An Introduction: Michael Oakeshott's Achievement

I

Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) is among the preeminent political philosophers of our time. His major works span a period from the 1933 publication of *Experience and its Modes* to the 1989 publication of his essays on education in *The Voice of Liberal Learning.* In between, the most notable works are *Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (1939), Introduction to the Blackwell Edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1946), *Rationalism in Politics* (1962; New and Expanded Edition, 1991), *On Human Conduct* (1975), *Hobbes on Civil Association* (1975), *On History and other essays* (1983).

Oakeshott's academic career was essentially divided between his time as a Cambridge history don-he was a life fellow of Gonville and Caius College where his portrait now presides over the faculty dining room-from the mid-1920s to 1949, and his professorship at The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) from 1951 to his official retirement in 1968. He was in the British Army during World War II. He spent a brief period at Oxford between 1949 and 1951. He continued to preside informally over the Tuesday seminar of the History of Political Thought Program at LSE, an MSc degree program he had founded, from 1968 through 1980, presenting annually his papers on the nature of historical inquiry, the latter being finally published in *On History* in 1983. Thereafter, he gave up his flat in Covent Garden and retired to his cottage on the Dorset coast.

His education was at St. George's School, Harpenden and at Cambridge. In the mid-1920s he attended lectures on theology and philosophy in Marburg and Tubingen. It is uncertain whether he heard Heidegger lecture at Marburg in 1926. Some have the impression that he said he did; others that he said he did not. It is

certain that in the 1920s in Cambridge he belonged to a small society of Cambridge dons (never more than eight or nine) called the "D Society" which met regularly to read papers on theological subjects. One of his papers, "Religion and the Moral Life," was published in 1927. He has recalled tome in a letter how he and others of this group went to hear Schweitzer, whose *Quest for the Historical Jesus* he much admired, play the organ at Trinity College Chapel in 1925. In the last years of his life he returned to this field reading such works as Jaroslav Pelikan's *Jesus Through the Centuries.*

In "Religion and the Moral Life;"Oakeshott rejects the idea that religion and morality are identical, proposing, rather, that "morality is a condition of religious belief," having to do with "honesty with oneself." "Religion," he argued, "if it is an activity of human beings must be the activity of moral personalities; and no religious doctrine or notion can properly be called `religious' if it does not accord with the requirements of moral personality....Since religion is a relation between God and moral'persons, all notions of irresistible grace operating mechanically. are impossible, for the characteristic of moral personality is its autonomy." The moral and the religious, in short, are intertwined, and it is in our self-enactment that we discover the way they go together in our particular circumstances: It follows both that a religious community can never be fully articulated in abstract rules or catechetical exercises, and also that the boundaries between the "church" and the "world" will always be uncertain. The boundaries will vary and will depend a good deal on the moral imagination..

In the moral dimension as such we will always face the ordeal Of living up to one ,"ought" after another; no success in one case guarantees success in the next; no success in one case precludes another case for which we may or may not find adequate ways to respond. Moral life is an endless series. "In religion," Oakeshott says, "we achieve goodness, not by becoming better, but by losing ourselves in God. For goodness is never achieved by becoming better: that is the self-contradiction of morality that always runs the risk of beingself-defeating. Religion, then, is the completion of morality, not in the sense of a final end to an historical series, but as the.

concrete whole is the completion of all the abstractions analysis may discover in it. Religion is not the sanction of morality, but the whole of which morality is an aspect, and in which mere morality perishes, that is, is discovered as an abstraction." Those familiar *with Experience and its Modes* will perceive the embryo of its argument here.

Oakeshott thus concluded that the absolute independence of the moral personality is the condition of knowing the absolute dependence upon God, where such dependence does not and cannot mean blindly obeying God's will. Otherwise, the moral would not be the moral, and a defining characteristic of the human would be excluded. But, Oakeshott goes on, the formal autonomy of the moral personality has to be connected to a moral content: "Free action is not moral action unless it is also wise....A concrete moral action is the autonomows, free, *and adequate* reaction of a personality to a situation." Morality, in short, inevitably issues in a history of actual conduct as it reveals a feature of the universal character of the human. We cannot be religious without enacting apattern of moral practices; we cannot enact a pattern of moral practices without being driven, implicitly or explicitly, by a desire for that completion in goodness which can never be captured fully in the particular decisions we take in the effort to do what we think it our duty to do.

This early essay suggests a way to grasp Oakeshott's life-long interest in theology and early church history which is little known to most of his readers because, after the early 1930s, *he* wrote virtually nothing overtly on these topics. Towards the end of his life he often remarked on his intention to have written more but that it was now "too late." Discerning readers of his essays will note passages in his essays, and one four-page section of *On Human Conduct,* that allow this interest to break through.

He was always reticent on this subject (he thought reticence was an appropriate acknowledgement of inevitable limitation), feeling that ours was not an age of much capacity for profound theological discussion. He thought it would be neither easy to state theological issues satisfactorily nor for readers to think with imagination on such matters. For him, theologizing required an imaginatively powerful construction of human experience as the encounter with the eternal

in the midst of the ineluctable temporality of our existence. He thought that St. Augustine enjoyed the greatest religious imagination within our tradition and after him Pascal. A clue to his religious sensibility may be found in his admiration for Walter Pater's novel, *Gaston de la Tour,* wherein is depicted the pilgrimage of a character who seeks beyond formalities the experience of the divine in all things, but who does not forget the necessity of practical judgment and skepticism towards claims made on behalf of personal "insights" and "revelations." J.H. Shorthouse's romantic *John Inglesant,* was another of Oakeshott's favorites. He once told me that, as a young man, he often made excursions to Little Gidding "just to see it." Indeed, in the last several years of his life, we conversed more often than not on topics like these; his exegeses of classic theological writings were remarkable and sometimes startling. It is a genuine loss that we shall not have them in written form. Oakeshott could strike one as an eccentric religious pilgrim with a sometimes stoic, but always a strongly romantic, if not bohemian, streak. Life for him was an adventure, a quest that, as with Don Quixote, was often uncertain of its direction. But as an intellectual adventurer, Oakeshott did not find that an uncertain destination left him with no sense of how to proceed. It is a pervading theme in his work that one need not understand everything that is going on in order to find an intelligible place for oneself.

His political philosophy, with its preference for a "civil association," maximizing the opportunity for individuals to find their own adventures, and his rejection of "rationalism," as a perversion of the medieval quest (a move from slaying the dragons that cross one's path to defining the world as a single great dragon to be put right), are intimately tied to this religious-philosophical attitude. One can also see that his critique of rationalism is akin to his rejection of the idea of morality as a completable, cumulative series of human actions. One needs to notice these features to see him whole.

There lurks also a connection to intellectual developments that run from Coleridge to T.S. Eliot, a connection that would have been difficult for him to accept insofar as its expression was too explicit. We find a clue in his admiration for Michael Foster's writings,

particularly *Mystery and Philosophy,* which emphasize the contingency of existence. All of these catalysts for his thought, no doubt surprising to many of his readers, move in the context of the influence on him of the ancient quest for the whole, of Hobbes's theological perspective which, to our misfortune, he expounded only briefly *in* "Leviathan: A Myth" (1947), and of Hegel's and Bradley's philosophy of religion: We can find parallels in the stories of Joseph Conrad and of Isak Dinesen, for both of whom he had the utmost admiration. It was evident in his conversation that these thinkers and writers fit together to him whereas many would find them jarringly inapposite.

II

The essays in the present collection mark the first sustained effort, following his death in December 1990, *to* assess his contribution to contemporary political philosophy. It is also the first collection of essays by political philosophers devoted to him since the special issue of *Political Theory in 1976.* The essays herein address several issues central to contemporary debates in political philosophy. They help clarify what the issues are and show the originality of Oakeshott's contribution. Each author is thoroughly acquainted with Oakeshott's writings *as* a whole. Several *of* them studied under him as graduate students at LSE, two of them wrote their dissertations *on* his work, one was a colleague of his for twenty years. Readers will discover that, typical of "Oakeshottians," these essayists do not engage in hagiography; they create a conversation with Oakeshott and among themselves. This collection does not take up every relevant topic-there are no essays on Oakeshott's philosophy of education or on his interpretation of Hobbes. But there is more than enough here to show the direction that discussion of Oakeshott's thought is likely to take.

Paul Franco's essay offers a virtual summary of the middle period of Oakeshott's work as encapsulated in the collection of essays, originally written between 1947 and 1960, in *Rationalism in Politics* (1962). The new, expanded edition (1991) adds six more essays, extending the period covered from 1932 to 1975, but shows the consistency in Oakeshott's thought that Franco suggests, even over that much longer period. *Rationalism in Politics* will probably

remain the principal point of entry into Oakeshott's work. It will continue to be the best way to make acquaintance with his work.

Franco explains in careful detail how Oakeshott's attack on "rationalism," while occasioned in part by opposition to the collectivistcharacter of post-war British politics, was much more, and decisively; developed from his long-standing philosophical skepticism going back to *Experience and its Modes,* and to essays criticizing Bentham and Mannheiminthe 1930s. Franco argues that the single "passionate thought" unifying Oakeshott's work from early to late is his expression of the distinctively human as the ceaseless endeavor to bring all experience into coherency by means of immanent critique and reflection. The always-to-be-sought, never-quite-to-be-achieved unity of experience as a whole is the driving force of human life; in this all human beings, qua human, participate.

Moreover, one could add that one form of the expression of this "passionate thought" was Oakeshott's regular resort to the ancient story of man's prideful aspiration to join the divine and the punishment for it, induced by a misunderstanding of our "autonomy." As Franco points out, Oakeshott, contrary to many modern thinkers, distinguishes the liberal tradition, which he wishes to defend, from rationalism and progressivism.

Oakeshott denies the transparency of the social order to individual reason and insists instead that the liberal aspiration has to do with limiting and dispersing power. The liberal tradition is, for Oakeshott, constituted in opposition to the politics of uniformity and perfection. The universal passion for the coherency of the whole of experience overwhelms claims to uniformity and perfection precisely because such claims will always caricature the whole, settling for an imitation, and thus must become barriers to the apprehension of the whole that is sought. Eventually, all putative perfections and uniformities will be burst apart by the neverending development of the human spiritin its quest for fulfillment. Oakeshott's very idea of what the human spirit seeks (sharedwith Plato, Augustine, and Hegel) leads him to a critique of all claims to have completed, or to know how to complete, that search.

Oakeshott's invocation ofthe Tower of Babel connects to Franco's

demonstration of the centrality for Oakeshott of the concrete universal, showing that freedom, the prime value of the liberal tradition, cannot have a merely abstract definition; freedom finds its rationality in coming to terms with the structure of a historically evolved world of practices and procedures, and ultimately with the formal expression of the intersection of this free play of the human spirit with its contingent conditions through a rule of law in a "civil association." In this, Franco prepares the way for the discussions of Oakeshott's remarkable contribution to the philosophy of law and the modern state in the essays of Richard Friedman and David Mapel.

Robert Orr covers much the same ground as Franco, but sees the character of Oakeshott's work very differently. Whereas Franco insists on subtle transpositions within a framework of strong consistency, Orr finds unresolved tensions in Oakeshott's intellectual development. Orr also prefers the Oakeshott of *Rationalism in Politics* over the Oakeshott *of Experience and its Modes* and especially of *On Human Conduct.*

What Orr prefers is the Montaigne-like, skeptical Oakeshott who knows that all intellectual constructions inevitably fail to manage and hold together the diversity of experiences they try to encompass. This is the Oakeshott-an authentic Oakeshottian character without doubt who seeks rather humbly and unassumingly to be at home in that corner of the world which is his allotted portion, and who is not seduced by efforts at systematic philosophic construction. This Oakeshott appeals as one who combats rationalism precisely by refusing to speak or to act in a manner that concedes anything to the rationalists. This is the Oakeshott of the "voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind," who looks for the delightful in the midst of the drab and who is sufficiently intrigued by his own circumstances to find adequate adventure at home and in quiet conversation with friends.

Orr brings this out by sharply delineating the antagonism between Aristotle's earthy, animal human being who barely peeks out from nature, and the abstract Oakeshottian agent, divorced from nature, portrayed in *On Human Conduct.* The late work of Oakeshott, as Orr argues, defined human beings as "agents" extricating them-

selves from the natural in favor of the realm of purely human, purely intellectual reflection (a reintroduction of Kantian elements he earlier seemed to have set aside). Thus, Orr shows that there is an unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, conflict in Oakeshott's thought.

This tension may well be related to a decision on Oakeshott's part that we are so far gone from the ability to appreciate traditionality that it became necessary to recast his earlier arguments in language appropriate to the prevailing intellectual idioms. But if so, Orr would argue that Oakeshott was mistaken to do so because it diluted the protest against modernity that was central. In contrast to Franco, then, Orr would argue that Oakeshott's "concrete universal" was finally lost from sight in his later work in favor of the expression of an abstract "ideal" of "civil association."

The dialogue between these two interpretations is a consequence of a complex effort on Oakeshott's part-reminiscent of Hegel, or more recently Gadamer, to mediate between the formalities and the contingencies of existence. For example, while Oakeshott was perhaps not, philosophically speaking, interested in the natural world, as Orr points out, he was in his personal life a devoted gardener, and in his personal relations forever a man of local and habitual affections. Thus, one might read *Rationalism in Politics* as an essay on civil society and *On Human Conduct* as a formal development of law and the state, seeing the two works in dialectical tension, qualifying and constraining each other.

Richard Friedman's essay expounds Oakeshott's idea of law in the context of contemporary legal philosophy. Friedman develops this topic, central to Oakeshott's thinking, in a way that should shape critical discussion for some time to come. What comes to light is that Oakeshott was one of the most remarkable philosophers of law in our time.

We can see in Friedman's discussion part of an answer to resolving conflicting tendencies, revealed by Franco and Orr, in terms of a theory of law and political authority. Friedman's essay shows how human beings, understood as subjects of law, continually reconcile agency with particularity: Oakeshott could respond to the quite reasonable dissent posed by Orr, that Aristotle did, in this sense, foreshadow his own work on law, authority, and civil association.

In Friedman's account, Oakeshott's agent is one who can always act otherwise, but who must act. As Hegel said, ideas are not so impotent as to remain only ideas: they have consequences. An agent is a human being with an idea of himself-a self-understanding-which unavoidably makes itself manifest in actions and utterances in the world. An answer to the alleged abstraction of the agent, in short, is to say that agency must realize itself concretely; it cannot avoid doing so. The agent must make a history and cannot remain only in the realm of ideas, while equally the history, even in its particularity, is the exhibition of the universal human capacity for self-conscious agency. Agents must seek their actuality according to some limiting conditions of doing so. Agents may be able always to act otherwise, but they also have their specific identities as they put themselves into action. They make themselves something in particular, and this is not lost but embedded in their actual lives. In a sense, agents are always "solving" the problem of their own abstractness, but never solving it once and for all. For this and other reasons, Horst Mewes will remind us in his essay that for Oakeshott it is crucial that a human being is a continually emerging, self-enacting dramatic identity, not a closed character. Self-enactment is not mere behavior; it is an interpretation for action of one's life.

Law and authority, then, are necessary elements in arranging ourselves in relation to each other so that whether taken as agents overcoming our own abstractness or as self-disclosing, self-enacting dramatic identities, we can live together cooperatively and not merely in self-defeating antagonism. In explicating how he con- ceived this, Friedman's is the best and most accurate account known to me of Oakeshott's intentions regarding the definitions of law and political authority.

Friedman distinguishes "neutrality" from "non-instrumentality" so clearly as to change the direction of subsequent discussions of this matter on the part of Oakeshott's critics. He also shows that Oakeshott's now widely known distinction between "civil associa- tion" and "enterprise association" is a distinction between that sort of compulsory association which is consistent with the freedom human beings enjoy in understanding themselves as agents of themselves-

i.e., civil association-and that sort of association proper only when it is voluntary: enterprise association. The emphasis on law as non-instrumental, rather than as neutral, refers to the way in which a subject of law, who is an agent, is actually subject to law. One discovers how it is possible to be rule-governed and still autonomous. This will lend support to John Coats's essay which discovers strong affinities to republicanism in Oakeshott's opposition to the tendencies of democratic cultures, obsessively concerned to satisfy bodily desires, to seek compulsory enterprise associations.

David Mapel's essay complements Friedman's by comparing Oakeshott's thought on law and the state to the work of H.L.A. Hart and Lon Fuller. Oakeshott's legal philosophy falls on neither side but rather, using elements characteristic of arguments of each, mediates among the tension-ridden strands of the efforts to define the character of the law. Mapel shows that for Oakeshott there is both a distinction between "moral duty" and "legal obligation," and also that there is an "inner morality of the law" and also "justice.""

Mapel also takes up the question of the non-instrumental law rightly showing that, for Oakeshott, the responses necessitated bylegal rules are not specified by the rules themselves. But he goes onto show that, in the act of subscribing to rules in particular circumstances, individuals do balance and weigh competing norms of moral duty and do consider external consequences of their actions even though under the constraints they have accepted in the law. The adequacy of the rules will depend on the adequacy of our action in specifying what the rules do not themselves initially specify. Thus, to Mapel's way of thinking, a pure non-instrumental civil association is neither possible nor desirable.

Mapel concludes that "if civil association must have purposes, there is no set of purposes it must have." There is a sort of constrained instrumentality. He gives a qualified assent to Oakeshott's effort to theorize a special kind of civil order in which the operation of the laws comes from our "specification," not from deduction, weighing or balancing, but which yet does not free us from having to draw rough and ready lines, depending on our diagnosis of current political life, between too much purposiveness and too little. Herein Mapel reminds us of Orr's conclusion about the problem of defining unam-

biguously what is an "adverbial background" condition of action and what is an expression of purpose.

Finally, Mapel shows that Oakeshott's originality is to depart from most current political theorists who merely debate which purposes they want to pursue, who do not ask themselves seriously whether pursuing purposes is the most significant undertaking, or whether civil association could ever be coherently organized merely by debating alternative purposes.

John Coats's essay breaks new ground by illuminating an implicit connection between Oakeshott's political philosophy and the theory ofrepublicanism. He points out, as do Franco, Friedman, and Mapel, that Oakeshott does not defend individualism by resort to a doctrine of rights but by appeal to the authority of law. This leads Coats to comparean ideal republican character to an ideal democratic character.

As Coats understands the republican tradition, it honors an association based on mutual deference among genuinely diverse talents. Such an_association defines as virtues discipline and civility, and encounters liberty not in "the silence of the laws," but in the "generality of the laws." Mature republicans are self-dependent, have no felt need or desire for "political- leadership," and think of themselves as creating a rational order for themselves in terms of their own resources and traditions, neither looking to outsiders for guidance, nor expecting outsiders to affirm their self-chosen way of life. Political activity in a republican order consists in continually revising and exploiting traditional knowledge or, as Oakeshott famously put it, politics is there known to be "the pursuit of intimations."

By contrast, democratic characters understand themselves to be pursuing power for the purpose of controlling the distribution of goods. They define their pursuits intangible, bodily ways and are proneto egalitarianism under the influence of the dominance of the body. Politics is reduced to competition for the same basic goods at the expense ofthe appreciation of true diversity, and is driven by the experience of relative deprivation and the hope of relief through leaders. There is a powerful temptation to assume the universality of this outlook, to assert prejudices as trans-prejudicial, and to claim to leap from ignorance to certainty by means of technique (to rely on

the "rationalism" Oakeshott opposes).

Finally, Horst Mewes breaks important ground by providing, so far as I know, the first major, direct comparison of Oakeshott with Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss based on thorough and equal conversancy with the writings of all three. Mewes does so by emphasizing Oakeshott's concern for the religious dimension of self-enactment as the overcoming of contingency contrasted with self-disclosure as the mere finding of one's place in the contingent. This is significant since most previous commentary on Oakeshott has not seen this nor put him into the context of his contemporaries in political philosophy.

Mewes shows that the questions of "agency" and "autonomy" are, for all three thinkers, fundamental questions of political philosophy. All three thinkers place the question of "the status of individuality," and their fear of individuality's tendency to self-destruction, at the center of their thinking. All three are struck by the banality of modern, democratic culture, all have republican tendencies (either Greek or modern), all are classically educated. Yet only Oakeshott, despite agreeing with Arendt and Strauss on much of the modern pathology, thinks that autonomy is not illusory. He thus embraces the modern liberal tradition, while Arendt and Strauss, each in a different way, express grave doubts.

Mewes shows that Oakeshott's individualism is not a "doctrine" of the individual: "Oakeshott's notion of individuality precludes a self based on any purely `internal' principle, instinct, normative intuition or inspiration attempting to assert....claims." The Oakeshottian self makes itself in and through "intelligent engagement" with the world and is "expansively adventurous."

While Oakeshott rejects all doctrines of human nature, contra Strauss's neoclassicism, he does not reject the possibility of a focal meaning of the human. Doctrines of human nature, for Oakeshott, are crystallizations of specific congeries of interrelated historical experiences, in all of which the faculty of human self-consciousness has shown itself in multifaceted ways. As such, these doctrines of human nature are enlightening and to be examined philosophically, but they cannot adequately capture and define once and for all the inexhaustible play of the human spirit in its universal, perpetual

quest for self-understanding.

Oakeshott carries this far enough to assert that, again contra Strauss, even the apparent primacy of the practical is only apparent. All forms of human understanding are conditional. Practical understandings are limiting intepretations of the possible ways to act responsibly toward the widely varying circumstances of time and place.

For Oakeshott, the defining, permanent character of the human cannot be realized once and for all, definitively or paradigmatically. Autonomy is not, then, to be sought by imagining that one is bringing oneself into conformity with a perfect model. Rather, autonomy is realized in the artfulness of a life, in that intellectual and emotional maturity that enables one to discover the nuances of possibility in the situations in which one finds oneself. Excellence lies in the formal perfection of action vis-a-vis one's associates in instances of opportunity for action, but never once and for all; it is the adornment that accompanies freely chosen action despite the limits of one's resources for responding to the demands of contingent situations.

But what Oakeshott takes to be real, Arendt, expounding much the same experience, finds to be an illusion. For her the central feature ofhuman action is the endless endeavor to extricate ourselves from the merely natural-towards what? Towards greatness and glory. In doing this, however, the action always will exceed the understanding so that the human will never know what it really is. The modest solidity of Oakeshott's world, its inhabitants confident of reaching some modicum of self-understanding, and thus a degree of flexible stability in the midst of contingency, dissipates in the mystery with which Arendt surrounds the human effort to be fully-purely-human. Thus, although Oakeshott understands human action as the creation of a dramatic identity, he resists defining, as Arendt does, the dramatic as the ineffable, the endless overcoming of human emptiness. At the same time, he finds Strauss's return to ancient concepts of human nature too restrictive for the full play of human consciousness. This will also explain why it is that Oakeshott, in his critique of modernity, shows neither nostalgia for the ancient alternatives, nor a sense of excessive futility about the present.

Oakeshott's is a quasi-traditional notion of character as situated

between nothingness and eternity, capable of self-enactment as an encounter with eternity, as autonomy within the dailiness of life, wherein religious sentiment is both a completion and admission of a limit.

III

We have, then, a set of independently developed essays which cohere in noticing salient features of Oakeshott's thought: his critique of modern rationalism, his theory of human agency and human knowing, his theory of autonomy and of the distinctively human, his concept of law and of political authority, and his exposition of the way we live now with civil association as the appropriate ordering of such lives as we have learned to lead.

It was Oakeshott'sview that philosophy is an accidental discovewwe make when we break into conversations questioning our assumptions only to discover the conditionality of all human knowing. This leads some contemporaries to imagine that he was, after all, a post-modernist thinker. We do not know what he would have thought about this argument; it came too late in the day for him to respond.

In fact, however, he learned from Socratic inquiry, from the Augustinian assault on Babelian pridefulness, from the skepticism of Montaigne, Hobbes, and Hume, from the confrontation with our unresolved inbetweenness in Pascal and Hegel, and from other lesser sources. He could be and was amused by the antiquity of contemporary philosophical prejudices. He was aware that the modern world regularly promotes itself on the grounds of its supposed novelty. He saw Towers of Babel forever being built under disguise and with clever circumlocutionsso as to obscure to ourselves that the way we live now resembles the way we have always lived. In opposing stories of our greatness with stories of our littleness, he nonetheless affirmed the imaginative power of the human spirit. In our end is our beginning, he could have said. The details of political debate he judged in the light that wisdom begins in knowing that we do not know.

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