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Timothy Fuller

## *Foreword*

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This volume presents essays on the work of Michael Oakeshott from the first two international conferences of the Michael Oakeshott Association, in London 2001 and in Colorado Springs 2003. The authors herein include both individuals who knew Oakeshott and younger scholars who did not have the chance to meet him but who have discovered his work. This is gratifying since this volume, in the company of a growing number of monographic studies of his work, anthologies of his unpublished writings, and doctoral dissertations, shows that international interest in Oakeshott's work is expanding significantly. Those of us involved in the Michael Oakeshott Association, and with long interest in his work, naturally see this as a major contribution to the field of political philosophy and to thinking carefully about politics, as well as a deserved tribute to the man.

These essays not only recognize Oakeshott's contributions to numerous fields of inquiry, but they also compare his work with other major thinkers. There was, in the past, a tendency for students of his work to consider Oakeshott in isolation, but no longer. As a result, not only do we now enjoy sympathetic and affectionate commentary, but also comparative and critical assessments and assertive questioning. This is all to the good. We remember that Oakeshott himself, while presenting his views directly and uncompromisingly, also was committed to conversation as an end in itself, as the most distinctive feature of being human. He was known to say that the philosopher may have a heavenly home but is in no hurry to get there. He did not expect closure on fundamental questions in the temporal sphere of human life even though he did think that, to be a good conversationalist, one needed to be clear on one's assumptions, taking care to know well what is likely to be said against them in dialogue. The idea that we could have a debate, and at the end of the day, discover a victor and a vanquished, was entirely foreign to

him. Thus his self-characterization as a 'skeptic' and his philosophical approach to politics. He understood that in politics there are necessarily victors and vanquished, however fleeting and alterable these categories are. To study politics philosophically is thus to consider politics from a vantage point different from that of the politicians themselves, to focus on the ironies of the claims of politics in a way that would disable the politician.

In calling himself a 'skeptic,' Oakeshott meant, following St. Augustine, Montaigne, and Hume, skepticism about human pretensions to succeed in 'the pursuit of perfection as the crow flies,' to build towers into a putative heavenly kingdom, or to control and manage the contingencies of human existence. Such aspirations he admired in individuals seeking their fortunes as they defined them for themselves, but he deplored such aspirations in governments. He did so because he saw the state as a basically involuntary, but necessary, arrangement presiding over diverse peoples and interests. To invest in a single ideal in this involuntary circumstance imposes on some for the sake of others, suppressing the natural diversity that is the ground of human freedom. What is preferable, he thought, is a 'civil association' in which diverse people with diverse interests acknowledge and subscribe to a rule of law to insure the basic order they must have, with a view to affording the greatest freedom to live according to their own self-understandings. Oakeshott thought that this was the principal achievement of modern Europe, emergent in the fifteenth century, gaining grand theoretical expression in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and persisting against fierce attacks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One might describe this as the transformation of relations of command and obedience into relations of authority and acknowledgment, and it was possible because the ideal of the self-regulating individual, competent to pursue individual interests within mutually acknowledged procedural arrangements, not primarily dependent on coercive enforcement, was increasingly instantiated in practice in modern European history.

Nevertheless, as the technical and military power of modern governments began significantly to increase, they brought with them the temptation to invest modern governments with grand purposes for the redesign or reconstruction of social orders. This practical turn of events was encouraged theoretically by the influential growth of 'rationalism' in modern Europe under the influence of the thought of Francis Bacon, Descartes, Jeremy Bentham and the modern social

sciences. Rationalism and its appearance in politics as ideology, as Oakeshott described it, advocates techniques or methods of reasoning, based on a mistaken conception of reason, by means of which we are to overcome the contingent character of historical existence. In extreme form, it holds that the hitherto endless activity of preserving and changing in politics can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and that this is to be done through a coalition of the intellectually enlightened with governments who are confident that they can use their power to steer people to the 'right' ends or end.

Thus modern politics is conducted in a charged field polarized between the skeptical attitude towards governmental power and the view that such power is the means to infinite improvement. The contest between the 'skeptic' and the 'rationalist' has so far proven historically interminable although Oakeshott thought that, in recent times, rationalism had clearly dominated. But because of the power in practice of the ideas of civil association, of rule of law, of authority grounded in acknowledgment, and because he thought these to be consistent with the human spirit, he believed that this remarkable modern achievement could persist. Modern politics is thus constituted in the tension between these competing understandings. They play off each other and the character of each is shaped by the presence of the other. Regardless of his personal preferences, Oakeshott thought that this is the reality of our situation.

For Oakeshott, the task of government is to keep the ship afloat, not to steer it to final port, so that individuals and voluntary associations could seek their fortunes, defining for themselves their personal destinies, constrained by a procedural structure of laws, and in a condition of dispersed power wherein the state, while not especially strong, and with few resources to distribute, would be strong enough to resist informal conglomerations of power that would turn civil association into a managerial enterprise, a modern Tower of Babel. In this one finds Oakeshott's 'conservative disposition.'

But a disposition is one thing, the vocation to philosophy another. The latter is higher than the former. Philosophy is the seeking, in detachment, to understand and to describe what is going on in the world. Conservatism is a particular practical response to the opportunities and perils of our modern life. Oakeshott thus provided a picture of the historical and philosophical context within which to identify more clearly what prompts the conservative disposition. He did not think philosophy could practically resolve the issues, but philosophy could clarify them in ways their advocates would likely

not consider. In expressing a preference for one pole, however, he associated himself with an ancient tradition in the West, which denies to politics the highest honor. He called politics a 'necessary evil,' meaning thereby to say both that we cannot do without politics and that from its necessity does not follow its candidacy to be the source of all meaning.

In the essays that follow, these themes, and many others, are discussed intelligently and provocatively, bringing out both the subtleties and ambiguities that may be found in Oakeshott's thought. In addition, substantial effort is made to place Oakeshott in relation to Plato (Debra Candreva and Eric Kos), Aristotle (Corey Abel), Spinoza and Hobbes (Douglas Den Uyl), Hegel (Paul Franco), Spinoza and Hegel (Lee Auspitz), John Stuart Mill and representative democracy (George Feaver), all of whom were thinkers of great importance to him. His understanding of the rule of law (Richard Friedman) and of the prospects and limits of the social sciences (Terry Nardin) are discussed. Assessments of his arguments in terms of issues in contemporary philosophy are considered (Keith Sutherland, Leslie Marsh). Oakeshott's relevance to the modern African context is a remarkable addition to the discussion (Gerhard Wolmarans). Kenneth Minogue assesses current forms of rationalism. Martyn Thompson discusses the centrality of poetry in Oakeshott's thinking about modern civilization, while John Coats explores the poetic dimension of his philosophy of experience. Robert Grant critically assesses the coherence of Oakeshott's account of aesthetic experience. The widening intellectual landscape offered here gives promise to flourish even more in the future.

Special thanks must go to Corey Abel whose editorial assistance made the timely completion of this volume possible. We are also grateful for essential financial support from Colorado College, which helped to make both the 2003 conference and this volume possible. Finally, we want to express thanks to Leslie Marsh, whose indefatigable efforts to launch the MOA were indispensable to its existing at all.

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