

## Oakeshott-22

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It might be timely to reflect on the nature of Oakeshott's achievement. If it was not obvious before 2020 that Oakeshott is of heroic status in thought, then this should have become obvious since 2020. Oakeshott of course does not stand alone in this. I was always rather dubious about the achievement of Foucault. But the events of the pandemic have convinced me that Foucault's writings were not merely obscurantist sketches of paranoid visions but actually deep perceptions about the shifting axis of the world. Foucault, of course, saw this on one side. He consigned 'juridical' thinking to the past, and suggested that states were now engaged in a deeper, more penetrating, form of control, manifest through statistics, education and medicine—the rigmarole he called, in a phrase I always found part of the obscurantism, 'biopower'. Oakeshott, of course, saw all this: the rise of technology, the rise of state statistics, the increase in the *power* but not the authority of the state; but it was in another manner that he attacked the fortress of twentieth-century enlightenment, rationalism and ideology—that unattractive politics of control and bullying and idealism (coloured in sky blue and lemonade sea on its *philosophe* side and in steel silver and concrete grey on its *Kameralist* side). He disliked the politics of coercive activity, collective will, common good. Foucault sought to characterise, sometimes too blandly, what had happened. Oakeshott attempted to defend what was in the course of being lost.

What was being lost was a tradition of continuity, a particular tradition: the English tradition, rooted in law. Oakeshott was not simple about this. He was not an exponent of common law, as, say, Scruton was. He admired Hobbes, as Skjónsborg reminds us, who was anything but an exponent of common law. He took up the phrase advanced by A. V. Dicey, 'the rule of law', and explored it in a half-Roman, half-English manner. He refused to write about 'rights' where he could write about 'rules'. Oakeshott was not a legal philosopher in the manner of Kelsen or Hart, so he could never be an exponent of the pure rule of law: of a conception of the world in which even political institutions were characterised as acceptable only on the side on which they could be characterised in legal terms. Hart and Kelsen treated the state as a legal institution. Oakeshott was, arguably, a theorist of *Rechtsstaat* rather than a theorist of 'the rule of law'. This is because, for him, 'the rule of law', was an ideal: and only one component of two components significant in politics, of which the other, rule in terms of common purpose, was for him the dark side of the necessary reality of the state. Oakeshott refused to theorise the state in terms of

an ideal. But he also refused to theorise only the ideal. He wanted to theorise the state, but he did so by theorising it as a fundamentally fractured entity.

The complications attendant to this have earned him much respect in the last twenty or so years, especially amongst legal theorists. We see him cited with respect by figures like Martin Loughlin and David Dyzenhaus. I am sure that this is not only because he treated law with respect (in all those fine reasonings on the *jus of lex*), but also because he did not treat law as a thing in itself. Oakeshott, the son of the Historical Tripos in Cambridge, could never have done that. His knowledge of history, though he did not really write anything we could consider historical, was not just a tincture of erudition. It was a consciousness. And it was a consciousness he did some work in theorising, in *Experience and Its Modes* and in the essay on history in *Rationalism in Politics*. He knew that no serious thinker should try to make sense of anything in politics without being aware of history. He saw historical consciousness of our own condition as a fundamental intellectual condition of good thought. He therefore had almost no patience for what everyone still calls ‘normative’ philosophy. He enjoyed reading history—and left a trail of compliments to historians like F. W. Maitland, Ronald Syme and Peter Brown. He also enjoyed reading theorists who worked on the marches where history and philosophy met: men like Bertrand de Jouvenel, G. C. Field and of course R. G. Collingwood. In various places, including the introduction to an unpublished manuscript from the 1950s (later published as *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*) and his lectures from the 1960s (later published as *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*), he wrote that the way to understand politics was to write in a somewhat awkward but absolutely necessary mixed medium, neither purely historical nor purely philosophical. This mixed medium could not really be theorised. It was an improvisation at almost every point. But the purpose was to say something about shape without losing a sense of sequence and to say something about sequence without losing a sense of shape.

Oakeshott is proving to be an eminently *useful* thinker. Those who would formerly have been his enemies are now able to find something in his writing. This is salutary, even if it is not perhaps something he would have wanted; though he certainly sought literary glory, and even recognition of his mastery. He is still somewhat underwritten about. I do not necessarily mean about his life: though that would be of interest. But it would be interesting to know more about his relations with, say, Kedourie, Cowling, Popper, Hayek, Butterfield, Barker, Carr; his debts to those who influenced him, like Heidegger, and his influence on people like Pocock, Parekh, Minogue, and many others, including some of the writers featured here on this anniversary.

What are Oakeshott’s achievements? I’d say the following.

Firstly, he showed what a twentieth-century philosophy could look like. By ‘twentieth-century’ I mean a philosophy conditioned by existing *in* the era of enlightenment, *after* the rise of a historical consciousness which put pure ahistorical philosophy to the sword (not that many modern academic philosophers have noticed), and in particular *following* the fracture of the belief in progress which was the most important single factor in intellectual life after 1914. He showed this in *Experience and Its Modes* and again, on a different axis, but with the same impetus, in *On Human Conduct*.

Secondly, he attempted to theorise certain things, and he did so in a very interesting way. He was against abridgement and abstraction, but what has to be noticed is that in defending very substantial things like ‘conservatism’, ‘tradition’, ‘history’, ‘practices’ and ‘poetry’ he himself had to engage in abridgement and abstraction. For this I think that sometimes his theories may be convicted of excessive elegance. Certainly I would say this is so with his theory of poetry, and his theory of conservatism—and I have said so in print. There *is* something paradoxical about being opposed to theoretical abstraction and yet having such a relentless inclination to carry it out. Oakeshott’s particular intellectual charm may lie here. It certainly explains part of the provocation caused by his work.

Thirdly, he explored, with much more persistence than he did any other subject, the subject of politics. He did not necessarily call this subject politics, and he was sceptical about the expansion and intensification of ‘political science’, ‘political theory’ and ‘political philosophy’ after the Second World War. He could not have agreed with the Rawlsians on how to proceed, as Rueda observes. But he himself was fascinated in

the classic questions of rule, authority, law, state, power, politics—‘politics’ in his own marvellous and yet elegantly narrowed sense of the word (for which see ten pages in *On Human Conduct*). This, as I have already suggested, appears to be where his glory is usually found by our contemporaries.

Fourthly, he engaged in a polemic which was political: because it alleged that abridgement and abstraction, even if theoretically necessary, as his own work made evident, should never be unnecessarily brought into practical considerations. And he alleged, as aggressively as it was possible for him to allege anything, that the modern mind was engaged in perpetuating a form of politics in which abridgement and abstraction were ruining everything: ruining politics itself, the old adversarial politics of Pitt and Fox, by trying illegitimately to *solve* political problems by offering apparent solutions from other ‘modes’ of thought—especially that of ‘science’. This was, he decided, after the Second World War, something so absurd and dangerous that it had to be identified, and so he called it—whether consciously or not—what Richard Hurrell Froude had used in the 1830s as the word for the worst possible thing: ‘*rationalism*’. What was ‘rationalism’? It was a distortion of rationality, a limiting of what reason was supposed to show, by excluding revelation, for Froude, and by excluding anything other than synecdochal reason, for Oakeshott. The chief exhibit of synecdochal reason in our own time is ‘*the science*’: with ‘science’ standing for authority, almost infinite authority, and the definite article, ‘the’, standing for any number of dubious claims about what it is necessary to do to combat a virus, or climate change: and the combination of the two certainly being very much less than actual science would indicate, and even less than what experience or good sense might suggest. When such politics is wielded in combat against ancestral privilege or unconscious bias or majority prejudice it is called any number of things: ‘*justice*’, or ‘*diversity*’, ‘*inclusion*’ or ‘*equity*’. Rationalism-in-politics is procrustean politics. Oakeshott disliked Procrustes. He probably admired Prometheus; though he actually, as he suggested in *On Human Conduct*, favoured Proteus even over Prometheus.

This brings me to his fifth achievement which, I think, was to defend a vision of the world which was more Paterian than Parmenidean. He defended delight, wonder and contemplation, as Boucher reminds us. And he also offered his mite to a recognition of the variegated nature of existence, and of the importance of doing *something* to defend one’s own tradition, especially if one could convince oneself that one’s tradition had something good, or *civilised*, in it. He did this while holding onto an aesthetic, momentary sensibility which, as Dockstader suggests, was too artificial to be eastern, but was a western, retreated, perhaps now faded, sort of taste. Oakeshott was absolutely unafraid of the surface aspect of reality, and thought we might as well enjoy it.

Sixthly, and finally, as Fear reminds us, he developed what might well be the most convincing defence in the twentieth century of university education as a continuation of ‘tradition’, as initiation into ‘conversation’, as perpetuation of ‘civilisation’. This required a clear distinction, a theoretical distinction, between *vocational* education (learning how to *use* languages) and *academic* education (learning something about the nature of those languages and how they affect the sense we make of the world). Many others have contributed to the defence of university education. Never has such a defence been more needed, as society and state have corrupted the university, and, perhaps, the university is now corrupting society and state. But Oakeshott’s doctrine about this is just about the clearest doctrine, and defence of it, we have seen.

Of these six achievements, the one I want to reflect on a bit further is the distinctively polemical one, the fourth, which is the one most associated with *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. In order to do this, and to elucidate my title, let us define a few terms.

Covid-19, as everyone knows, is the name for a disease caused by a novel coronavirus.

Polis-20, by analogy, should be the name for the monotonously consistent response to the spread of this disease found in both despotic and democratic regimes around the world.

Reset-21 could well be the name for the ‘New Normal’ which certain despotic and democratic regimes, monopoly capitalist corporations and corrupt, colluding and compliant agencies, institutions, networks and individuals *appeared* to want to see perpetuated, whether for direct conspiratorial reasons or for contingent opportunistic reasons or for successfully propagandised reasons. It is, or was, a glimpse of the most

uninhibited rationalism ever seen in politics. Let's hope that fear of its infinite perpetuation into the future may be confined to the year 2021 only.

Oakeshott-22 is the name of an anniversary of a book. The book is not just any book, but *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*; and, given the nature of the book, Oakeshott-22 can also be taken to be the name of a riddle, reminiscent of *Catch-22*. *Catch-22* was the greatest of all riddles. In Joseph Heller's novel the only way one could get out of following an order to do something crazy was to claim to be crazy; but if one claimed to be crazy then one had no reason to object to an order to do something crazy. By analogy, Oakeshott-22 is the name of a riddle whereby the only way one can get out of doing something 'rational' is to claim to be 'irrational', but if one claims that one is 'irrational' then one has no reason to object to doing the 'rational' thing.

For 'irrational' one can, if one wants, read 'deplorable'.

In 2016 we saw an irruption of the irrational politics described by Letwin. Academics around the world called it 'Brexit and Trump' for short. 'Brexit and Trump' also meant 'Putin', 'Orban' and 'Erdogan', and other things too, but the reason 'Brexit and Trump' was so potent a phrase was that it suggested that the rot of irrationality had entered the trunk of the great tree of liberal civilisation, the shared culture in the English language of the United Kingdom and the United States. It was the civilisation of Matthew Arnold, William James, George Orwell, F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling and Northrop Frye, committed to flames by, say, Alex Jones, Nigel Farage, Steven Crowder and Tommy Robinson, and decorated by a thousand of the 'greatest ever' tweets by Donald Trump and a hundred 'inverted pyramids of piffle' in the speeches by Boris Johnson.

In 2020 we saw *la contre-trahison des clerics*, the revolt of the elites against the irrationals, the deplorables, the lumpen-proletariat, the disenfranchised, the populists, the somewheres, the downers, the uneducated. This, alas, took the form of an eager embrace of the entire three-faceted policy of Polis-20, the 'distancing', the masks and the 'lockdown'. Of the three, the masks were, and are, the worst: the most *unreasonably* rationalist: a positively dystopian imposition of symbolic violence on the faces of mortal and otherwise conversant humans, for the sake of others, that is to say, to symbolise an collective good. What could be more rationalist, in Oakeshott's language? What could be a more devastating symbol of enterprise association? The rationalists advocated 'the science' of the experts, the appointed experts—those Faucis and Fergusons—and shepherded entire populations into compliance. Non-compliance was irrational. Compliance was rational. Therefore, theorising non-compliance—for those who were brave enough to do so, was irrationalist. And of course theorising compliance was rationalist. Theorising compliance was done by politicians, journalists, administrators, health experts, computer modellers, behavioural scientists: all rationalists to a man: or, let us say, in modern jargon, rationalists to a he/him/his, to a she/her/hers, and to a they/them/theirs.

Oakeshott *perhaps* would have said that all of this was the most remarkable instance of 'rationalism in politics' known in human history. Perhaps. We cannot know. *Perhaps* he would have cheerily donned the mask, sceptically gone along with the *mores* of the 'new normal', and asked for the words 'INDIVIDUAL MAN-QUE' to be tattooed in Chinese or Sanskrit characters somewhere on his lower back. But it seems unlikely. He is famous for having said that he did not feel it necessary to have opinions about political matters. But when he said this he was referring to minor details of policy—such as whether or not the British should join the European Economic Community. He might have been agnostic about Brexit. And he might have been right about that. But he clearly *did* have opinions about broad tendencies of policy in politics, and certainly had extremely trenchant opinions about the attempt by any politician to appear to solve any particular political problem by offering an 'abridgement' of an entire political tradition as the solution. A part standing for a whole in rhetoric is a synecdoche. And Oakeshott was against synecdoche in politics. In facing political problems Oakeshott wanted the entire tradition to be brought into consideration so that we could face our predicament. He did not want part of our tradition to sequester itself from its rivals, delete or defeat

those rivals, and then present itself as the sole purveyor of wisdom. And this is surely what has happened in the last year or two.

The elites, the somewheres, the uppers, the educated, the experts have heaved a collective sigh of relief. Meanwhile, individuals have suffered. Oakeshott always in his later years operated with a familiar binary of collective *versus* individual. For a time he, somewhat pretentiously, called his vision of two types of order nomocracy and telocracy. These words referred to an order concerned with law and leaving everyone to their own purposes as contrasted with an order concerned with a common purpose or *telos*. Under Hayek's influence, Oakeshott agreed to rewrite the second of these 'teleocracy'. (No falling out over a diphthong there.) And this binary, as Hayek saw, had something in common with his own binary of an order constructed out of unintended consequences, *cosmos* and an order constructed out of intentional planning, *taxis*. Oakeshott hated the politics of the common good, of associations united in terms of commitment to a single end. Therefore he would have hated the politics of what I am calling Polis-20: all of that politics of statistics out of context, stories exaggerated to be maximally frightening, all of that state propaganda encouraging compliance, all of the culture of signalling by wearing a mask that one is 'rational' and that anyone not wearing a mask is 'irrational'—and also a danger to the collective. The mask is the single greatest threat to liberty in the West since Tacitus's Germans first walked in the woods. Each individual *manqué*—individual *masqué*?—wanders around effortlessly chastising all the remaining children of the proud. Hobbes's *Leviathan* is not the book Oakeshott thought it was. For that Old Testament sea monster *is* seeking to crush the children of the proud like so many krill.

Not everyone will agree with me about this. Not everyone who admires Oakeshott will take such a jaundiced view of masks or distancing or lockdown. I doubt even those who have agreed to come together to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *Rationalism in Politics* would support what I say here. But Oakeshott believed in *conversation* and it is a surety that conversation has been damaged by lockdown, distancing and masks. No doubt many have suffered in other, unfortunate ways, not only because of the virus, but also because of our response to it. But nothing has been quite as bad as the relentless assault on conversation—the conversation of the elderly, the conversation of colleagues and acquaintances, the conversation of the young. Socrates has been prevented from entering the Agora. Johnson and Boswell have not been allowed in the Mitre. Rousseau is being quarantined at Dover for ten days. Marie Antoinette is having to show a recent PCR test certificate at the French border on her way to Paris. Kant is setting no one's clock. Gladstone is saving no one's soul. Shaw cannot walk Annie Besant home. (Probably Marlowe and Caravaggio are still stabbing and being stabbed in dark alleyways.) T. S. Eliot has painted his face green and is isolating. We have all become Montaigne and Machiavelli, stuck in our towers or studies, spending time conversing with the glorious dead. That, of course, is not a bad thing. Oakeshott admired Montaigne almost above everyone else. But it is not what even Oakeshott considered to be actual conversation, the sort of conversation which, as Marriott shows, is especially formative in those who are young, who are at university, who are encountering minds and forming a mind.

I spent most of my youth in conversation. I spoke and listened far more than I read or wrote. This changed—with some great effort—when I was about thirty-two (belatedly achieving what Schopenhauer considered to be intellectual maturity), which is when I began writing with something like conviction for the first time, and read with a different sort of attention. At around the same time I became less good at conversation, less of a friend; and now, happily with a family, I spend my days only in that most intimate and idle and easy of conversations, found in the household, and, apart from that, only in the conversation of the sort Montaigne had with Plutarch. No matter. But I have been *broken in* to the conversable world. Conversable—Johnson's spelling. Conversible—Hume's spelling. Hume and Johnson: both eminently conversable (even if Boswell did not manage, alas, to record them together). Once one has had enough actual conversation, then one can retreat to one's eminence, one's chair, one's tower. But not before. And it seems that damage is being done, especially to the young. And no amount of mediated interaction will suffice, stimulating though it is. We wait to see what the world holds. But the auspices in this sixtieth anniversary

year are not good. The universities are almost entirely in the hands of the rationalists. Thus, the schools. Thus, later, everyone. And so, for the moment, we are caught in an Oakeshott-22:

The only way one can get out of doing something 'rational' is to claim to be 'irrational', but if one claims that one is 'irrational' then one has no reason to object to doing the 'rational' thing.