Modern Individualism: Reflections on Oakeshott, Arendt, and Strauss

Most recently, Oakeshott's work has been characterized as a "reformulation" of liberalism, one which tries to free it of the traditionallypredominant doctrines of materialism, economism, and utilitarianism.' His individualism is said to be a "thoroughly Hegelian" rejection of the natural right theories underlying that materialist tradition.' In another rendition, Oakeshott is depicted as a liberal theorist combining "the Aristotelian claim for politics" with the modern liberal requirements of individuality. While basically adhering to the modern liberal doctrine of the "individuality of value," Oakeshott is said to nevertheless preserve the best elements of ancient politics.[3]

In what follows, I want to argue that Oakeshott is indeed to be viewed as one of the great political theorists of modern European individualism. But the gist of my argument, in the first part below, will be that his is a type of individualism that, strictly speaking, neither subscribes to the "individuality of value," nor is it sufficiently characterized as "Hegelian." In fact, Oakeshott's advocacy of a particular kind of individualism leads to his critical dismissal of most of its current forms. On the other hand, this dismissal is not undertaken from the vantage point of absolute spirit or absolute knowledge characteristic of Hegel. Furthermore, despite Oakeshott's own proclivity to claim Aristotle as a source, the foundations of his theory make it entirely antithetical to the ancient view of politics. I

1. Paul Franco, Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist, *in Political Theory,* vol. 18, No. 3 (August 1990), 411.
2. Ibid., 430.
3. Wendell John Coats, Jr., Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist, in *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Review canadienne de science politique,* XVIII:4 (December/decembre 1985).

shall attempt to back up this claim in the second part of my paper, by comparing relevant parts of Oakeshott's arguments with those of Leo Strauss, his contemporary and advocate of ancient political philosophy. In addition, in the third part below, I will contrast Oakeshott's view of individuality with parts of Hannah Arendt's theory of action. Both share a vehement rejection of modern materialistic and economistic individualism as destructive of genuine freedom. More generally, both reject theories of purely negative freedom and instead strongly advocate specific substantive notions of freedom. The key issue between Arendt and Oakeshott concerns the nature of the self (or self-disclosure) required for notions of positive or substantive freedom. At issue is therefore also the concept of the perfected free self, or human autonomy.[4]

As I understand it, Oakeshott's theory of human conduct is essentially a decidedly normative theory of human autonomy. Autonomy emerges in the free "abatement of contingency" found at the core of all individual human action. As a comparison between Oakeshott and Strauss makes clear, Oakeshott's theory of autonomy as the "excellence" of human action is distinctly modern or post-Kantian because it is clearly a formal rather than a substantive theory of autonomy concerned with "conditions" rather than the "quality" of genuine self-determination.[5] In contradistinction to both ancient political thought as well as modern "materialist" natural right theories, Oakeshott rejects all substantive theories of human nature as the ground of human agency. However, this "formal detachment" from the substantive qualities of human autonomy necessarily contains its own substantive prerequisites in the form of certain substantive presuppositions about the human condition and human agency. In other words, Oakeshott's formal theory of the postulates of agency is linked to substantive predispositions about the "futility" of material-

4. I agree with Robert B. Pippin, who has argued recently that "the deepest assumption in modernity's self-understanding" is the "assertion of autonomy." In this context, Oakeshott is very much a modern thinker. Cf. Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge, Mass:: Basil Blackwell, 16991), 10.

5. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), *36-37.*

istic or concretely purposive pursuits and the need to gain a limited measure of personal autonomy through attainment of human character in an otherwise contingent world. His formal theory of agency results in a substantive notion of personal excellence as autonomy intended to combat the putative emptiness of most substantive human pursuits in an entirely contingent world. Only if such substantive pursuits are freely chosen as opportunities for the attainment of autonomy do they gain a measure of value. It is no accident that Oakeshott's theory of personal autonomy is ultimately linked to religion as the "reconciliation" with the "hollowness" of the human condition.'

Oakeshott's Individualism

Oakeshott is probably cited most frequently for having metaphorically described human activity and intercourse as conversation.' Ironically, many political theorists miss Oakeshott's additional claim that the pervasive preoccupation with practical activities has actually helped make the general conversation of mankind quite "boring."8 Thus, his interest in the voice of poetry. But of even greater import than poetry, not to mention politics, is philosophy, even practical philosophy or theorizing about human conduct. For in contrast to the "inherent unsatisfactoriness of practical activity," philosophy is the "explicit pursuit of what is ultimately satisfactory in experience." [9] And it is the "attempt to achieve" that satisfaction.'°

Philosophy, however, is also essentially conversational; it is "unusally conversable."11 Consequently, one assumes Oakeshott would welcome a. conversational engagement of the results of his

6. Ibid., 81-85.

7. Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind", in *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962), 201. Hereafter referred to as "Poetry."

8. Ibid., 202. One theorist who missed Oakeshott's intent is Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 183-186.

9. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 305, 320.

10. Ibid., 347.

11. Oakeshott, "Poetry," op. cit., 201.

philosophizing with those of some significant contemporaries, like Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss. For philosophy, although an "unconditional" pursuit or adventure of understanding, and although attracted by the "notion of an unconditional or *definitive* understanding," is only capable of attaining distinct theories of *"conditional* understanding."[12] Thus, not unlike conversation, philosophy is without a conclusion, without a final truth discovered.[13] And, again like conversation, different philosophic voices "diverge only from one another,"[14] not from some identifiable ideal truth. Properly understood, then, philosophy as conversation consists of "acknowledgement and accommodation," or at least "oblique recognition" of its various voices, rather than merely the exchange of "assertion and denial.""

And yet, like the political theories of Arendt and Strauss, Oakeshott's work is replete with assertions and denials, and no one would think of him as accommodating. Even the most conditional understanding or theory, it appears, retains the spirit of assertiveness intrinsic to the unconditionality of philosophy as an interminable adventure in understanding. But this spirit of assertion is, finally, mitigated by the fact that philosophy, again like conversation, thrives on a proper "tension" between seriousness and playfulness. Its seriousness presumably provides its energetic impetus and assertiveness, enabling philosophizers to defend even the most conditional of understandings." In contrast to the imperatives of life's necessities, though, philosophizing is a playfulness guided only by the spirit of philosophical enquiry itself. Both Arendt and Strauss would not, in the main and with respect to philosophyproper as distinguished from political philosophy, disagree with Oakeshott. Strauss referred to classic dialectics as "the art of conversation and friendly dispute:"[17]

It is in this spirit, and in order to clarify Oakeshott's theory of

12. On Human Conduct, op. cit., 11,3,6.
13. Oakeshott, "Poetry", op. cit., 198.
14. Ibid., 304.
15. Ibid., 304.
16. Ibid., 202.
17. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 124.

human autonomy, that I contrast certain key aspects of the thought of Oakeshott, Arendt, and Strauss. A comparison is warranted if for no other reason than that they do provide variations upon primary themes. All address the fundamental question of political philosophy, human agency, be it in terms of its formal conditions or its substantive purposes. They agree with Oakeshott that practical life, as a presupposition of action, requires a "certain conception of the self or person."" They disagree as to the characteristics ofpersonhood, its necessary restraints and its dimensions of freedom. All three, furthermore, critically expose the conditions of human agency in modernity. More importantly, they are in fundamental agreement that the central issue of modernity is, in Strauss's words, "the status of individuality."[19] And finally, from their distinct perspectives all three understand the most recent stages of modernity as the self-destruction of individualism in its various modes of misapprehension. All three denounce modern society's tendencies toward the "illusions of democracy" (Oakeshott), the vulgarities of mass conformism (Strauss), the abnegation of responsibility and human dignity, of excellence or greatness (Arendt). They deplore the levelling effects of appeals to standards of human "behavior" and of behavioral sciences. They would agree, albeit in different fashion, that contemporary society thrives on what Oakeshott calls "banal individualism," or the public pursuit of private pleasures [20]

For Strauss, fundamental differences in the determination of individuality are the main source of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. Defending ancient political philosophy and its explanation of individuals in terms of the human soul, Strauss is critical both of modern bourgeois individualism (originating in Hobbes'satheistic political hedonism) as well as ancient Athenian political individualism.[21] Arendt, on the other hand, defends a view

18. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes,* op. cit., 369.
19. Strauss, *Natural Right,* op. cit., 323.
20. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 242.
21. Strauss, *Natural Right,* op. cit., 169. For Strauss's critique of ancient Athenian individualism, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 228-231.

of politics, modelled after the "highly individualistic" Athenian concept of political life in which "the public realm...was reserved for individuality."[22] It was Greek political philosophy's great failing, in her view, that it denigrated political life by subordinating its independent dignity to the superior "vita contemplativa." For Arendt, "private" individualism of modernity is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron. Genuine individualism is public or political. That is to say, individualism is expressed as the glory of great deeds, and the public realm exists to make possible such (individual) deeds. Oakeshott, in contrast, describes the contingent emergence of individuality as the "supreme event in modern European history, and, despite its historical, contingent origins, defends the "moral superiority" of individuality.[23] That individuality emerged "with the appearance of `privacy' in humanconduct."[24] Among the three, Oakeshott at first glance appears to be the most pronounced advocate of a peculiarly modern, private individualism. And yet, he is no less derisive of the banality and trivia of contemporary democratic individualism than are Arendt and Strauss.

The relation between the three thus defies simple categorization. For one, despite deep disagreements Arendt and Oakeshott join in rejecting Strauss's advocacy of "human nature" as the normative standard for either individual conduct or political order. Both, instead, depict the freedom of individuals within the broad confines and necessities of the "human condition." However, both Oakeshott's and Arendt's individualism contains its own definition of excellence, and is therefore anything but arbitrary. For both, the political serves not the "common good," but the expression of individuality, the story or history of the self-disclosure of an agent. The similarity in their respective views of the political is summarized in their mutual rejection of politics as being primarily "rule," or the pursuit of power.

22. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 41, 194.

23. Michael Oakeshott, "The Masses in Representative Democracy," in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 382. Hereafter referred tp as "Masses." Also see, Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 278.

24. Oakeshott, "Masses," op. cit., 370.

Still, they differ fundamentally in their assessment of the status of political activity. Oakeshott does not share Arendt's basic distinction between a (deficient and deprived) private existence, and a public life illuminative of genuine humanity. Still, Oakeshott's individualism is anything but private. Fundamental differences exist in Oakeshott's and Arendt's respective conception of the self, manifested in Oakeshott's distinction between self-disclosure and self-enactment, not found in Arendt. Ultimately, Arendt's unique amalgamation of Greek political individualism and an ineffable human essence reminiscent of German romanticism produces a "self' considerably more esoteric than Oakeshott's. These differences are epitomized in Arendt's complete rejection of what I argue to be Oakeshott's highest aim, namely the justification of personal autonomy. For Arendt, the goal of individual autonomy has been a major illusion of Western thought. I shall examine the significance of those differences below.

From Strauss's perspective, Oakeshott would be part of modern European philosophy's main preoccupation, the "examination of the notion of human nature," or the human soul.[25] It is the main result of the abolition of the fundamental conviction of classic philosophy, namely that a natural harmony exists between the human mind and the truth of "the whole," in favor of the profound scepticism informing most modern thought. For Strauss, modernity is not identified by this scepticism alone. The truly revolutionary innovation of early modern thought was the linkage it established between scepticism and the doctrine of the mastery of nature for the sake of charity. Thus, for Strauss modernity is not the effect of contingent historical accidents, but the result of conscious philosophical and dispositional decisions. Such decisions are, at least theoretically, always reversible. The quarrel between the ancients and moderns remains for, that reason always topical and an open question. For the quarrel is ultimately about human wisdom, over what insights and ways. of life are best for human beings and are in accordance with their "nature." Oakeshott does indeed hark back to the classic sceptic and exem-

25. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), 52.

plary early modern individualist, Montaigne. But while Oakeshott subscribes to modern scepticism, he is distinguished by the fact that he, unlike the moderns, directs his scepticism against modern science and progress as well. For Oakeshott, the core assertion of early modern thought, *"scientia propterpotentiam,"* science for the sake of power, is "that most dismal of all sentiments."[26] This profoundly anti-modern view, shared by Strauss, is a common root of both Strauss's and Oakeshott's so-called "conservatism."

As an Aristotelian, Strauss would also agree with Oakeshott as to the "conventionality" (i.e. historicity and contingency) of human practices and traditions. He has, moreover, not unlike Oakeshott, consistently defended the independent validity of practical knowledge against ideologies or behavioral sciences. He would, furthermore, be in agreement that philosophy is the unending pursuit of truth rather than the possession and dogmatic assertion of truth. However, for Strauss the spirit of scepticism intrinsic to philosophizing does not apply to the realm of politics. It is the one sphere whose true standards can be discovered in the experiences of the human soul.[27] Thus, while in its esoteric pursuits philosophy is sceptical, in its exoteric relation to political community philosophy supports the "natural consciousness" or the natural order of the soul partly visible in every conventional order. For this reason, philosophy can play a limited but supremely important practical role, as the teacher of political founders. In contradistinction, Oakeshott extends his scepticism to include knowledge about political conventions: all practices and conventional traditions are entirely contingent. In the spirit of Montaigne, men have no communication with being.[28] Consequently, the great multiplicity of human practices are pursued on their own terms and for their own sakes. Philosophy has no knowledge to add (about the human soul or anything else) which can

26, Timothy Fuller, editor: *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 128.
27, Strauss, *City and Man, op.* cit., 29.
28. Michel de Montaigne, Apology for Raymond Sebond, in Donald M. Frame (transl.), *The Complete Works of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 455.

be used in their enactments. I shall examine this fundamental difference between Oakeshott and Strauss below.

All of this leads to one issue central to the discussion between Oakeshott, Strauss, and Arendt, namely the question of the moral standards of action. For Oakeshott and Arendt, the self is what is distinct, separate, and unique. But this raises the ineluctable question of the standards of action. Strauss put it in classic terms: "Everything which comes into being through human action and is therefore perishable or corruptible presupposes incorruptible and unchangeable things-for instance, the natural order of the human soul-with a view to which we can distinguish between right and wrong actions:"[29] Can Oakeshott's theorizing about action distinguish right from wrong action? Doesn't Oakeshott explicitly reject human excellence and the "human good" as final aims of human life? The purposive purposelessness of his civil association appears to serve a standardless, self-justifying individualism. Consequently, his ill disguised contempt for modern "anti-individualism" and the therapeutic welfare state appears arbitrary. His politics seems to merely sanctify the groundless contingency and arbitrary choices of his basic human condition.

As indicated, I have a rather different understanding of Oakeshott's basic disposition. Despite first appearances, he offers, above all, a distinctly normative teaching, expressing a basic view of man in his "human condition." Oakeshott, his frequent claims to the contrary notwithstanding, offers a vision of human *excellence* transcending the individual, and intrinsic to agency within the confines of the human condition. I would argue that Oakeshott's highest virtue, human excellence, is personal autonomy. But the concept of personal autonomy is not a `-`construction" of political philosophy. It is, therefore, not derived from a theory of human "nature." Personal autonomy, emerging as a self-conscious experience out of the contingencies of early modern European history, can be explained and justified, not by the construction of philosophical foundations, but by an appeal to the documented, sheer "enjoyment" of its experience. Its virtue, its excellence, in other words, are self-evident to those who have

29. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 13.

enjoyed it. Theory is only capable of articulating that practical self-evidence. Oakeshott accomplishes this by showing that personal autonomy is the excellence of agency *per se.*

Oakeshott thus offers more than merely a hermeneutic (morally and ontologically neutral) theory of individual freedom. His is also more than a theory describing the universal, premoral presuppositions of human agency under the existential condition of radical contingency.. Although it has been convincingly argued that for Oakeshott "contingency is the defining characteristic of the human condition," and that his civil association has the "fundamental purpose" of privileging this view, this argument misses the heart of Oakeshott's theory of human conduct.[30] It is his firm conviction that the pursuit of personal autonomy or self-determination overcomes this condition of contingency and : radical historicity as much as is humanly possible. Oakeshott's theory is not primarily a theory of human contingency, but the abatement of that ubiquitious contingency, climaxing in (albeit very limited) human autonomy. This provides his theoretical account with a broad, fundamental standard for right and wrong conduct. The purpose of civil association is to provide the formal condition for possible attainment of such autonomy. The fact that politics as collective enterprise cannot provide for the shared substantive conditions of human autonomy, but rather by attempting to do so would destroy it, accentuates the individual nature of genuine autonomy. And finally, and most importantly, religion as a human practice is both the manifest limit as well as the completion of such autonomy.

Oakeshott presents the clearest account of individualism and autonomy in his discussion of its historical emergence. Historically, the "ideal character" of individuality appeared during the early years of European history and the breakup of feudalism. It was mainly during the 15th and 16th centuries that it reached its zenith and was given "a place in moral practice."[31] Moreover, it was recognized as

30. David Mapel, "Civil Association and the Idea of Contingency," *in Political Theory* vol. 18, No. 3 (August 1990), 401,393.

31. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 238. There is some similarity between Oakeshott's definition of autonomy and the one used by Richard E. Flathman.

"an important *virtue" in* its own right.[32] What is more, its practice showed conduct to "have an *excellence* simply in respect of its *authenticity* and perhaps to be, in part, *justifiable* in these terms."[33] This experience sufficed to once and for all establish the "moral superiority" of individuality.[34] Oakeshott does not hide his admiration for this description of individualism. On the contrary, in this context he identifies what constitutes the highest human excellence, a moral virtue authentic and justifiable on its own terms, exquisitely self-contained, an end in itself, i.e. personal autonomy.[35] Not only that, by attaining the human excellence of personal autonomy men approximate as much as is humanly possible the divine within them: "it is something almost divine for a man to know how to belong to himself and to live by that understanding."[36]

But divinity is emblematic of the non-contingent, the permanent. It is the emblem of the defeat of penultimate human contingency, individual mortality.[37] Personal autonomy thus corresponds perfectly with Oakeshott's earliest pronunciations on religion: religion is not only inseparable from our conduct of life, but is "practical experience at its fullest,"[38] It is, in fact, "the consummation of practice," the "achievement of what practice demands."[39] In *On Human Conduct,* religion as the consummation of practice demands and sustains the excellence of action, personal autonomy, as an

Flathman underlines the intrinsic "complementarily" of freedom and autonomy; and, like Oakeshott, describes autonomy as an "ideal of character." Cf. Richard E. Flathman, *The Philosophy and Politics of Freedom* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 296, 297.

32. Ibid.

33: Ibid. (My emphasis).

34. Ibid., 278.

35. Ibid., 61.

36. Ibid., 241. Oakeshott paraphrases Montaigne, who wrote "it is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully." Montaigne, op. cit., 857.

37. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes,* op. cit., 273. Also, *On Human Conduct,* 81-85.

38. Experience and its Modes, op. cit., 294.

39. Ibid., 295.

approximation of divinity.

The claim, however, that he proposes human excellence to be personal autonomy as the perfection of agency seems to be refuted by Oakeshott himself. He claims repeatedly, after all, that human excellence or the human good are "not a substantive purpose to be achieved as the outcome of performances."[40] Human excellence cannot be the "purpose of all purposes" it is made out to be by theorists of human nature. It cannot, he claims, constitute a kind of "superordinate purpose of human life."[41] It cannot be such a purpose because the self is "not a generic unity but a dramatic identity without benefit of a model of self-perfection."[42]

But while Oakeshott rejects purposive, substantive models of self-perfection based upon the notion of an agent as "generic unity," he nonetheless does know of a notion of self-perfection or excellence intrinsic to an agent viewed as the "dramatic identity" of self-enactment. It is personal autonomy. However, to Oakeshott's way of thinking autonomy is not the substantive purpose of dramatic identity, but is rather intrinsic to its very enactment of a self. It is therefore the intrinsic "excellence" of action rather than its extrinsic purpose.

A clue to this crucial difference is revealed in his entirely too brief examination of Aristotle's doctrine of *eudaimonia.* Instead of outrightly rejecting the concept, Oakeshott turns it to his own ends by claiming that Aristotle meant it not as a "substantial purpose" (as generally claimed), but a "formal condition" for action. That is to say, for Oakeshott happiness is not the *substantial purpose* of any action, but is instead identified with *acting itself,* the formal condition of any substantial pursuit. Eudaimonia is thus said to be an agent disclosing and enacting himself.[43] By equating *agency* as such, and its basic postulates like the self, with *form,* and all particular, contingent *practices* with *substance,* Oakeshott creates the impression of proposing formal universal postulates of agency without prescribing any substantive purposes. Purposes, it seems, properly belong to contin-

40. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 61.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 84.
43. Ibid., 119.

gent practices, and not to agency. In fact, however, what he calls "formal conditions" for action do indeed contain their own *substantial* conditions and even purposes.[44] This is indeed the case when individuality becomes its own practice, its own virtue, with autonomy its own excellence, and religion its culmination.

Thus, we can explain the apparent paradox that Oakeshott acknowledges a normative notion of excellence for action while rejecting it as a universal substantive purpose. Personal autonomy is not acting; but *excellent* acting, and as such is not *a formal condition* for acting, but is, I would suggest, its *formal perfection. As* such, it is not a purpose distinct and separate from action, but intrinsic: to agency. By that I mean to say that personal autonomy as the formal perfection of agency is intrinsic to Oakeshott's notion of a "dramatic identity" enacting itself. The reason: autonomy is the abatement of contingency, and the enactment of an identity assumes limiting contingency. The very notion of an acting self is incompatible with unlimited contingency: "the reality of the self is a function of its invulnerability."[45] As a minimum, the self constitutes the enactment of identity at the expense of fortuitous chance. But the acting self in a condition of utter contingency attains dramatic identity through the formation of "character" or personhood, and the formal perfection of personal character is personal autonomy. And while such autonomy can doubtlessly be gained by following a great variety of practices and their moralities, personal autonomy as formal perfection of *character* (the essential prerequisite of dramatic identity) constitutes in a sense a "purpose of all purposes." That is to say,it must be intrinsic to all "good" practices, no matter what their own stated

44. Oakeshott says as much when he describes the freedom of civil association. He rejects the argument that this form of association should be "recommended" because freedom is its "consequence" or "outcome," or because it "promotes" freedom as a "substantive condition of things." Instead, he insists that "freedom does not follow as a consequence of this mode of association; it is *inherent in its character."* Similarly, I think, personal autonomy is not to be understood as the substantive purpose of free action, but as a form of excellence is inherent in its character. Cf. Oakeshott, "The Rule of Law," in *On History and Other Essays,* op. cit., 161.

45. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes,* op. cit., 271.

purposes, to foster such autonomy. All practices and their virtues can be assessed in terms of how much they foster the autonomy of personal character. On the other hand, we become autonomous by virtue of enjoying the enactment of ourselves, not by consciously pursuing the "purpose" of autonomy in each single act we perform. But we nevertheless enact ourselves through practices which, by means of their own virtues, foster autonomy as a kind of "purpose of all purposes."

But what precisely is the state, the "sentiment," or disposition called personal autonomy? Initially, we can pursue the answer negatively, by eliminating all those versions of individualism and freedom rejected by Oakeshott. This in itself shows the degree to which Oakeshott's allegedly *formal* conditions of action entail *substantive* consequences. Some rejected modes of individualism undoubtedly are reflections of the influence of "anti-individualism," the "shadow" to the "substance" of individualism that historically arose in Europe as its antithesis; its envious rejection. Regardless, early modern European celebration and enjoyment of individuation and personal autonomy, was soon "almost buried under a mountain of rubbish, confused with trivial liberations, romanticized, mistaken for the exercise of `subjective will,' confounded with a `sacred inner light' and with a banal individualism, and finally corrupted in being confused with `sentience' (a capacity for feeling pleasure and pain) or with a so-called `libidinal instinct.'" Individualism, Oakeshott adds elsewhere, is not the "canonization of `conscience'," or "the worship of nonconformity," or a "devotion to arbitrary so-called `self-expression,'" or "a resolution to be different at all costs."[47] In short, genuine individualism and personal autonomy are qualitatively different from, and indeed superior to, almost every doctrine and fashion of individual freedom popularized during the last centuries. Oakeshott is anything but an unconditional, unmitigated individualist subscribing to the "individuality of value."

In point of fact, then, Oakeshott's notion of individualism and its form of excellence contain a substantively determinative notion of

46. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 238, 242.
47. Ibid., 236, 237.

the self. Or, to put it negatively, Oakeshott's formal conditions of agency exclude most substantive notions (and indeed the most popular notions!) of individualism and self. Generally, Oakeshott's notion of individuality precludes a self based on any purely "internal" principle, instinct, normative intuition or inspiration attempting to assert its own claims "against" the "external" world. Rather, the self is said by him to "make" itself by enactment in and through the world. And, quite obviously, individuality cannot consist of following externally generated fads, fashions, or even the most bizarre trends in nonconforming conformism. Oakeshott's notion of individuality is, instead, the enactment of a self in terms of an intelligent engagement of learning in and about the "world" understood as practices and "culture." It is an expansively adventurous rather than a self-satisfied, hidebound kind of individualism. Enacting a self means, as it did for Montaigne, the "making" of a self through conscious and intelligent, reflective interaction with the animate and inanimate world of which each self conditionally is a part. Personal autonomy is the culmination of such interaction. And although its accomplishment is always individual, its basic standards are not.

Strauss and Oakeshott on human Nature

Essential to Oakeshott's theory of human agency and autonomy is his rejection of basing agency on disputable philosophies of nature and human nature. Strauss, by appealing to the standards of "human nature" as the universal standards of virtue and excellence, and by making them, in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, the norms of political life, appears to advocate precisely those notions most firmly rejected by Oakeshott. He could not claim, with, Strauss, that human excellence is "the perfection of human nature toward which man is by nature inclined or which is the goal of his eros."[48]

Oakeshott asserts repeatedly that "there is no such thing as `human nature.'"[49] Instead of a nature, man has a history that he "makes" himself by virtue of the learning process of self-enact-

48. Strauss, *Liberalism,* op. cit., 23.
49. Fuller, *The Voice of Liberal Learning,* op. cit., 28.

ment.[50] Each man is thus "his own self-enacted history."" It seems quite clear that, to use Strauss's categories, Oakeshott subscribes to the typically modern,. post-Cartesian division between nature as the realm of blind necessity, and history as the realm of contingency, human freedom and "meaning." At the heart of the human condition is the freedom or "ordeal" of self-consciousness, the freedom of becoming *"in* himself what he is for himself.[752] His identity, in short, is what he has enacted for himself in full consciousness of himself. Learning in full self-awareness, and the classic admonition to know-oneself are crucial for Oakeshott. But self-knowledge is not the Hobbesian "read-thyself," which because of the assumed similitude of men enables a ruler to read "mankind" in his own thoughts and passions. And unlike his great mentor Montaigne, Oakeshott no longer avails himself of the traditional term of human nature or human soul to refer to "typical" human conduct.[53]

To be sure, Oakeshott does not consistently and categorically dismiss the very concept of human nature. He concedes that the notion is far from being entirely without meaning or significance: For instance, in the context of discussing the conservative disposition, he agrees that there "is something to be said for the belief' that this disposition is "rooted in what is called `human nature.'"[54] The reason is that a conservative disposition "is likely to prevail" wherever a "firm identity has been achieved," or where its balance needs to be maintained.[55] Despite this, however, Oakeshott still finds it unprofitable to engage in "general speculation about `human nature,¯ and does not assume it to be any more durable than "anything else in our

50. Ibid., 64.
51. Ibid., 21.
52. Ibid., 19.
53. Montaigne still examines and. scrutinizes his own self in constant reference to the classic literature and philosophy speaking of the experiences of the "human soul" and human nature. Oakeshott's great mentor, while not subscribing to any one particular religious *or* philosophical model of the soul, uses all such models and turns them to his own (sceptical) purposes. He thus implicitly still recognizes the human soul as a phenomenon of experience common to antiquity. All this is not necessarily dismissed by Oakeshott, as we shall see below.
54. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics,* op. cit., 173.
55. Ibid.

acquaintance."[56] This is about as close as Oakeshott ever gets to admitting some validity to certain "common sense" claims about general traits being rooted in prevailing human proclivities. Even if some such traits might conceivably be recognizable, they do not suffice to warrant the existence of a human "nature." Characteristically, though, Oakeshott acknowledges the limited usefulness of the concept of human nature when the subject is the universality of a trait attributable to individual "identity." While, as I argue, Oakeshott understands the essential, i.e., universal postulates of identity and self in terms of agency, he nevertheless acknowledges the limited validity of theories of human nature whenever the latter assert postulates of identity and self similar to those of agency *per se.* It corroborates the claim that for Oakeshott human agency takes on the fundamental function once assumed by the concept of human nature.

At yet another level, Oakeshott takes "human nature" even more seriously. As part of theorizing "human conduct" in terms of its postulates, and particularly in identifying agency as performance, Oakeshott considers the "contention" that the performance of an agent might be understood by relating it to an "ideal character" called human nature. Here he takes head on those theories of agency based on the presupposition of a universal human nature. And very revealingly, he accepts it at one level and rejects it at another, more fundamental one. That is to say, Oakeshott accepts the long history of various theories of human nature as "one of the great achievements of human self-understanding.j[57] Their greatness consisted of depicting agents in terms of an "organization of dispositional capaci- ties," and thus defining agents as "characters." Theories of human nature have established agents as characters in terms of "identity composed of aptitudes."[58] Without being explicit about it, Oakeshott appears to value theories of human nature insofar as they identified the basic postulates of human *agency.* This applies particularly to the concept central to agency, namely, the self as character, identity, or an

56. Ibid., 174.
57. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 93.
58. Ibid., 95.

organization of capacities. Most importantly, however, Oakeshott understands all such theories of human nature, defining the ideal character of an agent in terms of some organization of his dispositional capacities as "a practice to be subscribed to."[59] Human nature thus becomes an "instrument of understanding" to be employed in practice. "Human nature," in short, is an ideal to be pursued in practice, an ideal which gives meaning to such a practice. As practitioner of a practice, stipulating human character in terms of aptitudes, dispositions and virtues as "human nature," I can be a practical "subscriber" to human nature.

If, however, we are not "merely" such a subscriber, but ,are instead attempting a theoretical understanding of agency and action in general, theories of human nature prove to be inadequate. Despite their claims about the "generic unity" of a self based on universal human nature, such theories are based on merely one possible human practice among many (like those, for instance, of divine revelation). In contrast, the postulates of human agency, without which any action and practice would be inconceivable, discern a more fundamental, ubiquitous self as "dramatic identity" capable of choosing, or "subscribing to," the practice understood as expressing human nature. For Oakeshott, in other words, not our "natural e[g]os," but our choice to enact ourselves, might "incline" us to see our personal autonomy as an expression of human nature. But we could choose otherwise. Subcription to a practice in terms of human nature is, like all practices based on self as generic unity, deficient in another sense as well. For agency as theorized by Oakeshott always is "an action as a chosen response to an understood contingent situation related to an imagined and wished-for outcome" and thus entails an individual event of self-enactment and self-disclosure. And while an agent's action are indeed "necessarily conditional upon his dispositional capacities," such disposition would not suffice for understanding substantive performances.6° This would remain true even if such dispositions were much more closely specifiable than

59. Ibid., 93.
60. Ibid., 95.

they in fact are' As long as human nature is seen as a practice (which, Oakeshott maintains, has always been the case), "incalculable, gradations of conformity and disconformity" to human nature are .conceivable in individual actions, and thus not specifiable. Furthermore, Oakeshottargues that knowing the dispositional capacities, or the character and moral proclivities of an agent, does not give us an "understanding" of what an agent has done. There is no "dependent relation" between sentiments, dispositions, character and specific choices made and actions performed. For example, the general disposition of "fickleness" does not distinguish "this action from the million others which may be performed ficklely." [62]

But "theories" of human nature acting as practices to be subscribed to are, contrasted to theories of human agency, problematic for an even more fundamental reason. Strauss, for example, claims that Aristotle's theory of politics is "nothing other than the fully conscious form of the common sense understanding of political things."6[3] This common sense understanding of political life, furthermore, is `primary." [64] It is not only pre-philosophical or pretheoretical in the sense that it is a form of understanding intrinsic to the activity itself and not superimposed upon it by "theorizing." The common sense understanding is primary in the more important and fundamental sense that it is the foundation or access point for any theoretic knowledge. That is to say, common sense knowledge consists of "opinions" held about things, like political life, which are based on what phenomena "first reveal" to men about their "whatness ," their eidos or being or "nature." If the whatness or eidos (translated as the "surface appearance") of a thing is first disclosed in common sense opinions held about things, these first appearances or opinions constitute the access point to any further (more adequate) knowledge about the natures of phenomena. If we disregard these opinions, in a flush of universal radical doubt, we lose all means to transcend, in the manner of philosophy, opinions towards "truth," or the pursuit of

61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Strauss, City and Man, op. *cit.,* 12.
64. Ibid.

truth.[65] = We never exit the Platonic cave.

Any normative theory of human nature in the strictest and most concise sense rests upon the validity of this starting point. Consequently, the issue between Strauss's attempt to resurrect the truth of classic political thought, and Oakeshott's regard for the classical notion of human nature as (merely) a great practice or tradition, is this: in the post-Kantian age of modern science can a reasonable argument reestablish faith in the pre-modern "natural" eidetic consciousness? Its fundamental "assumption" or postulate is the conviction that opinions are "seen to be fragments of the truth."[66] Holding even common sense opinions about things, and thus perceiving at best particular things, "presupposes a fundamental awareness of the whole." Even to hold opinions, men must have an inkling of truth, as it were. They must live in the shadow of truth. "Opinions prove to be solicited by the self-subsisting truth," even if that truth can never be adequately articulated and known.[67] In other words, this theory that pre-theoretic common sense understanding is based on a partial surface disclosure of the true nature of things presupposes a fundamental "natural harmony between the whole and the human mind."[68] Man's soul,inshort, is "the microcosm."[69] The break with this. "primary or natural understanding of the whole" leads to extreme (and characteristically modern) scepticism.[70]

It is this scepticism that appears to be Oakeshott's starting point. Not that Oakeshott, in the manner of Descartes, wants to substitute "clear and distinct" theoretical knowledge for all opinions and prejudices held by men. Oakeshott's alleged "conservatism," closer to Hume than Descartes, is largely based on his insistence upon the independent validity of contingent practical understanding, or knowledge intrinsic to patterns of practices. Oakeshott argues that actual conduct consists of "idioms of activity," or practices that contain their

65. Strauss, *Natural Right and History, op. cit.,* 124,
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 125.
68. Strauss, The City and Man, op. *cit., 41*
70. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 43.

own knowledge of appropriate conduct which can be acquired only by practicing the activity.' All practices are, furthermore, purely conventional, without either reflecting a natural soul or pointing to a larger whole of which they are an integral part. Oakeshott could therefore never agree to Strauss's claim that the natural inequality of men "points to" an inequality which putatively pervades nature as a whole.[72] And while for Strauss's rendition of Greek philosophy opinions are "mere" entryways toward the pursuit of truth, and such truths can at least in part influence and instruct the opinions guiding practice, for Oakeshott practices are entirely self-sufficient and self-contained because purely contingent. Much more important, however, is the fact that for Oakeshott no particular idiom of activity or practice provides access to "natural truth." Consequently, no practice provides understanding of true "human nature:" Since no natural harmony between the human soul (or, Oakeshott's word, self) and the natural whole can be assumed to exist, common sense opinions or practices cannot be assumed to provide "privileged" or "primary" knowledge.

Oakeshott becomes quite explicit about rejecting something like the Straussian position in his critique of Heidegger's and other's notion of a primordial "Lebenswelt" or life-world. He rejects two versions of this theory. First, Oakeshott rejects the claim that the life-world or everyday world of practical human activity, the basic conditions of "human existence" has an immediacy of perception and "unconditionality" about it based on fundamental human practical purposes. Thus, insofar as this category would include Strauss's rendition of classic practical philosophy, he would reject that rendition. Oakeshott denies any notion of an "immediacy of perception" based on alleged unreflected, "primitive" human practical purposes because any such practices are already a "conditional universe of discourse."[73] Secondly, Oakeshott refutes the claim that the practical knowledge of the life-world is an inescapable and therefore "primor-

71. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics,* op. cit., 101.
72. Strauss, *City and Man,* op. cit., 38.
73. Michael Oakeshott, *On History and other essays* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 22.

dial" universe of discourse.[74] The life world of practical understanding may indeed be granted to have a degree of primordiality since it is "universal to mankind" and a condition for survival. But this practical priority of the life world is at best "circumstantial," not "logical," and thus does not establish its "superior status" as a mode of knowledge. Once practical knowledge is seen to be the conditional mode of understanding that it is, other independent modes of understanding can be acknowledged, not subordinated to practical knowledge and the demands of its "world." Most importantly, the "categorically different conditions" of such modes of knowledge cannot be said to be derived from the primacy of practical knowledge.

For that simple reason there also cannot be a "perfect and universal language of moral intercourse."[75] There will be as many moralities as there are practices. Nor is there a superordinate purpose of human life, like the universal human good, or human excellence or virtue.[76] Strictly speaking, they are not "substantive purposes to be achieved as the outcome of performances."[77] The same with virtue: "there is no one principle or categorical imperative of `virtuous' conduct when we go beyond the postulate that it is not virtuous unless it is chosen."[78] Beyond that, each vernacular language of morality contains its own internal standard of virtuous action, i.e. action conforming to the internal consistency of a practice.However, Oakeshott's denial of the existence of one primordial, categorical or natural practice does not imply the denial of basic human agency and its intrinsic mode of excellence which informs the choice of a practice and thereby serves as its normative standard.

As z argued earlier, Oakeshott's claim that no one universal principle or imperative of virtuous conduct exists beyond the virtue of having chosen it, indicates that the conditions of choice, i.e. agency and its freedom, are themselves the basic virtue, and its perfection, autonomy, the ultimate excellence. Thus, agency, or the postulates

74. Ibid., 23.
75. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 80,
76. Ibid., 61.
78. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 75.

of being a human agent, take on the universality previously taken by substantive notions of human life or nature. But insofar as agency is compatible with, intrinsic to, any number of (contingently generated) human practices, it is less exclusive and more universal than the practice of human nature. Nevertheless, the theory of agency necessarily retains some essential elements of the "practice of human nature." And insofar as any virtuous practice can be evaluated in terms of its support of choice and agency, the perfection of agency, autonomy, becomes in a sense the "purpose of purposes." However, since it is not a substantive purpose of action, but is the perfection of the formal condition of action to create dramatic identity (character), and is thus accomplished by virtue of free agency itself, Oakeshott prefers not to use the traditional terminology of "purpose." We thus might say that in comparison with Strauss, Oakeshott examines the most fundamental postulates of agency which are the very prerequisites of establishing a practice revolving around human character or identity defined as human nature. Not this practice, but if anything, human agency, is the "natural," i.e. eidetic human phenomenon.

What is more, it can be inferred that this basic concept of personal autonomy is so elementary as to include some of the substantive features of a character identified as "human nature." For instance, it is clear that the classic cardinal virtues, in some form, are necessary elements of personal autonomy of action as such. Such autonomy (of character) is unimaginable without basic courage (to be. adventurous), the temperance resulting from knowing one's limits, so important for Oakeshott, and wisdom (or maturity) as the result of self-enactment seen as understanding the perennial paradoxes of the human condition.[79] With respect to justice, however, Oakeshott differs considerably from classic theories of human nature as depicted by Strauss. Briefly, for Strauss justice includes facets of equity as well as inequity. That is to say, it is equitable to consider everyone's interest in the determination of the architectonic, politi-

79. In his essay on Oakeshott and education, Timothy Fuller emphasizes the importance of "intellectual and emotional maturity" as the aim of education; certainly a main ingredient of any concept of personal autonomy. Cf. Timothy Fuller, *The Voice of Liberal Learning,* op. cit., 16.

cal common good. The public good is based on compromise and accommodation. But men have unequal claims to rule in the name of the common good: those best qualified to rule by nature (the *megalopsyche)* have a natural claim to rule over others. In politics, personal autonomy for Strauss (and thus Aristotle) includes the ability to rule.

For Oakeshott it clearly does not, and his notion of a civil association amply attests to this fact. This leads to the serious consequence that his modern individualists and their envious detractors, the anti-individualists, cannot be brought under the aegis of a shared "public good." On the contrary, their civil association and enterprise association are mutually exclusive. Genuine justice is possible only for genuine individuality, or personal autonomy, under a rule of law sustaining that autonomy. Oakeshott's notion of autonomy, closer to the self-image of the classic philosopher than the statesman, is intended to transcend, not expose itself to, the contingencies of political life. If anything, Oakeshott tends to depict the desire to rule as a manifestation of the anti-individualist need for compensatory "leadership." And while ruling is certainly necessary when attached to office-holding, including in civil association, it is anything but paradigmatic to personal autonomy.

The conversation between Strauss and Oakeshott leaves us with an unresolved paradox. Strauss's disposition does provide for a more common sense notion of the final political end, which has always been, since Aristotle, the promotion of general welfare. This includes the political creation of conditions conducive to and culminating in human virtue and excellence. The result is government by a natural political elite ruling over a state of dependents. But Oakeshott, on the other hand, decidedly presents a more realistic account of the modern "common sense" political and social condition: no longer unified by a consensus about human nature and a natural right to rule, we live instead in a world characterized by a plethora of distinct practices and traditions. Under these circumstances, Oakeshott's aim of individual autonomy (and choice of practices sustaining it) provides a more appropriate model of human excellence. But Oakeshott's view precludes the political creation of conditions con-

ducive to autonomy for all citizens. In public discourse, personal autonomy is under constant challenge by demands for therapeutic public welfare policies.

Oakeshott and Arendt on Human Action

Oakeshott and Arendt both place freedom in human agency *per se.* They thus agree with modern philosophy's most fundamental conviction that agency and thus freedom constitutes man's humanity. Both understand freedom as the disclosure of an individual self through action. A self consists of the history of such disclosure. But neither Oakeshott nor Arendt are content to stop here. For while both insist that the human self does not enact itself in terms of "natural" functions or substantive final ends, the history of an agent's self-disclosure nevertheless *aims* towards excelling in action, or perfecting its self-enactment. For both Arendt and Oakeshott this aim towards perfection is intrinsic to action itself, and can thus be said to be part of the structure or necessary postulates of action. For both, it is intrinsic to action because self-enactment entails an identifiable, continuous self, a "character" (Oakeshott) recognizable within the field of contingency that is the condition of free action. Without such an enactment of a self as recognizable character, as autonomously transcending and thus distinguishable from the world of contingency, human action could strictly speaking not be said to exist.

But whereas Arendt and Oakeshott agree on self-disclosure issuing in the attempt to transcend the unpredictability, contingency, and uncertainties of free action, they differ fundamentally on the form such transcendence can take. For Oakeshott, as we have already seen, self enactment aims at an autonomy of human character sustainable ultimately only by religious practice. For Arendt, on the other hand, the self transcends mere contingency by means of public deeds whose greatness and glory points towards the ineffable essence of humanity. Since the glory of such deeds and especially the inexplicable essence of "who" a self is are truly beyond the agent's control, human autonomy is an illusion. In the remaining pages, I want to focus on these differences between Oakeshott's and Arendt's

conceptions of self-disclosure.

At the core of the human condition for Oakeshott are the postulates of human conduct, while for Arendt it is the basic conditions corresponding to the elementary human activities of labor, work, and action. Since for Arendt these activities constitute a hierarchy in which action is the highest, truly human activity, she would agree with Oakeshott as to the human significance of action, or freedom. Free action constitutes the disclosure of the truly human,in contradistinction to subhuman natural behavior. The human is characterized by the disclosure of meaning, transcending the meaninglessness of natural motion; For both; then, the world constitutes the sphere of human meanings. And the self attains its unique individuality only in terms of the history of its interaction with this world. Politics, or what Arendt prefers to call the public realm; and Oakeshott names the civil association, is intended to create the conditions for individual action or self-disclosure. Both Arendt and Oakeshott have therefore been criticized for their highly individualistic theory of the political. They both disdain a politics guided by a concept of the common good or the public welfare. But their individualism is anything but "private," and in a sense more public or worldly than *a* public welfare state merely administering purely private needs: Their individualism is , not perceived as the externalization of some purely private will or interest, or some assumed internal core of pristine authenticity intent upon remaking the world in its image. Instead, for both their individualism creates shared or public meanings, deeds and practices.

What then, do Arendt and Oakeshott understand by action in terms of self-disclosure? Here, usage of the same term hides essential differences of connotation. For Arendt, the starting point for defining the human is the simple distinction between "what" a person and "who" a person is. What a person is includes *identifiable* "qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings," as well as "type or *character* in the old meaning of the word. It thus includes motives or aims, as well as "moral standards."[80] On the other hand, who

80. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* op, cit., 179, 181.

somebody is cannot be fully revealed by whatever men do.81 Its intangibility transcends our capacity for adequate, unequivocal verbal articulation.[82] Indeed, "it is an indispensable element of human pride to believe that who somebody is transcends in greatness,and importance *anything he, can do or produce."*[83]

Who someone is, his or her essence, thus transcends both substantive accomplishments (or failures) as well as "conventional" moral judgment. True "humanitas" remains "untouchable and unlimited" by them.[84] Human greatness is "greater, than ; anything of the world." This accounts for the "extraordinary strangeness" of men.

Nevertheless, this ineffable "who," beyond the manipulation of the actor, and only equivocally articulated by the various story=tellers witnessing his or her life; results from a basic human "urge" to self disclosure. The ontological status and location of this "urge" Arendt leaves unclear. However, the human desire for greatness and glory beyond all material accomplishments and moral praise orginates in the ;need *to* escape the darkness and emptiness, the existential weakness of the purely private self. The urge to self-disclosure is the urge to gain reality in a public world, but as a self transcending the common world. At one point Arendt calls the public a "spiritual realm." The need to escape private darkness and nothingness is satisfied only in a transcendent ineffability: accomplishment in the "world" won't do. It won't do because of the intrinsic contingency, unpredictability and unreliability of the human world. For contingency is the price men pay for their freedom. The ultimate human

81. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 257.

82. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* op. cit., 179.

83. Ibid., 211. (My emphasis) This point is corroborated by Arendt's definition of freedom: "Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its deterrnining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to *transcend* them." (My emphasis). Cf. Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 151. Most commentators on Arendt who accentuate her "worldliness" neglect this crucial element of the "transcendence" of both action and human essence.

84. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times,* op. *cit.,* 77, 257.

experience of contingency is death. In his early work, Oakeshott went so far as to assert that "death is the central fact of life:"[85] It is central inasmuch as it fundamentally contradicts the very notion of an *active self.* For both Oakeshott and Arendt, the acting self thus must strive toward a measure of immortality to overcome the nemesis of action, death. But any notion of immortality cannot be attached to the world insofar as it is marked by contingency. Arendt's often-cited "love of the world" is, in the final analysis, *a* love for the transcendent world of men's (limited) immortality. But that world is said not to lie in "the beyond," it is not "utopian."[86] It exists as the stories told about the acts of innumberable self-disclosure, *as* the "web of human relationships." The human world is the poetry and prose of action. It is the essence of poetry to intimate, not reveal, the source of the self-transcendence of humanity.

For Arendt, the urge to transcend the meaninglessness of natural motion manifests itself in the self's urge toward greatness. Great deeds most starkly reveal the uniquely inexplicable greatness of *humanitas.* For Oakeshott, transcending futility and nothingness means attaining at least an intimation of an "encounter with eternity."Such intimations' are found, finally, in the practice of religion. In a sense, religion integrally belongs to human conduct. Oakeshott had called it the consummation of practice. Religion is the "motive of all motives."[87] The religious motive, affecting all action, is to transcend the inevitable contingencies of the human condition. It accomplishes this (always limited) transcendence not through a denial or avoidance, but through a "reconciliation" with or "acknowledgement" of the unavoidable "dissonances" of the human condition.[88] Precisely this reconciliation with basic contingency, and thus the "hollowness," the "futility," the "nothingness" of the human condition achieves an "intimation" of immortality, and "encounter with eternity."[89] Not the hope to escape death as the central fact of

85. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes,* op. cit., *273.*
86. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times,* op. cit., *80.*
87. Oakeshott, *The Human Condition,* op. cit., *83.*
88. Ibid., 81-82.
89. Ibid., *85.*

human life, but the very acknowledgment of death expresses human autonomy as an intimation of divine autonomy.

For Oakeshott, we claimed, human self-disclosure thus also involves the human transcendence of nothingness. How, in particular:, does this manifest itself in the enactment of personal autonomy? Concerning basic agency, we know that Oakeshott distinguishes between the two dimensions of action as self-disclosure and self-enactment. Most significantly, where Arendt combines both substantive purposive (pragmatic) goals, personal *character* as well as moral aims under the "whatness" of men, Oakeshott separates them as distinct aspects of all human acitivity.[90] Self-disclosure happens in the choice of substantive purposes and their desired outcomes. It is understood in terms of the intentions of the agent. It is judged in the moral vernacular of justice and guilt, the success and failure of substantive, pragmatic, worldly pursuits. Self-enactment, in contrast, refers to the manifestation of an action's motives in terms of the sentiments informing the choices of an agent. Its core is the actor's choice of enacting "himself as he wishes to be."[91] In other words, self-enactment is the establishment of "integrity of character."[92] Character is assessed in the vernacular of honor and shame.[93] Although action always involves both disclosure and enactment of self, enactment is clearly more essential to action. Since the self is, to repeat, "an absolute necessity in practical experience," and the self is perceived as "separate, single and unique," it presupposes, by definition, an abatement of unrestricted contingency." This is accomplished, however, by virtue of attaining "integrity of character."

Thus, behind these two facets of all action, the self in the pursuit of substantive purposes, and the self enacting itself as a distinctive character, there lies a "considerable difference.[94] It is indeed the crucial difference manifesting human action's intrinsic tendency

90. Ibid., 71.
91. Ibid., 72.
92. Ibid., 73, 76.
93. Ibid., 71.
94. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes, op.* cit., 272.
95. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 73.

towards the transcendence of contingency. For "character" is, first and foremost, the "desire" to compose a "more or less coherent whole."[96] The self enacting its character is the desire to create wholeness as self-integrity within the overall confines of the contingencies of the human condition. It is thus essentially the desire to overcome that contingency. Self-disclosure, however, or the attempt to accomplish something 'lasting" in this world, is immersed in "interminable" contingency.[97] Not only are man's purposive actions subject to frustrations and defeat, but their successes are only additional contingencies in a boundless sea of (accumulating) contingency. Oakeshott gives every indication of being in agreement with Augustine's judgment that in the pursuit of substantive worldly aims "every achievement is evanescent:"[98] The essential characteristic of the human condition of contingency is futility. No wonder Oakeshott prefers civil association with its freedom to attain autonomy of character to enterprise association with its hollow promise of futility. And although he makes certain to state that he does not mean to disparage practical politics, Oakeshott does make clear his priorities.

In self-enactment, however, conduct is "released from its character as a response to a contingent situation."[99] Enacting character is attaining "worthiness," not in terms of some entirely subjective "morality of conscience," but in terms of virtue intrinsic to a moral practice. Thus, in establishing one's character, there is "at least the echo of an imperishable achievement," the echo of durability.[100] But, as Oakeshott says, it is merely a distant echo of imperishability. And the durability intrinsic to the wholeness of character does not issue in self-fulfillment, some final good or condition. For the *self,* even if it attains a measure of integrity and durability, remains a

96. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics,* op. cit., 104.
97. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 73. Oakeshott also writes, perhaps with a touch of irony, that "human beings are apt to be disconcerted unless they feel themselves to be upheld by something more substantial than the emanations of their own contingent imaginations." cf. *On Human Conduct,* op. cit., 80.
98. Ibid., 84.
99. Ibid., 73.
100. Ibid., 84.

"dramatic identity," not a natural function or soul, and thus is without a model of perfection. If wholeness of character consists, then, of the conglomeration of motives or sentiments in which actions are chosen, then religion is the "motive of motives" in the sense that it underlies all other sentiments as the penultimate desire to maintain character in the sea of futile contingencies. For Oakeshott's self as dramatic identity, religion takes the place of having a substantive generic model of perfection. It is in religion (not as theology but in acting religiously) that we attain personal autonomy. And religious faith supplements our actions as self-enactment by enabling us to face the dissonances of the contingent human condition by inviting us to live "so far as is possible as an immortal."[101] This, for Oakeshott, is enacting oneself religiously,'[102] It is the highest degree of personal autonomy possible for human beings as free actors. In a world of contingency, Oakeshott's notion of human excellence reflects his notion of divinity. Oakeshott can be seen to agree with Emerson, who maintains that `self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms."[103]

For Arendt, such personal autonomy is inconceivable. This is not primarily due to the plurality of interacting men, and the unpredictabiility and boundlessness of action. It is first and foremost due to the fact that actors, while disclosing themselves, cannot "make" themselves. In point of fact, the actor is least likely to know who he is And because of their own individual uniqueness, storytellers are unlikely to agree as to "who" their hero was. Thus, since for Arendt identity transcends even character, the final essence of an actor remains unfathomable. The greater the deed committed to establish his immortality, the greater his character, the more incomprehensible his "essence." For Arendt, then, the unfathomable essence intimated in human greatness truly lies beyond good and evil. In Strauss's view, of course, such striving for human political

101. Ibid., 86.
102. Ibid.
103. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 159.

greatness in the form of universal immortal fame or glory is an illusion. It is based on the impossible universalism of the city or state: since universal fame would presuppose universal empire, it is a figment of the imagination. The desire for political immortality points, however, to the genuine universalism and immortality of understanding.[104] Genuine autonomy is to be found only in the life devoted to philosophizing. For Oakeshott, the "essential," i.e. durable and not wholly contingent accomplishment of selfhood, is an autonomous character. However, and although it is an intimation of the divine, Oakeshott's personal autonomy is not necessarily identified with Arendt's public "greatness," nor with Strauss's life of (divine) philosophy. Autonomous individuality runs the gamut from "masterful egoism" and worldly self-assertion to "unaggressive self-reliance."[105] Autonomy can be expressed as "an aristocratic recognition of one's own unimportance."[106] In other words, the rewards of action are more universally available for Oakeshott than they are for Arendt, much less Strauss. Yet, in the final analysis Oakeshott would agree with both Strauss and Arendt that modern men and women, in their pursuit of banal individualism and public hedonism have, in Strauss's words, paid the price of "oblivion of eternity," or immortality, and therewith "estrangement from man's deepest desire."[107] For humans, sheer contingency is sheer banality.

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104. Strauss, *The City and Man,* op. cit., 228.
105. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct,* op. cit;, 238.
106. Ibid.
107. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?,* op. cit., 85.