

MARRIAGE AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

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One strain of conservative thought, the one traceable to Oakeshott and Burke, tends to be positive about the past and present while being pessimistic about change in the future. Enlightenment liberals, on the other hand, tend to be deeply dissatisfied with the past and present while being optimistic about change in the future. These tendencies are often taken to reflect either differences in moral sensibility or, at least, differences in psychological disposition.

The differences can more usefully be traced to different ways of understanding the world. Michael Oakeshott, for instance, distinguished between rationalism and practical knowledge. Rationalism, as he described it, is committed to the proposition that knowledge arises principally from individual intellectual effort. Practical knowledge, in contrast, is knowledge that arises from participation in an activity. Rationalists, then, will tend to be less attentive to the particulars of human practices and relatively sanguine about the possibility of improvement. Traditionalists like Oakeshott will tend to be appreciative of the complexity of human activities and distrustful of the capacity of individual human minds to make helpful changes. What we often take to be differences between liberals and conservatives, in short, arises from opposite views on the relationship between activity and knowledge.

I will begin by explaining more fully what Oakeshott meant by rationalism and practical knowledge. I then will apply the distinction to the issue of homosexual marriage. Traditionalist understandings do not inevitably lead to the conclusion that such an alteration in the institution of marriage would be unwise, but they do help identify the kinds of concerns that proponents should be willing to address.