

# Prologue

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## I

This study is an interpretation of Michael Oakeshott's thought as a whole. As every interpretation involves a point of view, it is necessary to begin by outlining the ideas which guide it.

Generally speaking, there are two conflicting views of the character of Oakeshott's philosophy. On the one hand, he is often perceived as mainly a political theorist concerned with specific issues of his time. Although this approach reveals different views about how Oakeshott's ideas should be classified, (for example, whether they should be seen as 'conservative' or 'liberal'), these have in common an attempt to find some political doctrine in his writings.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, an opposite view asks us to take seriously Oakeshott's own claims about the irrelevance of philosophy to practical affairs and to see him not as an advocate of some political view but as a detached philosopher interested in exploring the presuppositions of every activity.<sup>2</sup>

Both approaches have richly contributed to our understanding of Oakeshott's ideas. Yet it seems that neither of them is entirely satisfactory, since both miss something important about his thought. It is true that Oakeshott cannot be understood as a political theorist in the narrow sense.<sup>3</sup> Whenever he discusses politics, he does so in the

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[1] Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). See also Benjamin R. Barber, 'Conserving Politics: Michael Oakeshott and Political Theory,' *Government and Opposition* 11, 1979, pp. 446-463; Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism: Politics and Doctrine* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

[2] Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). See also Ian Holliday, 'On Michael Oakeshott,' *Government and Opposition* 27(2), 1992, pp. 131-147; Glenn Worthington, 'Oakeshott's Claims of Politics,' *Political Studies* 45, 1997, pp. 727-738.

[3] See ch. 3, introduction.

most general terms, connecting his analysis with a wider social and philosophical outlook. There is nothing politically partisan about his philosophy, and so it cannot be reduced to an advocacy of this or that political platform.

To say this, however, does not mean claiming that Oakeshott's philosophy should be seen as completely detached from the concerns of its time and as possessing no evaluative message. On the contrary, it is possible to understand his philosophy as one that is saying something significant about the condition of modern civilisation and giving us advice. Oakeshott's ideas reflect a certain vision of the character of the modern age. This vision drives his entire thought, lying behind its specific aspects, connecting them and turning them into a coherent statement. To reveal the essence of this vision is the purpose of the current work.

It is true that Oakeshott denied any connection between philosophy and value judgements. Yet this study is dealing not merely with the explicit arguments of Oakeshott's thought but also with the broader context of the vision which underlies these arguments. Certainly, any philosophy deserves to be taken at its face value. Although a philosophical writing is partly an outcome of the contingent historical circumstances in which it was composed, in so far as it is really philosophical it possesses a significance far beyond the particularities of place and time. Whatever the vision contributing to our thought may be, this vision cannot be the criterion of the validity of a philosophical doctrine. Therefore, it is possible and desirable to discuss Oakeshott's philosophy from a purely philosophical standpoint in which everything that he said is looked at from the standpoint of the internal logic of his arguments and of the overall consistency of his ideas.

Nevertheless, the analysis of Oakeshott's thought from the standpoint of what he intended to say to our age — in other words, from the standpoint of a contextualised analysis of his ideas — is not fruitless. Firstly, we still live in the same epoch, and his view of the predicament of man in modern society therefore remains as relevant for us as it was for him.

Secondly, to understand what Oakeshott wanted to say is also to contribute to our understanding of what he did say, and to find the meaning of many aspects of his thought which would otherwise remain obscure. Even though such a study will not aim at demonstrating the validity of his views, it is capable of suggesting a plausible interpretation of their meaning.

## II

The vision underlying Oakeshott's philosophy bestows on it a certain character which often remains unnoticed at first reading. The two most important features revealed in it are that his philosophy is self-consciously coherent and that it contains quintessential expressions of the central intellectual concerns of his time.

Such an understanding of Oakeshott's thought challenges a common perception of it as being unsystematic and detached from its age. This perception is partly an outcome of the hostility that his writings faced at the time of their publication, and of the demonstrative unwillingness of some commentators to read Oakeshott seriously and carefully.<sup>4</sup> Yet even those sympathetic to his thought often take at face value his ironical attitude to his own philosophy, thus reinforcing the accusations of his critics. This precludes a more profound appreciation of his philosophy, preventing us from finding answers to its many puzzling elements. Only when Oakeshott's ideas are understood as possessing a coherent and relevant message, can the meaning and significance of his philosophy become clear.

It is true that Oakeshott often denied that his philosophy offered a system, and that he was also reluctant to acknowledge his debt to his contemporaries. Indeed, the idiosyncratic style of many of his writings only strengthened a perception of him as being isolated from his contemporary intellectual context. Yet his style is esoteric precisely because, in some sense, it represents a radical synthesis of ideas already made familiar to us in their more moderate forms by his contemporaries. It is therefore essential to trace parallels and connections between Oakeshott and other thinkers of his time for a proper understanding of his thought. Sometimes, influences on his thought are clear and direct. Other writings, however, absorb multiple influences from the general cultural climate, transforming those influences in a more radical manner. They are more distant from the immediate context and are not easily reducible to the ideas of particular authors and works. Here, grasping the cogency of Oakeshott's argument and its connection with a more general tradition makes better sense than discerning specific influences.

As for the question of coherence, it is true that Oakeshott was opposed to attempts to construct a rigid logical structure or build a holistic concept of the universe. However, he distinguished system

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[4] See, for example, Bernard Crick, 'The World of Michael Oakeshott: Or the Lonely Nihilist,' *Encounter* 20(6), 1963, pp. 65-74; Sheldon S. Wolin, 'The Politics of Self-Disclosure,' *Political Theory* 4(3), 1976, pp. 321-334.

from the capacity for systematic thinking and praised Locke for '[having] thought systematically and ... escaped making a system'.<sup>5</sup> Systematic thinking appears to be even more important when an overall system is regarded to be neither possible anymore nor desirable. Oakeshott's philosophy is not the rejection of systematic reasoning. It is about how to think systematically in a sceptical age. Although such thinking will not claim to be building a rigid and perfectly consistent system, it will be able to avoid confusion, to make our minds clear and, moreover, to compose a coherent message. Or, as Oakeshott himself said in the introduction to his first book, 'all I have desired is to achieve a general point of view, neither complete nor final, but *systematic* as far as it goes and presented as a reasoned whole.'<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, this study claims not only that Oakeshott is systematic when he deals with specific issues, but also that all his main writings together comprise a coherent body of thought. Oakeshott hints at this possibility when he argues that the principle of coherence is the criterion by which philosophy must be judged.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, a brief glance at his various writings reveals a remarkable continuity which persists, notwithstanding the many modifications of his thought. This suggests that there is some coherence in his philosophy waiting to be explored.

Thus, this interpretation is based on a view that Oakeshott's philosophy contains a coherent vision of modern civilisation. Such an interpretation is not a piece of intellectual biography because it does not provide a literal account of everything that Oakeshott ever wrote. Instead, it tries to focus on the essential elements of his thought. However, it is not properly described as a piece of philosophy because it is concerned with the intellectual context of his ideas and with a possible relationship between this context and his writings, rather than with discussing the strengths and weaknesses of his assertions.

With these qualifications in mind, Oakeshott's texts will be approached with caution, with the element of interpretation mainly confined to the arrangement of material and the analysis of connections and parallels between various texts or between texts and their context. I have drawn on the whole range of Oakeshott's published and unpublished writings. These include his major philosophical publications, his occasional articles and reviews, his typescripts, manuscripts, notebooks, lecture notes and some letters. A different

[5] JL, p. 72.

[6] EM, p. 8. Italics mine — E.P.

[7] 'Introduction to *Leviathan*,' HCA, p. 12.

significance, however, has been assigned to different texts, with the main emphasis placed on Oakeshott's major published writings. The reason is that even a brief comparison between his published and unpublished works reveals that the former are superior to the latter in the quality of their style and argument. This suggests that Oakeshott published those writings which best reflected the achievements of his philosophy. I have assumed, that is, that if there is any coherent vision in his thought, it must be found in his primary published works. Although other sources are referred to, these are secondary to the main thesis, providing nuances and hinting at possible ways to resolve ambiguities.

### III

The contribution of this book to Oakeshott studies lies, therefore, in the attempt to see his philosophy as the expression of a certain vision of modern civilisation, elaborated more or less coherently in his major writings, and offering a particular response to many of the important intellectual issues of his time. To conclude this introduction, it will be useful to present briefly the central thesis advanced about Oakeshott's philosophy, outlining the formal structure of the book.

One of the foremost problems of Oakeshott scholarship has been an artificial and confused separation of his social, or 'political', philosophy from the rest of his thought. The existence of the connection between Oakeshott's general and social philosophy is often recognised,<sup>8</sup> but the character of this connection remains unclear. Oakeshott's idea of the social and political is sometimes regarded as a reflection of a particular concept or an approach belonging to the realm of pure philosophy, be it the notion of the 'concrete universal',<sup>9</sup> or of 'practice',<sup>10</sup> or of some form of 'scepticism' underlying his writings.<sup>11</sup> Politics is also occasionally claimed to play the role of another form of experience alongside history or poetry.<sup>12</sup>

The problem here is that none of these interpretations has provided a clear and coherent picture of the place of the social and polit-

[8] W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London: Longman's Green, 1966).

[9] Paul Franco, 'Oakeshott's Critique of Rationalism Revisited,' *Political Science Reviewer* 21, 1992, pp. 15-43.

[10] John Casey, 'Philosopher of Practice,' in J. Norman (ed.), *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott* (London: Duckworth, 1993), p. 60.

[11] Steven Gerencser, *The Sceptic's Oakeshott* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[12] Nevil Johnson, 'Die Politische Philosophie Michael Oakeshotts,' *Zeitschrift für Politik* 32(4), 1985, p. 348.

ical within Oakeshott's thought as a whole. This is not surprising, as Oakeshott does not say much about subjects such as metaphysics or logic and it is thus not clear what his 'general philosophy' is. Besides, he does not consider politics as a distinct mode of experience, and he even denies that politics is a coherent discipline of inquiry.<sup>13</sup> His exposition of modes such as history and science therefore cannot help us to understand his view of politics.

The interpretation that this study offers is different in the sense that it does not consider Oakeshott's social and political ideas to be just one subject among the many different concerns of his philosophy. Rather, his thought is seen here as exploring our world from two standpoints. One deals with the question of the character of our reflective imagining of the world. The other is concerned with the pragmatic perception of our social life.

Oakeshott's later works suggest the possibility of such a distinction. He seems more especially to distinguish between two different levels, namely 'understanding' and 'doing'.<sup>14</sup> The level of understanding can be understood as containing various ways of explaining and imagining the world around us. It includes, among other things, science, history and art. Oakeshott's first philosophical book, *Experience and Its Modes* can be seen as the most articulate exploration of this level, although many of his other writings also deal with it. This aspect of his thought will be called here 'philosophy of experience'.

By contrast, the level of 'doing' can be seen as concerned with the interaction of human beings in the world in order to change it. 'Doing' involves a certain kind of understanding; however, this understanding is not an end in itself, but is instrumental to acting. The most coherent presentation of this aspect of Oakeshott's thought, called here 'philosophy of society', is found in *On Human Conduct*.

Philosophy of experience, then, deals with the level of 'understanding' in Oakeshott's thought, whereas philosophy of society deals with the level of 'doing'. This study will show that, when seen in this light, each of the two aspects is found to possess a significant measure of coherence, and this fact reveals a great deal of systematic reasoning.

These two aspects, moreover, though reflecting different standpoints, are not completely isolated from each other: there is a certain relation between them. Although they are not directly connected, their structures are analogous to each other, both being driven by the

[13] 'The Study of "Politics" in a University,' RIP, p. 212.

[14] HC, p. 33. Cf. Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 55.

same concern. In order to understand the vision inspiring Oakeshott's philosophy, it is therefore necessary not only to know the features of both its aspects but also to understand the nature of their relation.

In this sense, what this study shows is that Oakeshott's philosophy conforms to the criterion of coherence which he himself attributed to Hobbes, when he claimed that 'the coherence of [Hobbes'] philosophy, the system of it, lies not in an architectonic structure, but in a single "passionate thought" that pervades its parts.'<sup>15</sup>

More precisely, what is claimed is that Oakeshott's central concern is the idea of modernity understood as inescapable fragmentation and irreducible plurality. His main preoccupation is to understand the 'modern' in two respects. One deals with the question of what it is to be modern in our imagining of the world. The other explores what it is to be modern in the pragmatic view of our social life. The answer to both questions is that to be modern means to recognise radical plurality. And the sentiment underlying this answer is an attempt to reconcile ourselves with modernity by learning to appreciate and enjoy this plurality.

The structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 introduces Oakeshott's vision by highlighting the idea of modernity. Chapter 2 analyses his philosophy of experience. It presents the general framework of his idea of radical plurality and exemplifies his approach by discussing his philosophies of science, history and aesthetics in their intellectual context. The subject of chapter 3 is Oakeshott's philosophy of society. It analyses his ideas of practice, ethical life and civil conduct, and argues that his mature achievement is the transformation of the ideas of European liberalism into a coherent philosophy, based on the notion of radical plurality. It also shows how Oakeshott's philosophy of society is analogous to his philosophy of experience. Finally, chapter 4 is an attempt to demonstrate how Oakeshott's idea of education corresponds to his understanding of modernity and how it influenced the philosophy of education of his day. In other words, this chapter deals with the question of what kind of education modern society should encourage, given the kind of world in which we live and in which we want to continue to live.

The final chapter is particularly important for understanding the significance of Oakeshott's vision. It presents his writings on education, which was of great importance to him, in a new light. Before we can approach his view of education, however, it is necessary to understand the main body of his ideas, since his ideas on education

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[15] 'Introduction to *Leviathan*,' HCA, p. 17.

depended on them. Oakeshott's passionate defence of liberal education was very timely, and it remains so today, especially when what can be called a post-modernist spirit challenges its main foundations. Oakeshott can be seen as one of the most profound and eloquent opponents of this spirit. Long before the term post-modernism itself came into use, he was fully aware of the dangers which the relativism associated with it poses. Confronted by that threat, his thought presents a sincere, elegant and courageous defence of the values of modern liberal Western civilisation.