I

Introduction: Epistemological Backdrop

Michael Oakeshott's most consistent self-description was that he was a skeptic. Skepticism represents from earliest times the counterassertiveness of human reason against the "givenness" of the world. In response to the age-old question as to why there is something rather than nothing, the skeptic has the audacity to say that there is indeed nothing (nothing irrevocably fixed) about the furniture of the human world or the equipment of the human psyche. The skeptic highlights the role of conceptualization and categorization in yielding the world that we then take for granted. How we linguistically frame a slice of experience is never totally determined by the experience itself. The epistemological slack that accrues from linguistic-symbolic engagements of the world staves off the prospect of certainty indefinitely. The position that I have just described is often called "skeptical idealism" and consigned to the level of the precious and the esoteric because of its patently antirealist bias. Oakeshott was unique in the way that the skeptical idealism of the early part of his career got transmuted into a widespread cultural norm in the form of postmodernism by the later stages of his career. It is even possible to make the case that he was one of the motive forces contributing toward this transformation.

The epochal location at which Oakeshott is situated in the history of skepticism affords us a unique opportunity for reassessing the larger metaphysical import and background postulates of skepticism. What the theoretical trajectory of Oakeshott's career dramatizes for us are the inextricable theoretical fortunes of religious belief and skepticism. There is a very pronounced religious impulse animating skepticism. A world comprehended from start to finish from the perspective of a lack of finality of judgment is a world that negatively recaptures the prospect of wholeness: none of our intellectual schemata have an unreserved claim to truth. The truth (if it exists) is beyond us and elsewhere. The skeptic restores to God the conceptually empty universe that He bequeathed to us at the moment of Creation—indirectly reaffirming by his critical renunciations the space that God occupies.

This book is devoted to making the case that on grounds of reasoned argument skepticism issues forth in mysticism. The skeptic is driven to question everything—except his own deployment of skepticism. To be consistent, he needs to turn the critical engine of skepticism inward in relation to the tenets of skepticism themselves. However, to preserve protocols of consistency, he cannot merely dilute skepticism to the level of a generalized agnosticism—so that what results is a tepid, irresolute maintenance of both skepticism and its critical targets. To be consistently applied, the skeptical questioning of skepticism must encompass a thick, full-blooded rehabilitation of all of the objects of skeptical attack. The theoretical mandate of skepticism extends to making the "yes" of skepticism as resoundingly rich as its "no." Whatever objects are devastated by skepticism need, according to the internal logic of skepticism itself, to be thoroughly rehabilitated by it. This interminable oscilla-

tion between rejection and affirmation yields a mystically saturated world where all of the defining markers of human existence simultaneously are and are not. Under the prism of skepticism, the completely familiar world is exposed as a tissue of defamiliarized possibilities—permanently coexisting with and reconfiguring what on one level we believe we are encountering on a regular basis. In the skeptical-mystical universe of our daily habitation, suspended animation becomes a precondition for a recognizable human universe.

The conjunction—or, better still, the confluence—of skepticism and mysticism works to clarify the meaning and status of belief in God as well. The God of all three sets of monotheistic scriptures needs to be conceived as being Absolutely One—utterly transcendent—completely beyond human projection and imagining. If He bore any literal resemblance to things human—if His attributes overlapped with ours in any way—then God would have been situated in a comparative framework with ourselves, and no matter how superlatively superior He was to us in the display of those attributes, His radical and unique Oneness would have been tarnished and undermined. The way to remain faithful to the postulational requirement of God's Unqualified Oneness is to posit Him as subsisting in an infinite dimension, so that all of our descriptions of Him remain irreducibly metaphoric. However, it is precisely at this point that a parallel contradiction and paradox that we noticed emerging with regard to skepticism resurfaces in relation to the biblical teaching concerning God. If God as a matter of definitional and conceptual necessity must be postulated as "occupying" an infinite dimension, then to know that the traditional epithets of monotheistic religion—such as "omnipotent," "omniscient," and "all-merciful"—cannot be applied to Him in a literal sense is already to have pierced through

the impassable barrier to infinity in order to know which descriptions need to be ruled out. From a somewhat different angle of vision, we can say that if biblical religion affords us a notion of God only for the sake of parsing away the literal descriptions that religious texts and our own imaginations project unto Him, then in what sense can we be said to be working with an intelligible and sustainable notion of God? If God is only there to be perpetually deliteralized, how can we understand ourselves to be relating to—and speaking about—God at all? Where—and who—is the subject concerning whom these acts of deliteralization occur?

Our logical predicament with regard to God nudges us into a pattern of response that is similar to the one we mobilized in relation to the perplexities surrounding skepticism. The infinity of God debars us from saying both that He is and that He is not—and from coherently assessing how our human vocabularies might impinge upon and reflect His being. The community of believers is forever oscillating between statements and descriptions of Him—and a neutralization and cancellation of those statements and descriptions as being inadequate to or contradictory of the task of reporting who and what He is. Our relationship to God in biblical religion—just as our relationship to the everyday world and to specialized worlds such as science and history invented by human beings over the course of the generations, when viewed from the perspective of skepticism—remains irredeemably, unremittingly mystical. We simultaneously inhabit a "yes" and a "no" without the possibility of permanent release from the one type of response into the other.

Oakeshott was absorbed with questions of religion from his early writings in the 1920s to his later writings in the

1970s. He was also preeminently a philosophical skeptic who analyzed all issues in the domains of practice, morality, politics, science, history, and philosophy from the perspective of skepticism. In this book I endeavor to read his philosophy of religion in the light of his skepticism—and his skepticism in the light of his philosophy of religion, by way of tracing mutual patterns of infiltration and unity that have heretofore not been sufficiently appreciated. To take Oakeshott seriously would involve a dramatic recasting of the traditional ways in which we perceive and practice both philosophy and religion.

Since his death in 1990, there has been a tremendous growth of scholarly interest in and study of Oakeshott's work—and also a more widespread cultural appropriation of him as both an eloquent advocate of political conservatism and a theoretical architect of antifoundationalist, postmodernist sensibility. In order to arrive at a proper historical reconstruction of Oakeshott's antifoundationalism, a number of scholars (following what looks like Oakeshott's own cue) take a historical loop through Hegel and F. H. Bradley.[1] The following sentence and its paraphrases run like an intellectual historical leitmotif throughout a recent book on Oakeshott: "Oakeshott takes Bradley's notion of the 'Absolute' as experience, combines it to Hegel's conception of the 'Absolute' as the totality of thought, and thereby implodes the 'Absolute' into experience itself. This focuses attention upon the modes of thought."[2] While it is true that Oakeshott delved deeply into the thought of Hegel and Bradley and was strongly influenced by them, I think we can say based upon his own theorizing of skepticism and its metaphysical and political import that he did not require more than Plato in order to arrive at what nowadays is usually regarded as an

antifoundational position. Even his readings of Hegel and Bradley seem to be cast in a mold that had already been set in the light of his reception of Plato.

In an essay dating from 1948 that has been posthumously published—"The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind"—Oakeshott says that "It was the genius of Plato that first perceived that philosophy is, or should be, conversation, and rescued it for a brief moment from dogmatism."[3] According to Oakeshott, Plato conceived of philosophy as a dialectical discussion rather than an eristic one. In an eristic discussion, the participants view each other as opponents. A person can prevail only at the expense of discrediting or dislodging his or her neighbor. In a dialectical discussion, by contrast, "the impetus of discussion is spent ... when all simultaneously discover that each has been right all the time."[4] What I think Oakeshott means by imputing to Plato the discovery of dialectical discussion—conversation—in this sense is that the participants in a Platonic dialogue are imbued with (or come to develop) the understanding that the phenomena they are concerned to explore and elucidate are susceptible of multiple, and even contradictory, conceptual encasements. It is the formal skepticism that they share by participating in a conversational form of interaction that enables them to think "that each has been right all the time," even as their substantive understandings of things deeply differ.

From the perspective of this reading of Plato's concept of dialectical discussion or conversation, we can appreciate how one of the most central and enduring substantive components of Plato's thought—his Theory of Ideas—can be seen as a discursive translation of what is already insinuated by Plato's choice of the dialogue-form itself in which to communicate his philosophical teaching. On a straightforward

literal level, Plato's Theory of Ideas relegates the facts of the material world to an inferior ontological status, regarding them as mere copies of eternal Forms. However, this formulation can be construed as a metaphoric and picturesque way of stating that so-called facts are theory-dependent, that the world of theory is underdetermined by the universe of fact. When we read Plato's Theory of Ideas in conjunction with his notion of "degrees of reality" (that the Ideas are more "real" than their material embodiments), we can see the two together as compressed, metaphoric statements of the tenets of skeptical idealism. Reading Oakeshott's reading notes on Plato in his Nachlass at the London School of Economics together with his essay on "The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind" reinforces the sense that those scholars who assign equal weight to Hegel and Bradley alongside Plato in helping to shape Oakeshott's philosophical outlook (while it superficially follows Oakeshott's plot line of his own development) are providing us with secondary intellectual history rather than a full-scale reengagement of the steps through which Oakeshott arrived at his own philosophical position. For a reader as theoretically sensitive and nuanced as Oakeshott, all you need in order to have the epistemology of *Experience and Its Modes* and *On Human Conduct* is Plato.

There is a profound connection between Plato's Theory of Ideas and his theory of tacit knowledge (both of which have their counterparts in Oakeshott), which helps to fix for us the most revealing way to make sense of his thought. The underdetermination of theory by fact suggests that diverse—and even contradictory—theoretical formulations can with equal cogency describe and refer to the "same unit(s) of fact." The Theory of Ideas construed in this manner by endlessly staving off contact with an independent

universe of facts supports the notion of what we might call "the mysticism of everyday life." The everyday world is not populated by hard, objectively given entities, but by entities conceived as a tissue of possibilities that as a result of certain historical and cultural turns that sometimes endure for very long stretches of time are imputed to have the identities that we consider them to have. Everyday life is therefore lived at one overwhelming, unbridgeable remove from itself. We act as if all of the appurtenances of daily living (all of the objects of our daily interaction) are ready at hand and have known, fixed, and enduring identities. From the perspective of "underdetermination," however, the possibilities are primary, and the conceptual congealments (no matter how lengthy their duration) are contingent.

The unimaginable distance separating God from the world that monotheistic religion posits is traceable within the world itself between each individual human being and all other human beings, and what each one of us conceives to be the furniture of his/her world. The aura of persisting possibility hovers over every move that we take to increase our sense of mastery and at-homeness in the world. Whatever we do to confirm and solidify our sense of reality about the world is unmasked from the perspective of "underdetermination" as further distancing and dislocating it.

The only kind of knowledge that we can have in a mystical universe in which underdetermination prevails is tacit knowledge. According to Plato, it is only by postulating that knowledge (at least of the sort that is useful and is required or searched after by human beings) can proceed in a tacit, unconscious way that we are able to theoretically reconstruct how an infinite regress of interpretation of words can be sealed off and a translation between theory and practice can take place. Since, from the perspective of underdetermina-

tion, we can never arrive at a pure, uncontestable, unequivocal determination of what the "things" of the world are, we can only hope to figure out the meanings and references of strings of words by engaging in translations and paraphrases of the original set of words with which we are confronted. Similarly, since the projection of a scene or domain of practice by any theoretical text cannot be shown to intrinsically match what is being suggested by the text (more than one [and sometimes conflicting] theoretical texts can match what is being evoked by any particular scene or domain of practice), we must posit that the gulf or transition between theory and practice is being negotiated in tacit, unconscious ways. On an explicit level in both cases—the interpretation of texts; the movement from theory to practice—Plato argues that we would confront an infinite regress (the sentences doing the interpreting and translating would be as systematically ambiguous as the original set of sentences they were designed to make sense of, given the absence of a fixed and neutral object that the sentences ostensibly relate to) unless we embraced the notion of tacit knowledge. Thus, for Plato (and for anyone sharing a Platonic metaphysics), there is conceptual interdependence between his Theory of Ideas yielding a mystical grasp of ordinary life and his conception of tacit knowledge.[5]

Plato's arguments for postulating the notion of tacit knowledge engender paradoxes of their own that lead to an expanded pedigree for the idea of "the mysticism of everyday life." The infinite regress of interpretation to which theorizing the formation of knowledge and the possibility of communication as subsisting on a purely explicit plane gives rise can be problematically sealed off only by acknowledging or positing the tacit character of knowledge. The tacit medium for processing and building up knowledge

comes into being only by being verbally identified through a series of verbally achieved displacements of what might otherwise appear as the explicit components of knowledge. The tacit in multiple ways becomes a function of the verbal. The verbal medium creates space for the tacit—classifies it—and registers its ongoing, heterogeneous impact on the verbal. In addition, the category of the tacit is parasitic upon the contrasting category of the explicit. All of the ways in which we invoke a tacit medium for knowledge presuppose the coexistence of an explicit one. It almost appears as if the tacit were one further specification of the explicit—some phase or moment that explicit knowledge requires in order to be rendered more perspicuous. How can we coherently envision the tacit medium of knowledge as an autonomous overarching category?

It is at this juncture that mysticism comes into play. The tacit, according to Plato, needs to be viewed as a mystical infusion into—or overlay of—the ordinary. It constitutes the pregnant, "vibrating" silence that surrounds discourse and enables discourse to function. The ordinary sense-encounters and acts of verbalization of everyday life are the result of an illusion. It is the accompanying, pulsating presence of the extraordinary (the mystical) that enables the ordinary to happen. Every moment, event, and act of verbalization of everyday life is nudged into existence by what transcends words and rational, logical plotting. The mystical is just the impenetrable obverse side of the real and the everyday. Without the mystical, we would not have our intimate, familiar world(s).

Oakeshott's subscribing to the notion of tacit knowledge in so many different but still overlapping ways—his theorizing of the formation and dynamics of tradition; his political

preference for liberalism, the subordination of the more formal and explicit public sphere to the more informal, anonymous, and tacit private sphere; his assigning priority to a morality of habit and custom over a morality grounded in rule selection and compliance—in their own right already bespeak his commitment to the notion of the mysticism of everyday life. These factors are independent of but reinforce the other ways in which Oakeshott's philosophy of religion and his skeptical metaphysics and epistemology open up onto the notion of the mysticism of everyday life.

Some scholars are uncomfortable with and wish "to challenge the 'political' reading of Oakeshott's work and in particular the new orthodoxy (coming largely from North America) that takes the defining characteristic of Oakeshott's work as his liberalism."[6] To get Oakeshott most sharply into focus, I think we need to say that he is a philosophical radical. He is also a practical, ideological conservative and a political philosophical liberal. In his classic depiction of Hobbes in his 1946 introduction to *Leviathan*, Oakeshott becomes one of the major twentieth-century architects of the category of "political philosophical liberal."[7] A political philosophical liberal is someone who calls into question the claims to authority and knowledge advanced by devotees of both Revelation and Reason. After the manner of Hobbes, the political philosophical liberal affirms an unbridgeable conceptual distance between man and God and an equally nonnegotiable distance between the premises of an argument and the background, supporting argumentation needed to vindicate them. With none of our judgments in any sphere of human discourse or experience (from religion to politics to everyday life) conclusively underwritten by sources external to themselves (the Hobbesian sovereign is only a formal

reconstruction of how we bring theoretically limitless con-
testation to an end), the stage is set for acknowledging the
primacy of the values of human freedom and individuality.

There is no logical bridge that links Hobbesian skepti-
cism to the establishment of a state in which freedom and
the pursuit of individuality prevail. The skepticism, in order
to be sustained, has to be mapped in such a way that it incor-
porates a reflexive gesture that includes skepticism within
its own ambit of skeptical interrogation. This suggests that
there are only rhetorical analogues and affinities (and not
tight logical relations) between philosophical arguments
concerning the limits of reason and theoretical projections
concerning the ideally constituted state. The political philo-
sophical liberal is launched on his or her career in a burst
of recognition of how, in different but related ways, both
the operations and conclusions of human reason and the
most defensible vision of the political state lack foundations.
From this perspective, Oakeshott, following in the footsteps
of the Hobbes he has helped to define for us, was a political
philosophical liberal. To resist this characterization is to be
unfaithful to both Oakeshott's philosophy and his political
theory.

Oakeshott's privileging of practice that some scholars
believe is not adequately accounted for in his canon of writ-
ings[8] also has philosophical roots. Without Oakeshott ever
stating this openly, philosophy's continual exposing of the
limited, conditional claims to knowledge of all organized
perspectives on human experience and "reality" (the differ-
ent "modes" and "voices" in the Oakeshottian philosophical
lexicon) suggests that theorizing itself on one level of analy-
sis constitutes a form of doing, an engagement in a certain
sort of practice. The promise and allure of philosophy is the
possibility of attaining rational consummation—achieving a

total overlap between human thought and whatever stimulates and instigates it into operation. However, what is dramatically evident in Oakeshott in all phases of his career is that the search for unconditionality, which is the hallmark of philosophical reason, can only be manifested negatively in the highlighting of the elisions and gaps that the proponents of different disciplinary approaches to human experience harbor. For Oakeshott, the asymmetry between negative critique and positive restatement (the nontranslatability of the first mode into the second) remains insurmountable. Since philosophy subsists enduringly on the plane of negative critique that over the millennia has not been transcended or transformed, it implicitly has for Oakeshott the character of a form of practice—a type of doing. This for Oakeshott constitutes part of the tacit knowledge of the philosophical endeavor from its origins in Plato. To state this openly would be giving the upper hand again to theory—so that the content of the statement would be in irreconcilable tension with its form. Part of the reason why Oakeshott in his writings assigns centrality to tacit knowledge is that it enables the coherence of his own theorizing to emerge into bolder relief.

What I have just said also helps us make sense of another feature of Oakeshott's thought that has perplexed readers— namely, the fluidity and movement between the different modes of experience that Oakeshott practices and, as his career progresses, increasingly even preaches.[9] What is disconcerting and embarrassing for some of Oakeshott's critics is how philosophical reason theorizes and delineates autonomous regions of human experience such as history, science, and practice, only to have their boundaries continually transgressed not only by Oakeshott himself, in his dual roles of political theorist and historian of political thought,

but by the rest of us as well, in our regular shifting of perspectives in the ways that we approach politics. Given what I have just said about theorizing being a form of practice, then the lack of airtight boundaries between the modes and the constant movement to and fro between them become more intelligible. The restoration of ontological parity between theorizing and the objects of theorizing legitimates constant crisscrossing between these perspectival boundaries.

Some readers have also been disturbed by what they consider to be the insulated and self-referential character of Oakeshott's writing.[10] Oakeshott always seems to be writing in relation to himself—with scant reference to the secondary literature surrounding the texts and issues he is writing about, and with abundant allusions to the premises and points of departure that are found in his own arguments. A kind of paradox emerges that Oakeshott seems to rely on closure in order to advance his arguments in favor of liberal and philosophical openness.

It seems to me that the best way to make sense of this feature of Oakeshott's writing is to see it as profoundly implicated in key elements of his philosophy. If the search for foundational premises in any sphere of human discourse—any region of human experience—only makes us more thoroughly aware of the partiality and incompleteness of our starting points (as Oakeshott argues in *Experience and Its Modes*), then all local arguments that both philosophers and people situated in everyday contexts make are (despite the best efforts that the exemplars of these roles make) condemned to be circular in character. All of us navigating in whatever mode (or hybrid mode) of experience we happen to be immersed in can only proceed to converse by (artificially) privileging certain premises and moving ahead accordingly.

In argument as well as in conversation (and this is what makes argument like conversation), we are always moving within the charmed circles of our own creation and affirmation.[11] In writing in the manner that irks some readers, Oakeshott is merely dramatizing limits that are enshrined in his philosophy.

One might parenthetically add that Oakeshott's preference for the essay form also results from the same source. The essay, unlike the more fully elaborated and systematically structured treatise, represents on a formal literary level the closest analogue to conversation in the domain of the spoken word. If the counterpart to the treatise is a speech that is fully anchored in some preset beginning and proceeds through measured stages of argument to the conclusions it seeks to endorse and recommend, the literary equivalent to conversation is the essay, which is much more fragmentary in character and less able to camouflage the arbitrariness of its starting point(s) and its subsequent unfolding patterns of argument than the treatise or the speech. Conversation and the essay form embody circularity in a much more open and direct way than the treatise or the speech—and this helps to account for the preferred status that these genres enjoy in Oakeshott's literary production.

Conservative commentators and others have pointed to a moral factor that animates Oakeshott's work that renders it superior to the writings of other philosophers who have contributed importantly toward shaping the philosophical discourse of late modernity.[12] In his theorizing of morality, Oakeshott expresses a clear preference for a morality grounded in custom, habit, and tradition over a morality consisting in compliance with a set of self-consciously selected and affirmed rules. Oakeshott's assigning of priority

to customary and traditional morality over rule-based morality is most cogently seen as a direct outgrowth of his philosophical position. Given Oakeshott's skepticism as I have sketched it so far, all systems of thought and the patterns of behavior that they spawn and legitimate have to be viewed as acquiring in the course of time the ontological status of "traditions." Premises in whatever field of human discourse we are considering cannot be authoritatively, non-controversially grounded. The extent to which they become epistemologically and socially salient is largely a function of the inferences and structures of argument they generate, which both buttress and help define perspectives and ways of life that through their very appropriation and integration by human beings become binding upon us.

Explicitly according to the later Oakeshott of "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" and more implicitly possibly even according to the earlier Oakeshott of *Experience and Its Modes*, the picture does not change even with regard to philosophy. For Oakeshott, philosophizing itself needs to be conceived as constituting (or as devolving into) a series of traditions. How one thinks—how one mentally organizes experience—on the basis of premises that can never be categorized as more than insecure is a function of how a community of thinkers in the course of working out the implications and interconnections of those premises grow accustomed to defining their intellectual horizons in terms of them and thereby in this sense rendering them binding upon themselves.

A critique that has been leveled against Oakeshott is that his philosophizing in general and his political theorizing in particular are so radically individualistic that they leave little room for social, communitarian factors in accounting for the

formation and buildup of knowledge claims and the crystallization of value in diverse spheres of human experience.[13] We now have a theoretical corrective to this reading. Oakeshott's thoroughgoing skepticism, which both explicitly and implicitly points to the role of tradition in helping to make sense of how philosophical justification proceeds, becomes the tacit bridge notion that facilitates the recognition and acknowledgment of the role of communitarian factors in the articulation of knowledge and value.

It is very important to recognize that the skeptical idealism that Oakeshott theorizes opens up on both a conservative politics whose watchword is "tradition" and a radical politics governed by the insight that the relationship between human conceptualization and human experience remains enduringly contingent. A leading contemporary political theorist who has capitalized on the radical intimations implicit in Oakeshott's thought is Ernesto Laclau, with his discourse analysis. "Radical democracy would recognize the full play of difference and the constructed character of society."[14] Directly indebted to Wittgenstein and to Derrida for their notions of language-games and difference respectively, Laclau is also indirectly building upon Oakeshott who creates the metaphysical space wherein the notions of "language-games" and "difference" loom as cogent and persuasive. If words are underdetermined by things, then normativity in linguistic usage does not derive from a comparison with the structure and content of things but from patterns of linguistic usage in different regions of discourse that have become entrenched in society (Wittgenstein). By the same token—carrying the Oakeshottian logic one step further—in order to sustain the constructed, contingent character of the worlds that we inhabit, we need to guard against reifying

and fetishizing words and thereby transforming them into a surrogate universe of things. We have to make ourselves aware of how the reality conjured up by words will undergo continuing modification in relation to the sets of words that on an ongoing basis we contrast them with. From Laclau's perspective, the Oakeshottian-Wittgensteinian-Derridaean conceptual infrastructure enables us to appreciate how society is constituted as a coexisting series of always precarious "hegemonic articulations," which alerts us to the unceasing relevance and urgency (if we are so inclined) of further pushes toward equality and democracy.

Stuart Isaacs strangely criticizes Laclau from what he takes to be an Oakeshottian perspective for pursuing another version of "rationalism in politics" by cultivating Oakeshottian premises for purposes of promoting political radicalism.[15] To the extent that Oakeshott falls prey to the illusion (which is an open question) that there is a smooth logical circuit that connects his skeptical epistemological and metaphysical premises with his political conservatism, then one could say that Oakeshott, too, falls prey to the snares of rationalism in politics. However, if Oakeshott can be gotten off the hook on this issue, so can Laclau. I am arguing that the way to relieve Oakeshott of this charge is to read him as making a philosophical argument about the limits of reason and the limits of language and then metaphorically extrapolating and projecting a series of analogies and correspondences from it that support political conservatism. One can exonerate Laclau from the charge of rationalism in the same way. The analogies and correspondences that he synthesizes from skepticism are geared to buttressing political radicalism. Part of the glory of Oakeshott as a political philosopher is that in conceiving of philosophy in such a way that philosophy can speak in multiple, contradictory voices to politics, he has in effect

dramatized for us that philosophy does not speak to politics at all. On a substantive level—concerning what sort of state to establish, with what constellation of values—philosophy has nothing concrete and decisive to say to politics. In one fell swoop, our responsibility for the political realm that we collectively ordain and nurture (however actively or passively) becomes either nonexistent or infinite.[16]

A number of writers have noted affinities between Oakeshott's and Wittgenstein's thought.[17] One commentator, for example, says that for both Oakeshott and Wittgenstein, "Philosophy describes what we already know and leaves everything as it is."[18] While this is undoubtedly true, I would like to consider how the deep philosophical structure of Wittgenstein's thought might be seen to resonate with that of Oakeshott's thought. To try and show this, I shall outline Oakeshott's thought from its initial premises upward, showing how a mystical Wittgensteinian climax of argument seems appropriate for it as well.

Oakeshott's subscribing to the view of the underdetermination of theory by fact commits him without his overt acknowledgment of this consequence to the pervasiveness and insurmountability of contradiction. If theories are underdetermined by facts, then it is within the realm of possibility that contradictory theoretical formulations will be able to account for the selfsame body of fact. By positing underdetermination, we are bereft of a central censoring mechanism for filtering out contradiction. Once contradictions are allowed to enter into the body of statements that we take to be true, then (as Peano, Bertrand Russell, and Karl Popper have argued[19]) it debars us from blocking the entry of other contradictory statements (beyond the scope of the premises we are considering), so that we have to live with the ineliminability of contradiction.

This awareness yields an internal proof that the version of skepticism to which Oakeshott subscribes is a generalized agnosticism. Given that the opening premises in his skepticism in both *Experience and Its Modes* and *On Human Conduct* state the thesis concerning the underdetermination of theory by fact—that so-called facts themselves are already so theoretically saturated that they qualify as low-level theories—so that there is no body of neutral fact that can be uniquely captured by an objectively appropriate theory or conceptualization—then contradiction is inevitable. We can assume that in the course of time contradictory formulations will be able to account for the selfsame body of "fact." The inescapability of contradiction in which Oakeshott's premise of underdetermination eventuates means that his skepticism will always be lacking a critical apparatus to rule out those conceptual targets of investigation that the skeptic has been traditionally concerned to discredit, namely, God, truth, objective knowledge, justice, happiness, and virtue. At best, the skepticism can only be sustained as a generalized agnosticism—which allows to reenter through the back door (the unconsummable character of the critical apparatus set up by skepticism) whatever has been expelled from the front door (the skeptical interrogation of the entities, concepts, and categories in question).

Translating Oakeshott's skepticism into the vocabulary of a generalized agnosticism on one level appears to resolve the issue of consistency pertaining to skeptical positions in philosophy, but, on another level, it leaves the issue of consistency disquietingly hanging. The level upon which the issue of consistency appears to be resolved is that a generalized agnostic position turns its critical canons inward and interrogates the credentials and viability of skepticism

alongside the traditional conceptual targets of skepticism. However, what remains residually inconsistent in a generalized agnostic position is that the everyday, nonskeptical world is affirmed as a continuing possibility—a persistently open question—and does not enjoy the status of assuredness (of givenness) that it possessed before the canons of skepticism (even the canons of skepticism devolved into a generalized agnosticism) were turned against it. A generalized agnosticism is able to register only a certain version of skepticism (one that is more inclusive than the original version), but not nonskepticism or antiskepticism. To know as a result of our translation of the tenets of skepticism into the canons of a generalized agnosticism that our confidence in the perdurability of the everyday world has to be endlessly deferred is already to have crossed an illicit barrier in the direction of skepticism. Knowledge of the need for deferral is a knowledge that epistemologically speaking we have not earned—and we do not have the philosophical credentials to support. A rigorously consistent application of the principles of a generalized agnosticism to the issue of knowledge of the everyday world therefore would require us to leave all of our verbal and logico-metaphysical registers behind and approach it mystically—which is to say, in a way that cannot be defined either by what our theoretical and logical approaches, pursued to their outermost limits, tell us about its existence or its nonexistence.

We need to analytically distinguish between what a generalized agnosticism alludes to in terms of historical process—what the relationships of the explorations, investigations, and findings of one generation are to those of the next and ensuing generations—and what a generalized agnosticism signifies in relation to a theory of truth. With regard to the

historical process, a generalized agnosticism suggests a continuing openness concerning the issues that human beings have dealt with—including the issue of skepticism. When it comes to the translation of the import of a generalized agnosticism for the notion of truth, I am arguing that a generalized agnosticism rehabilitates in their pristine ontological force all alternatives under consideration, and thereby its perpetual oscillation between conflicting possibilities engenders a mystical approach to reality. Invoking for heuristic purposes the artificial distinction between what human beings do and how we make sense of what we do, we willynilly endlessly defer the completion of our inquiries—but each stage of our inquiries properly interpreted and understood signifies a mystical embrace of reality.

It is negative gestures that launch skepticism upon its career in philosophy and work to define its character once it has taken off. One can have the things—the furniture—of the world both by positing an overlap between words and things and by assuming a freedom of application of different (and even contradictory) strings of words to designate and make sense of a delimited body of things. The pursuit of this latter option is a function of engaging in a negative gesture—raising the question, "Why not?" Why not make sense of things through a lesser ontological commitment, rather than a more grandiose and inflated ontological commitment that posits a univocal relation between words and things?

When one follows through on the inspiration of this negative gesture, one realizes that one can sustain a mapping of what is on the basis of an even more dramatic negative gesture. One can preserve a delineation of what is not just on the basis of uncertainty, but on the basis of paradox and

contradiction. All of the entities that skepticism was poised to question—and potentially even reject—can be negatively rehabilitated because skepticism is incapable of consistently rejecting them. The methodology of skeptical argument is not sufficiently precise to destabilize its targets without simultaneously destabilizing itself—and thereby engendering a compensatory series of moves that reappropriate for the domain of the possible and actual what skepticism sought to banish to the realm of the impossible and nonexistent.

One way of theorizing the metaphysical terrain in which we find ourselves is that the pattern and structure of argument I have developed issue forth in a conception of the mysticism of everyday life, after the manner of what Wittgenstein famously describes toward the end of the *Tractatus*: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."[20] The reason why Wittgenstein's philosophical propositions are "nonsensical" is that they cannot be validated in their own terms. Only a limited class of empirical statements are considered justified in the *Tractatus*—those that meet the criteria set forth in the doctrine of logical atomism and the picture theory of the proposition: "Is the specimen [sentence] either (a) an elementary proposition, consisting of an immediate concatenation of names for objects and functioning as asserting the existence of a determinate state of affairs, or (b) a truth function of such elementary propositions? If so, it is a genuine piece of language and is the expression of a

genuine (even if false) thought. If not, then the utterance is shown to be a piece of nonsense and thus not a thought at all."[21] The problem that Wittgenstein confronts toward the end of the *Tractatus* is that the philosophical statements that compose the metaphysics of logical atomism and articulate the picture theory of the proposition cannot themselves be validated in accordance with that metaphysics and that theory. This means that even the delineation of a narrow class of empirically verifiable statements is jeopardized. Issues of consistency and coherence have hobbled the identification of even this class of statement. The upshot of these probings is that no statement whatsoever can be conclusively empirically verified. It is these considerations that approximate to Oakeshott's understanding of the relationship of underdetermination that subsists between words and things that point Wittgenstein in the direction of the mystical. If our skeptical rejection of a secure correlation existing between words and things were sustainable, Wittgenstein would not have to have recourse to mysticism. He simply would have clinched the argument in favor of skepticism. It is the fact that skepticism itself faces issues of consistency of the sort we have discussed that reorients Wittgenstein's whole discussion in the direction of mysticism. All of our concepts and categories—and the material entities that are implicated by them—Wittgenstein seems to suggest at the end of the *Tractatus* remain in an ongoing state of suspended animation between belief and disbelief. We can neither confirm nor disconfirm them. We can neither accord them credence nor discredit them. Our multiple everyday and specialized vocabularies constitute a vast, impenetrable veil, whose status as "veil" remains in question because we are bereft of words to describe what the veil might or might not be covering.

Not-knowledge of the whole does not translate into denial (even permanent deferral) of the whole. To circumvent this treacherous line separating not-knowing from denial, it becomes compelling to opt for a mystical reading of the whole. The whole is only sustainable as either belief in God as the ultimate explanatory factor accounting for everything or as skepticism—a denial of the possibility of secure knowledge altogether. The structures of argument—and the blockages—are parallel in both spheres. What drives belief in God as well as skepticism is a craving for ultimate explanation. What undermines both sets of arguments is that ultimacy defeats the prospect of intelligibility. God can serve as the final explanation of things only if He is located in an infinite dimension, which thereby only resituates our problem of being able to account for how He can be the ultimate factor responsible for events and phenomena encountered in finite space-time. The very comprehensiveness of the God-factor (which drives us to conceive of Him as infinite) defeats our efforts to insert Him into an explanatory framework. Analogously, it is the very broad scope of skepticism that prevents us from satisfactorily connecting it to the phenomena it was invoked to rebut. If skepticism is all-inclusive, then it must encompass a gesture of recoil that leads to the skeptical disruption of skepticism itself—and its consequent neutralization as an organizing perspective from which to account for the radical insecurity of all of our knowledge-statements and claims. A mystical relationship to reality (including God) is evocative of an awareness of the parallel structures of both belief and skepticism—and their attendant blockages.

We remain impervious to any set of ultimate factors validating our understanding of nature and the cosmos. Whether that factor or factors are taken to be immanent

to the natural order (i.e., skepticism) or transcendent to it (i.e., God) remains immaterial. We can say from a mystical perspective that our inability to penetrate to this level of analysis is what is connoted by the idea of God. From this angle of vision, pantheism and negative theology (resting upon the claim that we can only say what God literally is not but not what He is) become categories or notions that posit the equivalent unknowability of ultimate immanentist and transcendental factors. At the level of unknowability upon which ultimacy operates, the distinction between immanent and transcendent becomes blurred.

One can either speak about the supremely transcendent biblical God in contradictory accents (as existing on a theological plane of analysis that we cannot decipher and [necessarily] not existing on a sheerly human level of discourse[22]) or relate to Him exclusively in silence. All of the traditions and appurtenances of the religious life (including prayer) are part of the contradictory speech—projecting Him as existing even while logically speaking, given His lofty, transcendent, infinite status, He cannot exist in any terms that we can understand. What takes over after these appurtenances and traditions cease (if we are aware of their incompleteness) is silence. The everyday world for Wittgenstein and Oakeshott is sustained in the same way as the mystical God by the community of believers.

The reflections on skepticism and its limits that have been the crux of this introduction yield an unusual and unexpected thesis about Oakeshott that I will develop in the remainder of this book. In a letter to Patrick Riley, Oakeshott lamented in the last decade of his life that his greatest unfulfilled desire was to return to religion (his fellowship dissertation at Cambridge, which has been recently published and which I will

discuss at length later on, was about the inescapable merging of philosophy into mysticism[23]) and to write an essay on theology:

> During the last couple of years since I came to live here [in Dorset], spending much of my time re-reading all the books which I first read 50 or 60 years ago, I have gone back to "theology"—or rather, to reflection upon religion. And I would like, more than anything else, to extend those brief pages in *On Human Conduct* into an essay (you know how I admire and value this literary form) on religion, and particularly on the Christian religion. This ambition came to me, partly, from the re-reading of all that St. Augustine wrote—St. Augustine and Montaigne, the two most remarkable men who have ever lived. What I would like to write is a new version of Anselm's, *Cur Deus Homo*—in which (amongst much else) "salvation," being "saved," is recognized as [having] nothing whatever to do with the *future*. Oh, but I know I can never do it now; I have left it too late.[24]

If my reading of Oakeshott is on the right track, then we can say that Oakeshott had actually written what he felt he did not have enough time to write. His existing oeuvre utilizes the texts and arguments of philosophy to offer us a theological reading of some of the most persistent and defiant conundrums of philosophical reasoning. Oakeshott unmasks the familiar worlds of science, history, politics, and everyday life as tissues of never fully actualized possibilities teetering on the brink between existence and nonexistence. From the vantage point of critical reason, all regions of human experience have been—and are not-yet. What is salvageable from religion—just like what is salvageable from all

other areas of human experience—is the now of uncertainty
and possibility. Religion, in a sense that blurs the ideological
line separating the religious from the secular, gives us the
key for unlocking the rest of the universe. From that meta-
physically resplendent future described in the great mono-
theistic texts, all that remains is this analytically carved-out
now pointing to ignorance and impenetrability. This is our
most coherent vision of both eternity and the now.