epistemological premise in realism is elaborated, followed by an explanation of his concept of personal knowledge from which he derives his notions of tacit and focal knowledge, and finally, what Polanyi's epistemology signifies for the study of politics is explained. I then consider their epistemologies critically and comparatively in Part III, beginning with my argument as to why their respective notions of tacit and practical knowledge are equally significant to the study of politics. Following this I compare and critique their respective philosophical traditions of idealism and realism, and then offer a comparative critique of the fiduciary element in Polanyi's thought and the experiential basis of Oakeshott's epistemology. Finally, I explain why the transcendental element in Polanyi's epistemology achieves more in the endeavour to restore to the study of politics its *episteme*. In conclusion, a consideration of what the study of politics might consist of, were the epistemologies of these two philosophers adopted, is offered.

## **Part I: Michael Oakeshott's Epistemology and its Import for the Study of Politics**

### 1- Michael Oakeshott's Epistemological Premise<sup>6</sup>

Michael Oakeshott derives his epistemological perspective from the philosophical tradition of idealism. It posits a unified experiential ground of cognition in response to the limitations perceived in the opposing perspectives of transcendental realism and nominalism. The realist strand emerged concretely in Plato's conceptualization of knowing. There is a world of hidden essence behind the illusory variety of particulars we see around us, and man is capable of making contact with and knowing this hidden world of pure Being by means of a theoretical disposition towards it. This essential element, or idea, behind the form, is universal and timeless. John is mortal and transitory, but the essence of Man, as idea or concept, is eternal. To see is to make one's way to the essential. In Plato's allegory of the cave, it is to discern the shadows on the walls and to make one's way out towards the sun. Philosophy is the endeavour to make contact with the essence of particulars. The latter, being eternal and universal, exists regardless of one's sensorial misconceptions. Pure 'Being' simply is.

The most common alternative to transcendental Realism is a view in which the names of things are not conceived as references to eternal and immutable essences. Instead, these supposedly essential concepts, e.g., trees, human beings, bears, relations, causes, effects, justice, are but names of things we perceive. They are inventions of ours for the efficient, conceptual organization of the particulars. They do not point to hidden

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<sup>6</sup> See W. H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 6-16.

essences, of which there are none. There is merely a variety of things. We categorize such things as plants, animals and humans, but these categories are merely heuristic. Nominalism, from *nomina* or names, involves the rejection of the conclusions of transcendental realism, instead insisting upon a refusal to lose oneself in theoretical dreamland, a loyalty to the empirical world we live in, and a reliance on the sensory organs that perceive this tangible world of ours.

Both traditions can be equally convincing. Could it be possible that they each carry truth? The affirmative answer to this question is what idealism suggests. Seeking to embrace the whole of experience, from both the seer's and the empiricist's perspectives, idealists try to offer an epistemological explanation that is true to the whole of experience, and more concrete than the abstract visions of both realism and nominalism. Transcendental realism places the essential nature of particulars and fundamental principles in an *a priori*, other-worldly realm and nominalism fails to account for the more subtle kinds of experiences such as emotions, faith, or intuition. In Kant's philosophy, the result is a defense of the reality of the noumenal realm of essence and fundamental principles, and of the possibility of *a priori* knowledge, but the denial of experience's capacity to come to know essential truth on the grounds that mere "perceptions without conceptions... are blind."<sup>7</sup> In Hegel's philosophy, the result is an acceptance of fundamental principles as real, but a refusal to place their foundation in some other-worldly, noumenal realm, and therefore also a refusal to deny the experiential capacity of coming into contact with fundamental principles.

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<sup>7</sup> Will Durant quoting Immanuel Kant, "Kant and German Idealism," in *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), 206.

For idealists, experience does not correspond to the “Platonic understanding of activity as copying ideal models.” According to Oakeshott, this view “has been overshadowed by a concept of ‘creative’ activity.”<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Steiner, an idealist, explains: “Truth is not, as is usually assumed, an ideal reflection of something real, but is a product of the human spirit, created by an activity which is *free*... The object of knowledge is not to *repeat* in conceptual form something which already exists, but rather to *create* a completely new sphere, which when combined with the world given to our senses constitutes complete reality. Thus man’s... creativeness is an organic part of the universal world-process.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike the image of man as the passive onlooker who observes or discovers an already existing truth that is complete in itself, in reality, man actually participates in the making of truth through cognition, the thoughts and concepts of which complete the world of the given. In Oakeshott’s words, a ‘given’ “is not a mere gratuity; it is itself an achievement in understanding and not therefore (in its distinctness) independent of reflective consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> The coherence of man’s experience “springs neither from a separately inspired moral sense nor from an instrumental conscience. There is, in fact, no external harmonizing power, insulated from the elements enjoying and in search of harmony. What establishes harmony and detects disharmony, is the concrete mind, a mind composed wholly of activities in search of harmony and throughout implicated in every achieved level of harmony.”<sup>11</sup> At first, this bold statement can come across as hubris for it may be understood as a denial of God. It is

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 512.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Truth and Knowledge*, ed. Paul M. Allen, trans. Rita Stebbing (Blauvelt, N.Y.: Steinerbooks, 1958), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 130.

quite possible that it does in fact deny a conception of God as the source of this harmonizing power or order. Yet it does place the burden of responsibility for moral conduct upon the shoulders of man, for if this assessment is correct, only man can be responsible for harmonizing his actions to moral standards set by his own conscience.

Idealism suggests that experience is the ground of knowledge, and no experience should be denied. Sensory experience is as much a part of the whole of concrete experience as is the kind of theoretical experience that makes contact with fundamental principles. Somehow we must understand the underlying unity and harmony of all these seemingly contradictory experiences that make up the whole of experience, and see the whole that encompasses these conceptual oppositions. Hegel suggested that the movement towards this goal is dialectic. A limited experience will be opposed by a contradictory, yet also limited experience, but synthesis is then created by a more comprehensive experience that unites the previous two. Another opposition to this synthesis then emerges and eventually synthesis is created again, and so on. Such is the movement of thought that leads to increasingly refined conceptions of the world, the concrete whole or Absolute Knowledge always lying beyond the experiential horizon. It might not be possible to achieve this bird's eye view of the whole, but that is the criterion which satisfies true philosophical experience.

British idealist R.G. Collingwood understood this to signify that the modes of experience in which we understand the world –art, religion, science, and history –are an actual scale of forms in which the truth of one is dialectically opposed, and then

encompassed by the following, more comprehensive mode, philosophy being the most comprehensive form of experience. In the view of F.H. Bradley, these concrete experiences are not hierarchically related. They do not dialectically oppose each other because they each carry their own specific postulates that cannot be carried over from one to the other.<sup>12</sup> They are all (except philosophy) limited equally in that they are all abstractions from the whole of experience, but their respective values cannot be denied. They each offer a partial, yet relevant, view of the whole, and as such, contribute to the unity of this whole. The philosopher's engagement is in defining the limitations of these different kinds of experience in order to point continuously to a more concrete whole of experience.<sup>13</sup> Oakeshott's *Experience and Its Modes* is his attempt to do this. In it he describes the nature of experience, the different modes in which one can experience the world, and their respective limitations, from a philosophical perspective.

## 2- Experience and its Modes

### a) The Nature of Experience

Before explaining the different modes of experience, Oakeshott discusses the nature of experience. This concept is the stepping stone of his epistemology. Experience is a concrete, unified, and whole phenomenon. Rejecting the view that there is such a distinction between immediate sense experience and mediated thought experience, Oakeshott collapses experience into judgment or thought. The two are essentially the same for there is no thought form that does not comprise judgment, and we cannot consider the experience we may have prior to, or outside of, consciousness, for such does

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<sup>12</sup> W. H. Greenleaf, 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 6-9.

not exist, experience *is* consciousness. We can only explain the nature of experience as we are consciously aware of it, and what we can attest to is that all forms of experience are essentially thought, even though they may, at first, seemingly come across as mere sensorial blurts. A more critical approach to the nature of experience suggests to Oakeshott that sensing something is impossible without the factor of judgment. As soon as an image, a texture, a sound, or a smell appears, judgment is involved. Thought is judgment. This is blue; I hear a bell; this must be leather; the stars are beautiful. No human contact with the world of particulars is made without the involvement of mind in which thought and therefore judgment are inherent.

The popular distinction between sensory, immediate experience and mediated thought experience is based on a dichotomous illusion created by the intellect. The intellect divides thought from sensation, cause from effect, subject from object, etc. It cannot do otherwise. Analysis is its way, and analysis dissects. Intellectual analysis of the nature of cognition divides experience into immediate and mediate types, but this dichotomy is merely heuristic and an abstraction from reality. The subject/object division is also an abstraction from reality. Once this is recognized and the inherent unity of experience is re-established, one must abandon the view that there is such a distinction between immediate and mediate experience, and subject and object. Experience is a unified whole. Thought is as real as the sensory experiences of perception, feel, smell, and sound, because it is an integral part of experience as a whole. Given that experience is reality, judgment is always concerned with reality.

We come to know something through experience and experience only. The concept of *tabula rasa* is not appropriate for the mind.

Mind as we know it is the offspring of knowledge and activity; it is composed entirely of thoughts. You do not first have a mind, which acquires a filling of ideas and then makes distinctions between true and false, right and wrong, reasonable and unreasonable, and then, as a third step, causes activity. Properly speaking the mind has no existence apart from, or in advance of, these and other distinctions. These and other distinctions are not acquisitions; they are constitutive of the mind.<sup>14</sup>

Human understanding is always a movement from a given understanding to a more adequate understanding. In Oakeshott's terms, "understanding is not such that we either enjoy it or lack it altogether. To be human and to be aware is to encounter only what is in some manner understood."<sup>15</sup> Nor is the assumption of *a priori* knowledge appropriate either. According to Hegelian idealists, *a priori* knowledge is a false conception because it implies that something can be known independently of experience. Kant's epistemology, for instance, rests on the assumption that synthetic judgments, in which the concept of the predicate brings to the concept of subject something which lies completely outside the subject, can only be known *a priori*. According to him, "Proper mathematical propositions are always judgments *a priori*, and not empirical, because they carry along with them the conception of necessity, which cannot be given by experience."<sup>16</sup> However, if knowing stems from experience only, then mathematical propositions are somehow also known experientially and not in an *a priori* manner. If, as idealism suggests, there is no such thing as *a priori* knowledge, Kant's philosophical system falls apart. Steiner explains why even mathematical propositions cannot be said to be known *a priori* and how all knowing is experientially based:

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<sup>14</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Steiner quoting Immanuel Kant, 35.

For whatever object we are concerned to know, we must become aware of it directly and individually, that is, it must become experience. We acquire mathematical judgment too, only through *direct experience* of particular single examples... even if we regard them... as rooted in a certain faculty of our consciousness. In this case, we must say: This or that proposition must be valid, for, if its truth were denied, consciousness would be denied *as well*; but we could only grasp its content, as knowledge, through experience in exactly the same way as we experience a process in outer nature. Irrespective of whether the content of such a proposition contains elements which guarantee its absolute validity or whether it is certain for other reasons, the fact remains that we cannot make it our own unless at some stage it becomes experience for us.<sup>17</sup>

If experience is the only way one has to come to know something, if 'trying' that which we seek to come to know (for that is what the etymological roots of the word refer to, i.e. *ex-periri*, or what comes 'out' of the 'perils' of trial and error) is the only way, we have to give up the illusion of knowledge that is free of experience and somehow more pure for that matter.

Eventually, Oakeshott replaced the concept of experience with that of imagining: “the self making and recognizing images, and moving about among them in manners appropriate to their character and with various degrees of aptitude.”<sup>18</sup> In ‘imagining’, he found a way of accommodating the nature of poetic or artistic experience, while not losing the intellectual aspect of the concept of experience. As such, the concept of imagining was capable of comprehending the non-intellectual activities of art and feeling. Imagining comprises all of the modes such as “sensing, perceiving, feeling, desiring, thinking, believing, contemplating, supposing, knowing, preferring, approving, laughing, crying, dancing, loving, singing, making hay, devising mathematical demonstrations, and so on...”<sup>19</sup> Thus the worlds of thought were replaced by the worlds of images. He

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<sup>17</sup> Steiner, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 496.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

specified that “these images are not ‘given’ or ‘presented’ to the self; they are not independent existences... because they are not anything at all out of relation to a self.”<sup>20</sup> Here we recognize the refusal of dividing experience into subject and object. However, we should not understand this to signify that images are made by the self. This would imply that no image or thought content conforms to anything outside the mind, turning Oakeshott’s world of imagining into an inescapably subjective, mind-dependent world, and ultimately denying the experience of the realist. Oakeshott is not suggesting that individual minds create images willy-nilly, but that images “correspond to a specific mode of imagining” and that they always appear within a “world or field of images which on any occasion constitutes the non-self.”<sup>21</sup> The nature of this modal kind of imaging or experience is what we now turn to.

### b) Modal Experience

Experience is a world of ideas and in it there is “always the coordination and completion of a given world of ideas.”<sup>22</sup> The ways in which we experience the world are innumerable, but several have become concrete enough to be distinctive ways of conceiving the world. Oakeshott refers to the experiential modes of science, art or poetry, history, and practice, as the main modes of experience thus far evolved. Each determinate mode carries its own set of postulates, and presents an internal coherence that is self-satisfactory, but as an arrest in experience, “there is no way in which an abstract world of experience can, as a world and as such, be seen to be a part of or a contribution

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>22</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 259.

to the world of ideas ultimately satisfactory in experience, the world of concrete reality.”<sup>23</sup> Each mode is an abstraction from the whole of experience and is limited due to its presuppositions. What is problematic is that “each voice is prone to *superbia*, that is, an exclusive concern with its own utterance,” and may try to speak on behalf of the whole of experience.<sup>24</sup> Modal experience is akin to arrested experience. It stops short of seeing critically its own limitations, and understands itself as complete. As such it is incapable of grasping the concrete whole. Only the un-arrested experience of philosophy can do this. This is the perspective from which Oakeshott seeks to determine the abstraction of a given mode. In this endeavour, “what is relevant is not the degree of coherence which belongs to any world of experience, but whether or not that coherence is complete and unqualified.”<sup>25</sup> Within a mode’s own world of ideas and postulates, it makes complete sense to itself, but as an arrested form of experience, it fails to elucidate concrete reality and satisfy experience as a whole. It is also irrelevant to another mode of experience when the bearer of one seeks to convince the bearer of another about the nature of experience. Before exploring the significance of this, let us briefly look at what Oakeshott means by the several, determinate modes of experience.

*i) The Mode of History*

The historical mode of experience looks at the past solely for the sake of the past. The real historian does not look at the past to find general laws of historical development, or to derive practical lessons from it, nor does s/he morally judge the past. The practical

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 213.

<sup>24</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 492.

<sup>25</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 213.

mode will not do for true history, and the scientific and poetic approaches towards the past are as irrelevant to the historical mode. This is not to say that a practical approach to the past is illegitimate. Deriving lessons from the past is an important part of our practical experience, but it cannot be said to be history. Any kind of historical abridgment will not do for the historian. A general explanation of history would fail to satisfy the principle of historical coherence. The historical past “is a world composed wholly of contingencies and in which contingencies are intelligible, not because they have been resolved, but on account of the circumstantial relations which have been established between them: the historian’s concern is not with causes but with occasions.”<sup>26</sup>

To study history, one must account for change, neither in terms of cause and effect, nor in teleological terms by reading the present back into the past, but simply by delivering a full account *of* change. “The relation between events is always other events.”<sup>27</sup> “In the ‘historian’s’ understanding of events, just as none is ‘accidental’, so none is ‘necessary’ or ‘inevitable’. What we can observe him doing in his characteristic inquiries and utterances is, not extricating general causes or necessary and sufficient conditions, but setting before us the events... which mediate one circumstance to another.”<sup>28</sup> Any other kind of account does not constitute history. “The ambition of the historian is to escape that gross abridgment of the process which gives the new shape a too early or too late and a too precise definition and to avoid the false emphasis which

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<sup>26</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 183.

<sup>27</sup> Greenleaf quoting Oakeshott, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 172.

springs from being over-impressed by the moment of unmistakable emergence.”<sup>29</sup> His task is therefore “to create by a process of translation; to understand past conduct and happening in a manner in which they were never understood at the time; to translate action and event from their practical idiom into an historical idiom... to loosen the tie between the past and the ‘practical’ present.”<sup>30</sup> However, the historical mode is an abstraction from the whole of experience because experience is always in the present. The inherent paradox involved in the historian’s present experience of the past, is what renders this mode an abstraction that falls short of comprehensive experience.

*ii) The Mode of Poetry*

Although Oakeshott initially thought of the world of art as part of the practical mode of experience, he later conceived of it forming its own mode of experience which he called poetry. In the forms of painting, poetry, singing, sculpting, and writing novels, for instance, this kind of experience is contemplative, a kind of delighting in images that “are not recognized either as ‘fact’ or as ‘not-fact’, as ‘events’ to have taken place or not.”<sup>31</sup> Here we should note that, by ‘contemplation’, Oakeshott is not referring to the Platonic contemplative disposition towards the world of essence. Art is not the act of copying on canvas “an ideal model in the transitory materials of space and time.”<sup>32</sup> The act of “poetic utterance (a work of art) is not the ‘expression’ of an experience, it *is* the experience and the only one there is. A poet does not do *three* things: first experience or observe or recollect an emotion, then contemplate it, and finally seek a means of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 180-1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 509.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 511.

expressing the results of his contemplation; he does *one* thing only, he imagines poetically.”<sup>33</sup>

Its idiom is not purposeful like the practical mode of experience. When painting, artists are not involved in the experience of communicating “an emotional experience designed to evoke this experience in others.”<sup>34</sup> Nor can we approach poetic images morally, for these do not invoke approval or disapproval. These would be practical experiences. The real poetic experience is simply that of delighting in the world of images which “provoke neither speculation nor inquiry about the occasion or conditions of their appearing” but merely delight in their presence.<sup>35</sup> “At every turn what impels the activity and gives it whatever coherence it may possess, is the delight offered and come upon in this perpetually extending partnership between the contemplating self and its images.”<sup>36</sup> The mode of poetry is coherent in that it is a world of delighting, yet it remains an abstraction from the whole of experience because “there is no *vita contemplativa*; there are only moments of contemplative activity abstracted and rescued from the flow of curiosity and contrivance.”<sup>37</sup>

### *iii) The Mode of Practice*

Of greater concern to us are Oakeshott’s practical and scientific modes: the practical due to its political offspring and the scientific due to Polanyi’s direct experience

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 525.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 523.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 510.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 513.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 541.

of it and subsequent explanation of cognition based on this experience. The most commonly experienced of the modes is that of practice which involves human conduct expressed in relation to the self. “The coherence of the images of the practical world... springs from their being the creatures of desire” and aversion.<sup>38</sup> “Practice is the exercise of the will; practical thought is volition; practical experience is the world *sub specie voluntatis*.”<sup>39</sup> We give charity and pray to God for salvation. In our economic life, we seek higher wages to solidify our financial security. We pass a bill against child slavery which becomes law. We join a political party. In this mode, the “desiring self is engaged in constructing its world and in continuing to reconstruct it in such a manner as to afford it pleasure” and avoid pain.<sup>40</sup> Each thought or image “is recognized as something to be made use of or exploited.”<sup>41</sup> However, the mode of practice is also moral conduct, of which religion is the epitome. “This moral attitude is concerned with the relations between selves engaged in practical activities... there is a genuine and unqualified recognition of other selves... acknowledged to be ends and not merely means to our own ends.”<sup>42</sup> “And when the dimensions of approval and disapproval are acknowledged, practical imagining is recognized as an activity whose object is to fill our world with images both desired and approved.”<sup>43</sup> The sought for change is what is valued, and what is valued is valued by a community of individuals, and it is the “observation of a balance

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 512.

<sup>39</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 258.

<sup>40</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 499.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 502.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

of accommodation between the demands” of these desiring individuals that constitutes moral activity.<sup>44</sup>

Change is emblematic of this mode. Practical activity involves the constant allure of a better world ‘to be’. Its purpose is to make the present world of ‘what is’ become this better ‘to be’. A ‘better’ world implies a world more coherent than the existing one. In practical terms, coherence is viewed in terms of value. Thus, “the ‘to be’ of practical experience is not merely that which is ‘to be’, but also that which it is believed is valuable or ‘ought to be’.”<sup>45</sup> There is never a resting point in practical experience and the practical end of a better world can be achieved but is always met with eventual dissatisfaction for no later than action meets approval does the yearning for another ‘ought to be’ awake —this is the endlessness of practical activity.<sup>46</sup> For Oakeshott, its fundamental problem is that it “assumes a world of facts which is not merely susceptible of alteration, but which has change and instability as the very principle of its existence.”<sup>47</sup> It is for this reason that the mode of practice, when seen from the comprehensive perspective of philosophy, falls short of concrete reality. A reconciliation of ‘what is here and now’ and ‘what ought to be’ can never be achieved.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 291.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 263.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 304.

iv) *The Mode of Science*

The scientific world of thought is “a system of conceptional images related to one another consequentially and claiming universal acceptance as a rational account of the world we live in.”<sup>49</sup> It has “communicable intelligibility as the principle of its order.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike the mode of practice, scientific experience is understood not in relation to the self but “in respect of its independence of our hopes and desires, preferences and ambitions... the principle of this activity [being] the exclusion of whatever is private, esoteric, or ambiguous.”<sup>51</sup> As such it is a world of “absolutely communicable experience”<sup>52</sup> and “essentially a co-operative enterprise.”<sup>53</sup> Scientific concepts lend themselves perfectly well to measurability. The “master-conception [of scientific experience] is stability,” and its world is “conceived under the category of quantity.”<sup>54</sup> The communication is absolute when quantity is being communicated. Quantity cannot be misinterpreted, and as such is universal. In fact, mathematics should be able to express all scientific propositions.

The attitude of the scientist is impersonal and objective. Of course, “desire and approval and even the expectation of pleasure have their place in the generation of this activity, but they do not enter into the structure of this universe of discourse as they do into the structure of the practical universe: pleasure is... only the self-congratulation which comes with the belief that one has been successful in this intellectual

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 505.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 513.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 505.

<sup>52</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 171.

<sup>53</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 507.

<sup>54</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 171.

undertaking.”<sup>55</sup> However, this does not suggest that the scientific attitude is made neutral by way of methodological sovereignty. Contrary to what positivism assumes, it is not the case “that the self in scientific activity begins with a premeditated purpose, a ready-made method of inquiry, or even with a given set of problems. The so-called ‘methods’ of scientific investigation emerge in the course of the activity and they never take account of all that belongs to a scientific inquiry; and in advance of scientific thought there are no scientific problems.”<sup>56</sup> ‘All that belongs to a scientific inquiry’ cannot be wholly formulated into rules. It was in this context that Oakeshott referred to Polanyi’s work for a more comprehensive understanding of science.<sup>57</sup> The practical and embodied aspects of knowledge involved in scientific activity are epistemologically prior to, and more important than, the formalities of method.

In ascertaining whether scientific experience’s elucidation of reality is complete, and whether its character is satisfying to experience as a whole, Oakeshott suggests that the governing concepts of this world, i.e. communicability and quantity, are what preclude any attempt on behalf of science to establish a world satisfactory in experience. This is so because absolute communicability of the quantified implies a world of generalizations. A generalization can never be categorically asserted for it is always an utterance of probability. In other words, “the world of science is a world of supposals about reality,” thus never able to attain and make part of itself the concrete material of which it is about. And so “Unless we know more about reality than what is explicit in

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<sup>55</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 506.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 13, f. 4.

this world of judgments, we know nothing.”<sup>58</sup> We should recall that for Oakeshott, what is satisfying to experience as a whole, what, for him, is the criterion of un-arrested experience, is coherence. For him, “experience remains incomplete until the world of ideas is so far coherent as not to suggest or oblige another way of conceiving it.”<sup>59</sup> To conceive of a world of ideas in sole terms of universal communicability and quantity is to fall short of the kind of coherence which begs for no other way of conceiving this world. Every scientific statement reduces the world of concrete experience to a set of mathematical generalizations, and as such is incapable of relating to experience as a whole.

c) The Relationship between the Modes and the Significance of Modality

Rejecting Collingwood’s understanding of the modes of experience as hierarchically related to each other, Oakeshott explains that such a view is possible yet false because it abridges reality by positing a causal antecedent to each mode. To seek such an origin involves abstracting from the whole of reality an abridgment too limited to reflect coherent reality. Each mode of experience has evolved independently. Neither mode has engulfed previous modes and consequently taken a more comprehensive identity. They are all equally satisfying to their respective postulates and they all fall short of totally comprehensive experience. “Every mode of imagining is activity in partnership with images of a specific character which cannot appear in any other universe of discourse; that, is, each mode begins and ends wholly within itself.”<sup>60</sup> That is why the

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<sup>58</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 214-16.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 514.

worst conversational mistake is to make an irrelevant statement. If the postulates differ from mode to mode, there is no way in which the arguments and propositions of one mode can affect another's.

This does not forbid one to look at an object with different *appropriate* perspectives. After all, one can look at a flower, delight in its poetic expression, then look at it scientifically, by inquiring into the process of photosynthesis, and then think about it in a practical manner, inquiring as to whether it is edible or not. The moment of irrelevance is when the wrong approach is used for a given subject. The “formal condition of every specific engagement to understand is that the identity to be investigated shall have been abstracted and composed in such a manner as to be categorially [*sic*] unambiguous, the word ‘category’ being used here in the strict sense of that which predicates the ‘order’ of the inquiry in which an identified ‘going-on’ may come to be understood.”<sup>61</sup> Thus each ‘going-on’, or subject of inquiry, invites the observer to approach it in a distinct manner, forbidding any other that does not befit its category. The most common moment of irrelevance is when we slip into the vocabulary or conceptualization of the practical, i.e. meant for prescriptive application to practical activity, from the premise of a mode or an ‘order of inquiry’ which cannot cater to the practical, such as history, art, or science. In light of this thesis, the moment of irrelevance that concerns us is the currently *inappropriate* positivist approach to the study of politics which seeks to find universal laws of human political behaviour and to quantify political phenomena in order to predict future political events and tendencies. Not only is this

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<sup>61</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 12.

supposedly scientific approach foreign to this most practical, contingent and traditional of human activities, but it is also false on account of its underlying epistemological premise, which thinks of the mind as a blank slate upon which new and correct knowledge can be inscribed, and on account of its attempt to understand political activity in terms of a process, i.e. a non-intelligent ‘going-on’. This will be discussed in detail below, but for the moment, it serves as an example of what Oakeshott means by irrelevance.

The proper way to conceive of the relationship between these different modes of experience is conversationally. A conversation is an exchange of insights from different perspectives. The participants in a conversation are not involved in an activity of convincing or converting each other. Such participants may at times engage in demonstration or argumentation, but these do not constitute a conversation. In a conversation, “there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought.”<sup>62</sup> This is how the voices from different modes communicate amongst themselves without being irrelevant. “The final measure of intellectual achievement is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet.”<sup>63</sup> Contribution to this conversation is any coherent utterance made in a specific mode of experience. In light of this, the role of education is to enable one to participate properly, without being irrelevant, in this great human conversation amongst the diverse voices of experience. The concept of conversation denies the claim that all significant speech acts are inherently an inquiry into the essential nature of things or that they all have practical bearing. The conversation in itself is more important than any

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<sup>62</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 489.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 491.

demonstration or argumentation. It has a supremely civilizing effect in which “each voice learns to be playful [by not taking itself too seriously], learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognize itself as a voice among voices.”<sup>64</sup>

d) The Comprehensive Experience of Philosophy

Unlike abstracted and arrested modal experience, philosophy is comprehensive experience, the disposition of which involves the perpetual ‘re-establishment of coherence’ and nothing less. The “philosopher is never concerned with a condition of things but only with a manner of explanation, and of recognizing that the only thing that matters in a philosophical argument is its coherence, its intelligibility, its power to illuminate and its fertility.”<sup>65</sup> Philosophy is not a body of knowledge or a self-enclosed system. At the heart, philosophical thinking is the conversation with oneself,<sup>66</sup> a way of thinking in which engagement with experience is critical throughout. “There is no body of philosophical ‘knowledge’ to become detached from the activity of philosophizing...”<sup>67</sup> The philosopher’s task is to achieve an increasingly comprehensive understanding of experience by means of delineating the respective limitations of each world of ideas. It is “the impulse to study the quality and style of each voice, and to reflect upon the relationship of one voice to another.”<sup>68</sup> This does not signify that philosophy positively contributes anything to the conversation amongst the modes. If any contribution at all, it is negative in nature, delineating the purview of the modes to

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 493.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>66</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 232.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 492.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 491.

ensure that one mode does not encroach upon another, let alone upon the whole of experience. In light of this, theory is the result of the philosopher's insight into the essential character of the determinate and indeterminate modes of experience encountered, and it is experientially based. Its stamp of quality is comprehensiveness, for theorizing is the "resolve to inhabit an ever more intelligible, or an ever less mysterious world."<sup>69</sup>

### 3- Practical and Technical Knowledge

Regardless of the world of thought or image we may be experiencing, coming to know something always comprises a mixture of practical and technical knowledge, although practical knowledge necessarily precedes technical knowledge. Practical knowledge refers to that which "...exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules."<sup>70</sup> It is not learned but acquired through tradition, by having observed and imitated, by having been acquainted with a given world of ideas. Likewise, it is not taught but imparted.<sup>71</sup> Oakeshott quotes Chuang Tzu's story about the books of the ancestors judged to be the "scum of bygone men" in order to describe the embodiment of practical knowledge. Once the wise ancestors have passed away, the valuable part of their knowledge left with them, leaving behind only the scum of these bygone men in their books.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 14, f. 7.

Technique, on the other hand, can be learned simply by reading an instruction manual, a recipe book, or the rules of a game, but even these learning experiences comprise practical knowledge. “Learning a technique... consists... in reforming knowledge which is already there. Nothing, not even the most nearly self-contained technique (the rules of a game), can in fact be imparted to an empty mind; and what is imparted is nourished by what is already there.”<sup>73</sup> Learning the rules of a game necessitates the acquired concept of what it means to play a game and what rules in general mean. “We begin with what we *know*... and if we knew nothing we could never begin.” Rules of a game or of any other activity “are mere abridgments of the activity itself; they do not exist in advance of the activity, they cannot properly be said to govern it and they cannot provide the impetus of the activity.”<sup>74</sup> In short, technique almost always accompanies practical knowledge, but technical knowledge is not epistemologically necessary to any practice, and to deny this is to deny the creative capacity of the mind, for the activity of the mind is not determined by method.

The problem lies in the fact that for some people, whom Oakeshott calls Rationalists, the practical aspect of knowledge does not stand for knowledge at all. Instead, the formulated certainty which technical knowledge seems to provide is abstracted from the whole of knowledge and taken as the only relevant kind of knowledge.<sup>75</sup> Oakeshott explains how this comes to be:

Each man engaged in a certain kind of activity selects a particular question and engages himself to answer this question... And, with the normal neglect with which a man engaged upon a particular task treats what is not immediately before him, he supposes

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

that his activity springs from and is governed solely by his project. No man engaged in a particular task has in the forefront of his attention the whole context and implications of that engagement. Activity is broken up into actions, and actions come to have a false appearance of independence.<sup>76</sup>

This is how we arrive at the false assumption that the proper premise of a given activity is a proper method, that without this method, the fruit of our activity is spoiled. Yet we forget that our methods emerge from activity and not vice versa. In this forgetfulness, we subject our perspective to the abstraction of technical knowledge, and ironically the fruit of our technical procedures are effectually abstract.

Although we should not understand the following to be an attempt on Oakeshott's part to posit the origins of rationalism for this would constitute an abstraction in itself, it is perhaps helpful to consider that "the Rationalist character may be seen springing from the exaggeration of Bacon's hopes and the neglect of the skepticism of Descartes..." who in the end realized that all of knowledge could not be reduced to technique.<sup>77</sup> As such, "modern rationalism is what commonplace minds made out of the inspiration of men of discrimination and genius."<sup>78</sup> This yearning for certainty and the belief that technique fulfilled this criterion constitutes a 'gnostic' intellectual fashion' that was "certainly allied with a decline in the belief in Providence: a beneficent and infallible technique replaced a beneficent and infallible God; and where Providence was not available to correct the mistakes of men it was all the more necessary to prevent such mistakes."<sup>79</sup> Technique seems to have brought a sense of control over the psychic chaos emerging

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

from the wreckage of religious belief systems. Although this observation may not capture fully the intricate historical context in which what we now call rationalism may have risen, it nevertheless enables us to understand the underlying source of anxiety behind this attitude which permeates modernity and is very much present in the world of academia. According to Oakeshott, academia has been subjected to the “invasion of every department of intellectual activity by the doctrine of the sovereignty of technique.”<sup>80</sup> Relevant for this thesis is the realization that political studies departments have not been exempt from this development.

The current approach to the study of politics seems to validate only technical knowledge. For the Rationalist, this type of knowledge “not only ends with certainty but begins with certainty and is certain throughout.”<sup>81</sup> Hence the emphasis on methodology and research design in political science. However, “technical knowledge is never, in fact, self-complete, and can be made to appear so only if we forget the hypotheses with which it begins.”<sup>82</sup> These ‘forgotten’ hypotheses emerge from traditional or practical knowledge that cannot be reduced to method. A methodology can never be a complete form of knowledge because it cannot be understood apart from the tradition in which it emerged. It is merely an abridgment, useful perhaps, but in no way self-sufficient. The rationalist is under the false impression that an exact starting point is provided by method, and if one begins with the certainty of methodology, one’s results will therefore be certain. However, what has been forgotten is the underlying reality that the judgment

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

which initially certified a given method to be certain came not from methodology or technical knowledge but from practical knowledge. This is why methodology can never be a complete form of knowledge. It rests on a far more vast and subtle field of traditional knowledge which can never be reduced to mere method. In short, “the significance of Rationalism is not its recognition of technical knowledge, but its failure to recognize any other: its philosophical error lies in the certainty it attributes to technique and in its doctrine of the sovereignty of technique; its practical error lies in its belief that nothing but benefit can come from making conduct self-conscious.”<sup>83</sup> In order to remedy this situation, we need to realize that technique is not the bearer of the certainty that we yearn to achieve, and more importantly, that certainty is a concept foreign to the practical world of politics.

#### 4- The Significance of Oakeshott to Political Studies

The implications of Oakeshott’s epistemology for the study of politics severely undermine the current, positivist conceptualization of the way in which politics ought to be studied. His concepts of experience as unified and indivisible, and of practical knowledge, undermine the positivist illusion of objectivist, value-free, neutral, and certain knowledge, as well as its emphasis on methodology. His explanation of politics as practical human conduct makes the study of it unapproachable from a quantifying perspective which seeks to reduce all political phenomena to laws and statistics. Finally, his explanation of political education delimits the proper *academic* approach to politics to history and philosophy, and places the vocational approach outside the university context

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

and in the practical world of politics itself. The following is an explanation of these conclusions in greater detail.

a) Human Conduct

What differentiates humans from other living organisms such as animals, plants and minerals is the kind of experience and cognition they are capable of. Human conduct is not reducible to natural behaviour. The concept of human behaviour is misleading because it reduces the whole of human experience to being governed solely by natural, universal laws. Amoebas behave according to natural laws; plants and minerals also. Perhaps not even animals can be thought of as behaving solely on the basis of natural laws, as they themselves can demonstrate irregularities in their so-called behaviour. Humans, however, definitely do not behave. They act on the grounds of human intelligence. There is a world of difference between the concepts of behaviour and action. To act implies a kind of endeavouring in traditional yet not wholly known territory, a territory in which laws of nature are not so much lacking as irrelevant. Action signifies creativity, an ability to chart a path into an unspecified terrain. In other words, human conduct is free, unless a situation of duress occurs, like slavery, bodily or otherwise.

The Rationalist would have us believe that human conduct can be rational when it “[springs] from an antecedent process of ‘reasoning’” in which case man “must be supposed to have the power of first imagining and choosing a purpose to pursue, of defining that purpose clearly and selecting fit means to achieve it; and this power must be

wholly independent, not only of tradition and of the uncontrolled relics of his fortuitous experience of the world, but also of the activity itself to which it is a preliminary.”<sup>84</sup> According to Oakeshott, this view is false because of its underlying assumption that the “mind [is] an apparatus for thinking” which for him is “the error at the root” of this notion of rational conduct.<sup>85</sup> As previously explained, for Oakeshott the mind is the ‘offspring of knowledge and activity’:

[Following] from this, it is an error to suppose that conduct could ever have its spring in the sort of activity which is misdescribed by hypostatizing a ‘mind’ of this sort; that is, from the power of considering abstract propositions about conduct. That such a power exists is not to be doubted; but its prerequisite is conduct itself. This activity is not something that can exist in advance of conduct; it is the result or reflection upon conduct, the creature of a subsequent analysis of conduct.<sup>86</sup>

The nature of this conduct is effectively contingent and historical, subject to tradition. It is learned from the very moment that a parent exerts discipline or instills values. Practices precede theoretical reflection on them and inform objectives, intentions, and purposes which would not exist without the context of the practice itself.

In the different spheres of activity that comprise man’s life, his active conduct is appropriate to each. There is a communal context in which human activity is conducted and this context varies from one community to another. Change in conduct does occur, albeit slowly. The conservative nature of tradition is ‘elastic’ enough to enable gradual change. Revolution proper may occur on the surface, but the underlying traditional nature of conduct never disappears. “[P]olitical crisis... always appears *within* a tradition

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

of political activity...”<sup>87</sup> To understand the nature of this activity, one must approach the subject with all this in mind. We are far from the naturalist conception of human behaviour in terms of chemical reactions in the brain or from the rationalist illusion of the nature of conduct. We are in a world of historicity, contingency, and tradition. Our disposition towards the kind of practical conduct we should like to understand must appreciate this.

*b) The Practical World of Political Conduct*

Political phenomena belong to the practical mode of experience. Desire and aversion, approval and disapproval, are the experiences through which political activity carries its tradition, and these experiences always relate to the self and are lived in a context of community. For Oakeshott, politics is “the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together... the communities in which this manner of activity is pre-eminent are the hereditary co-operative groups... all of them aware of a past, a present, and a future, which we call states... the activity is one in which every member of the group who is neither child nor a lunatic has some part and some responsibility.”<sup>88</sup> He prefers the concept of ‘attending to’ over ‘making’ arrangements because it forbids an understanding of political activity as purely empirical. His understanding of politics denies that of the rationalist’s, i.e. the ‘politics of the felt need.’ We do not go about making political decisions merely on the grounds of the moment’s desire, completely cut off from tradition. Political “activity is never offered the blank sheet of infinite possibility. In any generation, even the most

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

revolutionary, the arrangements which are enjoyed always far exceed those which are recognized to stand in need of attention, and those which are being prepared for enjoyment are few in comparison with those which receive amendment: the new is an insignificant proportion of the whole.”<sup>89</sup>

Nor will an ideological understanding of politics do. Any activity must be understood as ‘self-moved’. By this Oakeshott means that it must be recognized as a “concrete whole... the source of its movement [lying] within itself.”<sup>90</sup> To think of the source of political activity as lying in an abridged formulation of a whole political tradition is to abstract from the whole a vulgarized outline of a far more subtle, vast, and embodied tradition of human conduct. Such an abstraction is untrue to the character of human activity. Political “activity, then, springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves.”<sup>91</sup> The implied contingency and idiosyncrasy of political activity forbids an approach that seeks to find universal laws that govern this realm of activity. The practical world of politics is one of intimations and not certainties. This activity takes the following form:

[The] amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them. The arrangements which constitute a society capable of political activity, whether they are customs or institutions or laws or diplomatic decisions, are at once coherent and incoherent; they compose a pattern and at the same time they intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear. Political activity is the exploration of that sympathy; and consequently, relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*.

The least evil of solutions is intimated from the traditional and circumstantial nature of political activity. “Politics is not the science of setting up a permanently impregnable society, it is the art of knowing where to go next in the exploration of an already existing traditional kind of society.”<sup>93</sup> This is not the work of the engineer, but of the statesman. Weary of utopian ideals of perfection, the statesman seeks the least disruptive of solutions. “Always so deeply veined with both the traditional, the circumstantial and the transitory,” political decisions are intimated, not calculated.<sup>94</sup>

c) *The Academic Study of Politics*

Education is “an initiation into the moral and intellectual habits and achievements of [one’s] society; an entry into the partnership between present and past, a sharing of concrete knowledge.”<sup>95</sup> At the university level, education is meant to provide an escape from the practical considerations of life in order to point one’s attention towards the distinct voices of modal experience that have emerged in one’s civilization. It involves an endeavour to come to know oneself and how to appropriately participate in the great conversation of mankind amongst the modes of experience. “To be an undergraduate is to enjoy the ‘leisure’ which is denoted by thinking without having to think in pragmatic terms of action and talking without having to speak in terms of prescription or practical advice –the ‘leisure’, in short, which distinguishes the peculiar academic engagement of explanation.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 406.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

Vocational studies, or the learning of skills, do not belong to university education. To learn a vocation one had best seek an apprenticeship with a practicing mentor, for if it is a practice one wishes to learn, there is no better way than to embark the ship and learn *in practice*. University education, on the other hand, is not such a learning experience. In Oakeshott's terms, it is one of "languages' rather than 'literatures'... it is concerned with the use and management of explanatory languages (or modes of thought) and not prescriptive languages."<sup>97</sup> In other words, there is implied in university education the encounter with a given culture, its diverse 'languages' here meaning the modes of experience in which this culture or civilization has come to express itself in its understanding of the world rather than the specific content which it produces. University education invites the student to engage with explanatory rather than prescriptive languages because the latter belong to the practical world of experience. University education is an invitation to *escape* this practical world to which prescriptions belong. Instead, "what undergraduates may get at a university, and nowhere else in such favourable circumstances, is some understanding of what it is to think historically, mathematically, scientifically or philosophically, and some understanding of these not as 'subjects' but as living 'languages' and of those who explore and speak them as being engaged in explanatory enterprises of different sorts."<sup>98</sup> University education is thus a learning experience into which a student is invited in order to shed momentarily the practical concerns of everyday life and listen in on the conversation between the different explanatory perspectives of his or her civilization.

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 197.

The rationalization of education has emphasized the utilitarian goal of fashioning students for the workforce. According to Oakeshott, “perhaps the most serious rationalist attack upon education is that directed against the Universities. The demand for technicians is now so great that the existing institutions for training them have become insufficient, and the Universities are in process of being procured to satisfy the demand.”<sup>99</sup> If we can speak of a dictatorship of the practical mode of experience, we must understand that what empowers it are “the prejudices and preconceptions of the larger part of mankind, who find it impossible to entertain the idea that this practical world, within which they are confined as if in a prison, is other than the universe itself.”<sup>100</sup> To constantly push students to exercise their creativity in churning out prescriptive solutions to practical problems is to forbid them the possibility of learning the different modes of thinking that compose this conversation.

According to Oakeshott, the texts brought forth to students should be amenable to learning about the various modes of experience. “In a university education, a ‘text’ is understood, not as an organization of information but as the paradigm of a ‘language’. Consequently... some ‘literatures’... are in a more appropriate condition to be studied, or offer a clearer paradigm of the ‘language’ concerned...”<sup>101</sup> The canons of proper historical, philosophical, scientific, and poetic expression should be the studied texts. The practical mode of experience, in its various forms such as law, politics, and religion, should be studied philosophically or historically and not vice versa. There is no practical

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 249.

<sup>101</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 197.

approach involved in university education, for this implies a vocational approach which belongs elsewhere. However, it becomes difficult to trace the line when it comes to the subject of politics. Being so practical in nature, politics has a tendency to invite its observer to see it practically. It is easy to slip into the mode of practice when endeavouring to give a historical account of a given political phenomenon or when philosophically trying to understand the activity.

The proper academic approaches to the study of politics must, on the one hand, be amenable to the given subject, and on the other, respond to the university purview of teaching students how to properly experience the several modes. “If there is a manner of thinking and speaking that can properly be called ‘political’, the appropriate business of a university in respect of it is not to use it, or to teach the use of it, but to explain it –that is, to bring to bear upon it one or more of the recognized modes of explanation.”<sup>102</sup> This not only denies the possibility of studying politics in a vocational manner, but also from the poetic and scientific modes of thought. The academic study of politics does not lend itself to poetry, of which the experience of delighting in a world of images is not explanatory in nature and therefore inappropriate for university education. This does not negate the possibility of seeing politics poetically; it simply places this possibility in a context that is appropriate to it. For instance, Oakeshott notes that “in ancient Greece (particularly in Athens) ‘politics’ was understood as a ‘poetic’ activity in which speaking

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 212.

(not merely to persuade but to compose memorable verbal images) was pre-eminent and in which action was for the achievement of ‘glory’ and ‘greatness’.”<sup>103</sup>

Nor is science the proper approach to the study of politics for when science carries over into the world of practical considerations, it loses its ability to “[pass] into the world of abstractions in which *alone* it can fully satisfy itself.”<sup>104</sup> In other words, science ceases to be science when catering to questions of practical relevance, in which case it becomes technology. We must recall that, for Oakeshott, the world of science is that which is “understood in respect of its independence of our hopes and desires, preferences and ambitions...” and this world is “a system of conceptional images related to one another consequentially and claiming universal acceptance as a rational account of the world we live in.”<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, the world of practice is that which *is* dependent on our hopes and desires, does *not* compose a world of images related consequentially but contingently, and which, contrary to claiming universality, is contextually limited to locality. We must make the distinction between the subjects of inquiry that belong respectively to the worlds of science and practice. The latter presupposes human conduct which in turn expresses ‘reflective intelligence’, i.e. capable of self-understanding and making choices. Science, on the other hand, inquires into processes, the nature of which does not exhibit human reflective intelligence.

[T]he understanding of identities recognized as themselves exhibitions of intelligence cannot be ‘reduced’ to the understanding of identities not so recognized... And the contention that all exhibitions of intelligence may themselves be understood as examples of the operation of ‘laws’ (psychological or sociological) of human understanding recognized as itself a ‘process’ is vetoed by the consideration that the theoretical

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 493, f. 2.

<sup>104</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 171.

<sup>105</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 505.

engagement in which such ‘laws’ might be formulated must (within the terms of the contention) also be understood as an example of the operation of the same ‘laws’, which is categorially absurd.<sup>106</sup>

In other words, we cannot be led to believe that the laws that govern non-intelligent processes, e.g. physico-chemical laws, also govern the act of theoretical engagement. Furthermore, “there can in fact be no ‘scientific’ attitude towards the past, for the world as it appears in scientific theory is a timeless world, a world, not of actual events, but of hypothetical situations.”<sup>107</sup> Such an approach is therefore also ill-disposed for the study of politics on the grounds of the latter’s inherent historicity.

In short, the attempt to understand politics from the scientific mode is irrelevant. And to think that we have established a proper scientific study of politics because we have adopted scientific methods such as analysis, verification, hypothesizing, and modeling is to delude ourselves because “none of it has served (or is even designed) to set us on to some other questions than the essentially ‘vocational’ questions... And much of it (because it has come to be concerned with imaginary ‘systems’ and ‘processes’, ‘powers’, ‘establishments’ and *élites*, stereotypes of one sort or another) diverts our attention from the often irregular character of political organizations and events, and thus makes our ‘vocational’ education less good than it might be.”<sup>108</sup> Oakeshott’s diagnosis thus only approves the historical and philosophical approaches to the study of politics, of which we now turn to.

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<sup>106</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 15.

<sup>107</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 164.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

i) *The History of Politics and Political Ideas*

In an academic context, where practical prescriptions should not be considered, political activity can be approached historically due to the inherent historicity of political existence.<sup>109</sup> A proper historical account of political activity and ideas must not judge from a limited, contemporary perspective the relevant facts to bring forth. Every historical fact must be taken as is, without the intrusion of contemporary values. For example, a historical approach to Machiavelli cannot involve moral judgments about his ideas; it should simply describe them in order to deliver the most complete intelligibility possible on the subject matter. It would also be out of place to judge that Plato's ideas were precursors to fascism, communism or neo-Kantianism for this would be reading the present back into the past and would therefore not constitute historical experience. The "ground for excluding moral judgment from 'historical' inquiry and utterance is not the difficulty of agreeing upon a standard to apply, nor the alleged absence of evidence, but the observation that to pronounce upon the moral value of conduct, and the imposition of a moral structure upon the past, represents the incursion of a practical interest into the investigation of the past."<sup>110</sup>

The texts to be analyzed by undergraduate students in such a historical context should of course relate to political experience, but their pedagogical value lies in the fact that they invite the students to acquaint themselves with the historical mode of

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<sup>109</sup> In the practical world of politics however, the historical mode is not the proper approach. According to Oakeshott, "perhaps it is in the field of politics... that practical experience is most often in danger of perversion by the irrelevant intrusion of history. Both the active politician and the writer on politics, both the reformer and the conservator invoke the oracle of history and interpret its answers according to their predisposition, giving out their conclusions as the lessons of history. But history itself has neither the ideas nor the language wherewith to teach practical conclusions (*Experience and its Modes*, 316)."

<sup>110</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 179.

experience. “Merely to extend our studies backwards a little way into the past in order to account for a piece of political conduct is not ‘doing’ history; it is indulging in a piece of retrospective politics which makes certain that the historical mode of thinking never properly appears.”<sup>111</sup> Oakeshott recalls Alexis de Tocqueville’s *L’Ancien Régime* as a good example of history. In it the character of the French Revolution is exhibited “not as the necessary and inevitable consequence of preceding events, but as an intelligible convergence of human choices and actions.”<sup>112</sup>

## *ii) Political Philosophy*

The concept of political philosophy at first posed a problem for Oakeshott. Unlike the determinate modes elaborated previously, he deemed political philosophy, and ethics and moral philosophy for that matter, to be indeterminate modes of experience due to their lack of internal coherence. He did not think they were instances of comprehensive philosophical experience because their focus was a limited aspect of experience. This is why he thought of these worlds of thought as pseudo-philosophy, i.e. philosophical but not fully comprehensive to constitute true philosophy. He later altered his view and considered political philosophy to be “what occurs when [the] movement of reflection [about political life] takes a certain direction and achieves a certain level, its characteristic being the relation of political life, and the values and purposes pertaining to it, to the entire conception of the world that belongs to civilization.”<sup>113</sup> Its purpose is to theorize on the postulates of political activity, not to be politically engaged. In no way is

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

it amenable to normative and prescriptive application to the practical world of politics. One cannot philosophize from a practical standpoint such as politics because the practical perspective is an abstraction from the whole of experience. From an educational perspective, the study of political philosophy is an invitation to learn the experience of philosophy via the subject of politics.

And when in the writings of Plato or Hobbes or Rousseau or Hegel or Mill what is being looked for is the political disposition of these writers, when expressions like ‘natural law’, ‘general will’, ‘freedom’, ‘the rule of law’, ‘justice’, or ‘sovereignty’, which, philosophically speaking, are explanatory concepts, whose explanatory value might have been explored, are turned... into prescriptive concepts, and when what is reflected upon is merely their injunctive force, all chance is lost of learning something about the philosophical mode of thought.<sup>114</sup>

#### d) The Current State of Political Studies

Rationalism is what characterizes the current approach to politics, both academic and vocational. Not only is it inappropriate for the study of this practical activity, but its identification as science is inappropriate as well. “The heart of the matter is the pre-occupation of the Rationalist with certainty. Technique and certainty are, for him, inseparably joined because certain knowledge is, for him, knowledge which does not require to look beyond itself for its certainty; knowledge, that is, which not only ends with certainty but begins with certainty and is certain throughout.”<sup>115</sup> The result of this pre-occupation with certainty is a discipline suffering an identity crisis and choked by methodology. The rationalist is under the illusion that the sought-for certainty is to be found in methodology, but the sovereignty of method destroys theoretical relevance. Consequently, the rationalist study of politics is incapable of ‘looking beyond’ the model

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

method (in this case, the model assumed to be the natural sciences) and producing much more than an abundance of methodologically relevant facts.

We have seen with the help of Oakeshott's concept of practical knowledge that one's way towards coming to know something is not wholly reducible to rules, or method for that matter. In fact, the "precise formulation of rules of inquiry endangers the success of the inquiry by exaggerating the importance of method."<sup>116</sup> This goes for *any* kind of knowledge. The self-identification of rationalist political studies as a science is therefore not only illusory on the grounds that the practical aspect of scientific knowledge has been denied, but also because the practical mode of politics is not amenable to the mode of scientific thought. Oakeshott's distinction of the practical mode of experience as circumstantial, historical, contingent, and traditional, forbids an approach seeking precise formulation. Oakeshott speaks of 'intimation' as the proper disposition towards the understanding of politics. This does not entail that one's approach should not be critical; it is meant to highlight the forgotten and crucial practical aspect of political knowledge. To learn it vocationally, one must thus enter the world of politics, observe, learn from a mentor, and practice it. Eventually, solutions to political problems will be intimated to the apprentice by the political tradition at hand. A crib sheet on the rules of conduct may help, but will definitely not suffice.

What has occurred in the university is a confusion of sorts. The vocational disposition was adopted in many departments in order to respond to societal pressures

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

and problems, i.e. what Oakeshott would refer to as the practical idiom taking over. Education became a training of sorts. In political science departments, practical solutions to political problems were sought and defended. This vocational approach would not necessarily have been so problematic were it not for the fact that the positivist attitude towards the study was adopted as well. Perhaps to legitimize themselves, or maybe to weed out the activists, rationalist scholars adopted an approach ill-disposed to the study of politics without knowing what they were really doing. As scholars of politics, they were arguably not as attentive to the underlying epistemological assumptions of the proposed rationalist methods as philosophers of science would more likely have been, for instance. Not only is a real vocational approach therefore prevented from taking place, but also truly historical and philosophical approaches to the study of politics are prevented as well.

And if it is said that the manner in which 'politics' is taught in universities has not forbidden a connection with history and philosophy, the reply must be that the connection is often resented as a diversion from the proper concerns of 'political science', and that wherever it has been made it has been apt to be corrupting rather than emancipating... 'History is patronizingly admitted so long as it remains in the 'background' (whatever that may mean). And 'philosophy' appears, not as a manner of thinking but as a misused word to identify what is believed to be a certain kind of interest in politics.<sup>117</sup>

Indeed we have 'far to go', as Oakeshott suggests, in order to restore a proper academic approach to the study of politics. Yet the fact that the work of such philosophers as Oakeshott is presently taught in political science departments is perhaps an indication that the prospects of such a restoration are not as bleak as we may assume them to be. Oakeshott offers two suggestions as to how a restoration may be attempted.

First, in a School of 'Politics' we should never use the language of politics; we should use only the explanatory 'languages' of academic study... And secondly, since in a university we should regard ourselves as supervising, not the study of 'texts' understood

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 214.

as organizations of information, but the study of the use of explanatory 'languages' in connection with appropriate 'texts', these 'texts' should be chosen with care and for the relevant (pædagogic) reasons.<sup>118</sup>

This would properly allow only for the historical and philosophical explanatory approaches to the study of politics in academia. One may wonder if, at this point, it is perhaps too late for such a restoration to take place. After all, the rationalist view of how politics should be studied is quite entrenched, albeit for a few departments which have purposefully kept their traditional approach towards the nature of university education. Is the rationalist disposition here to stay? Perhaps it would help us to recall Oakeshott's philosophical premise, i.e. idealism, in the pursuit of an answer to this question. If we know through experience, the answer must consider the nature of the rationalist's experience. Oakeshott suggests that this experience is characterized by a concern with certainty, which may be historically contextualized by the decline in the belief in an 'infallible' God. Thus an infallible technique was sought, perhaps in order to restore a kind of psychological balance or peace of mind.

If this account of experience is remotely accurate, then we cannot expect the rationalist disposition to give way until the implicit anxiety involved in the rationalist experience is resolved experientially. Ironically, the more the rationalist places confidence in the certainty of technique, the more he will likely experience the psychic anxiety of uncertainty. This is so because the practical aspect of knowledge is denied. To deny the validity of practical knowledge is to cut oneself off from the traditional roots of one's existence. Without tradition, there is no existential anchor, and consequently

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

what is experienced is chaos and the loss of one's sense of familiarity with the world. We must note, however, that experience is never completely void of tradition. As Oakeshott argues, activity is always occurring within an already existing, traditional flow of activity. What is problematic, however, is the celebration of the rationalist experience as progress. The rationalist disposition will likely remain intact as long as this perception of progress holds. Yet rationalism, as an 'intellectual fashion' is likely to give way eventually to the traditional, and far more concrete, flow of practical knowledge. The underlying positivist assumptions of rationalism cannot sustain the house of cards that its ideology represents, for the illusory epistemological foundation on which it stands has denied the most important aspect of knowledge. Without practical knowledge, what is left is the mere shadow of experience.

## **Part II: Michael Polanyi's Epistemology and its Import for the Study of Politics**

### 1- Michael Polanyi's Epistemological Premise

We have seen that the tradition of thought known as realism acknowledges the existence of an essential realm of being, and that humans have the capacity to make contact with it. It is in light of this perspective that Polanyi develops his epistemology. Contrary to the claims of nominalists, realists argue that concepts are more than merely heuristic tools or contrivances of the mind that serve to organize our thoughts. They are portals through which mankind obtains insights into reality, envoys from the stable world of essence, sent to the receptive mind. Furthermore, this hidden essential reality that exists beyond the world of the given as we perceive it is not mind-dependent. This is what distinguishes the realist from the idealist who refuses to place essential being in an other-worldly, *a priori*, external realm. The implied relationship of interdependence between truth and experiential knowledge in the idealist's perspective is unacceptable to the realist. How can man be co-creator with God? To place man in such light is tantamount to hubris. For the realist, it is crucial that the realm of essence should not be conceived as dependent on human experience. We speak of the divine with the foreknowledge that there is a realm of pure being that is independent from us. If this realm were of this concrete reality which we know with our senses, we would not have the transcendental experience of it as subtle and hidden behind the given that we see, nor would we have the experience of Grace. This does not, for that matter, make it impossible to come into contact with the essential realm of being, or truth. The fact that pure being is not immediately visible does not make it wholly unknowable. The highest

activity of the mind *is* to come to know what lies “behind” the world of the given and communicate this discovery to others, even though there may not always be a receptive audience. In light of this, we must understand the role of theory not as merely a record of our experience, but as a vehicle capable of taking us beyond experience. This explains how some scientific theories were capable of shedding light on deeper and never before experienced levels of reality. It is in this light that man expresses his true creativity (which in reality has nothing to do with the creation of truth, as relativists would suggest, but should be understood as one's capacity to discover truth), which flourishes most at the point when he is capable of transcending his subjectivity in order to get a glimpse of reality and relate it objectively to others.

This capacity to make contact with the real, to discover truth, is made possible by virtue of one's personhood. We can recall that Kant, though he belonged to the idealist tradition of thought, had refused the notion that we can come into contact with the essential realm through mere experience, which for him, implied immediate sense experience. ‘Perceptions are ‘blind’ without conceptions’, he thought.<sup>119</sup> Only *a priori* knowledge enables contact with the *noumenal* order because it is free of the biasing, experiential, human factor. We can denote in Kant’s vision the modern epistemological concern with subjectivity and the underlying anxiety to achieve objective knowledge. In opposition to Kant, Hegel had refused the division of experience into immediate sense experience and its mediate conceptual counterpart. Why posit the notion of immediate sense experience if there are no percepts without concepts? Experience is a unified

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<sup>119</sup> Will Durant, 206.

whole, *is* thought, and as such, *is* capable of making contact with essence, which is not in some other-worldly realm, but very much part of our concrete world of experience.

For Polanyi, knowledge is human knowledge, embodied and experientially derived. This nullifies the Kantian notion of strictly *a priori* knowledge. Man would indeed be blind to the hidden order behind the given were he to rely solely on immediate observations (if this were possible at all), but it is not by somehow bypassing his experience, however immediate it may be, that he can claim a conceptual vision of truth. “Our conceptual imagination, like its artistic counterpart, draws inspiration from contacts with experience.”<sup>120</sup> The embodied premise of all acts of knowing precludes the possibility of *a priori* knowledge. Man “must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within [himself] and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse.”<sup>121</sup> We shall see that, for Polanyi, any act of knowing involves the experiential process of 'subsidiarizing' aspects of the particulars of the whole one yearns to comprehend. The embodied aspect of this development and the transformation of self involved preclude the notion that knowledge could ever be disembodied and therefore free of experience.

Nevertheless, man is capable of transcending sense experience. Polanyi cites the Copernican, heliocentric perspective as an example. Defying the daily observation of the sun, moon, and stars rising in the East and setting in the West, and the subsequent experience of thinking oneself to be at the center of the universe, the heliocentric system

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<sup>120</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 46.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

was nevertheless more objective and intellectually satisfying than Ptolemy's perspective, even if theoretically more abstract and experientially more difficult to sustain. However, the perspective offered from a point of theoretical transcendence is still held from the center of one's personhood. As such, we have "abandoned the cruder anthropocentrism of our senses, but only in favour of a more ambitious anthropocentrism of our reason."<sup>122</sup> One may distinguish, for the sake of description, between sense experience and theoretical or conceptual experience, but both inherently presuppose the person. Perhaps this brings Polanyi closer to Hegel than Kant, but Polanyi is not an idealist. As a realist, he must be faithful to the notion that the hidden reality behind the given is independent from, and external to, man's experience. This faith in the hidden order behind the world of particulars may be understood as a leap of faith on his part, yet this should not mean that it is therefore irrational. Polanyi would say that it is indeed a fiduciary act to uphold his convictions as a realist, but these are held reasonably. Now it should be noted here that 'reality' for Polanyi is of two kinds. According to Prosch, there is, for Polanyi a) the "reality as that which exists independently of us, and b) those realities continually being expanded by the creative capacities of man in his efforts to attain broader and more moving meanings."<sup>123</sup> It is in reference to the first kind that we need to understand Polanyi's realism whereas the second kind should not be taken to imply any relativism on his part. In Polanyi's words, "An empirical statement is true to the extent to which it reveals an aspect of reality, a reality largely hidden to us, and *existing therefore independently of our knowing it.*"<sup>124</sup> The implied creative element in idealism is an

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>123</sup> Harry Prosch, review of *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, by Richard Gelwick, in *Ethics*, Vol. 89 no.2, (Jan. 1979), pp. 211-216: 216.

<sup>124</sup> Polanyi, 311.

affront to a realist's sensitivity towards the realm of the divine and even signifies arrogance. When transcending his subjectivity, man does not experience his own creation but an objective truth to which he must remain faithful in his rendering of it.

Notwithstanding the differences Polanyi has with nominalists and idealists, he is most in opposition with positivists, or in his words objectivists. It was to rectify their mistaken assumptions about knowledge and their false ideal of objective detachment that he elaborated his concept of tacit and personal knowledge. Polanyi's works are dedicated to re-acknowledging the self as the ground of knowledge, "to re-equip men with the faculties which centuries of critical thought have taught them to distrust."<sup>125</sup> His main critique is against the positivist or objectivist conception of personal detachment from the knowing process. His point is that the personal coefficient is a constant throughout the whole knowing process. It is impossible to achieve neutral knowing. Acts of appraisal made by the person are continuously made throughout any given process of understanding. "Even the most strictly mechanized procedure leaves something to personal skill in the exercise of which an individual bias may enter."<sup>126</sup> The positivists' resentment of the human cognitive element, their anxieties about subjective bias as well as their idealization of exact and neutral knowledge, and finally their subsequent faith in the sovereignty of method have led them to deny the very ground of knowledge that is the human self. Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, the fruit of a personal experience which suggested to him that knowledge always presupposes the self, is his way of countering this anti-human ideology and restoring the self as the ground of knowledge. All

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

knowledge is human and incarnate knowledge, and to deny this, as the positivists ultimately do, is to subject oneself to the tyranny of methodology and forsake the mind.

This concept of 'personal' knowledge does not render knowledge inescapably subjective, which is what Kant was worried about, and which many critics of Polanyi suggest. In response to Kant, Polanyi would say that man is vested subjectively and passionately in the discovery process but nevertheless responsible for, and capable of, testifying objectively to aspects of the real which he discovers. The “act of knowing includes an appraisal; and this personal coefficient, which shapes all factual knowledge, bridges in doing so the disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity. It implies the claim that man can transcend his own subjectivity by striving passionately to fulfil his personal obligations to universal standards.”<sup>127</sup> With Hegel, Polanyi would agree that there is no sense in positing knowledge that is free from experience, in the sense that every act of comprehension is achieved by experiential subsidiarization of particulars, but he would stop short of implying that human beings are necessary participants in the making of truth. For Hegel, nothing can be rationally said to be understood that is completely independent of an understanding consciousness. Hence man is co-creator of truth. For Polanyi, we must accept the otherness and independence of the realm of essence from the human mind. Man does not create Truth, he *discovers* it.

## 2- Personal Knowledge: A Theory of Being

Here we come to the realization that Polanyi's epistemology must become a theory of being. If the ground of knowledge is the self, we need to inquire as to what it is

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

about the self that enables understanding. It is a fairly recent idea that knowledge epistemologically precedes being. This view is epitomized in Descartes' maxim 'I think therefore I am'. However, the Cartesian maxim is a modern reversal of the way in which the relationship between knowledge and being was conceived in earlier days. Upon hearing Descartes, Plato would have responded: I am therefore I think. I am human, and by virtue of my humanity, of what it truly means to be human, I am capable of knowing.

For Polanyi, knowledge is always grounded in personhood.<sup>128</sup> He understands the person to be a being who has emerged from lower forms of life and has evolved into increasingly higher forms of consciousness. Man is a being endowed with 'centers of activity' the consciousness of which cannot be determined by the lower physico-chemical structures of his being. His whole person cannot be specified wholly from such a level. The individual that he is conscious of being (the 'I am') is an autonomous centre of consciousness that cannot be reduced to its particulars. Polanyi therefore cannot accept the neurological model of consciousness. Instead, he suggests that:

... the spectacle of anthropogenesis, confronts us with a panorama of emergence; it offers massive examples of emergence in the gradual intensification of personal consciousness. At each successive stage of this epic process we see arising some novel operations not specifiable in terms of the preceding level; and the whole range of them is unspecifiable in terms of their inanimate particulars. For no events occurring according to the known laws of physics and chemistry can be conscious.<sup>129</sup>

We have here a view of man as conscious being, emerging from lower forms of life throughout his evolution, yet not wholly determined by these. This "gradual

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<sup>128</sup> It is important to note that his concept of personal knowledge does not point to the English meaning, but to the Germanic or Hungarian meaning of the concept. Blum explains that while "in English the word 'personal' connotes intimacy and privacy, in Hungarian and in German the relevant terms ... are immediate derivatives of the concept of person (in Hungarian: "személy", which connotes: character, individual, personality) and personhood." See Paul Richard Blum, "Michael Polanyi: The Anthropology of Intellectual History," in *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 62 (2010): 198, f. 2.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 389.

intensification of personal consciousness” is exemplified well in Voegelin's interpretation of the Socratic experience:

The [mystic philosopher's] discovery of the new truth [about the order of the soul] is not an advancement of psychological knowledge in the immanentist sense; one would rather have to say that the psyche itself is found as a new center in man at which he experiences himself as open toward transcendental reality. Moreover, this center is not found as if it were an object that had been present all the time and only escaped notice. The psyche as the region in which transcendence is experienced must be differentiated out of a more compact structure of the soul; it must be developed and named. With due regard for the problem of compactness and differentiation, one might almost say that before the discovery of the psyche man had no soul. Hence, it is a discovery which produces its experiential material along with its explication; the openness of the soul is experienced through the opening of the soul itself.<sup>130</sup>

It is by virtue of this process of differentiation, or emergence, that man has eventually come to carry the 'powers' necessary to perceive order and rationality in nature. It is important to take note of Polanyi's understanding of emergent personhood firsthand, for this will provide the backdrop to his epistemology. We shall see that the leap across the logical gap which characterizes discovery, as well as all acts of understanding, are also unspecifiable in terms of the preceding formalized maxims and methods. Furthermore, it entails that for us to enter the perspective offered by Polanyi's concept of 'personhood' we must be willing to question the hold which our cultural conditioning has on us through our sustained belief that all of our levels of experience are reducible to physico-chemical determinations.

Now, given that everyone is a person, we may ask ourselves how knowledge varies from one person to another. Knowledge varies not in the way it is achieved, for

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<sup>130</sup> Voegelin, 67. We can also refer to E.F. Schumacher's depiction of emergence in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. He characterizes the four levels of being (namely matter, life, consciousness, and self-awareness, which correspond to the four realms of mineral, plant, animal, and human) as being ontologically discontinuous. "The ontological differences of these four elements are analogous to the discontinuity of dimensions... [They] are four irreducible mysteries, which need to be most carefully observed and studied, but cannot be explained, let alone 'explained away' (E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 33-34)."

this is the same for everyone:<sup>131</sup> it has two dimensions, tacit and focal. For now, let us say that the kind and degree of knowledge one can achieve varies according to experiential differentiation. Here is the Heideggerian element in Polanyi's thought. There is a quality to be ascribed to personhood, which differs from one person to another according to the extent to which the higher aspects of this personhood are integrated. Everyone is endowed with personhood, just by virtue of being human, but consciousness varies from person to person. It is through the experiences of life, and education in the classical sense of the turning around, that one comes to integrate higher centers of personhood. For the ancients, knowledge was not only conceived as grounded in the self, but more specifically, the *way* in which the self lives. One's love of the divine *Sophon* and disposition towards *Dike* were understood by Plato as necessary for making contact with the real. The 'good life' and good judgment depended on one being just in mind, body, and soul. All this depended on the quality of one's being, as exemplified by Plato's metaphor of the copper, silver, and gold people of his republic. Polanyi upholds this tradition and also borrows from Heidegger in his endeavour to explain that knowledge depends on the quality of one's way of 'being in the world'.<sup>132</sup>

The classical conception of education, or *periagoge*, reflected this and meant a transformation of the self which involved a refinement of this quality of 'being in the

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<sup>131</sup> Polanyi also addressed the degree of personal knowledge involved in various acts of understanding. It is not enough merely to say that all acts of understanding are grounded in personal knowledge. There are degrees of personal participation as well. Polanyi contrasts the "relative objectivity of classical dynamics with the more massively personal knowledge of quantum mechanics and of probability statements in general" in light of this (*Personal Knowledge*, 36).

<sup>132</sup> Here one might wonder whether Heidegger's association with the Nazi party should be enough to convince us that his concept of 'being in the world' is thereby a perversion of sorts and that Polanyi's usage of this concept is somehow a bad example of what he is trying to explain. I would suggest that Heidegger's concept can be left intact despite this association between the philosopher and the Nazis.

world'. We can recall the inspiring words set in stone at Apollo's temple, '*Know Thyself*'. This was a call to take on this transforming experience in order to discover the full extent of one's being, the true order of the soul. It involves a mind-opening experience which makes one more receptive to increasingly subtle realms of the real, but it depends on one's receptivity to such an experience, it depends on how one already *is* in the world. We shall see that there is a morality embedded in his epistemology, expressed in the contemplative disposition one can adopt towards the divine and the responsible act of commitment required for discovery. We should keep in mind that Polanyi was devoutly Christian, and the implied values are imbued throughout his perspective.

The pedagogical 'turning around' towards the right order of the soul will necessitate the key element of respect towards tradition and authority, as well as the fiduciary element that comes epistemologically prior to knowledge. The student, in order to come to know a subject more profoundly, must submit to the authority of one who carries the tradition of his practice in the belief that he or she can learn from this mentor. "To learn by example is to submit to authority. You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness."<sup>133</sup> This is not to suggest there is no room for critique or challenge. Polanyi thinks that entwined with submission to authority is its counter-position of revolt or challenge. No good mentor would forbid any form of challenge coming from his student. Nevertheless, for any knowledge to be communicated there needs to be a certain receptivity on the part of the student. This is what is implied by submission to the

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<sup>133</sup> Polanyi, 53.

authority of the mentor. For this to take place, however, the student must believe that this can and will occur.

What actually goes on in the relationship between student and mentor is that, in the daily presence of his or her mentor, while observing his or her actions and hearing his or her logical arguments, the student will absorb tacitly the knowledge that is being communicated to him. It is not due to a crib sheet, or a rulebook, or a textbook, that most knowledge will be transmitted. “An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice.”<sup>134</sup> Education and knowledge transmission has very little to do with textbooks or methodology. This view of education does seem to fly in the face of our current educational system. Perhaps most educational programs rely heavily on textbook abbreviations and methodological handbooks of operation. There is a concern about transmitting exact knowledge which the pedagogical administrators do not want jeopardized by the personal bias of the teacher. As such, teachers are motivated by formulaic exam success rather than the transformation and discovery of self inherent to the concept of *periagoge*. Furthermore, the over-emphasis on the need to doubt and critique all forms of knowledge put before the student prevents the kind of openness necessary to embark on a journey of comprehension. Students are told firsthand that they must question for themselves, doubt and put all material to critique. A balanced dose of this would not do any harm, but the objectivist understanding of critique will actually prevent true understanding from taking place, for an act of comprehension is essentially a-critical and fiduciary.

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

a) The Fiduciary Element: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy

Fundamental and inherent to this tacit nature of knowledge is the cognitive power of belief. It may puzzle one to think of belief as the foundation of any act of comprehension. One need simply look at the mission statements of pedagogical institutions to take note that one of their main goals is always to 'produce' critically minded individuals. Rarely are we invited to believe first, and then critique, in order to come to know something. Yet Polanyi insists on the fiduciary source of all acts of knowing. This is what he was referring to in the subtitle of his *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*.<sup>135</sup> Our first reaction to Polanyi's 'fiduciary programme' might be hostile. We may feel we have been duped too long by the belief systems that have sustained long held prejudices, superstitions, and charlatany of every sort, and that our protection against such erroneous explanations of reality lies in our ability to doubt, critique, and be skeptical. How can we accept the concept of 'belief' as epistemologically necessary for any act of understanding after all our efforts to rid ourselves of unfounded belief systems? At this point in time, when the concept of faith seems for many to be an antiquated experience, how can we agree with Polanyi that "we must now go back to St. Augustine... [who] taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*"?<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 266.

For Polanyi, belief is the source of all knowledge.<sup>137</sup> This is so because we inhabit and are shaped by a fiduciary framework which is impossible to experience from without. This framework comprises the whole of our “tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, [and] affiliation to a like-minded community...”<sup>138</sup> In other words, all of our specific assertions are made from within the given belief systems that both inhabit us and in which we inhabit at any given historical moment. Polanyi suggests that we now need to restore the balance between our twin cognitive powers of faith and knowledge.<sup>139</sup> To do so would alleviate the psychic tension created by the contradiction we experience by upholding the principle of objectivist doubt while realizing that the premises of our supposedly demonstrable statements are in fact unspecifiable and rest ultimately in our belief of these premises. “Innocently, we had trusted that we could be relieved of all personal responsibility for our beliefs by objective criteria of validity...”<sup>140</sup> The restoration of a proper balance between faith and knowledge would require that we entrust ourselves with the capacity to judge with intelligence the beliefs we choose to carry and subsequently to take on the responsibility of upholding these vital beliefs. Our disillusionment towards the capacity of such external criteria to validate our beliefs will make us “realize that we can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions –from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge.”<sup>141</sup> Let us take for example the moment a child attempts their first dive. As long as there is doubt in the child's mind about the

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

feasibility of diving, no dive will be attempted. The moment this child believes s/he can dive, a dive will ensue. Of course a certain getting used to the idea of diving, getting comfortable in and around the water, the diving board, etc. is involved. Belief operates within reasonableness and as such is rational, but as a cognitive power, belief has the ability to quell the doubt that prevents the leap across the logical gap which separates the state of not knowing from that of knowing. The fiduciary act is difficult because it implies the abandoning of the firm ground we know as well as risk and uncertainty.

To suggest that belief is the source of all knowledge points to the paradox of 'self-set standards'. "If the criteria of reasonableness, to which I subject my own beliefs, are ultimately upheld by my confidence in them, the whole process of justifying such beliefs may appear but a futile authorization of my own authority."<sup>142</sup> If we know by first believing, and belief is tacit and unspecifiable, how can there be any reasonable measure with which one can determine what is true? To this Polanyi reaffirms the necessity of accrediting our capacity to judge intelligently. "Only this manner of adopting the fiduciary mode is consonant with itself: the decision to do so must be admitted to be itself in the nature of a fiduciary act."<sup>143</sup> This would mean that our ultimate ground for knowing something is in fact ourselves. We can only know for ourselves and from our deepest convictions.

In the last resort my statements affirm my personal beliefs, arrived at by the considerations given in the text in conjunction with other not specifiable motives of my own. Nothing that I shall say should claim the kind of objectivity to which in my belief no reasoning should ever aspire; namely that it proceeds by a strict process, the acceptance of which by the expositor, and his recommendation of which for acceptance by others, include no passionate impulse of his own.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus everything we hold to be true is upheld, not by virtue of external criteria of validity, but by our passionate belief in its truth. The real criteria are actually self-set standards of reasonableness. The unspecifiability of the underlying assumptions on which supposedly external criteria stand precludes their personal detachment and objective, neutral status. Everywhere, mind is involved both passionately and intelligently, and all of our acts of understanding presuppose a personal leap of faith. After all his attempts to explain why it is that the personal element of knowledge is always present, after all his examples to point to this, the only foundation Polanyi can stand on is his belief in what he is trying to convey.

b) *Commitment: Resolving the Subject/Object Divide*

With this in mind, it is hard to understand how Polanyi's epistemology does not fall in line with relativism. If all knowledge relies ultimately on belief because the underlying assumptions of our diverse "methods" for acquiring any given knowledge are inherently unspecifiable, this means there is no possibility of proof, no means of demonstrating, and possibly no objectivity whatsoever. Polanyi argues that his perspective is saved from this by the act of commitment. That the person is at all times participating in the process of understanding, and that every act of understanding is supported by belief, do not mean that man is incapable of being objective. "Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing

contact with a hidden reality; a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications.”<sup>145</sup> Here Polanyi wishes to clarify what the true sense of objectivity means, as opposed to the positivist outlook which suggests that it means free of personal bias, or neutral, or value free. Polanyi clarifies:

I think we may distinguish between the personal in us, which actively enters into our commitments, and our subjective states, in which we merely endure our feelings. This distinction establishes the conception of the personal, which is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.<sup>146</sup>

We need to keep in mind that Polanyi is a realist of sorts. For him, the concept of objectivity refers to one's capacity to relate *responsibly* aspects of reality which one has come to know. “Personal knowledge is an intellectual commitment,” he says.<sup>147</sup> “The inherent structure of this fundamental act of personal knowing makes us both necessarily participate in its shaping and acknowledge its results with universal intent. This is the prototype of intellectual commitment... [which] is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true.”<sup>148</sup> It is by introducing the concept of belief in the light of commitment, by 'merging' belief into “the wider framework of commitment,” that Polanyi suggests personal knowledge is safeguarded from relativist 'self-destruction'.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, vii.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

The difference between belief and commitment would thus seem to be that belief or faith is epistemologically necessary for knowledge yet not capable on its own to 'link' the knower to the other end of the 'pole' that is the essence of the thing known. By believing, one opens one's heart center<sup>150</sup> towards that which is sought to be known, but it is by *committing* oneself to this act that one 'brings together' or links both the individual and the universal poles of personal knowledge. Being committed implies the willful pledge to carry out fully one's calling to come to know the essential nature of that which one has judged reasonable to believe. This implies that man is capable of being responsible in the manner he attempts to convey to others the reality which he has caught a glimpse of, by staying true to the essence of that which he has grasped. For this however, he must commit himself to what he says, which of course brings upon him the risk of incurring critique and opposition from his colleagues. We can be honest with ourselves, as students and scholars, and admit that we often change the wording of our papers in order to make them appear more objective and to make ourselves less liable to finger-pointing. We tone it down so to speak, and as soon as our passion erupts, we are told to make our words more 'objective'. We often stay out of our very own work. Yet “no sincere assertion of fact is essentially unaccompanied by feelings of intellectual satisfaction or of a persuasive desire and a sense of personal responsibility.”<sup>151</sup> Thus for instance, in the practice of mathematics, where, of all places, we would expect assertions to be entirely free of personal involvement, the usage of the assertion sign '□' actually signifies that one commits him or herself to the given assertion. As Polanyi writes, “it is not the act of my uttering a sentence *p* that I express by '□ . *p*' but the fact that *I believe*

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<sup>150</sup> Note that the latin root of 'belief', *credere*, stems from *cor*, i.e. the heart.

<sup>151</sup> Polanyi, 27.

what the sentence  $p$  says. The correct reading of ' $\square . p$ ' written down by me in good faith is therefore 'I believe  $p$ ', or some other words expressing the same fiduciary act... The symbol and the phrase convey in their respective terms the personal endorsement of the sentence prefixed by them."<sup>152</sup> It is our own commitment that enables us to grasp hidden reality. It is a responsible act which implies that one is adhering to self-set standards of universal intent. These two poles of all acts of understanding, personal participation and universal intent, are bridged by the act of commitment, which resolves the subject/object dichotomy by making possible a fusion or human grasp of essential truth.

c) *Sensus Communis: The Social Backdrop to Belief and Commitment*

The individual's quest for knowledge occurs within a fiduciary social framework. Thus truth claims are adjudicated according to the *sensus communis* of the community of inquiry to which one belongs. Again, Polanyi's epistemology risks falling prey to relativism. If it is impossible to see from without the social framework one is born in, how can we tell whether the truth claims upheld by one's community are relative or universal? Polanyi is conscious of the risk, and refers to a comparative example of the mystical Zande and naturalist European interpretative frameworks in order to illustrate the same circular logic that characterizes them both, thus implying the relativity of truth claims.<sup>153</sup> Borrowing from anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's study of the Azande, Polanyi cites that they "reason excellently in the idiom of their beliefs... but they cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 286-88.

express their thoughts.”<sup>154</sup> This is just as characteristic of our Western framework: “Our objectivism, which tolerates no open declaration of faith, has forced modern beliefs to take on implicit forms, like those of Azande. And no one will deny that those who have mastered the idioms in which these beliefs are entailed do also reason most ingeniously within these idioms, even while – again like Azande – they unhesitatingly ignore all that the idiom does not cover.”<sup>155</sup> Just like the Azande ignored all the facts pointed to by Evans-Pritchard which negated the Zande mystical interpretation of the use of snake poison by an oracle, so does each and everyone of us ignore all that our respective idiom does not cover. Now this should mean that all truth claims are in fact relative, that therefore there is no universal standard with which to judge truth claims for there is no way of escaping our social fiduciary framework, but Polanyi does not allow for this. He suggests that even though the community of inquiry in which we inhabit does adjudicate the truth claims to which we commit individually, our ability to commit personally to the quest of the real signifies the universal horizon of personal knowledge.

### 3- Tacit and Focal Knowledge

Polanyi regards knowing as “an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill. Skilful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skilful achievement, whether practical or theoretical.”<sup>156</sup> Knowing is an action because it presupposes a willful intention. It is spurred by the whole spectrum of lower to higher passions of the human being. It is skillful because it implies the whole range of human achievements down to the very

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<sup>154</sup> Polanyi citing Evans-Pritchard in *Personal Knowledge*, 288.

<sup>155</sup> Polanyi, 288.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, vii.

beginnings of our dexterity, linguistic achievements, and logical capacities. In every learning achievement, we come to a point where enough of the particulars (of the whole that comprises the learning achievement in question) have been subordinated or embodied so as to enable us to leap across the logical gap that entails the learning achievement. The subordination or embodiment of particulars is the tacit or unspecifiable process by which we come to know something without needing to refer specifically to its particulars in order for us to conceive of, or grasp, the whole. It is important to note that we cannot equate Polanyi's conception of tacitness with unconsciousness. "While focal awareness is necessarily conscious, subsidiary awareness may vary over all degrees of consciousness."<sup>157</sup> Being tacitly 'aware' points to the inability to specify and articulate formally what we are conscious of, not that we are unconscious of the particulars.

The more we dwell in the particulars of a given whole, the more difficult it is to recollect and bring to surface those particulars, but we are conscious of our dwelling in them nonetheless. Eventually, we come to a point where all that we know cannot be put into words. "We may then be said to become 'subsidiarily aware' of these particulars within our 'focal awareness' of the coherent entity that we achieve."<sup>158</sup> Gradually, our awareness of the particulars that make up the whole we wish to take hold of is such that it subsides into the deep recesses of our being so that we may focus specifically on the learning goal in question. For example, we can recall our first attempts at hammering in a nail. The knocks were most likely awkward and perhaps painful. It is as though the

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

hammer had not yet become an extension of our hand and arm. It was held with our focal attention not yet capable of going beyond the hammer. Eventually, with practice, the hammer became almost invisible to our senses because we had subsidiarized its utility, which became an extension of our hand. With greater precision we were able to hone in on the nail.<sup>159</sup>

As such, subsidiarization is a process of embodiment:

Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes [i.e. of particulars] can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body. The way we use a hammer or a blind man uses his stick, shows in fact that in both cases we shift outwards the points at which we make contact with the things that we observe as objects outside ourselves. While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as external objects. We may test the tool for its effectiveness or the probe for its suitability, e.g. in discovering the hidden details of a cavity, but the tool and the probe can never lie in the field of these operations; they remain necessarily on our side of it, forming part of ourselves, the operating persons. We pour ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them.<sup>160</sup>

We should note that this 'pouring oneself out' into the particulars and 'dwelling in' them not only occurs at the physical level, as in the example of hammering, but is also conceptual. "When we accept a certain set of pre-suppositions and use them as our interpretive framework, we may be said to dwell in them as we do in our own body. Their uncritical acceptance for the time being consists in a process of assimilation by which we identify ourselves with them."<sup>161</sup> As such, we can say that our minds must also come to dwell in the particulars of that which we wish to understand. Theoretical vision is thus also characterized by that same 'pouring out into' and 'dwelling in' the particulars of that vision. However we should not take this to mean that, somehow, the activity of the mind is disconnected from the body. Polanyi traces the personal coefficient of

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

knowledge to “its roots in the subsidiary awareness of our *body* as merged in our focal awareness of external objects.”<sup>162</sup> The more subtle achievements of understanding that occur at higher levels of personhood are embodied as well.

Polanyi's epistemology in this sense is phenomenological. The 'clues and tools' or particulars of a given act of comprehension “are made to function as extensions of our bodily equipment and this involves a certain change of our own being.”<sup>163</sup> It is as though man were capable of becoming or entering that which he is seeking to know. A fusion of sorts occurs between subject and object (which, as we shall see later, depolarizes the subject/object divide). The French have an expression which portrays this fusion well, albeit in a possibly negative way: *déformation professionnelle*. It becomes increasingly difficult to perceive things from without the professional framework one has eventually become fused with. After years of dwelling in the particulars of one's profession, one sees everything from the perspective of that profession, unable to extract oneself from those particulars.

The tacit nature of embodied knowledge implied by this phenomenological epistemology is such that we can summarize parts of our knowledge about certain things into maxims and rules, but the underlying art of that which we know how to do cannot be formalized and specified as such. Maxims “can function only... within a framework of personal judgment.”<sup>164</sup> Without the personal coefficient, maxims and rules of an art are meaningless. It is the intelligent judgment of an individual that generates the focal

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid* (*italics mine*).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, vii.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

awareness which then gives meaning to the rules and maxims. One of Polanyi's examples is how we know how to swim. Even if one does not know the 'mechanics' of swimming, such as how the inflated lungs prevent one from sinking, one can still know how to swim. The "aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them... Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge."<sup>165</sup> This is so because knowledge is experientially derived and experience is of a tacit nature. A technical instruction manual on swimming, or any other practice for that matter, cannot transmit the art of the practice in question even if it highlights well the principles by which the practice works.

Only the experience of the practice or the subsidiarization of its particulars, which presupposes the participation of the person, is carrier of knowledge. The underlying inarticulate and unspecifiable nature of experience is as such:

... the usual process of unconscious trial and error by which we feel our way to success and may continue to improve on our success without specifically knowing how we do it – for we never meet the causes of our success as identifiable things which can be described in terms of classes of which such things are members... Subsidiary or instrumental knowledge... is not known in itself but is known in terms of something focally known, to the quality of which it contributes; and to this extent it is unspecifiable.<sup>166</sup>

Thus it is impossible to come to know something in a predetermined and specifiable manner, i.e. by strict rules of procedure and methodological frameworks. The 'groping' manner in which we make our way towards any given learning goal precludes this

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 62 and 88.

possibility. Instead, we come to know something by tacitly subsidiarizing the particulars, the meaning of which comes to light only in the context of the whole we focus on.

#### 4- The Significance of Polanyi to Political Studies

This rendering of the nature of understanding points the way to a post-critical philosophy of knowledge. In order to know, we must first believe. Secondly, it signifies that any attempt to reduce to rules or maxims all parts of the understanding process is futile. Given that there is always a tacit component to knowledge and/or skills, and given that this tacit component is embodied in one's personhood, one cannot summarize into a methodology what is not specifiable. Methods will of course have their respective place in many areas of knowledge gathering, but these methods will be subordinate to the tacit acts of understanding made by the person in his or her given area of knowledge. One will use the appropriate methods in order to arrive at one's respective goal, but one will not let a methodology dictate the course. A method can never be wholly responsible for the act of understanding. Thirdly, it signifies that the fact/value distinction we always make is also unfruitful. Given that one's personhood is a constant throughout the understanding process, acts of personal appraisal are the backbone of the advancement of knowledge. To appraise is to judge, and to judge implies an evaluation. To ascribe factuality to a piece of information, an observation, or measurement, is to value this clue as a fact. It is evidence to our eyes because we have ascribed its evidential character ourselves. Finally, the concept of objectivity appears in a new light. It no longer refers to neutral, value free, or impersonal knowledge, but to our capacity to commit ourselves to self-set standards of

universal intent, being fully aware that our person is wholeheartedly vested at all points of our knowing process. Intellectual passion is our way towards discovery, and in no way is passion dispassionate.

To the study of politics, Polanyi's epistemology signifies that our adherence to what we think of as 'scientific' standards is misguided by our false notions of science. Let us first retrieve the etymological roots of this concept. 'Science' comes from the Latin word for seeing, '*scioscire*'. Now, seeing does not have to be taken literally. Seeing can be through imaginative creativity, theory, or conceptualization. This is insightful because we realize that in all fields of expertise, all academic disciplines, and all attempts to come to know something, some sort of 'seeing' is at hand. More importantly, there is no one method to 'seeing' properly. Of course methods will vary from field to field, but these methods will respect the subject matter at hand. Polanyi's work serves to redress the misconception we have inherited from positivist perspectives of science. His mission was to re-acknowledge the self as the ground of all understanding, that the self is tacitly involved in all acts of comprehension. This corrects the misconception we have about science in particular and knowledge in general.

Science is not some sort of depersonalized, value-free, objectivist domain of our intellect, just as all knowledge is not these things as well. Therefore, in political 'science' the correction we can first make is to reject our assumption that, by means of proper methodology, we can have neutral research results. It is not only a mistaken assumption, but a possibly dangerous one too. By depersonalizing our research, we make it void of

human meaning. This void can then be filled by utilitarian means-to-ends arguments that do not consider the human factor in all its meaningfulness, i.e. moral, social, ethical, emotional, and psychic, for example. Our results can then be administered in full acceptance of their 'unbiased' character, but can also be administered in outright opposition to human ethical codes of conduct. By giving up the idea that, by using the proper methodology, we can somehow make our research value-free and therefore unbiased, we allow ourselves to appraise the quality of our human judgments about political things. By acknowledging our capacity to come to know our subject matter tacitly, we free ourselves from the stranglehold of methodology and the ensuing overproduction of irrelevant political facts which occurs when theoretical relevance is subordinated to method. Furthermore, by acknowledging the powers of the mind implied by Polanyi's concept of emergence, we increase these powers. The more we deny our intuitive capabilities by barring them with methodological and measurable constraints, the less these powers will be exercised. We cut the roots off our very own qualities by putting all faith in methodology. We have basically outsourced our cognitive powers to methodology.

Finally, the significance of Polanyi's epistemology to political studies is that, by uncovering the illusion of scientific methodology, we let go of the insecurity we feel about the legitimacy of our field of knowledge. We have increasingly relied on the supposedly 'scientific' method in order to legitimize ourselves amidst all our academic fields and in response to our cultural bias in favour of the scientific perspective, not to mention the bureaucratic convenience of measurable variables and statistics. Perhaps it is

time to look into the mirror and be honest about the self-serving cycle this has generated. We get more funding for popular research subjects if we promise measurable results, and then, because of these results, we get more legitimacy along with further funding and the subsequent publication of even more research results. This is not to say that there is no room whatsoever for statistical analyses or polling surveys within our field. It is to say, instead, that our strict reliance on methodology constricts our level of understanding by delimiting the acceptable in terms of the measurable. This puts out of our field of research all metaphysical concepts. This is due to the positivist understanding of knowledge and reality we have come to accept. For the positivist, anything that is not observable by measurable technique, anything that is metaphysical in nature, does not belong to respectable academia. This is simply an erroneous view of reality.

All this begs the question of what approach we would move towards. First of all, it is not all political science that is subject to positivism, nor is it all political philosophy that is free of positivism. Nonetheless, were we to commit ourselves to a real assessment of the underlying assumptions that guide our current methodological bias towards the study of politics, and realize that these assumptions are inherently positivist and illusory on account of Polanyi's rendering of the nature of knowledge, we could possibly consider a phenomenological approach to our subject matter. This would obviously not require any specific method, although this is not to say that appropriate methods would not emerge either. Polanyi's understanding of personal knowledge as a tacit embodiment of one's subject matter would imply we consider entering our subject matter and making our way to the essential core of that which we are studying by means of subsidiarizing the

particulars of the whole it is we wish to comprehend. This would occur at a practical level, whereby a student would apprentice him or herself to a given politician with significant political experience. It would also occur in academia, where another student would do so with political philosophers. Nothing is new here. We would simply need to inspire ourselves from the traditional pedagogical approaches we were accustomed to before the onslaught of all pedagogy by positivism. Lastly, a Polanyian approach to political studies would entail that we focus once again on the whole and the essence which we seem to have lost sight of for the most part, i.e. a political science elevated to its full meaningfulness, which Eric Voegelin had rightly recognized as “the science of human existence in society and history, as well as of the principles of order in general,” and as a science of “the order in which human nature reaches its maximal actualization.”<sup>167</sup> What seems to have happened in political science is that we became so preoccupied with our methodological standards that we have lost sight of the whole which first ignited our curiosity. In order for us to refocus on the whole, we need to consider seriously the implications of Polanyi's epistemology, understand the illusion of depersonalized knowledge, and be honest with ourselves.

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<sup>167</sup> Voegelin, 2 and 3.

### **Part III: A Comparative Critique of Michael Oakeshott's and Michael Polanyi's Epistemologies**

We now have the accounts of the two philosophers' epistemologies, one rooted in the concept of personhood, the other in the nature of experience as a unified whole. Both philosophers present us with the necessary explanations for the reasons why our current approach to political studies is not tenable. Let us recall that the destruction wrought by positivism consists in the subordination of theoretical relevance to method. This perverts the meaning of science as all facts are considered viable scientifically if they submit to method. Furthermore, the erroneous fact-value distinction we make and the subsequent illusion of the necessity of a “value-free” science of politics come from the positivist conceit which dogmatically denies the metaphysical dimension of human experience.<sup>168</sup> Consequently, we search for laws of political behaviour because we think that human conduct is reducible to the physico-chemical level. We try to emulate what we have been misled to think the natural scientists do because we have lost the meaning of theoretical relevance and therefore think that the criterion for science is method. We doubt our cognitive powers to the point where, we not only let method control insight but, farcically, we make our creative insights fit the model method we have chosen to adopt *ex post facto*, so that the method justifies our insight.

Polanyi has offered us the concepts of subsidiary and focal knowledge in order to explain why knowledge can never be disembodied and therefore supposedly “value-free” and objectivist. Likewise, we have understood from Oakeshott's concepts of practical

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<sup>168</sup> Voegelin, 8.

and technical knowledge that the approach we have adopted regards only technical knowledge as valid, and that such a rationalist stance is illusory due to the inherently practical nature of knowledge. Thus both philosophers are relevant to the study of politics on account of these concepts. This assessment may seem like an 'un-committed' sitting on the fence. However, I also have to say that these philosophers complement each others' thought. My arguments are that: a) their respective concepts of practical and subsidiary knowledge achieve the necessary correction to our misconceived ideal of disincarnate and rationalist knowledge, even if, in my view, Polanyi's explanation of subsidiarity achieves this more successfully; b) while Polanyi's realism is a much needed correction to relativism, Oakeshott's idealism is more comprehensive; c) because Polanyi's fiduciary programme is untenable, Oakeshott's experiential framework, however omniscient it may seem to some, is more attuned to our present experience; and yet, d) Polanyi's elucidation of the cognitive powers of the mind brings us closer to a restorative endeavour in the science of politics.

### 1- The Significance of Practical and Tacit Knowledge

We have seen that the practical and subsidiary nature of the way in which knowledge is gained signifies that our neuroses about methodological exactitude are unfounded. It is not the method or the “technical rule” that ensures the act of discovery or the sought-for certainty of knowledge. In fact, nothing can ensure these. The fact that knowledge is rooted in one's personhood means that discovery depends on the quality of that person. Knowing is therefore dependent on the extent to which one undergoes pedagogical transformation in the classical sense. The “crib-sheet” or “life for dummies”

approach that characterizes modernity's way of handling the unknown is an illusion. We seek certainty of outcomes and think this will be obtained because we have the certain, exact method. In reality, we can only come to know something in practice. It is by a sustained effort at getting acquainted with the other –whether this other is a discipline, an art, or a technique –by the everyday contact with it and dwelling in the particulars of that which is not of the self, that one comes to know things. This has been explained in greater detail previously, but suffice it to say here that both Oakeshott's and Polanyi's concepts of practical and tacit knowledge signify to the study of politics that our underlying epistemological assumptions need a major revision.

The reason why I think that Polanyi's concept of subsidiarity achieves this revision more successfully is somewhat akin to William Poteat's assessment of Oakeshott's rendering of the concept of experience. He says of the latter that “One almost never has the sense that it is “experience” that Oakeshott *feels himself to have* and to be *in the midst of* “Experience” ...remains...unowned... [There is no] sense of the author's own personal and dynamic embodiment in [concrete experience].”<sup>169</sup> Now, it may be the case that we feel this about Oakeshott because we are comparing his rendering of experience specifically with Polanyi's, which comes across as the opposite of all that Poteat is saying about Oakeshott's “experience”. In defense of Oakeshott, however, and partly because I can also identify *personally* with his notion of experience, the fact that we might feel this about Oakeshott does not, for that matter, make Oakeshott someone whose rendering of experience is erroneous. In other words, one's way of

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<sup>169</sup> Walter B. Mead quoting William Poteat, “Michael Oakeshott as Philosopher: Beyond Politics, A Quest for Omniscience,” in *The Political Science Reviewer*, No 32 (2003), 228.

experiencing the world does not make it the measure with which to judge another's way of experiencing the world. I think that the way one experiences is a function of *who* one is. Everyone is human, yet everyone is unique nonetheless. This assessment may pose a problem to those weary of relativism. They may think that if each one of us had a unique way of experiencing this world, this might entail that we each have our own world-contents. There is some truth to this on the surface. For instance, we can all think of someone who seems to always see the positive aspect of everything and conversely, someone who sees but the negative. Perception is relative, but only to a certain extent. Here I think we can draw from Polanyi in order to understand how, subjectively, we can limit ourselves to relative perceptions of our world, but, and this depends on the person one *is*, we *can* strive to transcend our subjectivity in order to get a glimpse of the reality of this world. Oakeshott's conception of experience also helps us understand that experience is never merely personal, but is capable of being communicated, either verbally through rhetorical, poetic, or scientific discourse, or in an exemplary fashion as occurs in the teacher/pupil or master/apprentice relationship.

In light of this, depending on whom we are and therefore how we experience the world, we may sense that Oakeshott sees from without and Polanyi feels from within. This is why we do not get the same sense of experiential embodiment in Oakeshott's epistemology as we do in Polanyi's, even if this element is present in Oakeshott's epistemology nonetheless. It is quite possible that they simply relate differently to the world about them, the character of Oakeshott's way of experiencing being highly intellectualized or thought driven, while Polanyi's being embodied, sensual and

kinesthetic. This is not to say that Oakeshott's experience is somehow disembodied, or that Polanyi's experience does not involve thought. Oakeshott's concept of practical knowledge does carry the meaning of embodiment. Let us recall that he too referred to Chuang Zu's story of the 'disembodied knowledge of bygone men' in order to convey this; nor could Polanyi have put into words his epistemology without the structure of thought. Oakeshott and Polanyi simply experience the world in different ways, ways which emerge from the nature of their individuality. This being said, I do acknowledge the "bird's eye view" aspect of Oakeshott's epistemology which Walter B. Mead is critical of because of its implicit denial of tacitness.<sup>170</sup>

In response to Mead, I would say that we are dealing here with two very different persons, one whose being seeks to capture the most comprehensive vision of experience and whose way of experiencing the world truly is from a bird's eye view, however reminded he is that an Absolutely encompassing perspective is impossible and perhaps not even relevant to human experience. On the other hand, we have another individual whose way of experiencing the world brought him to the concept of tacitness. We can only imagine, given the impossibility of being Polanyi himself, what the nature of his experience was like. The words I have chosen to express my impression of it, i.e. he feels the world from within, are meant to contrast Polanyi's very embodied experience with Oakeshott's. From the deep recesses of Polanyi's personhood, the concept of 'tacitness' emerged. Conversely, it is quite understandable why Oakeshott cannot settle with a concept of tacit knowledge. It goes against the very nature of *his* person, which

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<sup>170</sup> See Walter B. Mead's article, "Michael Oakeshott as Philosopher: Beyond Politics, A Quest for Omniscience," in *The Political Science Reviewer*, No 32 (2003), 221-268.

seeks to comprehend the all. This is why Oakeshott did not think that Polanyi's concept of personal knowledge consisted of a theory of knowledge. For Oakeshott, a theory should bring to light the dimly seen. If the latter is purposefully kept in the unspeakable dark, theory is not achieved.<sup>171</sup> In defense of Polanyi however, he himself admitted to not having offered “any definite theory concerning the nature of things...”<sup>172</sup>

Our view should nevertheless be able to let these two individuals' perspectives exist in complementarity. What enables us to appreciate this is the understanding that in Polanyi there is a bit of Oakeshott and in Oakeshott there is a bit of Polanyi. They merge in their concepts of practical and subsidiary knowledge, and they part ways in their philosophical interpretations of life, namely, realism and idealism.<sup>173</sup> This is why we cannot make too much of the “isms” they chose to identify with. Polanyi's epistemology is fundamentally realist, and Oakeshott has indeed acknowledged himself to be an idealist, but these two schools of thought are interpretive frameworks of differing yet very real human experiences of the world. Now, the fact that we can identify more with Oakeshott's or Polanyi's way of experiencing the world does not render the one whom we do *not* identify with less qualified. Having said this, and therefore defending Oakeshott's notion of experience as equivalent to thought on the grounds that the character of

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<sup>171</sup> See Oakeshott's review of *Personal Knowledge* entitled “The Human Coefficient” in *Encounter*, Vol. 11 (Sept. 1958): 77-80. Oakeshott's main argument against Polanyi's work is that it does not constitute a theory of scientific knowledge at all. This is because scientific objectivity has been drowned in the murky concept of tacitness. Oakeshott suggests that Polanyi could have resolved this problem by either highlighting the Hegelian echoes in his work or by the Platonic notion of affinity between the person and reality.

<sup>172</sup> Polanyi, 381.

<sup>173</sup> See Mark T. Mitchell's article “Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott: Common Ground, Uncommon Foundations,” in *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2001-02): 23-34. He argues that both philosophers agree that the modern predicament is due to an erroneous conception of knowledge, but their divergent conceptions of reality, namely Oakeshott's idealism and Polanyi's realism, are what fundamentally distinguishes them apart from one another.

experience is unique to each and every one of us, I am nevertheless commending Polanyi for having so well described the experience of indwelling and subsidiarity, which seems to me to be common to all humans, even if highly developed in Polanyi's person. Polanyi's genius has been in the rendering of this character of knowledge. It is in this sense that Polanyi's explanation of subsidiary knowledge more successfully achieves the necessary revision to our mistaken understanding of knowledge as methodologically assured.

## 2- Idealism without the 'ism'

The philosophical schools of thought we come to identify with have crystallized into the form implied in the notion of a 'school of thought'. A closer look at them reveals the grey zones, or areas of overlapping thought, which dissolve the rigid classifications we label these different ways of conceiving our experience with. Thus *'Idealism without the 'ism''* should be taken to signify the conciliatory manner in which I prefer Oakeshott's idealism to Polanyi's realism. It is partly because idealism acknowledges the experience of the realist, that I consider the idealist's perspective to be more comprehensive. Personally, I could not be in harmony with a vision that negates the hidden essential realm of the given, for this denies the metaphysical and consequently the multidimensional nature of man. Nor could I settle for a vision that negates man's essentially creative role as cognitive being. Truth and reality *are* the fruit of the human spirit, but this does not render reality relative. There is a contextual element in that truth is subject to the spirit of the times, but truth, or reality, is not a product of human subjectivity. Note here that subjectivity is not spirit. Man's relationship with his spirit, or

cosmic counterpart, is what enables both the discovery and making of reality. What would man's presence here on Earth be at all valuable for if no creativity was expected of him? While Polanyi's realism is a much needed correction to relativism and nominalism, its implicit denial of this creative element signifies its limitation.

Oakeshott's idealism is closer to reality, even if missing a fundamental epistemological element which realism does provide. Oakeshott's criterion of truth is that "Truth is the condition of the world of experience in which that world is satisfactory in itself."<sup>174</sup> In response, we feel that there is something missing. There is the need for a measure with which to gauge satisfaction, and the "in itself" makes Oakeshott's criterion of coherence somewhat lacking. It is the realist experience which provides this measure, which is that the satisfaction is derived when this "world of experience" conforms to the essential nature of that which is experienced. In other words, there is a missing element in Oakeshott's idealism. Experience or thought can be objective in so far as it conforms to the essential nature of the given or the real. Then we can say that reality is that which is re-unified through the cognizing thought process. Rudolf Steiner, who can be thought of as an *objective* idealist, has explained this well:

Thinking first lifts out certain entities from the totality of the world-whole. In the given nothing is really separate; everything is a connected continuum. Then thinking relates these separate entities to each other in accordance with the thought-forms it produces, and also determines the outcome of this relationship. When thinking restores a relationship between two separate sections of the world-content, it does not do so arbitrarily. Thinking waits for what comes to light of its *own* accord as the result of restoring the relationship. And it is this result alone which is knowledge of that particular section of the world content.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 27.

<sup>175</sup> Steiner, 65 (*italics mine*).

In other words, the criterion of coherence is better explained by realism, even if realism fails to appreciate the truly creative dynamic of cognition. If thought is to be coherent, it must conform to “what comes to light of its *own* accord.” It must conform to the essential nature of that which is thought *of*. This is why the quality of thought depends on its capacity to *be* real. Therefore in response to Oakeshott's assessment that experience is thought is reality, I have to say yes, but only in so far as thought conforms to the real. This is the missing ground in Oakeshott's epistemology.

Having said this however, I still have to choose Oakeshott's idealism over Polanyi's realism, albeit without the 'ism'. Perhaps I would opt for an 'objective idealism', like that of Steiner's, if that were possible. What I mean to say is that the creative element in idealism is what I cannot sacrifice. On the one hand, I cannot identify with a strictly reflective notion of the mind. On the other, I acknowledge the need to ground the ideal in the real. For this reason, I think Oakeshott's idealism –without the ism –is more comprehensive. The other reason is that I do not believe it necessary to posit the essential realm of being in another world than the one we belong to. There is a need for thought to conform to something, and this something is the Platonic idea behind the form, but when we say 'behind' we do not need to posit this “place” in other worlds. In what other world could we possibly ground the essential idea 'behind' the form? More importantly, where does this yearning to do such a thing come from? The realist would respond by saying that it is the experience of the divine which answers this question. This is why this particular debate can be so poignant, for what fires it is the experiential clash between God-believing and God-questioning experiences. One cannot allow

oneself to give in to the other, for the stakes are too high. Cherished on the one hand is the belief in God and the value of humility, while on the other, what cannot be sacrificed is man's responsibility for his own moral conduct. In response to this epistemological debate, I have to say that the essential idea is indeed hidden, but it is *of* that which is form, just as the form is *of* that which is idea. Our physical bodies do not belong to one world, while our essential or ethereal soul and spirit bodies belong to another. The whole is not divisible as such. And so the essential ground of personhood is not external to the person. Idealism seeks not to posit the essential realm of being in an external world, for its perspective has gone beyond the existential need to do so. This is why idealism is more comprehensive, for it comprehends the experience of the realist, yet it rectifies the illusion of the need to ground being elsewhere than in the world-content.

### 3- The Point of No Return

It was suggested by Polanyi that what was needed now, in order to rectify our mistaken assumptions about the nature of knowledge and readjust the modern disequilibrium which has denied our cognitive powers, is to recognize belief as epistemologically prior to knowledge: “we must now go back to St. Augustine... [who] taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*”<sup>176</sup> This is a problematic solution for it disregards the experiential impossibility to go back to another concrete experiential point in time. It is programmatic, and for this very reason, because it does not consider the concrete reality at hand, is not tenable. The concrete reality is that for many, the experience of faith is either a) not available; b) negated; or c) integrated and

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<sup>176</sup> Polanyi, 266.

surpassed. We are dealing with societies where vast amounts of individuals are no longer brought up in a classical Christian pedagogical framework, where some are even brought up to denigrate the Christian experience, and where some have gone beyond faith to other experiential realities. How can we possibly “go back to St. Augustine” given that this is the concrete situation we are in?

In agreement with Eric Voegelin who also dealt with the modern epistemological predicament in his *New Science of Politics*, “the very historicity of human existence, that is, the unfolding of the typical in meaningful concreteness, precludes a valid reformulation of principles through return to a former concreteness.”<sup>177</sup> The context in which Voegelin was writing there was the need to restore political science to the consciousness of principles, but his advice is as applicable to our epistemological discussion here. In other words, we cannot go back to St. Augustine because “the very historicity of human existence” precludes this possibility. And so we can take Voegelin's counsel that “the principles must be regained by a work of theoretization which starts from the concrete, historical situation of the age...”<sup>178</sup> We must first start by asking ourselves what *is* our concrete, historical situation. Now, because Polanyi's experience was inherently Christian, it is understandable that he would conceive of the solution to go back to St. Augustine, because for him this *was* an experiential possibility. But what of all the others who do not have this experience for whatever reason? One cannot indicate an experiential destination that lies in the past.

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<sup>177</sup> Voegelin, 2.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

As such, Polanyi's solution may betray his own concept of personal knowledge. We cannot simply go back to a given experiential point in time. To enunciate such an imperative is to disregard the underlying experiential requirements to go from any point A to B. Polanyi's fiduciary program is untenable because a program inherently leaves the experiential backdrop out of the equation. It is a formalized equation. It seems as though Polanyi is liable here to the very rationalism he is trying to rectify. The fiduciary program is a superimposed plan. If any fiduciary element is to be revitalized, it would have to emerge out of experiential discovery in the natural flow of things. This is rather doubtful in this given historical reality that is modernity. As previously mentioned, a lot of people either deny the experience of Grace or acknowledge themselves to have integrated this experience and moved on. Furthermore, a lot of people have felt betrayed by the institutional pillars that have been the carriers of the message of Grace.

It is for all of these reasons, and because we must acknowledge the historical reality we inhabit, that I think we should not adopt a reactionary oppositional stance towards modernity. We do need to look at it with critical eyes, but no matter how dissatisfied we may be with its excess egocentrism and rationalism, we somehow need to find a way to integrate the modern experience, by seeking to comprehend the creative element in this modern experiential reality that is unfolding before us. We need to create harmony, not by going back to a previous experience, for this is impossible, but by integrating what we have come to experience so far, and adjusting or recalibrating our conceptualizations through newly discovered experiential horizons. It is in this sense that Oakeshott's experiential framework is more fruitful in the face of modernity's

disequilibrium than Polanyi's fiduciary program. In idealism, it is understood that there is a “logically necessary progress of the spirit.”<sup>179</sup> This progressive dynamic precludes a static understanding of personhood as well as the possibility to return to a previous experiential point in time.

Interestingly, Polanyi had also pointed to the impossibility of returning to a previous cognitive state of mind once a cognitive leap had been made across a logical gap that separates not-knowing from knowing. It leaves me perplexed as to why he would then propose the solution to go *back* to St. Augustine. Perhaps it did not occur to him that the experience of faith, to *have* faith, was obsolete for so many, that simply designating an experiential destination would not achieve the intended results for the very same reason why methodological exactitude does not ensure the sought for answers to our questions. It is easy to project one's experiential reality on others without realizing that two people can be worlds apart experientially. We all do it. This is why it is understandable that Polanyi would point the way back to St. Augustine, which for him did not consist of an experiential impossibility, it *was* his experience. This being said, and having expressed the problem with this solution, I am suggesting that Oakeshott's experiential framework provides a more fruitful approach to the modern disequilibrium.

In idealism, philosophy is the “perpetual re-establishment of coherence.”<sup>180</sup> This understanding, coupled with the progressive dynamic of the spirit, means that man tries to find coherence between perpetually new experiential discoveries and the systems of

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<sup>179</sup> Greenleaf, 10.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

thought that explain his experience. Let us recall Voegelin's explanation of the mystical philosopher's experience as an example. The Socratic discovery of the new truth about the order of the soul was “a discovery which produces its experiential material along with its explication; the openness of the soul is experienced through the opening of the soul itself.”<sup>181</sup> This means that man was not always the way he is now, nor will he be what he is now. Just as the Socratic mystical experience engendered the experiential differentiation which enabled the mystics to ground their reason for opposing the pagan experience, so will the modern experience eventually engender the experiential differentiation that will enable us to ground our reason for declining any solution to go back in time to another experiential reality. The implied dynamism of spirit evolution in idealism precludes the possibility to go back to an older truth about the order of the soul. Thus when Polanyi wishes to go back to an understanding of knowledge as a gift of Grace that we must strive for under the guidance of antecedent belief, the question arises as to how that can be done when it seems to be that the modern experience has made the experience of Grace obsolete for so many. It is for these reasons that Polanyi's fiduciary program is not tenable, and that Oakeshott's experiential framework, however omniscient it may seem to some, is more coherent with our present experiential reality.

#### 4- Cognitive Powers of the Mind

Let us give our attention once more to the current state of political science. Perhaps the methodological wars have subsided, and it is sometimes said that we have moved beyond positivism in the social sciences, but one can notice that positivism left a mark too deep for this to be the case. The reality is that we are dealing here with an

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<sup>181</sup> Voegelin, 67.

expression of modernity the experiential roots of which cannot be “swept” away simply by means of logical clarification. There is no quick fix solution to the root cause which points to a disequilibrium in the modern psyche. Furthermore, when someone holds a dogmatic position, there is great difficulty in communicating logically the reason why this position is not tenable. As Voegelin had pointed out, “disregard for elementary verities happens to be one of the characteristics of the positivistic attitude.”<sup>182</sup> We can recall Polanyi's example of the European anthropologist, who was studying the Azande tribe, his incapacity to convey to them the illogical grounds on which they attributed power to the snake poison used by the shaman. In parallel, the average political science department still resonates the positivist attitude in the textbooks and methodological instructions given to students. What is by far the most debilitating effect of this attitude is its denial of the intuitive capacities of the mind, the expression of which becomes methodological neurosis. For example, when a student hands in his term paper, and the importance of the insights are overshadowed by the emphasis on the prescribed methodology, not only does this protocol deny the cognitive powers of the mind, it is the most destructive aspect of positivism in that it brutalizes the creative mind to the point of creating human automatons.

Both Oakeshott and Polanyi have provided us with the explanation as to why a positivist understanding of knowledge is absurd. We saw with Oakeshott that positivism acknowledges only technical knowledge as the right kind of knowledge, while in reality, all knowledge is practical first, and then may be technical, but always on practical premises. Polanyi has explained how the kind of value-free, objectivist knowledge that

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

positivism celebrates is a perverted understanding because it denies the personal coefficient in every act of knowledge. The intuitive intimations present throughout are implied in both of their concepts of practical and tacit knowledge. However, there is in Polanyi's epistemology an element which strikes a higher note. I have found that Polanyi's elucidation of the cognitive powers of the mind achieves more in light of a needed restoration, not only in political science, but for the modern, materialistic mind in general.

In Oakeshott's epistemology, knowledge is arrived at by means of experience, the practical nature of which signifies a contingent, traditional, and learned experience, but we never get a sense in which our cognitive faculties have the power of any kind of transcendence whatsoever. This is the case if we consider his idealism to be sceptical. If, on the other hand, we take Walter B. Mead's understanding of Oakeshott's idealism at face value, it may be that, in Oakeshott's epistemology, it is the philosophical experience which provides the vehicle for transcendence, whereby the limits of arrested experience are transcended by the all-comprehensive philosophical vantage point. I would suggest that Oakeshott's psyche was perhaps too "British" or pragmatic to have espoused such an omniscient idealism. Yet we do get a sense in which his depiction of philosophy could lend itself to transcendence: "experience without reservation or arrest, experience which is critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial or abstract..." however "fleeting and elusive."<sup>183</sup> Could it be that what Oakeshott experiences in those fleeting, nocturnal moments of clarity is transcendental? It could possibly be the case, but the experience of transcendence is understood as illusory for

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<sup>183</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, 3.

Oakeshott. There is no concept which apprehends the personal and universal poles of commitment because there is no need to posit the essential realm of being externally. This is due to the admittedly idealist premise from which Oakeshott is explaining the nature of experience as a unified whole.

I agree with Oakeshott's view that there is indeed no need to posit the ground of essential being externally; yet we must safeguard the notion of transcendence that is implied in Polanyi's concept of the personal/universal pole of commitment because this concept comprehends more fully the multidimensional nature of man as body, soul, ego, and spirit. The *episteme* is lost otherwise. Let us recall that for Polanyi, the concept of the personal/universal pole of commitment served to express the experience of transcending the subjective limitations of ego consciousness and making contact with the real. As such, the real for Polanyi is something other than the 'I am'. His phenomenological epistemology implied that man can make contact with what is 'other' because there is a "yearning" from both ends of the pole of commitment to meet and a capacity for 'fusion'. Polanyi's intention was to overcome the polarized misconception of the subject/object divide by means of indwelling and breaking out. The transcendental nature of the 'breaking out' or 'logical leap' necessary to come to know the real was implied in his concept of the pole. This experience cannot be tossed aside flippantly. Somehow we must reconcile the very real experience of transcendence with idealism. This would mean that transcendence does not involve a movement from our world to another external world beyond ours, and that the real or the essential nature of that which constitutes our world does not constitute another worldly foundation or ground. In

agreement with Steiner, “There is... not the slightest reason for seeking the foundation of things outside the given physical and spiritual world, as long as a comprehensive investigation of this world does not lead to the discovery of elements within it that clearly point to an influence coming from beyond it.”<sup>184</sup> This would imply that the personal and universal poles of commitment would constitute two dimensional areas of the same world, in this case, of one's being. Transcendence could then be understood as a movement characterized by the overcoming of one's ego in the experiential discovery of one's spirit or higher mind, and not a kind of gnostic 'stepping out' of one's own consciousness. It would mean that, the experience we have come to characterize as transcendence was in fact not outside of experience but very much part of the human experiential horizon. If we characterize the experience of transcendence as wholly illusory, without clarifying that the illusion consists not in the notion of transcendence itself but in grounding that which is of this physical and spiritual world in another world, then we lose the *episteme*, for it is the communication with one's spirit that provides the measure with which one can transcend subjective opinion or *doxa*, and know for oneself.

In Polanyi's epistemology, there is truly a sense in which our cognitive faculties are capable of transcendence. It may be that it is because Polanyi's epistemology is inherently phenomenological that he achieves this. A phenomenological epistemology suggests that, by means of indwelling, we let come to us what is essential to that which we study. In other words, as Steiner puts it, “thinking waits for what comes to light of its *own* accord...” We can appreciate this element in Polanyi's epistemology when he is describing how the real “seeks” to make contact with us, and when he expresses

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<sup>184</sup> Steiner, 10.

knowledge as a gift. Somehow Polanyi's epistemology breaks out into a whole other register of experience, the resonance of which transcends intellectual boundaries. We get a sense of this with Polanyi's explanation of the cognitive leap across the logical gap, which he thought possible on the grounds of faith. In other words, what enabled the leap was the belief in finding something meaningful on the other side. He also expressed transcendence with his concept of the pole of commitment, with the two grounds, one personal and the other universal. Finally, he expressed it with his concept of indwelling and breaking out. In each of these conceptualizations, there is an element of transcendence which enables contact with reality. We perceive reality by overcoming or transcending our subjective limitations that had previously kept us from seeing this reality. We may also describe this movement as integrating or moving beyond ego consciousness. Whichever way we describe it is not important. The key is that our concept must be able to communicate the essence of this experience. Transcendence is part of the human experience. By demystifying the nature of our cognitive powers through these concepts, Polanyi has shown us the grounds on which we can re-acknowledge and trust our intuitive faculties. Herein lies Polanyi's greatest achievement, and it is in this sense that I feel Polanyi's epistemology to be more fruitful at this point in time, when materialism may very well be at its peak.

### **Conclusion: A New Science of Politics?**

Keeping these four assessments in mind, we may contemplate what an Oakeshottian/Polanyian political science would consist of. Whether our departments would be called 'political science' or 'political studies' might depend on whether this development leaned more heavily towards Polanyi, the former, or Oakeshott, the latter. A more Polanyian leaning in our hypothetical development of political science would have our departments called political science, but science here would refer to its original meaning, well described by Voegelin simply as “a truthful account of the structure of reality, as the theoretical orientation of man in his world, and as the great instrument for man's understanding of his own position in the universe...”<sup>185</sup> Our approach to politics would be to seek the essential, and for this purpose, we would not let method dictate the course, but the course, the method. Oakeshott's understanding of science might have reflected what had come to pass for science at the time, i.e. a positivist understanding of it.<sup>186</sup> If so, it would be the reason why he could not agree with a “scientific” approach to politics. Yet, as previously mentioned, he was very much in agreement with Polanyi about the real nature of knowledge, i.e. not based on technical rules but as having emerged out of practice and tradition. This does not equate Oakeshott's understanding of science with Polanyi's, but it certainly raises doubt as to the claim that Oakeshott was a positivist when it came to his understanding of science. He was *not* a positivist, and he *was* able to see its expression in its many forms, including science.

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<sup>185</sup> Voegelin, 5.

<sup>186</sup> See Efraim Podoksik's article entitled “The Scientific Positivism of Michael Oakeshott,” in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol 12, No 2 (2004), 298. Podoksik argues that Oakeshott's understanding of science was “shaped under the influence of scientific positivism (p. 198).”

The Oakeshottian element in such a development in the academic study of politics would imply a greater emphasis on historical and philosophical approaches to the study. The historical classes would be of prime importance, for it is through these that the youth may gain a civilizational perspective in which they may get a sense of where it is that they come from. A greater understanding of the traditions that have fuelled theirs and other civilizations would of course be nurtured in such classes. Political philosophy classes would no doubt focus more on introducing this youth to the experience of philosophy than the actual subject of politics, for we cannot forget that for Oakeshott, the university experience consisted not in training the youth for the workforce, but in offering a place in which one could escape practical concerns for the sole purpose of becoming acquainted with the great conversation of mankind amongst the several modes of experience that had come to maturity, and in this process get a greater sense of one's identity in this world.

Polanyi's influence would engender a turn towards a phenomenological approach to the study of politics. This implies that, instead of imposing model methods upon the particulars of the political world, we would let come to light of its own accord what is essential to the political problems we seek to elucidate. A classical understanding of education, as in the turning around of *periagoge*, would be necessary. Of course this would imply that those in the position to effect such a development in political science would have had the experience themselves. If that were the case, classes would no longer be taught according to subjective personal interests but according to the elucidation of the

structure of political reality. We would finally have moved beyond a relativist educational approach. Uncertain though he may have been of the ultimate ground of his own intuition, his *Personal Knowledge* has struck a chord, the resonance of which has re-awakened Meno's paradox from the slumber of the modern mind. With Polanyi's concept of personal and subsidiary knowledge, we can understand why we know what to look for even if we do not grasp the whole of that which we are seeking to know. We recollect from the deepest recesses of our personhood that which we already know, yet cannot put into words in order to come to reveal that whole.

If the nature of knowledge were understood to be both practical and personal, any attempt, however subtle, to rid the human coefficient of the contingent nature of knowledge, would simply seem absurd. Thus there would be no need to separate fact from value because it would be understood that our values are upheld not arbitrarily but on experiential premises of tradition and theoretical observations. In other words, we would recognize the inherent human capacity for theoretical orientation which enables a critical assessment of values. Political values such as order, authority, and representation would no longer require the veil of *doxa* but would be affirmed with the authority derived from man's theoretical orientation towards the world. We would no longer need to hide behind the cloak of political philosophy in order to explore metaphysical dimensions because these would be understood as inherently part of any political discussion. Both philosophers' epistemologies would free us from being so absorbed with methodological concerns. Methods would not rule the study of politics but would be subservient to it. There is a world of difference implied here. An Oakeshottian and Polanyian political

science would restore the mind as proper bearer of authority in matters of methodological judgment. Consequently, we might notice a rush of creative insight, no longer burdened by positivist dogma and methodological neuroses. Political science might indeed be restored to the great science of man's existence in society and history, "the order in which human nature reaches its maximal actualization."<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Voegelin, 12.

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