



there isn't any room for agency, just for fantasies of control (that never work). While it might sound nonsensical to argue that time isn't linear and that history is indeterminate (and always 'to return'), it isn't. The first 50 pages of *Swann's Way* should tell anyone that. Rather this insight merely mirrors the properties of language through which time and history are experienced linguistically in the first place.

The chapter on how to have a theory of language that is necessarily *within* language (and yet not) is a subtle reading (and rescue) of Heidegger, with which I would not presume to quarrel. Substantially, Chambers argues that much of philosophy treats language AIO ('as if objectified'), which he identifies as an incoherent and disabling view of things. While no philosophical view is ever going to put the world right just like that, I have to say that I am intrigued with this one, precisely since it's such a thorough inversion of so much certainty and such a careful celebration of indeterminacy. As in language, so in life. If you think Nietzsche is dangerous and should be stopped (an untimely thought), then this book is not for you. However, if you suspect that tarring poststructuralists with the brush of philosophical determinism and political paralysis doesn't really work, then this book will tell you why you're right.

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The Philosophy of Oakeshott

Terry Nardin

Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 2001, x + 241pp.
ISBN: 0 271 02156 X.

Contemporary Political Theory (2005) **4**, 103–105. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300172

Michael Oakeshott is still usually thought of as a political thinker, a political theorist or an historian of political thought. This is of course not false. He was all of these things, but they were not the only thing. He is less often taken seriously as a philosopher, except within the realms of the philosophy of history, where his account of historical experience in *Experience and its Modes*, 'The Activity of Being an Historian' and *On History and other Essays* have an honourable place. The starting point for most is still the Oakeshott of *Rationalism in Politics* or Hobbes's *Leviathan* or perhaps *On Human Conduct*. *Experience and its Modes* is still mentioned more than read and there lurks a corresponding myth that it is an obscure and forbidding work of Hegelian metaphysics, which Oakeshott grew out of once he had written it out of his



system. All three views are false: it is neither obscure nor forbidding, he never got it out of his system; and he never grew out of it, but rather modified and refined its main themes throughout his career. And it is worth placing on record that *Experience and its Modes* is in fact one of the most accessible and enjoyable of the major works in idealist epistemology and always a pleasure to return to, whether one agrees with its main theses or not.

In this fine book Terry Nardin wants both to acknowledge Oakeshott the political thinker and to insist that he was also much more. It follows that his political thinking itself should be carefully placed in the context of a thinker concerned to theorize experience as a whole and to spectate rather than intervene. Oakeshott could be polemical but he was not essentially a polemicist. On the contrary, for Nardin, Oakeshott should be read as primarily a philosopher concerned with epistemology. Nardin summarizes his aim thus:

I have tried to show that Oakeshott's most significant contributions as a thinker are philosophical, not practical, that his interests range far beyond the boundaries of politics as it is ordinarily understood, and the very idea of politics is one he came to disparage as largely incoherent. Given his lifelong effort to distinguish different modes of understanding by uncovering their presuppositions, Oakeshott is best read as a theorist of knowledge, not a moralist (much less an ideologue), and as a philosopher of human experience generally, not only of politics. (p. 230)

Oakeshott's primary concern was to theorize experience in all its shapes and forms, and to distinguish modes of understanding, conduct or experience, each grounded on its own presuppositions or postulates. His great enemies were above all modal confusion on the one hand, and modal monopoly on the other. He was, to coin a phrase, a philosopher of experience and difference, a veritable Earl of Kent: 'I'll teach you differences: away, away!' (*King Lear*, I, iv). This could be Oakeshott's motto and the corresponding attempt at modal clarification his life work.

Nardin is adept at drawing out and linking the detail of Oakeshott's writing and has given us a fascinating and penetrating narrative of those parts of his work that he considers both important and insufficiently appreciated. However, there are one or two niggles worth mentioning. The first is whether the relatively depoliticized Oakeshott Nardin presents is still Oakeshott. Surely the polemical political essayist of the *Cambridge Journal* and *Rationalism in Politics* is as real as the intellectual boundary-keeper Oakeshott? And if the tone of his political writings is not always the tone of a disengaged intellectual, why can we not say that he was both a philosopher and a public intellectual? That would raise the thorny issue of how the one fitted with the other, but might it not be more true to the facts? Secondly, there is still more to be said



about the notion of modal distinction. What Nardin says is good, well written, thought provoking and helpful, and I am happy to agree with the truth of the proposition that ‘modality ... appears in everything Oakeshott wrote. The modes are categorically different from one another: modal distinctions are distinctions of kind, not degree’ (p. 230). However, I am less persuaded that the meaning or justification of such an assertion is so straightforward. Oakeshott had a lifelong struggle with the problem, constantly rethinking the issue afresh and finding new ways of reasserting both the importance of recognizing modal difference and of defining what the modal differences were. But why should we accept the assertion that modes are constituted by mere differences of kind? In the same year, 1933, that Oakeshott first propounded his views, Collingwood published his *Essay on Philosophical Method* in which he argued that in philosophy concepts differ both in degree and in kind, and that therefore there will be an overlap between modes or forms of experience. This is not Oakeshott’s preferred conclusion, but it seems to me that it is one that makes sense. It allows both for modal identity and difference; it allows that overlap might be appropriate in certain cases but not perhaps in all; it suggests that we should pay attention to differences while acknowledging that there might also be identities; it indicates that theory and practice (to take an instance) might overlap without either collapsing into the other. Of course, one can reject Collingwood’s conclusion and reasoning, but it would still have been interesting to read a clearer justification of why Oakeshott presented himself with the mammoth task of asserting and maintaining modal distinction solely in kind without overlap when this might have been chasing a will o’ the wisp. Finally, the book is suggestive in all sorts of ways about Oakeshott’s relationship with other philosophers — and especially interesting in its discussion of Rickert and other late 19th century Germans working on the distinction between the natural and the human sciences — but it does not make good the promise to discuss Heidegger and phenomenology. More on this would have been welcome both because it is interesting in itself to trace the lineaments of Oakeshott’s philosophy and also because it was promised on the dust wrapper.

But we can’t have all we want, and this book is a magnificent treatment of Oakeshott from which any attentive reader will learn a tremendous amount. Further, if Nardin is right, the time is overdue for a reappraisal of Oakeshott’s philosophical work and a recognition of his proper place in the history of the philosophy of the 20th century.

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