

REVIEW

*The Conversation of
Modern Political Thought*

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Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought by Luke Philip Plotica. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.

American Public Media runs a weekly radio show called the “Dinner Party Download” that bills itself as “a fast and funny hour of culture, food and conversation.” With tongue in cheek, it is “The show that helps you win your next dinner party.” The quip is humorous because we do not ordinarily see dinner parties as things at which we win or lose. We have dinner parties and they may be successful or unsuccessful, fun or not fun, but they are not, usually, competitions. And they are not competitions precisely because they are seen as “parties” in which conversations takes place.

Plenty of things can go on in a conversation: stories related, questions asked and answered, declarations made, arguments ignited, jokes told, information conveyed—all more or less skillfully performed by the participants. But still, conversations are not quite like having an argument, or being informed of something, or hearing an announcement or merely listening to a storyteller. Whatever they are, conversations are more than or are different from these other activities. Few have understood this more clearly than Michael Oakeshott. As he wrote in “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind,” conversation is

to be distinguished absolutely from enquiry, from argument, from debate and from a symposium under the direction of a symposiarch. Its tone is colloquial, but it is not a colloquy. Where others discern a quarry to be pursued and brought to bay, the man of conversation participates in the chase merely for the pleasure of the ride: for him it is a hunt without a victim (2004, p. 187).

In a metaphor that always expressed something to be admired in his eyes, Oakeshott noted that “Conversation...springs from the movement of present minds disposed to intellectual adventure.” (2004, p. 189). Moreover,

Its enemies are the tedious, pertinacious talkers, resisting the flow without being able to give it a fresh direction; those who, like a worn gramophone record, distract the company by the endless repetition of what may have begun by being an observation but, on the third time round, becomes the indecent revelation of an empty mind; the noisy, quarrelsome, the

disputatious, the thrusters, the monopolists and the informers who carry books in their pockets and half-remembered quotations in their heads (Ibid.).

Conversation is very much a social activity but Oakeshott also sees it as a manner of thinking. As such, it is a temperament, requiring a kind of self-discipline, self-doubt, and self-acceptance (2004, p. 193). It is “an exercise in politeness and in tactical humility” (2004, pp. 193-194). It “civilizes” any activity and through Plato’s dialectic, it civilized philosophy. Philosophy, or a kind of philosophy, concludes not with a triumph or an agreement to disagree, “but when all simultaneously discover that each has been right all the time” (2004, p. 194).

Conversation is a mode of social interaction, a style of thinking, a manner of conducting philosophy and it is a way to civilize politics. More strongly, Oakeshott asserts that it is the “gist and meaning of democracy” (Ibid.). On his account, democracy as a conversation is not rule by the people or a culture of equality, but a politics in which single-mindedness, abstract intelligence, and dogmatic reforms are dissolved. It is politics that is humble in its aspiration, cognizant of human imperfections, and undertaken by individuals who are neither rulers nor subjects and neither gods nor heroes (2004, p. 196).

In perhaps his most famous use of the idea of conversation, Oakeshott deploys it as *modus vivendi* for different modes of understanding. In “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (1991), poets, scientists, historians and practical types are able to interact without seeking to inform, debate, or defeat one another. These participants may differ without disagreeing (1991, p. 489). Conversation is way to imagine a plurality of ways of understanding human experience existing, not in separate silos, but in an on-going respectful and lively form of interaction. Conversation suggests a “meeting-place” where these idioms could “talk to” one another without informing, persuading, or refuting one another. The idea of the conversation of mankind captures how practitioners, historians, scientists, and poets could relate to what the other was doing. In a conversation, there is no hierarchy, no arbiter, no door-keeper, no profit and no prize. The participants “acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 490). He goes on to soften some of these conditions by noting,

Of course there is argument and inquiry and information, but where these are profitable they are to be recognized as passages in this conversation, and perhaps they are not the most captivating of the passages. It is the ability to participate in this conversation, and not the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world, or to contrive a better world, which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian (Oakeshott 1991, p. 490).

All of this is by way of introduction to Luke Philip Plotica’s wonderful book. As his title suggests, Plotica applies Oakeshott’s notion of conversation to Oakeshott himself. More specifically, he places Oakeshott in conversation with Ludwig Wittgenstein (chapter one), Alasdair MacIntyre, Edward Shils, and Charles Taylor (Chapter two), Michel Foucault, Isaiah Berlin, and Hannah Arendt (Chapter three), and Chantal Mouffe and Stanley Cavell (chapter four). The topics of these conversations range from the character of language and human agency (chapter one) to the relationship of individuality to tradition (chapter two), to the emergence, conditions and character of the state (chapter three), to the meaning and role of deliberation and democracy (chapter four). Although Oakeshott is the primary voice in these discussions, Plotica provides a wide-ranging discussion of a number of issues central to modern political thought.

Plotica’s intention behind his approach is driven, in part, by his observation that although there has now emerged a wealth of insightful scholarship since Oakeshott’s death, it has also “tended toward the repetition and modification of a rather narrow range of themes and has thus left much of the richness, scope, and implications of Oakeshott’s work unexhausted” (2015, p. 4). One is tempted to say that much of the scholarship concerning Oakeshott has focused on trying to figure out what he was trying to say. Plotica’s

project is to discern whether what Oakeshott says can be put in conversation with late twentieth century political thought.

Plotica values the idea of conversation for a number of reasons. First and foremost, conversation is important because it was important to Oakeshott. Thinking about his work conversationally is not an imposition or a procrustean enterprise. Second, it is a way for Plotica to get some leverage on Oakeshott's positions that are overly rigid. Along these lines, Plotica sees conversation as a way to soften the demand for ideological labels that may unfairly box-in Oakeshott as merely a liberal, or as a conservative, or as a libertarian, or an authoritarian, etc. or as inconsistently advocating one set of ideas over another. In a conversation, Oakeshott need not be saying the same thing over and over again (unless one wants to read him as a boor). Third, Plotica sees conversation as opening up Oakeshott to contemporary debates. Here, Plotica distinguishes his work from the work of Wendell John Coates who reads Oakeshott as being in conversation across the centuries with such thinkers as Montaigne, Augustine, Hegel, Hobbes, Constant, Rousseau and Hume. In contrast, Plotica goes beyond references made implicitly and explicitly by Oakeshott and *places* Oakeshott in conversation "with significant figures of twentieth-century philosophy and political theory with whose ideas he was almost certainly familiar, but whose work he rarely if ever undertook to discuss" (Plotica 2015, p. 9). Why place him in such a situation? Plotica writes, "My purpose in doing so is not only to provide a view on Oakeshott that identifies elements of his thought that are interesting for Oakeshott scholars, but also to highlight elements of his thought that speak to broader, less obvious topics and audiences" (Ibid.). In this endeavor Plotica is successful.

In one of his metaphors of the experience of being in a conversation, Oakeshott writes, "Up go the balls, the plates, the hats, the whole miscellany of the juggler's box; up and over, in and out spinning and leaping. Nobody asks where they have come from, or on what authority they have appeared; no one is interested in what happens to them when they are once more put away. It is enough that they are moving before us in the air, graceful and enchanting" (2004, p. 187). If the topic of the conversation in chapter one is the relationship between agency and social context, Wittgenstein sets spinning the plate of "language games" and Oakeshott throws in his notion of "practices." Plotica juggles these ideas with the notion of "critical agency," wondering whether social context must preclude the possibility of agents calling into question social conventions and norms that have constituted their self-understandings. Well, it's not quite hats, balls and plates, but neither are there proofs and demonstrations that critical agency is possible within a convention-saturated understanding of the human condition. Rather, the first chapter conveys the sense that when Wittgenstein and Oakeshott are placed side by side one can hear more clearly their endorsement of individuality and the capacity of agency to be enabled by social convention and to be able to critically assess those conventions. Along the way we also arrive at a refutation of a particularly conservative reading of their work in which agency is exhaustively determined by social structure.

When the conversation turns to tradition in chapter two, we find that there are plenty of purveyors of tradition who wish to convince us that we must choose between a view of the world in which tradition constitutes who we are and a view of the world composed of disconnected, disenchanting, atomized individuals. Many readers of Oakeshott have heard him as endorsing the first option or what Plotica calls "the constitutive view." But, Plotica continues, the constitutive view only makes sense if we ignore what Oakeshott says about the role of contingency. When placed in conversation with Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, Oakeshott's theme of contingency can be seen more clearly as spinning in a direction that threads between an unencumbered self and a self that is exhausted by tradition.

The idea of contingency takes Plotica into, among other things, a discussion of a narrative style of understanding and freedom. As part of a style of narrative, the idea of contingency enables Oakeshott to portray the relationships between events, actions and agents as something other than causal or teleological. This view is important for Oakeshott's concept of historical understanding, but it is also connected to an intersubjectively constituted world that must always be interpreted and understood. In that world, an agent is free "insofar as she enacts herself in response to a world about which she has fashioned an understanding, employing practices that had to be learned and can be used in virtue of being understood" (2015, p. 62).

Freedom on this philosophical (as opposed to political) account is less connected to acting in the absence of external obstacles and more a condition of acting. Freedom is linked to an intelligent (as opposed to caused or behaviorally conditioned) response to the world. The free agent here is not a Prometheus but a Proteus, “a character distinguished from all others on account of his multiplicity and of his endless power of self-transformation” (Oakeshott quoted in Plotica 2015, p. 63). Individuality for Oakeshott becomes the embrace of the Protean possibilities: “Her individuality consists in her self-aware exploration of the proposition that she is what in doing she becomes” (2015, p. 65). There are those who despair over their individuality (the individual manqué) and those who rage against it (the anti-individuals). Throughout this discussion Plotica superbly and concisely considers the relationship between contingency, freedom and Oakeshott’s conception of individuality.

I pause, however, over a couple of lines that Plotica writes towards the end of chapter two (a pause that was prompted by a point that Andrew Norris makes in a paper titled “Michael Oakeshott and the Postulates of Individuality”). The view of persons as mere emanations of networks of tradition, discourse or power-relations is one that Oakeshott regarded “as subhuman, yet possible and often all too real” (2015, p. 66). Plotica goes on to note that only the self-enacted individual who embraces her self-enacted individuality “bears a fully human face” (Ibid.). To formulate my response to these comments in an Oakeshottian tone, I think that this phrasing is unfortunate. It is one thing not to live up to one’s potential. It is another to call the results of that failure subhuman. This objection also raises the deeper question of whether the individual manqué and the anti-individual can really be what Oakeshott says they are. Is it possible to intelligently escape freedom if freedom is understood as an exhibition of intelligence?

The conversation picks up again in chapter three’s discussion of the modern state. In partnership with Michel Foucault, Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, the chapter offers a very lively discussion of the consequences of the historical consolidation of the state’s powers (Foucault and Oakeshott), the importance of pluralism to a civil society (Berlin and Oakeshott) and the character of the public space (Arendt and Oakeshott). Although this is not the happy form of a conversation in which “all simultaneously discover that each has been right all the time,” it is the strongest chapter of the book, offering a compelling example of how Oakeshott’s work addresses themes that are central to other thinkers even though he never explicitly engaged them. In addition, Plotica uses these interlocutors to enrich and criticize Oakeshott’s views. Plotica writes, “When read alongside the work of Foucault, Berlin, and Arendt, Oakeshott’s political thought breaches the ideological fencing within which it is too commonly presented” (2015, p. 110). Chapter three alone is worth the price of the book.

The final substantive chapter considers Oakeshott’s place in democratic theory. While there is no sustained discussion of democracy in his work, Oakeshott was clearly critical of much that went under the heading of democracy. By partnering him with Chantelle Mouffe and Stanley Cavell, Plotica argues that Oakeshott would have rejected the deliberative democratic call for consensus and he would have challenged their epistemological presumption that political and moral questions are truth-apt. Oakeshott is more liable to see disagreement as indicative of a wider form of pluralism as opposed to some form of misunderstanding. What Plotica adds to this discussion is the idea that a conversational ethos can inspire democracy. Democratic talk, of course, is not the whole of democratic politics. Decisions must still be made—something that Oakeshott understood. Yet, Plotica argues, “when animated by a conversational ethos, democratic politics can accept the necessity of temporary breaks in the conversation and of momentary impositions of tentative priorities, without converting arrest into foreclosure or hegemony into exclusion” (2015, p. 132).

I will conclude with two observations, one that may be tangentially related to Plotica’s argument and a second that is connected to whether the practice of political theory is indeed a conversation. My first observation begins with the admission that the pluralist impulse behind Oakeshott’s idea of conversation is one that I find enormously attractive. Despite its attractions, however, there is a passage in “The Conversation of Mankind” essay, where I wince. Oakeshott writes, “A girl, in order to escape a conclusion, may utter what appears to be an outrageously irrelevant remark, but what in fact she is doing is turning an argument she finds tiresome into a conversation she is more at home in (1991, p. 489). “Fiddle-dee-dee” one wants to

say. Yes, of course, Oakeshott was a gentleman of his times. And yes, his example is meant to show that at least the “the girl” knows something that the boorish Ashleys and Rhetts with their arguments may not. But still, the implication is that her *home* is in the conversation where she can make unruly remarks and not in the logical world of argument from whose conclusions she seeks refuge. The passage only works because these gender roles are taken as given. There is something up here, not in the “gotcha!” sense of dismissing what Oakeshott says about conversation because of an unfortunate illustration, but in the sense that questions of who can speak about what may help illuminate, enrich and complicate his notion of conversation. Do these gendered presumptions disturb his notion of individuality? Is Oakeshott’s understanding of conversation feminine? Perhaps Plotica also thinks that something is up insofar as he takes care to use feminine pronouns to illustrate his examples.

My final question is connected to the practice of political theory. Plotica’s employment of the idea of conversation as a way to make sense of Oakeshott’s contribution to contemporary discussions is original and significant. The writing is very clear and the text is wonderfully concise. That Oakeshott saw philosophy as being civilized by conversation in the Platonic dialogues indicates how close Plotica may be to how Oakeshott, in his more philosophical moments, wished to be understood. I wonder, however, whether the Socratic dialectic is as conversational as Oakeshott suggests. Perhaps in some dialogues, but in others Plato’s Socrates wants to win an argument and literally stun his interlocutors. Regardless of whether Oakeshott got Socrates right, one would have a difficult time making the case that political theory, as an actual practice, is conversational. Plenty of political theorists want to win the dinner party. In a way that Oakeshott suggests, that’s too bad. But as difficult as it might be to imagine a polity adopting an ethos of conversation, it is just as difficult to imagine our colleagues doing the same.

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