Against the Current:
Speculative Knowledge and Practical Wisdom

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It is unusual these days for philosophers to profess a comprehensive doctrine. Even if Locke's view of the philosopher as an "under-labourer" is not widely accepted, philosophers nevertheless generally find themselves addressing conceptual puzzles that have been thrown up in the ordinary business of making a living, devising new technologies, painting pictures, attending to the needs of dependants and so on.[1] The philosopher keeps quiet while we pursue our mundane (self-contained) activities. He comes on the scene when the wires get crossed and we find (to our astonishment) that particular engagements cannot be treated in isolation, that (whether we like it or not) we have to accept interconnection as a basic fact of our lives.

The predicament of the "plain man" is unlikely to be eased very much by a modern philosopher. Philosophers long ago renounced the idea that they could tell the rest of us how to live (the precise point of Plato's *Republic*).[2] They may contribute to the conceptual clarification of difficulties that arise in (first-order) pursuits and disciplines, though practitioners in these spheres are more likely to fashion working solutions to their problems for themselves. The typical philosopher is obsessed with the problems of other philosophers. He does not have to take a stand on the question of whether philosophy is any use to anyone other than a philosopher. He simply accepts conceptual clarity as a good in itself.

Pointless philosophy can be a lot of fun. It keeps some of us occupied for most of our working lives. But it is also something we may feel uneasy about on Sunday afternoons. Philosophy, after all, has a very long history. It has survived in the most unlikely and least promising circumstances. And now that well-endowed universities are prepared to pay us to think about it, we seem to be unclear why we should be doing it at all.

The problem arises partly because intellectual specialization has done a great deal to devalue the standing of a generalized view of things. Unless we narrow our focus, we are likely to be overwhelmed by new findings and new ideas. But if we think back to the Platonic root of modern philosophy, we will see quite clearly that philosophy cannot be treated as a specialism of any ordinary sort. Certainly not everyone can do it. The perspective it brings to bear on our lives, however, enables us to set our more specialized pursuits in a proper light. Intriguingly, Plato treats a refusal to see things in the round as an intellectual disorder. We cannot appreciate the significance of a specific activity unless we see it in relation to our lives as a whole. If modern philosophers do not do this, who does? Plato's specific treatment of the priority of the whole to the part may be wrong, but it would be odd if the need for this kind of thinking had disappeared altogether.

Donald Phillip Verene's *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* is a plea for philosophy to return to its original task.[3] It is delightfully unfashionable and wide-ranging, addressing not only technical questions about the proper role of philosophy but also wider dilemmas that are intrinsic to technological society and culture. More is at stake here than the fate of philosophy as a discipline. Philosophical error is as old as philosophy itself and should not trouble us unduly. But it matters hugely if through philosophical error we are denied even the possibility of understanding ourselves.

Verene centres his discussion around the fabled injunction from the Temple of Apollo, "know thyself".[4] This is by no means a straightforward undertaking. He is not interested in arguing against specific positions but rather seeks to show by example that philosophy conducted in a certain style can yield a worthwhile body of speculative knowledge. He endorses Hegel's claim that the "true is the whole", without committing himself to the historicism that Hegel's modern followers are largely happy to accept.[5] Philosophy may begin by presenting "its own time apprehended in thoughts", but it cannot end there.[6] At the very least, philosophy must endeavour to present the different dimensions of experience as a coherent whole. This does not mean that the apparent contradictions in our ordinary experience are simply ironed out. In Hegelian fashion, Verene invites us to look beyond the fragmented and disjointed world of our daily kaleidoscope in order to grasp experience in relational terms. We cannot understand the wise man without accounting for the fool. To be sure, this will take the philosopher beyond his normal reading. Verene's point, however, is that it is precisely obsession with formal argument that has prevented modern philosophers from appreciating the wider relations of ideas which make philosophy possible in the first place.

Following Vico, Verene takes the problem of origins very seriously indeed. He endorses Vico's dictum that "doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat", extending the discussion beyond historical origins to the cultural forms that create the space for thinking philosophically.[7] What he defends is a "topical" rather than "critical" philosophy, concerned to grasp the wisdom embodied in myths, stories and entrenched practices. Indeed without these concrete embodiments of wisdom, philosophers really have nothing worthwhile to talk about.

The point about "critical" philosophy is not that it is mistaken in any ordinary sense, but that it is parasitic on received wisdom. Minute analysis of received wisdom proves, in the end, to be self-defeating. We cannot expect to "find" anything remotely like a body of knowledge "beneath" (or implicit within) the array of positions that may be adopted in ordinary practices. At best we may end up with fragments that relate to each other like images in a kaleidoscope.

The response of "critical" philosophy has been to turn away from the idea of a body of knowledge and to focus instead on the idea of a judging subject constructing meaningful spheres of discourse. Descartes and Kant are the pivotal figures in this development in modern philosophy. From Verene's perspective, however, they have simply reinforced the refusal to look for connection which is the root of the problem for critical philosophy. If "parts" are only intelligible in relation to a "whole", then obsession with minute analysis merely generates confusion confounded. We can ask (as Descartes and Kant could not) where this process might end. Verene's view is unambiguous. The individual judging subject, viewed apart from received bodies of wisdom, is free to say anything, claim anything. Emotivism and relativism are the ghosts at the feast of modern moral philosophy. Everyone is uncomfortable with the implications of their positions. Yet within the resources of critical philosophy, it is not clear how they can be effectively exorcized.

Verene offers no easy solutions. He certainly does not expect philosophy to be able to help us resolve our moral and practical dilemmas. The idea that all problems have solutions, and that philosophers are simply specialized people looking at specialized problems, is a seriously misleading view of the proper role of the philosopher. It is essentially what is left over when philosophers lose sight of their primary objectives. It is part and parcel of what Verene describes (following Vico) as the "barbarism of reflection".[8]

It should not surprise us unduly to be told that philosophers have been going about their business in the wrong way. Verene's wider point is that philosophical error is indicative of a wider cultural malaise. If we are troubled in mind or body, we simply assume that we can consult experts for advice. Our experts, of course, are likely to have a narrowly circumscribed competence. They will be very wary about venturing beyond their designated spheres. No one will want to say much, least of all philosophers, about what it means to lead a human life.

Life may be difficult, but why should we think of it as a problem? Problems (we assume) have solutions. We sometimes feel that we are overwhelmed by them. But at troubled moments we are likely to remind ourselves to sit down quietly, break our problems down, and try to tackle them one at a time. The "sensible" response, however, is based on outrageous (and quite unjustified) confidence. It is an example of the expansion of what Verene calls "technological desire".[9] Clever people dream up conceptual and technical gadgets to help us get from A to B quicker, easier and in a more contented frame of mind. But we may not have the faintest idea why we want to get from A to B.

Once we focus on desires *seriatim*, there really is no end to the story. Whatever we want, we can always imagine something bigger, brighter and better. It opens the door to the "false infinite" that will have us chasing out tails forever.[10] Thomas Hobbes, the prince of "barbarous" philosophers, described the process as a "perpetuall and restlesse desire of power after power, that ceaseth onely in death".[11] It is clearly possible to conceive of human life in these terms. We find the position first portrayed in Plato's brilliant sketches of Thrasymachus, Callicles and others. Our stark picture of the practical agent in the hurly-burly of modern life is probably very close to the archetype.

The oddity, given the polemical context in which Plato depicted the sophists, is that the picture of the rugged, assertive, possessive individualist should have scarcely been modified in the course of two thousand years of critical comment. Plato was not presenting us with balanced accounts of human nature to assist our considered judgment. He wanted to show that a dimension we could all recognize in our own characters would become self-destructive and intrinsically untenable if it was abstracted from a wider form of life. Surveying the issue from our perspective, Verene can argue that the parody has become a reality. The parody, however, is no more tenable now than it was in its first formulation. The fact that we can accept it so uncritically now should serve as a warning. Surely only a mind that had (quite literally) forgotten how to think could fall into such egregious error. Verene's book is a reminder that we had once been better equipped to address these matters.

We are not simply dealing with philosophical error here in any ordinary sense. It is not a question of "correcting" critical philosophy but pursuing philosophy in a different idiom. Cartesian philosophers (in the broadest sense) may think of themselves as guardians of clarity. Yet their criterion of what can count as a philosophical argument has ruled out discourses on which philosophy crucially depends. If our problem is a "corruption of consciousness", then we are unlikely to make much headway if we persist in working within systematically misleading terms of reference.[12] But nor does it make sense to assume we can start from scratch. Descartes, Hobbes and other early modern rationalists had tried to imagine what it would be like to think without the constraint of received wisdom. Far from illuminating ordinary experience, they created a theoretical language that distanced common sense from technical philosophy. Verene focuses our minds on the baleful effects of that fateful separation.

These are fundamental issues that take us to the heart of our understanding of philosophy as a discipline. In what follows I will focus not on the broad picture of the proper (and original) scope of philosophy, but rather on the implications of Verene's position for political philosophy. Verene is trenchant in his criticism of the practical consequences of the adoption of the perspective of critical philosophy. He is hostile to the very idea of theoretical justification, as if we had the wit and intellectual resources to sit in judgment of the manifold forms of life that have sustained human beings over centuries. He equates civil wisdom (which features centrally in the rhetorical form of the argument) with prudence, a proper respect for the complexity of human affairs in unimaginably complex circumstances. If political philosophy has a practical role in this scheme of things, it is very much as a corrective to the wilder flights of our utopian desires. When Verene endorses the injunction "know thyself", it is always with the rider "nothing too much".[13] We cannot think of self-conscious awareness as a pretext for refashioning everything we have thought or done. In Verene's view, "the true teacher of politics is the law itself."[14] Philosophical reflection can help us not to over-reach ourselves, but it cannot tell us what to do.

Verene's position is epitomized in his contention that "critical reflection can never generate virtue".[15] We can picture ourselves wondering about the desirability of certain practices in the light of changing circumstances. But the idea that by thinking hard we can come up with ideal schemes that all right-thinking people could endorse is to be rejected out of hand. The argument here has close affinities with Michael Oakeshott's celebrated dismissal of "rationalism in politics".[16] We may assume that to act "rationally" involves setting aside habit, custom or prejudice in order to regulate our conduct solely in terms of clear criteria which could be universally endorsed. A basic presupposition of rationality, from this perspective, is that our goals can be separated analytically from the activities we happen to be engaged in. But when we begin to reflect intelligently on our various pursuits, it is with a mind already informed by the practices and procedures that constitute those pursuits. We cannot think "rationally" about cricket, chess, cooking, carpentry, politics and so on unless we already know something about them. We may be casually inducted into these pursuits in the first instance. Yet it would be unwise to ask our advice until we had gained some "know-how". To treat a condition of pure innocence, where all acquired knowledge is discounted, as a paradigm case of rational reflection is pure folly.

Lurking behind the error, in this case, is a widely held but wholly misleading conception of mind. The mind is not an entity that subsequently acquires beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, points of view. The mind is what it does. It is inseparable from the judgments we make in the course of thinking and doing. It is not (in Oakeshott's phrase) "an apparatus for thinking" but is thought itself.[17] It follows that we cannot step outside our thought in order to check its rationality.

Whatever we think and do is informed by specific assumptions. These can be reviewed as we develop a more sophisticated awareness of what we are doing. But it makes no sense to seek an independent rational standard for conduct as such. We may be said to act rationally when our conduct is appropriate to the circumstances we find ourselves in.

The implications of this position for our understanding of political and moral discourse are far-reaching and radically subversive. We should note, in the first place, that respect for practical judgment has tended to be undermined by an obsession with technique or method. Practical judgment is refined in the course of our experience of arts, crafts and pursuits. It may be passed on in some measure by a master to his apprentice or by a supervisor to his research student. But it cannot be committed in preceptive form to a textbook. Self-help books are only of use to us when we already know something of what we are about.

Precisely why practical knowledge should have been so undervalued in modern times is a complex historical question that cannot be resolved here. Verene supplies some of the materials for an answer in his account of the expansion of technological desire. Collective impatience no doubt assumes different forms in different cultures. There is no doubt, however, from a cursory examination of the tone of contemporary political discourse, that we are overwhelmed by a craving to better ourselves and to better ourselves in a hurry. In these circumstances, we no longer have the time to devote to the acquisition of specialized skills (like mastery of the collected works of Thomas Aquinas). Instead we seek short cuts in technical manuals of one kind or another. Above all we need to be assured that forced instruction will fit us for our tasks once and for all. What cannot be learned quickly is dismissed as an irrelevance. If judgment is set aside, all we have left to rely upon is technical certainty.

Oakeshott's critique of politics in the rationalist idiom (which Verene would largely endorse) focuses on the folly of treating thought as simply "a matter of solving problems".[18] On this reading, clever people apply "reason" to politics in much the same way an engineer would tackle the business of construction and repair. Just as the technical skills of the engineer are held to be universal in scope and application, so too the rationalist "politician" will attempt to apply his instrumental criteria in any circumstance or situation. He will not rely on received political wisdom ("prejudice") but the most up-to-date manual ("science"). On closer inspection, however, it will be evident that the rationalist politician understands neither politics nor science. His basic conception of what it means to engage in any sort of practice is so wide of the mark that anything that has been accomplished is bound to appear unsatisfactory to him. He cannot accept accommodation and compromise because what he seeks is perfection. Yet even to envisage perfection on his terms is to conceive of human life completely other than it could possibly be lived.

What makes rationalism so difficult to counter in practical life is its insistence that premeditation and planning are always to be preferred to habit and custom. We pride ourselves on our self-consciousness, our restless pursuit of improvement or even perfection. We regard it as a mark of intellectual sloth or worse if we rest content with time-honoured patterns of conduct. Not to be aware of alternatives to our moral life, to renounce choice and deliberation, is to lead a stunted existence, quite out of place in the dynamic world we have fashioned for ourselves.

If we are each enjoined to pursue perfection in our own way, then we can expect a future beset by agonizing and incommensurable conflicts of ideals. Moral life always involves choice of a kind, for it only arises (as Hegel reminded us) in situations where we are freed from natural necessity.[19] But it does not follow that alternative courses of action should always be consciously before our minds or that we should act in certain ways only if we can give ourselves good theoretical reasons. A preoccupation with moral justification in fact casts us off from one possible form of the moral life, where conduct is grounded by unreflective attachments. We cannot accept a settled mode of life because we see moral conduct as the application of considered criteria in our pursuit of our conceptions of the good life or in our observance of conventions. In this scheme of things, the self-conscious formulation of abstract principles or ideals is a prerequisite for conduct. Principles and ideals, however, have to be balanced against one another before they can be put into practice. As sophisticated moral agents, we know that principles and ideals can clash. Even if we are confident that we can defend a particular stance in theoretical terms, we are still left with the problem of responding to infinitely variable circumstances. We end up in the lamentable position of knowing what to think but not what to do.

Quite where we should turn in these circumstances is not altogether clear. In confident (Hegelian?) moments we may think that an "ideal" form of moral life would amount to a synthesis of habitual and reflective modes of thought. If Verene is right, our confidence is likely to be misplaced. Reflection presupposes a universal criterion. It cannot endorse a specific practice or habit of thought simply because we happen to have grown up with it. Our contingently situated selves can only strike the critical moral philosopher as a problem. We have somehow to find a way through the thicket of the different bits and pieces of our moral and cultural inheritance. But the very act of standing back, even in thought, changes the world. In order to give ourselves the space to make critical judgments, we must imagine other possible ways of thinking and acting. If we present the problem to ourselves in these terms, we are thrown back to theory, despite our deep reservations about the adequacy of a purely theoretical criterion of judgment.

Verene's principal concern in *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* is with the state of philosophy as a discipline. He highlights what he sees as the baleful consequences of thinking about human life in the wrong way, without offering us too many pointers if our concern is primarily with practice. The implication here is that philosophy (properly conducted) may have some beneficial practical consequences; but if we focus primarily on those practical consequences, we are likely to find ourselves working within rationalist terms of reference that have led us all astray.

Verene invites us to take the symbolic origins of thought seriously, but he hesitates to explore the political implications of that strategy. His reticence here is entirely appropriate. It is one thing to argue that rationalism and disenchantment go together, and quite another to repose any confidence in the theoretical "re-enchantment" of the political world. Close readers of twentieth-century political history, especially in Europe, will shudder at the prospect of yet another primitivist solution to the problem of political community. To be sure, various species of political fideism are much more popular now, in theory and practice, than they were twenty years ago. And we may wonder where the pursuit of community may lead us in a world in which complex interdependence is a dominant theme. Verene, at any rate, resists the temptation of the sirens, though there may be a hint of nostalgic regret in his tone.

What, then, in these circumstances, can philosophy offer to citizens troubled about a prevailing political culture? The paradox here is that Verene wants to keep philosophy at arm's length from practice, yet there is no doubt that he is deeply concerned about the false expectations that a rationalistic culture has encouraged. There is a temptation here to argue that philosophy should disengage from practice altogether, for fear that a practically motivated philosophy would only make matters worse. But, of course, if this option is chosen, anything might happen. Romantically-inclined communitarians might dream of cosy face-to-face cultures, while the real business of managing economic and political life followed a quite different (and potentially alarming) logic. At the very least, political philosophy can highlight the absurdity of our practices, without endorsing anything remotely like a political programme.

My concern in what follows is to explore the philosophical implications of the idea of a practice.[20] If we take Verene's strictures against the perils of rationalism in a technological society seriously, as I think we must, it remains for us to develop an alternative account of viable social practice. We will do well to heed his comments on modern folly, without necessarily retreating from active engagement with the absurdity that confronts us. Certainly our expectations about what philosophy can deliver should be modest. But the tried and trusted modes of unreflective practice are simply not available to sustain us.

Our cultures and communities are embedded in complex interdependence at all levels such that we can hardly take any given perspective for granted. We may be tempted to play a game of political make-believe. At one level, a politics of nostalgia is bound to be attractive to us. It enables us to feel at home in the world by closing our eyes. Yet much as we may regret that habitual modes of conduct have been rendered problematic by circumstances, a refusal to think hard about the conflicting demands on our time and attention is hardly a comfortable position. This, of course, is a very old story. Hegel long ago noted that the most innovative political philosophy, including Plato's *Republic*, has often been the product of acute cultural crisis, where reliance on old certainties has ceased to be viable.[21] Verene's book can be profitably read in this fashion. It is quite as much a work of cultural criticism as of philosophy in a narrow sense. If he avoids direct political prescription, that is largely because the practical benefits that stem from philosophy must necessarily be indirect.

Part of the problem with modern political philosophy, especially in its applied versions, is that discussion centres on how we might best attain our ends, as if philosophers were offering sophisticated advice books designed to help people better themselves. Doubtless reading of this kind is profitable if we happen to share certain ends. Where we do not, the advice is likely to be irrelevant, distracting or just plain annoying. We can take or leave advice because we already know what we want. The situation is quite different if we are genuinely puzzled about how we should see ourselves in a world in which a bewildering array of options seem to be available. If we pursue our random desires we are likely to lose any coherence as agents. We may think of ourselves theoretically as the heteronomous products of evanescent circumstances, but it certainly does not help us when we are trying to work out what we should do. We are driven back to a view of ourselves as agents, despite reservations we may have about excessively abstract characterizations of agency detached from cultural contexts.

The key issue here is that agency only makes sense in a context of social practice. Yet if we focus on the (political, moral or whatever) point of particular practices, we are unlikely to make much headway in articulating the conditions that make practices possible. Following Wittgenstein and Winch, we have come to accept a capacity for rule-following as a constitutive feature of human conduct.[22] Doing things involves applying criteria; and these criteria consist of (more or less formally acknowledged) social rules. It is important to stress that we do not need to be able to specify the rules we are following in order to be said to be following rules. Wittgenstein classically focuses on the grammar of a language as a framework of rules which enable us to speak. Children can use a language before they can analyse sentences. And we can imagine languages that have never been analysed by anyone. The users of such languages can nevertheless be said to be following rules even if the rules have not been formally specified. If they juxtapose sounds in a wholly arbitrary way they will not be understood. Children acquiring the language will be corrected by adults, though the adults may not be able to specify the linguistic rule that had been wrongly applied. We may expect the range of practical usage to be wide in a language that is wholly informal. But informal rules remain rules, specifiable in principle even if they have not been specified in practice. We simply cannot conceive of a language that is not (in some sense) rule-bound.

It is surely significant that we assume that anyone could (in principle) learn any language. They may not be taught rules but they know how to carry on making meaningful sounds.

The framework of rules implicit in any language may appear to be entirely neutral. Yet, as Winch has argued, a presupposition of truthfulness is a basic requirement of any language.[23] People tell lies and deceive one another because it can be assumed that (on the whole) they mean what they say. He stresses, too, that using a language is a practical engagement in which commitments are made to other people. When children are taught a language they are at the same time inducted into the ways of a form of life. The rules which constitute the form of life could not be specified in abstract fashion. What we have, instead, is a series of over-lapping practices, not all of them mutually supportive, that yield a sense of how to carry on, how to respond to other people, what to expect of oneself.

Language is instructive to us here as an illustration of a natural practice. We do not choose to learn our first language, we may have little or no understanding of the grammatical rules implicit in that language, and yet we learn to correct ourselves as we speak. We also acquire a rudimentary understanding of how we should respond to other speakers. The use of a language is thus a social engagement that commits us to much more than a basic set of grammatical rules.

Lyotard, among others, has stressed the inseparability of speaking and listening.[24] We know that societies devise complex ways (ritually and professionally) of limiting rights to speak about certain matters. If someone were systematically denied the right to speak on any occasion, however, they would effectively have been reduced to the status of a non-person, irrespective of whatever else might happen to them. In this sense, some basic rights accompany language use. Rights can, of course, be forfeited through wrongdoing. But recognition of a *prima facie* case to be heard can be justified simply by focusing on the logic of conversation. It would be absurd to claim that everyone had a right to take part in any conversation, even in principle. I simply do not know enough about brain surgery or football to insist that my voice should be heard. Yet to be denied the right to participate in any conversation would be tantamount to being excluded from all human community. Such things may be thought desirable in exceptional circumstances, but they would always have to be justified in terms of some conception of human flourishing.

Just how far this sort of reflection can take us is a much-disputed question. Few modern philosophers would want to follow Hegel's attempt in the *Philosophy of Right* to defend the necessity of a specific institutional framework from a series of reflections on the character of human agency. Yet it may well be that what we should be worried about in Hegel is not so much the ambition of the project as the detailed development of the argument. Modern readers tend not to find the elaborate deductive structure of the *Philosophy of Right* helpful. It should be clear, however, that when he asks us in the compressed introduction to reflect on what we might mean by agency, what we presuppose about human conduct when we make choices, how we should regard ourselves in relation to the cultures that sustain us, he is raising questions which any political philosophy must respond to.[25] It does not follow, of course, that these issues are always treated self-consciously. For the most part, many basic presuppositions will simply be taken for granted in order to proceed with more specific and practically compelling questions. But it remains the case that presuppositions are made which have different implications for practice.

A genuine philosophical concern, then, before we consider the institutions and policies we might happen to desire, is to explore the necessary requirements which enable practices to flourish. We must assume that these requirements will be very general indeed since we know from ordinary experience that different cultures pursue all manner of ends in a variety of ways. Our focus should be on what people need to acknowledge in order to attain any satisfaction at all rather than on the things they happen to want.

When we do things we apply and adapt rules and procedures; and these rules and procedures have a public (social) life even if they are not formally acknowledged. To say or do things deliberately is to apply criteria such that we might wonder whether or not we had said or done the right thing. Following a practice necessarily involves the possibility of making a mistake. But it would make no sense to say that it was entirely arbitrary whether or not a mistake had been made.

Practices are thus to be understood in terms of rules and conventions which are more or less adequately observed. In relation to any specific engagement, the rules and conventions are regarded as authoritative. Sometimes (as in a game) the engagement is constituted by specific endorsement of a formal set of rules. You cannot play chess and repudiate the rules at the same time. The overlapping (and largely informal) rules of social life are much more difficult to discern. In this case it makes perfect sense to suspend judgment about certain conventions while continuing to engage in cooperative projects more or less normally. But we could not repudiate all rules and conventions without ceasing to make sense, even to ourselves.[26]

The intelligibility of our own conduct thus depends upon the social dimension of the practices we are inducted into. We can envisage an esoteric practice, but it is clearly parasitic on the fact that we have been inducted into other practices naturally, much as our ability to construct private languages is parasitic on the fact that we already know what languages are.[27] It is only because practices are held to be authoritative in some sense that we can be said to engage in intelligible activity. And this applies even if our concern is to revise radically the way a practice is carried on. The focus is again on how things are done, not on the specific goals that are pursued.

The conception of rules defended here does not depend upon the self-conscious adoption of rules of conduct in particular communities. My concern is rather with the necessary conditions of intelligible action. If we are to conceive of societies at all we must think in terms of rules which constitute practices. Of course, societies cannot be conceived in purely procedural terms. Cultures and sub-cultures will endorse different conceptions of a worthwhile life, often pursuing ends that are strictly incommensurable. And if we focus on these different ends, it may be that we will have to accept that certain ways of life are incompatible. We may not be able to find any common ground between deeply held beliefs. No matter what we might say, however, about the constitutive values of particular communities, we still have to regard the practices within these communities as instances of rule-following, even if it has never occurred to agents to describe their conduct in this light. They may think of themselves as marionettes in a display of divine virtuosity; and we must refer to these beliefs when we reconstruct their conduct. But what they are actually doing is making decisions, appraising one another's conduct in terms of assumptions and standards, correcting each other when they make mistakes, arguing, reproaching or punishing one another for failure to observe appropriate rules and procedures. The things they do can be done well or ill, with more or less good faith. But simply to say that they are doing something commits us to certain ways of conceiving of conduct.

The stress on procedural rules should not be misunderstood. The claim is not that a minimal framework is sufficient to sustain a polity or way of life, rather that the framework provides a basis for different modes of political flourishing. Following Oakeshott, the framework may be described as "the minimum condition of any settled association among individuals".[28] But no polity actually flourishes on the basis of minimal conditions alone. What is built upon this minimal (or "weak") foundation will depend upon the specific (and contingent) features of a given political culture. The point, however, is that the contingent values of particular cultures may distort or constrain practices which may be shown to be constitutive of a flourishing political life. The terms of reference here are still very broad indeed. We are dealing with the possibility of human flourishing rather than preferences as these have often been understood within liberal theory. The point to focus on is that philosophical reflection on the necessity of a minimal foundation may furnish grounds for preferring certain political options to others.

Normative political philosophy often gives the impression that theory can help us to make appropriate practical choices. At one level this is undoubtedly true. The cut and thrust of political contention involves (among other things) the marshaling of arguments. Rhetorical persuasiveness, however, should not be confused with philosophy. A distinctive philosophical approach will focus on the assumptions that enable cultures to function. But these assumptions are not choices or preferences; they are, rather, the "presuppositions" or "hinges" without which we simply could not carry on.[29]

The claim that philosophical reflection on the necessity of a legal and cultural framework is at the same time a justification of order should not itself be contentious. We can easily appreciate that a pure theory of legal order would not loom large in a society that happened to display an overwhelming consensus around a substantive conception of the good. But it clearly would not follow that legal order depended upon such a substantive consensus. In practical terms, we simply have to accept a plurality of defensible values as a starting point for our reflections. Recognition of the contingency of values at this level, however, does not rule out the possibility that more binding philosophical reasons might be advanced in defence of a political order which made diversity manageable.

Examples of the kind of argument I have in mind will be familiar to everyone from the canon of "classics" of political philosophy. To be sure, the usual suspects among the classics constitute a motley crew. We find arguments ranging from the most abstract accounts of conditions of theoretical intelligibility to detailed moral and political prescriptions for proper conduct in everyday life, informed by personal obsessions which are (in some cases) laughable or contemptible. But this is just to recognize that classics of political philosophy operate at many different levels, and that matters of philosophical interest are sometimes concealed in the most unlikely places. Whatever else might be going on in such texts, we nevertheless find attempts to specify what would need to be true about human beings living in communities if the ordinary things they take for granted are to make any sense at all. This, of course, is not necessarily what political philosophers suppose they are doing, especially in cultures untroubled by the "burdens of judgment".[30] But we go back to them as philosophers precisely because certain sorts of problems necessarily arise when we take the justification of terms of social co-operation seriously. Oakeshott put the point nicely in a celebrated discussion of Hobbes. He defined philosophy as "the establishment by reasoning of true fictions".[31] Given the things we accept, there are certain notions that simply have to be held to be true. The point is not that we can give a list of these indubitable truths; rather that critical thinking depends upon presuppositions which can and (at times) must be examined.

Nor is there any suggestion that "true fictions" are unchanging. What needs to be presupposed in order to make sense of ordinary experience will change with the variety of circumstances, but not as a matter of taste or fashion and some very basic assumptions may be more or less invariable. The point, however, is that we cannot specify what will be assumed to be invariable before critical enquiry begins. It would be very odd if someone (other than a mischievous philosopher) were to deny that things happen at some time in some place. And while we can conceive of a human world in which moral choices were somehow unreal, we would nevertheless be surprised (as a matter of fact) to learn that languages existed without an imperative mood. At some level we picture human association as a matter of agents making choices which affect others, even if a capacity for making autonomous choices is not greatly prized within a particular culture.

The significance of agency for an understanding of morality can be easily granted. What this concession may commit us to at the political or institutional level is much less clear. At the very least, we must accept that intelligible agency depends upon stability of expectations. Stability, of course, can be attained in all sorts of ways. There are stable expectations in prisons and monasteries, yet it would be odd to regard either as models of social and political life. *Leviathan* also secures stability, but at a price modern liberals have been reluctant to pay. If we supposed, however, with Hobbes, that an anarchic and unpredictable state of nature was the only alternative to authoritarian government, then we may accept that authorizing a sovereign to lay down binding rules was a small price to pay for a measure of "commodious living".

In the ordinary way of things, we are not confronting Hobbes's dilemma. We are faced with more or less desirable options in viable political circumstances. What may be lost from sight is that stress on what is chosen may obscure the significance of an institutional context which makes choice possible. It is a paradox, as Oakeshott has pointed out, that "Hobbes, without being himself a liberal, had in him more of the philosophy of liberalism than most of its professed defenders".[32] Recognition of the overriding significance of stability in contexts in which agreement about ends cannot be expected does not commit us to Hobbesian measures. Stability of expectations may also be achieved in legal orders that guarantee basic rights.[33] Philosophical interest focuses on the fact that we should have rights, not simply on the specific rights we happen to value.

It remains the case, of course, that urgent and contentious theoretical issues are raised when we consider the sorts of rights that should be enshrined in a modern legal system. And at the policy level, too, it is by no means clear how a foundational commitment to agency should be translated into concrete proposals for educational and health provision, taxation and so on. Even theorists who share a broadly neo-Kantian approach to these questions will diverge widely in their views on the role of the state in specific areas.[34] Philosophical agreement is thus much more likely on the priority of liberty than (say) the difference principle.

What I am defending here is the idea of a spectrum that runs from political philosophy, through ideology, to policy questions, rather than a categorial distinction between philosophy and other modes of theoretical concern. Relations of entailment do not obtain along the spectrum; rather, we are dealing with compatibility in relation to what Rawls terms “lexical order”.[35] The significance of political philosophy at the level of policy is unlikely to be intrusive in consensual political cultures. But contentious issues (such as abortion in the United States or welfare in Britain) cannot be adequately handled without confronting (what still might properly be called) foundational questions. If we ask ourselves how the citizen should stand in relation to the state in a modern polity, we are inviting reflection at a number of different levels. We could be concerned with the obligation of parents to ensure that their children are educated and law-abiding or the obligation of the state to provide support for the destitute or wider questions of shared responsibility for the conduct of public life. It would be too much to expect a seamless web of doctrine to run through these questions. But the claim that philosophical discussion is irrelevant, inappropriate or meaningless would surely cripple our critical endeavours.

The implications of this view are wide-ranging and cannot be developed in any detail here. Even if the radical contingency of values and institutions is granted, we are still left with the problem of explaining what it means to make hard choices in contexts where binding decisions have to be made. For the most part, we can accept that reasons which are regarded as compelling within a tradition may have little purchase beyond it. But traditions are no more self-contained than language-games or forms of life. It is precisely when terms of reference are challenged that more basic forms of justification are called for. In these cases, we have to give reasons for our choices which extend beyond the values we happen to have. We do not have to presuppose that stark moral or theoretical dilemmas can always be resolved satisfactorily, only that we have to appeal to (something like) practical reason whenever we are asked to give a public justification of our preferences.

My claim, then, is that a logic of practical wisdom is at work whenever hard choices are made. Where analytical theory goes astray is in treating the strong version of practical reason that has emerged in pluralist societies as the ideal form for the resolution of public disputes in any context. If my argument is correct, a weak foundationalism, drawn from reflection on the necessary formal requirements for viable agency, can be seen to be the basis for our exercise of practical wisdom. To be sure, the idea of a philosophical foundation invoked here is very general indeed. Most regularian polities could be defended along these lines. And, of course, no polity is merely regularian. My contention, however, is that awareness of the necessary conditions for any polity to flourish does provide philosophical grounds for tempering more narrowly ideological preferences.

NOTES

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols., ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), vol. I, 14.

2. "The argument is not about just any question, but about the way one should live." Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 352d.

3. See Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

4. Ibid., 259.

5 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11.

6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, ed. and trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 11.

7. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), par. 314.

8. Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge*, 41–87.

9. Ibid., 141–91.

10. See William Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1873), pars. 94–95.

11. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 161.

12. The phrase is Collingwood's. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 217, 220, 282–85.

13. Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge*, 259.

14. Ibid., 255.

15 Ibid., 58.

16. See Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962); and for discussion Bruce Haddock, "Michael Oakeshott: *Rationalism in Politics*", in Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens-Soper, eds., *The Political Classics: Green to Dworkin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 100–20.

17. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 90.

18. Ibid., 4.

19. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, pars. 5–7.

20. I develop these arguments more fully in "Liberalism and Contingency", in Mark Evans, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Liberalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

21. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 10.

22. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968); and Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

23. See Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), especially 61–63.

24. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Other's Rights", in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, eds., *On Human Rights* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 135–47.

25. See Bruce Haddock, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Philosophy of Right*", in Murray Forsyth, Maurice Keens-Soper and John Hoffman, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 104–36; and Bruce Haddock, "Hegel's Critique of the Theory of Social Contract", in David Boucher and Paul Kelly, eds., *The Social Contract from Hobbes to Rawls* (London: Routledge, 1994), 147–63.

26. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. E. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

27. See Rush Rhees, "Can There Be a Private Language?", in his *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 55–70.

28. Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 55.

29. The terminology here is drawn from R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 3–77, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 44.

30. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 54–58.

31. Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association*, 25.

32. Ibid., 63.

33. See Rex Martin, *A System of Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

34. Consider, for example, the contrasting positions of John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); and F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

35. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 42–48. A useful distinction philosophy and ideology is also mooted but not defended in detail in Benedetto Croce, *Etica e politica* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), 235–43 and 263–67.