

Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2004), xii + 209 pp., £27.50, ISBN 0 300 10404 9.

Paul Franco highlights two ‘enduring contributions’ made by Michael Oakeshott to philosophy and political philosophy. First (and in the area of epistemology), Oakeshott’s argument that the world of knowledge consists in a multiplicity of modes (history, science and practice) that are irreducible and, hence, not amenable to ranking. Second, Oakeshott’s theory of civil association in which he points up the main features of an essentially liberal political order. Franco succeeds in impressing upon his readers the importance and distinctiveness of these contributions. In some respects, however, Franco could usefully have pressed his analysis of Oakeshott further. Relevant here is Oakeshott’s observation that ‘political action involves mental vulgarity’ (which Franco quotes in his discussion of Oakeshott’s political philosophy). There are reasons for thinking that Oakeshott’s distaste for ‘mental vulgarity’ (in political and other contexts) may go a long way towards explaining both the strengths and weaknesses of his contributions to philosophy and political philosophy.

In his discussion of Oakeshott’s early (epistemologically-oriented) writings, Franco emphasizes the importance placed by Oakeshott on the fallacy of irrelevance (*ignoratio elenchi*) as a source of confusion in practical and philosophical contexts. We fall victim to *ignoratio elenchi* in circumstances where we fail to keep the various modes of experience separate from one another. This happens when, for example, scientific thought is used to interrogate features of practical life. Moreover, where this sort of mistake results from insensitivity to the distinctiveness of the sphere under interrogation, we are, on Oakeshott’s view, confronted with mental vulgarity. The same point applies where we misapprehend a ‘world’ (Oakeshott’s term for a ‘complex integral whole or system’) by failing to understand it in terms of the ensemble of norms that invest it with significance. In light of these points, Oakeshott argues that we should understand philosophy as a discipline that grasps ‘experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest, or modification’. To this end, we should see ‘worlds’ as concrete universals.

The emphasis on ‘worlds’ as concrete universals is, as Franco makes plain, a prominent feature of Oakeshott’s political philosophy. Relevant here is Oakeshott’s writing on liberalism. Oakeshott regards liberalism not as an abstract idea or a fixed body of abstract rights but, rather, as a ‘living method of social integration’. This ‘method’ (or tradition or practice) involves, *inter alia*, the diffusion of power and the rule of law. Moreover, liberalism does not, on Oakeshott’s account, exhibit an overarching purpose. Hence, ‘liberalism’ names a non-instrumental civil association. In this civil association, individuals enjoy, *inter alia*, the freedom to engage in the conversation of mankind (in which various discourses and modes of knowledge complement

rather than compete with one another). But this does not stop politicians trying to impose on liberal institutions purposes that threaten freedom and the conversation it makes possible. Where this happens, we are confronted with a paradigmatic example of vulgar political thought. For 'the most effective method ever invented' for social integration (liberal civil association) is mistaken for or turned into a means by which to pursue some more or less narrow (and often stultifying) end.

But while the ends about which Oakeshott has misgivings are both narrow and a threat to liberal civil association, some of them have (as Franco notes) moral appeal. Consider the egalitarian project of expanding participation in higher education. This is an end about which Oakeshott had misgivings. For he saw the agenda of social justice as a threat to the quietistic ideal of the university as 'a place apart', where conversation and individuality could flourish. For Oakeshott this threat was embodied in students unprepared to take the opportunity to 'stretch [their] sails to the wind' but alive to the material benefits to be wrung from a valuable academic qualification. Here, again, we see Oakeshott responding disdainfully to mental vulgarity. But on this occasion his response surely merits sharp criticism. For even in the radically instrumentalized British university of today we can see (in efforts to widen participation) an attempt (typically clumsy; often forlorn) to encourage participation in the sort of conversation celebrated by Oakeshott.

Had Franco pressed his analysis further in the way suggested above, he might have been better placed to throw light on, *inter alia*, Oakeshott's admiration for 'philosophical imagination' and his distaste for 'minute analysis'. The modesty of Franco's analytic ambitions becomes particularly obvious in his concluding chapter. He makes two telling criticisms of Oakeshott. First, Oakeshott failed to address 'the crucial, if contingent, question of the social, economic, and cultural conditions necessary for the perpetuation of civil association'. Second, by drawing (most obviously in his early writings) a 'hermetic distinction' between theory and practice, Oakeshott deprives philosophy of any bearing on the way we live our lives. Franco makes these points on the penultimate page of his book. Thus he denies himself the opportunity to pursue them very far. Nonetheless, he offers a crisply written and meticulously researched introduction to Oakeshott. He also succeeds in conveying some sense of Oakeshott's personality. Plainly, Oakeshott was (like Montaigne, whose writings he greatly admired) a man for whom there was no occupation as sweet as scholarship. This may go some way towards explaining his distaste for the vulgarity of politicians. But it is perhaps no coincidence that the Oakeshott who returned to academic life after service in the Second World War moved away from astringent philosophy. He struck down the path of political philosophy and offered a sometimes polemical defence of the liberal tradition. Thus he compromised his commitment to the view that theory and

practice should be sharply distinguished, and he came dangerously, but fruitfully, close to the vulgar world of the politician.

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