

"Orwell's Despair: Nineteen Eighty-four and the Critique of the Teleocratic State"

Kenneth B. McIntyre
Department of Political Science
Campbellsville University

Prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the
Kentucky Political Science Association
Bowling Green, Kentucky—March 2005

Abstract

In this paper, I examine aspects of Orwell's political thought as expressed in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. I focus on the novel as an exploration of the logic of the conception of the modern state as a teleocracy, an historical concept which was elaborated by the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott. I first provide a summary of Oakeshott's historical account of the emergence of modern morality and the modern state. I then offer an interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-four* within the context of Oakeshott's historical claims.

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

'Epitaph on a Tyrant'
W.H. Auden, 1940

Most interpretations of Orwell's political thought have concentrated on his critique of the ideology of totalitarianism, especially as this ideology manifested itself in the 1930's in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in Nazi Germany under Hitler.¹ These interpretations have provided valuable insights into Orwell's own perceptions of the dangers of centralized state tyranny. However, they suffer from two weaknesses connected with the concept of totalitarianism. First, the concept of totalitarianism as it has been developed in academic political science has been related specifically to the Soviet and Nazi experiences, and, thus, does not adequately account for other types of tyrannical regimes.² Second, the application of the totalitarian model to the examination

¹For example, see Michael Zuckert, "Orwell's Hopes, Orwell's Fears: *1984* as a Theory of Totalitarianism," *The Orwellian Moment: Hindsight and Foresight in the Post-1984 World* (Fayetteville, AR: The Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1989) 45-67.

²The most influential investigation into the character of totalitarianism remains Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* which suggests that totalitarianism is the product of a modern conception of thinking about the world as the product of human production. See Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1951).

of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* tends to emphasize the prophetic aspects of the novel and to diminish its character as an investigation of contemporary political life.³

Instead of using the normal rubric of totalitarianism, I shall examine Orwell's political thought as expressed in *Nineteen Eighty-four* in terms of the conception of the modern state as a teleocracy, a concept which was elaborated by the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott understood teleocracy and nomocracy as the two poles between which modern political theory has oscillated. According to Oakeshott, the teleocratic state is the state conceived as an association of individuals united by their pursuit of a common goal, or *telos*. The function of the government of the teleocratic state is to manage the pursuit of the purpose. Rules or laws are understood to be merely instrumental to the achievement of the purpose. I shall suggest that Orwell's novel can be understood as an exploration of the logic of what Oakeshott called teleocratic government. The political conditions of the world in the novel (e.g., the elimination of most of the activities which we associate with politics and the 'politicization' of eccentricities of all sorts) are possible, or perhaps, probable manifestations of the logic of conceiving the state as an enterprise association.

I shall also suggest that Orwell's despair, which is manifested primarily in the pessimistic ending to the novel, is related to his own political commitment to conceiving the state as a teleocracy. Orwell remained a politically engaged, but rather eccentric, socialist throughout his life. Although he was a moral individualist, his commitment to

³For example, Neal Riemer provides a checklist of thirty-one predictions from the novel in order to determine how accurate Orwell's prophetic eye really was. See Neal Riemer, "Orwell's Worries in *1984*: Myth or Reality?" *PS*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring, 1984) pp. 225-226

individualism was tempered by a sentimental nostalgia for communalism.⁴ Thus, his socialism was anachronistic, but the suspicion of modern individualism, which his sentimental communalism engendered, and his commitment to a vague notion of social and material equality led him to view the state as a teleocratic productivist enterprise.

Nonetheless, Orwell increasingly identified the excesses of teleocratic government with socialism, and was led to conclude that his own political goals were just as likely to lead to tyranny as those of his political enemies. However, he never fully engaged other theoretical possibilities. Specifically, Orwell neglected the conception of the state which Oakeshott described as nomocracy. According to Oakeshott, the nomocratic state is the state conceived as an association of citizens in terms of general conditions of conduct (laws) subscribed to when making their own choices about purposes and goals. The function of the state is to be the custodian of the conditions of conduct, and thus to protect both the freedom of the individual to pursue particular goals or purposes and to preserve an adequate space for political activity within the larger society. Thus, Orwell's despair could be plausibly attributed to an ignorance of the possibilities within his own political tradition, an ignorance which was characteristic of British socialism during the interwar and postwar years.

I. Individualism and Collectivism, Nomocracy and Teleocracy

In Michael Oakeshott's work on the character of human conduct, he claims that morality is a general condition of all human activity, including, of course, political activity. His historical work on the emergence of modern morality and the concomitant

⁴I discuss the character of moral individualism, communalism, and collectivism in section one of this paper.

emergence of the modern state reflects this claim.⁵ Oakeshott writes that “law and morality have the same center but not the same circumference,” and his examination of the modern state takes place within the context of his analysis of modern morality.⁶ According to Oakeshott, two distinct and opposed moralities emerged from the dissolution of a more unitary medieval moral tradition. Although certainly not the sole condition, the emergence of these two moralities, the morality of individualism and the morality of collectivism, constitutes the most significant general context within which to understand the emergence of the two distinct and opposed conceptions of the modern state and its activity.⁷

Oakeshott begins his account of modern morality by connecting it more closely with the unitary medieval morality of communal ties. He writes that modern morality “begins in those perplexing centuries which, because of their illegibility, no historian can decide whether they should properly be regarded as a conclusion or a preface, namely the 14th and 15th centuries.”⁸ Oakeshott views this as a time in which a settled manner of living collapsed. The morality of communal ties, in which membership in a particular

⁵Kenneth Minogue recognizes this aspect of Oakeshott’s work when he writes that, for Oakeshott, “the relevant context [of the history of modern political thought] was to be found not in social conditions or historical events but in the changing moral beliefs of Europeans”. Kenneth Minogue, “Introduction,” Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, ed. S. Letwin. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993) x.

⁶*Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, 16.

⁷Oakeshott also refers to the morality of collectivism as the morality of the anti-individual and as the morality of the individual manqué. See Michael Oakeshott, “The Masses in Representative Democracy”, in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. T. Fuller (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Press, 1991) 371-381.

⁸“The Masses in Representative Democracy”, 364. Alan Macfarlane suggests that by the 13th century England already manifested many of the characteristics which are associated with modern individualism. He writes that “the majority of ordinary people in England from at least the 13th century were rampant individualists, highly mobile both geographically and socially, economically ‘rational’, market-oriented and acquisitive, ego-centered in kinship and social life.” Macfarlane’s claims are based upon a detailed study of the documentary history of English parish life between the 14th and 18th centuries. See Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978) 163.

community is seen as the defining moral characteristic of human beings, was disintegrating, while the conditions of new moralities were emerging. For this communal morality, custom defined the place of the individual, and loyalty was conceived in terms of familial relations, not in terms of abstract principles. There was no substantial idea of change or moral progress. In fact, change was perceived negatively as an immoral abrogation of custom. However, these general ideas about the character of the moral world were gradually changing during the period of late medieval Europe as feudal ties loosened and the universal authority of the Catholic Church began to be questioned.

According to Oakeshott, the modern morality of individualism emerged from these late medieval conditions as individuals became, by choice and circumstance, more habitually disposed to make choices for themselves and to approve of such a disposition to make choices. As Oakeshott writes:

achievement in respect of human individuality was a modification of medieval conditions...It was not generated in claims and assertions on behalf of individuality, but in sporadic divergences from a condition of human circumstances in which the opportunity for choices was narrowly circumscribed.⁹

Thus, the emergence of the modern individual was not the result of a preconceived ideology, nor was it merely the result of changes in the ownership of the modes of production, but, for Oakeshott, the emergence of this modern individual is “the event of supreme and seminal importance in modern European history.”¹⁰ The modern individual emerged as an exploration of the various opportunities for the exercise of choice. The escape from communal life into larger towns suggested that custom was not immutable. The various reformations of the Church reflected the idea that not only was Church ritual

⁹“The Masses in Representative Democracy”, 365.

¹⁰“The Masses in Representative Democracy”, 382.

not unassailable, but that the choice of religious belief and confession ought to be personal and individual. Oakeshott, like Burckhardt, claims that the modern individual first appeared among the various principates and republics of the Italian peninsula, and, afterward, moved north as conditions favorable to the exercise of individuality emerged and touched all areas of life.¹¹

Further, the emergence of the modern individual generated an appropriate moral vocabulary. The disposition to make choices was celebrated, and self-direction was recognized as a positive good. Freedom, which Oakeshott claims is a postulate of human conduct, and had at other times in the past been lamented, was elevated to a necessary aspect of human dignity. Conduct was judged in terms of its contribution to the cause of human freedom. Choice itself became an ingredient in human happiness. For Oakeshott, this moral conception of the individual “received its classic expression in the *Essais* of Montaigne...: a reading of the human condition in which man’s life is understood as an adventure in personal self-enactment.”¹² This conception of individuality did not hold out the promise of salvation or ultimate truth, but involved the pursuit of self-knowledge and the acceptance of human imperfection. Writers as diverse as Cervantes, Luther, and Rabelais explored various dimensions of this novel individuality and produced a new conception of human nature. As Oakeshott writes, “a new image of human nature appeared--not Adam, not Prometheus, but Proteus--a character distinguished from all

¹¹Burckhardt writes that, “at the close of the 13th century, Italy began to swarm with individuality; the ban laid upon human personality was dissolved; and a thousand figures meet us each in its own special shape and dress.” Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 98.

¹²Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 241.

others on account of his multiplicity and of his endless power of transformation.”¹³ The approbation associated with human choice spread throughout the whole of European life, generating novel ideas about privacy, family life, commerce, and, of course, politics.

Although Oakeshott considers the emergence of the modern individual and the morality of individualism to be the most significant event in modern European history, he claims that the morality of modern Europe is not, in fact, unitary. A distinct, and opposed, morality emerged from the dissolution of the medieval morality of communal ties which, although it shares a vocabulary with medieval morality, is distinctly modern. Oakeshott calls this other morality both the morality of collectivism and the morality of the anti-individual.¹⁴ He considers this anti-individualist ethic to have arisen in opposition to the morality of individualism. He claims that, although the gradual disintegration of the morality of communal ties was a cause for celebration among those inclined to make their own choices, it deprived those without this inclination of the old security of their former communities. The individual who enjoyed the freedom to choose was met by an anti-individual to whom choice meant little and who bemoaned the loss of security and identity which had been provided by the feudal community.¹⁵ As Oakeshott

¹³“The Masses in Representative Democracy”, 366. See also *On Human Conduct*, 241, where he attributes this new image of man to Pico della Mirandola.

¹⁴In *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, Oakeshott refers to it as the morality of collectivism, while, in “The Masses in Representative Democracy”, he calls it the morality of anti-individualism. In *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott has less to say about the morality associated with this reaction to individualism than with the understanding of the state associated with it. See *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, 24-27; “The Masses in Representative Democracy”, 370-381; and *On Human Conduct*, 275-278.

¹⁵Oakeshott refers to Eric Hoffer’s work on the features of the anti-individual, but a more rigorous historical account is found in Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Cohn notes that, in millennial collectivities, leaders “found their following...where there existed an unorganized, atomized population, rural or urban or both” which lacked the support of social groups which were available to most people during the middle ages. However, unlike Oakeshott, Cohn views these anti-individuals, not as a specifically modern phenomenon, but as persisting on the edges of society throughout the history of medieval and modern Europe. See *On Human Conduct*, 278, n.1; Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New

writes, “the character we are concerned with is that of those who...are disposed to prefer substantive satisfactions to the adventure and risk of self-enactment.”¹⁶ The anti-individual rejected the responsibilities of choice as a burden from which to be released.

Further, the emergence of the anti-individual gave rise to an alternative to the morality of individualism. Oakeshott claims that the prevalence of the morality of individualism bred its own opponent by turning the circumstantial failure of the anti-individual into a moral failure. Thus, the individual manqué turns against, not only the circumstances of failure, but against the morality of individualism itself. Oakeshott writes that “what had been no more than an inability to hold his own in belief and conduct became a radical self-distrust; what had been the discomfort of ill success turned into the misery of guilt.”¹⁷ This guilt led the anti-individual to seek protection against the vicissitudes of choice both in the political and in the moral realm. Oakeshott characterizes this new morality of collectivism as deriving “strength and plausibility from its deceptive affinity to [the] morality [of communal ties].”¹⁸ However, Oakeshott makes it quite clear that the morality of collectivism is, in fact, completely modern, and did not, indeed, become distinct until the 17th century. This morality developed in reaction to the morality of individualism, and defined itself in opposition to that morality. An emphasis on equality and solidarity replaced the emphasis on the value of individual freedom. The concept of a substantive condition, often called the common good, understood as

York: Harper & Row, 1951) 25-58; and Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970) 282.

¹⁶*On Human Conduct*, 276.

¹⁷*On Human Conduct*, 277.

¹⁸*Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, 25.

independent of and superior to the choices of individuals supplanted these choices as the proper ends of human activity. The love of a notional community replaced the love of self as the locus of moral loyalty. A general distrust of privacy, especially private property, emerged as a reaction to the novel separation of public and private which had accompanied the end of feudalism.

Thus, for Oakeshott, modern European morality is distinguished by its dualistic character, and modern political life and beliefs about the modern state reflect this dualism. These two moralities are not indistinct, and they have each generated ideas about the character of the modern state, the character of the citizens of the modern state, and the proper activities of its government. Oakeshott claims that the appearance of the morality of the individual was one of the significant conditions of the emergence of an understanding of the state as a nomocracy in which citizens are associated in terms of non-purposive rules which condition their individual pursuits, while the appearance of the morality of collectivism conditioned the emergence of the conception of the state as a teleocracy in which citizens are associated in terms of a single unified substantive purpose. Thus, he rejects both the negative and positive versions of the teleological interpretation of history which describe modern European politics as a unified tradition.¹⁹ Instead, Oakeshott argues that there are two conceptions of the character of the state, nomocracy and teleocracy, and the understanding of the proper activities of government which they entail, and these two conceptions inform the politics of modern Europe.

¹⁹The first version claims that the history of the modern state embodies the decline of the classical commitment to truth, while the second suggests that the history of the modern state embodies the progress and triumph of universal democracy. For a version of the thesis that modern political life is inherently and increasingly decadent because it has fallen away from the classical tradition, see Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 40-55. For a version of the thesis that the political life of modern Europe represents the culmination of a movement toward some form of participatory democracy, see Raymond Gettell, *History of Political Thought* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1924) 16-19.

These two conceptions of the state, nomocracy and teleocracy, were taken from an analogy with the Roman legal concepts of *societas* and *universitas*, and signified two distinct types of association²⁰. It is this division which is crucial to understanding his historical account of the modern state.

According to Oakeshott, under Roman law, a *societas* was understood to be an association of agents bound by loyalty and conditioned by formal law. This type of association was the result of an agreement to accept certain conditions in the pursuit of individual choices. It was a formal relationship in terms of rules, not a substantial relationship in terms of a common purpose, and the conditions of the relationship were considered to be the rules themselves. Examples of this type of relationship include the use of a common language, participation in a game, and participation in a judicial proceeding. A modern state, understood on the analogy of the *societas*, was considered a non-purposive association of individuals related in terms of their acknowledgement of a single authority and their subscription to a set of formal conditions known as laws. Oakeshott writes that “the ruler of a state when it is understood as a *societas* is the custodian of the loyalties of the association and the guardian and administrator of the conditions which constitute the relationship of the *socii*.”²¹ As is suggested by Oakeshott’s general term for this conception of the state, nomocracy is the state

²⁰*On Human Conduct*, 200. Anthony Black’s account of the history of modern political thought follows Oakeshott in noting two traditions of understanding the modern state. Black relates the idea of the state as a teleocracy to the guild culture of medieval Europe, and claims that this conception has been eclipsed by the idea of the state as nomocracy, which he relates to the emergent civil society of the late medieval period. Unlike Oakeshott, however, Black views these conceptions of the state primarily as epiphenomenal effects of the system of labor relations existent within the state. See Anthony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press) 237-41.

²¹*On Human Conduct*, 202. This conception of the state parallels the theoretical understanding of the state which Oakeshott calls *civitas* or civil association.

understood as an association of citizens under the rule of law. This particular conception of the state arose concomitantly with the emergence of the modern individual in the 15th century, and, although not caused by that emergence, was conditioned by it.

According to Oakeshott, the experience of modern individualism suggested that the proper understanding of the character of the modern state and its offices had to reflect the assumed autonomy of the individual. The state, understood as a nomocracy is an association of citizens, not in terms of purposes, but in terms of conditions of conduct, not designed to secure any common goal, but to be subscribed to in making choices. These conditions are understood as the general laws of the association. The proper office of such a state is to be the custodian of the conditions of conduct. The activities in which such a state engages, like making laws, judging offenses against the law, enforcing the law, punishing offenders, and defending the state against external enemies are all concerned with the conditions of the nomocracy. Political activity in such a state involves the considerations of these conditions in terms of their desirability. Oakeshott also calls this type of association a *civitas peregrina*, and describes it as:

an association...of adventurers each responding as best he can to the ordeal of consciousness in a world composed of others of his kind..., partners in a practice of civility the rules of which are not devices for satisfying substantive wants.²²

Thus, nomocracy is the state understood as an association of individuals under the rule of law.

However, according to Oakeshott, the history of the modern European state is not solely the story of the morality of individualism and the nomocratic state. An alternative conception of the state which corresponds to the morality of collectivism emerged in

²²*On Human Conduct*, 243.

which the state was considered on the analogy of the Roman legal concept of *universitas*. A *universitas* was a mode of association in which the agents were related in pursuit of a substantive goal. This mode was the creation of an already constituted authority and its existence was subjected to periodic review by the constituting authority. A *universitas* was a perpetual association in which membership was voluntary and related to a commitment to pursue the common goal of the association. Rules were instrumental, being considered solely in terms of their usefulness in reaching the goal. There were numerous examples of such associations in medieval Europe, including guilds, monastic orders, and universities. A state conceived on the analogy of a *universitas* was considered to be a group of individuals joined together in the pursuit of a substantive purpose. Oakeshott calls this understanding of the modern state a teleocracy, and describes it as “a many become one on account of their common engagement and jointly seized of complete control over the manner in which it is pursued.”²³ The laws of such a state, like the individuals composing it, are instrumental to the achievement of the purpose, and the ruler of such a state is considered to be the manager of the purpose.

According to Oakeshott, this understanding of the state as a teleocracy has remained extraordinarily stable over the past five hundred years, with its only significant alterations coming in the character of the goal pursued. Oakeshott finds four distinct ends in the modern history of teleocracy, but two of these are so closely related that they can be dealt with together.²⁴ First, in the religious version, the state is understood as a

²³*On Human Conduct*, 205. Unlike Oakeshott’s use of the terms *societas*/nomocracy which have a theoretical counterpart in his term civil association, his use of *universitas*/teleocracy has no theoretical counterpart because Oakeshott claims that these beliefs are not conceptually adequate ways of understanding the state. Enterprise association, which is similar to the Roman conception of *universitas*, is not a theoretical conception of the state, but of associations within a state.

cultural and religious association in pursuit of salvation, and the ruler is considered to be the manager of the salvation of the citizenry. Oakeshott writes that the notion that the state as a corporation in the service of the salvation of souls was “the outcome...of that blending of what may be called the authority to rule and the authority to educate.”²⁵ Oakeshott claims that this understanding of the state informed the works of both Catholics and Protestants of the early modern period, and, in part, constituted an attempt at consolidating the authority of the state and integrating its citizens. The ruler is considered the manager of this activity, an activity in which he is the minister of God to sinful human beings in need of correction and direction.

In the second version, which Oakeshott calls the economic version, the state is understood as a productive enterprise. This conception owed a great deal to the relic of lordship that still attached itself to the office of government in the states of early modern Europe. Oakeshott writes that the state, here, was “recognized to be, and not merely to have, an ‘economy’.”²⁶ In this version, the state is conceived to be an association in the pursuit of the maximum exploitation of its own resources. The management of the enterprise has been so successful that it has generated a distributionist concern with the products of the productivist state. This *civitas cupiditatis*, as Oakeshott calls it, conceives

²⁴He only notes two in *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism and Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, the religious and the economic versions. He adds the notion of the state as manager of ‘enlightened’ conduct and the state as remedial association in *On Human Conduct*. See Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996) 58-64; and *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, 89-110.

²⁵*On Human Conduct*, 286. The conception of the state as a religious association is closely related to what Oakeshott calls the understanding of the state as a remedial association. In this second version, which is only a secularization of the first, the state is understood as an association of victims seeking a cure for a common malady, such as sin, error, or poverty, and the office of government is considered to be either, in the Gnostic version, the pursuit of the cure, or, in the therapeutic version, the management of convalescence. See *On Human Conduct*, 308-310.

²⁶*On Human Conduct*, 288.

of the state as a vast industry for the satisfaction of human wants in which the office of government is now the management of both the production and distribution of the resources of the state.

The third version, which Oakeshott claims is a combination of the first two, considered the state as the manager of ‘enlightened’ conduct. It involved the combination of the relics of lordship, which informed the economic version, and tutorial authority, which informed the religious version. The purpose of the state is understood to be the promotion of the ‘common good’, or the virtuous life. Oakeshott writes that “the enlightened state identified itself as a development corporation in which virtue and cupidity were to constitute a single engagement directed or managed by a lord and his agents.”²⁷ The writers associated with this conception of government were not theorists, but administrators and other practical thinkers. The Cameralists, whom Oakeshott identifies as the pre-eminent thinkers associated with this conception, recognized the necessary connection between the state understood as a teleocracy and a greatly enlarged apparatus of government. They were concerned with the transformation of the administrative apparatus of the early state into a ‘scientific’ endeavor through which the whole life of the citizenry could be managed. The state, thus conceived, is an association of apprentices to adulthood, and the office of government was the education of these neophytes and the provision of their needs.

Oakeshott concludes by suggesting that the character of the modern state as an exclusive and comprehensive organization intimates that the only reasonable understanding of the state is as a nomocracy. The state is a non-voluntary association,

²⁷*On Human Conduct*, 299.

and can be understood in terms of the acknowledgement of its authority as such only if the association is in terms of non-purposive rules which condition the choices of individuals. Freedom in such an association consists in the fact that the choices of the associates are only conditioned, not prescribed by the law. Conversely, a teleocracy is an association in terms of a substantive purpose which excludes both the consideration of other purposes and the existence of other modes of association within itself. The freedom associated with such an association is the freedom to choose to be associated in terms of the stated purpose. Thus, a compulsory teleocracy is not only a logical contradiction, but, in its denial of the autonomy presupposed by moral agency, it is a moral enormity.

II. *Nineteen Eighty-four* and the Logic of Teleocracy

There is no evidence that Orwell ever read any of Oakeshott's work and it is highly unlikely that he did so. The only substantial work published by Oakeshott before Orwell's death was *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott's book on metaphysics, and Orwell was uninterested in academic philosophy. However, it is not anachronistic to read Orwell's work in terms of Oakeshott's historical categories. These categories constitute attempts to make the history of modern moral and political thought intelligible, and, thus, are eminently appropriate to an historical account of Orwell's moral and political thought.

Orwell, unlike Oakeshott, was not a political philosopher but a journalist, a novelist, and a committed political activist. An attempt to offer an interpretation of his work must first determine the character of the arguments which Orwell deploys and then situate these arguments within an appropriate intellectual tradition. In this paper, I concentrate on Orwell's political thought as it is manifested in his novel, *Nineteen*

Eighty-four. Although the novel can be read and interpreted in purely aesthetic terms, my concern is with the moral and political ideas which are represented in the work.²⁸ However, interpreting a work of fiction as an expression of political thought presents its own difficulties. For example, a novel is not a political pamphlet or treatise; it is not an extended argument recommending some practical political proposal; and it is neither an elaboration of some ideological doctrine, nor an exploration of the nature and meaning of politics within the context of human activity. Thus, one should not expect the same kind of arguments or the same type of coherence that is expected from practical or philosophical works.²⁹ Indeed, as suggested already, treating a novel as a manifestation of someone's thinking about politics involves ignoring the novel's aesthetic character, which often means missing the primary intention of the author. However, the willful misunderstanding occasioned in treating art as political statement is, at least, somewhat justified in Orwell's case by his own comments about his late novels. He described these works as attempts at "fus[ing] political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole."³⁰ Although Orwell did not fall into the category confusion of judging aesthetic works purely by his own political criteria, he, like most socialists, did believe that the political

²⁸An aesthetic reading would concern itself with attempting to answer questions concerning subjects like genre, character, or metaphor. For example, is it a 'prophetic' novel, and, if so, what type of prophet is Orwell? Is it a work of science fiction, given the plot's dependence upon technological innovations such as the two-way television and the helicopter? Is it primarily a satire in the tradition of Swift? For an interpretation of Orwell as satirist, see Bernard Crick, "Reading *1984* as Satire," *Reflections on America, 1984: An Orwell Symposium* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1986) 15-45.

²⁹An example of the fundamental confusion of theoretical claims and aesthetic imagination can be found in Zuckert's essay on Orwell. Zuckert claims that *1984* is "an attempt to develop a theory about the nature and causes of the European totalitarian experience." In a particularly egregious and incoherent example of attributing authorial intention to characters in fiction, Zuckert attributes both Goldstein's tract on oligarchical collectivism and O'Brien's justification of the Inner Party to Orwell as an elaboration of an explicit theory of totalitarianism. See Zuckert, "Orwell's Hopes, Orwell's Fears," 45-46. 50-59.

³⁰George Orwell, "Why I Write," *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1946) 316.

and the aesthetic were intimately connected. He wrote that he had “developed...an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world...which makes a purely aesthetic attitude towards life impossible.”³¹ Thus, it seems appropriate to accept Orwell at his word and to consider *Nineteen Eighty-four* as an exploration of the political and moral implications of conceiving the state as a compulsory purposive association or teleocracy.

However, Orwell’s novel manifests not only an imaginative construction of life in a teleocracy, but also presents some of the ambiguities of his earlier novels and of his journalistic essays. Orwell was personally committed to a moral individualism which was fundamentally at odds with the moral collectivism of teleocracy, while also retaining a nostalgic or sentimental attachment to an idealized version of communal morality. Orwell the man was an exemplary type of English eccentric individual. He went to Eton, the most elite of the British primary public schools, but eschewed Oxford and Cambridge for a potential career as a colonial police officer. Despite or because of his time as a colonial official, he was an anti-imperialist, although his anti-imperialism resulted as much from his concern about the malign effects of empire on the imperialist as it did from his sympathy for the colonized.³²

He was a dissenter, a contrarian, and a democratic socialist who is currently as well known for his criticism of socialism as his commitment to it. His early experiments in ‘new’ journalism, *Down and Out in London and Paris* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*,

³¹George Orwell, “Writers and Leviathan,” *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume IV: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1968) 409.

³²Orwell wrote that “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.” George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant,” *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1945) 9. See also his first novel, *Burmese Days* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1934).

were exposés of the corruption of capitalist society and the degradation of the working classes in such societies.³³ In fact, he claimed that “every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written...against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism.”³⁴ However, he was constantly vilified by other socialists and communists for his supposed betrayal of their cause.³⁵ These critics were perceptive in many ways, as Orwell has proven to be a much more effective voice against the teleocratic state than a proponent of socialism. For example, *The Road to Wigan Pier* included such a devastating critique of intellectual socialism in Britain that Victor Gollancz, the editor of the Left Book Club which originally published the book, felt compelled to write a critical introduction to the book defending British socialism.³⁶ However, Orwell’s eccentric individualism was tempered by his nostalgic reverence for a lost pastoral world. This nostalgia is most evident in his novels, especially *Coming Up for Air*, in which Orwell devotes the entire middle section of the book to the evocation of an idyllic, though not utopian, communal world which would subsequently be shattered by the combination of capitalist individualism and world war.³⁷

³³Robert Coles remarks on the distinctiveness of Orwell’s participatory journalism. This participation came to define the ‘new’ journalism which became fashionable in the US in the decade of the 1960’s. Robert Coles, “George Orwell’s Sensibility,” *Reflections on America, 1984: An Orwell Symposium* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1986) 46-49.

³⁴“Why I Write,” 314.

³⁵The British Communist historian E.P. Thompson wrote of Orwell that “he is sensitive...to the least insincerity on upon his left, but the inhumanity of the right rarely provoked him to a paragraph of polemic.” Quoted in Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) 36.

³⁶ For Orwell’s critique of intellectual socialism, see part two of George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1937) 121-232. For Gollancz’s defense, see Preface, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, ix-xxii.

³⁷George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1939) 39-166.

Orwell's most deadly sin against progressive politics, according to his socialist and communist critics, came in his publication of *Homage to Catalonia*, which detailed Orwell's experience fighting on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War. In it, Orwell's most damning criticism was directed, not at the fascist forces against whom he was fighting, but against the Stalinist communists who were attempting to control the Republican partisans. According to Orwell, the Communists were more interested in destroying the other elements of the Republican effort than in defeating the fascists.³⁸ Despite his distaste for capitalism and the excesses of moral individualism, Orwell seemingly sensed that his own type of political contrarianism was possible only in a democratic government like that of Great Britain. At least, his experience in the Spanish Civil War convinced him of the moral enormity of collectivism.

Orwell's last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, exhibits his various and sometimes ambiguous political and moral commitments, while focusing more closely on the moral incoherence of the teleocratic state and concluding on a note of bleak desperation, a quality which is only intermittently present in his earlier work. Orwell's moral individualism is especially apparent in his portrayal of the main character in the novel, Winston Smith. Smith is not a political rebel in the normal sense of the term, although his first name, with its reference to Winston Churchill, suggests that his parents' 'vaporization' was most likely the consequence of their fondness for the *ancien regime*. Instead, Smith's actions in the novel constitute an assertion of his own individuality and the inherent value which he places on moral autonomy. He, like his creator, is a willful,

³⁸George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1938) and George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1946) 188-210.

eccentric individual and his various acts of rebellion can be considered as such only in a society in which moral individuality itself is considered criminal.

First, Smith purchases a journal and begins keeping a diary. This is certainly not a political action in the traditional sense of the term. Indeed, for the most part, Smith's journal consists of an impressionistic and not completely coherent account of his reactions to various events. The entries sometimes take the form of reportage, but they are primarily opportunities for Smith to sort his own memories or record his fleeting perceptions of reality. However, as Smith recognizes, the contents of the diary are "not more dangerous than the initial act of opening the diary."³⁹ The purchase of the diary constitutes Smith's claim that he has a right to act on his own initiative and that he possesses an inviolable sphere of individual privacy. Both of these ideas are closely connected with the morality of individualism.⁴⁰ The government of Oceania, which is run by a highly organized and highly bureaucratized political party nominally headed by a Stalinesque figure called 'Big Brother', does not recognize any such right. Instead, as Smith describes it:

the ideal set up by the Party was...a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting—300 million people all with the same face.⁴¹

³⁹George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co. 1949) 19.

⁴⁰Samuel Hynes views *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as, at least in part, a defense of moral individualism. He writes that, for Orwell, "to be human is to be private, to have a personal identity that is inward and inviolable." Samuel Hynes, "Introduction," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971) 16.

⁴¹*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 76.

Smith writes the diary for himself as an attempt to preserve not only his memories but also his autonomous selfhood in the face of the all-encompassing logic of collectivist teleocracy.⁴²

Winston Smith's second act of rebellion is not actually initiated by him, but by a fellow worker at the ironically titled Ministry of Truth, which is responsible for propaganda in Oceania. A young lady named Julia whom Smith has mistaken as a true believer in the government lures him into a passionate love affair. However, Julia is not political at all, as Smith notes when he says that she is "only a rebel from the waist downward."⁴³ She hates the regime in the way that a callow youth dislikes authority of any kind, and, for her, breaking the rules is a kind of game. However, Julia is sensitive to the suppression of individuality inherent in the teleocratic state. She recognizes Smith as an eccentric, claiming to be "good at spotting people who don't belong," while also equating this eccentricity with political dissent.⁴⁴ She tells Smith that "as soon as I saw you I knew you were against *them*."⁴⁵ They both understand that government restrictions on sexual activity are meant to limit personal autonomy. However, Smith is more perceptive in linking the state's control over sex to its attempted elimination of any alternative allegiance. He understood his affair with Julia as "a blow struck against the Party[,]. . . a political act."⁴⁶ The primary importance of being able to choose one's mate

⁴² Roberta Kalechofsky writes that "Orwell's ontological presumption is that the individual is an indisputable unit of reality, and his political assumption is that this unit is in danger of extinction." Roberta Kalechofsky, *George Orwell* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973) 119.

⁴³ *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 159.

⁴⁴ *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 124.

⁴⁵ *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 124.

⁴⁶ *Nineteen Eighty-four*, 129.

and to create a family is denied by the teleocratic state, which subordinates the autonomous choices of the individual to the collective will of the state itself.

Smith's decision to join 'the Brotherhood' in open revolution is only tenuously connected with his love for Julia. Instead, the decision reflects his despair over the possibility of maintaining his moral integrity within the teleocratic state of Oceania. Smith's embrace of revolutionary action involves the rejection of politics as a possible solution because politics, as it is traditionally understood, does not and cannot exist in a teleocratic state such as Oceania. In any case, his rebellion is purely negative. Neither he nor the fragments of 'Goldstein's' spurious pamphlet on oligarchical collectivism present any positive program other than vague references to proletarian revolution.⁴⁷ Smith's actual commitment consists of a series of promises which commit him to engage in the same types of moral enormities as the state itself. Indeed, Smith's hold on his own moral individualism is attenuated quite severely by the act of initiation into the Brotherhood which ends with "a wave of admiration, almost of worship, flow[ing] out of Winston toward O'Brien."⁴⁸ War, or revolution in this case, is an inherently teleocratic activity which necessarily subsumes individual purposes under the single substantive purpose of achieving victory.

⁴⁷*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 206-222. Orwell derived the arguments of 'The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism' from two sources, James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* and Dwight MacDonald's articles on oligarchy in *Partisan Review*. For Orwell's views on Burnham, see George Orwell, "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1945) 122-148; and for MacDonald's influence on Orwell, see John Newsinger, "The American Connection: George Orwell, 'Literary Trotskyism' and the New York Intellectuals," *Labour History Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (Spring 1999) 31-34.

⁴⁸*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 179.

Winston Smith's momentary moral lapse in the service of the nebulous cause of the Brotherhood is redeemed to some extent by his reassertion of moral autonomy and individuality after his arrest by the agents of the internal police, or Ministry of Love. Smith is a 'hard case' because he refuses to surrender his intellectual independence, and it is his stubborn repudiation of the Party's attempt to destroy his individuality which prolongs his suffering at the hands of the state's secret police. In fact, according to O'Brien, the chief torturer and party ideologist, Smith's resistance to the torture/brainwashing of the state makes him "the last man,...[he is] alone."⁴⁹ Smith explicitly claims that his purpose "was not to stay alive but to stay human" and that he "preferred to be a lunatic, a minority of one" than to have his personality submerged in the undifferentiated unity of the Party.⁵⁰ Even Smith's insistence on the objective character of external reality, exemplified in his allegiance to mathematical verities, can best be understood not as an expression of Orwell's commitment to some notion of natural law philosophy but instead as another attempt by Smith to maintain the existence of a realm beyond the control of the state.⁵¹ In the end, however, Smith, like all of the other characters, is broken. In many ways, this pessimistic ending is unconvincing, at least in terms of O'Brien's desire to have Smith will his own transformation. Smith's betrayal of Julia is not intellectual or emotional; the state has dehumanized him by reducing him to pure animal instinct. The state has converted Smith by metaphorically lobotomizing him. However, the nightmarish ending is consistent with the logic of

⁴⁹*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 279. Orwell's original title for the book was *The Last Man in Europe*.

⁵⁰*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 170-171, 256.

⁵¹Paul Griffiths claims that Orwell is primarily concerned with supporting the notion that there is a natural order beyond the control of ideology on which political activity and the institutions of government should be modeled. Paul Griffiths, "Orwell for Christians," *First Things* 148 (December 2004) 32-40.

teleocracy insofar as Smith does become one of “the 300 million people all with the same face.”⁵²

Orwell’s commitment to moral individualism is tempered, if not confused, by his sentimental communalism. In *Nineteen Eighty-four*, this ambivalent attachment manifests itself primarily in Winston Smith’s vague dreams of ‘the Golden Country’ and his nostalgic conception of the past. Knowledge of the past in Oceania is tightly controlled by the Party. Indeed, Smith’s job is to ‘correct’ the past in order to make it conform to the current Party line, so he is aware of the essential falseness of the official state history. However, his encounter with independent evidence of the past is always colored by his idealized conception of a pre-socialist, pre-capitalist, pre-modern past.⁵³ For example, his admiration for the ‘proles’ is derived from his belief that they have remained free from the corruption of modern life in a state of pristine nature. The ‘proles’ had “never learned to think” and Smith’s “mystical reverence for [them] was...mixed up with the aspect of the pale, cloudless sky, stretching away...into interminable distances.”⁵⁴ Smith’s affection for the glass-enclosed paperweight which he purchases at Mr. Charrington’s antique shop is another expression of his sympathy for a static, self-contained immaculate world. He calls this world the Golden Country, and conceives it as a pastoral, idyllic land without conflict or compromise. He dreams of its innocence and, in fact, identifies it with the wooded area in which he and Julia begin their

⁵²*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 76.

⁵³Stephen Spender suggests that Orwell had an “atavistic...fear of the machine.” Stephen Spender, “Introduction to 1984,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971) 66.

⁵⁴*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 226.

affair. He dreams that a revelation of its transcendental innocence could destroy the teleocratic state. However, this longing for a static world without conflict betrays the fundamental tension between Smith's desire to preserve his individual freedom and his admiration of the unconscious pre-modern communalism of the 'proles'.

This tension between modern individualism and pre-modern communalism, which renders Orwell's moral thought fundamentally ambiguous and forecloses his consideration of the state as a democracy, does not prevent him from exploring the political implications of the teleocratic state in a profound and original way. Although many of the general circumstances of living in Oceania are taken directly from Orwell's wartime experiences, they present an imaginative picture of political and moral life in a teleocracy. First, Oceania is a warfare state.⁵⁵ The state is conceived as a war-making machine and a productivist enterprise. The purpose of the state is to maximize production in order to insure success in the war-making effort. The irony of this single-mindedness is that, according to the Party leader O'Brien, it is power itself which is the ultimate *telos* of the teleocratic state.⁵⁶ All resources are in a constant state of mobilization, including, or especially, the citizens. There are special minutes of hate each day and weeks of hate which are set aside to inspire the citizens to sacrifice further for the good of the state. There are also constant reminders of production (e.g. chocolate, shoe, cigarette, and pig iron production), and the concomitant manipulation of these figures. However, more important than the government's manipulation of such figures is the fact that the state is considered responsible for them. The state conceived as a

⁵⁵Murray Rothbard claims that "the foundation for [Orwell's] nightmare totalitarian world is a perpetual cold war." Murray Rothbard, "George Orwell and the Cold War: A Reconsideration," *Reflections on America, 1984: An Orwell Symposium* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1986) 10.

⁵⁶*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 272.

productivist war-making enterprise is in not merely in charge of an economy. It is an economy. Further, teleocracies like Oceania destroy the rule of law. In fact, in Oceania, “nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws.”⁵⁷ Teleocracies have policies, not laws, because teleocratic governments are concerned solely with instrumental calculations concerning their ultimate purpose.

Citizenship, like the rule of law, becomes purely functional. Considered solely in terms of their contributions to the overriding purpose of the state, citizens in Oceania are understood as mere instruments. They are required to wear uniforms which are mocking reminders of the working-class origins of socialism. They are forced to exercise together and socialize with each other. Their free time is devoted to re-creation so that they are better equipped to fulfill their function. Indeed, “to do anything that suggested a taste for solitude...was always slightly dangerous”⁵⁸ The distinction between private and public is obliterated and individual choice is criminalized, becoming an act of rebellion. O’Brien openly boasts that the Party has “cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman.”⁵⁹ Art, friendship, and love cannot exist in teleocracy because these promote other loyalties. Smith notes that “tragedy...belonged...to a time when there were still privacy, love, and friendship,” and claims that “you did not have friends nowadays, you had comrades.”⁶⁰ Indeed, it is a part of the Party’s plan that “there will be no art, no literature, no science...all competing

⁵⁷*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 6.

⁵⁸*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 84.

⁵⁹*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 276.

⁶⁰*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 50.

pleasures will be destroyed.”⁶¹ The logic of teleocracy involves the destruction of moral autonomy which is the preeminent presupposition of modern moral individualism.

In the end, the teleocratic state involves the elimination of politics itself. As Orwell understood, the conception of the state as a teleocratic enterprise is a profoundly anti-political political idea. Politics, understood as the public tending to and modification of the legal and institutional arrangements of a particular society, cannot exist in a state managed by an elite for a particular substantive purpose. Political dissent is also prohibited. If there is no place for political activity, then there is no place for dissent. One of the great ironies of the novel is that the only apparent political dissent is manufactured by the state itself in order to justify its suppression of dissent and to enhance its own position. Finally, teleocratic governments must quash individuality. Individuals pursuing their own interests necessarily undermine unity of purpose of a teleocracy and cannot be tolerated.

Despite Orwell’s ‘prediction’ and the constant state of mobilization in US and Western Europe since 1933, neither has become Oceania internally. In part, Orwell underestimated the capacity of the Anglo-American tradition of democratic government to resist totalizing politics. The tradition of understanding the state as an association of citizens in terms of general conditions of conduct subscribed to when making choices or, in other words, as an association of individuals under the rule of law, and not as an association in pursuit of a particular purpose, has proven more resilient than Orwell foresaw. However, the seventy-year existence of the mobilized warfare state and the subsequent and related creation of the welfare state have encouraged both Americans and

⁶¹*Nineteen Eighty-four*, 277.

Europeans to think of the government as a productivist enterprise. As such, most citizens in the West hold the government responsible for their jobs and the economic growth of the state. The development of the modern warfare/welfare state has undermined respect for rule of law and has weakened the procedures protecting citizens from governmental intrusion. The end of the Cold War seemed to lessen the urgency of conceiving the modern state in terms of a single common purpose. However, with the advent of the war on terror, the possibility of a catastrophic event, like the limited nuclear war which justified the creation of teleocratic rule in Oceania, has reintroduced the language and logic of teleocracy to Western governments and has made Orwell's monitory exploration of the dangers of such a state relevant again.