

Chapter 1

Oakeshott and Modernity

Here there was no promise or salvation for the race or prevision that it would late or soon be gathered into one fold, no anticipation of a near or distant reassemblage of a 'truth' fragmented at the creation of the world...
On Human Conduct, 1975

No settlement with our enemies will ever be satisfactory unless it arises from a real confidence in our civilization. [*On Peace with Germany*], 1943

I

This chapter aims to provide a contextual framework for subsequent discussion of the vision behind Oakeshott's ideas, for it is claimed in this study that his vision is best understood when related to the intellectual debates of his time. The specific context which reveals this vision most clearly is one characterized by the perception of modern civilisation as marked above all by the fragmentation of knowledge and the individualisation of society. This perception is important in particular for Oakeshott's idea of radical plurality. In order to show this, attention will initially be focused on the moment when Oakeshott presented in full, for the first time, the idea which would guide him in his later writings — the idea, that is, that radical plurality is inherent in modern civilisation. That moment is the publication of *Experience and Its Modes*.¹ The present chapter seeks to show that that book, besides being a self-contained philosophical treatise, can be seen as inspired by a wider vision. When the nature of that vision

[1] On the development of Oakeshott's ideas prior to the publication of *Experience and Its Modes* see ch. 2, introduction, and, in more detail, in Efraim Podoksik, 'How Oakeshott Became an Oakeshottian,' *European Journal of Political Theory*, forthcoming.

is revealed, the ideas underlying the rest of Oakeshott's philosophy will be more easily appreciated.

The significance of *Experience and Its Modes* in the wider context of Oakeshott's thought as a whole is best understood when juxtaposed with the ideas of R.G. Collingwood. The significance of the implicit Oakeshott–Collingwood argument, in turn, only emerges when it is related to philosophical and social questions which were especially prominent in continental European thought at that period. What links the two philosophers is their concern with fragmentation as the distinguishing feature of the modern age: in this fundamental respect, both thinkers share a specific vision of the meaning of modernity. Placing Oakeshott's ideas in this framework is indispensable for understanding what his philosophy is and, no less important, what it is not. More generally, this mode of analysis will reveal that the vision behind Oakeshott's philosophy permits him to defend what is called 'modernity' not only against the attacks of conservative critics but, more recently, against those of so-called post-modern ones.

II

At first glance, *Experience and Its Modes* is a book of pure philosophy, detached from intellectual debates of its time. This impression is, nevertheless, deceptive. The work is very closely connected with another impressive piece of writing, which is an early philosophical work of the British Idealist thinker R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis, or the Map of Knowledge* (1924).² Oakeshott's work should be understood, in part at least, as an argument with the ideas Collingwood presents there.

Various commentators noticed parallels between the two books.³ Yet what often escapes attention is that Oakeshott, while following Collingwood's path in many respects, consistently opposes him on fundamental points. To understand the nature of Oakeshott's disagreement with Collingwood is to take a step forward in our understanding of Oakeshott's vision.

Speculum Mentis is a philosophical work, yet Collingwood makes it absolutely clear that his concerns are not purely philosophical in

[2] R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

[3] See W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London: Longman's Green, 1966), pp. 10-11, 25, 33, 95; Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 41, 79n.

their nature. In the prologue he shares with readers his worries about the state of modern civilisation. He reveals that his work is an attempt to diagnose what he calls the '*maladie du siècle*',⁴ and perhaps to see whether it is possible to find some solution to this disease of modernity.

Specifically, Collingwood starts with what he sees as the miserable condition in which philosophers, artists, and religious devotees — all those who form the spiritual elite of society — find themselves in the modern age. They are not listened to, certainly not revered any more, what they produce can hardly interest a wider audience, and their economic condition is completely dependent on market demands. Collingwood compares this situation to the past, which is idealistically described as the time 'when young men of every degree crowded to Oxford to hear Duns Scotus, or when Cimabue's Madonna went through the streets of Florence...'⁵ The reason for this current misery is not that the public has lost interest in the product that artists, philosophers or religious leaders can offer. On the contrary, today people need art, religion and philosophy not less, but perhaps even more than they needed them in the past. The problem is that people feel that they are not offered what they want and need. Why is this so?

According to Collingwood, this situation is the symptom of the special feature of modern life. Modern man is characterised by the loss of the unity of mind that medieval man possessed. Once, all the activities of the mind co-existed in some state of harmony, and 'there was a general interpretation of the various activities of the mind, in which each was influenced by all'.⁶ This harmony has disappeared in modern life, since the activities of the mind developed in different directions, splitting from each other. Previously, art and religion mutually supported each other, and an artist who worked in a monastery could both fulfil his artistic needs and feel his work to be required and appreciated by his fellows. Today, however, there is a prolonged battle between religion, art, and science, an international war, in which each activity claims priority, but in which there is no judge. In fact, every activity needs all the others for its harmonious fulfilment, but is unable to accommodate them.

Yet Collingwood believes that one may still try to find some resolution even in the condition of separation. Perhaps the very fragmentation of different activities may contain in itself the way to overcome this fragmentation. Collingwood's project is therefore to

[4] Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 22.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

scrutinise various activities of the mind and their pretences to autonomy. He distinguishes between art, religion, science, history and philosophy, calling them 'forms of experience'.⁷ He attempts to show that their claims for autonomy are false, that, in fact, all forms of experience are incoherent modes of knowledge. He builds a hierarchy of these forms according to the degree of their adequacy in reaching absolute knowledge. When the inadequacy of each form is exposed from within, such a form necessarily transforms itself into a higher form of knowledge. Art for him is the most primitive form of experience in this sense, while philosophy stands closest to the Absolute.

Yet, in the conclusion, Collingwood argues that his analysis has shown that no system of relationship between various activities can be found. According to him, a map of knowledge, in which every activity will be assigned its proper place, is impossible.⁸ Each form pretends to comprehend the whole, but this claim is a mere illusion. Every form of experience is merely a modification of the whole, an abstraction which will vanish under philosophical scrutiny. Yet this philosophical journey is not fruitless, because, through the analysis and supersession of those different degrees of knowledge, the mind learns to recognise itself in its own activity. It learns that there is no real autonomy of each activity. 'There are no autonomous and mutually exclusive forms of experience, and, what is more, it is in no one's interest to assume that there are.'⁹ Such autonomy is illusory and can lead only to conflict. The philosophical journey through these activities is fruitful only if the mind learns to overcome them, and thereby to become more aware of itself.

Speculum Mentis is perhaps the most Hegelian of the books written by Collingwood. Not accidentally, there are apparent similarities between it and *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and it is supposed to be a guide to the perplexed modern mind, which gradually comes to be conscious of itself in the process of analysing and dissecting various forms of knowledge.

This book was not Collingwood's last word in philosophy. In fact, throughout his intellectual career, Collingwood continuously modified his views on various philosophical subjects, and later his philosophy turned to a rather more historicist direction, emphasising the

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 306.

[9] *Ibid.*

primacy of history rather than of philosophy and the Absolute.¹⁰ Yet here I am concerned only with Collingwood's views expressed in *Speculum Mentis*, for it is this book which seems to have provoked Oakeshott to write *Experience and Its Modes* in the way he did.

Though Oakeshott never mentions Collingwood's treatise in his book, the parallels between the two works are obvious. Both books focus on the analysis of various forms of experience. Both are written in a neo-Hegelian idiom. Both are preceded by a declaration of the intention behind writing the book. Collingwood's prologue is very long, and it explicitly refers to the contemporary historical situation, whereas Oakeshott's introduction is short and deliberately detached. However, the latter can be seen as a response to the former. Collingwood begins with the assertion that

all thought exists for the sake of action. We try to understand ourselves and our world only in order that we may learn how to live. The end of our self-knowledge is not the contemplation by enlightened intellects of their own mysterious nature, but the freer and more effectual self-revelation of that nature in a vigorous practical life.¹¹

This sort of claim is rejected by Oakeshott at the start of his book:

An interest in philosophy is often first aroused by an irrelevant impulse to see the world and ourselves better than we find them... Thinking is at first associated with an extraneous desire for action... But we must learn not to follow the philosophers upon these holiday excursions.¹²

Later in the book Oakeshott almost literally quotes the assertion of Collingwood to which he objects: 'All thought exists for the sake of action... and we try to understand the universe only in order to learn how to live.'¹³

There are other similarities. Collingwood praises 'the childishness of medieval man',¹⁴ and Oakeshott speaks of 'the childhood of thought, when knowledge appears undifferentiated'.¹⁵ Collingwood introduces the terms 'modifications' and 'forms of experience';¹⁶ Oakeshott uses the term 'modes of experience'.

Yet the most important point is that Oakeshott's entire work is an argument, which, though being similar in form, is actually the precise opposite of Collingwood's. Whereas Collingwood rejects the

[10] Allan Megill, "'Grand Narrative" and the Discipline of History' in F. Ankersmith & H. Kellner (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), pp. 151-173.

[11] Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 15.

[12] EM, p. 1.

[13] EM, p. 317.

[14] Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 29.

[15] EM, pp. 1-2.

[16] Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 39, 48.

idea of the exclusivity of each form of experience, Oakeshott affirms it. As we shall see in more detail in the following chapters, Oakeshott argues that every mode of experience is irrelevant to all others, that each mode forms a homogeneous world of ideas, and that to pass an argument from one mode of experience to another is to commit a grave logical error. In other words, the idea of the complete autonomy and homogeneity of various worlds of experience is at the heart of Oakeshott's philosophy. We will also see how Oakeshott parts ways with Collingwood almost at each juncture of his thought. Meanwhile, however, it is enough to notice that Oakeshott adheres to the view which Collingwood rejects.

Moreover, the disagreement between Oakeshott and Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis* does not centre only on the issue of the analysis of the modern mind. Collingwood links this analysis to his view of the state of modern society. And he sees the condition of modern society in no more favourable light. He argues that the fragmentation of mind did not happen by itself but was the outcome of a profound social change which Western civilisation underwent since the Middle Ages. According to Collingwood, medieval life was governed by the idea of institutions:

The individual counted for nothing except as the member of his guild, his church, his monastic order, his feudal hierarchy. Within these institutions he found a place where he was wanted, work for him to do, a market for his wares. He could devote himself to fulfilling the duties assigned him by his station in that great organism within which he found himself lodged.¹⁷

The Renaissance broke this culture. It gave birth to modern individualism, expressed in 'the freedom of discovering that one can leave one's ordained place and march out into the world without being struck dead by an offended God'.¹⁸ This quest for freedom also led to the freedom of various activities of mind to become mature and separate from each other. But God was offended, for this freedom was bought at the price of an internal conflict, which is the disease of modernity. The curse of modern individualism is, therefore, the deep cause of the miserable condition of modern consciousness.

Oakeshott had little to say about this idea in *Experience and Its Modes*. But everyone familiar with his later writings will hardly overlook the parallels. Like Collingwood, Oakeshott believes that the modern individual is a child of the Renaissance age, and that this individuality is expressed in his ability to choose his way for him-

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

self, to embark on the long journey in a search for the place for a person like *him*. This idea can be found in Oakeshott's writings of the middle fifties and in his later book *On Human Conduct* (1975).

Oakeshott is therefore engaged with ideas similar to those of Collingwood. The difference between the two authors, however, is to be found in their attitude. While, for Collingwood, modern individualism is just another symptom of the disease of the modern age, for Oakeshott, the birth of the ideas of freedom and individuality is, perhaps, the most praiseworthy of all historical events. The cherishment of individuality for him is, in fact, the only adequate response to modernity.

Thus, as one can already see, that single book of Collingwood contained the ideas with which Oakeshott was preoccupied during his entire lifetime. This is not to suggest, of course, that Oakeshott's philosophy should be described as a prolonged argument with Collingwood. This would be to underestimate its significance. Rather it can be said that both authors struggle with the same kind of problems but solve them differently. It is, nevertheless, fruitful to begin with this particular connection between Oakeshott and Collingwood for, when Collingwood's ideas are placed together with those of Oakeshott, the specific character of Oakeshott's view becomes clearer.

III

There is, however, another reason why it is important to highlight the relation of *Experience and Its Modes* to *Speculum Mentis*. Collingwood's book was a well-written and quintessential presentation of the set of problems which engaged many other authors. That is, it was directly related to a wider intellectual debate. What was at stake in this debate? Collingwood is known as a follower of the school of British Idealism in the years when Idealism went out of fashion in Britain. Thus, *Speculum Mentis* was written as a neo-Hegelian book, and it attempted to offer a quasi-Hegelian solution to the problems of the modern time. Yet Collingwood cannot be regarded as fully belonging to the neo-Hegelian trend, exemplified by Green, Bosanquet and others. This is to misunderstand the nature of his position.

The subject of *Speculum Mentis*, its philosophical and social problems, and the emotional intensity with which these problems were outlined, were not typical for the British philosophical life of that period. British philosophy of the early twentieth century was dominated by British Idealism and, later, by realism and logical positiv-

ism. Of course, British Idealists borrowed many ideas from continental philosophical schools. Yet these ideas were not accompanied by the sense of a sharp crisis so apparent in Collingwood's book. British Idealism was in many respects a native movement.¹⁹ Although many British Idealists claimed to have learnt much from Hegel, this was a rather moderated form of Hegelianism, employed as an alternative to empiricism and utilitarianism. And, certainly, their metaphysical preoccupations with the Absolute were out of touch with the trends in contemporary continental philosophy. Although Collingwood was indebted to his older British Idealist contemporaries, the source of his concerns lay elsewhere. He was perhaps the most continental of all British Idealists, being very familiar with, and deeply influenced by, his contemporaries such as Croce.²⁰ Moreover, he was influenced not only by a certain set of ideas, but also by an acute sense of the crisis of modernity.

If we are to look for statements similar to those of Collingwood we should travel across the Channel. For example, just a few years earlier, Alfred Weber gave a similar diagnosis to the problem of modernity, accusing German intellectuals of becoming too professional. According to him, intellectuals, concentrating on their narrow fields of study, abandoned the quest for the truth.²¹ The intellectual fragmentation was the main disease of modern time, and the intellectuals who succumbed to this fragmentation lost the ability to be spiritual leaders of the nation. Weber was not alone in his concerns about fragmentation. The perception of modernity as fragmentation and of fragmentation as a tragedy was characteristic of Central European thought at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The turning point here was the collapse of Hegelianism in the middle of the nineteenth century and the rise of neo-Kantianism, indicating the end of many attempts to find a unified system of knowledge. Neo-Kantianism can be described as a critique of Absolute Idealism.²² Neo-Kantians, each in their own way, postulated the impossibility of the unified philosophical system and insisted on the autonomy and irreducibility of different axiological spheres.

This idea was, in some sense, a radicalisation of the notion of the diversity of knowledge characteristic of earlier German philosophy.

[19] On British Idealists see, for example, David Boucher and Andrew Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 1-26.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

[21] Alfred Weber, 'Die Bedeutung der geistigen Führer in Deutschland,' *Die neue Rundschau* 29, 1918, pp. 1249-1268.

[22] Frédéric Vandenberghe, *Comparing Neo-Kantians: Ernst Cassirer and Georg Simmel* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1996), p. 10.

It was the self-proclaimed task of German philosophy to restore unity in the condition of this diversity. Diversity seen as a problem may already be found in Leibniz's writings. It is certainly one of Kant's main preoccupations. For Schiller, who speaks about the polytheism of the new age, this is the most important characteristic of the modern epoch. And the predominant motive of Hegel and the romantic philosophers of his generation is an attempt to find unity in diversity, which they see as the main task of philosophical inquiry.²³ The revived idea of philosophy as the centre of knowledge and the ultimate arbiter between rival claims of different faculties, advanced by Kant, Fichte, and, in some sense, developed by Hegel, was a desperate attempt to reclaim systematic unity even in the condition of this diversity.²⁴

The rise of Neo-Kantianism, therefore, led to the radicalisation of that perception of diversity and to its transformation into the notion of fragmentation. Almost every one of the neo-Kantian thinkers postulated, in a more or less radical form, the autonomy of different spheres of knowledge and value. This perception, however, should not be reduced only to neo-Kantian philosophy, though neo-Kantians were, perhaps, most consistent among the proponents of this view. The idea of fragmentation was a commonplace in the intellectual life of that period, signifying the advent of what was called 'modernity'. This idea of modernity was indeed a popular subject of discussion in Europe, and especially among the intellectuals in the German-speaking countries, from the collapse of the 1848 revolutions onwards, culminating in the *fin-de-siècle* climate at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁵ The idea of modernity as fragmentation can be found in the philosophy of Nietzsche, in the social theory of Max Weber, or in novels such as *The Sleepwalkers* by Hermann Broch.

Thus, Collingwood was engaged with a widespread notion of modernity, yet his specific target seems to have been the

[23] 'The basic theme to emerge from Schiller's *Letters*, then, and from the writings of other early romantic critics of existing society is that the highest human aspiration is the drive for unity. However, this is a unity of a special kind. It is a unity that presupposes and even welcomes diversity and conflict.' Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 34.

[24] See Terry Pinkar, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 93-95.

[25] See Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. xix-xx. On the intellectual situation within German universities see also Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969).

neo-Kantian assumption of the autonomy of different spheres of knowledge and value. He presented a neo-Hegelian alternative to this view. The main adversary of Collingwood's Hegelian treatise was, therefore, not English empiricism, but the neo-Kantian frame of mind.

Oakeshott too was well read in German philosophy. Although it is difficult to trace the particular ideas by which he was influenced, there is no doubt that he was very familiar with the Central European intellectual climate. He certainly undertook a very serious study of German philosophy in the middle twenties in the original language. If Collingwood's work is a neo-Hegelian attack on the idea of the autonomy of different spheres of knowledge, Oakeshott's *Experience and Its Modes* is a restatement of the basic neo-Kantian position, although expressed through neo-Hegelian terminology. Oakeshott turns Absolute Idealism upside down in order to offer a response to Collingwood on his own territory. Whether this combination of methodological holism and neo-Kantian influences is successful, and how far, if at all, Oakeshott's book can be seen as lying within the neo-Hegelian tradition, will be discussed later. Meanwhile, it is important to point out that Oakeshott's main idea – the mutual irrelevance of various modes of experience – while original in the British intellectual atmosphere, was not new in itself and was quite familiar to anyone immersed in the Central European debate.

One of the most unequivocal proponents of this idea was Georg Simmel, who was the most widely read social thinker at the time.²⁶ Twenty years before Oakeshott, Simmel presented a view almost identical to that of Oakeshott, using sometimes the same terms. Simmel, like other neo-Kantians, recognised the plurality of the forms of understanding in modern experience. He regarded the fragmentation of culture as a tragedy but, unlike many of his pessimistic contemporaries, he did not regard plurality itself as a problem. He insisted that, when all forms of experience are taken in their purity, they are absolutely irrelevant to each other. This claim is maintained throughout many of his different writings. Thus, he speaks about countless modifications (*Modifikationen*) of knowledge, such as science, art, or religion, each assuming totality (*Ganzheit*) of the world as its content.²⁷ Each form of experience can

[26] On the personality and philosophy of Simmel see Rudolph H. Weingartner, *Experience and Culture: The Philosophy of Georg Simmel* (Middletown, Co.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962).

[27] Georg Simmel, 'On the Nature of Philosophy,' in K.H. Wolff (ed.), *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918: A Collection of Essays with Translations and a Bibliography* (Columbus:

be recognised as a world (*Welt*) since it pretends to represent totality under a general principle (*Gesamtprinzip*).²⁸ Yet there can be no overlap or meeting between these forms, and therefore no clash.²⁹ Thus, Simmel does not see any problem in the principle of the existence of a plurality of categorically distinct forms of experience. The problem for him is practical, and it arises from the imperfection of human understanding. In reality none of these worldviews is able to be perceived in its completeness, since our knowledge is always limited, and this is what drives us to confuse different forms of experience.³⁰

Oakeshott uses the same idea of irrelevance in order to reject what is, in fact, Collingwood's thesis. Whilst Collingwood draws the map of knowledge in order to show that the separation between different realms is impossible to maintain, Oakeshott argues that all modes of experience, if taken in their pure form, are homogeneous within themselves and completely irrelevant to each other. Moreover, these modes have an identity of their own which may be worth defending.

Thus, one can argue that Oakeshott started his intellectual career not with an obscure work of philosophy, as is often supposed, but with a treatise which can be properly seen as an elaboration of the idea of the radical plurality existing in the modern mind. This plurality should not be fought against. Instead of exploding each form of knowledge from within, as Collingwood does, it is necessary to maintain strict limits between them. *Experience and Its Modes* is, therefore, a statement defending the radical plurality of different forms of experience, and this statement is affirmed in further writings of Oakeshott, such as 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' (1959) and *On History* (1983). At the time it was published, it had little relevance to the mainstream concerns of British philosophy. Yet it was very much in line with contemporary debates in Central Europe.

IV

As we have seen, Collingwood rejected the notion of the autonomy of different spheres of knowledge, attacking it from the position of Absolute neo-Hegelian Idealism. From Collingwood's standpoint, such an attack was probably very timely. Neo-Kantianism looked to

The Ohio State University Press, 1959), p. 288. Originally published in *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (Leipzig: Sammlung Goschen, 1910), pp. 8-43.

[28] Georg Simmel, *Lebensanschauung: vier metaphysische Kapitel* (München: Duncker & Humboldt, 1918), p. 30.

[29] Georg Simmel, 'Christianity and Art,' in *Essays in Religion*, trans. H.J. Helle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 76; *Lebensanschauung*, p. 30.

[30] Simmel, 'Christianity and Art,' p. 76.

have won this particular battle against methodological holism. Yet this does not mean that the recognition of fragmentation was greeted without concern. Actually, it was perceived as a burden rather than as an achievement, the symptom of a crisis rather than progress. Fragmentation was often perceived as a tragedy inherent in modernity, although it was recognised as a tragedy with no escape.

This pessimistic modernism which admits the loss of unity and predicts an eternal conflict, dominated the intellectual atmosphere in the German socio-philosophical debate of that time. It can be found in some of Nietzsche's writings, where he mourns the absence of unity of style in modern German culture,³¹ and it is most sharply exemplified by Max Weber's value pluralism. Even Simmel, perhaps the most optimistic among the theorists of fragmentation, perceived it as a tragedy.

What is interesting about Oakeshott is that he recognises radical fragmentation without expressing any uneasiness about it. For him, fragmentation leads to the radical plurality existing in modern experience, and this plurality should be wholeheartedly cherished and not mourned. It is in this sense that Oakeshott can be called a defender of modernity.

There is, however, an additional reason why it is fruitful to interpret the vision that drives Oakeshott's philosophy in this way: if we situate Oakeshott in this context, we can more easily discern the differences between his position and that of other thinkers with whom he is often associated. Oakeshott is sometimes perceived either as a conservative anti-modernist or as a proto-post-modernist before his time.³² Yet it seems that both views are somewhat misplaced. The similarities between his views and those of some conservatives and so-called post-modernists can be found, but these similarities are superficial. What is important and significant about Oakeshott are the points where he differs from post- and pre-modernists. To understand this is to understand the essence of the vision of Oakeshott's philosophy.

For this purpose, it will be necessary to establish a coherent idea of what the notion of modernity as fragmentation entails and what is wrong with it from the point of view of its critics. The intention is not

[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 5-6.

[32] The terms 'modernity', 'pre-modernity' and 'post-modernity' are used here in their general socio-cultural meaning and not in the sense they are used in the theory of aesthetics. There may be some parallels between the two spheres; however it is important not confuse them.

to suggest here a full scope analysis of these terms. It is true that the concepts of 'modernity' and 'post-modernity' are overused in current debate in Anglo-American social philosophy, and that they may refer to many different, even contradictory phenomena of contemporary life, seen in whatever perspective, and artificially abstracted from any other aspects of reality. It is even possible to speak about different 'modernities'.³³

However, there are two main reasons which determine the choice of such a line of interpretation in this book. Firstly, the wide-spread debate on modernity and post-modernity, however ambiguous it may appear, is an indication of our intuitive understanding that something essential is at stake in this debate, even though the definite idea of what it is may be unclear. It is not an accident that many interpreters of Oakeshott have placed him somewhere in this debate. Thus, Richard Rorty includes him among 'post-modern bourgeois liberals'.³⁴ Several other commentators regard him as a conservative critic of modernity.³⁵ And John Gray, at least at some points, finds in Oakeshott a follower of the philosophers who were 'unequivocal modernists'.³⁶ All these characterisations are not merely metaphors. They are designed to make important claims about the way one should understand Oakeshott's philosophy. Therefore, to claim that Oakeshott is a defender of modernity is to make a certain assertion about what Oakeshott's thought is, and, no less importantly, what it is not. Saying, that Oakeshott is a critic of both post-modernist and anti- or pre-modernist positions, implies the direction in which this interpretation of Oakeshott's philosophy leads.

Secondly, as is already clear, the term 'modernity' is limited here to a particular set of ideas prominent in continental European thought at the beginning of the twentieth century and, above all, to the idea of fragmentation, which may serve as a relevant background to the development of Oakeshott's philosophy. The present

[33] See, for example, Peter J. Taylor, *Modernities: A Geohistorical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999).

[34] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 197.

[35] See, for example, Matthew Johnson, *Michael Oakeshott's Critique of Modernity: Science, Ideology and Reason* (PhD diss., Nebraska University, 1999). On Oakeshott as a conservative see also Perry Anderson, 'The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century,' *London Review of Books* 14, September 24, 1992, pp. 7-11; Robert Devigne, *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss, and the Response to Postmodernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

[36] John Gray, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 206.

aim, it should be emphasized, is not to offer a comprehensive theory of modernity, which is bound to remain one of those contested and ambiguous concepts which fill today's intellectual climate. It is rather to illuminate some of the problems which shaped Oakeshott's thought and to clarify a few terms so that they can be meaningfully used in reference to his ideas.

Thus, the notion of modernity is understood here to focus on the idea of the fragmentation of worldviews, values and individuals within contemporary Western civilisation.³⁷ Fragmentation may be understood to exist in two different realms. It may be seen as characterising either the state of modern knowledge and culture, or the condition of modern society. Various thinkers have understood the relationship between the realms of culture and society in different ways. Thus, the fragmentation of culture may be seen as related to the fragmentation of society, so that the two compose one philosophical system (as that of Hegel), or the two phenomena can be grasped as independent developments of the modern age. In any case, both the development of modern culture and of modern society can be understood through the idea of fragmentation.

Collingwood's book, for example, was driven by this vision of modernity. The problem may be generally described as follows. During the preceding period the world had been perceived to be a more or less consistently unified whole, so that it had been possible to build an interdependent system of knowledge. In this system all elements could be unified in an hierarchical order with the religious-ethical realm at the top of the pyramid, and other branches of knowledge derivative from it. This hierarchy was destroyed when other systems of knowledge revolted against the religious worldview and presented themselves as alternative systems independent of it. Science was the primary adversary, but other disciplines also put forward their claims to autonomy. Thus, the eighteenth century witnessed the appearance of aesthetics as an independent discipline and of the concept of genius as the ideal of an

[37] Fragmentation is not the only way to define modernity. It can be seen just as a symptom of another phenomenon such as, for example, the experience of 'newness' and 'transitoriness' in modern civilisation. David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985) presents modernity as 'the modes of experiencing that which is "new" in "modern" society.' (p. 1) Yet the fragmentarity of modernity plays a prominent part in this experience. It is the basic element of what is seen here as modernity. Intimations of such understanding can be often found in the literature. See, for example, William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

independent artist.³⁸ Later, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, historical inquiry was often seen as the ultimate umpire of knowledge.³⁹

The breakdown of the old hierarchical system of values could be perceived as unique because it had not been followed by the formation of an alternative comprehensive worldview. There were, of course, adherents of various worldviews who put them forward as substitutes for religion. Thus, early 'positivists' such as St-Simon and Comte found in science their new religion.⁴⁰ Proponents of aestheticism, such as Walter Pater or Stefan George, suggested that art could be such a religion.⁴¹ And post-Hegelian German historicism of the nineteenth century might have wished history to be at the top of the comprehensive system of knowledge.⁴²

Nevertheless, it was clear that none of these attempts had been successful, because all of the different worldviews continued to flourish. Within the spheres of science, history and art, moreover, there was a tacit tension between the demand for autonomy and the claim to supremacy.⁴³ Indeed, many of the proponents of the ideas of art for art's sake, or science for science's sake, or history for history's sake, were prone to adopting the view that their sphere was the one which was supreme and that all other spheres should be subject to it. Had one of these claims been accepted, a new hierarchical structure would have emerged.

However, the different spheres continued to co-exist, each refining its own individuality, and thereby denying the claim to supremacy of the others. Yet each sphere produced by the fragmentation of the old integrated worldview was itself in danger of disintegration since, without being supported by a comprehensive philosophical

[38] See, for example, Paul Kaufman, 'Heralds of Original Genius,' in *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), pp. 189-217; Kineret S. Jaffe, 'The Concept of Genius: Its Changing Role in Eighteenth-Century French Aesthetics,' in P. Kivy (ed.), *Essays on the History of Aesthetics* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1992), pp. 224-244.

[39] Reinhart Koselleck, 'Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process,' in *Futures Past: On the Semantic of Historical Time*, trans. K. Tribe (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1985), pp. 21-38.

[40] Edward Caird, *The Social Philosophy and Religion of Comte* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999); Frank E. Manuel, *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1956).

[41] Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 177.

[42] Koselleck, 'Historia Magistra Vitae'.

[43] See, for example, Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

system, none could preserve its own unified character and prevent itself from being further divided into different branches. The danger of further fragmentation can already be felt in the concerns intimated, for example, in Nietzsche's essays or Broch's novels. These concerns would be later transformed by French philosophers into the ideas of deconstruction and post-modernism. To use the current jargon, the conclusion might be drawn that after the religious grand narrative had been deconstructed, the time was ripe for the deconstruction of the fragments of this narrative such as scientific or historical positivism, or the autonomy of art.

Thus, one can imagine a scale of different attitudes towards the possible ways of co-existence of the various spheres. There are two extreme poles in this scale. At the one pole, there is a hierarchical system, which is advanced by those who would welcome the return to some form of primordial certainty. Here this position will be called 'pre-modernist'. Included among its proponents are those who are usually regarded as conservative or religious critics of modernity, like Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, or Alasdair MacIntyre. At the other pole, there is a situation of permanent instability, in which all value systems are constantly scrutinised and deconstructed. This position will be called 'post-modernist'. For example, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty can be included in this category as 'post-modernist' critics of modernity. The distinction between pre- and post-modernists is not perfect, given, especially, that 'pre-modernist' and 'post-modernist' critiques of modernity can often co-exist. Moreover, a critique of modernity can often serve as a meeting point of these two extremes. This is the reason for similarities between some strains of conservative and postmodernist thought.

Nevertheless, a different position is possible, which is not the combination of pre-modern and post-modern critiques of modernity, but a point in the middle of the scale. This position will be called 'modernist'. Included among the proponents of this view are the aforementioned theorists of fragmentation at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and it is with this view that we began our discussion. These theorists deny hierarchy but at the same time do not anticipate the relativism and deconstruction associated with post-modernist theories. They, therefore, subscribe neither to the 'pre-modern' nor to the 'post-modern' view.

The 'modernist' position is in some respects similar to pre- and post-modernist positions, for it is situated somewhere in the middle between these extremes. But at the same time it is the rejection of

both. To adhere to a pre- or post-modernist critique of modernity, or to both, is to commit oneself to the denial of the autonomy of various spheres such as science, history or art. The only difference between the two is that pre-modernists deny this autonomy because they want to impose their comprehensive worldview, whilst post-modernists want to explode any coherent view, including that of these spheres. By contrast, 'modernists' postulate the autonomy of several well-established spheres.

Now, apart from the idea of the fragmentation of modern culture, a parallel development may also be found in the fragmentation of modern society. Not only may our worldview be seen as fragmented, but the structure of our society may be presented as undergoing an analogous process. Reflection on this social aspect of 'modernity' originates, perhaps, in the political economy of the Scottish Enlightenment with its emphasis on the importance of the division of labour. The Scottish school's analysis was borrowed by German philosophers, and especially by Hegel, who transformed division of labour into one of the main elements of his philosophy of mind.⁴⁴ The idea of the centrality of the functional differentiation of modern society lies at the heart of the modern sociological theories of Tönnies and Simmel.⁴⁵ This coincides with the idea of the appearance of individuality as a modern phenomenon salient in Hegel, and later developed by Burckhardt and Nietzsche.

The specific understanding of 'modernity' to which this study refers when claiming that Oakeshott's thought implies a defence of modernity should now be clear. This understanding is not idiosyncratic. Besides being quite common in the historical period in which Oakeshott's philosophy originates, this view incorporates many familiar ideas about modernity and even helps to resolve the paradoxes which result when 'modernity' is associated with developments and ideas such as objectivity, secularisation, science, aesthetic enjoyment, individualism, liberalism and many others. To put them together in a coherent fashion is not a simple matter. Thus, individualism, pushed to its extreme, revolts against the standards of objectivity. But if we use the idea of plurality as a heuristic term for the various aspects of modernity, many contradictions disappear. For

[44] On the influence of the Scottish political economists on Hegel's thought see, for example, Laurence Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics and the Politics of Spirit 1770-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[45] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, trans. J. Harris & M. Hollis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. K.H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1950). See also, Roy Pascal, *Culture and the Division of Labour: Three Essays on Literary Culture in Germany* (Coventry: University of Warwick, 1974).

example, modernity is, of course, characterised by the development of the modern scientific mind as creating the most rigorous rules of scientific research, yet scientific activity is limited and it relates only to a particular sphere of modern consciousness. This is why Oakeshott is able to combine his adherence to the strictest scientific positivism with an appreciation of the limitations of science.⁴⁶ He is a philosopher not of some specific part of the fragmented reality of the modern age, but of modernity in its entirety.

The understanding of modernity as fragmentation, therefore, can provide an explanation of many aspects of modern civilisation. Yet, theoretically speaking, 'modernity' is a problematic and elusive concept. It promotes a view which is internally unstable and even contradictory. On the one hand, it rejects an overall system of values; on the other hand, it retains several different spheres of values. It rejects the unified system, but maintains that every system of values is sovereign in its autonomous sphere. In other words, it is both the rejection and affirmation of value. Modernity is the attempt to preserve value in a devalued world.

It also becomes clear why 'modernity' is referred to in so many different and contradictory ways. It itself is situated between two contradictory drives, and therefore it can be seen as merely an imperfect type of either of them. Thus, for 'post-modern' critics, modernity is just a continuation of pre-modernity, with its affirmation of value, by other means. This is why Adorno and Horkheimer, or Lyotard, identify modernity with the Enlightenment and despotism of Reason.⁴⁷ On the other hand, 'pre-modern' critics such as Leo Strauss or Roger Scruton associate modernity with an almost post-modern nihilism, or at least see it as leading to such nihilism.⁴⁸

The figure of Max Weber is particularly relevant here, because Weber as a theorist of modernity takes to the extreme the combination of fragmentation with an insistence on the objectivity of value-spheres. Therefore, one can find Weber being attacked not

[46] See ch. 2, science.

[47] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (London: Verso, 1979); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington & B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

[48] 'The ruin of meaning would never be sanctioned by a philosopher who is merely modern; but it lies in the agenda of those modernists and post-modernists from Sartre to Rorty whose world is bereft of all authority.' Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 477. See also his definition of 'modern', 'modernist', 'post-modernist' in *ibid.*, pp. 1-2; also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953).

only by conservative authors such as Voegelin and Alan Bloom, for whom he is the prophet of a dangerous nihilism of values,⁴⁹ but also by radical authors, for whom he is the advocate of old-fashioned notions of objectivity and value-neutrality.⁵⁰ In fact, both kinds of critic are right, since modernity itself is Janus-faced: it involves, that is, both the preservation and rejection of value.

However, even the 'modernist' recognition of the existence of several established independent spheres may provoke different responses. The danger of 'modernity' can be seen, for example, as lying in the clash between different systems of value, though not in the disintegration of the spheres themselves. One extreme response will be to retreat to some form of the pre-modern position disguised as modernism. Thus, a scientific positivist who advocates the independence of science is a 'modernist'. But if he is tempted to claim that science is the only true form of knowledge he simply falls back into hierarchy. This is why, for example, Communism with its emphasis on technology and science can be seen as an anti-modern phenomenon.

Another response would be to retain some kind of a compromised 'modernist' position, which would shore up diversity with at least some loose kind of unity. Certain aspects of Hegelian philosophy may be interpreted in this way, and this is the direction to which Collingwood seems to be heading in his rejection of the neo-Kantian idea of the autonomy of various spheres of knowledge.

Finally, there can be a recognition that this plurality is irreducible to any kind of unity. Pluralism of different worldviews is recognised, and at the same time relativism is not yet respectable. However, as it has already been indicated, this basic irreducibility of the established value spheres often provokes a deep pessimism with regard to the condition of modern culture, mostly because of the fear of a war between different value spheres, for example between science and art.⁵¹

The idea of the fragmentation of society and the development of individualism is no less problematic. That view also provokes attacks from two opposite directions. Conservative (pre-modern) criticism sees in the modern individual a dangerous abstraction, a phantom of the 'atomist' approach, which fails to recognise that

[49] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp 1-26; Allan Bloom, *The Closing of American Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 150-151.

[50] See, for example, John Horton, 'The Fetishism of Sociology,' in J.D. Colfax & K.L. Roach (eds.), *Radical Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 171-193.

[51] See Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*, pp. 199-219.

individuals can exist only as members of social institutions within the succession of many generations. 'Post-modernists' like Deleuze may attempt to attack the notion of individuality from the opposite side, denying the existence of unified personality and promoting what is now known as the 'multiple self'.⁵²

Yet the idea of differentiation and individualisation may be seen as the predicament of modern social life and supported by the political doctrine of modern liberalism. Like the idea of the plurality of independent values, liberalism (as an idea of the plurality of independent individuals) is an essentially unstable doctrine based on two opposing drives — the one affirming the independence of the individual, and the other emphasising the moral responsibility of such an individual and the social harmony achieved through the free development of independent members of society. Again, this view can be attacked from two sides. Pre-modernists may see in liberalism a disguised nihilism, leading towards anarchy and disorder.⁵³ Post-modernists may see in liberalism just a disguised doctrine of oppression and domination designed to preserve the old system of privileges.⁵⁴

Thus, modernity understood as fragmentation, either in the cultural or the social dimension, appears to be an inherently unstable and contradictory concept. Any defence of modernity will necessarily involve a battle on two fronts — against the traditional hierarchical systems on the one hand and against nihilism and relativism on the other. Those who undertake this task will also need to respond to the scepticism of pessimistic modernists about whether and where such defence is possible.

V

It has been a rather long excursion, but it has helped us to construct a theoretical framework based on which we can discern what is essential in Oakeshott's thought. First of all, he is not a pre-modernist. He accepts the modernist notion of radical plurality. Partly to emphasise this point, I took the liberty of substituting an apparently more straightforward expression — 'Western civilisation' — for the

[52] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem & H.R. Lane (New York: The Viking Press, 1977). See also Jon Elster (ed.) *The Multiple Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[53] See Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. E. Kennedy (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1985).

[54] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

notion of modernity. Oakeshott himself would perhaps choose the former to describe his own views and call himself a defender of Western civilisation. Yet I would like to insist on this notion in order to make clear the gap between him and those conservative thinkers who, like Leo Strauss, tend to assign what is valuable in Western civilisation to its pre-modern heritage. True, Oakeshott also venerates the ancient heritage of our civilisation. However, in his philosophy, he puts an emphasis on the value of what is specifically modern in the Western world. The central element of this modernity is an appearance of the plurality of different spheres.

The idea that the modern age is qualitatively different from all other ages, and that modern Western civilisation is perhaps exceptional compared to all other civilisations, is present, even when it is not explicitly stated, in Oakeshott's major works. For example, as we shall see later, Oakeshott regards poetry, science and history as activities characteristic of the specifically modern consciousness. Some may argue that this presentation of his position is puzzling, given the salient historicism of many of his writings. It is true, that in his historical or quasi-historical mood Oakeshott is always averse to the idea of historical discontinuity. He prefers to present the historical process in terms of gradual change. Thus, he qualifies Strauss' view of Thomas Hobbes's philosophy as representing a complete break with previous thought because he believes that its seeds can be found in the Stoic-Christian tradition.⁵⁵ Oakeshott also attributes some of the ideas developed by himself to ancient thinkers such as Aristotle.⁵⁶ And on other occasions, Oakeshott argues that the modern morality of individuality did not appear suddenly, but resulted from the gradual development of moral attitudes during several centuries.⁵⁷ Similarly, the two different understandings of the character of the modern European state, though fully developed in the modern period, had been intimated in the character of the institutions and legal thought of the medieval epoch.⁵⁸ Indeed, the idea of social development as the process of gradual change in which a society can use only those resources which are already intimated in its tradition is the subject of one of the most famous of Oakeshott's essays.⁵⁹

However, the idea that a certain phenomenon is the outcome of gradual development is perfectly compatible with the attempt to

[55] 'Dr. Leo Strauss on Hobbes,' HCA, pp. 153-154.

[56] HC, pp. 109-111, WP.

[57] MPME.

[58] HC, ch. III.

[59] 'Political education,' RIP, pp. 43-69.

present it as qualitatively new. For, whatever his admiration for historical study might be, Oakeshott himself was not an historian, certainly not according to his own rigid criteria of what historical writings should look like.⁶⁰ His method of presentation is not an account of change for its own sake, but the formulation of ideal types through which a certain condition can be understood. And here Oakeshott maintains a clear dichotomy between the modern and pre-modern age. Though he recognises that historically the development of our civilisation into what we recognise as modernity was gradual, complex and ambiguous, he thinks that it is important to maintain a clear distinction between the modern Western and other civilisations. Thus, while in *Experience and Its Modes* he mentions the modes of history, science and practice as historical phenomena, he nevertheless analyses them from a purely theoretical standpoint. In *On Human Conduct* he speaks about two modes of understanding of the modern state, and his analysis is, again, theoretical, and not historical. He also speaks about new types of morality which are clearly distinguished from the medieval morality of communal ties. And in this sense, the philosophy of Hobbes is seen as an analysis which is suitable to a specifically modern moral sensibility.⁶¹

Furthermore, Oakeshott often refers to the modern age as the situation of maturity of the human race, and this maturity indicates the break between the previous, childish and primordial condition, when 'death was close, leisure was scarce',⁶² and sophisticated modern culture. This consciousness of the exceptional character of modern civilisation is supported by the significance that Oakeshott attributes to seeing the world in the category of presentness, to the feeling of the importance of what is truly present. He praises all of those whose life in the present is not dominated by the considerations of the past and the future.⁶³ Oakeshott is deeply aware of the gap between the modern and the ancient age. The exceptional character of modernity is understood by him to pose new and serious questions with regard to the human condition, and these questions require serious reflection.

Secondly, the choice of the term 'modernity' implies that Oakeshott is *not* a post-modernist philosopher, and this is an especially important point in the face of a growing tendency to study

[60] 'The Activity of Being a Historian,' RIP, pp. 151-183.

[61] HC, chs. II and III; 'The Masses in Representative Democracy,' RIP, pp. 363-383; 'The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes,' RIP, pp. 295-350.

[62] 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,' RIP, p. 488; see also EM, pp. 1-2.

[63] 'Religion and the World,' RPML, p. 33.

Oakeshott's thought in the context of various post-modernist philosophies.⁶⁴ Such study may, perhaps, render his thought more popular but only at the price of losing what is distinctive and valuable in it and of ignoring his deeply felt beliefs.

Bruce Pilbeam, in a recently published article, argues that there are interesting similarities between conservative and postmodernist thought yet these similarities remain largely unnoticed, as most conservatives regard postmodernism as an enemy, and thereby become defenders of rationalism and universality contrary to what one might expect from a traditional conservative.⁶⁵ Unlike them, Oakeshott is more radical in his critique of rationalism and this is why he is one of a few conservatives 'to be given by postmodernists either attention or respect'. At the same time, Pilbeam thinks, it would be 'erroneous to impute postmodern inclinations to Oakeshott'.⁶⁶

But what precisely does it mean to be similar to postmodernists without having postmodernist inclinations? Pilbeam's answer seems to be that Oakeshott is a conservative whose critique of modernity is not corrupted by rationalism, and his views are therefore akin to the post-modernist critique. In my view this would be an erroneous interpretation, and the analysis of what 'post-modernism' means, which is offered here, makes it clear why. It is true that 'modernism' and 'post-modernism' share in common their rejection of the unified hierarchical world-picture. Yet to reject such a picture and to recognise the conditionality of any experience does not necessarily lead to the adoption of the post-modernist view which promotes the destruction of the notions of objectivity and standards.

In his philosophy of experience Oakeshott shares the modernist conviction that there are several well-established spheres of knowledge, that these spheres are self-contained and homogeneous, that they have their own measures of objectivity and standards and that they are not going to be fragmented any further. All these premises are unacceptable to a typical post-modernist view which rejects any notion of self-sufficiency and objectivity. Moreover, as will be shown later, Oakeshott is influenced by thinkers such as Poincaré and Croce, who are alien to any post-modernist mood, and it is superficial to declare those writers 'proto-post-modernists'.

Likewise, Oakeshott builds his philosophy of society to defend the ideas of individuality and the liberal order, not to destroy them.

[64] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 197.

[65] Bruce Pilbeam, 'Conservatism and Postmodernism: Consanguineous Relations or "Different" Voices?' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6(1), 2001, pp. 33-54.

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

True, he does not speak about individuality in essentialist terms and recognises that the 'self' is an abstraction. However, for him, the 'self' is not a chimera to be deconstructed but a coherent identity valuable in itself.⁶⁷

Yet it is not surprising why there is such a wide range of possible interpretations of Oakeshott's thought, and why many commentators see him either as a traditionalist conservative or a post-modernist. As has been shown, the idea of modernity includes features of both the pre-modern and post-modern outlook. Therefore, depending on what aspect is highlighted, modernity can be interpreted either as pre-modernity or post-modernity. Those interpreters who present Oakeshott as a traditionalist or post-modernist are not entirely wrong, they are just partially correct. Those who find in Oakeshott the combination of conservative and post-modernist critiques are even closer to the truth. Yet this is not the view that is offered in the current work, for it regards Oakeshott not as a critic, but as a defender of modernity. The affinity of his thought with some claims of pre- and post-modernists simply derives from the fact that modernity finds itself in the middle of the scale between pre- and post-modernist positions.

VI

Oakeshott, therefore, is a defender of modernity. Like many other theorists of modernity he understands it as a radical plurality resulting from fragmentation and individualisation. Yet, unlike many of them, he sees this condition as valuable in itself. The question, however, arises: by what argument can this defence of modernity be supported?

As we have seen, pessimism with regard to modernity is deeply implied within its very definition. Modernity, being both the rejection and defence of value, is unstable and self-contradictory. If this is the case, then the philosophical defence of such condition, if it is ever possible, requires a great measure of ingenuity.

I will analyse Oakeshott's position in the later parts of my book. However, some preliminary remarks may be required. As it seems, Oakeshott offers no philosophical justification for the condition of radical plurality he observes, yet he does not regard the lack of demonstrative argument as a failure. He is a philosophical sceptic who recognises the impossibility of creating a comprehensive philosophical system. For Oakeshott, the condition of plurality is just an histor-

[67] See ch. 3, practice, morality, individuality.

ical outcome of a series of contingent events. He does not believe that the necessity of plurality itself or of a particular form of experience can be philosophically proven. Neither does he think that philosophy is well placed to prove the very idea of irrelevance of these forms to each other. The best one can offer is not an argument, but an exposition of a certain standpoint. Philosophy can elucidate merely *what* we cherish but not *why* we cherish it.

Oakeshott's vision is, therefore, a combination of an historical claim about the existence of plurality with an implicit normative subtext asserting that in order to preserve this plurality, it is necessary to see different modes as irrelevant to each other. Yet the idea of irrelevance is merely postulated. As we shall see, for Oakeshott, maintaining modernity is not the task of modern philosophy, but of modern education which must be specifically non-philosophical.

My suggestion is that this understanding of modernity reflects the fact that Oakeshott is the heir of two very different intellectual attitudes. Oakeshott's thought is that of an English philosopher, who gets to grips with the German philosophical tradition, but who, at the same time, is able to keep his detachment from that tradition.

Oakeshott's defence of modernity is, in this sense, the response of an English intellectual to the challenge of the critique of modernity made by his continental-minded fellows. Oakeshott is an Englishman who is engaged with German philosophy and with its preoccupation with modernity. Therefore, while he is able to share this preoccupation *intellectually*, he is not ready to buy its *sentiment*. Oakeshott recognises the circumstance of fragmentation but refuses to see in it a tragedy. He does not see modernity as a project, but as his own tradition. He advocates the combination of reflexive understating of modernity with non-reflexive, 'poetical' enjoyment. What is implied here is a distinction between the intellectual and the habitual attitude towards modernity. In the speculative realm Oakeshott is a radical critic of what he affirms in the realm of practice.⁶⁸ This twofoldness is implied in his remarks which refer to 'the charm of a compromise and appeals to that love of moderation which has as frequently been fatal to English philosophy as it has been favourable to English politics'.⁶⁹ Perhaps here lies the reason why Oakeshott always thought that philosophy as an engagement of understanding was irrelevant to the pursuit of practical life. For modernity can be defended only from the practical and not the speculative standpoint.

[68] See, for example, ch. 2 in which it is described how Oakeshott exposes the postulates of modes of experience, while at the same time affirming the identity of each of them in the most uncompromised way.

[69] EM, p. 196.

Having grasped this, we may proceed with a detailed analysis of Oakeshott's philosophy in its two aspects — as a philosophy of experience and a philosophy of society.