

## What Can We Learn from Michael Oakeshott's Effort to Understand Our World?<sup>1</sup>

TIMOTHY FULLER

Colorado College

My intention on this occasion is, first, to say something about what sort of activity Oakeshott understood political philosophy to be; and, second, what he thought the philosophical study of politics might reveal about the world in our time and place.

Although Oakeshott never spent much time talking about influences on his thinking, he did mention a few influences that show us something about his approach. He admired Montaigne's *Essays* and often described himself as a writer of essays. For example, he described his masterpiece, *On Human Conduct*, as a set of three essays whereas most readers would take it to be a systematic whole. An essay is a tentative expression of how one understands oneself and how one understands what is going on in the world. For Oakeshott, the essay is an act of self-disclosure about how one sees things. It is also an invitation to others to say how they see things and thus to keep alive the conversation of mankind regarding the most important matters. In such acts of self-disclosure and response human beings are at their most human.

Oakeshott also acknowledged Hegel for understanding our world as the continuous experience of oppositions to be mediated, reconciled only to disclose further oppositions to be mediated in the continuous flow of experience which constitutes the historical character of the human condition. Oakeshott did not adopt the progressive theory of history with which Hegel is often credited, but he did adopt Hegel's method of explaining what is going on in the world in terms of fundamental oppositions in search of reconciliation. I will provide illustrations of this from many places in his writings.

Oakeshott described himself as a skeptic who would do better if only he knew how to do better. In this he invoked the skepticism of Montaigne along with the dictum of Hegel that the main lesson we learn from history is that we do not learn from history if by learning from history we imagine that the oppositions we must deal with are identical to those of the past and are susceptible to the same responses. The Owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk; our wisdom is largely gained in the retrospective contemplation of what is past. This insight might moderate our tendency to rush headlong into the future, lacking as we do answers in advance.

Here also is the influence of David Hume on Oakeshott's thinking, especially Hume's essay on the Skeptic. There Hume remarks that "philosophic devotion...like the enthusiasm of a poet, is the transitory effect of high spirits, great leisure, a fine genius, and a habit of study and contem-

plation...” (Hume 1987, p. 167). However, Hume says, such a state cannot sustain itself. It must reattach to the actualities of common, historical existence. Hume thus recommends a virtuous temper to counteract alienation from the world. To lose connection to the dailiness of life is to lose sight of the weakness of philosophy’s claim to authority. When Hume wrote this he was recalling the Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s Republic.

Reflection at its best “insensibly refines the temper” against the illusions of passion and quiets the mind without inducing that indifference which would diminish the pleasures of life. If there is no philosophical cure for the human condition, there may be a philosophical cure for the philosophical ill: The philosopher has encountered problems he cannot solve. Thus the skeptic philosophizes also about philosophizing, warning against the pretension that philosophy should rule. Hume had already recognized that the age of ideology was dawning, that the lust for abstract theorizing was growing, that the classical defense of moderation was in decline, that philosophers were tempted to become politicians.

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Oakeshott, acknowledging Montaigne and Hume, and deriving his method of analysis from Hegel, thus describes himself as a skeptic who would “do better if only he knew how.” (“Political Education”, Oakeshott 1962, p. 111) In this Oakeshott was formulating his own response to the possibilities and perils of the modern situation. For him, the philosophic examination of politics seeks to describe the character of political activity quite apart from defending or attacking particular polices. The philosophic examination of politics is not an effort to participate in current arguments but rather to understand why the arguments take the form they do.

Politics is a self-contained manner of human activity; it does not require an independent theory to get it going, to maintain its momentum, or to carry out its self-chosen activities. The philosopher, Oakeshott says, speaks in the indicative or descriptive mood, expressing in other words what has already been expressed in the words and actions of daily life. The practitioner of politics does not require this exposition from the philosopher, often choosing to ignore the philosophic description altogether.

Speaking indicatively, Oakeshott said that politics is the “activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 112). More specifically, this usually means “the hereditary co-operative groups” called “states.” The modern state began to come into being long before us and may persist long after us. We never possess a blank slate on which we may write what we want. To think we can start from scratch is to suffer an illusion. This illusion is nonetheless evident in our world and must be noticed as a feature of the rhetoric of politics.

For Oakeshott, “politics springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves.” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 123) “Arrangements,” in short, are neither merely desires nor merely principles. They are a manner of living, a way of life, composed over time by the myriad choices of individuals in the society of each other, establishing practices through which they render their association concrete and humanly possible.

Such arrangements, of course, have consequences. They are the product of intelligence responding to its surrounding circumstance according to its understanding of those circumstances. In responding, human beings discover “intimations” to pursue, possibilities which are not necessary implications but present themselves as significant. There are always more such intimations than can be followed up at any moment. Choices among the possible avenues of exploration must be made. Political debate makes its appearance here: “relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 124)

There is no logically implied direction to be discovered, no self-evidently right intimation among all the intimations that come in for consideration. Human beings find their purposes in life in constructing purposes as they respond to their circumstances. All such responses, no matter how far removed from our

own sympathies, are exhibitions of intelligence at work with intermittent success. We cannot specify our final goal or *the* final goal. We may be able to minimize the chance of disaster “if we escape the illusion that politics is ever anything more than the pursuit of intimations; a conversation, not an argument” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 125). On this point, we might respond to Oakeshott that such conversation nevertheless regularly becomes stridently argumentative.

For some the philosopher may have a depressing effect when the philosopher is obliged to say that in politics, “men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbor for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 127). (One will note that the postulate of this view is expressed in Montaigne’s advice about making a friend of death).

Perhaps with regret the philosopher puts aside the possibility of superhuman wisdom, but also perhaps with relief points to the traditions without which we would fall into a morass of random choices. The emphasis is on the capacity of human intelligence to continue to use the resources of its history. There is confidence that intelligence is not likely to be exhausted. In our moment, the responsibility is ours. It is not likely to be the final moment, and, in any case, we cannot act as if it were. We do not and cannot know that. Nor can we unmake the inheritance we have. History cannot be taken back. Thus we must go on.

Tradition, says Oakeshott, “is not susceptible of the distinction between essence and accident, knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail: to know only the gist is to know nothing” (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 128-9). Intimacy with tradition may yield stability without rest. Politics is best conducted in the attitude of energetic sobriety. This attitude results from having grown up hearing the already ongoing voices of one’s world, and having learned to speak with them. The study of history, properly conducted, will introduce us to the detailed, concrete nature of our way of life, and will illustrate on a broader scale what is true of our own experience. The lesson will be that a manner of living indicates how we may conduct ourselves but not what we are required to do, nor where we are required to go. We may gain inspiration, Oakeshott thought, from “thinkers and statesmen who knew which way to turn their feet without knowing anything about a final destination” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 131).

Political philosophy – philosophic reflection on the character of politics – may help us to think straighter about the concepts we employ. Here and there it may reduce the incoherency of our thinking. But it has no capacity to guarantee success in political activity. All of the foregoing reflections may be seen as the effort of a political philosopher to escape from his own occupational illusions by looking directly at the object of his investigation, namely, politics itself.

There we see what political actors actually succeed in doing: they pursue the intimations of the traditions of which they are a part. They may deny this and seek to do something else. Ideologies promise that we can escape the world we have inherited. Proponents of ideologies can sometimes persuade others that they have escaped this limitation. They can rename the Tower of Babel and vary its architectural nuances. They can attempt to pursue perfection as the crow flies. They can also become cynical graspers after power for its own sake. What, finally, they cannot do is to fend off the reassertion of the human condition as it has always been.

Fortunately, the death of false ideas is not identical to the death of the human spirit. It arises from its own ashes. Nevertheless, it would be to the good to avoid recipes for the production of ash heaps where possible. Sensible politicians will do so. Philosophers cannot produce sensible politicians, but they can be irritating reminders of the limits of politics. Philosophers might notice sensible politicians and speak their praises simply by describing them. In so doing, they perform a not altogether useless task. Their task is to understand why the world is the way it is, not to postulate a program to liberate us into a world beyond change or to reach the end of history.

Political philosophers in a special sense are thus of a conservative disposition. This is not to be confused with what is currently discussed as “conservatism” whether paleo- or neo-. Oakeshott’s reference is specifically to a disposition from which no obvious generalizations about views on specific policy ques-

tions may be drawn. The political philosopher is not in the business of determining of which ideas it may be said that their time has come, or gone. This conservative disposition reveals the nature of the skeptical way. Plans to eliminate contingency, or to “give the government back to the people,” or to achieve “peace in our time,” or to “make poverty history,” claim a potential for control the historical record does not support.

If one were to ask Oakeshott, “Why ought governments to accept the current diversity of opinion and activity in preference to imposing upon their subjects a dream of their own?” His reply is “Why not? Their dreams are no different from those of anyone else; and if it is boring to have to listen to the dreams of others being recounted, it is insufferable to be forced to re-enact them. We tolerate monomaniacs, it is our habit to do so; but why should we be ruled by them?...Government...does not begin with a vision of another, different and better world, but with the observation of the self-government practised even by men of passion in the conduct of their enterprises...the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection” (“On Being Conservative”, Oakeshott 1962, pp. 187-88). Here is Oakeshott’s critique of the enlightenment project, and of rationalism in politics, in the wake of the horrendous events of the twentieth century. What then is the proper role of governing? For Oakeshott, it begins with the rule of law.

Governing involves the making and enforcing of rules of conduct. Rules of conduct are not prescriptions for how we ought to live. They are adverbial conditions, specifying that, whatever we choose to do, we must do it under certain conditions. Such conditions may help or hinder us in the pursuit of our aims. The function of the rules of conduct, however, is neither to help nor to hinder, neither to pronounce in favor of nor against particular self-chosen pursuits of individuals, but to encourage the capacity for self-regulation.

Governing provides a structure of laws. When successful, it will reduce the number of unfortunate collisions among interests. It will insure compensation for injuries. It will punish those who refuse to abide by rules of conduct. But government is “not the management of an enterprise, but the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises...not concerned with concrete persons, but with activities...not concerned with moral right and wrong...not designed to make men good or even better...” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 189). Such a government seeks only “necessary loyalty” because it is indifferent to truth and error alike. Such a government may expect “respect and some suspicion, not love or devotion or affection” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 192). Oakeshott is describing procedural governance as the means to allow for the widest range of human self-regulation through voluntary transactions.

Rules of conduct will have to change over time, of course. Such modification as is necessary “should always reflect and never impose, a change in the activities and beliefs of those who are subject to them, and should never on any occasion be so great as to destroy the ensemble” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 190). Even armed with this disposition it will not necessarily be an easy or simple task to act in accord with it: “To rein-in one’s own beliefs and desires, to acknowledge the current shape of things, to feel the balance of things in one’s hand, to tolerate what is abominable, to distinguish between crime and sin, to respect formality even when it appears to be leading to error, these are difficult achievements” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 195).

Reflection of this sort fosters being at home in the world. As with Montaigne, we discern a pattern of movement from natural harmony at birth to the disharmony of youthful exuberance, to the reflective return to the world which we must inhabit and which differs from the one of our poetic images and political fancies. There is no rule enforcing this upon us. We may experience this with greater or lesser grace, but it is the capacity to find the days of age equal to the days of youth which qualifies us for undertaking political activity.

There is a parallel between the wisdom of the philosopher and the practical insight of the mature politician. But they do not need each other to come to them. Oakeshott thought we should be thankful if they can live safely together in the same polity.



Throughout his writings, Oakeshott explored a number of oppositions in search of mediation which characterize the modern situation. Among them are these:

Empirical politics—Ideological politics

Politics of Skepticism—Politics of Faith

Nomocracy—Teleocracy

Morality of habit and affection—Morality of reflective thought

Civil Association—Enterprise Association

I will say something about each of these oppositions and offer a tentative conclusion about what we can learn from them about our world, divided as it is between impatience and disillusionment.

The distinction between the empirical style of politics and the ideological style of politics was a central feature of “Political Education,” Oakeshott’s inaugural lecture as Professor of Political Science, presented at The London School of Economics and Politics in 1951. The “empirical” style suggests a kind of ad hoc response to the kaleidoscopic array of issues one confronts everyday, a kind of not well-organized pragmatism often generating contradictory responses. Opposing this style is the ideological style which, impatient with the disorderly character of the prevailing order, seeks an independently designed plan for the society—a model of how one imagines the society ought to look—coupled with the demand for the power to impose that design in order to bring to an end the sloppiness of the existing situation. The opposition between the empirical and the ideological style is mediated by recognizing the possibility of an orderly but revisable set of judgments as to what it is possible to achieve, involving something like the practical judgment described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*.

At about the same time as his 1951 lecture, Oakeshott was writing a book which he never published, the typescript of which only came to light after his death in 1990, the book subsequently published with the title, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*. The “politics of faith” describes the utopian or millennialist aspirations to direct our existence towards a final stage of harmony and relief from the ordeal of history. Marx’s belief in the final withering away of the state in favor of a post-political tranquility is one classic image. The “politics of scepticism” arises as a warning against concentrated centralized power, exemplified in the modern constitutional state. Oakeshott thought that both of these were modern responses to the emergence of the modern state beginning about 500 years ago, setting up a polarized field of argument in which each side energizes its opposite even as it seeks to dominate. Each responded to the centralization of power in the modern state beyond anything found in the premodern period, particularly as the technology of control expanded in unprecedented ways—an issue we currently clearly worry about, for example, in the era of the surveillance state. For Oakeshott, modern history is characterized by the unresolved opposition between the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism which he thought was observable in all modern states. The current debate over the “constitutional state” versus the “post-constitutional state” instantiates this conflict.

In his lectures on the history of political thought at LSE, Oakeshott developed a theory of law based in the opposition between “nomocracy” and “teleocracy.” The first, nomocracy, refers to the rule of law strictly speaking as a set of procedural norms to provide the background conditions which reinforce the capacity of individuals to interact with each other through self-regulation, reinforced by the law, promoting mutual recognition and accommodation. The alternative, teleocracy, implies that there is a specific arrangement of human beings to be achieved, defined as an end or goal to be reached through government regulation ad-

justing and directing self-regulation. This is often described nowadays as the rule of experts. In its moderate form it advocates the use of governmental power to nudge people in the right direction through limited coercion. Current debates about the “administrative state” or the “deep state” reflect the underlying unresolved opposition of our time. One recent legal theorist has described this opposition as the difference between the rule OF law, and rule THROUGH law.

In his 1948 essay, “The Tower of Babel,” Oakeshott distinguished between the morality of “habit and affection” and the morality of “reflective thought.” He thought that in our time we have increasingly resorted to the morality of reflective thought. This means increasing suspicion of inherited moral habits, even suspicion of all tradition altogether. In a way this means continually second guessing ourselves, continually questioning our motives, feeling that we cannot expect others to observe the same rules of conduct that we may continue to respect. Oakeshott thought that this must lead to constant anxiety and unease. It is not that traditional notions of conduct disappear but that we allow ourselves to be embarrassed by them.

Finally, in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott presented the opposition between “civil association” and “enterprise association.” He thought that this was the most comprehensive description of the oppositional character of modern history which he had been attempting to describe throughout his study of modern politics. One can see the connection of this description of the oppositionality to the other attempts that go back to his efforts beginning with *Experience and Its Modes* in 1933, and expressed also in his 1939 book, *Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, and in his Harvard lectures of 1958, *The Morality and Politics of Modern Europe*. In *On Human Conduct* (1975), Oakeshott elaborates at great length the distinction between a society of largely self-governing, self-regulating individuals supported by the rule of law or nomocracy, and the idea of the modern state as a managerial enterprise involving the pursuit of a single goal in which governors manage us through laws and regulations, treating us as individuals who play our roles in a vast division of labor pointing to a unified outcome or end, at which point the conversation of mankind will become a song in unison.

If we consider all these attempts, these essays to understand ourselves and the world we inhabit, we might say that the fundamental opposition in the twenty-first century is between impatience with the failure of the end of history to materialize and disillusionment with the proclamation of its coming. We have become suspicious of the enlightenment project but we find it difficult to give it up. Like Icarus we have flown too close to the sun; unlike Icarus we have survived our fall and must make sense of what has happened to us.

Thus Oakeshott: “The predicament of Western morals, as I read it, is first that our moral life has come to be dominated by the pursuit of ideals, a dominance ruinous to a settled habit of behaviour; and, secondly, that we have come to think of this dominance as a benefit for which we should be grateful or an achievement of which we should be proud. And the only purpose to be served by this investigation of our predicament is to disclose the corrupt consciousness, the self-deception which reconciles us to our misfortune (“Tower of Babel”, Oakeshott 1962).

This conclusion is one aspect of Oakeshott’s self-disclosure; it suggests stoic resignation regarding the human condition since the world must be as it is and as it will come to be. Beyond that, however, there was cheerfulness and enthusiasm for life discernible to anyone who knew him. This is evident in his 1929 essay, “Religion and the World,” where he criticizes “worldliness,” the disposition haunted by guilt about what has past and intense anxiety about what is to come. The result is to depreciate present possibilities, seeking perhaps desperately to live elsewhere than in the moment one has been given which nevertheless remains inescapable. To overcome this was, I believe, the point of view informing Oakeshott’s life work. Echoing Montaigne, Oakeshott sought to overcome the anxieties of self-consciousness through openness to the intimations of immortality, where immortality is understood not as a future state of affairs but as the poetic experience transcending the dailiness of life.

## NOTES

- 1 A lecture presented to the Laboratory for Research on Politics, Behaviour and Media, Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, October 29, 2020. I want to thank Professor Luiz Bueno and the members of the Laboratory for inviting me to discuss with you the significance of the work of Michael Oakeshott, the leading British political philosopher of the twentieth century. I also remember fondly the time when Daniel Marchiori and later Felipe Cardoso worked on Oakeshott's thought with me in Colorado Springs. I am most happy to be with you all even if, for the time being, only remotely.

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