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# A disputed state: the nature and practice of political philosophy in Michael Oakeshott's early writings

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# Contents

# Abstract

This dissertation contextualises Michael Oakeshott's early political writings in the discourse of political philosophy in the 1920s. Oakeshott's early writings are currently under-surveyed, primarily because they were not published during his lifetime. They provide a new perspective on debates in early twentieth century political philosophy: on the nature of the state, the relationship of individuals to the state and on what political philosophy really was. There are two motivating questions: First, what were Oakeshott's philosophical interests in this period, and where did he see himself in relation to other philosophers? Second, what can Oakeshott's early political writings tell us about the concerns and capabilities of political philosophy in this period? To answer these questions, this dissertation examines Oakeshott's relationship to Harold Laski and G.D.H. Cole, two pre-eminent contemporary political philosophers. Oakeshott presented Laski and Cole as the antithesis of good political philosophy, disagreeing with their empiricism, normativity and their views on the nature of the state. Laski and Cole's work – often labelled as Pluralist - provided a counterpoint for Oakeshott's own views, which were influenced by British Idealism. This dissertation first examines the methodological approach of Oakeshott, Laski and Cole to political philosophy, before looking at the relationship between British Idealism and Pluralism. It highlights several areas of agreement and concludes that, although Oakeshott presented Laski and Cole as the antithesis to his work, they were in fact much closer to him than he would admit. This dissertation further concludes that political philosophy in these years was concerned with a few issues that generated broad agreement. Part of the value of comparing political thinkers in this manner is to enable an assessment of what the practice of political philosophy involves. It allows the reader to question the nature of politics, and theorising, itself.

# List of Abbreviations

*STY - Social Theory,* G.D.H. Cole (1920)

*DPP - Some Thoughts Preliminary to a Discussion of Political Philosophy*, Michael Oakeshott (1925)

*PAP - The Philosophical Approach to Politics*, Michael Oakeshott (1928-9)

*AOS - The Authority of the State*, Michael Oakeshott (1929)

## I: The Many Faces of Michael Oakeshott

Over the course of a long career, Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) taught at some of the most important institutions for the study of political thought, at Cambridge, Oxford and the LSE, published several significant philosophical works and influenced a series of later thinkers, including John Gray and Bhikhu Parekh.[1] Yet it is not easy to summarise Oakeshott's political thought, nor his impact on the discipline of political theory. His interests and influences varied across his career. The early commitment to British Idealism, which dominated his thinking in the 1920s, was replaced with a strong scepticism about the role of rational thinking in politics. Oakeshott's thoughts on the relationship between politics and philosophy shifted, from the pre-war writings that culminated with *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) to his magnum opus, *On Human Conduct* (1975).[2] Likewise, his academic influences changed; he was inspired by Hobbes, Hegel and even Rousseau, and the imprint of a number of thinkers on his work is at once clear and yet hard to distinguish. Oakeshott's writings have been variously interpreted. This has created a thinker with multiple faces, depending on where one looks. Although he identified as a political conservative, others – Paul Franco, Richard Rorty and Chantal Mouffe - have defined him as an advocate for political liberalism, for radical democracy or as a voice against rationalism in politics; the last category perhaps being the only one he would have agreed with.[3] Even then, Oakeshott is 'better known for his conservative politics than his philosophy.' [4] Commentators have tended to highlight his –

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[1] Paul J. Kelly, "The Oakeshottians," in *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, ed. Matthew Flinders et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–19; Paul J. Kelly, "'Dangerous Liaisons': Parekh and 'Oakeshottian ' Multiculturalism," *The Political Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2001).

[2] Terry Nardin, "Michael Oakeshott," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016, sec. I, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/oakeshott/.

[3] Steven Anthony Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (New York: New York : St. Martin's Press, 2000), 2.

[4] Ibid., 5.

tenuous – connection to Thatcherism and the intellectually confident conservatism of the later 1970s and 80s, a member of the 'intransigent Right at the end of the Century'.[5]

There are various reasons for this reputation, but one of the most significant is that much of Oakeshott's work is still under-surveyed, nearly thirty years after his death. This is especially true of his early period. This essay focuses on a selection of his early political writings. These are: *Some Thoughts Preliminary to a Discussion of Political Philosophy* (*DPP*, 1925), written for Oakeshott's application to a fellowship at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge; *The Philosophical Approach to Politics* (*PAP*, 1928-9), a lecture series delivered by Oakeshott at Cambridge; and *The Authority of the State* (*AOS*, 1929), an essay on political authority that was later published in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, as part of a selection of Oakeshott's early writings. Although he produced a great deal between 1925 and 1929, these works are the only writings that directly relate to Oakeshott's thoughts on politics during this period. Many were published posthumously, which partly explains why little has been written on them. They are different to his later writings, in both interest and style. Oakeshott's conservatism is not as obvious; his writing is direct, confident and, at times, almost polemical. Elements of his later, more well-known, theories are present in early forms, particularly his idealism, his conviction that natural scientific approaches to politics are misguided, and his distrust of normative or ideological theorising.[6] These are not major philosophical works, but are instead deliberate attempts to construct a theory of politics; definitions of 'the political', 'the state', discussions of how one ought to treat political theorising and the distinction between philosophical, historical, scientific and 'pragmatic' understandings of politics.

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[5] Ibid., 2; Kelly, "The Oakeshottians," 167.
[6] Kelly, "The Oakeshottians," 161.

It is important to study *DPP*, *PAP* and *AOS* for two reasons. Oakeshott's early thought enables comparison with his later works. The lineage of his ideas can be traced, the process of thesis and antithesis studied. This is a *biographical* reason. There is also a *contextual* reason. Oakeshott's early thought can be contrasted to, and contextualised within, the political philosophy of the 1920s. This enables a closer and more informed reading of *DPP*, *AOS* and *PAP*. Oakeshott's allusions and references to other bodies of work, and thus his argument – which is often developed through the critique of other thinker's ideas – becomes clearer. Contextualisation also provides an insight into the state of political philosophy in the 1920s more generally. It develops our understanding of the capabilities and concerns of Oakeshott and his contemporaries. This essay contextualises Oakeshott's early works into this world to answer two questions. First; what was the early Oakeshott doing, philosophically, in this period and where did he see himself in relation to others?' Second; what can this tell us about the focus of political thinking in these years?

To answer these questions, this essay focuses on the relationship between Oakeshott and two political philosophers of an older generation and philosophical disposition, Harold Laski (1893-1950) and George Douglas Howard (G.D.H.) Cole (1889-1959). Why? Laski and Cole were two of the most famous thinkers of their day. They occupied important academic positions, published acclaimed and influential works and corresponded with other well-known authorities on politics, philosophy and law, including Bertrand Russell and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. It would be impossible to contextualise Oakeshott's early political writings without reference to Laski and Cole, purely because they dominated the field in

which he worked. [7] Laski and Cole formed the later stages of the Pluralist movement. Not only was this a term that they used at the time, but subsequent scholars, notably David Runciman and Marc Stears, have argued that Pluralism was enormously influential on the political thought of the 1920s.[8] Contextualising Oakeshott requires that we place him in relation to Laski and Cole's Pluralism.

Oakeshott deliberately and directly argues against the Pluralists. They provide the thesis which Oakeshott uses to present his counter-argument. Laski comes to represent a body of thought that is directly opposed to Oakeshott's work, and Oakeshott devotes large sections of *DPP* and *PAP* to contesting Laski's political theories, citing Cole in the same breath. The Pluralists provide a space for Oakeshott's argument, which is predominantly influenced by the British Idealist school, to develop. If Oakeshott's motivational carrot was the influence of British Idealism, then the stick was Laski and Cole's approach to political philosophy. Contextualising Oakeshott's writings therefore also involves engaging with Laski and Cole, if only to understand what Oakeshott found so objectionable in their approach.

It is not entirely correct, however, to see Laski and Cole as one side of the dialectical dyad. The influence of Pluralism and British Idealism on Oakeshott's work is more complex. Oakeshott, Laski and Cole relied on a common set of conceptual tools. Whist Oakeshott does not acknowledge this, the influence of British Idealism on his writings ties him to a strain of political thought that both influenced, and was influenced by, Pluralism. The interaction between Oakeshott's early political thinking and Laski and Cole's Pluralism opens the door

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[7] See Robert Wokler, "The Professoriate of Political Thought in England since 1914: A Tale of Three Chairs," in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 134–58.

[8] Marc Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

to the concerns, capabilities and assumptions of political theorists in the 1920s more generally. British Idealism and Pluralism represent two of the most significant intellectual movements in the political philosophy of the early twentieth century, and Oakeshott's early writings were, partly, the latest iteration in an ongoing process of debate, critique and comparison between the two. Oakeshott's objections to Laski and Cole's work allow us to see his philosophical influences and interests more clearly. They highlight some of the central concerns of political philosophy in the years after the Great War, as British Idealism, Pluralism, Laski, Oakeshott and Cole share conceptions of group personality and an awareness of the contingency of sovereignty. Oakeshott's methodological critique of Laski and Cole also calls into question the practice of political philosophy as a discipline, enabling contemporary theorists to examine their own practice in the light of debates from the early years of the twentieth century.

This essay demonstrates that Oakeshott's early political writings represent a developed and coherent approach to political philosophy that drew on the influence of British Idealism and were set against Laski and Cole's Pluralism. It challenges Oakeshott's distinction between his British Idealism and the Pluralists by examining the common roots of British Idealism and Pluralism. Finally, it assesses the Oakeshottian and Pluralist conceptions of the state, to understand some of the common concerns and concepts of political philosophy in the years immediately following the Great War. Chapter II assesses the methodological distinctions between Oakeshott, Laski and Cole's approach to practising political philosophy, with the aim of understanding why Oakeshott presented his approach as radically different. Chapter III examines the common ground between British Idealism and Pluralism, explaining why certain concepts, particularly those of group personality and the Idealist conception of political liberty, were shared. Chapter IV looks at how these shared concepts were employed

in Oakeshott, Laski and Cole's visions of the state. Chapter V concludes that, whilst we certainly should not see Oakeshott as a similar thinker to Laski and Cole, we should acknowledge that the early Oakeshott drew heavily both on the work of the British Idealist school, and on a set of concepts developed by Pluralist thinkers. This essay is a 'voice in the conversation' that surrounds the contribution of Michael Oakeshott to political philosophy.[9] Oakeshott's early writings reveal a developing thinker who deliberately placed himself in relation to other political philosophers, whilst at the same time calling into question the very nature of political philosophy as a discipline.

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[9] Michael Oakeshott, as quoted in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1979), 264, as quoted in Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, 3.

# II: Methodology

While Oakeshott's academic focus changed over the course of his long career, a lack of interest in contemporary political events was a hallmark of his approach to political philosophy throughout his life. [10] Once, when asked for his views on Britain's entry into the European Community in 1972, he replied, 'I do not find it necessary to hold opinions on such matters'.[11] This encapsulates the popular – if it can be called that – perspective on Oakeshott as a political thinker; aloof, detached and conservative, disinterested in what would appear to have been, for someone who had held fellowships at Caius College, Cambridge and Nuffield College, Oxford and the Chair of Political Science at the LSE, a major political issue in contemporary Britain.

This detachment was also present in his academic work. For Oakeshott, the process of theorising was far more important than the material that the theorist worked with. Oakeshott's theoretical early writings were radically different to the more involved approach taken by Laski and Cole. Where the latter two used the 'real' political world as the raw material for their political theorising, Oakeshott denied that the world as it appeared to be bore anything more than a vague resemblance to what it actually was. This chapter assesses the dissimilarities between Oakeshott's approach to political philosophy and that of Laski and Cole, and argues that these differences are the reason that Oakeshott is commonly seen as a different breed of political thinker to his predecessors. Yet, as subsequent chapters will

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[10] See Wokler, "The Professoriate of Political Thought in England since 1914: A Tale of Three Chairs," 152.

[11] David Boucher, "Politics in a Different Mode: An Appreciation of Michael Oakeshott," *History of Political Thought* 12, no. 4 (1991): 718.

demonstrate, many of the underlying assumptions of Oakeshott's political writings are drawn from the same body of work that influenced Laski and Cole, leading them to a set of key assertions that are remarkably similar.

Oakeshott's definition of political philosophy in his early writings was in marked contrast to the definition of the political thinkers he attacked throughout the 1920s. This was partly a response to the way in which Harold Laski and G.D.H. Cole practised political philosophy. Cole's major study of associational thinking, *Social Theory* (*STY*, 1920) drew a link between political philosophy and ethical philosophy. The principles that underpinned all forms of human association were concerned 'not with fact, but with *right*', connecting the moral rights of individuals to the political rights of citizens.[12] Cole argued that all studies of political or social institutions should therefore attempt to derive 'practical generalisations' from the study of social phenomena, in order to protect and secure political rights. Because rights could be won or lost, political discourse and the nature of the state were contingent on a range of social, economic and political factors. Cole's definition of politics and statehood '[had] reference, not to all social situations, but to the social situation of the civilised communities of our own day'.[13] Cole saw politics as an historically and economically situated activity, its 'essential' features dependent on history and economics, as well as social psychology.[14] Because politics was a contextualised and contingent phenomenon, Cole drew on writers who focused on the influence of external factors on politics: J.N. Figgis, who looked at the Church as an institution to rival that of the state; Bolsheviks, Syndicalists and Guild Socialists, who concentrated on democratic trade unionism as an alternative to centralised government; and historians who demonstrated the contingencies at the heart of the contemporary view of the

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[12] G.D.H. Cole, *Social Theory* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1920), 20.
[13] Ibid., 65.
[14] Ibid., 66–73.

state as an omnipotent and omnipresent institution.[15] Because politics was influenced by

external factors, Cole's work in political philosophy focused on the historical and economic

context in which political change took place.

History's ability to isolate unique ways of thinking about the state gave it as much authority

for Harold Laski as it demonstrated its analytic uselessness for Oakeshott. Both would have

agreed with Lord Bryce, that 'the great object of teaching history is to enable people to

realise that… there is not such a thing as a normal world'. [16] Whilst Oakeshott took this as

evidence that history could not achieve anything more than an abstract analysis of a particular

instance, Laski used this to demonstrate the abnormality of the modern view that the state sat

above all other associations. Laski used examples from history to argue that all states, from

the *ancien regime* to modern Britain, were 'concerned only with those social relations that

express themselves by means of government'.[17] He explicitly placed historical examples

over philosophical definitions of politics and statehood on the grounds that philosophical

conceptions were unable to capture the way in which States, and conceptions of the State,

changed over time.[18] Laski claimed to be writing in a 'critical epoch' for representative

government, defined by an increasingly complex state, a lack of well-educated and engaged

citizens, and a shift from a nineteenth century, *laissez faire* liberal state to a new, 'positive'

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[15] Ibid., 10–11. J.N. Figgis's *Churches in the Modern State* (1913) was an influential study of church history; Cole's *Self-Government in Industry* (1918) is the best example of socialist industrial theory; Harold Laski was a believer in historical analyses of politics, as was von Gierke in the previous century, who had influenced Figgis, Cole and Laski. See Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, 34, 180.

[16] J. Bryce, 'On the Teaching of History in Schools'. As quoted in Michael Oakeshott, "The Philosophical Approach to Politics," in *Michael Oakeshott: Early Political Writings 1925-1930*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 189.

[17] Harold J. Laski, *Authority in the Modern State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), 26–27.

[18] Harold J. Laski and Paul Q. Hirst, "The Pluralistic State," in *The Pluralist Theory of the State*, ed. Paul Q. Hirst (London: Routledge, 1989), 192–93.

state that directly regulated national life through the legislature and executive.[19] His political

philosophy stemmed directly from the observation of contemporary social, economic and

political issues, and the solutions were pragmatic, designed to address the specific problems

at hand.

In contrast, Oakeshott's writings were structured around a series of epistemological

arguments that allowed him to provide a definition of politics that did not rely on historical,

scientific or 'pragmatic' forms of analysis. Oakeshott explicitly defined his approach against

the work of Laski and Cole. Mid-way through *DPP* he rebuts;

> Mr Laski's accusation that philosophers have devoted themselves to the "analysis
>
> of the 'pure instance', rather than to the actual experiments with which history
>
> presents us", [as] meaningless nonsense. Either the "pure instance" is the "real
>
> thing" to which a comprehensive consideration of "actual experiments" leads us, or
>
> it is a void and meaningless conception.[20]

This is one of the many points in *DPP* where Oakeshott attacks Laski for methodological

sloppiness. He accuses him of mistaking the present form of the state for the 'real thing', the

true conception of 'the state' that political philosophers ought to define. Laski had identified

elements of statehood that appeared common to all states throughout time, but was in fact

guilty of the 'egregious logical flaw of *cum hoc, ergo propter hoc*, or the assumption of a

logical connection between things where no more than an historical association…can be

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[19] Harold J. Laski and Paul Q. Hirst, "The Problem of Administrative Areas," in *The Pluralist Theory of the State*, ed. Paul Q. Hirst (London: Routledge, 1989), 131–33.

[20] Michael Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," in *Michael Oakeshott: Early Political Writings 1925-1930*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 85.

demonstrated'.[21] Oakeshott rejected the idea that an historical analysis of what politics had meant for previous generations could lead to a timeless definition of either 'the state' or 'the political'; this was because history could not distinguish between those things that were central to these concepts, and those things that appeared to be 'political' or of 'the state' through historical circumstance. From this, the similarities between what Laski had taken to be 'states' throughout history did not necessarily reflect a true concept of 'statehood', in the same way that 'a building of some kind is common to all the colleges of Cambridge, but it would be absurd to define the *vis vitae* of a college as existing in the fact of this possession'.[22] Oakeshott's goal, in his early political works, was not so much to produce a theory of politics, but to define what the study of political philosophy actually was. The only way of doing this, he argued, was 'to see the wholeness of things' by rejecting descriptions of the state, or politics, or the individual, that misidentified them by utilising an incorrect mode of analysis.[23]

Philosophy provided the only correct way to define what 'politics' truly meant. Oakeshott was not interested in how politics, or the state, had been defined previously, or what politics had meant historically, but instead engaged in a theoretical treatment of the '*intimae essentiae*' of what politics was, would be, and had always been.[24] Etymology could describe what 'politics' had meant through different iterations of the word, but did not reliably 'seek for the meaning which most abstracts the thing itself from its merely contingent qualities'.[25] Similarly, historical analysis only described how politics manifested itself in previous ages, and did not demonstrate what was essential to politics and what was merely contingent.

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[21] Ibid., 90.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Oakeshott, "The Philosophical Approach to Politics," 161.
[24] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 54.
[25] Ibid., 56.

Philosophy alone could provide a true description of politics because it questioned the veracity and coherence of all the facts presented to it. If politics was defined as something to do with human society, it was necessary to question what was meant by 'society', as both a word that had had several historical and socially-situated meanings, and the 'thing' that it actually purported to describe. Following Spinoza, whom Oakeshott frequently cited, any definition 'must explain the inmost essence of a thing, and must take care not to substitute for this any of its properties'.[26] Cole and Laski's reliance on history, economics, contemporary politics and social psychology was thus at odds with Oakeshott's approach, and was at risk of assuming that ephemeral phenomena, rather that the 'essential' qualities of an object under study, were common and important to that object.

Oakeshott's insistence that philosophy was the only mode of analysis that would lead to a true definition of 'politics' and 'statehood' was derived from a set of ideas developed by the British Idealist school, a philosophical discipline that had dominated Anglo-American philosophy from the later years of the nineteenth century.[27] Oakeshott argued, with the British Idealists, that 'the whole of any one thing cannot be seen apart from those things with which it is indisseverably united', because every thing that might be said to exist is connected to every other thing in a logical and rational manner.[28] These connections existed in a number of ways: they might be temporal, causal connections of the sort examined by historians or scientists, or they might be taxonomic, in that a book might be said to have certain features essential to 'bookness' – recall Oakeshott's discussion of the relationship between Cambridge colleges and buildings. In defining one 'thing' as distinct from everything else, the

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[26] Ibid., 50, footnote [8].
[27] Paul Guyer and Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "Idealism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, sec. VII, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/idealism/. [Accessed June 2017]
[28] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 40.

philosopher simultaneously distinguishes the 'thing' from its environment, but can only truly

describe the 'thing' in relation to all those things which are 'not-thing'. Thus, the 'thing'

cannot truly exist independently of its environment. The primary goal of the theorising

philosopher was to define what every 'thing' was in relation to every other 'thing', and

therefore to seek a true definition of 'thingness'. Oakeshott asserted that these connections

can be known through a process of rational thought.[29] In this way, philosophy might be said

to be superior to any other form of analysis, because it questions what every other discipline

takes as facts, and asks whether or not they can truly be compared through their 'essential'

features, or whether their apparent commonalities are actually ephemeral to their true

essence.[30]

Oakeshott's definition of a political philosopher deliberately excluded the activities of Laski

and Cole. Whilst the latter were engaged on a *critical* project, with the aim of describing,

improving and directing solutions to political problems, Oakeshott saw himself as a *theorist*,

whose goal was 'neither to describe, to improve or to direct, but simply to theorise'.[31]

Theorising, the process of producing true definitions of 'things', quite accurately describes

Oakeshott's aims in these early political works. A theoretical definition of 'politics',

'political philosophy' and 'the state' provided the groundwork for any further normative

discussion on what 'the state' ought to look like, or how 'politics' could be improved. Luke

O'Sullivan argues that Oakeshott modelled this division between criticism and theory on

Bosanquet, an earlier British Idealist, and his work on aesthetics, further demonstrating the

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[29] Though his insistence on the primacy of rational thought waned over the years. See Luke O'Sullivan, "Introduction," in *Michael Oakeshott: Early Political Writings 1925-1930*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Imprint Academic, 2010).

[30] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 64–65.

[31] Ibid., 131.

influence of British Idealism on the young Oakeshott. [32] From this distinction, Oakeshott's

early political writings were intended to be 'constructive and not critical… to focus the

telescope, and not to examine the features of the landscape for their own sake'. [33] This

approach also demonstrates why Oakeshott did not see it necessary to hold opinions on

contemporary political issues, as he did not believe that the analysis of contemporary political

problems was not part of the work of a theorist. His brand of political philosophy was in

opposition to Laski and Cole's. This was both a reaction to the way that they practiced

political philosophy and a consequence of the influence of British Idealism on his thought.

Despite significant differences in Oakeshott, Laski and Cole's approach to political

philosophy, however, their conceptualisation of the state in the first decade after the Great

War bore noticeable similarities. The function of the state, the limits of government, the role

of the individual and the extent and contingency of associational life were common areas of

concern that produced noticeably similar descriptions of what the state was. Oakeshott's

political works were inspired by British Idealism and a reaction to Laski and Cole's

Pluralism. Yet far from being distinct, Oakeshott, Laski and Cole's intellectual backgrounds

shared a common route; British Idealism and Pluralism relied on common influences that had

developed in the years leading up to the Great War. Oakeshott's radically different approach

to political philosophy masks a common train of thought between his early writings and those

of Laski and Cole.

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[32] O'Sullivan, "Introduction," 2–3; Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 131–32.

[33] Ibid., 97.

## III: Ideology

Oakeshott was evidently 'convinced of the essential correctness of [British] Idealism' between 1925, when he submitted *DPP*, and 1929, when he published *AOS*. [34] British Idealism was a broad philosophical discipline that took inspiration from Hegelian metaphysics, Benthamite utilitarianism and Millian liberalism.[35] Oakeshott's use of concepts like the 'Absolute', and his assertion of the need to analyse all forms of knowledge so that the mind can '[advance] from the part to the whole, from the merely actual to the real', were drawn directly from the writings of, amongst others, Bernard Bosanquet, T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley, key figures in the British Idealist movement.[36] As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Oakeshott's Idealism provided him with a conceptual language – of the distinction between theory and criticism, and of the relationship between 'things' and their environment – that allowed him to attack the pragmatic political philosophies of Laski and Cole.

However, Laski and Cole's school of political Pluralism drew from the same well of thought as British Idealism. In the pre- and intra- war years, Idealism and Pluralism were, whilst remaining distinct schools, in close agreement on a variety of topics. These were not so much opposing schools of thought as they were different responses to earlier ways of conceptualising group identity, political liberty and the nature of the state. [37] It is not possible to properly contextualise Oakeshott's methodological critique of Laski and Cole without acknowledging the common root of many of their ideas. The differences between the Idealist and Pluralist conceptions of the state in fact derived from a shared set of commitments; to the

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[34] O'Sullivan, "Introduction," 6.
[35] Ibid., 4.
[36] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 46–47.
[37] O'Sullivan, "Introduction," 3–5.

life of the group, to the communal construction of morality and law, and to the actualisation of individual freedom. This chapter sets out the broad features of the Idealist and Pluralist schools to demonstrate their conceptual relationship to each other and to Laski, Oakeshott and Cole.

British Idealism and Pluralism were far more of a reaction to the theories of sovereignty and law developed by John Austin in the mid-nineteenth century, than they were two sides of a dispute over the correct approach to political philosophy. The common critique of Austinianism enabled the two schools to develop a shared conceptual language. The Austinian theory of sovereignty was tripartite. It described a binary state in which the ruler (the Sovereign) commanded and the people (the Subjects) obeyed, because of the implicit threat of violent coercion embedded in the sovereign's commands. Second, the sovereign, as the source of all law, existed prior to the law and could not be limited by it. Lastly, Austinianism dismissed concepts of group personality as a juristic shorthand to describe what was in fact the direct interaction of sovereign and individual. [38] Austin's ideas were some of the most important in nineteenth-century jurisprudence, and continued to influence legal scholarship into the twentieth century.[39]

Pluralism and Idealism critiqued Austinianism along these same lines. Rather than seeing sovereignty as a binary relationship between ruler and ruled, they conceptualised it as a consequence of a social existence in which a shared group identity enabled a representative sovereign at the heart of the state, and whose sovereignty was limited by the members of the

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[38] Janet McLean, *Searching for the State in British Legal Thought: Competing Conceptions of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge Studies in Constitutional Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 57–60.

[39] Ibid., 55.

group. Similarly, rather than existing prior to morality and law, the sovereign's morality and juristic personality was defined by the group, and was not imposed externally. Most importantly, this critique relied on a conception of group personality that was more than just a legalistic shorthand. Instead, groups were able to act as more than the sum of their parts.

This common critique of Austinianism was not coincidental. Idealism and Pluralism in fact provided the other with philosophical and juristic tools that enabled a critique of Austinianism and allowed common political theories to emerge. F.W. Maitland, the legal historian and early Pluralist, developed the concept of group personality that influenced British Idealist thought. Maitland argued that the Crown – the legal entity that governed the British state and its Colonies -  should not be seen as a *corporation sole* – as a sovereign that occupied the position alone – but instead as a *corporation aggregate*, where sovereignty was in the Crown as a representative of the body-politic.[40] This corporation transcended the individual interests of its members, who were represented as a whole by the Crown. Maitland's conception returned to what he claimed to be the 'suppressed' medieval conception of the state, a system in which the public realm created and sustained the sovereign.[41] This radically altered the notion of groups in political theory. Rather than existing as a legal shorthand, groups of people were in fact able to create and sustain entities that could generate their own moral and legal frameworks. Laski argued that the so-called 'sovereign' state was merely a pre-eminent corporation that relied on the acceptance of the public to sustain it, in the same way that a University, or a Trade Union, were maintained as corporate associations through the willingness of their members to act in solidarity, in the belief that they were 'real'.

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[40] Ibid., 69–71.
[41] Ibid., 69.

Maitland used this account of corporate personality to refute the Austinian idea that legal

personhood – of the sort conferred on associations to allow them to enter into legal

relationships – was simply a juristic shorthand for the sum total of their members. The

understanding that groups could influence their members in the same way that the

membership could influence the character of the group also allowed the Idealists to expand

upon their conviction that 'the individual is formed by society and the state is formed by

societies'.[42] This enabled them to view the state as 'a totality of the common consciousness

of a people or nation and the purposes it [embodied].' [43] Oakeshott's claim that the state was

the 'social whole' derived from this.[44] Instead of the Austinian binary between Sovereign and

Subject, there was now a duality, a mutually dependent relationship between individual and

group. For Bosanquet, the state was therefore a real person, which sat above and before all

others within society.[45] Maitland's theories contributed to both the Pluralist and Idealist

schools, by providing an alternative to the Austinian view of society as a multitude of

disparate individuals. Both schools of thought placed social groups, of all forms, at the core

of their conception of the individual.

Maitland provided a theory of group personality that crossed from Pluralism to Idealism. Yet

the connection between the schools ran in both directions. A conception of political liberty

developed by the Idealists became influential amongst Pluralist circles. British Idealism

represented a move away from the 'classical' notion of liberty developed by John Stuart Mill:

a broadly negative conception that limited the role of the state by preventing direct

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[42] Ibid., 74.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Oakeshott, "The Philosophical Approach to Politics," 221.
[45] McLean, *Searching for the State in British Legal Thought: Competing Conceptions of the Public Sphere*, 75.

interference in individual choices.[46] The Idealist conception of political freedom instead

revolved around five points. First, that an increase in liberty only applied to 'worthy' actions

that improved oneself – restrictions on 'non-worthy' actions did not count as restrictions on

liberty. Second, that impediments to liberty could be both external (in the form of state or

individual interference) and internal (in the form of skewed desires, irrational fears or

uncontrolled, destructive urges). Third, that all 'worthy' actions were in some sense actions

that contributed to the furthering of society; and fourthly and fifthly, that an external power

could increase overall liberty by restricting 'non-worthy' actions and promoting 'worthy'

actions, and that the state was the external power best placed to coordinate the process of

restricting and promoting. [47]

There were two important aspects of this liberty that were equally attractive to Pluralists and

British Idealists. Liberty was social – only goods that furthered society, and not just the

individual, could be considered freedoms. It was also possible for an external force – and not

an individual will – to promote liberty in society. The Pluralist school used this conception of

liberty in their work, only really challenging the assumption that the state was the institution

best placed to assist individuals in increasing their liberty. Pluralists including J.N. Figgis

argued that the Church had historically played a role in developing (socialised) political

freedoms, whilst Laski and Cole's view of Trade Unions and functional associations was that

they were best placed to provide for the political rights of their members against the

domineering presence of the state. An overall view of liberty as something that could only be

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[46] Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State*, 27–28. Stears notes that the use of 'negative' and 'positive' to describe forms of liberty, whilst predating Berlin's famous essay, has been distorted by his work. Cole and Laski both employ the term 'negative' liberty, but use it in a subtly different way to Berlin. Thus, whilst this essay follows Stears in describing liberty in negative and positive terms, it is worth noting that they are not employed in exactly the same way as later theorists used them. See Ibid., 25.

[47] Ibid., 28–33. Much of this paragraph is based on Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State.*

achieved through an engagement with society fitted with Oakeshott's commitment to British Idealism. Political freedom could not be associated with the maximisation of individual freedoms, because the concept of the individual was an inherently abstracted and unhelpful discourse. Instead, group rights and the maximisation of liberty by the group fitted much better with the Oakeshottian state.

Marc Stears claims that Laski and Cole began to challenge the ideological commitments of the Idealists as the 1920s wore on. In the terms of Stears' focus on political freedom, this is a valid critique. Laski and Cole began to dispute the notion that an individual could be entirely capable of self-expression within one institution – the Idealist vision of the state – and became sceptical of earlier Pluralist claims that an individual simply needed to join another association through which they could find expression. Laski and Cole argued that an individual could find self-expression through several different associations *simultaneously*. One's religious beliefs could be fulfilled in a church, the need for productive solidarity through a Trade Union, leisure activity in a swimming club. Cole's functionalist theory of the state only allowed the democratically elected representatives of an association to represent those aspects of the individual members that the association was responsible for.[48] An association could only act, debate, or legislate on a narrow set of issues that were confined to its function. A steel manufacturer's representatives could legislate on issues that affected steel production, such as worker's rights, but could not have a say on how workers voted in any other association that they might belong to. For the individual members, the association represented only a narrow part of who they were, or who they wanted to be. As Laski and Cole became increasingly sceptical about the role of specific associations in defining individual identity and protecting political freedoms, so the individual as the basic political

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[48] Cole, *Social Theory*, 103–6.

unit became more important, to the point where they ended up 'closer to John Stuart Mill than to Thomas Hill Green'.[49]

Despite this, the dual influences of Maitland's notions of corporate personality on the Idealists, and of political, group-centric liberty on the Pluralists, meant that the two schools should not be seen as directly opposed. Although Laski and Cole came to emphasise the importance of the individual, and began to reject the notion that external forces could actualise individual freedom, they remained committed to the idea that associations external to the state could provide individuals with the space in which to increase their freedom. The next chapter explores the concepts that remained common to Oakeshott, Laski and Cole's thought, despite an increased emphasis on individual rights within Pluralism. Oakeshott's early political philosophy relied on the same commitments as Laski and Cole; to group identity and to political freedom; and the same distrust of the isolated Austinian individual, subjected to the will of the sovereign, even if he arrived at this point via a different route. The next chapter compares the various visions of the state described by Cole, Laski and Oakeshott to demonstrate how these commonalities produced similarities in the Oakeshottian and Pluralist states.

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[49] Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State*, 89.

## IV: Contingency

> In a true philosophy of politics there would be two chapters, entitled,
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> respectively, the individual, and the state; and a political philosophy would
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> fall short of truth which did not show, also, that these two were somehow
>
> really one.[50]

Laski and Cole's approach to political philosophy, combined with the influence of British

Idealism, provided Oakeshott with two sets of ideas: one to react against, and one to take

inspiration from. Oakeshott's explicit intent was to discuss how political philosophy ought to

be approached, rather than to present a theory of politics itself.  However, Oakeshott's

arguments against 'pseudo-philosophical thinking about politics' do contain positive

descriptions of the state and of what the study of politics ought to be. [51] This is because his

critique of Laski and Cole's writings made it 'impossible [for him] merely to destroy,

because destruction proceeds from a positive ground'. [52] Oakeshott recognised that criticism

must be accompanied by a positive theory.

The relationship between the Oakeshottian and Pluralist states was not straightforward. As

the previous chapter demonstrated, the connection between the British Idealist and Pluralist

schools in the pre- and intra-War years provided Laski, Cole and Oakeshott with a set of

common influences, from a belief in group agency and identity, to a concept of liberty that

allowed external forces to enhance the liberty of citizens. Of course, Laski and Oakeshott's

conceptions of the individual were profoundly opposed, which produced political

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[50] Oakeshott, "The Philosophical Approach to Politics," 218.
[51] Ibid., 205.
[52] Ibid.

philosophies that emphasised different elements of statehood.[53] Yet to say that the

Oakeshottian and Pluralist states did not resemble each other would be to mischaracterise

their relationship.  This chapter demonstrates that, despite their divergent descriptions of the

individual, there was an important conceptual similarity between these states that revolved

around the influence of the concept of group personality. This stemmed from the common

ground between British Idealism and Pluralism, which lead all three thinkers to emphasise

the fundamental contingency of statehood, and the potential for any associational group to

achieve a unity that could rival the state itself. As a preliminary, this chapter briefly sketches

the outline of the Oakeshottian and Pluralist states.

The structure of Oakeshott's state mirrored his approach to political philosophy. In the same

way that no true political philosophy ought to deal in abstractions, because any piece of

knowledge taken out of its context ceased to be intelligible, so no understanding of society

could make use of the concept of the isolated individual. Because it was not possible to

'comprehend *concretely* the nature of the soul without comprehending the nature of the

universe', it was not possible to understand the concept of an individual without

understanding that individual as part of the state.[54] Political philosophies that relied on a

distinction between individual and society became unhelpful 'abstractions', because the

notion of the individual only made sense in the context of its existence with every other

individual in a society.[55]  If the world were made up of entirely isolated individuals, there

could be no language, culture or identity, because these qualities rely on a shared conceptual

language. There would therefore be no state, no community and no body-politic. Oakeshott's

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[53] See Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State*.
[54] Oakeshott, "The Philosophical Approach to Politics," 158. Oakeshott is paraphrasing Socrates.
[55] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 109–10.

view of the relationship between state and individual is something inseparable. The state was necessarily implied by virtue of the fact that people exist in groups.

This identity between individual and state was a metaphysical constant. This made Oakeshott's use of the term 'state' very different to that of Laski and Cole. Oakeshott arrived at his description of the state by assessing other conceptions of it. These ranged from the state as a territorial body, to a 'secular whole', to 'the political machinery of government in a community', and Oakeshott rejected all of them on the grounds that they were all abstractions from the concrete whole.[56] The only true description of the state, he says, is one that 'carries with it the explanation of itself and requires to be linked on to no more comprehensive whole[s] in order to be understood'.[57] In order to make sense, the state has to be contextualised within the entirely of social existence. Without this contextualisation, rather like the abstracted notion of the individual, 'the state' becomes an arbitrarily abstracted notion. The Oakeshottian state included everything: it was morally and culturally 'comprehensive', and was directed to fulfilling a conception of the 'good life'.[58] Oakeshott was not referring to government, nor to a juristic construction – the latter was 'merely a useful legal fiction'.[59] The Oakeshottian state was much more similar to what we might call 'society', 'community' or even 'civilisation'; it included all elements of human social existence and provided a conceptual framework for those who lived within it.

In contrast to the metaphysical underpinnings of the Oakeshottian state, Laski and Cole's Pluralist states developed in the context of a dramatically expanded British state during and

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[56] Quote from G.D.H. Cole, *Self-Government In Industry* p.71, as quoted in Michael Oakeshott, "The Authority of the State," in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 82.

[57] Ibid., 83.

[58] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 79.

[59] Oakeshott, "The Authority of the State," 85.

after the Great War. As the War provided an incentive to centralise and direct industrial

production, and to require loyalty to a task that demanded far more than previous conflicts

had, so the state reached further into the lives of British subjects.[60] Cole and Laski's

pluralism was an attempt to decentralise decision-making power in society, and reduce the

influence of the state in individual lives. Protecting the individual right to choose the 'good

life' was at the core of Laski and Cole's pluralism, even if this right was often expressed by

membership of an association, and not directly by individuals. Cole's state enabled individual

freedom through a form of federalised society. The legislative and executive functions of the

state[61] were dispersed amongst different 'functional' associations. Industrial associations

contained lawmaking bodies, courts and administrations drawn from the ranks of those

involved in the industry itself. Similarly, the Church of England was governed entirely by the

General Synod, and regulated by ecclesiastical courts.[62] The state's role was defined by its

'function', limited only to those things that affected the people entirely in common. This

included the regulation of the supply of essential commodities, and the broad regulation of

'moral principles', such as the institution of marriage and the criminal justice system.[63]


Where Cole provided the structural blueprints for a pluralist society, Laski was more

concerned with the relationship between state and individual in contemporary academic

discourse. Like Cole, Laski used the term 'State' to describe the organised, centrally directed

body that was 'concerned with those social relations which express themselves by means of

government'.[64] Laski attributed the tendency to place the state above all individuals and

associations to the influence of Hegel on contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. The

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[60] Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, 163–66.
[61] 'State' in this context meaning something more like 'Government', including the judicial and legislative functions.
[62] Cole, *Social Theory*, 124–27.
[63] Ibid., 100–101.
[64] Laski, *Authority in the Modern State*, 26; Oakeshott, "The Authority of the State," 82.

state had become and expression of 'the Absolute', a form of social being that was of a higher moral order than the individual. [65] Conceiving of the state as a higher social being risked limiting the freedom of individuals, because the state could prevent them from making valuable choices over the direction of their lives, and 'the greatest contribution that a citizen can make to the state is…that he should allow his mind freely to exercise itself upon its problems'.[66] Pluralism provided a dual solution to the problem of the Absolute State. From the perspective of the citizen, it enabled individual self-expression to take place within any association, and not just the state. From the perspective of the community, it forced the state to stand alongside, and not above, any association that was capable of providing a space for individual self-expression.

There is an obvious objection to the argument that the Oakeshottian and Pluralist states relied on common theoretical concepts. It appears that Oakeshott, Laski and Cole were describing two very different phenomena. The Oakeshottian state was the entire social order, encapsulating and promoting everything that made the people whole. For Cole, the state was the government, a body that ought only to concern itself with those things that were entirely common to everyone in society. Laski saw the state as one association amongst a multitude that could enable individual freedom. Any comparison risks comparing apples to oranges. This objection is compounded when we consider that Cole and Laski appeared to diverge from the earlier forms of Pluralism by the 1920s. Between 1925 and 1929, when Oakeshott completed *DPP*, *PAP* and *AOS*, Laski and Cole had moved away from the community, the association and the group as the defining influence in the lives of individuals, and were instead engaged in a sort of Pluralist thought that emphasised the role of the individual. If this

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[65] Harold J. Laski and P Q Hirst, *Collected Works of Harold Laski: Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 7–8.

[66] Laski, *Authority in the Modern State*, 56.

is the case, a comparison seems fruitless. However, the ascendency of the individual in Pluralist thought did not wipe out all the common features between Oakeshott's Idealism and Laski and Cole's Pluralism. Certain concepts remained: a sense of the contingency and contestability of statehood that had developed partly as a reaction against the influence of John Austin in the previous century; and, from this, an acknowledgement of the fact that government, if not the state, was susceptible to forms of factionalisation and division that had the potential to lead to tyrannical rule.

Stears rightly focuses on the defining feature of Laski and Cole's Pluralism that contrasts with earlier members of the Pluralist school; their insistence that the individual right to choose between forms of associational life was the key to maximising freedom. However, the individualism of the 'Socialist Pluralist' school obscures a broader point about the relationship between non-State associations and the state itself. Laski and Cole relied on a series of assumptions about the nature of associational thought that were also key to Oakeshott's conception of the group. Laski, Cole and Oakeshott all saw the sovereignty of the state as something that was contingent on its relationship to other associations. Under Laski's theory, individuals had to be able to choose between associations.[67] Choice is only meaningful if one chooses from a range of valuable and comparable options; if the choice is between a state that encompasses almost all social goods, and an association that only maximises one social good, and will only ever be able to maximise this good, the freedom to choose will be meaningless. Thus, the state and all non-state associations had to be of the same genus, the same associational material, to present a valuable choice.

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[67] Ibid., 66–67.

To demonstrate this, Laski turned to the history of English political theory. From Hobbes onwards, political writers had treated non-state associations as a threat to the state. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes a potentially fatal affliction of the Commonwealth, where 'the great number of corporations, which are as it were many lesser Commonwealths in the bowels of a greater, [are] like worms in the entrails of a natural man.'[68] The existence of these worms was, for Hobbes, a threat to the Commonwealth itself, as supposedly 'lesser' associations proved to be capable of growing and, malignantly, overwhelming the state from within. The state could only be overwhelmed by these smaller corporations because they represented 'lesser Commonwealths', smaller versions of the state itself.

From Maitland's insistence on the personality of groups, any sufficiently organised body of people could become a Hobbesian worm, an association with the potential to develop into a body the size of the state. Members of a society had the ability to choose between a variety of associations that all had the potential to dominate, in the way that the nation-state had come to dominate society from the end of the nineteenth century. Laski asserted that all associations had this capability, and deliberately focused on groups like the Catholic Church, or Trade Unions, because they had the potential, in his eyes, to rival the state. He deliberately drew an analogy between his pluralism and the European 'medieval empire', a 'community of communities' in which national states were in direct competition with the papacy, nobility, guilds and corporations for dominance.[69] Laski claimed that 'the societies of men are spontaneous'; any association had the potential to transform itself into a body that could rival the state, developing a legal system, an executive, and enabling a form of individual self-

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[68] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 218.; See also *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, 24–25.

[69] Laski and Hirst, *Collected Works of Harold Laski: Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*, 274.

expression by providing those things which were important to a specific conception of the 'good life'.[70]

All associations, including the state, were thus in continual competition for dominance. Not only was statehood transferrable, it was also variable by degree. This was true both for Laski and Oakeshott, who made a rare reference to real-world events in *DPP*: 'England in August 1914 was more of a state than she was during the great industrial strikes of 1911-12'.[71] This implied that the dominance of the English state, and the degree of statehood that it held, was not assured. Oakeshott may have presented statehood as a metaphysical consequence of the existence of a people, but this did not mean that it necessarily attached itself to a national government. He made it clear that no real-world association had ever fully achieved this conception of statehood, because all associations were 'finite entities', only ever possessing 'a degree of unity and a degree of statehood'.[72] Oakeshottian statehood was contingent on the extent to which the state expressed the entire and whole needs of the individuals within it; '"If the state is all that satisfies the whole needs of complete persons, *where*, then, is the state?" And I can reply only that the state exists insofar as such a satisfaction exists, and wherever that satisfaction is found, there is the state.'[73] Oakeshott was not describing an association capable of governing a territory, but a metaphysical condition generated by a unity of people. In this sense, the Oakeshottian 'state' had something in common with the Pluralists: it could be made up of any grouping of individuals that was sufficiently organised.

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[70] Laski, *Authority in the Modern State*, 56.
[71] Oakeshott, "Some Thoughts Preliminary to the Discussion of Political Philosophy," 80.
[72] Ibid., 79.
[73] Oakeshott, "The Authority of the State," 84.

Whilst Oakeshott might have disagreed with Laski's method of practicing political philosophy, he agreed that competing factions within the European 'medieval empire' all had the potential to transform themselves into a 'state', in the sense that one could achieve the unity sufficient for Oakeshottian statehood. Laski, of course, used the analogy to medieval Europe to demonstrate the fact that the *national* state had not always been a dominant force, and instead had to compete with other non-State associations, but this analogy could only make sense if the non-State associations had the ability to rival the state, because they were, fundamentally, capable of achieving exactly the same moral unity that the state could provide. Both Laski and Oakeshott relied on statehood as something *contingent*, a condition that could be gained, or lost, by any group depending on circumstance.

In one sense, this is an uncontroversial point. Oakeshott, Laski and Cole agreed that the state (in Cole and Laski's usage) was not the only association capable of achieving statehood (in the Oakeshottian usage). But it belies an important fact; that this understanding of the role of groups had developed from the same source, from the critique of Austinian sovereignty which saw groups, and the notion of group personality, as 'simply a technical matter, related to certain issues of private law', and thus as a legal shorthand for the sum-total of the individuals within a group, and not of the group itself.[74] Maitland's theories of corporate personality can be glimpsed at the core of both conceptions of the state.

A second similarity between Oakeshott, Laski and Cole derives from this conception. This was a willingness to accept that associations could also fail to fulfil their basic functions, and thus be overtaken or removed by other associations. One of Laski's most consistent critiques

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[74] John Austin, *Lectures on Jurisprudence, or the Philosophy of Positive Law*, as quoted in McLean, *Searching for the State in British Legal Thought: Competing Conceptions of the Public Sphere*, 60.

throughout this period was that government could not be truly representative, that it inevitably fell under the control of one or more factions, who then ran it for their benefit. 'When power is actually exerted by any section of the community, it is only natural that it should look upon its characteristic views as the equivalent of social good'.[75] Hence, Laski continually pushed for limited government responsibility, and devolution to a local government system that he saw as more accountable.[76] Oakeshott, though he rarely produced any specific political prescriptions, similarly acknowledged the dangers of dysfunctional associations within the state, as it was always the case that 'a fluctuating and elusive majority, wholly without the characteristics of authority' had control over the government, and thus did not promote the social unity of the state as a whole.[77] Statehood was contingent in two ways; first, it could be produced by any association, not just the nation-state, putting all associations into a competition for dominance; second, it relied on the ability of the members of each association to generate a unity of spirit, a corporate personality that would allow the association to act as a unified body.

It is important to recognise, of course, that the Oakeshottian and Pluralist states approached political freedom in different ways. Laski and Cole's increasing emphasis on individual rights, and individual choice, was at odds with Oakeshott's view that the state and the individual were not two separate identities. His was much more of a 'positive', perhaps even interventionist, state than Laski's, of the sort that Laski and Cole had railed against during the expansionist phase of the British State during the Great War. Oakeshott's state could enable people to achieve satisfaction and political freedom in a manner that made Pluralist thinkers uneasy. Oakeshott and the Pluralists used the same conception of group unity and the

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[75] Laski, *Authority in the Modern State*, 38.
[76] Laski and Hirst, "The Problem of Administrative Areas," 139–42.
[77] Oakeshott, "The Authority of the State," 86–87.

contingency of statehood, but these shared concepts did not translate into a shared discourse on political freedom; normatively, they remained separate. The Oakeshottian and Pluralist states were not entirely similar, nor did they have similar aims; the Oakeshottian 'positive' state contrasted sharply with the Pluralist emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. Despite this, Cole, Laski and Oakeshott relied on the same conception of group identity and group agency that had developed in the decades prior to the Great War.

**V: Legacy**

After Michael Oakeshott took over the Chair of Political Science on the death of Harold

Laski in 1950, it was rumoured that Laski's widow refused to set foot in the LSE ever again.

Oakeshott's appointment changed 'the whole character of the school'.[78] He delivered an

inaugural lecture that attacked Harold Laski and Graham Wallas, his predecessor. Politics at

the LSE was no longer to be the scientific, ideological project that it had been under Laski

and Wallas. Oakeshott called into question the normative and empirical basis of their work,

setting the stage for a sceptical and non-empirical approach.[79] Yet the contrast between

Oakeshott and Laski was not always as distinct as it appeared. The first question posed at the

start of this essay was, 'what was the early Oakeshott doing, philosophically, in this period

and where did he see himself in relation to others?'. Oakeshott presented Laski and Cole as

the antithesis of correct political thinking, but his early political writings drew heavily from

the well of thought that sustained Laski and Cole's work. Although the critique of Laski

created an antithesis to Oakeshott's thesis, in order to develop a synthetic political

philosophy, the distance between the two arms of the dyad was perhaps smaller than he

realised.

Oakeshott's commitment to British Idealism was short-lived. These early writings provided a

platform that enabled Oakeshott to step away from British Idealism, toward newer ground. In

the context of the political philosophy of the 1920s, Oakeshott's early political writings were

a late statement in the debate between British Idealism and Pluralism that had, by the later

1920s, begun to die out. Laski and Cole moved away from Pluralism; Cole increasingly

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[78] Wokler, "The Professoriate of Political Thought in England since 1914: A Tale of Three Chairs," 151.

[79] Kelly, "The Oakeshottians," 161.

interested in the economic history of the English working classes, and Laski more concerned with the protection of individual liberties and his involvement in Labour party politics. Oakeshott shifted from political to pure philosophy, which culminated in the publication of the heavily theoretical *Experience and its Modes* in 1933.

This does not mean that Oakeshott's early political writings are less useful or insightful. The similarities between Oakeshott, Laski and Cole's work in this period provide us with two answers to the second question; 'what can Oakeshott's early political writings tell us about the focus of political thinking in these years?' The theories of group personality, identity and the contingency of sovereignty demonstrate that the question of exactly what constituted a political group was at the heart of political philosophy in the 1920s. The relationship between individual and state, or individual and group, has not been constant or consistent in the history of political thought. Oakeshott's Idealism and Laski and Cole's Pluralism ought to be regarded as an attempt to clarify how individuals and groups with both competing and complementary interests can exist and prosper in society.

The relationship that I have explored between Oakeshott, Laski and Cole produces a further question. Quoting the jurist and Liberal Politician Lord Bryce, Oakeshott argued that the teaching of history in schools 'enable[d] people to realise that… there is not such a thing as a normal world'.[80] Contextualising Oakeshott's early political writings as part of a debate over the proper nature, content and focus of political philosophy, the definition of the state and politics, allows the modern reader to question whether it is possible to view the practice of political philosophy in a 'normal' manner. The early Oakeshott's definition of politics and

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[80] J. Bryce, 'On the Teaching of History in Schools'. As quoted in Oakeshott, "The Philosophical Approach to Politics," 189.

philosophy was ideal and absolute – even if it could never be attained. Contrasting Laski and Cole's alternative allows questions of definition to come to the fore. Oakeshott's early political writings offer a glimpse of a period in which the definition and practice of political philosophy were undergoing a major revision, and the contrast between Oakeshott, Laski and Cole asks the modern reader to reconsider their own practice. A biographical reading of Oakeshott's early works in light of his later writings has the same effect: although he may have expounded on a timeless definition of politics in his early career, the fact that the later Oakeshott emphasised 'the contingency of the activity of politics and therefore [rejected] its universal character' [81] allows us to pose this third question, the same question that Oakeshott opened his first lecture series with in 1928: What is politics, and can we ever achieve a 'normal' political philosophy?

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[81] Kelly, "The Oakeshottians," 161.

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