

Introduction

Although Michael Oakeshott is one of the most profound philosophers of political activity in the 20th century, his ideas have been relatively neglected, and, when studied, they have often been misunderstood. Indeed, the general misunderstanding of his work is one of the main reasons that it has been neglected. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of published studies of Oakeshott's work, but these studies have tended to confuse as much as clarify.¹ In particular, recent studies of his thought have exhibited two fundamental misreadings of Oakeshott's work. First, they have perpetuated the initial misconception of Oakeshott by casting his thought primarily in terms of the familiar schools of 20th century political thought, both practical schools such as conservative, liberal, or postmodernist, and philosophical schools such as Idealist, neo-Kantian, skeptical, or non-foundational.² Second, several recent studies of Oakeshott's work have created new

- [1] Recent works on Oakeshott include Roy Tseng, *The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of the Enlightenment* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003); Efraim Podoksik, *In Defense of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003); Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park, PA: Penn St. Univ. Press, 2001); Steven Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Luke O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003); and Wendell Coats, *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries* (Susquehanna, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2000).
- [2] For interpretations of Oakeshott as a political conservative, see David Spitz, "A Rationalist *Malgré Lui*: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott," *Political Theory*, 4 (1976) 335-52. ; Perry Anderson, "The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century," *London Review of Books*, 14 (Sept. 24, 1992) 7-11; and Hanna Pitkin, "The Roots of Conservatism:

misreadings by identifying radical breaks or major transformations in the development of Oakeshott's ideas about the relationship between philosophy, practice, history, and political activity.³

However, both sets of misreadings serve to obscure the distinctiveness and originality of Oakeshott's philosophical insights into the nature of politics in the modern world. The first set of writers do so by failing to take seriously, on the one side, Oakeshott's insistence on the unbridgeable gulf between theorizing practices and engaging in those practices, and, on

Michael Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics," *Dissent*, 20 (1973) 496-525. For interpretations of Oakeshott as a defender of liberalism, see Wendell Coats, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1985) 773-87; and Paul Franco, "Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist," *Political Theory*, 18 (1990) 411-36. For Oakeshott the postmodernist, see Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991) 197-202; and Fred Dallmayr, *Polis and Praxis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984) 41-44, 60-66, 209-18. For Oakeshott the Idealist, see Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990) 13-31, 161-66. For Oakeshott as a neo-Kantian, see O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*, 84. For Oakeshott as a philosophical skeptic, see Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, 33-51. For Oakeshott the anti-foundationalist, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1979, 389-94. Although I am in agreement with Franco's general characterization of Oakeshott as a philosophical Idealist, I am concerned to investigate the unique character of Oakeshott's philosophical Idealism rather than to assimilate his work to the tradition of philosophical Idealism.

- [3] The two primary examples are Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, 33-51; and O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*, 219-22. Both maintain that Oakeshott abandons his early philosophical Idealism, and replaces it with an ill-defined skepticism about philosophical understanding. Tseng, although he calls Oakeshott a skeptical Idealist, insists that "no fundamental change in spirit has ever occurred in Oakeshott's idea of philosophy in terms of a skeptical character." Tseng's primary distinction is between what he understands to be Hegelian absolute idealism and Oakeshott's particular kind of idealism. He describes this as skeptical although all that he suggests is that Oakeshott is more provisional in his conclusions than Hegel. However, the term 'skepticism', because it is closely related to a realist epistemology, is inappropriate to Oakeshott's understanding of philosophy, which commits him to conceiving the world as he is obliged to believe it is. See Tseng, *The Skeptical Idealist*, 5, 7.

the other side, his unique kind of philosophical Idealism. In doing so, they have neglected the singularity of Oakeshott's thought in order to subsume his work under their own various general conceptions of politics and philosophy. The second group of writers compounds and reinforces the errors of the first group because, in identifying a supposed break instead of continuous refinements between Oakeshott's early, unique Idealism in *Experience and Its Modes* and his supposed skepticism about philosophical Idealism in *Rationalism in Politics* and *On Human Conduct*, its members cut these explorations of the character of political activity loose from their philosophical moorings.⁴ In doing so, they reduce Oakeshott's philosophical claims to mere preferences, leaving his work open to the claim that he is, in fact, merely a conservative, liberal, or postmodern political thinker.

In this book, I offer a reading of Michael Oakeshott's philosophy of political activity which stresses the underlying continuity of his major writings on the subject and which takes seriously his rigorous pursuit of the implications of understanding the world in terms of modality.⁵ The interpretation

-
- [4] Podoksik, while admitting that Oakeshott's work "reveals a remarkable continuity", claims that there is a significant change in Oakeshott's understanding of human conduct from an early Hegelian emphasis on the abstract character of practice to a later, more skeptical, neo-Kantian emphasis on conditionality. Podoksik bases his interpretation on the shift in Oakeshott's descriptive vocabulary from the use of the term 'mode of experience' to the term 'platform of understanding.' However, Oakeshott's terminological changes do not necessarily entail alterations to his basic conception of theoretical explanation or of his conception of the practical world. In fact, Oakeshott refers to the distinctive ways of experiencing the world in terms of *modal* distinctions throughout his career. See, for example, Michael Oakeshott, "Present, Future and Past," *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 1999) 1-29. Podoksik, *In Defense of Modernity*, 4, 149-51.
- [5] Podoksik understands the importance of modality in Oakeshott's work within the context of what he takes to be Oakeshott's defense of "modernity understood as inescapable fragmentation and irreducible plurality." For Podoksik, the illocutionary intention of Oakeshott's *oeuvre* is the defense of this vision of modernity against not only the scientific or practical reductionism of those like Ayer or Heidegger, but also against the attempted theoretical synthesis of those like Collingwood. However,

which emerges in this work suggests strongly that Oakeshott's philosophy of political activity cannot be reduced to a branch of conservatism, liberalism, or postmodernism.⁶ Nor can Oakeshott's work be reduced to a theory or set of doctrines which fit neatly into any conventional school, like that of Idealism or Skepticism. Rather, Oakeshott's philosophy of political activity is a challenge, a provocation, to all of the currently dominant schools of political theory and political practice.⁷ It questions their presuppositions and exposes as ambiguous, arbitrary, or confused all of the supposed certainties which they take for granted. It does all this by offering profound insights into the nature of political activity in the modern world. I will also have occasion to criticize Oakeshott for inconsistencies, especially in his essays on the historical emergence of modern political activity. However, my primary concern is to bring to light once more the main outlines of Oakeshott's consistently held and rigorously explored philosophy of human experience in general and modern politics in particular. I will do so by examining Oakeshott's general understanding of philosophical experience in chapter one, his conception of human conduct in chapter two, his critical philosophy of history in chapter three, his account of the emer-

although Podoksik's account is convincing on this point, its relevance to an explanation of the character and significance of the concept of modality within the thought of Michael Oakeshott is questionable. While a necessary aspect of a practical understanding of actions, an accurate perception of illocutionary intentions cannot, in fact, explain the historical particularity or analyze the theoretical adequacy of a particular work or set of works. Podoksik, *In Defense of Modernity*, 7.

- [6] For a sympathetic attempt to place Oakeshott's work within the context of the contemporary debate between liberals and communitarians, see Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, 230-36.
- [7] This provocative aspect of Oakeshott's explains, in part, the vituperative reaction that it has received from the academic community. See, for example, the essays by Pitkin, Wolin, and Spitz in the symposium on Oakeshott in *Political Theory* number 4. Hanna Pitkin, "Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory," in *Political Theory*, 4 (1976) 301-20; Sheldon Wolin, "The Politics of Self-Disclosure," *Political Theory*, 4 (1976) 321-34; and David Spitz, "A Rationalist *Malgré Lui*: The Perplexities of Being Michael Oakeshott," in *Political Theory*, 4 (1976) 335-52.

gence of modern politics in chapter four, and his theory of political activity in chapter five.

In the first chapter, I analyze Oakeshott's conception of philosophical experience and its relation to what he calls the separate modes of experience. His understanding of philosophical experience as reflection on a unified, concrete, presuppositionless experience provides the criterion by which other forms, or modes, of experience can be judged. For Oakeshott, these modes are arrests in experience, conditional platforms which are constituted by their postulates. The philosopher's task includes not only the delineation of the nature of philosophy, but the investigation of these various modes of experience in terms of their postulates. Because the postulates which constitute each world are different, the modes are completely independent from each other. Philosophical reflection examines the postulates of the modes and, in so doing, moves beyond the modes. By thus explaining or defining the character of each of the modes, philosophy does not participate in them. In this crucial sense, philosophy is irrelevant to historical, scientific or practical activity. Oakeshott's insistence on the independence of the modes from each other and from philosophical reflection provides the grounds for his exclusion of scientific and historical explanation from the practical world, and enables him to offer a substantial critique of normative political philosophy.

Chapter two focuses on Oakeshott's investigation of the character of practice and the inherently traditional nature of human conduct. For Oakeshott, political activity is not an isolated subject to be analyzed in the abstract, but an intelligent activity embedded in the world of practice, and Oakeshott's concern with this world and the character of traditional activity is as persistent as his concern with the character of political activity. Thus, any adequate judgment of Oakeshott's contribution to the understanding of political activity depends upon an examination of his understanding of the world of practical activity, or, as he phrases it in his most considered work on the subject, the world of human conduct. His understanding of the

character of human conduct is a reflection of the understanding of the character of philosophy and modality discussed in chapter one. He conceives conduct as specific performances emerging from and embedded in practices, or traditions, which condition and are conditioned by those performances. These practices are either instrumental or prudential practices concerned with successful performance or they are non-instrumental practices like morality and language, which condition all performances. Conduct itself is an effort to alter one's present situation in terms of a preferred situation. However, this new situation inevitably presents problems which call for action, and the necessarily interminable, mutable and incomplete character of conduct is evidence, Oakeshott argues, of its theoretical inadequacy.

Chapter three consists of a consideration of Oakeshott's critical philosophy of history. Oakeshott claims that there are three categorially distinct ways to understand political activity as a particular type of human conduct. There is the understanding of the practitioner, the philosopher, and the historian. Practical understanding cannot be reduced to a set of rules, but can be learned only within a particular practice. No philosophically satisfactory prescriptive account of any particular practice can be given because practices are not amenable to such a formulation. There are also two explanatory languages appropriate to human conduct, which are, thus, also appropriate to political activity. As seen in chapter two, human conduct can be understood theoretically, in terms of its postulates or presuppositions. This understanding entails an examination of both the general conditionality and the specific conditions of the world of conduct. However, such a theory of conduct cannot explain specific performances. Oakeshott claims that the explanatory language appropriate for understanding these performances is the language of historical understanding. Thus, an adequate examination of Oakeshott's theory of politics necessarily includes an examination of his philosophy of history. For Oakeshott, historical understanding involves a categorially distinct conception of a completed

past of human actions, which is independent from practical, scientific, or aesthetic claims. These actions are the specific performances of intelligent agents responding to their self-understanding of particular situations in terms of achieving wished-for outcomes. However, these actions are understood by the historian, not as invitations to respond with similar performances, but as completed events. Historical understanding transforms the practical considerations, beliefs, and performances of agents into a specific account of an historical event. For Oakeshott, history, like science, art, and conduct, is an autonomous mode of experience, and, thus, necessarily independent of the claims of the other modes. It is Oakeshott's assertion that the world of historical understanding is completely autonomous which most clearly distinguishes his philosophy of history from that of his contemporaries.

Chapter four examines Oakeshott's works on the history of modern morality and the history of the modern state, and analyzes his conclusions in terms of his conception of the presuppositions of historical understanding. I am not concerned with the validity of Oakeshott's historical judgments, but with the general character of his inquiry. Oakeshott claims that only an historical account provides an explanation of specific performances of specifiable agents and of events, and, thus, an examination of his understanding of politics entails the consideration of his attempt to explain the emergence of modern political life. More precisely, Oakeshott attempts to provide an historical explanation of the emergence of the modern state and the coeval emergence of two distinct conceptions of the modern state which are directly connected with the appearance of two distinct moralities. For Oakeshott, the modern state and modern moralities are not the result of a complete break with the past, but are, instead, the result of a continuous yet distinct renovation during which the medieval realm and medieval morality gradually disappeared. The two modern moralities, which Oakeshott calls the morality of individualism and the morality of collectivism, are related to dif-

ferent conceptions of the character of the state and to different conceptions of the activities appropriate to the state. For the individualist, the state is considered a *societas* or nomocracy, which is a non-purposive association of individuals in terms of rules which condition the choices that they make, and the activity of the state consists primarily in the preservation and sustenance of these rules. Conversely, for the collectivist, the state is understood as an *universitas* or teleocracy, which is a joint enterprise of co-workers associated in terms of a single purpose, and the activity of the state is the complete management of the association in pursuit of that purpose. Oakeshott considers this great disjunction to be the most significant aspect of modern political life.

It is within the context of the disjunction between nomocracy and teleocracy that the nature of Oakeshott's interest in Hobbes becomes clearer. For Oakeshott, Hobbes is the first philosopher to provide a satisfactory account of the morality of individualism and of the state as a non-purposive civil association under the rule of law. Thus, Oakeshott's affinity for Hobbes has less to do with the purported rejection of philosophical Idealism by Oakeshott suggested by Gerencser than with Oakeshott's identification of his own philosophy of politics with a certain modern philosophical tradition of which Hobbes's work is not only a prominent example, but is historically primary.⁸ I conclude chapter four with an examination of the character of Oakeshott's historical work, and suggest that his self-described historical essays are in fact neither exclusively nor primarily historical, but consist of the construction of ideal types or characters which Oakeshott, in his essays on the philosophy of history, identifies with a practical, not an historical, conception of the past.

In chapter five, I explore the distinctiveness of Oakeshott's philosophy of politics. Oakeshott's political philosophy is distinguished from other contemporary political theories in several significant ways. First, his insistence on the absolute

[8] Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, 77-123.

independence of modally distinct worlds of experience results in a non-prescriptive philosophy of politics. The contemporary debates among liberals, communitarians, natural law theorists and postmodernists about political life are informed by the assumption that philosophical understanding can and should guide political activity. Oakeshott rejects this conception of philosophy, insisting instead that philosophical understanding offers no guidance to practical life. Second, for Oakeshott, political activity is inherently practical, and although it is a specific type of practice, attending to the institutional arrangements of a legal community, political activity still partakes of the general character of practice and is viewed in this larger context. Oakeshott's concern with traditions of activity is a theoretical one, not a normative one. Unlike most contemporary political theorists, he insists that politics is an activity in which meaning and purposes arise from within a particular political practice and cannot be derived from an abstract ideology. Third, Oakeshott's systematic theoretical account of the modern state posits a modal distinction within the world of human conduct between two distinct types of human association. According to Oakeshott, human beings are associated in terms of purposes and in terms of non-instrumental rules. These two types of association are exclusive of one another, but can accommodate the existence of each other. Oakeshott conceives the state as an authoritative association in terms of non-instrumental rules. His claim that this understanding of the state as a civil association in terms of non-purposive laws is the only understanding which preserves the moral autonomy of the individual involves an explicit rejection of the conception of the state as a purposive association, an idea common to most modern political thought.

I conclude by restating that the characteristic distinctiveness of Oakeshott's philosophy rests in his absolute separation of the modes of experience. This emphasis on the modal autonomy of different conceptions of the world informs his conception of conduct as pre-eminently traditional activity, and it distinguishes his conception of historical understanding as

completely autonomous. An understanding of the significance of Oakeshott's insistence on the complete autonomy of the modes of experience also helps clarify the uniqueness of his political thought which rests both in the non-prescriptive character of his thought and in his elaboration of a limited notion of political activity derived, not from transcendental claims, but from the character of a tradition of human activity.