

Reflections on Good Judgment: Towards a Cookbook for Avoiding Rookie Mistakes

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My father's bookshelves were a curious mix of genres. Probably no more peculiar, however, than any other reader's personality expressed through his collection. Among the English literature from college and self-help tomes for the achiever in all of us, was a staple of the American home library: the "how-to" guide. A life-long learner with a penchant for spending too much money in bookstores, he ended up with shelves on shelves of instructions for all sorts of skills—coaching soccer, selling in one's spare time, winning friends and influencing people. In his retirement years, it was all about how to grow the family nest egg—books on books and newsletters and magazines for the individual investor.

Go to any bookstore and you'll see the shelves overflowing with the how-to guide. The explosive popularity of the "(Whatever) for Dummies" series is a highly visible testament to this ubiquitous phenomenon in American culture. Want to learn HTML programming? Win Big \$\$\$ at poker? How about raising a genius? There's a book (probably half a shelf) on the topic. On line, Amazon.com won't let you settle on any one book you might want—multiple "personalized recommendations" always follow.

So, where's the book for newly elected municipal officials? Better yet, where was the knowledge of how to serve as a transplant in the unique cultural garden that is Salt Lake City?

Of course, there is no such book. But why not? I had consulted similar sources in my city council campaign, titles such as *Winning Local Elections* and *Successful Campaign Management*. They had been helpful in determining the basic outlines of our campaign structure and strategy. So maybe it wasn't such a stretch to think that the complex existence of an elected official could be captured in a single how-to guide. I must have just mistyped the correct keywords for *Rookie Councilman, Your Cookbook for Political Success*.

PHILOSOPHY'S COMPLAINT

Recently I had occasion to reflect on this when preparing for a class in which I was a guest lecturer. Asked to introduce political theory to graduate students, I chose to represent with Michael Oakeshott, a mid-20th Century Englishman. Worrying about a world "which thinks what it has discovered

for itself is more important than what it has inherited," he criticizes an approach to the world that emphasizes the importance of technical knowledge over practical (or "complete") knowledge (Oakeshott, 1994). His essay "Rationalism in Politics" is an indictment of a revolutionary impulse misappropriated and run amok. We all appreciate reason and rationality; however, it has become an imperious and crude paradigm, which he calls *rationalism*.

As an ideology, when applied to politics, rationalism has two distinct tendencies. First, the rationalist devalues tradition and folklore. In Oakeshott's words, "Much of his political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of society before the tribunal of his intellect... To the rationalist, nothing is of value merely because it exists (and certainly not because it has existed for many generations), familiarity has no worth, and nothing is to be left standing for want of scrutiny" (Oakeshott, 1962).

Does this sound familiar? I, for one, know this stance toward the world. It's the attitude of youth, discontent with the status quo, idealism for a new world. It's rightly called liberal, for it's the legacy of the Enlightenment, where thinkers like Descartes and Bacon insisted that in order to construct true knowledge, one must begin with "radical doubt" and sweep the mind clean of all superstition, prejudice, and myth. "Reason" becomes the yardstick of legitimacy, charged with logically ordering the pieces of the world together into true knowledge, uninhibited by bias.

By the turn of the millennium, rationalism has become the last paradigm standing in politics. This once-fledgling impulse has grown into a monster of a dominant ideology. Providing a mode of being for public life, it obliterates tradition and folkways, leaving only the "sovereignty of technique" standing. A second consequence of rationalism for politics is that the art of politics becomes assimilated into engineering. The problems of politics are increasingly seen as technical, as strategies to be devised and crises to be dealt with. Rationalism makes technical knowledge its sole legal tender.

Political life, for Oakeshott, should be, and has been more. Rationalism flattens the richness of political and administrative activity; rationalist vision is one-dimensional. The robustness of our larger context is lost, including the

familiar and traditional. Oakeshott recognizes that this tendency has existed for hundreds of years. But something profound has changed: what was once the inspiration of Enlightenment geniuses has been institutionalized into an insidious paradigm shift. “What was the *Art of Living*,” he notes, “has become the *Technique of Success*” (Oakeshott, 1962).

While technical knowledge became the currency of legitimacy, this Enlightenment reorientation devalued the other component of knowledge: practical knowledge. As the traditional know-how of the artisan, this type of knowledge “can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired. It exists only in practice, and the only way to acquire it is by apprenticeship to a master—not because the master can teach it (he cannot), but because it can be acquired only by continuous contact with one who is perpetually practicing it” (Oakeshott, 1962). Denigrated by rationalism—Oakeshott notes that in the rationalist paradigm it “is not considered knowledge at all”—practical knowledge is under all sorts of threats in the modern world. Really, how is apprenticeship to survive in a culture so technological, impersonal, and saturated with user-friendliness?

It is clear that rationalism dominates contemporary politics. Given that many of us suspect something is missing, what might we do to restore some quality ingredients to the recipe of politics?

THE NEWCOMER’S CONUNDRUM

Fortunately this question is related to my rookie insecurity. How am I to function as newcomer to elected office void of apprenticeship, tradition, and not eligible for a Hinckley internship?

As a transplant to Salt Lake, and the son of school teachers, I have had no access to the tradition of serving in local elected office. This may be an option, however, for political families, where Jenny Wilson, for example, would have the benefit of apprenticing to her father Ted, former Mayor of Salt Lake, and veteran of senate and gubernatorial campaigns. But that opportunity of deep mentorship is so rare. I certainly have sought out the advice of Salt Lake politicians, even having the ear of a friend who served in the very same office in the previous decade. But the apprenticeship that Oakeshott references is qualitatively different than ringing up a friendly expert to help put out another fire.

PHILOSOPHY’S TONIC

In such a vacuum, left to learn on the job, the challenge is to open up to the art one seeks to learn, to allow the world to teach intricacies of which the instruction book is ignorant. Our only choice is to create our own apprenticeship and let the world be our master. Without the vigilant presence of a master artisan, we are left to our own devices, to learn as we do. When the best how-to book conveys only technical knowledge, and practical knowledge is a thing of the past, we desperately need an existential compass for good judgment.

I, too, worry about a society “which thinks what it has discovered for itself is more important than what it has inherited.” I wish we paid better attention to the lessons of history. I wish we took time to discover what we really esteem, instead of always moving on to the next best thing. My question ultimately narrows to this: How can I make good judgments in the absence of practical knowledge and apprenticeship?

After studying centuries of commentary on judgment, integrating moral philosophy, political philosophy and neuroscience, my dissertation advisor Leslie Paul Thiele concludes:

What makes for sound judgment, in the end, are the countless micro-judgments that go into it. These micro-judgments determine when to let decision rules, habits, and intuitions play their respective parts, and when to subject these intrinsic elements of judgment to the watchful eye of reason.

(Thiele, 2006)

Clearly, the subconscious, the world of un-reasoned motivations, plays an important role in making good judgments. In the absence of practical knowledge, “un-reason” is frequently all one has. Friend-mentors can help with offering technical advice, and expert staff can instruct. But there’s so much more that they can’t address.

Luckily I’m still carrying around with me some of the philosophy that I studied for my dissertation. As Oakeshott contends, knowledge is both information and judgment. Facts by themselves are not knowledge; in order to “make sense” in the contemporary blizzard of information, one must make a host of judgments: which data is more and less relevant, what time sequence is applicable, what motives actors may have. When one senses the appropriateness of the elements of an utterance or an occurrence, one judges whether it “makes sense” or “just doesn’t seem right.”

To challenge the imperial dominance of rationalism, I suggest a stance toward the world, a mood we might say, that rises out of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, like his contemporary Oakeshott, resisted the narrowing of the world through rationalism. Heidegger’s term for this dominant modern perspective is “technicism.” It is evidenced by our instrumental outlook on the world, where animals, the environment, and other people exist as tools for humans’ use. Heidegger rightly condemns it as “humanism”: a chauvinistic, solipsistic, narrow view of the plurality of being. His worry is that we are becoming less human by closing ourselves off to the wealth of the non-human. Less a contemporary environmentalist than an old-school European influenced by Greek metaphysics, Nietzsche, and Eastern philosophy, he advocates a “disclosive” stance towards being. Instead of manipulating the world for our narrow purposes, we need to open up to the wealth of human being, actively letting the world manifest itself. This disclosive stance is a mid-way point between the fatalism of the Ancients and the heroism of the Moderns, where Heidegger advocates “letting beings be.” To disclose is to actively steward.

An enthusiastic and creative student of ancient Greek philosophy, Heidegger terms “*techne*” the operate force of technicism-rationalism. Trying to cultivate a disclosive stance toward the world, the mood that discloses, I have searched for a countervailing force to *techne*. What is the proper energy to propel disclosure? What currency would best interact with the technical sphere, chastening its dominance while engaging its best qualities?

CONCLUSION

What is the opposite of *techne*? We might say intuition, or poetry, or play. But these last two, at least, incorporate *techne*, where technical knowledge and skill are important components of writing a good poem or playing a game well. “Intuition” is part of what I’m getting at, but it doesn’t fully encompass the concept I’m trying to convey. What are we doing when we open up to a world that seeks to teach us?

The best answer I’ve come up with rises out of my Christian education. I recall a sermon about *agape* from somewhere in my days as a regular church-going youth, defined in the context as God’s love for the world. The speaker, who my foggy memory recalls as the rector of our suburban Episcopalian congregation, had an engaging intellectual stance toward his pastoral duties. Refracting his insights through the Heideggerian disclosive mood has brought spiritual content into my everyday life. Practicing *agape* has become the way I try to balance and enrich rationalism. By invoking a mood of love for the world—akin to the shepherd, the caretaker, and the steward—the technical-rationalistic mode is chastened and freshly activated.

Invoking *agape* as the dialectical partner of *techne* helps reveal worlds within political life that are closed under the dominance of rationalism. It allows the familiar and valued to come forward out of the background. It creates solidarity between colleagues where previously they used each other only as means to their particular ends. It creates “we space” in conversations and meetings where the participants can discover common purposes where none previously existed. It leads to solutions that are precluded when we stay “inside the box.” In short, coupling *techne* and *agape* can help us all achieve the kind of democracy that some of us now only dream of.

REFERENCES

- Oakeshott, Michael. (1991/1962). *Rationalism in politics and other essays*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
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FINAL WORD

“*T*he difference between success and failure is frequently just a matter of persistency.”

—ROBERT H. HINCKLEY