

An informal introduction  
to Michael Oakeshott's  
vision of a free, civilized  
and affirmative life.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Michael Oakeshott's life spanned the twentieth century  
2 (from 1901 to 1990) and confronted him with all the main  
3 problems which still face us today. The problems were part-  
4 ly general philosophical ones concerning the meaning of  
5 life and partly political ones concerning the nature of the  
6 liberal democracy in which we live. But before I say more  
7 about Oakeshott's response to these problems, I would like  
8 to mention that I encountered him personally when I was an  
9 undergraduate at the LSE, where he was a professor.

10 What I especially remember is the talk Oakeshott gave  
11 to first year students like myself in which he offered a short  
12 account of the purpose of a university education that is still  
13 the best I have heard. He said that we should think of uni-  
14 versity as an interlude in life. During that interlude, he ex-  
15 plained, books and libraries are quite important, but they  
16 are not the real point of being at a university. The real point  
17 is to make a start on the main task of life, which is to get rid  
18 of the readymade, off the peg identity with which we all be-  
19 gin life and to begin constructing a unique self of our own  
20 instead. Part of what this meant is that you should not waste  
21 money looking for a guru who will help you find yourself,  
22 or discover yourself, because you have not got one to find  
23 or discover: you only have one to invent. I might add that  
24 Oakeshott fully realized that this is of course often a messy  
25 and quite painful business. He hoped, though, that the uni-  
26 versity interlude would make it a more imaginative and in-  
27 teresting process than it would otherwise be.

28 One vital way in which university would do this,  
29 Oakeshott maintained, was by making us aware that we not  
30 only have the ready-made or off-the-peg identity with which  
31 we grow up and do not need to go to university to find out  
32 about. We have, in addition, what may be called an 'historic'  
33 identity of which we are not conscious until education has  
34 made us aware of it. This historic identity consists of key as-  
35 sumptions we make about our daily life which are inherited  
36 from ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and Christianity.  
37 From ancient Greece we inherit our instinctive tendency to  
38 place reason above an appeal to authority when we argue or  
39 want something explained. From Rome we inherit the con-  
40 ception of law as the basis of our conception of citizenship  
41 in a liberal-democratic state. From Christianity we inherit  
42 our belief in the equality of all human beings. Seen in this  
43 light, the purpose of Oakeshott's famous lecture course on  
44 the history of political thought was not just to interest his  
45 students in notable Western thinkers from Plato onwards.  
46 Its deeper purpose was to make us aware of our historic  
47 identity.

48 Much later in life, and still on a personal note: I remem-  
49 ber a postgraduate party Oakeshott was attending where I

noticed a very alienated goth dressed in black from head to toe and complete with chains and a Mohawk hairstyle. Although the goth kept his head down all evening and didn't speak to anyone, towards the end he suddenly got up and button-holed Oakeshott. I happened to be standing nearby and heard the goth say just one thing, which was to ask Oakeshott why he never discussed the most important problem in life. Oakeshott looked intrigued by this and asked him what that problem was. The goth replied, despair. Oakeshott smiled for a moment and then replied: 'I think you will find you gradually get used to that.'

I am glad to add immediately that Oakeshott has a great deal more to say of a more cheerful kind about the despair theme than this since a primary concern of his philosophy was to reject the mood of pessimism which dominated much twentieth century literature, due partly to the decline of religion but also due to the rise of Nazism, Fascism and Soviet Communism. You may know some of the main works reflecting this pessimism—works like Beckett's play '*Waiting for Godot*', which is a vision of life as pointless waiting, and T. S. Eliot's poem '*The Wasteland*', of which the title speaks for itself. The first novel of Sartre, the best-known French existentialist philosopher, was called *Nausea*, which crystallized his own experience of life, and another French thinker, Albert Camus, began one of his books (*The Myth of Sisyphus*) by saying that the only serious problem worth talking about today is the problem of suicide. One of the best-known twentieth century German philosophers, Martin Heidegger, described our age as a condition of total spiritual alienation since we have gradually lost contact with the real world because we have tried to dominate it, instead of treating it as our home.

I do not think the twentieth century mood of pessimism has disappeared in our day: all that has happened is that it has been plastered over by the social media, electronic games and anti-depressant pills, along with other devices which take our minds off ourselves. From this point of view, the unusual thing about Oakeshott's philosophy is that it embodies a fundamentally affirmative view of life. What I want to do now is consider how Oakeshott arrived at this affirmative or positive view. I suggest that for Oakeshott, it involves three things. The first is the need for a much more modest way of thinking about ourselves and our relation to the world than has characterized Western culture during the past two and a half thousand years. A central characteristic of Western culture for all that time has been what is called anthropocentrism, which is the belief that human beings occupy a special position at the centre of the universe. Anthropocentrism is a feature of Christianity in particular, which holds that God has made the universe for man's enjoyment and has a special interest in the salvation of every individual.

Someone once said that if you go out into the garden you would question whether God was really so concerned about human beings because you would see all around you that his main interest seemed to be in insects. That view would be reinforced by the David Attenborough nature programmes. The main problem with anthropocentrism, however, is that it has created unrealistic expectations about happiness which have been disastrous partly for our attitude towards the environment and partly for political life. The biggest political disaster was twentieth century totalitarianism, which was produced by utopian dreams of an ideal society from which all politics would be eliminated and in which complete harmony would exist. Although Nazism, Fascism and Soviet Communism had different visions of utopia, this is what the utopias had in common—that is, the end of politics and the triumph of perfect harmony. The trouble is that attempts to implement utopian visions of heaven on earth always lead to repression of all opposition, which is seen as destroying the perfect harmony of utopia.

The first message of Oakeshott's philosophy, then, is that we need in effect to pull in our horns and adopt a more modest view of ourselves and our relation to the world. This involves above all a sense of being continuous with nature, rather than being masters of the universe through science and technology. In politics, it means coming to terms with human differences and defects, and accepting the inescapable existence of politics and power, instead of trying to eliminate them completely in a perfect society.

Oakeshott's second condition for an affirmative view of life reinforced his conception of philosophical modesty in another way. In this case it concerns the deep-seated Western belief in the power of reason to provide absolute knowledge of reality. In the ancient world, the Greeks believed metaphysics could do this. In the modern world, many have believed that science provides an absolute knowledge of reality. A central

theme of Oakeshott's philosophy is that reason can only ever provide a restricted or conditional knowledge of reality, never an absolute one. This is because we always think from a particular perspective or context and can never step outside it into an absolute or pure reality, so to speak. For Oakeshott, indeed, we cannot even conceive of what an 'absolute' reality we could hope to step into might look like. I should emphasize that Oakeshott did not believe that the conditional nature of knowledge, which is now the starting point for Western thought, leads to relativism or subjectivism: it only meant that truth takes different forms in different contexts, according to whether we are looking at the world scientifically, morally, aesthetically, or historically, and so on. In each of these cases, there are always objective criteria implicit in what we think or say that save us from relativism.

The overall result of Oakeshott's rejection of absolute knowledge is a vision of the highest achievement of civilized intellectual life as an open-ended conversation, rather than the pursuit of absolute truth. In this conversation, all the different perspectives have an equal right to be heard, and no perspective is entitled to dominate the others.

The second dimension of Oakeshott's philosophical modesty was especially important for his political thought, which rejected ideologies of every kind. He rejected them because they assumed that abstract reason can provide a plan for the good society which we can use for reconstructing existing political reality. Abstract reason, Oakeshott maintains, can never provide a plan because it can only ever come up with a highly diluted extract from the existing social and political order. Oakeshott called the ideological approach to politics 'rationalism' and gave some simple examples of why rationalism gets the role of reason in life wrong.

One example concerned the Victorian designers of bloomers, which was what women wore when they wanted to use the new invention of the bicycle. So that women could cycle in public, the designers came up with idea of bloomers. What they claimed they were doing in designing bloomers was using pure reason alone to construct a logical match between the bicycle and the form of the female body. Oakeshott said this claim was absurd because what really gave rise to the design of bloomers was Victorian ideas about female modesty when women were cycling in public places like parks where respectable Victorian families were relaxing.

In politics, Oakeshott gave another simple example of what rationalism gets wrong about the use of reason. This was the example of the American Founding Fathers, who thought they had drafted an ideal political constitution by using pure reason alone. What actually happened was that they had simply adopted many features of the English constitution while failing to realize this.

The conclusion Oakeshott draws from his critique of ideological or rationalist politics is not the reactionary view that all political change is bad, but just that political action must not begin from an abstract plan, but from a detailed knowledge of the existing order. Just rejecting it out of hand because it doesn't conform to a utopian plan of some kind is likely to be a formula for jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

Oakeshott's third condition for an affirmative view of life is that it requires a sense of personal responsibility. He believed, however, that the Western tradition has tended to undermine this in two ways. The first way in which the tradition has undermined personal responsibility is by tending to think of human beings as made up of two parts—one material part (the body) and the other a mental or rational or spiritual part. Unless we get rid of this divided conception of the self, Oakeshott maintains, we cannot appreciate that freedom permeates us all the way through, and not just a mental bit of us. Only if we realize this can we accept full responsibility for our lives and for shaping them ourselves, as I said we have to do at the beginning.

The second way in which the Western tradition has undermined personal responsibility is characteristic of the modern period and is through widespread acceptance of a new theory of evil which appeared in the eighteenth century. According to the old theory, evil is intrinsic to the human condition and therefore cannot be eliminated. This is the idea behind ancient tragedy, for example, and also behind the medieval Christian doctrine of Original Sin. According to the new theory, which is particularly associated with Rousseau, evil is not intrinsic to the human condition but comes from the social order we live in. Human

beings, in other words, are naturally good, and the main task is to identify the aspect of society which makes them evil. Ever since this new concept of evil appeared, the main difference between radical ideologies concerns the aspect of society they believe is destroying human goodness. Marxism is one, radical feminism is another, and contemporary ‘woke’ culture is a third. All of these ideologies, then, are theories of victimhood. Oakeshott’s view is not that we should put up with social injustice, but that we should avoid the abstract conception of social ‘structures’ because it destroys the concept of individual freedom.

Oakeshott’s third condition for an affirmative view of life, then, is a sense of responsibility based on awareness of freedom. But he knew that this is a difficult achievement since human beings like to avoid responsibility, and in the modern world he believed they are constantly tempted to do so by endless opportunities created by the new theory of evil to think of ourselves as victims—the attraction of victimhood being that it lets you off the hook.

I now want to say a little more about Oakeshott’s political philosophy, but before I do that, I should add that Oakeshott did not assume that an affirmative conception of life automatically brings happiness. What it brings is three things. One is clarity or lucidity about life, in place of delusions about ourselves, society and the world. The second is what may be described as openness to life, instead of closing it off by trying to achieve complete control of it. This openness is what permits conversation, which is impossible so long as anyone aspires to silence others. The third, as I mentioned, is responsibility. Oakeshott believed that a life that combines lucidity, openness and responsibility is preferable to one based on fantasies and superstitions, drugs, and a quest for endless diversions.

Turning to Oakeshott’s political thought, this can be seen as a sustained attempt to clarify the nature of a free society such as the one we live in. There have been many attempts to do this since the Second World War, but in Oakeshott’s view they have all been unsatisfactory. Some of the ones he rejects include:

- Friedrich Hayek’s claim that a free society is mainly characterized by a free market economy. Hayek, as is well known, was the thinker who impressed Mrs. Thatcher.
- Karl Popper, another influential thinker, claimed that a free society is an Open Society but left the concept of ‘Open’ somewhat vague.
- An even more influential American philosopher, John Rawls, claimed that the essence of a free society is a commitment to rational principles of distributive justice.
- For Robert Nozick, another American philosopher, the essence of a free society is a minimal state which does not interfere with natural rights.
- On the continent, the Czech philosopher Vaclav Havel held that what characterizes the free state is that it fights against social isolation by promoting spiritual integration.

Oakeshott had two main reasons for rejecting these different views of liberal democracy. Since these take us to the core of his political philosophy they are worth pondering. The first is that all the views mentioned fail to realize that the entire tradition of modern British political thought since the seventeenth century is inescapably *ambiguous*, since every political word we use, including words like freedom and democracy, can quite properly be interpreted in two different ways. These two different ways arise, Oakeshott says, because there are two quite different and ultimately incompatible conceptions of politics itself. One interpretation of politics is based on what Oakeshott calls ‘civil association’, for which the rule of law is of intrinsic value. This is the conception of politics which Oakeshott regards as the essence of a liberal democratic state.

What characterizes civil association is that it is not held together by an ideology, or agreement about the good life, or by religion or ethnicity of any kind. What holds it together is that citizens agree to accept a political constitution which provides a framework of rules which do not restrict freedom because the rules do not command anyone to do anything in particular: all they do is modify the *way* in which we do anything. In our country, for example, the laws relating to road usage do not tell you where to go if you drive, or even that you must own a car or any other kind of transport. The rules only require you to keep to the

left and to observe speed limits if you do go on the road. In this sense, the rules do not limit your freedom of choice in any way because they are simply formal or procedural rules. This, Oakeshott says, is what characterizes the nature of laws in civil association: because they are purely formal or procedural ones, they do not affect the choices you make but only concern the way you put the choices into practice.

Another simple example is what happens when you get a cup of coffee. You think you are only doing one action, which is getting a cup of coffee. But in fact you are doing something else at the same time, which is observing the laws of England. You do this by paying for the coffee rather than getting it by holding a knife at the cashier's throat. As I say, you do not consciously think about this second action—unless you are a thief, of course—because it does not affect your choice to get a cup of coffee but only relates to how you get the coffee.

The second interpretation of politics is quite different from the civil one because it treats politics as having a specific aim or purpose, which is the creation of a particular kind of society. This is why Oakeshott calls it a 'purposive' conception of politics. The purpose may be a nice one of the kind we associate with the social democratic welfare state, or it may be a nasty one, of the kind we associate with Nazism. But in both cases, what is taken for granted is that the state is an essentially purposive organization of citizens which can make laws that compel you to do whatever is necessary for creating the particular conception of the good society the government is pursuing. In this purposive conception of politics you won't have a problem as long as you agree with the government's aims, but if you disagree with the government, your freedom to disagree won't be protected in a purposive state. Think of the position of Navalny in Russia.

Oakeshott's first point, then, is that there is no way of avoiding the two different ways in which politics can be interpreted—that is, the civil and the purposive. Each way gives rise to a different interpretation of every word in our political vocabulary. His second point is that the only way of deciding between these two different conceptions of politics is by making a choice. Which choice you make, Oakeshott says, depends on what your personal values are. If your main value is individual freedom—which simply means the ability to live a life that is self-chosen—then you will adopt the ideal of civil association and the formal conception of the rule of law that goes with it. But if you are committed to promoting an ideology or religion or a particular conception of the good life, you will adopt a version of what Oakeshott calls a purposive state.

Oakeshott's own commitment, needless to say, is to the ideal of civil association. I should add that this does not mean that the state does not have any purposes, such as welfare commitments and improving the environment. Every state inevitably has purposes of some kind. What it means is that these purposes must not dominate to such an extent that they transform a civil association into a purposive state. Similarly, civil association does not mean that you cannot promote a religion or ideology or conception of justice of some kind: what it means is that you cannot use government to implement those ideals.

At this point it is necessary to consider more closely the overall vision of life which underpinned Oakeshott's thought as a whole. This vision was briefly referred to above as one which culminated in conversation as the ideal achievement of civilized living, but it is illuminating to locate it within modern European thought at large. In this broad perspective, which Oakeshott scholars have only recently begun to explore in depth, Oakeshott's vision displays a marked kinship with that of Nietzsche, although the idiom in which Oakeshott presents it is altogether less extravagant. The fact that Oakeshott read Nietzsche very carefully is evident from his extensive footnote references to many of Nietzsche's works in his *Notebooks*. Oakeshott himself studied in Germany during 1923/4, and his familiarity with contemporary German philosophy is clear in his review, for example, of Werner Brock's *Introduction to Contemporary German Philosophy* in *The Cambridge Review* in 1936 (Oakeshott 1936, p. 195). There, Oakeshott remarked that 'the German tradition is distinguished by the presence of two writers—Nietzsche and Kierkegaard—who have no counterpart in English thought; profound philosophical thinkers, yet writers whose . . . natural voice is that of the prophet rather than that of the philosopher'. If we disregard Oakeshott's transformation of Kierkegaard from a Dane into a German, then what may be noted in passing is that Oakeshott himself was of course by

no means reluctant to speak at times in the voice of the prophet, although in somewhat more muted tones than Nietzsche.

Twelve years later, Oakeshott returned to Nietzsche in an extremely sympathetic review of a study devoted entirely to his thought. The book was *Nietzsche: An Approach*, by Janko Lavrin (1948). The great mistake of both many Nietzsche enthusiasts and their opponents alike, Oakeshott wrote, was to have attended only to the least important part of Nietzsche's work, which is the part concerned with remedies for the ills of European society such as a New Aristocracy that would defend the strong against the mediocre masses (Oakeshott 1948). Fortunately, Oakeshott continued,

those who are now beginning to make themselves heard recognized in his writings, not remedies, but a profound and imaginative diagnosis of a crisis in European culture. He sounded an alarm: for the world in which Nietzsche detected the crisis was as insensible of its predicament as we are of the speed at which the earth is whirling through space (Ibid.).

Nor, Oakeshott continued, did Nietzsche

merely reveal the crisis at the heart of the [contemporary] trance and diagnose its character in the general terms of 'nihilism', 'irreligion' and 'weakness'; he elaborated his diagnosis in detail with untiring insight into every field of human activity . . . in phrases . . . which have the power of opening up vistas of reflection and setting the imagination on fire. . . If we are to understand [him], we must understand him as, in this sense, an artist (Ibid).

I cannot think of any other thinkers, except perhaps Montaigne, Hobbes and Hegel, whom Oakeshott praised so highly. It is a little strange, however, that Oakeshott's review fails to mention Lavrin's principal thesis, which is that much of the diagnosis by Nietzsche of the malaise of contemporary culture that Oakeshott admired was inspired by a fundamentally religious temperament reminiscent, Lavrin remarks, of 'a self-tormented Pascal, or even a St. Paul' (Lavrin 1948, p. 66). As a result, Lavrin maintains, the heart of Nietzsche's own thought never escaped from the quest for moral absolutes he berated in the European tradition. 'On the contrary', Lavrin wrote, 'his own "biological" standard of moral values demanded a discipline the strictness of which would have frightened the majority of so-called Christians' (Lavrin 1948, p. 78). For Lavrin, indeed, Nietzsche's violently anti-Christian sentiments merely expressed the inverted Christianity of 'a latent Christian of the highest order attacking his own secret inclinations' (Lavrin 1948, pp. 65-66). In short, 'the passion with which [Nietzsche] defied the very idea of God betrayed his repressed longing for him' (Lavrin 1948, p. 75). Whether Oakeshott failed to mention this dimension of Lavrin's analysis of Nietzsche's thought because he himself shared some of the intense moralism which inspired Nietzsche is not a matter I shall pursue here. What matter in the present context are the words about Nietzsche with which Oakeshott concluded his review of Lavrin's book. 'The most valuable sort of book on Nietzsche', he wrote, 'is not one about Nietzsche, but one which passes on what has been fired by Nietzsche in the writer's imagination' (Ibid). These words are relevant because they indicate the nature of the relationship I want to explore between Oakeshott and Nietzsche—one based, that is, on an overlapping diagnosis of the ills of European modernity which led both thinkers to an increasing convergence on one theme in particular, which is the central place they both assigned to myth as the form ultimately taken by any comprehensive attempt to give meaning to the human condition.<sup>1</sup>

Myth in this context, it should perhaps be added, is used in the very broad sense of a vision of life as a whole, rather than in the narrower sense with which Oakeshott was concerned when he examined the part played by myth in, for example, specifically political contexts such as Roman political thought. It is with this narrower sense that Natalie Riendeau is concerned in her illuminating book on the place of myth and legend in Oakeshott's political thought (Riendeau 2014). In the broader sense of myth, Oakeshott's convergence with Nietzsche in his later thought reflected in particular his sympathy for Nietzsche's profound dis-

illusion with the all-pervasive rationalism and instrumentalism of modern Western culture. Western culture since Socrates, Nietzsche maintained, has been dominated by a series of destructive attempts to escape from myth into an entirely objective reality which it was foolishly believed could be discovered by philosophy or theology or, more recently, by science. It is this indictment which is echoed by Oakeshott in a radio broadcast in 1947 in which he observed that if we ever actually succeeded in escaping from myth, we would not discover objective reality but would suffer instead from world alienation. We would, as Oakeshott put it, not only 'find ourselves awake in a profound darkness, but [would find that] a dreadful insomnia would settle upon mankind, not less intolerable for being only a nightmare' (Oakeshott 1975, p. 151). Since it was in this broadcast that Oakeshott first developed his own concept of myth it will be instructive to recall what he said about it.

Every civilization, Oakeshott maintained, takes the form of a myth which gives expression to a collective dream. By myth, he emphasized, he did not simply mean a flight of fancy but 'an imaginative interpretation of human existence' which offers an interpretation of 'the mystery of human life', but no solution to the problems of the human condition (Ibid., p. 150). What then does Oakeshott consider to be the myth inspiring our own civilization? It is, he said, mainly inherited from medieval Christianity, and was shaped in particular by Augustine. The myth contains three principal elements.

- (a) The first is belief in an original **human perfection**, based on the belief that the human race was originally created by God in a condition of perfection like God's own.
- (b) The second is belief that man was subsequently corrupted by **the original sin of Pride**. Belief in the fall of man, in other words, is a vital part of the myth.
- (c) The third is a no less vital belief in the possibility of **an ultimate salvation** which will restore man to his original perfection (Ibid., pp. 151-2).

Seen from this point of view, Oakeshott's thought may be interpreted as an elaborate attempt to refashion the inherited myth in a way that would make it more viable in the modern world. The main revisions Oakeshott undertook have already been considered: they consist of the conditions he considers necessary in order to lead an affirmative and responsible life. With these in mind, he gave credit to Hobbes in particular for eliminating the story of the Fall of Man from the myth, along with the accompanying idea of the possible recovery of human perfection, and for substituting instead a profoundly sceptical view of human nature that emphasized man's 'littleness, his imperfection [and] his mortality, while at the same time recogniz[ing] his importance to himself' (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 154).

Although Oakeshott gave credit to Nietzsche for emphasizing that the most rewarding human activity consists of creative imagination expressed not only in art but in the conduct of life, it is worth recalling two crucial distinctions between Oakeshott and Nietzsche in the kind of myth they favoured. The first is that Oakeshott's myth assigns a central place to civil association and the rule of law as the essence of civilized life, whereas Nietzsche believed that a primary division of human beings into the noble and the base is so fundamental to civilization that civil equality is impossible, not least because we now live in what he termed the age of 'the last man', for whom equal treatment would simply mean the final triumph of mass mediocrity. The second characteristic which distinguishes Oakeshott's version of myth from Nietzsche's is the central place in it assigned by Oakeshott to love and friendship. Both thinkers share a sympathy for Schopenhauer's belief that life is doomed in the end to disappoint us, and both also reject Schopenhauer's consequential retreat into the consolations of music and quasi-Buddhist contemplation. However, whereas Nietzsche turns for consolation to the more or less wild Dionysiac ideal of spiritual heroism displayed by the *Übermensch* (Superman), Oakeshott places his faith in love and, like Spinoza, in friendship. 'We must love and desire', he wrote in the notebook for 1931, 'but we must conquer desire not by denying it and withdrawing from it as much as possible, but by admitting its inevitable unsatisfactoriness' (Oakeshott 2014, p. 247).

The final and perhaps most striking feature of a revised modern myth that can confer meaning on life which is shared by Oakeshott with Nietzsche is the belief that the comic vision is in the end the only positive way of coming to terms with the human condition. As Oakeshott observed in his notebook for 1931, neither philosophy nor aesthetic provides a completely satisfactory horizon for life but only laughter. ‘Humour’, he wrote, ‘is the attitude which a full realization of mortality induces, and which is the only answer to mortality. Humour’, Oakeshott added, is ‘the maturity of sentiment’, without which the experience of age is ‘impossible’ (Oakeshott 2014, pp. 246-247).

There is, I think, more than an echo in Oakeshott’s praise of humour in the ‘Critical backward glance’ Nietzsche wrote as an introduction to a late (1886) edition of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which had originally appeared in 1872. In it, Nietzsche explained that his project was nothing less than to teach his readers what he termed ‘the art of terrestrial comfort’. This did not mean, he wrote, teaching them a new philosophy: what it meant was, rather, teaching them to laugh at the Western search for a ‘foundational’ morality—including, by implication, the kind often pursued by British Idealist philosophers prior to Oakeshott. By teaching his readers to laugh, Nietzsche added, he hoped to teach them to ‘send all metaphysical palliatives packing’ with a ‘peal of laughter’. I have placed, he concluded, ‘the rose-chaplet crown’ of laughter on my head and declared laughter to be blessed. ‘You who aspire to greatness,’ he ended, should learn how to laugh!’ (Nietzsche 1956, p. 15).

If it is asked why only the comic vision offers an escape from nihilism, an eloquent formulation of the position shared by Nietzsche and Oakeshott has recently been provided by the Slovenian philosopher, Alenka Zupancic. The tragic vision, she writes, is based on a search for absolute meaning, combined with a simultaneous disappointed realization that none is to be found. It is the void created by this disappointment which opens the door to nihilism. The comic vision, in contrast, laughs at the very idea of absolutes of any kind and instead embraces life’s limitations positively (Zupancic 2008).

I will end there. I have tried to say a bit about Oakeshott’s belief that the affirmative life is easiest to live if it is a modest and responsible one lived in the freedom of a civil association. I have also mentioned Oakeshott’s view that the aim of all education, in philosophy and every other subject, is not to discover a final truth but to prepare us to join in an unending conversation which began in the ancient world, continues at the present day, and will continue into the future if we remain civilized enough to take part in it. As Oakeshott’s sympathy for Nietzsche suggests, however, we will only remain sufficiently civilized to do so if we can sustain a vision of the world which combines a rejection of the quest for absolutes, on the one hand, with a project of self-creation imbued with a sense of humour and an aesthetic awareness, on the other.

## NOTES

- 1 An early version of this paper was read to undergraduates at a British university who were unfamiliar with Oakeshott’s work. I have retained the personal note I struck in the hope of making Oakeshott more accessible to them without misrepresenting him.
- 2 There are short but valuable discussions of Oakeshott’s view of myth, as well as comparisons of his view of myth with that of Carl Schmitt. See, Bhuta ‘The mystery of the state concept, state theory and state making in Schmitt and Oakeshott’; Boucher, ‘Schmitt, Oakeshott and the Hobbesian legacy in the crisis of our times’; Dyzenhaus, ‘Dreaming the rule of law’—all in Dyzenhaus and Poole 2015, pp. 10-37, 123-152 and 234-260 respectively.

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