# Michael Joseph Oakeshott 1901—1990

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*(Note: The pipe character | indicates a page break in the original text)*

[p. 403] MICHAEL JOSEPH OAKESHOTT was born in Chelsfield, Kent, on 11 December 1901. His parents belonged to the educated middle class and enjoyed a modest financial independence. His father, who was a civil servant in the Inland Revenue, had an interest in Fabian socialism and was a man of studious tastes; his mother engaged at various times in charitable social work and seems to have had a more active temperament than her husband. There were two other sons, both of whom lived into old age. By all accounts the household in which Oakeshott grew up was cultivated and serious in outlook, though not in any way an intellectual hothouse. The family moved house several times in order to be near to suitable schools. At the age of eleven Oakeshott was sent to St George's School, Harpenden, a somewhat unusual coeducational school, founded by its headmaster, the Revd Cecil Grant. It provided an environment favourable to the growth of intellectual curiosity and the stimulation of aesthetic sensitivity, whilst at the same time sustaining a respect for the individual's moral obligations in society and for the conduct of his or her own life. To judge from Oakeshott's friendship with Mr Grant (lasting until the latter's death in the 1960s), the school made a lasting contribution to the shaping of Oakeshott's moral perceptions and to his conception of education.

At school Oakeshott received a fairly conventional academic education. This included classics, and for the rest of his life he was to reveal the abiding influence of classical thought, especially as expressed in the Latin language. He went to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1920 as an Entrance Scholar in History, and gained distinguished results in 1922 and 1923 in Parts I and II respectively of the History Tripos. In the liberal atmosphere of those times gifted students were not expected to throw themselves into some specialised groove. From the beginning Oakeshott displayed | an interest in philosophy and attended J. M. E. McTaggart's lectures in that subject. No doubt this served to nourish his growing interest in philosophical Idealism. But alongside this developing concern with philosophy there were other intellectual preoccupations—with theology, with literature and, increasingly, with the history of political thought. After completing the Tripos he gained the Christopher James studentship at Caius and was then able to spend some time in Germany during 1923—4, and probably again in 1925. He was also for a short time a schoolmaster teaching English at Lytham St Anne's Grammar School. Meanwhile he prepared a dissertation which gained him a Fellowship at Caius in 1925. He was to retain this status, one which he probably prized more than any other, until his death sixty-five years later.

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Oakeshott undoubtedly absorbed quite a lot of German philosophy and literature on his early visits to Marbug and Tubingen, but it is doubtful whether this owed much to any systematic course of study. Some have asserted that he

heard lectures by Heidegger who was then engaged in the preparation of *Sein und Zeit* (1927), but to others Oakeshott denied this. Whilst his thinking undoubtedly reveals debts to the world of German thought and sensibility, apart from his acknowledgement of Hegel Oakeshott was never very explicit about what he owed to that source. Indeed, after his early visits he rarely went back to Germany and in later years preferred to take his holidays in Italy and above all France. There is even a passage in which he mocks the Germans for their propensity to fall for a *Weltanschauung*. In his feelings towards Europe Oakeshott was essentially an eclectic and tolerant Englishman. He owed most to the cultural heritage of his own country and was proud of it. But he also saw England within a wider European tradition and was always ready to draw on whatever elements in that tradition caught his imagination and excited his interest.

By the end of 1925 Oakeshott had embarked on the life of a Cambridge don. Initially he had only research duties, but he soon began to teach history to undergraduates. In 1931 be became a College lecturer, and then in 1933 University Lecturer in History, a post he was to hold until his departure from Cambridge in 1949. Much of his teaching in both supervisions and lectures was directed to the history of political thought. He quickly became known both for his mastery of an easy, conversational form of instruction and for a capacity to deliver carefully constructed formal lectures. It was one of the attractive features of the History faculty in Cambridge in those days (and this persisted until quite recently) that it was totally hospitable to members who were philosophers and moralists rather than conventionally defined professional historians. Earlier in this century philosophy at Cambridge was
[p. 406] without a clearly defined and exclusive | academic base, and so nobody minded if the subject was pursued by historians. Oakeshott exemplified this situation most vividly. His earliest articles were on religious matters and on Locke and Bentham. Then in 1933 his first book was published, *Experience and its Modes*, and this is a strictly philosophical treatise. Nobody unaware of the Cambridge scene could possibly have guessed that this austerely abstract treatment of human experience was written by someone who was, officially at least, an historian rather than a philosopher.

*Experience and its Modes* is a remarkable book which, so it seems to me, retains its power to persuade rather more than some other parts of Oakeshott's writing. One reason for this is that it is a young man's achievement, presented with verve and self-confidence bordering on arrogance. Moreover, it is stylistically rather more attractive than some of the late works, being written in a flowing and relatively easy language, and showing no sign of anxiety about the author's capacity to say clearly what he wants to say. So sure is Oakeshott's touch in this first book of his that it is hard to believe, reading it nearly sixty years on, that he was not yet thirty-two when it appeared. His precocious philosophical assurance recalls Hume rather than Kant: like the former Oakeshott affirmed definite views early in life, but he also resembled the latter in that he was still struggling with his own ideas when already on the threshold of old age.

It is tempting to argue that *Experience and its Modes* sets the framework in which and out of which Oakeshott evolved into a political philosopher. In some respects this is a correct view of the matter. The book sets out a

philosophical position to which, in essentials, Oakeshott remained faithful for the rest of his life. It is also true that what he later had to say about politics and political philosophy remains congruent with the conclusions of *Experience and its* Modes. But without doubt it would be a serious mistake to imagine that this work of philosophy was seen by Oakeshott as an explicit prolegomenon to his later political writings. Like everything else in his life it was an experiment, a *ballon d'essai, ein Versuch,* undertaken for its own sake and dedicated strictly to the resolution of the particular questions which the author had in mind when he wrote it. What then does Oakeshott seek to do in *Experience and its Modes*?

His purpose was to examine the character of experience, to say something about what is involved in the philosophical understanding of it, and to present a view of philosophising as an intellectual activity. Right at the outset (p.7, *Experience and its Modes)* he asserts that philosophy is the effort in thought to begin at the beginning and to press to the end'. To philosophise (assuming that we actually get going) is always to enter on a critical engagement, a sustained and patient effort to tease out the postulates on which we talk about this or that
[p. 407] aspect of experience. The aim | is to recognise the limitations and the conditionality of what we commonly say about the world, and through the creative dismantling of our everyday categories of judgement eventually to achieve a more coherent account of experience.

With characteristic succinctness Oakeshott in 1985 summarised for the dust-jacket of a paperback edition of *Experience and its Modes* the aims of the work. It deals with 'Modality: human experience recognised as a variety of independent, self-consistent worlds of discourse, each the invention of human intelligence, but each also to be understood as abstract and an arrest in human experience'. The inquiry was pursued with reference to three modes of experience—history, science and practice. In essence what Oakeshott does is to establish what he regards as the only satisfactory terms in which to specify historical, scientific and practical experience: history is experience subject to the postulate of pastness; science is experience subject to the postulates of measurement and quantity: practical experience is experience subject to the postulates of willing and doing. To the understanding of each mode of experience there is an appropriate language, and to transfer the categories required by one mode of experience to another is to fall into categorial confusion or, more technically, to indulge in *ignoratio elenchi.* Oakeshott was to retain until the end of his life the essentials of this scheme of thought. True, he modified later some features of the terminology used in *Experience and its Modes,* and he qualified his account of the most familiar modes of experience by introducing aesthetic experience as a distinctive mode. But he remained convinced that though experience is in principle a whole, it is through distinctive varieties of experience that the experiencing subject becomes aware of his world. The task of philosophy is to elucidate the best way of talking sense both about these varieties of experience and about experience as a whole. In this way philosophy discharges a critical and therapeutic function: it adds nothing, but it can help us both to avoid confusion and to discern the lineaments of coherence in relation to experience as a whole and to its various distinctive modes.

*Experience and its Modes* made no great impact and it took over thirty years for a print-run of a thousand copies to sell. It appeared at a time when what

soon came to be known as 'logical positivism' took off in British philosophy, becoming for several decades the dominant voice. It was easy for philosophers of that persuasion simply to ignore the book or to dismiss it as an exercise in a discredited idiom of Idealist philosophising. Moreover, we must not forget that not long after 1933 any way of thinking which appeared to owe debts to German philosophy became suspect, whilst at the same time there also emerged a preoccupation with critical empiricism in relation to both the natural and social worlds which was to | lead in matters of social explanation to conclusions very different from Oakeshott's. Nevertheless, as more than one commentator has noted, Oakeshott's conception of philosophising was by no means as sharply at odds with what was recommended by practitioners of logical positivism, linguistic analysis, and common sense reasoning as has often been assumed. Like them Oakeshott attached more importance to philosophising as a method or mode of thought than to any conclusive utterances about life or reality which philosophers might make. He too wanted to achieve clarification in relation to our experience of the world around us, he too was profoundly impatient with muddled arguments. But doubtless there the resemblance ends. Compared with the majority of professional philosophers active in the years after the publication of *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) Oakeshott was aiming high. His concern was how to clarify our understanding of experience as a whole, a large problem when compared with the preoccupation with tidying up linguistic muddles which soon came to dominate philosophical writing in Britain.

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In the course of the thirties Oakeshott's interest in a philosophical understanding of 'politics' begins to emerge. In *Experience and its Modes* there are only cursory references to politics in the course of the analysis of practical experience where, indeed, he gives more space to religion as a type of practical experience. But he was already deeply engaged in a study of Hobbes, the first fruits of which were articles published in 1935 and 1937. Later this effort to grasp the thought of the man whom he regarded as England's greatest political philosopher was to culminate in the famous 'Introduction to *Leviathan'* (1946) and the essay, 'The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes', first published in *Rationalism in Politics* (1962). In the years before the Second World War Oakeshott was, however, already spreading his net beyond the history of political thought. He published in 1938 a remarkable essay, 'The Concept of philosophical jurisprudence', which prefigures his abiding concern with the nature and status of law as a specific framework for human relationships. In it he offered a stern criticism of all current jurisprudential theories and sought to set out what in his view were the proper points of departure for a philosophically adequate account of law. In 1939 came *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe,* a work untypical for Oakeshott and consisting of a collection of illustrative extracts for which he wrote an introductory commentary. If this seemed to indicate some edging towards an explicit preoccupation with contemporary 'goings-on', any such impression was firmly dispelled by the 1939 article in *Scrutiny* on 'The claims of politics'. Here he made no bones about his contempt for 'politics' seen as a bundle of remedies to be applied to the world in order to improve it. It called for some courage to write in such terms | at *that* time. Perhaps too it called for some courage to publish in 1936 a book written jointly with a colleague, Guy Griffith, entitled *A Guide to the Classics or How to Pick a Derby Winner.* Though written with dry urbanity, this was a serious effort to 'offer a brief and

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businesslike account of the rational principles upon which we believe a winning selection may be based.' Fear of raised eyebrows did not deter Oakeshott from agreeing to a second edition of this light-hearted work in 1947.

The outbreak of war interrupted Oakeshott's academic career. He enlisted in the army in 1940 (though by then he was already thirty-eight) and after sonic time in the ranks was commissioned in Intelligence. There he served until 1945 in a unit called 'Phantom', the purpose of which was to collect, analyse and distribute information bearing on the effectiveness of artillery targeting. He appears to have adapted well to army life, even to have enjoyed it after a fashion. He formed friendships and experience of military life no doubt reinforced his profound respect for the diversities of human character and personality. Yet in his submission to the impositions of serving his country there was no enthusiasm at all for war itself. As he made plain in several passages in his post-war writings, war represents the very antithesis of an acceptable civil condition. It subjects those involved in it to the rigours of a common enterprise (winning) and necessarily excludes that freedom to live one's own life which he had come to regard as crucial to the definition of a civilised society. Whatever he took from Hegel, he had no time for that philosopher's grandiloquent comments on war and the virtues it may inspire.

After demobilisation Oakeshott returned to his teaching duties at Cambridge. By now a person of some seniority he became again a busy tutor and lecturer whose reputation was beginning to spread well beyond the confines of his college. That he steadily became more widely known was in part the result of his association with the newly founded *Cambridge Journal,* the general editorship of which he took over in 1947 and was to hold until the journal's demise in 1954. This gave him *inter alia* an outlet for several notable essays, including 'Rationalism in Politics', (November-December 1947) and 'Rational Conduct' (October 1950). But it also imposed a tremendous burden of work. After all, it was a monthly magazine running to ninety pages or so, it embraced an astonishingly wide spectrum of intellectual interests and concerns, and it carried a large number of book reviews. Though there was an editorial board, the work of editing fell almost entirely on Oakeshott. That he coped so successfully with this, that the journal attracted contributions from a dazzling constellation of scholars, and that he found time to write a substantial number of notable contributions himself is a tribute to Oakeshott's stamina and efficiency. But no doubt it was in part the burdens of editorship, combined
[p. 410] with the | demands of heavy teaching commitments, that led him to contemplate a move away from Cambridge in the hope of finding more time to devote to his own research and writing. Accordingly in 1949 he moved to Nuffield College, Oxford, a graduate college then in its infancy, which had the previous year elected him to an official fellowship.

The move to Oxford was to be no more than a brief interlude. Early in 1950 the chair of political science at the London School of Economics and Political Science became vacant on the death of Harold Laski. In September of that year the electors offered the succession to Oakeshott who agreed to come. Having left the comforts of Gonville and Caius for the rigours of Nuffield's temporary buildings on the Banbury Road and what must have been a shabby *pied à terre* in St Aldate's in order 'to follow up the research and writing I want to do' (letter to Henry Clay, Warden of Nuffield, November 1948), Oakeshott now

went off to head what was probably the largest department of political science (or 'Government' as it was actually called) in the country. On the face of it the translation to the LSE was, for man of Oakeshott's disposition and academic inclinations, puzzling. It meant acceptance of formal teaching duties again, it involved substantial administrative responsibility, and in some degree it was to thrust Oakeshott on to a public stage, something he had always disliked. But perhaps he suspected that the cunning of reason was at work in a modest way, and anyway his own approach to life required a cheerful response to the cards that fate dealt out. He must too have been somewhat flattered by the offer of election to the LSE chair, especially as he cannot have been insensitive to the irony implicit in the choice of himself to succeed Laski. This is reflected ever so gently in a letter he wrote to the Warden of Nuffield on 15 September 1950 telling him that if offered the chair, he would accept it. The reason he gave for this conclusion was that the students at the LSE 'have rather a raw deal and (that) I think they are worth while trying to help'. So at the end of 1950 Oakeshott's brief sojourn in Oxford was over and he exchanged the prospect of life as a full-time researcher for a renewed commitment to teaching. With hindsight it can be seen that he did the right thing: neither Oxford nor Nuffield could ever have offered an hospitable climate either for Oakeshott's style or for his ideas. The LSE was to provide opportunities not available in the older academies.

When Oakeshott arrived at the LSE the department he was to head had about a dozen members; when he left it had grown to nearly thirty. For fifteen years Oakeshott discharged the duties of head of department with skill and good humour. This administrative role was then separated from the academic duties of the chair of political science and devolved on one or other of the professors in it. By that time Oakeshott was not far off retirement, a threshold crossed at the
[p. 411] beginning of 1969. His running | of the department was economical in the calls it made on conventional bureaucratic resources: after all, here was a man who preferred to write letters in longhand. But he was no dilettante in the conduct of practical affairs. He had a strong sense of his own authority as head of the department, though showing a keen appreciation of what was required for the maintenance of amicable relations amongst his colleagues. He did, however, see the role of the head of a department in what would now widely be regarded as old-fashioned terms. Whoever holds such a position had in Oakeshott's understanding of the matter to be in the first place a scholar and a teacher, not an entrepreneur or a manager. He had no sympathy for empire-building, no desire to become deeply immersed in 'academic politics' as the game of bargaining inside universities is now called, and no real interest in acquiring positions of influence in external bodies which might be held to bolster the status of the departmental chairman within his own academic institution. Instead, he put his energies first into lecturing and the supervision of students: administration had to be attended to, hut not at the expense of the primary responsibilities of the teacher.

The LSE gave to Oakeshott a stage which, in some elusive sense, he needed. It was then normal at the LSE for a senior professor to offer formal lectures for undergraduates, which were regarded as a major part of the instruction offered. Oakeshott's lectures on the history of political thought, delivered weekly as a rule to audiences of four hundred or so, became famous. They were not histrionic occasions, still less theatrical performances. But they did have the

supreme merit of being exemplary: they showed in compelling language what efforts of thought were required of those who might hope to ascend to a modest plateau of understanding in relation to what is conventionally designated as 'politics'. Apart from lecturing Oakeshott also taught in smaller groups and was unfailingly generous in offering advice and guidance to individual students, both undergraduates and graduates. But he was not a directive supervisor, preferring always to leave the student free to explore a subject for himself. In his later years he must have despaired of the graduate research industry which has now become established with its emphasis on early definition of the research to be done as a precondition of 'higher output' and more rapid 'completion'. Another feature of Oakeshott's teaching life at the LSE was the seminar on the history of political thought which he gradually established on a permanent basis as a key element in the programme for a Master's degree in that subject. For at least a decade after retirement he remained the key figure in this seminar, and through the opportunities for conversation which it provided a serious interest in his ideas and arguments was ever more widely diffused. He had too a genuine interest in mature, part-
[p. 412] time students | and enjoyed in his earlier years at the LSE the evening classes provided for them.

Oakeshott was, however, neither preacher nor proselytizer. It is true that his great inaugural lecture, 'On Political Education', represented something in the nature of a *credo,* and thus could be regarded as akin to a manifesto or declaration of intent. In it he presented an account of tradition as the ground of political activity, gave a very clear statement of what the content of a political education should be, and rejected flatly all ideological thinking in politics. In words that were to become famous he asserted that in politics 'men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat…' And those in his audience who found this a depressing doctrine were sharply reminded that this was so only for 'those who have lost their nerve'. But Oakeshott was temperamentally averse to the stridency of active persuasion and had no desire to gather a band of followers around him or to send missionaries out into the world. So he never tried to establish anything like an Oakeshottian orthodoxy at the LSE. He was content to be one voice—though no doubt a highly persuasive one—amongst several contributing to a conversation. If as a result some of those participating in the conversation came to understand the problems addressed in a manner Oakeshott appreciated, then so much the better: that was a bonus to be welcomed. But conversations were not to be transformed either into public meetings or into séances.

Not long after going to the LSE Oakeshott held in 1952-3 the Muirhead Lectureship at the University of Birmingham, a visiting appointment previously held by, amongst others, L. T. Hobhouse and J. S. Haldane. In 1958 he also spent some months as a visiting professor at Harvard. Generally, however, he eschewed external commitments of that kind. During his years at the LSE Oakeshott published little. Or, to put the matter more accurately, he did not write a great deal that was new. He did, however, see through in 1962 the publication of what is perhaps his most famous book, *Rationalism in Politics*. It is certainly his most dazzling and accessible work, and offers the most wide ranging introduction to his leading ideas about politics. *Rationalism*

*in Politics and other essays* (to give it its correct title) consists of ten essays written over a period of fifteen years and seven of which had already appeared elsewhere. Two of them are directed explicitly to a critique of rationalistic thinking as applied to moral conduct and political life, but three more of them, those on 'Political Education' and 'On Being Conservative', which deal mainly with tradition as the necessary foundation of political life, and 'The
[p. 413] Tower of Babel', which attacks the pursuit of abstract moral ideals | as disruptive of a settled morality, also contribute to what is essentially the same argument. Of the remaining essays one deals with what is involved in writing history, another in the form of a book review illuminates the interconnection between a market economy and a liberal political order, and a third examines with subtlety and penetration Hobbes' conception of the moral life. Standing somewhat apart from the rest is the remarkable essay on aesthetic experience, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', in which Oakeshott elegantly retracts an earlier remark about poetry by providing a careful account of a mode of experience which he believed he had failed to distinguish adequately when writing in 1933. Finally, there is the amusing and often sardonic essay on 'The Study of 'Politics' in a University'.

Certain themes which recur constantly in Oakeshott's thinking about politics, the philosophical understanding of this sphere of life, and the world of experience to which politics has to be related, dominate these essays. There is the attack on rationalistic constructions purporting to explain more or less scientifically what we are, how we got to our present position, and how we can engage in systematic improvement of our world. Such an approach, which Oakeshott traces back to Bacon, treats politics as an activity dependent on techniques. In Oakeshott's view all such thinking is ideological and at bottom inimical to human freedom: as he derisively remarks in a footnote, the Rationalist transforms everything into an abstraction. 'he can never get a square meal of experience'. There is the affirmation of existing practices and traditional forms of living together as the only possible basis both for a moral life favourable to individual self-development and for an acceptable mode of politics. There is persuasive deployment of the argument that all genuine politics as an activity is the 'politics of repair', 'the pursuit, not of a dream, or a general principle, hut of an intimation'. There is an account of education in a university which identifies thinking critically for its own sake as the feature which distinguishes it from all other forms of education and 'training'. There is an urbane yet robust dismissal of positivist empiricism as the high road to some kind of systematic understanding of politics. And above all there is repeatedly the affirmation of forms of experience distinct from and owing nothing to politics which are valuable in themselves and need to be protected from the depredations of the philistines and *Banausen* who lurk in the political world.

The conception of politics that emerges most vividly from *Rationalism in Politics* is that of a sceptical conservative. True, there is much else in the work which properly considered qualifies and indeed demands amendment of this view of what Oakeshott was offering. But if during the 1960s and later he was
[p. 414] by some erroneously typecast as an ingenious apologist for a | vanishing world, and dismissed by others as a corrosive sceptic obstinately refusing to recognise the dawn of a new science of society, he hardly had grounds for complaint. He had explained with great care why he held all doctrines of progress and

perfectibility to be both false and absurd, he had held up to ridicule many of the cherished shibboleths of the post-war epoch (including those of some of his academic colleagues), and he showed that he could do all this in a prose style of insinuating beauty which might well beguile the young and the unwary. At a time when Britain was moving towards the high-water mark of the Keynesian consensus such opinions were bound to be regarded by some as reactionary, by others as frivolous. By 1991 when a new and expanded edition of *Rationalism in Politics* was published in the USA by the Liberty Press some at least of Oakeshott's formerly unconventional opinions had secured a certain reluctant recognition.

Retirement, which was marked by the presentation to him of a notable *Festschrift* entitled *Politics and Experience,* must in some degree have been a release from bondage for Oakeshott. For many years after 1969 he continued to guide and animate the history of political thought seminar, and he retained a somewhat run-down room at the LSE. But freed from the diurnal duties of a professor he was able to return to writing. He put together his principal essays on Hobbes in a volume entitled *Hobbes on Civil Association* which came out in 1975. Meanwhile he was pressing on slowly, far more slowly than he had expected, towards completion of his most important work, *On Human Conduct.* This too was published in 1975 and consists of three long connected essays, the first on human conduct, the second on the civil condition, and the third on the character of a modern European state. In the preface Oakeshott records that the themes of which he writes have been with him nearly as long as he can remember. Then, after apologising for having taken so long to put his thoughts together, he concludes by confessing that 'when I look back upon the path my footprints make in the snow I wish that it might have been less rambling'. Even if there is artifice in this appeal to the reader, it is hard to resist the poetic beauty in which it is expressed.

*On Human Conduct* is a difficult book, written to some extent in a semi-technical language composed in part of Latin terms – *cives, civitas, lex, respublica, societas, universitas* and the like. But there are also complex and unusual conceptions presented in English, notably those of self-disclosure and self-enactment in human conduct. The denseness of the writing (at any rate in the first two essays, the third being easier to read) renders impossible a satisfactory summary of what Oakeshott contends for in this volume. As with most of his work, anyone who wants to understand it must get to grips with the original: there is no substitute for that. But if his argument is to | be reduced to [p. 415] its essential elements, then it is as follows. Human beings are neither the objects of a process nor the components of a structure. They are intelligent agents who have to engage in transactions with each other in order to live. They are capable of understanding their lives both as revealing the terms of the moral practices in which they have grown up, and as demonstrating their own capacity for achieving fulfilment through fidelity to these practices. Above all human conduct is characterised by an ability to qualify actions adverbially, that is to say to do *this* or perhaps *that* in a certain way rather than simply to pursue ends such as a good salary, happiness or grace abounding. To theorise politics is to delineate the kind of state (or civil condition) appropriate to human beings capable of that kind of conduct.

The construction which emerges on this foundation is a spare rule of law state, what Oakeshott refers to as the civil condition or civil association. It rests upon a morality and is embodied concretely in the practices of civility appropriate to the society in which it is exemplified. (Practice is the concept which Oakeshott now prefers to tradition as allowing a more rigorous specification of the conditions of social life within which conduct *inter homines* takes place.) The law of such a state is general in form and appears chiefly to consist of prohibitions. There are offices of rule, notably those of deliberating the laws to be made, enforcing them, and adjudicating disputes arising from their application. In contrast to its long-standing competitor in the European political tradition, enterprise association, the civil condition prescribes no common purpose for those subject to it, and the authority of its laws rests entirely on the subjects' continued subscription to them. By virtue of that subscription the subjects are under an obligation to obey the law and can properly be punished if they do not. Yet the civil condition is very limited in its range. For the most part it prevents collisions between subjects in order that they can then safely get on with their own lives as they see fit. In the third essay Oakeshott attempts an historical outline of the emergence of this kind of state in modern Europe. This he does by presenting the two contrasting ideal types—civil association and enterprise association—as persistent themes which can be located at various points in the evolution of modern Europe and its states. In a rather loose way this essay might be regarded as presenting something like empirical backing for the two preceding theoretical discussions. But it is unlikely that this was Oakeshott's intention, and any-way his history is too lightly sketched in to be quite convincing. What we really have, therefore, is a continuation of the theoretical argument.

In *On Human Conduct* (as in many other parts of his writing) Oakeshott proceeds by constructing ideal types. This was his favoured method of
[p. 416] presenting an argument, and one which can he regarded as a necessary | consequence of his concern to expose the postulates of particular features of experience. It follows, of course, that it is irrelevant to ask how far we can actually show empirically (and that could only mean historically) that Oakeshott's ideal types are to be found in the world, past or present. They are not constructions derived by induction, they are constructs of thought achieved by reflecting critically on human experience. If we wish to escape from the higgeldy-piggeldy world of discrete facts—the slag-heap of innumerable happenings—then in Oakeshott's view the only way open to intelligent human beings is to consider the terms on which the muddle they face might be made coherent. This is, however, in his opinion by no means an arbitrary engagement. He was still enough of a philosophical Idealist to believe that the intelligent theorist can construct reality only in certain ways, and that he is capable of avoiding categorial confusion. The lessons of *Experience and its Modes* are thus re-affirmed in *On Human Conduct* and it is, incidentally, for that reason that we can properly regard *On Human Conduct* as presenting a political philosophy: it sought to show how a particular specification of politics was required and justified by a larger philosophical analysis of experience.

Both its style and the philosophical method employed contributed to the cool reception accorded to *On Human Conduct*. It was held by some to be remote and artificial, by others to be simply too clever and too paradoxical to be

credible. Moreover, for those in or on the fringes of 'real' politics such a book was quite useless: after all, apart from warning against the New Jerusalem and a place called *Schlaraffenland* it offered no practical recommendations at all! Worse still, *On Human Conduct* appeared to dismiss such virtuous notions as basic human rights and social justice out of hand, and that at a time when they were at last coming into their own. But if disappointed by the reaction to his efforts to explain his understanding of politics as closely and as explicitly as he could, Oakeshott did not show it. And certainly he was not deterred from pressing on to a further elaboration of his position. This reached the public in 1983 (he was then approaching eighty-two) under the title *On History and other essays*. Once more he returned to questions which had preoccupied him for the best part of sixty years. What is the nature of historical knowledge? What is the minimum adequate specification of a rule of law? The book contains only one essay on the rule of law, though it is substantial in scale. In it Oakeshott provides a succinct, even terse re-statement of what he takes to be the minimal defining characteristics of the rule of law. Whilst in many respects he reiterates the arguments set out in the 1975 essay on the civil condition, he does in this later essay achieve a degree of completeness and compression in his treatment of the subject that testifies eloquently to the strength of his
[p. 417] conviction that a rule of law, | properly understood, is 'the most civilised and least burdensome conception of a state yet to be devised'. Equally impressive are the three essays on history which integrate in a compelling manner all the considerations which had over the years gone into his view of what is involved practically and theoretically in understanding the past. The lineage back to *Experience and its Modes* can easily he traced. Yet there is in this late work a far more comprehensive account of what history is and how we are to distinguish historical knowledge from other forms of knowledge than he had provided before. It is as if some of the philosophical baggage had been shed, thus enabling Oakeshott to focus sharply and intensely on a concept which is at one and the same time grossly misused and misunderstood, and yet crucial to the kind of self-understanding that has evolved in the West. The book concludes with another version of the fable of the Tower of Babel, an image to which Oakeshott often returned in his search for ways of illustrating the moral predicament of a world bewitched by the desire to 'Take the Waiting out of Wanting'.

After *On history and other essays* Oakeshott published no more on his own initiative. But he did bless a volume of essays on education which Professor Timothy Fuller edited and brought out in 1989 under the title *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Most of the essays had appeared before in various places, but the book also contains some hitherto unpublished work. What is perhaps most valuable about it is that it brings together in convenient form most of the important statements about education and the character of a specifically liberal education that Oakeshott had written over many years. Yet there is an unavoidable sadness attaching to the volume: did it not appear just at a time when the very idea of a liberal education in Britain and elsewhere was in full retreat in the face of the advocates of education as a preparation for practical life and nothing more? By the end of the 1980s it did indeed appear that the cause of liberal education was about to be overwhelmed.

During the last twenty years or so of his life Michael Oakeshott lived chiefly at Acton, Langton Matravers, a village in a bleak situation on the Dorset coast

not far from Swanage. It was only when approaching retirement that he purchased the cottages where he was to die on 19 December 1990 at the age of eighty-nine: up till then he had merely rented the various properties in which he had made his home. His hesitation about borrowing to buy property reflected some of those Victorian values in which he was brought up and to which he remained faithful throughout his life: a duty to pay as you go along and not to get into debt, frugality and rejection of ostentation in outward appearances, punctuality and regularity in working habits, courtesy and attention towards others, self-help and individual responsibility. Yet though
[p. 418] there was this austere side to his | character, he was at the same time a man of warm feelings with a gift for friendship And to his many friends he showed unfailing kindness and generosity. He was too a man of unconventional dispositions, with much of the Bohemian and the romantic, even the eccentric, in him. It was in his relationships with women in particular that he was for most of his life an incurable romantic. He enjoyed many close attachments with the opposite sex, and nearly all of those who remember him from earlier years testify to the ease with which he was able to secure the company of engaging young ladies. No doubt it was his fascination with '*das Ewig-Weibliche'* that contributed to the difficulty he had in adapting to the ties of marriage. His first two marriages, one in early life and another some years later, ended in divorce: his third marriage came when he was just over sixty and endured until his death. But it is hard to write about Oakeshott's private life. He was an intensely private person who believed passionately in the individual's right to conduct as he saw fit that part of his life which was unconnected with public duties. Naturally, even in private life there were always obligations to be met, but it was for individuals to decide themselves what these were and how best to fulfil them.

Oakeshott was indifferent to, perhaps even contemptuous of the usual symbols of social recognition. He would accept no public honours and was extremely reluctant to take honorary doctorates, though eventually he yielded to the solicitations of friends and former students and did accept them from Durham (UK) and Colorado (USA) universities. He was also willing to become a Fellow of the British Academy in 1966. Yet whilst recognising the somewhat bizarre character of the British way with honours he could see its rationale: after all, as he is said to have remarked, honours should go to those who most enjoy them. Nor did he seek the company of the great and the good, still less was he ever on the lookout for a place on this or that committee of inquiry or council for sundry good works. To have courted favours in the world of public affairs would for Oakeshott have signified moral corruption as well as foolishness. Since he regarded politics as a highly ambiguous sphere of life and political science as a generally misconceived undertaking, he was only being consistent in steering clear of most entanglements in political life. This is one of the reasons why it is erroneous to link him at all closely with the Conservative revivalism of the Thatcher years. He sympathised with the Conservative party and no doubt approved of much that Mrs Thatcher set in motion, in particular her efforts to reduce the power of trade unions in the political life of the country. But in a profound sense Oakeshott was the antithesis of a party man: his vocation was to establish a philosophical understanding of politics. By definition that excludes both practical recommendation and dalliance with the world of affairs. Of all important
[p. 419] British political philosophers since Hobbes he may | well have been the most

detached from current events and the actors on the political stage. Expressive of this detachment is the absence in his writings of virtually all explicit references to the great upheavals of his times: in this respect he was remarkably like Jane Austen in her novels. But for all his determination to eschew overt political engagement, he remained deeply committed to the traditional political forms and procedures of his own country. He had a strong feeling for England and it was chiefly from his reflections on the political experience and achievements of England that he drew the conclusion that the civil condition must rest on a slowly evolving practice of civility.

Oakeshott was an elusive and multi-layered thinker who resists straightforward categorization. He drew eclectically on many sources—philosophers and theologians, moralists and historians, poets, novelists and dramatists. But he cared little for the visible apparatus of scholarship and so provides few clues to the main influences on his thought (and some that he does offer are misleading too!). But three thinkers above all did inspire his own effort to understand experience and to construct a political philosophy: Montaigne, Hobbes and Hegel. About these three at least he is reasonably explicit. From Montaigne he derived the sense of life as *une aventure,* a moral exploration until death supervenes; from Hobbes comes much of what Oakeshott re-fashions as the rule of law and the civil condition; and from Hegel there comes both the Idealist philosophical heritage (or as much of it as Oakeshott chose to adopt) and an awareness that a genuine political order must rest on appropriate moral traditions in society.

The achievement of Michael Oakeshott was to transmute these pre-existing elements into a philosophical composition that is original, expressed wholly in his own style, coherent, and complete. There is an impressive consistency in his thinking from the philosophical foundations laid down in *Experience and its Modes* through the essays on more explicitly political themes of his middle years on to the chillier, almost magisterial conclusions of the works written in old age. His undertaking was and remained in the first instance to locate politics and political forms on a philosophically grounded map of experience: the project of establishing 'the connections, in principle and in detail, directly or mediately, between politics and eternity' which he attributed to Hobbes in his 'Introduction to *Leviathan'* was indeed what he pursued unremittingly himself. The outcome was a specification of politics as an activity and political association as a form of social order which is coherently related to a philosophical account of what we can know of experience and how we are to understand human conduct. And it is precisely because he adhered so rigorously to the effort to locate politics philosophically that he has so little to offer in the shape of specific recommendations. This does not mean that he had
[p. 420] no views on what should | be done in the world of affairs. On the contrary he often had strong private opinions on many matters. But in his public, academic capacity he just did not see himself as being in the business of telling people what to do.

Nevertheless, there is also much in Oakeshott's published work which at least indirectly has important practical implications. His critique of rationalism and ideology counts against all projects of total reform and, therefore, points to the *prima facie* benefits of a conservative position. The stress on tradition and established practices reinforces this conservative strand in Oakeshott's

arguments. Yet he remains at the same time an unusual kind of liberal. For Oakeshott freedom was virtually the equivalent of intelligent human activity: the world is inhabited by individuals who can act intelligently and must do so if they are to survive. From this postulate Oakeshott derived both the impossibility of deterministic accounts of human conduct and social development and his conclusion that individuals should have as wide a scope as possible for deciding how to shape their lives. This leads to a very rigorous kind of liberalism, akin almost to a libertarian standpoint. Consistently with this position Oakeshott argued for something that looks rather like the minimal state, though he carefully steered clear of all dogmatic commitments purporting to define the exact scope and limits of government. But of one thing we can be sure. The kind of state Oakeshott was prepared to endorse had to be one which allowed its citizens a wide sphere of liberty in which they could then show that they were capable of intelligently shaping their own lives. Above all, the state which he recommended could not be a managerial or a planning state, it was not an enterprise association keen to thrust its common purposes on to citizens who might not want to take part in them.

Yet it seems to me that there is a still deeper motive inspiring Oakeshott's construction of the political realm. He believed that practical life is in some sense primary, in any event inescapable. As he remarks at the end of 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', 'there is no v*ita contemplativa;* there are only moments of contemplative activity abstracted and rescued from the flow of curiosity and contrivance.' For most of the time we are caught up in practical life, and this entails willing, doing, seeking, trying, hopefully moving from one state of affairs to another which we then prefer. There is a restlessness about practical life which threatens to consume all else and to blunt our capacity to grasp other forms of experience. It is in this connection that we can best explain the close attention Oakeshott paid to history. Clearly he was as a philosopher (and no doubt as a somewhat dilettante historian) interested in what history is, the status of historical knowledge, and the proper philosophical context in which to grasp history as a mode of experience. But for him what was really striking was the contrast between
[p. 421] historical and practical experience, | and the constant danger that the latter will corrupt and consume the former. History is present knowledge which refers to a world that is dead and gone, it is knowledge for its own sake made possible by the human capacity to grasp 'pastness' as a category of experience. Thus the effort to isolate and specify historical knowledge in a rigorous way was at the same time an effort to keep practical life at bay and to hold back its incursions. The conclusions about history have, furthermore, a direct bearing on Oakeshott's account of politics. Just as he wished to save historical knowledge from those who would degrade it to 'the lessons of history', so he argued for a minimalist account of the civil condition in the hope that this would leave space for much else in life which he prized more highly than politics. Here we can see Oakeshott's affinity with Montaigne and Hume, and his lack of sympathy for an idealised view of the polis life *à la grecque*. It is the outlook of a humanist and sceptic who believes that an obsession with politics, apart from the risks of tyranny it brings, is bound to impoverish our lives. There are simply better things to be getting on with in life. Nevertheless, the kind of citizen who can accept a highly limited role for government and then get on with his own affairs, is in a minority. In one of his darkest essays, 'The Masses in Representative Democracy' (1957 in German, 1961 in English)

Oakeshott depicts the anti-individual who prefers the comforts of benevolent despotism to the risks and rigours of a free society. If that harsh picture reflects what we can normally expect to encounter, the chances of keeping politics at bay and of sustaining Oakeshott's ideal of the civil condition are but modest.

Oakeshott will be remembered as a political philosopher, the most compelling and original British contributor to this rare genre in the twentieth century. But he will also be remembered as an essayist and as the protagonist of a liberal, humanist education. The essay was Oakeshott's preferred literary form, and in some measure all his work consists of essays, some more closely linked with each other than others. He took great pains over the composition of each essay, and the best of them reveal a remarkable unity of harmonious expression and carefully balanced structure which demonstrates his mastery of this art form. (He was equally a master of letter-writing and maintained an extensive correspondence). Moreover, Oakeshott had wit and irony at his command, qualities which he deployed skilfully to point up arguments and to enhance their persuasiveness. Surely many of his essays, especially those of his middle years, will survive simply as splendid examples of this literary form. About education he wrote sympathetically and persuasively on many occasions. In his concern to see each level of education contribute appropriately to an opening of the minds of those being taught, he was perhaps not so far away from many 'progressive' educationalsts of quite different political persuasion | [p. 422] who also stressed helping children and students to learn for themselves and in their own way. But Oakeshott totally rejected social engineering through education and was deeply critical of the modern obsession with training and the preparation for jobs. In his view all these errors of judgement could be traced hack to a failure to draw the necessary distinctions in our thinking about education.

I have remarked several times that Oakeshott was a sceptic. His scepticism certainly extended to metaphysics, and probably to religion also. Notwithstanding his deep respect for Augustine as a thinker there is little reason to believe that he adhered to traditional Christian beliefs and there are only a few passages in his *oeuvre* in which religion is explicitly considered. Yet what he did write about this aspect of experience suggests that he attached great importance to it. In *On Human Conduct* there are some pages of haunting beauty in which Oakeshott characterises religious experience as 'a reconciliation to the unavoidable dissonances of a human condition'. In the same passage there is much else which evokes the transitoriness of human life and the inevitable frustration of so many of its hopes. Religion is a response to that awareness, a way of coming to terms with our mortality. The explicit references to religion by Oakeshott may be few and far between. But his whole work is pervaded by a sense of the mystery inherent in life and a perception of how difficult it is to find even modestly satisfactory words with which to express what needs to be said if experience is to be made intelligible. This is a feeling which we can detect in Hölderlin, a poet greatly admired by Oakeshott, and some have claimed to find it in much of Wittgenstein's writing too. Many of those who have been deeply sensitive to this sense of mystery in life have in their efforts to penetrate the veil of experience come to those margins of reflection where expression can be found only in mysticism. It may be that what created the deepest gulf between Oakeshott and so many of his contemporaries was precisely some unarticulated awareness of this

undercurrent in his thinking. For a world addicted to rationalism and empiricism such a possibility was profoundly disturbing. No wonder that some dismissed him as a nostalgic reactionary, a Proust of political philosophy, whilst others simply passed him by uncomprehending. But the possibility remains that much of life is a mystery and that coming to terms with it is a hard matter. Oakeshott saw this possibility as a reality and took up the challenge implicit in it.

In the course of a long life Michael Oakeshott assumed, certainly without willing it, the character of a sage. Notwithstanding that most of his opinions and beliefs were persistently at odds with whatever happened to be the fashionable nostrums of the passing moment, he became for a considerable number of those closely concerned with the study of moral and political argument a
[p. 423] source of inspiration. No doubt he would have | protested against the ascription to him of such a position: was not his whole philosophical endeavour founded on the conviction that everyone must do his own thinking? Was there not in his writing so much awareness of the mystery and ambiguity of all experience that the very notion of a sage offering 'inspiration' would have struck him as mildly absurd, and more especially with himself in the guise of the sage? Nevertheless, he could not help exerting on others a certain fascination. He was able to use the English language with skill and distinction, commanding a full range of tones from elegaic sadness to dismissive contempt, from hilarious mockery to finely drawn semantic differentiation, from elegant simplicity to an almost tortured archaicism in the pursuit of exactness. Such stylistic gifts go some way towards explaining his impact even on those who never met him or heard him lecture. But for many the personality was compelling too. This was not because he ever sought to impose himself on others, still less to affirm his status as a scholar or his reputation as a philosopher. What was arresting about him as a man was his capacity to establish around himself a pool of stillness in the midst of which he would then engage in a conversation. For Oakeshott such occasions were in the first instance an opportunity to listen to others. Those who entered into conversation with him then nearly always came away with a mixture of awe and exhilaration prompted by the manner in which his penetrating intelligence was reflected back on to whatever features of the world they happened to be talking about. And above all the ideas he developed and the arguments he deployed in his published work are difficult and challenging. He offered no easy answers: there may be shortcomings and weaknesses in the arguments he presents and the conclusions he reaches. But he set out to scale a great peak. The intrepid endeavour to do so will continue for many years to come to command admiration and to serve as a compelling example of how to reason philosophically about politics. Through his writings he became a starting-point for others.

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