Schumpeter's Epistemic Intervention in Conservative Thought

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Abstract

This essay explores an undertheorized juncture in conservative thought by putting Joseph Schumpeter's political thought in dialogue with authors representative of the conservative tradition. It begins by assessing the similarities between traditional conservatives such as Russell Kirk and Roger Scruton and liberal conservatives like Friedrich Hayek and Michael Oakeshott. These similarities are a conception of politics as a purposeless association, and an assertion of skepticism about social and political knowledge. The essay argues that when conservatives attempt to combine the two dimensions they consistently privilege the purposelessness over epistemic skepticism and that this has created a gap in theorizing conservatism. To rectify this, five epistemic ideas are extracted from the works of Hayek and Oakeshott and these are shown to also be present in the work of Joseph Schumpeter but without the added postulate of purposelessness. Schumpeter thus represents a new avenue in conservative political thought that can be explored in the future referred to as "epistemic conservatism".

Cette démonstration explore la conjoncture sous-théorisée de la pensée conservatrice en plaçant le travail politique de Joseph Schumpeter en dialogue avec les auteurs caractéristiques de la tradition conservatrice. Les similarités entre les conservateurs traditionnels, tels que Russell Kirk et Roger Scruton, et les conservateurs libéraux comme Friedrich Hayek et Michael Oakeshott sont d'abord débattues. Ces similitudes représentent une conception de la politique comme une association sans but, ainsi qu'une affirmation du scepticisme à travers le savoir et ses revendications politiques et sociales. Cet essai soutient que quand les conservateurs essaient de combiner les deux dimensions, ils privilégient continuellement l'absence de but sur le scepticisme épistémique et cela entraine des lacunes dans la théorisation du conservatisme. Pour rectifier ceci, cinq notions épistémiques sont extraites des travaux de Hayek et d'Oakeshott. Ces dernières sont aussi présentes dans l'ouvrage de Joseph Schumpeter. Cependant elles ne présentent pas le postulat ajouté sur l'absence de but. Ainsi, Schumpeter représente une nouvelle ouverture de la pensée conservatrice politique qui pourra être explorée dans le futur appelée « conservatisme épistémique ».

Preface and Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of a several years long fascination and perplexity with conservative political thought. While I admired and was quite captivated with conservatives like Burke and Joseph de Maistre, I was confused as to their relation to other conservatives, particularly conservative political parties. When I was introduced to Hayek and Oakeshott during the coursework for my Masters degree I was struck by the idea that perhaps I didn't admire the content of conservative political thought but the way in which conservative theorists thought. When I read *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* by Joseph Schumpeter, I felt that I had found an author who shared a similar mode of thinking about social and political questions but who did not particularly fit either the liberal or traditional conservative frameworks of other authors I was familiar with. I then realized that perhaps these two ideas were capable of being separated and that a focus on the epistemic ideas rather than strict political content could be a fruitful avenue of inquiry. The contents of this work are entirely my own and I received no assistance beyond those whom I thank in the next section.

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Introduction

For some time, authors and pundits have puzzled themselves over the relationship between conservative and classical liberal political thought. In contemporary politics, Conservative political parties in Anglo-American countries have periodically been represented as an unholy-alliance between social conservatives and economic liberals with many in both camps puzzled by this association. The same issue has been salient in the history of political thought as well; whether it is Friedrich Hayek's essay: "Why I am not a Conservative", or the attempt by Russell Kirk to distance conservatism and libertarianism in *The Politics of Prudence*, the partisans of both camps have experienced the same difficulties as outsiders in attempting to understand the relationship. It was this puzzle that led me to the study of conservative political thought and the attempt to gain some traction on this perennial issue.

I begin by making a distinction between two strands of conservative political thought. The first, is what I refer to as traditional conservatism and some of the key authors in this tradition include Russell Kirk, Roger Scruton, and John Kekes. These authors are contrasted with liberal conservatives examples of which include Friedrich Hayek and Michael Oakeshott. I argue that the two kinds of conservatism share similarities along two dimensions. The first I refer to as "politics as purposelessness" where the authors argue that politics is or ought not to pursue normative goals and ought to leave individuals free to pursue their goals whatever they may be. The second is concern with the way in which we think about social and political questions. In particular, it is a skepticism about the possibility of acquiring the knowledge that would be required in order to engage in large scale social planning. This reticence toward large scale social and political planning is usually referred to by conservative authors of both varieties as "rationalism". The major differences between these two kinds of conservatism is related to the way in which they articulate ideas about epistemic skepticism, and how they conceive of the relationship between politics and desirable social outcomes.

I assess the strength of conceiving of politics as purposeless from both traditional and liberal conservative perspectives. I argue that Hayek's argument conflates economic development and societal progress in a way that does not follow from his postulates. Oakeshott's articulation of purposelessness which he frames in terms of a distinction between civil (purposeless) and enterprise (purposeful), associations does not hold water as a coherent

distinction. Purposeless politics is a problem for traditional conservatives because their understanding of non-interference in the purposes of individuals is reliant on a conception of human nature that is itself a product of ideas about proper human purposes.

The second dimension of conservative political thought is skepticism about how knowledge is collected and utilized with respect to social and political thinking. Chiefly conservatives believe that it is not possible to have perfect knowledge of what would be good for a society in all times and places and therefore those involved in thinking and acting in socially and politically salient contexts ought to be very cautious about how they act and why. Traditional conservatives as a rule suffer from an excessive vagueness when it comes to explaining *why* it is difficult to have knowledge of social facts, and their arguments tend to devolve into speculation about bad consequences that might hypothetically result from epistemic overexuberance. I therefore turn to the thought of Hayek and Oakeshott in order to develop some epistemic principles that we can use to systematize our understanding of conservative epistemology. I develop two major principles of conservative epistemology from the thought of Hayek and Oakeshott and then add three more postulates that I argue necessarily follow for a total of five.

Because of their emphasis on purposeless liberal politics, Hayek and Oakeshott do not consistently adhere to these conservative epistemic principles. I therefore turn to the political thought of Joseph Schumpeter, showing that he fits with the characterization of epistemology I developed from Hayek and Oakeshott. I then show how we might use Schumpeter to analyze the inconsistency between Hayek and Oakeshott's political liberalism and epistemic conservatism and show how this kind of epistemic conservative thinking can be helpful to thinking about perennially relevant political questions. I conclude by suggesting that conservative epistemological skepticism conceived independently from either liberal or conservative purposelessness would be a fruitful avenue for further research and suggest a possible term to refer to this would be "epistemic conservatism".

Hayek on Purposelessness

Part of what makes Hayek such a complicated thinker is that he has two different ways of thinking about epistemology that he expounds in his different works. The first, and the focus of this section is found in both *The Constitution of Liberty* and *Law, Liberty and Legislation vol. 1.* The second is best outlined in his articles "The Theory of Complex Phenomena" and "The Facts

of the Social Sciences" and is the subject of the section entitled "Hayek and Skepticism". While both arguments have something to say about epistemology and could be reasonably characterized as skeptical in their understanding of human capacities, the two are not compatible in terms of their implications. In this section I will illustrate that the way Hayek attempts to connect epistemology and normative theory in *The Constitution of Liberty* is heavily reliant on two non-sequiturs. When we explore the argument, we see that his attempt to justify a normative political position (the idea that politics ought to be purposeless), does not follow from his epistemological claims. While traditionally the political implications of Hayek's epistemology have been the emphasis of those who study Hayek's political thought, in the later section on Hayek and skepticism, my focus will be on the articulation of his skeptical epistemology in his other works. We begin with a passage this is illustrative of a typical conservative view of the relationship between knowledge and society:

"The Socratic maxim that the recognition of our ignorance is the beginning of wisdom has profound significance for our understanding of society. The first requisite for this is that we become aware of men's necessary ignorance of much that helps him to achieve his aims… Philosophers and students of society have generally glossed it over and treated this ignorance as a minor imperfection which could be more or less disregarded. But, though knowledge may occasionally be useful as a preliminary exercise in logic, they are of little use in an attempt to explain the real world. Its problems are dominated by the "practical difficulty" that our knowledge is in fact, very far from perfect. Perhaps it is only natural that the scientists tend to stress what we do know; but in the social field, where what we do not know is often so much more important, the effect of this tendency may be very misleading. Many of the utopian constructions are worthless because they follow the lead of the theorists in assuming that we have perfect knowledge."[1]

As we will see, this is a statement that could have been written by any conservative theorist, liberal or traditional. According to Hayek, the principle error made by rationalists is that they assume that there is no inherent difficulty with acquiring the information that is necessary to make decisions. This realization however leads us to an even more significant one. It is not only that it would be impossible for one mind to aggregate all the knowledge that would be required to create solutions to problems in society, but because of this dispersal of knowledge, even conceiving of something as a societally relevant problem presents great difficulties. Hayek gives an example where there may be a problem in a society that goes unrecognized as a problem and hence a solution is developed that no individual actor realizes is a solution:

[1] F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Complete Works of F.A. Hayek Volume 17*, ed. Ronald Hamowy. (London: Routledge, 2011), 73-74.

"Every change in conditions will make necessary some change in the use of resources, and in the direction and kind of human activities, in habits and practices. And each change in the actions of those affected in the first instance will require further adjustments that will gradually extend throughout the whole of society. Thus every change in a sense creates a "problem" for society, even though no single individual perceives it as such; and it is gradually "solved" by the establishment of a new over-all adjustment. Those who take part in the process have little idea why they are doing what they do, and we have no way of predicting who will at each step first make the appropriate move, or what circumstances, will suggest to some man the suitable answer, or by what channels his example will be transmitted to others who will follow the lead…"[2]

Moreover, the same difficulty that leads to this ambiguity with regard to recognizing societal problems leads us to realize that just like individuals, societies too may have a plurality of values, and it is not possible for us to have knowledge of all the particular norms and values a society holds at a given time or may hold in the future.

"It is one of the characteristics of a free society that men's goals are open, that new ends of conscious effort can spring up, first with a few individuals, to become in time the ends of most. It is a fact which we must recognize that even what we regard as good or beautiful is changeable – if not in any recognizable manner that would entitle us to take a relativistic position, then in the sense that in many respects we do not know what will appear as good or beautiful to another generation. Nor do we know why we regard this or that as good or who is right when people differ as to whether something is good or not. It is not only in his knowledge, but also in his aims and values, that man is the creature of civilization; in the last resort, it is the relevance of these individual wishes to the perpetuation of the groups or the species that will determine whether they will persist or change."[3]

Hayek characterizes the problems with a rationalist mindset as follows:

"The rationalist who desires to subject everything to human reason is thus faced with a real dilemma. The use of reason aims at control and predictability. But the process of the advance of reason rests on freedom and the unpredictability of human action. Those who extol the powers of human reason usually see only one side of that interaction of human thought and conduct, in which reason is at the same time used and shaped. They do not see that for an advance to take place, the social process from which the growth of reason emerges must remain free from its control."[4]

More abstractly, we might say that reason is applied to things in order to develop and codify our understanding of them. Thus the objects to whuch reason is applied must precede the application of reason. Knowledge is not the product of a direct sequence of logical inferences, but rather something that happens after a moment of creativity or spontaneity. These then are the broad strokes of the first instance of Hayek's epistemology and we are now in a position to understand the first of the non-sequiturs where Hayek attempts to link epistemology and purposelessness:

[2] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 79.
[3] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 87.
[4] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 89.

"What is essential to the functioning of the process is that each individual be able to act on his particular knowledge, always unique, at least so far as it refers to some particular circumstances, and that he be able to use his individual skills and opportunities within the limits known to him and for his own individual purpose…. we must recognize that the advance and even the preservation of civilization are dependent upon a maximum of opportunity for accidents to happen."[5]

Now, while it might be true that the process just described requires individuals to be able to act on their individual knowledge of particular circumstances, it is not *necessarily* true that "the preservation of civilization…[is] dependent upon a *maximum* of opportunity for accidents to happen." It does not follow that because society is dependent on the evolution of social practices that we must therefore maximize the potential for evolution, for this would be like arguing that because humans are dependent on food for their survival we ought to maximize the amount of food we produce. While surely creating the conditions that allow for social evolution is a desirable thing, it does not follow that it is the only desirable thing and ought to be pursued to the exclusion of others. The second difficulty with Hayek's argument arises when he adds the concept of progress to his account:

"When we speak of progress in connection with our individual endeavors or any organized human effort, we mean an advance toward a known goal. It is not in this sense that social evolution can be called progress, of it is not achieved by human reason striving by known means toward a fixed aim. It would be more correct to think of progress as a process of formation and modification of the human intellect, a process of adaptation and learning in which not only the possibilities known to us but also our values and desires continually change. As progress consists in the discovery of the not yet known, its consequences must also be unpredictable. It always leads into the unknown, and the most we can expect is to gain an understanding of the kind of forces that bring it about."[6]

In this passage, Hayek identifies progress in the social realm with what in other contexts we might call evolution. Evolution and social progress do not have an end or a goal; if we attempt to make normative judgements about about the outcomes of evolution or social progress, our statements will verge on incoherence. We would for example think it peculiar if someone were to say it is *bad* that humans have wisdom teeth or giraffes have a peculiar laryngeal nerve. We could therefore never coherently say whether we are made "better off" by progress. Hayek however immediately adds confusion with the following passage:

"What matters is the successful striving for what at each moment seems attainable. It is not the fruits of past success but the living in and for the future in which human intelligence proves itself. Progress is movement for movement's sake, for it is in the process of learning, and in the effects of having learned something new, that man enjoys the gift of his intelligence. The enjoyment of personal success will be given to large numbers only in a society that, as a whole, progresses fairly rapidly. In a stationary society there will be about as many who will be descending as there

[5] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 80-81.
[6] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 94.

will be those rising. In order that the great majority should in their individual lives participate in the advance, it is necessary that it proceed at a considerable speed."[7]

While Hayek continues to use the term progress in an evolutionary sense, he adds the terms "personal success" and "advancement". It is no longer evolutionary progress that is of overriding import, but rather evolutionary progress in the service of personal success and advancement which is signaled by individuals "descending" and "rising". We soon learn that this is in relation to *material* advancement when Hayek's argument abruptly shifts gears; he begins to talk about the idea that in order for *economic* progress to be possible, it requires inequality whereby new inventions or processes which are at first only available to a few, will eventually become available to all, and this discussion is the topic of the remainder of the chapter.[8]

Again, this is a non-sequitur. Hayek's argument for liberty rests on the idea that for society to survive it requires rapid change. The only argument Hayek has provided for this however is an economic one where the fruits of new innovations can be rapidly disseminated. While this may be an argument for why freedom is at least in part required for economic development, Hayek doesn't adequately explain a) why this would be desirable; or b) how economic advancement is analogous to societal evolution. While it is true that in both cases there is no "end" that progress aims at, Hayek seems to imply that at least in part the purpose of social evolution is related to economic development.

To summarize, while Hayek does have an explicit account of skeptical epistemology in *The Constitution of Liberty*, the way in which he uses it within his normative political framework does not logically follow. First, it does not follow that because societies are the product of evolution and that this evolution requires freedom as one of its preconditions, we must therefore maximize freedom or this evolution will be halted. While certainly some amount of freedom is necessary, Hayek has given no reason for us to think that freedom provides anything desirable beyond some bare minimum requirement for continued societal evolution. As Hayek himself notes, evolution is unpredictable and we cannot coherently judge its results as either good or bad; but Hayek implies that the more evolution that is possible the better this will be for the society in question. Hayek can only make this argument however because he conflates economic advancement with socially desirable outcomes and this is a premise that was neither explicitly

[7] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 95-96.
[8] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 96-105.

articulated nor follows from anything he had said before. Without these two crucial pivot's Hayek's defence of freedom sits completely divorced from his skeptical epistemology. We might admit that more freedom allows for an increased ability for a society to use dispersed knowledge, but without material advancement as the highest good there is no reason that this would be normatively desirable. In the section entitled "Hayek on Skepticism", we will look at a fuller account of Hayek's epistemology and see what sorts of implications we can draw out. Before that however, we will look at thought of Michael Oakeshott and illustrate how he too attempts to rationalize a liberal normative position by drawing an inappropriate connection to skeptical epistemology.

Oakeshott on Purposelessness

I will begin by explaining Oakeshott's distinction between civil and enterprise associations, and will then provide a critique that illustrates that the distinction he attempts to draw does not hold up under scrutiny. Later, when I articulate the five principles of skeptical conservative epistemology, I will indicate why such a distinction would be impossible to make if we are take this way of thinking seriously. In this section I will show why the distinction lacks coherence even in terms of its own conceptual apparatus.

While Oakeshott lacks a succinct description of the differences between his two types of associations, his most economical definitions are as follows, beginning with enterprise associations:

"But in respect of being seekers and therefore providers of satisfactions, agents may be related in the joint pursuit of some imagined and wished-for common satisfaction. I will call this 'enterprise association', because it is relationship in terms of the pursuit of some common purpose, some substantive condition of things to be jointly procured, or some common interest to be continuously satisfied. It is association not merely concerned with satisfying substantive wants, but in terms of substantive action and utterances, and consequently it belongs to the same mode of relationship as that in which agents seek the satisfaction of their individual wants in the responses of others…. An enterprise is a 'policy', and enterprise association is a 'managerial' engagement; it is agents related to one another in the substantive activity of choosing performances contingently connected with a common purpose or interest, or in their acknowledgement of such choices and performances of their own."[9]

Below we see Oakeshott's explanation of civil associations:

"Politics, then, is concerned with an imagined and wished-for condition of *respublica*, a condition in some respect different from its current condition and alleged to be more desirable. It is deliberation designed to specify and find reasons for, utterance designed to recommend and give reasons for, and action designed to promote the change from

[9] Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 114-115..

the one to the other. And political proposals together with the reasons in terms of which they are recommended may be recognized and distinguished from projects of some other sort in respect of this consideration: in order to be recognizably 'political' a proposal together with the reasons for it must relate to a possible condition of *respublica* and to nothing else."[10]

If the central distinction has to do with the idea that an enterprise association is formed and exists for a given purpose, while a civil association is formed and exists for an idealized condition or "purposelessly", then we should begin by attempting to understand enterprise associations and their relation to purposes. My critique will center on three distinct problems:

1) Must an enterprise association be directed to only one purpose?
2) How does one define a purpose?
3) Could a given enterprise association's purposes change or be contested?

By exploring these three questions I will show that the idea of an enterprise association is too broad to plausibly distinguish it from a civil association. Later on, in the section on Oakeshott's epistemology, I will show that this distinction is also at odds with Oakeshott's own epistemology.

Oakeshott uses a fire station of an example of an enterprise association and characterizes it as having the purpose "to prevent and to extinguish unwanted fires."[11] But on further reflection, this seems too narrow of an understanding of the purpose of a fire station, surely everyone knows that firemen also participate in saving cats from trees, is this not also a purpose of a fire station, and if not why not? It certainly seems like if we took a narrow understanding of the fire station's purpose (exclusively preventing and extinguishing fires), saving cats seems like the kind of extraneous action that violates the purpose of a fire station. Saving cats may put the firemen in a location in which they cannot easily respond, or they may be using fuel and energy they could otherwise use to fight fires. We must either conclude that saving cats is an illegitimate act for a fire station to engage in because it violates its clear and understood purpose, or we must allow the saving of cats to be a purpose of a fire station as well. If we allow for a plurality of purposes then it seems we are opening the door to allow a whole variety of purposes that a fire station might be engaged in such as socialization and community building for example. If this is

[10] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 168.
[11] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 117.

so, then it might be better to speak of enterprise associations as having a hierarchy of purposes (for example fighting fires is a higher purpose than saving cats).

A second question we might raise about Oakeshott's understanding of enterprise associations is that he refers repeatedly to "the purpose" of an enterprise association without ever referring to how such a purpose is to be defined. Oakeshott gives a variety of descriptions of what such a purpose might be:

"the pursuit of some common purpose, some substantive condition of things to be jointly procured, or some common interest to be continuously satisfied. It is association not merely concerned with satisfying substantive wants, but in terms of substantive actions and utterances, and consequently it belongs to the same mode of relationship as that in which agents seek the satisfaction of their individual wants in the responses of others."[12]

Oakeshott also argues that enterprise associations are:

"… a common substantive purpose and the choice of each of the agents concerned to be related in terms of it. The purpose may be anything recognizable as a substantive condition of things imagined and wished-for as the outcome of human activity. That it is a chosen relationship follows from it being association in terms of a common want: two or more agents may be joined in seeking a common satisfaction only in virtue of a choice on the part of each. This choice may be revoked, and if it is revoked the relationship lapses. The association may be dissolved by common consent or it may be destroyed by internal dissension. An agent need not have expressly enrolled himself by a deliberate act, but this joint pursuit of a common purpose entails agents related to one another in the acknowledgement of it as their common purpose and it is a relationship from which an agent may extricate himself by a choice of his own."[13]

The language that Oakeshott repeatedly uses of "a common purpose" seems to suggest that Oakeshott conceives of all enterprise associations as pursuing one purpose. Building off of my previous criticism, this seems either to not describe enterprise associations appropriately (even his own example of a fire station), or it seems to indicate that what he really means is some combination of a plurality of interests. I will deal with potential problems that a plurality of purposes might lead to shortly when I discuss Roger Scruton's explanation of this point, but for now let us assume that Oakeshott in fact conceives of a properly constituted enterprise association as pursuing only a single overriding purpose. If this is the case, how are members of the association to adjudicate when it seems like the association has more than one purpose? The example of the fire station may not be very instructive here as even with a hierarchy of purposes the average person might be inclined to agree with Oakeshott's claim that its purpose is "to prevent and to extinguish unwanted fires." But take the university as an example: there seems to

[12] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 114.
[13] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 114-115.

be a stark disagreement or uncertainty about whether the purpose of a university is to produce new knowledge or transmit already existing knowledge. Now again, if the answer is "both" then the problem will be discussed in the following section; the question is: "if a university must have one and only one purpose then how are its current members or prospective new ones to know which of these purposes are the true purpose of the association?"

Take for example a sample mission statement: "The mission of McGill University is the advancement of learning and the creation and dissemination of knowledge..."[14] Rather than one overriding purpose, it seems like there are in fact three potentially competing purposes at play in the university: creation of knowledge, advancement of learning, and knowledge dissemination; how is one to know which of these purposes will be supreme in the case of such a conflict? One answer might be to look at the actual conduct of the university, but that too seems like an unreliable guide. To the student who is dissatisfied with the quality of teaching, the interest of knowledge creation may seem dominant, while to the faculty member who has to teach two courses a year instead of conducting research, it may appear that the interest of disseminating knowledge is primary.

Scruton for example recognizes this difficulty, and he argues that we need to distinguish between the purpose of an institution and its incidental effects. He uses the example of a game of football and describes its purpose as the scoring of goals with a variety of incidental effects such as "exercise, companionship, delight" that sit auxiliary to this purpose. He argues that were any of these incidental effects to become the purpose of the game it would destroy concept of the game as such. A purpose then, is a sine qua non of a given institution.[15] There are a couple of problems with this argument. First, as in the football example, the purpose isn't specific enough to adequately describe the activity. For example, it would seem that on its own it would seem like "scoring goals" is also a description of the purpose of hockey or lacrosse. Second, it requires us to supress the understanding of the purpose of an activity as understood by an individual member of the association.

Suppose for example that someone joins a casual football team and is content to always sit on the bench and provide refreshments for the more active players, getting enjoyment out of

[14] "McGill University Mission Statement," accessed May 4, 2017, https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/mission
[15] Roger Scruton, *How to be a Conservative*, (Great Britain: Bloomsbury 2014), 28-29.

football exclusively from the comradery and friendships they can cultivate. In this person's understanding it truly seems as if the purpose of football *is* comradery and friendship and it seems like scoring goals is one of the incidental features that makes *this* activity a good method to achieve said goal rather than joining a book club for example. If we want to understand such associations as in some way being legitimated by their being created from the bottom up by free acting individuals, then we must also be committed to recognizing the plurality of reasons that someone would have joined such an organization in the first place. The first baseball game for example clearly could not have been played "for the purpose of scoring runs", because the concept of scoring runs could only come into existence after someone had conceived of awarding points for hitting a ball and running the bases. The reason anyone was running the bases in the first place must have been for some *other* purpose such as exercise or comradery, so it does not seem far-fetched to think that people could still have this as their purpose even after scoring runs became one of the purposes of baseball.

This leads to my final critique of Oakeshott's concept of enterprise associations. It should be fairly clear by now that for the concept of an enterprise association to be capable of describing real-world occurrences, it must allow for a plurality of purposes to be present in an enterprise association. If we take this step however, we see that the distinction between enterprise and civil associations becomes blurred and thus the distinction that Oakeshott intended to draw evaporates. If enterprise associations are characterized by a plurality of competing purposes that may change over time, then this begins to sound like any conventional account of political association. To have a coherent account of enterprise associations we must admit that it is up to the members of the enterprise association to decide what their purposes are, how they adjudicate when disputes arise between these purposes, and when a given purpose ceases to be the purpose of an association. This also has the implication that someone may join or be a part of an enterprise association where they fervently believe that the association either has or ought to have purposes different from what other members believe the purposes to be.

I have argued that Oakeshott's distinction between civil and enterprise associations is one that does not adequately hold up under scrutiny. First, there is no reason to think that *any* association can be conceived of in terms of only one purpose much less an entire category of kinds of associations. Second, even were there not such a problem there would be a difficulty

with defining the purpose of a given association if members disagreed or exhibited different behaviours with respect to the association. Finally, if as I have argued we *must* understand enterprise associations as a combination of a plurality of purposes, then there is no reason to distinguish between an association that pursues a plurality of purposes that are contestable and one that is considered "purposeless". When I discuss the core tenants of conservative skeptical epistemology I will indicate why according to the logic of Oakeshott's own epistemology it would be impossible to conceive of an association without it having a purpose, but for now I have shown that the distinction between civic and enterprise associations cannot be a hard and fast one.

Traditional Conservatives and Purposelessness

In this section I will argue that while we can recognize something that approximates the idea of purposelessness in traditional conservative thought, it is different than the distinction Oakeshott makes between civil and enterprise associations, and Hayek's argument about necessity. Traditional conservatives understand purposelessness in terms of restraining from interference in the norms and institutions of a society. For them, these norms and institutions are prima facie legitimated because they satisfy requirements of "human nature" and therefore to interfere in these institutions (or to think of society as pursuing purposes), is illegitimate. First, I will defend traditional conservatives from a common criticism that this sort of language is really just a way in which traditional conservatives subtly attempt to impose their own normative ideals on a society. I will illustrate that while traditional conservatives may run afoul of a criticism that they are insufficiently precise when it comes to articulating their ideas, or insensitive to some understandings of coercion or structural power relations, they are not (at least in their own minds), inconsistent when it comes to their policies.

Traditional and liberal conservatives alike tell us they are not interested in imposing societal blueprints on others, but rather working within pre-existing traditions and norms. Conservatism is thus a positional ideology, as norms and circumstances change, the policies that conservatives support will change as well and this therefore accounts for why conservatives have supported different or even opposing policies within single polities over time or contemporaneously within different polities. On its own, this is very much in the same vein as Hayek and Oakeshott, but traditional conservatives modify what they mean by "purpose" by

attaching a notion of human nature. Thus, the semi-radical non-purposiveness of Hayek and Oakeshott is transformed into a guided non-purposiveness, where individuals are free to pursue their own purposes but never against the demands of human nature. Before tackling the particular arguments advanced by conservative theorists, it would be helpful to begin with an explanation of how this form of theorizing finds its expression in modern politics. By understanding the way in which such theories are used in practice, it will assist us in understanding why traditional conservatives are so radically different from liberal conservatives despite starting from very similar premises.

In what ways can we understand traditional conservatives as advocating for non-purposiveness in situations that accord with human nature? Some examples from contemporary politics may be instructive. Conservative parties have traditionally advocated that donations to private charities and religious organizations ought to be made without having to pay tax. Conservatives see this as different than rationalism because the rationalist attempts to impose a particular distribution of income (for example one that is more equal), while the conservative does not care about the end, but rather incentivising the behavior itself. This is similar to the argument a traditional conservative might make about non-heterosexual marriage. To attach the same title and thus the same emotional attachment and reverence to a practice that does not accord with what traditional conservatives see as a human teleological imperative (procreation), is to give unwarranted sanction to a practice that is opposed to human teleology. While an extreme conservative (what we might call a reactionary), may advocate for something akin to sodomy laws, the more nuanced conservative position would be that non-heterosexual practices and even unions may be acceptable as long as it is made clear that it is distinct from heterosexual marriage not only in its actual content, but also in terms of its purposes. For the traditional conservative then, these policies are recognizably different from rationalism in the sense that they are not impositions. One is free to pursue a heterosexual marriage or a non-heterosexual "personal union" just as one is free to get licence to drive a car or one to drive a bus. For the traditional conservative, what is important is that the political organization assists the society in keeping these sorts of concepts distinct. Conservative politics is about constantly reminding society about the distinctions to be made between acts in accord with human nature (the realm of purposiveness), and all other acts (those that can safely be treated as non-purposive and thus left to individual discretion).

Now, there are very many criticisms that can be made about this line of reasoning such as that in practice such "incentivization" is really a subtle form of compulsion, or that the distinction between heterosexual and non-heterosexual marriage is essentially a way of institutionalizing discrimination. These points have their merits but they are beyond our scope here. The important point is that we can see a clear difference between an act of overt compulsion (you *must* get married by age 18), and one of definition (marriage has these components). If the former is the mentality that rationalism gives rise to, the latter is what we might think of as a conservative mental disposition. Again, many have argued that these are not in fact different, and the conservative mentality is merely a way of imposing normative ends by stealth; we will see some of these issues in our discussion of Russel Kirk and Roger Scruton. The point for now is merely that this is the distinction that conservatives *claim* to be making, and is one that is at least conceivably plausible. Let us now turn to traditional conservative authors to see how they characterize conservatism in their own words, and to provide examples of how they articulate this idea of purposelessness as I've described it.

"In various edition of my book *The Conservative Mind* I have listed certain canons of conservative thought -the list differing somewhat from edition to edition; in my anthology *The Portable Conservative Reader* I offer variations upon this theme. Now I present to you a summary of conservative assumptions differing somewhat from my canons in those two books of mine. In fine, the diversity of ways in which conservative views may find expression is itself proof that conservatism is no fixed ideology. What particular principles conservatives emphasize during any given time will vary with the circumstances and necessities of that era."[16]

Two problems immediately strike us with this argument. First, it is not obvious that this inconsistency is due to the nature of conservative thought and not due to say, Kirk's inconsistency as a theorist. Second, this argument might make sense if we were comparing the thought of conservative authors in two different eras such as Burke and Oakeshott, but not between Kirk's *own* books. If the contents of conservative political thought were thought to change *that* radically then it's unclear how there could really be any consistency at all.

I mentioned earlier that traditional conservatives have a tendency to be quite vague when articulating their ideas which is also well illustrated by Kirk:

"First, the conservative believes that there exists and enduring moral order… A society in which men and women are governed by belief in an enduring moral order, by a strong sense of right and wrong, by personal convictions about justice and honor, will be a good society – whatever political machinery it may utilize; while a society in

[16] Russel Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (ISI Books, 1998), 17.

which men and women are morally adrift, ignorant of norms, and intent chiefly upon gratification of appetites, will be a bad society – no matter how many people vote and no matter how liberal its formal constitution may be."[17]

Now this sounds like a lofty principle indeed, but it seems to lack usable content. What would it mean for a society to not be governed by belief in some kind of moral order? Even a morality of solipsism is some kind of a moral order (although clearly not one that Kirk or anyone else would think is conducive of a healthy society). Why must individuals have strong convictions of justice and honor; is there no potential conflict between this and society's conception of "right and wrong"? Is this not one of the core questions of political association stretching back to *Antigone* and *Apology*? How could individuals in a society ever be *ignorant* of norms? Certainly they might not be able to articulate their norms to one another but if the norms are norms then surely they must be obeyed or recognized in order to maintain such a status.

"… conservatives pay attention to the principle of variety… For the preservation of a healthy diversity in any civilization, there must survive orders and classes, differences in material condition, and many sorts of inequality. The only true forms of equality are equality at the Last Judgement and equality before a just court of law; all other attempts at leveling must lead, at best, to social stagnation. Society requires honest and able leadership; and if natural and institutional differences are destroyed, presently some tyrant or host of squalid oligarchs will create new forms of inequality."[18]

This principle too seems to be a peculiar combination of assertions. We should note first the strange rhetorical flourish in the comment about the "equality at the Last Judgement". It does not seem to particularly add anything to the passage but it does suggest that Kirk has extra-societal norms lurking in the background of his argument. Second, the passage seems to indicate that attempts to limit inequality will inevitably lead to different types of inequality. Thus, the thrust of the statement that "there must survive orders and classes", is just a tautology about what it means to live in a society, the appropriate styling of these inequalities is something for a society itself to decide. In a different context, this could be seen as a call to action rather than a principle of conservatism; if one is currently at the bottom of a system of inequality (in poverty, racialized, facing sexual discrimination), one should strive for a new form of inequality that privileges oneself rather than a system of equality and accommodation with one's former superior.

We see similar difficulties in Roger Scruton's attempt to define tradition:

[17] Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 17
[18] Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 20

"traditions… are not the latest in a series of abortive starts… they engage the loyalty of their participants, in the deep sense of moulding their idea of what they are and should be. (Contrast the traditions of family life with those of torture.) Finally, they point to something durable, something which survives and gives meaning to the acts that emerge from it."[19]

Scruton's definition of tradition doesn't do the normative work that he intends for it as it would appear to legitimate something like a commune established by conspiracy theorists who have brainwashed their children. Such a society would certainly engage the loyalty of their participants and mould their idea of what they are, and certainly every act of organic desert farming would have a great deal of meaning for those participating. This does not seem to establish the normative desirability of adhering to tradition. To make it so, traditional conservatives would have to be willing to (and often do), take the step of denying or at least severely restricting the character of normative desirability they demand. Kirk for example seems to explicitly deny a non-Christian conception of a conservative society:

"Belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems… Politics is the art of apprehending and applying the Justice which is above nature." [20]

"[The conservative] believes… that the object of life is Love. He knows that the anarchical or the tyrannical society is that in which Love lies corrupt. He has learnt that Love is the source of all being, and that Hell itself is ordained by Love. He understands that Death, when we have finished the part that was assigned to us is the reward of Love. And he apprehends the truth that the greatest happiness every granted to a man is the privilege of being happy in the hour of his death."[21]

These sorts of statements seem at odds with Kirk's attempts to be encompassing of a plurality of social conditions:

"The conservative believes that the world is not perfectible, and that we poor fallen human creatures, here below, are not made for happiness, and will not find happiness at least, not if we deliberately pursue it; therefore, unlike the ideologue, he is not under the impression that any single fixed system of political concepts can bring justice and peace and liberty to all men at all times, if uniformly applied."[22]

If Kirk seems inconsistent in his attempts to explain the content of core conservative beliefs without resort to contradiction or proselytizing, Scruton fares no better when he tries to translate his understanding of conservative principles into policy proposals. His argument in opposition to the EU for example, verges on incoherence.[23] Scruton argues that the UK has clear

[19] Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 34.
[20] Russel Kirk, *The Conservative Mind,* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), 7-8.
[21] Russel Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives,* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), 18-19
[22] Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives,* 4
[23] Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 61.

and obvious physical borders with respect to sovereignty. He then extends this to conclude that laws ought not to be made at the EU level because that is clearly outside the bounds of the UK's sovereignty. While this may be true, it doesn't seem clear why the national level is the obvious sphere in which all policy issues ought to be handled. For example, Scruton concedes that the EU is a natural sphere for formulating trade policy, but why does this not hold for defence, immigration, or any other kind of issue? Suppose one were to argue that the clear and obvious sphere for determining education policy is naturally the family and not the state. Where does this essentialist notion of suitable spheres come from? If the answer is "it depends on the circumstance" then it would seem just as legitimate for education policy to be done at the European level rather than the family or state level.

Scruton also has a peculiar argument about familial relations:

"…the support and protection of [the family] must be central to the conservative outlook, and that changes in the law which are calculated to loosen or abolish the obligations of family life, or which in other ways facilitate the channelling of libidinal impulse away from that particular form of union, will be accepted by conservatives only under the impulse pressure of necessity."[24] "Massive legal interference in legacy and hereditary right constitutes a direct affront to the securest of social feelings. It is therefore impossible for those affected by it to be persuaded of its legitimacy… [legacy and hereditary right] seeks to conserve social continuity, so that people may envisage generations which stretch before and after them. Without that vision, much of the motive for procreation is lost, and children become and accident, an anxiety, a reminder of one's isolation…"[25]

Scruton's argument comes from an extension of a notion that was first articulated by Edmund Burke. Society is a contract between the living, dead, and those not yet born, government policy must therefore not destroy the mechanisms which allow for the living and not yet born to be associated. Thus, the government should not tax estates or allow for behaviours that disrupt the chain of sentiment. However, if family is so essential to the human condition and so self-sustaining, why does a government sanction of marriage or equal rights for non-heterosexual couples serve to support or undermine it? Why, if homosexual couples are recognized and allowed to adopt/procreate (under what we assume to be their natural impulses), does that undermine anything? Do people need to be incentivised to engage in these behaviors or are they so natural that they will engage in them regardless? If it's the former, the behaviour is

[24] Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 129.
[25] Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 131.

something other than basic human instinct, if it's the latter then how could interference be relevant?

We have seen how traditional conservatives articulate their conception of politics as a purposeless association. While slightly different than Hayek and Oakeshott, the features are recognizably similar with respect to opposition to rationalism. I noted however that both Kirk and Scruton have problems with consistency in their arguments and both continuously allude to normative assumptions that lurk in the background of their understandings of society. As I said at the beginning of the section, there is some truth to the conservative claim that their idea of purposelessness is not about imposing their normative ideas of good by stealth. Just like with Hayek and Oakeshott however, normative goals are not sufficiently excluded from purposelessness and this leads to the appearance that conservatives attempt to impose normative ends by stealth. This is a characterization that also fits both Hayek and Oakeshott although perhaps it is less obvious since their "aims" are essentially liberal.

Traditional Conservatives and Skepticism

We have seen that liberal and traditional conservatives share the idea that politics is or ought to be purposeless and the difficulties these authors have in maintaining this claim. In the following section, we will transition to a discussion of conservative skepticism beginning with traditional conservatives and concluding with Hayek and Oakeshott. Traditional conservatives by and large express similar sentiments about epistemological skepticism, but their explanations tend to be vague and lack significant theoretical content. We will rectify this by appealing to the epistemic skepticism of Hayek and Oakeshott, and developing their thought into workable epistemic ideas. Kieron O'Hara defines conservatism as follows:

"Small-c conservatism is at bottom an *epistemological* doctrine. This makes it unlike most other ideologies, which tend to assume there is no difficulty *in principle* in obtaining the information that is needed to make political decisions."[26]

John Kekes notes that skepticism of this kind does not require a conservative to abandon the idea that there are absolute moral standards, but only to posit that absolute knowledge of such standards is not possible for humans to achieve. This leads conservatives to reject attempts to construct political and social institutions according to totalizing plans:

[26] Kieron O'Hara, *Conservatism*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2011), 24.

"A *via media* between the dangerous extremes of rationalistic politics and the fideistic repudiation of reason is skepticism that takes a moderate form. Conservatives who hold this view need not deny that there is a rational and moral order in reality. They are committed only to denying that reliable knowledge of it can be had… Skepticism, however, does not lead conservatives to deny that it is possible to evaluate political arrangements by adducing reasons for or against them. What they deny is that good reasons must be absolute and eternal. The skepticism of these conservatives is, therefore not a global doubt about it being possible and desirable to be reasonable, to base beliefs on the evidence available in support of them, and to make the strength of beliefs commensurate with the strength of the evidence. Their skepticism is about deducing political conclusions from metaphysical or utopian premises."[27]

In brief, conservatives ideally do not judge circumstances in relation to some idealized conception of goodness or justice, but rather their evaluations should be particular to the context in which a given decision may or may not be reasonable. We saw earlier that traditional conservatives have difficulties living up to this ideal, and we should note how similar it sounds to the idea that politics ought to be purposeless. If reliable knowledge of absolutely good reasons cannot be had, then it would be difficult to guide society toward an overriding objective or purpose. Note however that our earlier discussion had to do primarily with the legitimacy of purposes while this argument has to do with the possibility of purposelessness; it is helpful to keep these two ideas distinct. One might admit for example that it is impossible to acquire such knowledge, but might still assert that were it possible to do it would be desirable; this would be a sentiment like "communism is good in theory but not in practice". This might also mean that were some particular threshold of technology that allowed us to collect the requisite information were met, this particular plank of traditional conservative theory would be rendered moot.

One of the difficulties with characterizing conservative thought is that conservative authors have a tendency to be extremely vague and imprecise when it comes to articulating their own conceptions of conservative thought. It is my contention that we can reasonably characterize Russel Kirk's political thought as recognizably skeptical, but it requires a modicum of interpretation in order for us to see that this is the case. While Kirk clearly articulates the attitudes and dispositions he thinks conservatives possess, he never systematically lays out the reasons that a conservative might have skeptical attitudes the way we will see that Hayek and Oakeshott do.

We may begin with Kirk's definition of ideology:

[27] John Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 30-31.

"… this word *ideology* since the Second World War, usually has signified a dogmatic political theory which is an endeavour to substitute secular goals and doctrines for religious goals and doctrines; and which promises to overthrow present dominations so that the oppressed may be liberated.… Ideology inherits the fanaticism that sometimes has afflicted religious faith, and applies that intolerant belief to concerns secular. Ideology makes political compromise impossible: the ideologue will accept no deviation from the Absolute Truth of his secular revelation. This narrow vision brings about civil war, extirpation of "reactionaries", and the destruction of beneficial functioning social institutions."[28]

Now certainly Kirk has used some rather monstrous language in his description, but there seems to be nothing that is inherently wrong with a certain fanaticism about one's political beliefs. One could easily for example be sympathetic to someone who "fanatically" pursued racial equality and was unswerving in their pursuit of such a commitment. We might even applaud such a person's refusal to compromise and insist that social institutions are not beneficently functioning if they are instantiations of an unjust racialized order, or we might further insist that there is no reason to suspect that civil war or proscriptions are any less of an injustice than the maintenance of an unjust social order.

In contradistinction to ideology, Kirk refers to conservatism as "political prudence":

"To be "prudent" means to be judicious, cautious, sagacious…. A prudent statesman is one who looks before he leaps; who takes long views; who knows that politics is the art of the possible…, prudential politicians, rejecting the illusion of an Absolute Political Truth before which every citizen must abase himself, understand that political and economic structures are not mere products of theory, to be erected one day and demolished the next; rather social institutions develop over centuries, almost as if they were organic."[29]

While again we have received a characterization of conservatism, we have seen no argument about *why* a conservative disposition is more appropriate than ideologies beyond consequentialist arguments that ideology can lead to bad outcomes. We see this same style throughout Kirk's various works on conservatism:

"The conservative believes that the individual is foolish, although the species is wise; therefore, unlike the confident intellectual, he declines to undertake the reconstruction of society and human nature upon the scanty capital of his private stock of reason… unlike the ideologue, he is not under the impression that any single unified system of political concepts can bring justice and peace and liberty to all men at all times, if uniformly applied… The true conservative knows that the economic problem blends into the political problem, and the political problem blends into the ethical problem, and the ethical problem into the religious problem… The conservative understands that the circumstances of men are almost infinitely variable, and that any particular political or economic policy must be decided in the light of the particular circumstances of time and place-an enlightened expediency, or prudence. I am

[28] Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 5-6.
[29] Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 9-11.

attempting to outline here, rather the general principles upon which conservatives ought to endeavor to form their opinions of particular issues and make their decisions in particular circumstances."[30]

"Perhaps it would be well, most of the time, to use this word "conservative" as an adjective chiefly. For there exists no Model Conservative, and conservatism is the negation of ideology: it is a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the civil social order."[31]

We have seen that Kirk has articulated a variety of conservative characteristics that sound at least in their broad strokes like skeptical epistemology. These are things that conservatives think, but not a coherent theory of why it would be desirable or necessary to think those things beyond vague claims about potential bad consequences that may result. Let us turn to Hayek and Oakeshott's account of skepticism in order to develop some reasons conservatives would have to think in this manner.

Hayek and Skepticism

We saw in the earlier section on Hayek that while he articulated something like a skeptical epistemology, the argument was in service a higher ideal of economic advancement. In this section we will look at a slightly different and more robust version of his epistemology which we will later combine with Oakeshott's in order to develop our principles of conservative epistemology.

To understand Hayek's epistemology is to understand what he means by "order". For Hayek, an order is any pattern that is capable of recognition by the human mind.[32] All knowledge begins with the recognition of patterns; these patterns may be physical for example that humans have hair not fur, or they may be conceptual such as an observation that people tend to associate with those who approximate their own socio-economic standing. Orders may thus be intentionally created such as the rules of a game (*taxis)*, or they may be the result of a combination of factors that was never intentionally created such as the market (*kosmos)*.

Hayek defines the complexity of an order as "the minimum number of distinct variables a formula or model must possess in order to reproduce the characteristic patterns of structures of different fields"[33] Hayek therefore draws a distinction between complex and non-complex fields

[30] Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives,* 4-5.
[31] Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence,* 16.
[32] F.A. Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena", in *The Market and Other Orders: The Complete Works of F.A. Hayek Volume 15* ed. Bruce Caldwell. (London: Routledge, 2014), 258-259.
[33] Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena", 261.

of inquiry, defining fields in the social science as having relatively more complexity, and fields in the natural sciences as having relatively less complexity. While the natural sciences are undeniably extremely *complicated*, they are uncomplex because they proceed from a very small number of distinct variables or assumptions. In contrast, fields in the social sciences can only be viewed as distinct from one another by the inclusion of a multitude of distinguishing variables.

"… when we ask ourselves by what criteria we single out certain phenomena as 'mechanical' or 'physical' we shall probably find that these laws are simple in the sense defined. Non-physical phenomena are more complex because we call physical what can be described by relatively simple formulae."[34]

Moreover, the attempt by some scholars to think of the distinction as one that is made between "open" and "closed" systems is inappropriate:

"It is somewhat misleading to approach this task mainly from the angle of whether such structures are 'open' or 'closed' systems. There are strictly speaking, no closed system within the universe. All we can ask is whether in the particular instance the points of contact through which the rest of the universe acts upon the system we try to single out (and which for the theory become the data) are few or many… There is, however, no justification for the belief that it must always be possible to discover such simple regularities and that physics is more advanced because it has succeeded in doing this while other sciences have not yet done so. It is rather the other way round: physics has succeeded because it deals with phenomena which, in our sense, are simple."[35]

One of the implications of this is that fields of a greater complexity will have less stringent criteria for falsifiability. To make serious progress in fields that rest on a large variety of variables and assumptions means that the standard of demonstrability must necessarily fall:

"The advance of science will thus have to proceed in two different directions: while it is certainly desirable to make our theories as falsifiable as possible, we must also push forward into fields where, as we advance, the degree of falsifiability necessarily decreases. This is the price we have to pay for an advance into the field of complex phenomena."[36]

Different fields of inquiry will thus develop different standards of what is considered acceptable scholarship. This leads us into another of Hayek's epistemic points: in the social sciences, knowledge can only be created with reference to teleology.

"It is easily seen that all these concepts [tools, food, medicine, weapons, words, sentences, communications…] (and the same is true of more concrete instances) refer not to some objective properties possessed by the things, or which the observer can find out about them, but to views which some other person hold about the things. These objects cannot even be defined in physical terms, because there is no single physical property which any one member of a class must possess. These concepts are not just abstractions of the kind we use in all physical sciences, but they abstract from all the physical properties of the things themselves. They are all instances of what are sometimes

[34] Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena", 261.
[35] Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena", 262.
[36] Hayek, "The Theory of Complex Phenomena", 264.

called "teleological concepts," that is, they can be defined only by indicating relations between three terms: a purpose, somebody who holds that purpose, and an object which that person thinks to be a suitable means for that purpose."… In short, in the social sciences the things are what people think they are. Money is money, a word is a word, a cosmetic is a cosmetic, if and because somebody thinks they are."[37]

In the above passage we see that Hayek thinks that a core part of what it means to have knowledge about a social scientific fact is to provide answers to questions about teleology. Different people may have differences of opinion on what the purpose of a given thing or concept is, or the same person may have competing ideas about what a thing's purpose is or ought to be. All this is in addition to the observations one would normally make in the natural sciences about the features or definitions of such objects, and for both of these enterprises we require the communicative tools of language. While Hayek did not develop an explicit philosophy of language, he certainly comes closer than any of the authors I have mentioned so far. Indeed it is something of a puzzle because Hayek's comments about the use of language are so succinct and yet so far reaching that it is somewhat surprising he did not consider them more thoroughly. I contend that it is perhaps the case that he did not fully realize the full implications of what he said, for it has fairly radical implications for how we think about epistemology.

"Now, what makes two instances of the same word or the same kind, in the sense that is relevant when we discuss intelligible behavior? Surely not any physical properties they have in common. It is not because I know explicitly what physical properties the sound of the word "sycamore" pronounced at different times by different people has in common but because I know that *x* or *y* mean all these different sounds or signs to mean the same word, or that they understand them all as the same word, that I treat them as instances of the same class. And it is not because of any objective or physical similarity but because of the (imputed) intention of the acting person that I regard the various ways in which in different circumstances he may make, say, a spindle as instances of the same act of production."[38]

The above passage implies that teleology is not present merely in the study of the social sciences, but actually within the very structure of language itself. For Hayek, language possesses meaning only intersubjectively and is dependent entirely on context. Relations between concepts do not exist outside of the way in which people speak or act with regard to them, for without actors to impute teleology to these concepts, the concepts themselves dissolve into meaninglessness. This is illustrated nicely by an example:

"We are likely, for example, to think of the relationship between parent and child as an 'objective' fact. But, when we use this concept in studying family life, what is relevant is not that *x* is the natural offspring of *y* but that either or both believe this to be the case. The relevant character is not different from the case where *x* and *y* believe some

[37] F.A. Hayek, "The Facts of the Social Sciences" in *The Market and Other Orders: The Complete Works of F.A. Hayek Volume 15* ed. Bruce Caldwell (London: Routledge, 1943), 80.
[38] Hayek, "The Facts of the Social Sciences", 81.

spiritual tie to exist between them in the existence of which we do not believe. Perhaps the relevant distinction comes out more clearly in the general and obvious statement that no superior knowledge the observer may possess about the object, but which is not possessed by the acting person, can help us in understanding the motives of their actions."[39]

The implications may not be obvious, but they are quite radical. Many philosophers have struggled with Gettier problems that challenge the understanding of knowledge as "justified true belief". For Hayek, such a definition of knowledge is absurd because it ignores the intersubjectivity of knowledge. If the child and parent in Hayek's example believe they are related biologically, then they *have knowledge* that they are related. There is no such thing as a "truth" that exists independently of people who could hold views about truth. This leads Hayek to characterize the process of generating knowledge, not as one of discovery, but of constructing definitional and conceptual structures:

"Of course, we can go on constructing models which fit concrete situations more and more closely — concepts of states or languages which possess an ever richer connotation. But as members of a class as similar units about which we can make generalizations, these models can never possess any properties which we have not given to them or which do not derive deductively from the assumptions on which we have built them. Experience can never teach us that any particular kind of structure has properties which do not follow from the definition (or the way we construct it). The reason for this is simply that these wholes or social structures are never given to us as natural units, are not definite objects given to observation, that we never deal with the whole of reality but always only with a selection made with the help of our models."[40]

"This is all the theories of the social sciences aim to do. They are not *about* the social wholes as wholes; they do not pretend to discover by empirical observation laws of behavior or change of these wholes. Their task is rather, if I may so call it, to *constitute* these wholes, to provide schemes of structural relationships…"[41]

For Hayek then, knowledge is about constructing a vocabulary which we use to construct rather than "discover" relationships. Knowledge, in particular with respect to the social sciences is always normative in its character because all knowledge requires teleological claims about how concepts are related to one another. Let us now turn to Oakeshott before combining their articulations of skepticism into a set of conservative epistemic principles.

[39] Hayek, "The Facts of the Social Sciences", 81.
[40] Hayek, "The Facts of the Social Sciences", 91.
[41] Hayek, "The Facts of the Social Sciences", 90.

Oakeshott and Skepticism

Oakeshott defines knowledge or "understanding" as:

"… understanding as an engagement is an exertion; it is the resolve to inhabit an every more intelligible, or an ever less mysterious world. This unconditional engagement of understanding I shall call 'theorizing'. It is an engagement to abate mystery rather than to achieve definitive understanding."[42]

For Oakeshott, the pursuit of knowledge is not the pursuit of something definitive or settled, it is rather the pursuit of increased (but never complete), clarity. Knowledge is only ever a process, an always incomplete striving for better than what has come before. Regarding the object of knowledge, Oakeshott suggests that they are emergent, the product of a happenstantial thought that two[43] things may be alike or unalike:

"Ineligibles emerge out of misty intimations of intelligibility when noticings become thoughts and when, in virtue of distinguishing and remembering likenesses and unlikeness in what is going on, we come to inhabit a world of recognizables. These recognitions may often be vague, obscure, and tentative.... But continually gone over, rehearsed, revised, and refined they endow what is going on with the intelligibility of familiar characteristics."[44]

What Oakeshott means by ineligibles is the specific vocabulary we use to talk about things in the world. To Oakeshott, at some hypothetical time zero, a human would have no concepts that would allow them to conceive of anything other than particular objects. In other words, categories like "human, table, red, etc." would not be available, there would be only an individual's personal experiences with particular objects. To render these particular objects "intelligible" requires a way of grouping objects into categories: rather than *this* object and *that* object we would have this and that object that while distinct are both "tables". As our experience develops, we refine, develop, and alter our categorizations which Oakeshott also refers to as "familiar characteristics" and "facts".

"The engagement of understanding, then, begins in an already understood: a verdict or what we ordinarily call a 'fact'. But this verdict is the contingent starting-place of a critical inquiry; it is an understanding waiting to be understood. This first account which a theorist gives to himself of a 'going-on' has, like all understanding, a conditional sufficiency; but for him it is an invitation not to accept but to interrogate it…. there can be no absolute distinction between 'fact' and 'theorem'. A fact has no finality and no authority over further adventures in understanding: it is a first and conditionally acceptable understanding of a 'going-on'. And a theorem is not an unconditional terminus; it, also, is an understanding waiting to be understood… Temporary platforms of conditional

[42] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 1.

[43] To provide a somewhat more plausible argument, we might concede that it would require more than merely two "ineligibles" in order to establish coherent differences. Were we in the absence of all knowledge of smells, to smell a daisy and a rose for example, we would never be able to establish the category of "sweetness" as the two scents would be so radically different that we would never think to associate them. It would only be with the addition of a multitude of different smells such as musk, citrus, etc. that we would be able to understand the daisy and rose as both being "sweet" relative to our catalogue of other smells.

[44] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 3.

understanding are always being reached, and the theorist may turn aside to explore them. But each is an arrival, an enlightenment, and a point of departure. The notion of an unconditional or definitive understanding may hover in the background, but it has no part in the adventure. "[45]

As we see, while facts are treated as fixed in a particular context or in the investigation of a particular "going-on", this is always a temporary situation. Outside of the context of a particular investigation, facts are always contingent and potentially subject to revision or obsolescence. Knowledge always begins from a place that lacks absolute certainty for it must always begin from an assumption that is treated as true but its truth is itself an assumption that were it to be false would require rethinking of the knowledge that the initial assumption had led to. Because of this conditionality, there is no distinction that can be made between fact and theorem, or at least we cannot coherently say that facts are "inherently" more certain than theorems. Facts are merely assumptions that we have decided to hold as constant for the sake of conducting a given inquiry (what Oakeshott refers to as a "going-on"), and theorems are the postulates we use to create new knowledge. A further piece of Oakeshottian vocabulary is his use of the term "identification", a term which is likely to invite more confusion than clarity:

"By identification, then, I mean an understanding in which we take a hold upon 'goings-on', not in terms of casual and marginal resemblances and differences of recognizable characteristics, but in terms of ideal characters specified as compositions of characteristics. In identifying a 'going-on' we do not need to announce the specifications we are relying upon, but if we are asked to account for our conclusion we can only point to the marks which specify an ideal character and to the manner in which they are represented in what we are attending to as the reasons for it: 'for these reasons I understand that what I am attending to is a dance, a book, a wild flower, a proposition, a performance of *King Lear.*"[46]

What Oakeshott means by "identification" is the idea that we cannot understand a concept such as a "table" by enumerating a list of characteristics (four legs, made of wood, etc.), but rather only with reference to some idealized conception of what we expect a table to be like, perhaps with reference to other tables, or idealized concepts that are similar to but distinct from tables such as desks, bars, counters, etc. Oakeshott unfortunately confuses the characterization with the addition of the following passage:

"But a 'going-on' identified in terms of an ideal character itself specified in terms of characteristics is not only an understanding of a certain sort (namely, a verdict); it is also an invitation. It invites the theorist to extend his understanding of it by investigating the relationship with other such identities. Indeed, theorizing here has reached what I call a platform of conditional understanding which invites exploration."[47]

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[45] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 2.
[46] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 5.
[47] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 6.

The problem is that Oakeshott has now suggested that the ideal characterization is itself understood in terms of enumerated characteristics, but this cannot be the whole story. In our table example, the table cannot be coherently understood as a combination of "legs, wood or plastic, having objects placed on it, etc." because such an enumerated definition alone will never be sufficient to capture all instances of the characterization, or it would exclude obvious objects that should be included (metal or bone tables for example). I think in this instance we should omit this particular idea from Oakeshott's epistemology and chalk the inconsistency up to imprecise writing . It seems to run against the grain of what he said in the previous passage, and the major thrust of the current passage is the idea of theorizing as a "platform of conditional understanding" which we discussed above. What Oakeshott means by "a platform of conditional understanding" is that in any inquiry, we must hold a host of assumptions constant and these assumptions then become the foundation on which the subsequent inquiry proceeds.

We have developed the idea of a "platform of conditional understanding", from which further knowledge inquiries are then launched, but this alone does not tell the entire story of how we structure knowledge. For any individual 'going-on' there might be multiples platforms of conditional understanding that might be appropriate to its analysis. For our table example, we might be interested in studying the table in relation to other tables (how well does it hold objects for example), but we might also be interested in understanding the table as an aesthetic 'going-on'. These categories, Oakeshott refers to variously as an "order of inquiry", and "a science" which Oakeshott suggests is the ideal type of such an order. The specific instance of "this particular table with relation to the study of all tables generally", he refers to as "a particular idiom of inquiry".[48]

Once we have developed a conditional platform of understanding, we then begin to interpret the world in terms of one or more of these paradigms. To understand a table as a table, and not for example as a work of art, requires us to step into one of these paradigms long enough for us to conduct our inquiry, and to treat the going-on for a moment as if one paradigm was the only way we could understand it as contributing to knowledge:

"… this engagement to be perpetually *en voyage* may be arrested without being denied. The theorist who drops anchor here or there and puts out his equipment of theoretic hooks and nets in order to take the fish of the locality,

[48] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 16-17.

interrupts but does not betray his calling. And indeed, the unconditional engagement of understanding must be arrested and inquiry must remain focused upon a *this* if any identity is to become intelligible in terms of its postulates."[49]

Implications of Hayek and Oakeshott's Epistemology

Having outlined the basic elements of Hayek and Oakeshott's epistemology, we are now in a position to systematize it and show some of the implications of these ideas that are not developed by the authors directly. At the end of the section we will have developed a total of five principles of epistemic conservative thought. First, both Hayek and Oakeshott indicate that knowledge arises from the development of patterns by knowledge seeking agents. In Oakeshott's understanding, the creation of knowledge involves two way communication between the object of a study and the paradigm (or discipline, science, etc.) by which the object is studied. On the one hand, the paradigm is constructed by categorizing a variety of objects of inquiry as like and unlike, creating distinction between different ways of thinking about particular objects. However once the paradigm is in place, objects of inquiry become understandable only with reference to a paradigm. Our very notions of intelligibility "this object as an object of this kind" are dependent on there being an idea of what that kind of object should be. To have, knowledge requires that we have an understanding that is created from the object and developed into a paradigm, but knowledge is also constituted by the way the paradigm influences our understanding of objects. New knowledge will therefore always be informed by our prior paradigmatic understandings. To put it a slightly different way, knowledge is built on the foundations of prior knowledge, it is never "discovered" but only ever developed out of our previous understandings.

Hayek too sees knowledge as constituted by patterns. Like Oakeshott, he thinks that the first steps in the creation of knowledge is for a knowledge seeking agent to articulate a pattern that they observe. These patterns are then built into orders which are categorized by the number and kinds of distinct variables that they are constituted by. We see here what can be thought of as an exact parallel to Oakeshott's somewhat confusing description of the "ideal characters" that constitute the parameters of a given field of inquiry. Orders can only be coherently understood with respect to what actors think and say about them, they cannot be understood as externally existing entities which are discovered by knowledge seekers, but rather the variables that

[49] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 11.

constitute the study of an order as an order are the product of human agency. This is the first of our principles: knowledge arises from observed patterns.

From both authors we also see the idea that there is no clear distinction that can be made between fact and theory. Because a fact is only a fact within the context of a particular paradigm of investigation, facts have no special ontological status that puts them "above" a theory. The special status of facts is merely that within a given paradigm there is an agreement to not consider that particular going on as subject to investigation, it is considered fixed until investigations into other goings on give us reason to reconsider the understanding we had of that particular fact. Facts are the starting point for theorizing and theorizing is the way in which we come to describe new facts, the two concepts are intertwined and it is a mistake to think that the act of treating fact as non-contingent for periods of time elevates them to a status of something that accords with an absolute truth value. This is our second epistemic idea.

Our third idea is not explicitly stated by Hayek and Oakeshott but rather is implied by their thinking, and this is a rejection of essentialist thinking. By essentialism I mean the idea that for a given object of inquiry there exists a group of attributes or properties that define it as that object, and that these properties would exist *independently* of any human actor that referred to them as such. For us to reject this view however means we must accept what may seem like counterintuitive or even bizarre propositions. We would have to accept for example, that were all humans to vanish from the earth tomorrow, a table would no longer be a table because the concept of a table requires a human agent that assigns teleological purposes to things. The "table" would still hold things on it, still be in the same place relative to other objects in the room and still stand right-side up on the floor, but would not be a table. To put it a slightly different way, the state of affairs would still be "so"; it would not however be "so-called", because human concepts have no transcendental meaning beyond our uses of them.

The fourth idea, is that because concepts are only given meaning by humans (rather than being "extracted" from reality), these concepts are always filtered through our language. Because we have rejected essentialism, we must admit that there is no such thing as a completely neutral definition of a concept that is free from the contingencies of how it is used. There can be no check on uses of language that allows us to say that a particular use of a word is appropriate or proper. Such as cashiering can only take place within a community that shares a conception of

how a word can be used legitimately. There is for example no authentic definition of what a planet is. Were we to refer to the sun as a planet for example, this is not an error that can be rectified by an appeal to nature. It is not because the sun is "actually" a star that this usage is wrong, but because it is the sensibility of a contextually relevant group that the usage is inappropriate. What this means for the social sciences is that a concept like justice or virtue can have no relevant meaning outside of a particular associative community. Such a community could have a robust and far reaching conception of justice, for example an individual could refer to an action that is "clearly" unjust and this could be intelligible to all their interlocutors, but the "clearness" of the injustice is because that community shares a similar understanding of what justice is, not because in this particular instance an extra-human understanding of justice was able to penetrate through a shroud of human ignorance.

The fifth and final idea, is that there can be no knowledge that is not infused with normativity, nor is knowledge capable of adjudicating impartially between normative positions. We saw that according to both Hayek and Oakeshott, that there is no hard and fast distinction to be made between fact and theory because the two are dependent on, and constantly reinventing one another. Even were we to attempt to make a distinction (as Oakeshott does), between humans studying non-human phenomena such as the cosmos, and studying human phenomena such as the social sciences; the fact that our definitions inevitably involve notions about the "purposes" of concepts, means that even where the object of study is not humans themselves, there is a normative element inherent within them. What this means is that while we may use facts to help us adjudicate between normative positions, this could never be a purely value free proposition. If, for instance we were trying to determine what kind of electoral system we thought would be best, it would require us to pre-specify what sorts of traits we thought were desirable. If we valued proportionality and narrowly representative parties for example, then proportional representation might be desirable, but notice that this requires us to make normative claims about what features are desirable before we ascertain any "facts" about what the potential options are. Facts cannot be purely neutral arbiters between differing normative opinions, they can only help us make decisions once we have already settled on what we think is normatively desirable.

To summarize, our five epistemic conservative ideas are as follows:

1) Knowledge arises from observed patterns.
2) There is no clear distinction that can be made between facts and theories.
3) Essentialism is rejected.
4) The way we talk about knowledge is always filtered through language.
5) There is no way separate knowledge production and normativity.

With these ideas in hand, we can use them as a starting point to develop conservative skepticism distinct from both traditional and liberal conservative notions of purposelessness. In the remainder of this essay, I will turn to the thought of Joseph Schumpeter, illustrating that his social and political thought fits the five characteristics of conservative epistemic skepticism. I will then provide some examples of how this way of thinking can help us think about salient political issues, and conclude that it would be useful to think of it as a new kind of conservative political thought that I call epistemic conservatism.

Before undertaking that task however, it would be wise to clarify the relationship between traditional and liberal conservatism on the one hand, and Schumpeter's epistemic conservatism on the other. What I hope that I have shown in the previous sections is that while liberal and traditional conservatism have elements of epistemic skepticism inherent in them (Hayek and Oakeshott), or inveighl against "ideological" thinking in favour of "prudential" thinking (Kirk), all fall short of fully developing these ideas when it comes time to articulate their visions of a purposeless politics. As we will see in our section on Schumpeter, the epistemic skepticism of liberal and traditional conservatives should naturally lead them to view political purposes as social constructs that are contingent and may change. When they articulate their ideas of purposelessness however, they treat political ends as fixed as with Kirk and Scruton's appeals to human nature, Hayek's conflation of politics and social advancement, and Oakeshott's attempt to make a distinction between civil and enterprise associations. Thus, neither branch of conservatism succeeds in fully fleshing out or developing the ideas that follow from their epistemic thinking. To my mind this is a shame, not so much because I believe that such thinking holds the key to reconciling these diverse views or revitalizing conservative politics, but rather helps us to think about how we think about political questions or what is a relevantly political questions in new an interesting ways.

Patterns and Synthesis

We will begin our discussion of Schumpeter by drawing a parallel between the idea that knowledge arises from patterns, and Schumpeter's concept of synthesis. Schumpeter characterizes synthesis as an exceptional method of knowledge production that runs against some of our traditional intuitions about how knowledge is produced. By juxtaposing synthesis with conventional knowledge production, we will see that Schumpeter fits the mold of conceiving of knowledge as based on pattern recognition and being understood in terms of paradigms.

"I said a moment ago that Marx's synthesis embraces all those historical events – such as wars, revolutions, legislative changes- and all those social institutions… that non-Marxian economists are wont to treat as disturbing factors or as data… No longer is "politics" an independent factor that may and must be abstracted from in an investigation of fundamentals, and, when it does intrude, plays according to one's preferences either the role of a naughty boy who viciously tampers with the machine when the engineer's back is turned, or else the role of a *deus ex machina* by virtue of the mysterious wisdom of a doubtful species of mammals referred to as "statesmen". No – politics itself is being determined by the structure and state of the economic process and becomes a conductor of effects as completely within the range of economic theory as an purchase or sale… Once more, nothing is easier to understand than the fascination exerted by a synthesis which does for us just this."[50]

In the typical mode of the production of knowledge, the scholar is confined to their singular field of inquiry. The economist for example, must treat data outside of their competence such as political or sociological phenomena as variables that are external to their inquiry properly understood. In terms of the epistemic ideas we discussed before, we find echoes of how Hayek and Oakeshott characterized the development and use of intellectual disciplines. Within the realm of a given discipline, there are a host of assumptions that inform the kinds of claims and knowledge that may be produced. Where the assumptions that are presently available are not sufficient, we are left with an explanation that is workable only insofar as we are satisfied with an appeal to another discipline. We see this for example in theories that attempt to explain state behaviour in terms of relative power where "power" is defined broadly as military, economic, and social influence. The theory does not attempt or need to explain where each of these factors come from or how they are utilized in particular instances (although good theories might provide case-studies), what is important is that political power is being understood in terms of powers that are external to politics itself and the study of what constitutes those powers is the subject of a separate discipline.

[50] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 47.

Schumpeter defines synthesis as the "coordination of the methods and results of different lines of advance…" and notes that it "is a difficult thing which few are competent to tackle."[51] By "different lines of advance", we must understand him as describing something more than merely an interdisciplinary approach, for interdisciplinary fields are themselves constituted by a theoretical apparatus understood in terms of agreed upon assumptions. Synthesis is the weaving together of the conceptual apparatus and vocabulary from different disciplines into the same argument. By importing vocabulary, synthesis also imports the normative implications and background assumptions that comes with that vocabulary.

"We have seen how in the Marxian argument sociology and economics pervade each other. In intent, and to some degree also in actual practice, they are one… Thus the economic category "labor" and the social class "proletariat" are on principle at least, made congruent, in fact identical…. Or capital in the Marxian system is capital only if in the hands of a distinct capitalist class. The same things, if in the hands of the workmen, are not capital… The ghostly concepts of economic theory begin to breathe. The bloodless theorem descends into *agmen, pulverem et clamorem*; without losing its logical quality, it is no longer a mere proposition about logical properties of a system of abstraction; it is the stroke of a brush that is painting the wild jumble of social life."[52]

Synthesis thus preserves the form of logical argument while substituting variables that when interpreted within the framework of a different discipline do not in fact logically follow:

"Now, though Marx *defines* capitalism sociologically, i.e. By the institution of private control over means of production, the *mechanics* of capitalist society are provided by his economic theory. This economic theory is to show how he sociological data embodied in such conceptions as class, class interest, class behavior, exchange between classes, work out through the medium of economic values… and how they generate precisely the economic processes that will eventually break its own institutional framework and at the same time create the conditions for the emergence of another social world. This particular theory of social classes is the analytic tool which, by linking the economic interpretation of history with the concepts of the profit economy, marshals all social facts, makes all phenomena confocal. It is therefore not simply a theory of an individual phenomenon which is to explain that phenomenon and nothing else. It has an organic function which is really much more important to the Marxian system than the measure of success with which it solves the immediate problem… There are and always have been, some enthusiasts who admired the Marxian theory of social classes as such. But far more understandable are the feelings of all those who admire the force and grandeur of that synthesis as a whole to the point of being ready to condone almost any number of shortcomings in the component parts."[53]

We saw earlier that Hayek articulated that different disciplines would be able to achieve different degrees of falsifiability based no the kinds of assumptions they worked under. We also see this idea in the thought of Schumpeter although with a slightly different phraseology:

[51] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 46.
[52] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 45-46.
[53] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 20.

"Now the rational attitude presumably forced itself on the human mind primarily from economic necessity; it is the everyday economic task to which we as a race owe our elementary training in rational thought and behavior – I have no hesitation in saying that all logic is derived from the pattern of the economic decision or, to use a pet phrase of mine, that the economic pattern is the matrix of logic. This seems plausible for the following reason. Suppose that some "primitive" man uses that most elementary of all machines, already appreciated by our gorilla cousins, a stick, and that this stick breaks in his hand. If he tries to remedy the damage by reciting a magic formula – he might for instance murmur Supply and Demand or Planning and Control in the expectation that if he repeats this exactly nine times the two fragments will unite again – then he is within the precincts of pre-rational thought. If he gropes for the best way to join the fragments or to procure another stick, he is being rational in our sense. Both attitudes are possible of course. But it stands to reason that in this and most other economic actions the failure of a magic formula to work will be much more obvious than could be any failure of a formula that was to make our man victorious in combat or luck in love or to lift a load of guilt from his conscience. This is due to the inexorable definiteness and, in most cases, the quantitative character that distinguish the economic from other spheres of human action, perhaps also to the unemotional drabness of the unending rhythm of economic wants and satisfactions."[54]

Schumpeter is trying to show that the economic way of thinking and disciplines informed by and related to economics are closely related to rational (by which he means logical or mechanistic), forms of thought. In other disciplines such as love or combat, the larger number of variables at play may make it more difficult to ascertain if a less rationalistic mechanism such as a charm or mantra is effective or not. We thus see that in disciplines such as the humanities or social sciences, the degree of potential falsifiability is different just as Hayek articulated earlier in the work.

Returning to the concept of synthesis, it might surprise us that Schumpeter would speak so approvingly of a form of knowledge inquiry that sounds as if its greatest virtue is its propensity to deceive; is it not illegitimate for the entire thrust of one's argument to be based on a blurring of definitions? On the one hand yes, and this is one reason why Schumpeter spends so much time dissecting Marx's style of argumentation, and showing how it is that this process occurs. On the other hand, Schumpeter, like Hayek and Oakeshott does not conceive of a hard and fast distinction that can be made between facts and theories, and it is to this idea that we now turn.

Facts and Theory Inseparable

While Schumpeter's articulation of synthesis might be somewhat at odds with how we intuitively conceive of knowledge production, it is not at all alien to the way Hayek and Oakeshott thought about knowledge. Hayek and Oakeshott were very prescient to the idea that it is not possible to draw a hard and fast distinction between fact and theory. I noted earlier that we

[54] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 122-123.

often think of facts as being in the service of the creation of theory, but that both Hayek and Oakeshott would characterize this as a misnomer. In order to think of something as a fact that is relevant to some "x", it requires that we have a pre-existing theory about how that a fact is relevantly related to that "x". While Marxian synthesis is certainly a more extreme version of this sort of characterization, it does not run against the standard principles of knowledge generation.

"Now Marx saw this process of industrial change more clearly and he realized its pivotal importance more fully than any other economist of his time. This does not mean that he correctly understood its nature or correctly analyzed its mechanism. With him, that mechanism resolves itself into mere mechanics of masses of capital. He has no adequate theory of enterprise and his failure to distinguish the entrepreneur from the capitalist, together with a faulty theoretical technique accounts for many cases of *non sequitur* and for many mistakes. But the mere vision of the process was in itself sufficient for many of the purposes that Marx had in mind."[55]

Part of what Schumpeter finds admirable in Marx is that while Marx could not adequately explain why he thought capitalism would collapse (at least according to Schumpeter), the fact that Marx had such a strong "vision" of what he thought would happen enabled him to push the frontiers of knowledge far further than if he had been confined to articulating what he had the mechanisms to explain:

"The reader will recall my emphasis on the distinction between one's theory and one's vision in the case of Marx. It is however always important to remember that the ability to see things in their correct perspective may be, and often in, divorced from the ability to reason correctly and vice versa. That is why a man may be a very good theorist and yet talk absolute nonsense whenever confronted with the task of diagnosing a concrete historical pattern as a whole."[56]

Recall that Oakeshott thought of "facts" as a platform of conditional understanding, where different patterns and mechanisms would lead to linkages from one platform to another. Schumpeter's characterization of Marx allows for the higher platform of understanding to become a stable new platform of inquiry without requiring there to be solid mechanisms that link the two platforms. To put it slightly differently, while Marx phrases the new social fact of capitalism transitioning to socialism as an inevitability, if the mechanisms for why this would be so are found lacking, then the new platform is no longer being "pushed" inevitably from structural factors below, but rather becomes a freestanding platform for further inquiry. This new platform of inquiry facilitates two directions of further knowledge production. On the one hand it gives us a new platform for further "upward" inquiry (what will socialism as a social fact look

[55] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 32.
[56] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 76, ft. 3.

like), but it also facilitates knowledge production "downward", when other authors attempt to link the new platform of knowledge back down to the original using alternative mechanisms:

"Thus the author of so many misconceptions was also the first to visualize what even at the present time is still the economic theory of the future for which we are slowly and laboriously accumulating stone and mortar, statistical facts and functional equations. And he not only conceived that idea, but he tried to carry it out. All the shortcomings that disfigure his work must, because of the great purpose his argument attempted to serve, be judges differently even where they are not, as they are in some cases, fully redeemed thereby."[57]

"The doctrine that the capitalist economy will inevitably break down for purely economic reasons has not been established by Marx... On the one hand, some of his propositions about future facts are essential to the orthodox argument, especially about the inevitable increase of misery and oppression are untenable; on the other hand, the breakdown of the capitalist order would not necessarily follow from these propositions, even if they were all true. But other factors in the situation that the capitalist process tend to develop were correctly seen by Marx, as was, so I hope to show, the ultimate outcome itself. Concerning the latter, it may be necessary to replace the Marxian nexus by another, and the term "Breakdown" may then turn out to be a misnomer, particularly if it be understood in the sense of a breakdown caused but the failure of the capitalist engine of production; but this does not affect the essence of the doctrine, however much it may affect its formulation and some of its implications."[58]

If we initially had doubts as to the utility of Marx's research project, we see that it is an essential component for enabling Schumpeter's own inquiry. Schumpeter uses Marx's idea of the decline of capitalism as a platform from which to theorize "down" and explain the mechanism he thinks will lead to the decline of capitalism, and "up" to suggest what a socialist society will look like. Both of his accounts differ starkly from Marx's, but Schumpeter's inquiry is possible only because he can treat the idea of a transition from capitalism to socialism as a foundation from which to pursue his inquiry.

We now see why synthesis is both problematic and a useful tool in skilled hands. On the one hand, it enables an author to provide justification for their normative vision above and beyond what they would be able to by ordinary means. This allows the author to treat their normative vision as a "fact", enabling them to use it as a foundation for the creation of new knowledge. It also allows for other authors to use this new "fact" as a jumping off point for their own knowledge inquiries, pushing the frontiers of knowledge further and faster than would be possible without synthesis. One final point of interest we might make with respect to Schumpeter on this topic, we see that in matters related to the social sciences, there are situations in which an appeal to matters of "fact" may be inappropriate:

[57] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 43-44.
[58] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 56.

"… rational recognition of the economic performance of capitalism and of the hopes it holds out for the future would require an almost impossible moral feat by the have-not. That performance stands out only if we take a long-run view; any pro-capitalist argument must rest on long-run considerations. In the short run, it is profits and inefficiencies that dominate the picture. In order to accept his lot, the leveller or the chartist of old would have had to comfort himself with hopes for his great-grandchildren. In order to identify himself with the capitalist system, the unemployed of today would have completely to forget his personal fate and the politician of today his personal ambition. The long-run interests of society are so entirely lodged with the upper strata of bourgeois society that it is perfectly natural for people to look upon them as the interest of that class only. For the masses, it is the short-run view that counts."[59]

According to Schumpeter, despite the fact that one of the strongest arguments in favour of capitalism is its expected long-run performance, it is not in fact a relevant argument in many circumstances. The mere fact of capitalism's performance is only relevant if one is willing to make a normative claim that long-run performance is a more significant consideration than an individual's own perception of their personal plight of that of their families. Moreover, the blind advocate for capitalism does not realize that from the perception of the observer, they are making a further normative claim that the interests of the bourgeoisie as a class (which are one and the same as the long-run interest of capitalism), are more important than any other class interest or individual's circumstance. We thus see that for a given fact to be relevantly interpreted, it requires one or more background normative assumptions that different individuals may or may not agree upon or recognize in the argument of another. We thus see that fact and normativity are intrinsically connected, but as we will see in the following section, this is further complicated by fact that language is the medium through which all knowledge claims and discussion occurs.

Knowledge Filtered Through Language

Throughout *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* Schumpeter provides a variety of examples of how unconventional or contested uses of language can alter meanings or create deceptive argumentation. We saw earlier some examples of this in our discussion of Marx's synthesis where for example he defined "the economic category "labor" and the social class "proletariat" are on principle at least, made congruent, in fact identical…. Or capital in the Marxian system is capital only if in the hands of a distinct capitalist class. The same things, if in the hands of the workmen, are not capital". This was also what allowed Marx to shift between economics and sociology with such deftness: "Now, though Marx *defines* capitalism

[59] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 146-147.

sociologically, i.e. By the institution of private control over means of production, the *mechanics* of capitalist society are provided by his economic theory."

We see this most clearly where Schumpeter notes that part of what gives Marx's theory of exploitation its force and vigor is that Marx uses "exploitation" in an unconventional way:

"[The capitalist] can exact in this sense, more actual hours of labor than they have paid for. Since the resulting products also sell at a price proportional to the man-hours that enter into their production, there is a difference between the two values – arising from nothing but the *modus operandi* of the Marxian law of values – which necessarily and by virtue of the mechanism of capitalist markets goes to the capitalist. This is the Surplus Value. By appropriating it the capitalist "exploits" labor. Though he pays to the laborers not less than the full value of their labor potential and receives from consumers not more than the full value of the products he sells… Let us admire, in passing, the pedagogics of it: however special and removed from its ordinary sense the meaning might be which the word Exploitation now acquires, however doubtful the support which it derives from the Natural Law and the philosophies of the schoolmen and the writers of the Enlightenment, it is received into the pale of scientific argument after all and thus serves the purpose of comforting the disciple marching on to fight his battles."[60]

Here Schumpeter has noted that while ordinarily we would think of "exploitation" as having connotations of injustice or unfairness, Marx's analysis does not indicate any sort of underhanded dealing on the part of the capitalist. Each party receives precisely what it is they have agreed to. By using the term "exploitation" to mean "normatively undesirable" rather than "unjust" as we would ordinarily think about that word, Marx thus succeeded in injecting a normative argument into what was originally a purely descriptive account of the mechanism of capitalism. We see a related example in his use of the term crisis:

"In most cases Marx used the term crisis in its ordinary sense, speaking of the crisis of 1825 or that of 1847 as other people do. But he also used it in a different sense. Believing that capitalist evolution would some day disrupt the institutional framework of capitalist society, he thought that before the actual breakdown occurred, capitalism would begin to work with increasing friction and display the symptoms of fatal illness. To this stage, to be visualized of course as a more or less prolonged historical period, he applied the same term. And he displays a tendency to link those recurrent crises with this unique crisis of the capitalist order. He even suggests that the former may in a sense be looked upon as previews of the ultimate breakdown. Since to many readers this might look like a clue to Marx's theory of crises in the ordinary sense, it is necessary to point out that the factors which according to Marx will be responsible for the ultimate breakdown cannot, without a good dose of additional hypotheses, be made responsible for the recurrent depressions, and that the clue does not get us beyond the trivial proposition that the "expropriation of the expropriators" may be an easier matter in a depression than it would be in a boom.[61]

Here Schumpeter has illustrated that a change in vocabulary can serve a slightly different purpose than in the example above. Whereas in the first example an unorthodox use of language was able to transparently communicate normative judgements, in this case it is used to support

[60] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 27.
[61] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 41-42.

the argument by hiding a non sequitur. By using the word crisis in these two different ways, Marx was able to use periodic crises as evidence of the wider crisis within capitalism without having to explicitly make the argument that this was the case (which as Schumpeter notes would have been false). A further example is provided by Schumpeter's discussion of the term monopoly. On the one hand monopoly has a technical meaning in the field of economics:

"Monopolist means Single Seller. Literally therefore anyone is a monopolist who sells anything that is not in every respect, wrapping and location and service included, exactly like what other people sell: every grocer or every haberdasher, or every seller of "Good Humors" on a road that is not simply lined with sellers of the same brand of ice cream. This however is not what we mean when talking about monopolists. We mean only those single sellers whose markets are not open to the intrusion of would-be producers of the same commodity and of actual producers of similar ones or, speaking slightly more technically, only those single sellers who face a given demand schedule that is severely independent of their own action as well as any reactions to their action by other concerns… But if accordingly we do define it like this, then it becomes evident immediately that pure cases of long-run monopoly must be of the rarest occurrence and that even tolerable approximations to the requirements of the concept must be still rarer than are cases of perfect competition…."[62]

According to Schumpeter, over the course of time, the term monopoly took on a normative meaning of opprobrium, at first stemming from the use of monopolies by the English government which both satisfied the economic inefficiencies and the subsequent indignation. On the other hand, later examples of monopolist behaviour have not always involved these economic inefficiencies, and indeed alleged monopolists may in fact provide a service if they benefit from economies of scale or concentration of talent that would otherwise be unavailable to non-monopolists.

"Why then all this talk about monopoly?... In the Anglo-American world monopoly has been cursed and associated with functionless exploitation every since, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was English administrative practice to create monopoly positions in large numbers which, on the one hand, answered fairly well to the theoretical pattern of monopolist behavior and, on the other hand, fully justified the wave of indignation that impressed even the great Elizabeth….. The theory of simple and discriminating monopoly teaches that, excepting a limiting case, monopoly price is higher and monopoly output is smaller than competitive price and competitive output. This is true provided that the methods and organization of production – and everything else – are exactly the same in both cases. Actually however there are superior methods available to the monopolist which either are not available at all to a crowd of competitors or are not available to them so readily: for there are advantages which, though not strictly unattainable on the competitive level of enterprise, are as a matter of fact secured only on the monopoly level, for instance, because monopolization may increase the sphere of influence of the better, and decrease the sphere of influence of the inferior, brains, or because the monopoly enjoys a disproportionately higher financial standing. Whenever this is so, then that proposition is no longer true. In other words, this element of the case for competition may fail completely because monopoly prices are not necessarily higher or monopoly outputs smaller than competitive prices and outputs would be at the levels of productive and organizational efficiency that are within the reach of the type of firm compatible with the competitive hypothesis."[63]

[62] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 99-101.
[63] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 99-101.

Schumpeter's argument is not just that it is incorrect or unfair to be critical of monopolists in this way, but rather that the very argument that is being advanced is incoherent because the argument flies in the face of the observed data. That is not to say that Schumpeter thinks that one or the other of the uses of the term is more appropriate or "correct"; both uses are clear and unambiguous. It is merely that in the technical economic use, the term is much more specific than commonly thought, and when used in the sense of opprobrium, the meaning is often divorced from any data that would support the normative claim. Again, this is not necessarily a problem since we do this all the time with all kinds of words. However Schumpeter wants to alert us to the fact that we might *think* the technical meaning and the normative claim are related (and indeed at one point they were), but that is no longer always the case.

We see a similar situation in the use of the word "property". According to Schumpeter, while in the past "property" was simply an item such as an implement, some land, or a building, the capitalist impulse led to a metamorphosis of the concept. "Property" now signifies an abstract share or portion of what might be a really existing, tangible entity; or today it might even stand for a portion of a variety of theoretical shares as in the case of a mutual fund. According to Schumpeter, this change in object leads to a change in attitudes toward property. Because there is no one owner who feels responsible for *his* building or business, the very concept one's "property" being expropriated or manipulated fades away:

"Thus the capitalist process pushes into the background all those institutions, the institutions of property and free contracting in particular, that expressed the needs and ways of the truly "private" economic activity. Where it does not abolish them, as it already has abolished free contracting in the labor market, it attains the same end by shifting the relative importance of existing legal forms – the legal forms pertaining the corporate business for instance as against those pertaining to the partnership or individual firm – or by changing their contents or meaning. The capitalist process, by substituting a mere parcel of shares for the walls of and the machines in a factory takes the life out of the idea of property. It loosens the grip that once was so strong – the grip in the sense of the legal right and the actual ability to do as one pleases with one's own; the grip also in the sense that the holder of the title loses the will to fight, economically, physically, politically, for "his" factory and his control over it, to die if necessary on its steps. And this evaporation of what we may term the material substance of property – its visible and touchable reality – affects not only the attitude of holders but also that of the workmen and the public in general. Dematerialized, defunctionalized and absentee ownership does not impress and call for the moral allegiance as the vital form of property did."[64]

The final example comes from Schumpeter's discussion of marriage and bourgeois culture. Schumpeter argues that the capitalism continually undermines the bourgeois social structures that it depends upon and that the argument is no less persuasive just because it is

[64] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 141-142.

incapable of being measured statistically. Schumpeter uses the example of the marriage rate which is problematic because the term "marriage" does not have fixed normative connotations. In the medieval period marriage may have implied a political or commercial alliance between families, in the 1900s marriage may have signified a first step toward the creation of a new nuclear family, while contemporarily it may signal a certain type of emotional attachment or a signal of a particular hope without any implication of a family in the future. Schumpeter's point, is that the only way one could verify his hypothesis statistically would be know what proportion of marriages were established or dissolved with particular bourgeois aims in mind.

"Still more important however is another "internal cause", viz. the disintegration of the bourgeois family. The facts to which I am referring are too well known to need explicit statement. To men and women in modern capitalist societies, family life and parenthood mean less than they meant before and hence are less powerful molders of behavior; the rebellious son or daughter who professes contempt for "Victorian" standards is, however incorrectly, expressing an undeniable truth. The weight of these facts is not impaired by our inability to measure them statistically. The marriage rate proves nothing because the term Marriage covers as many sociological meanings as does the term Property, and the kind of alliance that used to be formed by the marriage contract may completely die out without any change in the legal construction or in the frequency of the contract. Nor is divorce rate more significant. It does not matter how many marriages are dissolved by judicial decree – what matters is how many lack the content essential to the old pattern."[65]

We have seen that Schumpeter displayed a keen awareness that knowledge is always filtered through the medium of language and that as language evolves, concepts take on new normative baggage. What we are saying with a given phraseology, and how we understand our previously existing knowledge will shift along with linguistic meanings. This understanding of the interface of language and knowledge means that Schumpeter would deny any sort of an essentialist conception of knowledge. According to Schumpeter, there is no pure or essential definition of a concept like property, marriage, or capitalism nor could one ever be "discovered" and quantified statistically because the ideas that people have about such concepts are shifting and malleable. We might therefore characterize Schumpeter's understanding of what it means to have knowledge as one resting on intersubjective agreement. Our understanding of a concept like property, or whether we conceive of monopoly as a problem that needs solving, can only be understood as a product of an understanding that is shared among a group of individuals.

[65] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 157.

Essentialism Rejected

We see the importance of Schumpeter's rejection of essentialist conceptions in favour of intersubjectively defined ones in his discussion of democracy. According to Schumpeter, the problem with understanding democracy is *not* as some would think that there are many different definitions of its constituent sub-components (people, rulership, etc.) and it is therefore difficult to know which of these are "fundamentally" correct; indeed, as we will see Schumpeter would think of categorization like this trivially easy.

"It is not because it covers as many meanings as there are combinations between all the possible definitions of the concept "people (*demos,* the Roman *populous*) and all the possible definitions of the concept "to rule" (*kratein)*, and because these definitions are not independent of the argument about democracy. As regards the first concept, the *populous* in the constitutions sense may exclude slaves completely and other inhabitants partially; the law may recognize any number of *status* between slavery and full or even privileged citizenship. And irrespective of legal discrimination, different groups considered themselves as the People at different times."[66]

The problem is rather that the concept of democracy is the heir to so much normative baggage that the core elements that should make democracy easy to define are in fact obscured. Democracy when used in this way does not describe a state of affairs or a method of deciding elections, it is rather a sentiment or feeling, a synonym for "good" or "just" or a way of expressing approval for something (we often call something a democratic decision when it is in agreement with our normative ideals not when it is decided by a particular mechanism for example).

"….democracy, when motivated in this way ceases to be a mere method that can be discussed rationally like a steam engine or a disinfectant. It actually becomes what from another standpoint I have held it incapable of becoming, viz., an ideal or rather part of an ideal schema of things. The very word may become a flag, a symbol of all a man hold dear, of everything that he loves about his nation whether rationally contingent to it or not. On the one hand, the question how the various propositions implied in the democratic belief are related to the facts of politics will then become as irrelevant to him as is, to the believing Catholic, the question how the doings of Alexander VI tally with the supernatural halo surrounding the papal office. On the other hand the democrat of this type, while accepting postulates carrying large implications about equality and brotherliness will be in a pivotal position also to accept, in all sincerity, almost any amount of deviations from them that his own behavior or position may involve. That is not even illogical. Mere distance from fact is no argument against an ethical maxim or a mystical hope. Second, there is the fact that the forms and phrases of classical democracy are for many nations associated with events and developments in their history which are enthusiastically approved by large majorities. Any opposition to an established regime is likely to use these forms and phrases whatever its meaning and social roots may be. If it prevails and if subsequent developments prove satisfactory then these forms will take root in the national ideology."[67]

[66] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 243-244.
[67] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 266.

However we would be making a grave error were we to attempt to simply remove what we saw as any undesirable normative sentiment from our understanding of democracy:

"Of course we might say that a democratic society is one that does not differentiate, at least in matters concerning public affairs such as the franchise. But, first, there have been nations that practiced discrimination of the kind alluded to and nevertheless displayed most of those characteristics which are usually associated with democracy. Second, discrimination can never be entirely absent. For instance, in no country however democratic, is the right to vote extended below a specified age. If, however, we ask for the rationale of this restriction we find that it also applies to an indefinite number of inhabitants above the age limit. If persons below the age limit are not allowed to vote, we cannot call a nation undemocratic that for the same or analogous reasons excludes other people as well."[68]

To attempt to privilege the term "democratic" on the basis of normatively desirable features will always lead to awkward exceptions such as age when it comes to the franchise or the wearing of inappropriate headgear in government issued photo identification. This difficulty leads Schumpeter in two different directions. First, it leads him to argue that a superior approach is to define democracy as competitive elections or "a competitive struggle for the people's vote."[69] It is superior in that it captures more instances of the phenomena as it avoids distinguishing between good and bad outcomes, and has less awkward exceptions than those that are more contingent on normative judgements. Now of course the difficulty remains that there will be borderline cases where it is not clear whether a given contest can be considered competitive or not (as is the case in contemporary Iran or Russia), but it would for example allow us to unambiguously declare that the US electoral college is a democratic institution since it is a way of aggregating the results of a competitive struggle. Second, and most important for our purposes, it leads Schumpeter to the following conclusion:

"Observe: it is not relevant whether we, the observers, admit the validity of those reasons or of the practical rules by which they are made to exclude portions of the population; all that matters is that the society in question admits it… fitness is a matter of opinion and of degree. Its presence must be established by some set of rules. *Without absurdity or insincerity* it is possible to hold that fitness is measured by one's ability to support oneself. In a commonwealth of strong religious conviction it may be hold – again without any absurdity or insincerity – that dissent disqualifies or, in an anti-feminist commonwealth, sex. And so on."[70]

According to Schumpeter, the only relevant normative judgements about the affairs of a community, are ones that the community itself makes. There is no Archimedean point from which an outside observer can coherently and "without any absurdity or insincerity" make judgements about such practices. Whatever the rules or norms that a given community works

[68] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 244.
[69] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 269.
[70] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 244.

under (at least at a particular moment in time), are the ones that the community will find in accordance with their ideas of normative desirability or positive adjectives like justice and good. We see almost an identical idea in Schumpeter's discussion of economic systems and social norms:

"Under the circumstances of its own epoch – like every bit of institutional framework, feudalism survived what was truly "its" epoch – this arrangement was the only feasible one and it embodied the only method by which those public functions could be discharged. If Karl Marx had put in an appearance, say, in the fourteenth century and if he had been so foolish as to advocate another method of public administration, then he would have laid himself open to the reply that such a system was an admirable device for getting done what without it could not have been done at all and in particular that "human nature being what it is" the profit motive was indispensable for the functioning of public administration; its elimination would in fact have spelled chaos and could have been well described as an impracticable dream."[71]

Just as it is incoherent to judge a particular society's normative arrangements with regard to politics, it would be equally incoherent to judge the appropriateness of one's economic or social framework independently on the context and circumstance in which one finds oneself. A syndicalist in Ancient Greece, or a return to nomadic pastoralism in the 21st century are both equally incoherent notions when they are divorced from the prevailing currents and norms. We thus see that Schumpeter rejects rational approaches to politics on purely epistemological grounds, without any appeal to purposelessness.

No Separation of Knowledge Production From Normativity

With Schumpeter's epistemology fully developed we can now use these ideas to help us shed light on some topics that Schumpeter mentions but does not fully develop. We can also use Schumpeter to help us understand some of the difficulties we noted earlier with Hayek and Oakeshott; in particular, Schumpeter helps us to see that a liberal conception of purposeless politics is incompatible with conservative epistemic skepticism.

We saw earlier that Schumpeter agreed with Hayek and Oakeshott that it was not possible to draw a hard and fast distinction between fact and theory, but Schumpeter also agrees with the idea that this also means that it is not possible separate normativity from any knowledge producing endeavour. We see this relation in the following passage for example where Schumpeter articulates the relationship between capitalism and a rationalist mentality:

"The capitalist process rationalizes behavior and ideas and by so doing chases from our minds, along with metaphysical belief, mystic and romantic ideas of all sorts. Thus it reshapes not only our methods of attaining our

[71] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 201.

ends but also these ultimate ends themselves…. Even if mankind were as free to choose as a businessman is free to choose between two competing pieces of machinery, no determined value judgement necessarily follows from the facts and relations between facts that I have tried to convey. As regards the economic performance, it does not follow that men are "happier" or even "better off" in the industrial society of today than they were in a medieval manor or village…. However, whether favorable or unfavorable, value judgements about capitalist performance are of little interest. For mankind is not free to choose. This is not only because the mass of people are not in a position to compare alternatives rationally and always accept what they are being told. There is a much deeper reason for it. Things economic and social move by their own momentum and the ensuing situations compel individuals and groups to behave in certain ways whatever they may wish to do – not indeed by destroying their freedom of choice but by shaping the choosing mentalities and by narrowing the list of possibilities from which to choose. If this is the quintessence of Marxism then we all of us have got to be Marxists. In consequence, capitalist performance is not even relevant for prognosis."[72]

There are a few interesting points that we can draw from this passage. First is the idea that while we may think of capitalism as a means for achieving some given end (such as material wealth), the ends themselves are continually reshaped by the means we use to achieve them. This means that it would be a mistake to merely judge the means based on their efficacy for attaining a given set of ends because that would not account for the changes in the aims themselves which in time will change our estimation of the efficacy of the means. If the claim seems abstract, we might draw a parallel with the advertising (say with respect to duvets). On the one hand, the role of advertising is to get consumers to buy company A's duvet over company B's duvet and therefore changing the means (the company), that supplies a given end (the duvet). But truly effective advertising not only siphons sales from one's competitors but actually creates demand where there was none, perhaps convincing a new consumer that they in fact need two blankets, a duvet for cold winter nights and a conventional blanket for other times of the year. In the future, such a consumer will now reflexively purchase a new duvet when their old one wears out, and will not require further advertising to get them to do so; thus, the ends of the consumer have changed and the duvet has become a felt need and an item of habitual rather than discretionary consumption. This is what Schumpeter means by a process reshaping not only the means but the ends that are pursued. It is this that leads to Schumpeter's perhaps rather shocking contention that the performance of capitalism is not particularly relevant for its prognosis; to understand the future of capitalism requires that we understand how it reshapes the way people think and act rather than merely providing data about current economic performance. This also means that there is a sense that to advocate for any particular means to attain a given end or solve a particular problem is in a sense to engage in a normatively salient act as it means the possibility

[72] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 127, 129-130.

of reshaping the ends that may be pursued in the future. This is of course not necessarily a problem in and of itself and normativity on its own is not a term of opprobrium, but what it does illustrate is that the idea of a "value-neutral" rational, scientific, or economic approach is not an idea that holds water.

We can use the insight we developed in the previous paragraph to help us analyze the problems present in Hayek and Oakeshott's thinking. Take the following passage as an example:

> "It is no doubt possible to argue that given time the collective psyche will evolve opinions that not infrequently strike us as highly reasonable and even shrewd. History however consists of a succession of short-run situations that may alter the course of events for good. If all the people can in the short run be "fooled" step by step into something that they do not really want, and if this is not an exceptional case which we could afford to neglect, then no amount of retrospective common sense will alter the fact that in reality they neither raise nor decide issues but the issues that shape their fate are normally raised and decided for them."[73]

We see here a fairly robust criticism of Hayek and Oakeshott's contention that liberal politics is legitimate because it allows individuals to pursue their own purposes. Schumpeter argues that this idea is a fantasy because individuals often do not have long-run plans that they consistently pursue or if they do they are always at risk of deviating whenever a disruptive short-run condition presents itself. We saw above that Schumpeter characterizes the very idea of individualism as a product of the social conditions of early capitalist society. While Schumpeter's argument only touches on democratic politics narrowly understood, we might also raise the following question: if we understand a legitimate political organization as the one that allows individuals to pursue *their* purposes, what about all kinds of other social institutions like families, churches, social clubs, and centers of learning where one's purposes are the product of all kinds of external influences? We saw much earlier that the problem of distinguishing between enterprise and civil or purposeful and purposeless associations was that the subjective perception of individuals meant that there could be no such thing as an association that obviously pursued one and only one purpose. It is therefore inevitable that individuals will contest and dispute the kinds of purposes that ought to be pursued by a given association. Schumpeter notes a further difficulty with the problem in that associations also have a reciprocal effect on their members and will always shape the purposes that individuals pursue. In the political sphere, while a society may have a long-run purpose that it pursues such as individual freedom and expression, this may change as short-run considerations change the perception of what is in an individual's

[73] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 264.

long run interest, and as the policies that are pursued change the individual's perception of what the purposes of politics are.

Consider security for example. While we may have lofty ideas about individual freedom and expression, when a society experiences a large-scale terrorist attack they may decide that it is in their short-run interest to give up some degree of this freedom in order to provide security in the immediate future. If the perception is that this is an extended crisis then over time perceptions may change and many may believe that the purpose of political organization is *always* to provide for security against what was initially seen as only a exceptional circumstance. Now while we might characterize this as individuals deciding for themselves the ends that their associations pursue, this is certainly a distortion of what is happening. The long-run ends that individuals pursue are conditioned by the changes that happen in the short run at the associational level.

"…our theory seems to clarify the relation that subsists between democracy and individual freedom. If by the latter we mean the existence of a sphere of individual self-government that boundaries of which are historically variable – *no* society tolerates absolute freedom even of conscience and of speech, *no* society reduces that sphere to zero – the question clearly becomes a matter of degree. We have seen that the democratic method does not necessarily guarantee a greater amount of individual freedom than another political method would permit in similar circumstances."[74]

What we see here is that while Hayek and Oakeshott hold up a certain kind of freedom as the politically salient one, what we think of and mean by freedom can never be a settled question even in an ideal liberal society. While Schumpeter characterizes the issues as "a matter of degree", I think the problem is actually more complicated than that. It is not merely that we will disagree on the amount of freedom that we as a society want such as for example trading off the freedom of privacy for increased security. The issue as we have seen from Schumpeter's epistemology is that a concept such as freedom is nebulous and people are likely to disagree with respect to what it constitutes. Are we more free for example in a system of proportional representation where our individual proclivities are more directly expressed by particular political parties who form coalitions to rule, or are we more free when we can hold a particular party accountable even if it does not directly track our personal preferences? Are we more free when we individuals are completely unrestrained with respect to the kinds of associations they can join and the society as a whole provides no oversight, or are we more free when we are

[74] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 271.

protected against being part of associations like cults or being subjected to duplicitous advertising?

Toward Epistemic Conservatism

To conclude our discussion of conservatism and Schumpeter, I want to show how the ideas we've developed can be used to help us think about certain perennial problems that Schumpeter raises but does not explicitly discuss in terms of epistemology. The first of these topics has to do with Schumpeter's discussion of the economic theories of oligopoly and perfect competition. Recall that according to conservatives the creation of theory requires a normative component in addition to any factual or empirical data that the theory is created out of. Take for example the theories related to perfect competition. The theory was not the result of economists going out into the world and observing examples of industries or countries that maximized the efficiency of inputs, had zero unemployment, where quantity demanded and quantity supplied were precisely equal, and then gave this category the name of "perfect competition". No theory could possibly have such origins for in order to recognize such similarities across industries let alone across different countries requires a pre-figured idea of the properties one is looking at to begin with. We also saw that theories become a new platform of conditional understanding that is then used in further knowledge inquiries and can allow new theories to be developed from it. In Schumpeter's discussion of perfect competition, he notes the problems that arise when perfect competition is assumed to be the default situation from which inefficient deviances arise. While this might be an easy way to teach such concepts (in an economics department for example), it can lead to the creation and perpetuation of false conclusions:

"If we look more closely at the conditions… that must be fulfilled in order to produce perfect competition, we realize immediately that outside of agricultural mass production there cannot be many instances of it. And as regards practically all the finished products and services of industry and trade, it is clear that every grocer, every filling station, every manufacturer of gloves or shaving cream or handsaws has a small and precarious market of his own which he tries – must try – to build up and to keep by price strategy, quality strategy – "product differentiation" – and advertising. Thus we get a completely different pattern than perfect competition and which fits much better into the monopolistic schema. In these cases we speak of Monopolistic Competition…As soon as the prevalence of monopolistic competition or of oligopoly or of combinations of the two is recognized, many of the propositions which the Marshall-Wicksell generation of economists used to teach with the utmost confidence become either inapplicable or much more difficult to prove…. In the general case of oligopoly there is in fact no determinate equilibrium at all and the possibility presents itself that there may be an endless sequence of moves and countermoves, an indefinite state of warfare between firms…. In the second place, even in these cases not only is it much harder to attain than the equilibrium in perfect competition, and still harder to preserve, but the "beneficial" competition of the classic type seems likely to be replaced by "predatory" or "cutthroat" competition or simply by struggles for control in the financial sphere. These things are so many sources of social waste, and there are many

others such as the costs of advertising campaigns, the suppression of new methods of production (buying up of patents in order not to use them) and so on. And most important of all: under the conditions envisaged, equilibrium, even if eventually attained by an extremely costly method, no longer guarantees either full employment or maximum output in the sense of the theory of perfect competition. It *may* exist without full employment; it is *bound* to exist, so it seems, at a level of output below that maximum mark, because a profit-conserving strategy, impossible in conditions of perfect competition, now not only becomes possible but imposes itself."[75]

Two things are worth noting here. The first is the idea that in the majority of situations in which the average consumer interacts with the capitalist system, their interactions are with businesses that in Schumpeter's 1930s were typified by the small-business owner. The local grocer, gas station owner, or pharmacist, possessed what was an effective monopoly on the provision of their particular goods or services in their respective areas, and yet there were no cries from consumers of price gouging or unfair competition. The monopolist was conditioned by the knowledge that if they charged prices that were too high, it was possible a competitor to arise. Thus, while monopoly *may* result in higher prices or restricted output, the merchant herself does not operate with perfect information about the cost structure faced by her potential future competitors. It may be that said competitor would actually operate under a less expensive cost structure once they overcome the initial start-up costs, and therefore the initial merchant may feel they have to keep prices lower than they would in a "true" monopoly situation in order to signal to a competitor that they ought not to enter the market. Schumpeter also notes that in the case of big oligopolistic businesses which have close to near perfect information about one another's practices (a situation that describes contemporary economic practice even better than it did Schumpeter's), the ability to regulate one another's pricing may in fact keep prices *lower* than a perfectly competitive situation in which it might take time for a new entrant into the market to disrupt a situation of disequilibrium.

The point is not that concepts like perfect competition, oligopoly, or monopoly have meanings that are inaccurate or unhelpful, rather what Schumpeter is trying to illustrate is that these concepts do not have only one fixed and immutable meaning, but rather carry a number of normative implications at any one time. If an industry has only a few large players we call it an oligopoly, but oligopoly also has additional connotations such as a lack of competition, reduced output, and high prices. It may be that such an industry actually has more effective competition and thus lower prices, or it may mean that it has more competition but the competition is

[75] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 78-80.

predatory and therefore wasteful. Schumpeter encourages us to be aware of the way in which we use terms like this and the normative meanings they carry. We are able to freely and easily shift between the various descriptive and normative ways in which we use words, and there is and could be no check to make sure that words as used "correctly" or "legitimately":

"The conclusions alluded to at the end of the preceding chapter are in fact almost completely false. Yet they follow from observations and theorems that are almost completely true. Both economics and popular writers have once more run away with some fragments of reality that they happened to grasp. These fragments themselves were mostly seen correctly. Their formal properties were mostly developed correctly. But no conclusions about capitalist reality as a whole follows from such fragmentary analyses. If we draw them nevertheless, we can be right only by accident." [76]

We see similar themes if we apply Schumpeter's method to poverty as well.

"Now if the [capitalist] system had another run such as it had in the sixty years preceding 1928 and really reached the $1300 *per head of population,* it is easy to see that all the desiderata that have so far been espoused by any social reformers – practically without exception, including even the greater part of the cranks – either would be fulfilled automatically or could be fulfilled *without significant interference with the capitalist process.* Ample provision for the unemployed in particular would then be not only a tolerable but a light burden…"[77]

If social reformers are leery of capitalism, it is because they are concerned about absolute levels of poverty where workmen are unable to afford their basic necessities. Were economic growth to proceed throughout the 20th century at a rate approaching what it did in the late 19th, both absolute poverty and unemployment would be effectively eradicated without any need for interference in the capitalist system.

"…each time… an avalanche of consumer goods… permanently deepens and widens the stream of real income although in the first instance they spell disturbance, losses and unemployment. And if we look at those avalanches of consumers' goods we again find that each of them consists in articles of mass consumption and increases the purchasing power of the wage dollar more than that of any other dollar – in other words, that the capitalist process, not by coincidence but by virtue of its mechanism, progressively raises the standard of life of the masses. It does so through a sequence of vicissitudes, the severity of which is proportional to the speed of the advance. But it does so effectively."[78]

If capitalism is constantly increasing the quantity and quality of goods available to the masses, why is poverty still a salient issue? The answer is twofold. Recall that Schumpeter would deny that there is an essential category or definition of something like poverty and would argue that to understand what poverty means is simply to be prescient of the ways in which the term is ordinarily used. The first such distinction for example might be between absolute

[76] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 81-82.
[77] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 69.
[78] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 68.

measures of poverty (where poverty is defined as a specified dollar amount or access to a particular basket of goods), and relative poverty (where poverty is defined as some amount of distance below the median income level). The difficulty runs far deeper than this however. If we use relative poverty as our definition of poverty then it has two important implications. For one, it means that poverty could only ever be completely *eliminated* if incomes were to converge to a single point. To advocate for poverty reduction or elimination is thus to simultaneously and by definition to advocate for a reduction in income disparity.

If we were to refer to absolute poverty in contrast, the difficulty is slightly different. In the first quote, we saw Schumpeter make the argument that if capitalist performance continued at the rate that it did in the late 1800s, poverty and unemployment could be eliminated within 50 years without significant interference in the capitalist system. Now from the perspective of the 1930s, this may in fact be more or less correct. The quantity and quality of consumer goods available today (indeed the very emergence of the concept of disposable income for the majority of people), would have been unthinkable to the average person 80 years ago. And yet, most of us would be reticent to suggest that there is something acceptable about suggesting that a 1930s standard of living is an acceptable standard of material comfort (why the 1930s and not the 1970s or even 1870s for that matter)? The problem is therefore not merely a distinction between absolute and relative poverty because our conception of what absolute poverty constitutes changes as well. Today we would likely include some standard of adequate nutrition in addition to mere calories in our calculations of poverty, or would find it unacceptable if someone's only source of news was a single daily newspaper and radio. While capitalism creates the conditions for the alleviation of poverty, it simultaneously creates conditions that make its eradication impossible.

If the results of the above analysis seem somewhat paradoxical, Schumpeter assists us in unpacking what is going on. Just as poverty can be used as an absolute or relative measurement and we often do not specify which of these we are using in casual conversation, so can such a term be used as a normative signal rather than as a communicator of fact. If I say for example that "poverty is increasing", I have not said anything factually meaningful; my statement has a completely ambiguous meaning when it comes to what this means empirically. Obviously the first step would be to specify if I meant a relative or absolute measure of poverty, but this alone

does not provide useable content either. If I am referring to relative poverty then I might mean that a higher percentage of people inhabit the lowest quartile of income earners. I might instead mean that according to the measures of some particular organization (whose criteria or system of measurements may have perhaps changed), that their measure of poverty has increased. The situation is similar if I am referring to absolute poverty. I might for example be saying that for the average person the amount of material wealth they possess relative to some previous time has decreased (and this could itself be ambiguous because it would require a specification of a basket of relevant goods etc.); I might however instead be saying that there has been (or ought to be), a reconfiguring of the kinds of goods which are (or ought to be), included in a measure of absolute poverty such as a measure of nutrition rather than merely calories or including adequate internet access rather than a telephone connection.

Now, while it might seem trite or obvious that these things need to be specified, I might not even intend to mean anything factual at all by my statement. It might be that my statement is meant to be *exclusively* normative in its character and not intended as an appeal to fact at all. By "poverty is increasing", I might mean the statement as a call to action, perhaps to vote out a particular political party that I deem to be responsible for bad things, or an appeal to reduce income inequality. We see then that the meaning of poverty is contextual not only in the sense of its "factual" meaning but in whether it has factual meaning at all. Now that is not to say that any and all uses of a word like poverty are equally legitimate or useful, far from it. What Schumpeter and the epistemic ideas we have developed throughout this essay encourages us to think about, is the way in which we use vocabulary in both factual or technical senses and in normative ones. It is not that a word like poverty, oligopoly, or democracy has no meaning or is somehow being used incorrectly when used in a strictly normative sense, indeed words used this way have a great deal of meaning. Rather, Schumpeter encourages us to be aware of precisely how normative and factual meanings can be intertwined, and to be prescient of how they are being used in particular contexts.

Conclusion

I began this essay by mentioning what often appears to be a peculiar combination in the makeup of contemporary Anglo-American Conservative parties. While the marriage of social/traditional conservatives and liberal conservatives might strike us as somewhat odd, it can

be partially understood by a combination of the concepts of purposelessness and epistemic skepticism. With regard to purposelessness, we saw that it had slightly different meanings for each of these two camps. For traditional conservatives, political authority is legitimate when it is purposeless but also does not violate variously conceived ideas of human nature. With respect to liberal conservatives, Hayek sees individual freedom and therefore purposelessness as an essential component to the maintenance of societal progress while Oakeshott conceives of a hard distinction between kinds of human associations. With respect to the second dimension, traditional conservatives express sentiments that either explicitly appeal to or conceivably sound like epistemological skepticism however their explanations are vague and do not lend themselves to systematization. Liberal conservatives in contrast are much more systematic in their articulation of this epistemological position but they fail to recognize that it has major incompatibilities with conceiving of politics as purposeless. Neither group succeeds in fully developing the ideas of epistemic skepticism and this is unfortunate because it is perhaps the most unique attribute and the idea of most value that conservatism has to contribute to political discourse. To develop this line of thinking I suggested it would be useful to turn to the thought of Joseph Schumpeter and proceeded to illustrate how these ideas found their expression in his thought.

Epistemic conservatism is helpful as a concept for a few reasons. First, it creates the possibility of including a wider variety of authors in the conservative canon. For example, it expands the scope of conservative thought to include authors who are traditionally more known for being concerned with questions of epistemology or language. Additionally, it gives us the opportunity to incorporate authors in the history of political thought for whom the term "conservative" would not necessarily be an obvious or appropriate moniker. Second, it expands the scope of conservative political thought away from politics on the ground (as exemplified by authors like Kirk and Scruton), and toward a more explicitly theoretical conception. This distance is valuable because it gives us additional avenues through which to think comparatively about liberalism and conservatism, and makes conservative political thought less directly engaged in normative political combat. This may assist in helping to deflect the criticism that conservative theory is merely a way to obliquely impose a particular normative vision on society.

I plan on furthering this research by pushing in two directions. First, I hope to illustrate that the ideas of epistemic skepticism are present in various authors throughout the history of political thought and philosophy such as Aristotle, Hayek, and Wittgenstein. This will assist in proving the claim that while epistemic skepticism has most recently found its expression in traditional and liberal conservative political thought, its legacy can be traced much farther than that. Second, I plan to use the principles of epistemic skepticism in the analysis of contemporary political issues, focusing on how ideas and thoughts are presented by interlocutors in order to demonstrate how epistemic conservatism can be a relevant and important paradigm in the future.

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