

The Wisdom of Mentor

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Abstract

Thomas Hobbes posited a social contract which legitimates sovereign authority. But what grounds, or could ground, such a contract? Through reflection on Oakeshott, and on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the paper argues for a so far unrecognised mode of human association: philic association. It briefly considers a possible expression of philic association in the history of English law, before making the case for programmes of mentoring as a policy both reflective and supportive of this mode. It ends by suggesting that the existence of such a mode shows why Hobbes's social contract theory, however ingenious and influential it has proven to be, is neither sufficient nor necessary for its stated purpose.

I have been asked to discuss a specific policy, but within a wider philosophical context. So this paper is aimed mainly at a general audience, with an interest but no specialist background in the subject, and I will take a rather roundabout and ruminative approach.¹

The flow of both the paper and the original lecture moves from philosophy to history to policy, and since I do not think there are any general logical relationships between these modes of thought, I would caution the reader against thinking of either paper or lecture as offering an overall argument. Even so, I hope it is of interest.²

1. Society as an association

I want to start with a traditional tension in political philosophy and classical political theory, between the coercive power of the state and the freedom of the citizen. That tension raises a question of legitimacy: by what right does a sovereign govern?

¹ This paper is considerably shorter than the lecture as given; zealots are encouraged to view the original online.

² I am of course speaking purely from an academic perspective, not as a Minister or Member of Parliament.

The most famous answer to that question was, of course, advanced by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century, in *Leviathan*. Hobbes's answer is that the sovereign governs in virtue of a social contract. Casting it in its most schematic form, his thinking imagines a starting point: that individuals originally lived in a state of nature in which they were both isolated and defenceless, and moved by the instinct for self-preservation. Looking around, they see others like themselves, and this creates a natural but potentially disastrous competitive tension between them, towards what Hobbes calls a 'war of all against all'. As a result, their lives are dominated by the fear of violent death; lives famously described by Hobbes as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

In his telling of the story, such people decide to come together and to agree with each other to give up some of their personal autonomy, and repose that power in a sovereign or magistrate. In return for this grant of authority and power, the sovereign assumes the obligation to maintain internal order and protect the people from external attack.

So, that is the foundational idea: society as a contractual association. Note the ingenuity of the approach. Hobbes lays down a small number of premises at the start – humans as individuals in a pre-social state of nature, the desire for self-preservation, the competitive context – and from it deduces a basis for the existence of human society and legitimate state action. It is an astonishing *coup de main*, almost a conjuring trick. We do not know anything, indeed we do not need to know anything about these people in order to get the idea going of a social contract, and from that, of a sovereign endowed with just authority.

So that is the core idea. Needless to say, it has attracted a vast amount of attention and commentary over the centuries, and a huge number of arguments for and against. But I want to focus briefly on just one objection, which I believe has its roots in the thought of David Hume. It goes something like this: it is all very well to talk about people making a contract with each other, but in virtue of what practice are they supposed to be able to make this contract? If they are not able to make promises and strike agreements already, there is no basis for such a contract. But if they are able to make promises already, if they have a convention of promising amongst themselves, then first of all they are not isolated and pre-social, contrary to the original hypothesis, and secondly it is unclear why there is any need to postulate a social contract as such at all. This Humean objection sets a potentially devastating dilemma to social contract theories of this form.

2. Civil and enterprise association

I turn now to a different way of thinking about political association, to be found in the work of Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott was described at his death as ‘the greatest philosopher in the English speaking tradition since Mill, or even Burke’. Yet he is almost unknown amongst the wider public today. Over the course of a very long life, he published a slim but profound body of work: two monographs, *Experience and its Modes* and *On Human Conduct*; and two sets of essays, called *Rationalism in Politics*, and *On History*. Of those, the only one that has really had any wider attention is *Rationalism in Politics*.

I want to dwell a little on Oakeshott because we can use him to set up the argument I want to make. Recall that a main current of political philosophy thinks of human society as an association of individuals. Within this broad view, Oakeshott identifies two different ideas, of what he calls civil and enterprise association. Broadly, civil association is the idea of an association considered under the heading of practice, while enterprise association is the idea of an association considered under the heading of purpose.

In a civil association, people are associating just in virtue of the knowledge and acknowledgement of a single law-like set of non-instrumental rules by which they abide. That is, they recognise an idea of law, they share that idea of law, and it becomes integral to the identity of their association. In an enterprise association, by contrast, people come together to achieve a particular collective purpose, and they are in that sense confederates in a common cause.

We can think of these as ideal types, but they can also be combined. In effect, Oakeshott is inviting us to attend to two potential aspects of a society. One is what we might call its rule-of-law aspect, the procedural aspects embodied in its constitution, its civil regulations, its administrative law and such like. The other is its aspect as a collective endeavour. These aspects are compossible, and they can vary over time. In wartime, for example, a society may feel itself under some pressure to abridge its purely civil rules in order to take collective actions dominated by a single purpose of repulsing and defeating the enemy. But you can see Oakeshott’s distinction at work in other ways. Both in history and today, some societies find themselves taking on the goal of ensuring religious purity, or ethnic homogeneity, or military preparedness against an enemy, for example.

A crucial point is that the implicit view and status of the individual vary with the character of the association. In a civil association, people are seen as endowed with the presumptive rights of formal equality

associated with the rule of law. In an enterprise association, dominated as it is by the idea of collective purpose, individuals are valued as contributors to the society's overall project or goal. Finally, to some extent there is a mapping from the civil/enterprise association distinction to a further distinction we see in politics today: between campaigning and governing. When you are campaigning, you are working to advance a particular goal, such as a policy goal or an electoral victory, and all your efforts are devoted to securing that. When you are governing, however, you do not have a specific goal as such. Rather, you are trying – as Oakeshott puts it, in a memorable metaphor – to keep the ship of state on an even keel. The enterprise is simply to keep afloat.

Now we can ask: is Oakeshott right about this? Note that there are several ways to misunderstand him. One is that this is just a formalism, without any genuine relevance to real-world politics. Another is that this is really a reworking of a conception of the minimal state associated with someone like the philosopher Robert Nozick in his book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*.

You will see at once that these objections cannot both be correct, since one asserts that the distinction is an empty formalism and the other asserts that it is a substantive characterisation of the minimal state. But I would argue that neither is correct, and that this is actually a deep and rather telling distinction, which can be read compositionally, as I have noted, or developmentally. Oakeshott does not offer the idea of civil association as a characterisation of a minimal state, and few if any could rationally believe that a minimal state could be established, even in principle, on the basis of its purely civil aspects. But the distinction is certainly not an empty formalism, since it usefully allows us to analyse and explain a range of specific cases. We can say, for example, that the project of setting up the London Olympics, a huge collective endeavour, was an enterprise aspect of British government, or that the Velvet Revolution in Eastern Europe started to move several those countries from a kind of totalizing communist view of society as an enterprise to one of it as a civil association, at different speeds, beginning in 1989.

So I would suggest this is an important and useful distinction. But there is a worry, which mirrors the worry I touched on with Hobbes's original rather game-theoretic analysis of the social contract. This is that while not being purely formalistic, Oakeshott's distinction under-specifies the character of association itself. It allows us to understand an association in terms of two or more people getting together to do something, conceived as an enterprise. It allows us to see an association as an institution that sustains itself over time, where a

core aspect is simply the continuation of itself and its traditions and practices, in its civic aspect. But still, it feels as if something is being left out.

3. Aristotle on friendship

To see what that might be, I want to take another step back; and to look at a famous discussion in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* of what he calls *philia*, a word often translated as 'friendship'.

Philia is a central topic to the *Ethics*, where it takes up two books of a ten-book work, so one might ask the question, why does Aristotle think it is so important? One initial thing to note is that Aristotle appears to be aiming at several different targets at the same time, because *philia*, as he thinks of it, ranges much more widely than friendship. Thus, for him it includes your friends, of course, but it also includes your family, the relationship between parents and children, the relationship between lovers, your commercial relationships with your butcher or your music tutor, and the fellowship that exists between soldiers. It includes the relationship between members of the same religious society or grouping or tribe, the relationship between a king and his subjects, and the relationships within and between cities. All of those come under the category of *philia* for Aristotle.

In line with this, I want to think of *philia* as inclusively as possible. If we were to try to give it a philosophical characterization, there are a few things to note. The first point is that this appears to be a symmetrical relationship but not a transitive one. Let's use the phrase '*philos*' to mean 'has a relationship of *philia* with'. Then *philia* is symmetric because if A *philos* B then B *philos* A. They are, in the Greek word, *philoí*. But *philia* is not transitive because A *philos* B and B *philos* C do not together imply that A *philos* C. So I can have a link of this kind to you and you can have a link of the same kind to Jane, but that does not mean that I have that same kind of link to Jane. Even so, because it is symmetrical, *philia* involves what we would call a mutual relationship.

Secondly, *philia* appears to vary for Aristotle with social or psychological distance, while also carrying with it a default presumption of goodwill. So when you are a *philos* of someone you start off from a position or status of goodwill in relation to them, even though you may not in fact have any actual emotional relationship with them.

Thirdly, this is not a gendered relationship. Although Aristotle has some very unprogressive things to say about women elsewhere in his writings, he seems quite prepared to allow that women can be in relationships of *philia*.

Fourthly, *philoï* can be unequal in their places in society. Here Aristotle seems to be driving towards a distinction between what we might call substantive and presumptive equality and inequality. So it seems that a king and his subject may be substantively unequal in their wealth and rank, but when they encounter each other, at least in an informal context, they may address each other as presumptively equal; that is, they can be interested in each other's views as intelligent, thoughtful beings, irrespective of the regal or kingly aspects of the relationship.

What unites *philoï*? For Aristotle, it is the idea of *homonoia*: literally translated, something that is the same in their minds. It seems this can include having a shared history or interest, or a mutual regard for some third thing or person. This is not the same thing as what we might call sociability, the human capacity to form ties, but it is closely related. Nor is it the same as unanimity, a term derived from Latin meaning 'being of one mind'. The significance of this is that for Aristotle *philia* is what holds states together, and he says that lawgivers almost care more for it than for justice. It is the social amity that they aim at most of all, and it expels faction, which is their worst enemy.

If this is right, then it points to what I would suggest is a missing mode in Oakeshott. As we have seen, Oakeshott's ideas of enterprise and civil association are intended to be entirely general categories or modes of association. They can apply to whole societies, or more narrowly to smaller organisations and institutions, such as expeditions, or sports clubs or leisure groups.

But though these institutions may have an orientation towards practice or purpose, that is not all of what they are about. Take a dining club, or a book club. These exist, of course, ostensibly in order to eat food or to read books together. But what they are really about is human companionship and engagement, and a club that failed to attend to this aspect of its existence would very soon cease to exist at all.

We can see this phenomenon at work elsewhere. Take the example of a communal table in a pub or restaurant. Someone who eats at a communal table does not know who else will be there; they simply go for the unexpected pleasures of the company of others. Or take a football kickabout in the park on a Sunday afternoon; you are not necessarily expecting to play with anyone you have ever played with

before. It is just for fun and friendship. More formally, if you look at the literature on different games, such as ultimatum games, you can see that even in one-off contexts people bring enormous amounts of expectation, goodwill and trust to their dealings with others.

4. Philic association and the growth of trusts

What I think this highlights is a further mode of association, which we might call *philic* association after Aristotle. Again, we can think of it as one ingredient or aspect of a given association, alongside its nomic or telic, that is civic or enterprise, aspects. And again, we can also think of it developmentally. Thus, one way of analysing the historical movement from agrarian to commercial societies is that in each case the philic aspect is progressively redefined as it moves from the more local to the more diffuse, from personal trust to wider norms of trust, from direct association to the associations of associations long identified by thinkers such as Burke and Tocqueville as characteristic of open civil society.

I think this starts to explain what Aristotle has more broadly in mind, and why he takes *philia* so seriously. A society whose philic aspect is flourishing is one that cherishes freedom of thought and speech and association, and the institutions, practices and habits that sustain them. It is also a tacit response to the earlier Humean objection, for relationships of *philia* are mutual ties of precisely the kind that can give rise to institutions of promising. The suggestion is that, however brilliant Hobbes's social contract theory may be as a heuristic or debating device or spur to formal game-theoretic treatments of social interaction, it postulates a world that is neither, plausibly, our own, nor logically necessary to explain the legitimate basis of sovereign authority.

Finally, I want to suggest that it is an astonishing fact about British history that it has given legal expression to all three of the modes we have been discussing: the idea of civil association through the English common law, and the wider constitutional tradition into which it feeds; the idea of enterprise association through the emergence of the corporation and of contract law; and perhaps yet more interestingly, the idea of philic association through the emergence of trusts governed not by the common law but by the law of equity.

For it was the law of equity that became the legal basis for the growth of unincorporated associations in the UK. It is in the nature of a trust that it allows an unincorporated association to hold property, and the result was an explosion of associations over the last 300 years. These included coffee houses, societies and clubs of

every kind in the 18th century, mutuals and working men's clubs in the 19th century, unions and co-ops in the 20th century. There really is no parallel to this anywhere else in Europe, because of the use of Roman law there, to which the idea of a trust is foreign. It gives a peculiarly British national expression to the idea of philic association.

5. The wisdom of Mentor

Now at last we can turn to policy.

Over the last 30 or 40 years, there has been a great concern, given canonical expression by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*, that US society and western societies more generally are becoming increasingly fragmented and atomized. Today, worries might focus on growing inequalities, the effects of technology and especially social media, political and religious division, the pressures on home life, the changing economics of elites and manual workers, culture wars, fear and stress, all latterly shaped by our collective experience of having to deal with this dreadful pandemic.

Within this, there is growing concern about the effects of loneliness. It is important to say that whether loneliness has in fact increased in recent years is not quite as clear as one might think. I wish there were more academic research into this vital issue, and into the effects of loneliness on people's mental and physical health, and the sense of desperation. But note that loneliness is not the same thing as solitude. Solitude is a state that people choose. Loneliness, however, is an unchosen state of being cut off from others. It is a state, we might say, in which *philia* cannot apply.

And now finally, we come to what I have called the wisdom of Mentor: the social value of mentoring. Mentor himself, as you may know, was the man appointed by Odysseus to be guardian to his young son Telemachus in the *Odyssey*. The name of Mentor was then picked up at the end of the 17th century by François Fénelon in a book, *The Adventures of Telemachus*, which became both a best seller in France for its homily to the simple life, a constitutional monarchy and international amity, and a scandal for its covert attack on Louis the 14th. The book's great reveal is that Mentor is the goddess Minerva in disguise, which underlines the association of mentoring with wisdom.

So how should we think of mentoring, and why is it important? In today's world there is always a risk that a one-to-one personal relationship will only be cast in terms of grooming and the potential

for abuse, and it is vital that appropriate safeguards are built into any structured system of mentoring.

But with these important protections in place, the huge potential for mentoring to do good is evident. A well-managed mentoring relationship is a two-way one between people of different age and experience. It allows for the transfer of specific knowledge or skills, and the pleasure of teaching or guiding someone in the earlier stages of their life. It is the stuff of meetings and conversation and personal contact, of shared projects and new friendships. But perhaps most importantly, it allows for the sharing of tacit knowledge, the unarticulated rules of the game, the sense of how to get on, be that in one's work or play or just in life generally, with all the extra confidence these things bring.

Mentoring has proven benefits for both parties, and many of them are benefits that can be realised at any age. Just to take one example local to me in Hereford, Funkey Maths (www.funkeymaths.com) is a mentoring maths programme set up by a brilliant constituent of mine, with my support. Their work shows the extraordinary effect that mentoring can have: older primary school children learn a body of basic mathematics through play, and then become mentors to the younger children. This mentoring relationship taps into something that seems to be deep in the human sensibility. Its effect here is that the older pupils are enormously incentivised to teach the younger ones. The older pupils make sure they know their stuff, and the younger ones learn from them. It is incredibly effective, and it costs virtually nothing.

How could we build up a really effective mentoring capability across the UK? It should not require any great political genius. There are plenty of energetic and pro-social people at any age, and an enormous pool of time-rich people over the age of 50. These latter have a vast amount of experience and vast access to networks and other forms of social capital. There are, too, national public service programmes at the moment such as National Citizen Service, which could be put to service and be tied to mentoring activities. And there are innumerable online apps and learning and counselling platforms that could be drawn into this picture and of course, we could have public examples of people in great places in public life, who wish to lead in mentoring and who can both elicit and drive a shift in our public norms.

I have myself been the beneficiary of several of the most marvelously inspired mentors through my own life, and have been able to play that same role to others on one or two occasions. In every case it has been an enormously personally fulfilling experience. And lest

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you think this is mere personal anecdote, let me encourage you to ask others, and test the power of mentoring in your own case. You will not regret it.

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