Introduction

I

Michael Oakeshott is widely recognized as one of the most significant political philosophers of the twentieth century. His contribution to twentieth century Hobbes scholarship is also acknowledged by Hobbes specialists to be of great importance. While most studies of Oakeshott have noted the significance of his reading of Hobbes for understanding his own political theory, few have given it the prominence that it deserves.[1] This study offers a reading of the major developments in Oakeshott's theory in the light of his own changing reading of Hobbes. As Stephen Gerencser[2] has recently shown, despite

[1] Recent studies that have paid close attention to the Hobbes connection include Stephen Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), Ted H. Miller, 'Oakeshott's Hobbes and the Fear of Political Rationalism' *Political Theory* 29, December 2001, 806–83, Bruce Frohnen, 'Oakeshott's Hobbesian myth: pride, character and the limits of reason', *Western Political Quarterly*, December 1990, 43, 789–809. See also my 'The Life of Hobbes in the Writings of Michael Oakeshott', *History of Political Thought*, vol.XVIII. no.3. Autumn 1997, 531–557, and 'Leviathan as Myth: Michael Oakeshott and Carl Schmitt on Hobbes and the Critique of Rationalism', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 1, October 2002, 349–369.

[2] *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*. This present study has much in common with Gerencser's work, which also pays close attention to the Hobbes material. Gerencser's claim is that in a variety of ways Oakeshott's thought becomes increasingly sceptical as it develops and this is partly attributed to Oakeshott's engagement with Hobbes's philosophy. Though Gerencser probably overstates Oakeshott's 'break' with Idealism I am broadly sympathetic with his reading of the material and chapters 1 and 3 of this present book covers some similar territory to chapters 4 and 5 of Gerencser's work. However, since Gerencser is primarily concerned with tracing Oakeshott's emerging scepticism a number of important issues, it seems to me, are not addressed in his work. These include both methodological and moral issues. By methodological I refer to the way that Oakeshott contextualises Hobbes's thought and its implications for understanding Oakeshott himself and the history of political thought more generally. By moral I'm thinking of what Oakeshott refers to as 'the morality of

Oakeshott's early admiration for, and emulation of, writers such as Hegel, Bradley and Bosanquet, Thomas Hobbes is in fact the crucial figure behind the development of his political theory. Oakeshott's interest in political philosophy seems to have coincided in the mid 1930s with an interest in Hobbes and he wrote substantially more on Hobbes than any other philosopher or political thinker. In all, Oakeshott wrote six essays on Hobbes or Hobbes interpretation.[3] Because they were written at different stages in his career it is possible to mark the changes in his reading and indicate the way they reflect certain changes in his own theory.

Oakeshott was not only one of the most original political thinkers of the twentieth century as well as one of its most astute, if selective, readers of Hobbes, he was also deeply reflective about the nature of interpretation itself. Like his contemporary Gadamer, Oakeshott considered the problem of hermeneutics to be more than an academic concern over the meaning of texts, but to be central to understanding what it means to be human. "Thinking", he claimed, "is not a professional matter; if it were it would be something much less important than I take it to be" (EM 7). The human world, for Oakeshott, is a world of languages or modes of understanding which provide for us the terms of our experience. In order to clarify his philosophy of agency, morality, authority, history and religion, Oakeshott did not simply isolate each of these questions from the rest of human experience but proceeded by examining in a fundamental way the very nature of human understanding. Instead of asking questions of the type, 'what is history?', 'what is science?', 'what is practice?', as if history, science, and practice were all things separate from human participants, Oakeshott asks what it means to be an historian, a scientist, a practitioner.[4] True to the calling of the philosopher Oakeshott returned again and again to these fundamental

---

individuality' which is a crucial aspect of his reading of Hobbes. It also underlies Oakeshott's critique of rationalism and collectivism, on which his reputation as a political thinker still largely rests. These themes will be discussed further shortly.

[3] Two of which appeared as newspaper articles—"The Collective Dream of Civilization", *Listener*, 37 (1947), 966–7, subsequently reprinted in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) as "*Leviathan*: a myth", and "A Reminder from *Leviathan*", *The Observer*, (29 July, 1951).

[4] Cf. Coleridge, ch.14, *Biographia Literaria*: 'What is poetry? is nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.' From *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge* (random House, 1951), ed. D. Stauffer.

questions — all the time clarifying, expanding, and reworking what he understood interpretation in its various modes to entail. Similarly, Hobbes emerges repeatedly in Oakeshott's work each time with a slightly altered emphasis or a new line of thought developed. More than any other philosopher that he discussed, with impressive persistence Oakeshott sought to clarify the meaning and significance of Hobbes. Given that Oakeshott understood the thoroughly conditional nature of textual interpretation, the task of grappling with the meaning of Hobbes was never going to be one resulting in a final, definitive picture of the seventeenth century philosopher. I want to suggest that this body of work on Hobbes provides us with not only material which enriches our understanding of Hobbes but a useful perspective for making sense of Oakeshott's own philosophical agenda. One way of clarifying this further is to ask the question what it was — in terms of his own understanding of the modal nature of interpretation — that Oakeshott was doing in interpreting Hobbes. Was it history, philosophy, philosophical history,[5] or myth building?[6] Though the answer to this question will, I hope, be clarified as I develop my argument, for the moment I simply want to suggest that analyzing Oakeshott's *practice* as an intellectual historian, political theorist, polemicist (to miss this aspect of Oakeshott is to miss much), all of which find a fascinating focal point in his readings of Hobbes, helps clarify and points to the limitations of Oakeshott's modal *theory* of human experience. In this work I want to bring these two aspects of Oakeshott's writings together to see how each illuminates the other. I do not want to claim that everything that is distinctive and original in Oakeshott's thought is really just an elaboration of his writings on Hobbes. Indeed, my approach prevents me from discussing in any great depth either Oakeshott's aesthetics or the subtleties of his philosophy of history. Nor would I suggest that when he came to concern himself with Hobbes's work Oakeshott in any simple sense just read his own set of priorities into Hobbes. Nevertheless, the affinities between Oakeshott's Hobbes and Oakeshott himself extend all the way from a common set of philosophical assumptions and arguments concerning both the artificial and modal nature of human knowledge to a fully elaborated moral and legal theory.

---

[5] Though he originally deemed such an inquiry to be an *ignoratio elenchi*—a misplaced mixture of the modes of experience—later he appears, in practice at least, to have relaxed this view.

[6] This is a view that I partially endorse towards the end of this book. See chapter 5.

II

Though Oakeshott's reading has been of great interest to many Hobbes scholars, his approach to Hobbes should not be assessed purely in terms of its contribution to contemporary Hobbes studies. Oakeshott's attitude to Hobbes seems to slide between straightforward scholarly interests and his own philosophical project, which itself depends on a certain reading of the philosophical (and non-philosophical) past. In this sense Oakeshott never entirely leaves behind the approach to political philosophy characteristic of earlier Idealist thought in which the history of political philosophy assumes an integral relation to present theoretical activity. Oakeshott himself makes the point that the philosophical enterprise cannot begin *de novo*, but must begin with a recognition that the entire history of (political, legal or any other) philosophy is the appropriate context which the activity itself assumes.

In his first essay on Hobbes Oakeshott spells out in general terms what he takes to be the appropriate interpretative approach to past philosophers. Here it is claimed that "the only healthy attitude towards the writings of a philosopher is a philosophical attitude" (TH 265). This excludes both the sort of approach which attempts to uncover the meaning of a political philosopher's ideas from an account of his political opinions as well as a *merely* historical or antiquarian interest in his works. The first approach is deemed inappropriate because it takes the least important aspect of a philosopher's thought to be the key which illuminates the whole. However, according to Oakeshott, the political philosopher's most valuable contribution to an understanding of political activity arises from his broader, more comprehensive vision of the place of politics on the whole map of human experience. In *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott claimed that the philosopher views the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. And in his introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan* he suggested that the task of the political philosopher is "to establish the connections, in principle and in detail, directly or mediately, between politics and eternity" (RP 225). Oakeshott consistently maintained that a philosopher's opinions are the least important aspect of his thought and so should not be taken to be the central source for understanding the entire philosophical system. In a 1975 review of Shlomo Avineri's *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, for instance, we are told that the place to look for Hegel's philosophical theory of the state is not in the myriad of circumstantial issues Hegel chose to comment on but in his account of crucial concepts such as *der Geist, das Subjekt, der Wille, Sittlich, das Recht*, all of which together comprise his understanding of the modern state in philosophical terms,

and, according to Oakeshott, "none of which are merely contingent states of affairs to be preferred".[7]

So the philosopher moves within an entirely different world of ideas to the analyst, commentator, or political practitioner. Moreover, Oakeshott's contention that philosophical ideas operate within a world which is *sui generis* by implication rules out the second attitude, the merely historical or antiquarian, as inappropriate since, he argues, "it is the business of philosophy continuously to renew itself. And such new philosophy may arise from the study of what belongs to an earlier time; and the study of what belongs to an earlier time is profitable, in the end, only when it is related to a genuine renaissance" (TH 267). In contrast to the philosopher, the historian works with a past that is dead. The historian's past is neither an "inheritance" nor does it offer "an inspiration for fresh thought" (TH 267). Above all it is marked by its disjunction from the present. The philosopher must therefore approach the philosophical past from a philosophical, not a historical, perspective. The 'pastness' of past philosophy is its least important aspect. Indeed, when the history of philosophy is understood in these terms it is "seen as a living, extemporary whole in which past and present are comparatively insignificant" (CPJ 359). This is clearly Oakeshott's intention in his approach to the history of political philosophy generally, and Hobbes in particular. Oakeshott does not deny the value of historical works which help illuminate past philosophers. Indeed, he suggested that most of the best works on Hobbes in the years immediately prior to his review were of this kind. His point seems to be that a philosopher must be understood on his own terms and any other account, however illuminating in other ways, is less than complete.

Though, as I will show in the first chapter, Oakeshott's understanding of political philosophy, and the past that it draws on, changes considerably as his thought develops, for now it is enough to point out that his explicit approach to Hobbes is a philosophical one. With some scepticism Oakeshott asks the question in this early essay "whether Hobbes's writings, when studied in this way, can ever yield the philosophical inspiration which has come from (for example) either Plato or Spinoza". This is a question, he suggests, which "cannot be answered in advance", though, "the attempt (if it attracts us) is worth making" (TH 267). It is my contention that, on one level, this sort of inspiration underlies Oakeshott's political theory and I have attempted to chart the course of his philosophy of politics while keeping his reading of Hobbes firmly in view. Importantly, I also want to argue that the inspiration Oakeshott

[7] In *European Studies Review*, 5 (1975), pp. 217–220, at p. 220.

found in Hobbes was not exhausted by his philosophical interest, but was the expression of a deep moral and practical commitment to a particular vision of European civilization threatened by forces not dissimilar to those that Hobbes himself confronted. By exploring what I would call Oakeshott's 'moral vision' as it appears both in his writings on Hobbes and elsewhere it is possible to test Oakeshott's modal theory of human understanding. Indeed, I would argue that Oakeshott constructs a version, not only of the philosophical, but also of the practical past in his interpretation and appropriation of Hobbes.

However, as alluded to earlier, Oakeshott seems at times to put aside his effort to appropriate Hobbes to his own philosophical purposes and approaches the latter in the manner of an intellectual historian, engaging other Hobbes scholars — notably Strauss, Warrender and Spragens — in debate on points of detail. It is on this level that Oakeshott's writings on Hobbes have mostly been read and have had considerable influence. Though this is a study of Oakeshott via his reading of Hobbes, not Hobbes himself, in order to assess the distinctiveness of Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes it has been necessary to discuss it in the context of other major twentieth century interpretations. Where I have elaborated Hobbes's thought, it is principally for the purpose of elucidating Oakeshott's understanding of him. This does not mean that I have nothing to say about Hobbes, nor would I suggest that Oakeshott's reading is without its limitations. In the chapter on authority, for instance, I will suggest that the difficulties of conceiving of civil association in purely procedural terms, which many of Oakeshott's critics have made much of, is also a feature of the way he comes to read Hobbes, and his reading contains similar explanatory difficulties and ambiguities. Hobbes's legal theory, I will suggest, can only be assimilated to Oakeshott's procedural theory of civil association by overlooking some of Hobbes's explicit claims. Moreover, I also want to question the distance that Oakeshott opens up between Hobbes's rationalism and the rationalism that Oakeshott takes a hostile attitude towards as well as Oakeshott's reluctance to acknowledge Hobbes's own understanding of the utilitarian nature of his theory. To admit this could carry the implication that Hobbes, contrary to just about everything Oakeshott says about him, is in fact an example of the lowest of intellectual creatures — the theoretician (see OHC, 26,30).

In order to determine the extent to which Oakeshott's reading was one of mere plunder for his own (philosophical or practical) purposes, as opposed to one guided by the disinterested concern of the

scholar,[8] requires making judgements about the validity of Oakeshott's Hobbes. So although this is a work principally about Oakeshott, and only derivatively about Hobbes, the nature of the task precludes an attitude of complete agnosticism towards the latter. This does not entail — at least this is my contention — juxtaposing Oakeshott's Hobbes with an idea of what Hobbes 'really meant'. Even if such a task was possible a preliminary acquaintance with the secondary literature, wherein many versions of Hobbes appear, highlights the difficulties of such an endeavour. But it is necessary to take a critical stance towards the way in which Oakeshott treats Hobbes's writings and to ask why it is, for instance, that certain aspects of Hobbes are emphasised and others are ignored or minimised. In other words, the task of determining the extent to which Hobbes is used as a more or less silent interlocutor through which Oakeshott can write his own script, as opposed to a relationship of straightforward influence where Hobbes has his own voice, requires being sensitive to the way that Oakeshott deals with the evidence presented by Hobbes's writings. So even though the principal aim of this study is to provide a new perspective through which Oakeshott's political theory can be read I am also hopeful that it might even throw fresh light on the figure of Hobbes himself. Further, there are issues in Hobbes which Oakeshott only briefly mentions without explicitly drawing out their full implications. This is only to be expected in a series of writings which serve either as introductions or review essays. At times, such as in chapters 4 and 5, I have developed the lines of Oakeshott's interpretation, mostly by drawing on authors who read Hobbes in ways consistent with his, in order to explore more fully the affinities between Oakeshott and Hobbes.

By breaking down the entire body of Oakeshott's work into manageable thematic units the interpreter runs the risk of reducing what is a complex, nuanced philosophical outlook to a series of theoretical excurses on isolated topics. As will become apparent throughout the course of this work the topics discussed in the various chapters not only build on the arguments developed in those preceding it, they

[8] I hesitate to say something along the lines of—"the endeavour to understand Hobbes as he understood himself"—because such an aim is precluded by Oakeshott's understanding of human experience. For Oakeshott, the past *an sich* does not exist. Various pasts—practical, philosophical, historical—exist in the present, and though the historian's concern is with the historical past this is not an inherently privileged form of knowledge of the past. Oakeshott, therefore, denies claims such as Collingwood's, that the past can be re-enacted, as well as Skinner's contention that history is in some sense the primary mode for understanding past ideas. Oakeshott's interpretative system (if I can describe it as such) precludes the privileging of any particular mode of understanding.

also overlap in various ways. In chapter 3, for instance, I discuss not only the idea of civil or legal authority but also the concept of a moral practice on which the former is based. Indeed, civil association, according to Oakeshott, is but one instance of the general class of practices Oakeshott terms moral. So, for example, the essay on "The Civil Condition" in *On Human Conduct*, does not stand on its own but presupposes the account of human agency developed in the first essay of that book, which in turn arises from his theory of human understanding. Since Oakeshott argues that human conduct is invariably conditioned by the requirements of a moral practice or practices, the theory of agency discussed in chapter 2 clearly overlaps with material covered in chapter 3. I have chosen, therefore, to elaborate the meaning of many of these themes as they appear in their various, overlapping contexts. All of Oakeshott's writings are held together by a conception of philosophy which, despite subtle shifts and changes in emphasis, ties the various themes into a more or less coherent whole. It is necessary to qualify the coherence of Oakeshott's system since, as I intend to show, in various works Oakeshott breaks out of the tightly argued theory of modality that he sets out most fully in *Experience and Its Modes*.

By stressing the importance of approaching Oakeshott in terms of his philosophical system I am, of course, reiterating the point that Oakeshott made in his reading of Hobbes. In the introduction to *Leviathan* Oakeshott suggested that Hobbes had suffered at the hands of those interpreters who had largely failed to appreciate what a philosophical system entails. Moreover, this interpretative sloppiness resulted in a misidentification of Hobbes with writers whom he had little if anything in common — a case in point being Erastus. Though both Hobbes and Erastus agree that civil and ecclesiastical power should converge, as thinkers they are worlds apart. Where Erastus's argument is based on political expediency, Hobbes derives his conclusion from a thorough chain of reasoning based on the fundamental limitations of human understanding. According to Oakeshott, Hobbes's theory, deduced as it was from man's existential predicament, and not from mere expediency or the contingencies of the moment, marks him as a genuine philosopher (see TH 277). Equally, I would argue that Oakeshott's misidentification with a writer like Burke arises from a similar misunderstanding of Oakeshott's philosophical system. Some of the early interpretations of Oakeshott's critique of Rationalism, for instance, which failed to see the argument in terms of the concrete, Hegelian conception of rationality outlined in *Experience and Its Modes*,

concomitantly failed to appreciate that the polemical style of these post-war essays contained a deeper philosophical point.[9]

Though Oakeshott's account of the philosophical enterprise undergoes various significant alterations he never severed his substantive connection with the general Idealist position given full expression in *Experience and Its Modes*. Ostensibly, Oakeshott's philosophical Idealism is the complete antithesis of Hobbes's supposed materialism. As will be subsequently shown, however, there are important affinities between the Idealist notion that mind is constitutive of reality and (at least on Oakeshott's reading) Hobbes's scepticism regarding the possibility of harmony between knowledge which is created by the mind and the world itself. This anti-positivist reading of Hobbes, where knowledge is propositional and discursive, is one that holds obvious attractions for the philosophical Idealist. In chapter 1 I will explore in some depth Oakeshott's modal understanding of the whole of experience in the light of his reading of Hobbes's similarly categorial or modal account of human knowledge.

Oakeshott consistently resists the sort of identification of Hobbes's epistemology with Baconian empiricism common in earlier readings and this account of Hobbes's epistemological project also underlines his own attack on Rationalism. Hobbes has traditionally been read as an archetypal rationalist philosopher. As Oakeshott put it, "his place in the Saint's Calender of Rationalism was never disputed" (TH 263). Hobbes was seen as a defender of the very intellectual project that Oakeshott persistently criticized and on which his academic reputation still largely rests. A closer examination of the way Oakeshott reads Hobbes's philosophical system, particularly in the light of the former's account of other seventeenth century rationalists such as Bacon and Descartes, shows the distance there is between Oakeshott's Rationalist and Oakeshott's Hobbes. This will be developed especially in chapter 5.

On questions with a direct bearing on political philosophy, such as will, agency, freedom and authority, the alterations Oakeshott makes demonstrate a shift away from the manner in which these issues were treated by his Idealist predecessors such as Green and

---

[9] Fortunately this view and the identification of Oakeshott with Burke that tended to go with it is now being corrected, most recently by Roy Tseng's *The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of the Enlightenment* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2003). See also Paul Franco in *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) and Jeremy Rayner, "The legend of Oakeshott's conservatism: Sceptical philosophy and limited politics", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1985), pp. 90–112. Needless to say, this study is a further contribution to this project of reassessment.

Bosanquet to a position more recognizably Hobbesian, albeit a Hobbes seen through Oakeshott's distinctive interpretative glasses. Chapters 2 and 3 will chart the course of these changes. These chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order in order to illustrate the way in which Oakeshott's theory comes to converge with his reading of Hobbes.

In chapters 4 and 5 I take a different tack. The fourth chapter takes up the question of religion, which was of immense interest to Oakeshott. Indeed, I would argue that many interpretations of Oakeshott's political philosophy have suffered by not fully appreciating the essentially religious nature of his entire project. Though he does not say a great deal about Hobbes's theology it is significant that Oakeshott recognized it to be by no means peripheral to the coherence of the argument of *Leviathan*. In this chapter I have drawn out the affinities between Oakeshott's and Hobbes's understanding of religious experience and the way in which each arises from an attempt to accommodate religion in the light of the contemporary intellectual preoccupations that they respectively sought to address. For Hobbes this involved grappling with the emergent mechanistic science, for Oakeshott it centered on the claims of historical understanding. At a more fundamental level, both were concerned with the vexed issue of hermeneutics arising from the limitations of human understanding and of the threats that substantive beliefs about the world — whether they be in a 'religious' or 'secular' form — potentially pose to civil authority.

In chapter 5 I will assess Oakeshott's estimation of those forces which threaten civil association and the ideal of civilization which it reflects. Along with Hobbes and Augustine, Oakeshott understood civilization to be imperiled by recurrent manifestations of pelagianism. Here Oakeshott's debt to Hobbes, especially in his essay "*Leviathan*: a myth", clearly transcends that of the specialist philosopher. I will show that Oakeshott's return to Hobbes went beyond academic interest and was guided by a deep moral concern with the fate of civilization. In the final chapter, as well as in the conclusion, I will question the extent to which Oakeshott's political theory remains faithful to the highly circumscribed theory of knowledge that he first outlined in *Experience and Its Modes* and developed and modified throughout his career.

Though this is a study about the relationship between two philosophers, it raises issues of wider relevance in the field of intellectual history concerning textual interpretation and the transmission and understanding of ideas. Consequently I have used the conclusion as

an opportunity to explore such themes and have attempted to place Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes in the context of recent debates in the history of ideas.

III

Before concluding this introduction, it is necessary to examine some important preliminary issues concerning the way in which Oakeshott proceeds to 'contextualise' Hobbes's political theory. As will subsequently become apparent, these questions of interpretation not only affect the way Oakeshott reads Hobbes, they also carry implications for Oakeshott's entire philosophical project.

At the outset of his two most substantial works on Hobbes (the introduction to *Leviathan* and "The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes") Oakeshott invokes two distinct frameworks in order to instill intelligibility into past political thought in general and Hobbes in particular. It is notable that these frameworks or contexts are deployed at the outset of these works on Hobbes as this indicates that his engagement with Hobbes was central to the working out of his methodological or hermeneutical concerns.

In the introduction to *Leviathan* Oakeshott makes his famous claim that the appropriate context for considering a masterpiece such as *Leviathan* ("the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language" — RP 223) is nothing short of the entire history of political philosophy. This history can be analytically broken into three distinct sub-traditions. They are, Reason and Nature, Will and Artifice, and Rational Will. Plato, Hobbes and Hegel are recognized as the masters of these respective traditions. Of the tradition of Rational Will Oakeshott observes that "its followers may be excused the belief that in it the truths of the first two traditions are fulfilled and their errors find a happy release" (RP 227). Here Oakeshott is clearly employing the sort of triadic framework common to other post Hegelian philosophical Idealists. Though not always so explicitly presented, the British Idealists developed their own philosophical concerns in the light of a dialectical reading of the history of political thought. The British Idealists, as David Boucher puts it, "had a conception of the subject matter, an intellectual framework if you like, in terms of which they appraised past systems of thought in order to advance their own".[10] Like Hegel they sought to overcome the deficiencies in past political thought, not by rejecting it *in toto*, but by incorporating the important insights of each tradition and superseding the defects.

[10] "W.H. Greenleaf, Idealism and the Triadic Conception of the History of Political Thought", *Idealistic Studies*, 16 (1986), pp. 237–52, at p. 243.

Though Oakeshott never endorses their teleological reading of historical development he shares their conviction that the history of philosophy is central to its current practice.

This attitude is exemplified in R.G. Collingwood's *The New Leviathan*, which, the author claims, "is best understood as an attempt to bring the *Leviathan* up to date, in the light of the advances made since it was written, in history, psychology, and anthropology".[11] Like Oakeshott, Collingwood attempts to renew the philosophy of the past to make it speak to the present.[12]

As Boucher has recently shown, Collingwood's project of bringing Hobbes up to date needs to be understood in terms of the triadic conception of the history of political thought that Collingwood constructs in order to address issues of present philosophic concern.[13] The three traditions that Collingwood invokes, Boucher terms the objective, subjective, and immanent. Since, according to Collingwood, the last tradition overcomes the deficiencies in the former two and Hobbes is associated with the second, Collingwood's task of renewing Hobbes involved superseding those aspects of Hobbes's thought that the tradition of immanent reason has made redundant.

Whatever the explanatory merit these traditions have for coming to terms with past political philosophy (which at this stage can only be crudely hinted at) they need to be kept in mind when approaching the Idealists themselves, as they each employed them in more or less self-conscious ways. For instance, in his study of Oakeshott, Greenleaf, who of recent theorists has done most to turn these traditions of political philosophy into something approaching a systematic methodological program,[14] has described these traditions respectively as 'transcendental realism', 'empirical nominalism', and 'Idealism', and explained Oakeshott's thought in terms of the last of

---

[11] *New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), p. iv.

[12] It should be stressed however that Collingwood set himself the task of bringing about a *rapprochement* between both history and philosophy as well as theory and practice and so his task of updating Hobbes involved what Oakeshott would term an *ignoratio elenchi*—a confusion of the modes of experience. Oakeshott's renewal of Hobbes, at least according to his explicit pronouncements, is purely philosophical and so leaves enquiries such as "history, psychology and anthropology" untouched. In this respect, ie. in the deployment of a linked hierarchy of forms, Collingwood is closer to Hegel than is Oakeshott.

[13] See Boucher, *The Social and Political Thought of R.G. Collingwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 71–80.

[14] For a full account see Boucher "W.H. Greenleaf " and *Texts in Context: Revisionist methods for studying the history of ideas* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhof, 1985), ch . 3.

these.[15] At least for this limited project the invocation of these traditions serves a useful heuristic role.

It should be stressed that the only place Oakeshott mentions this tripartite account of the history of political philosophy is in the introduction to *Leviathan*.[16] He never fills in the detail of this history in the way Hegel, or indeed, Collingwood does. Moreover, he never employed it as a means to draw the sort of concrete historical accounts of political thought that Greenleaf has. Indeed, I will contend that Oakeshott's changing reading of Hobbes, which demonstrates a substantial convergence with his own thought, points to a modification in his understanding of the adequacy of these Idealist traditions in interpreting the history of political philosophy. Moreover, these traditions cannot be separated from the way in which he conceives philosophical activity to proceed, and they do not readily transfer to purposes independent of this.

On this point, Paul Franco notes Oakeshott's remark that the inadequacy of Hobbes's theory of volition was only overcome in the Hegelian theory of rational will, which, according to Oakeshott, was yet to receive a fully convincing rendition. Franco takes this judgement to be a key factor in understanding Oakeshott's project of developing a more complete theory of the will than that bequeathed by Bosanquet. Thus Oakeshott is said to present a Hegelian theory of the will chastened by a form of Hobbesian anti-teleology. The traditions of 'Will and Artifice' and 'Rational Will' are said to converge in Oakeshott's account.[17] With some qualifications I endorse this reading. Oakeshott does not simply take over from Hobbes everything he finds there and he clearly grafts on to his understanding of Hobbes's theory of agency, for instance, insights gleaned from his Idealist predecessors. However, it is clear that Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes, on the question of volition (amongst other things) changes, in line with his own theory. This convergence seems to suggest that these traditions are open and porous and their importance appears to fade as his thought develops. Indeed, he seems to retreat from his early judgment that Hobbes's theory of volition contains inadequacies that need to be superseded.

As I mentioned earlier, there is also another framework Oakeshott employs in order to instill intelligibility into past political thought.

---

[15] *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*, (London: Longmans, 1966), pp. 6–16.

[16] Though according to Ken Minogue he also used it in his lectures on the history of political thought at the LSE. See his introduction to *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), Shirley Letwin ed. p. vii–viii.

[17] *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 102,178.

This was developed in "The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes" and it tends to assume a preponderant place in the philosophical history he constructs later in his career, cutting across and in some sense surpassing the earlier tripartite account set out in the introduction to *Leviathan*. This second context adds another layer of complexity to Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes, adding richness, yet making the relationship between the two philosophers less straightforward. In this case he also employs a triadic framework, this time in an attempt to make intelligible the moral experience of post-medieval Europe, and its reflection in the moral and political thought of the period.

The three specific moral idioms (as he refers to them here) are the morality of communal ties, the morality of individuality, and the morality of the common good. Since the first of these fell into desuetude with the break up of the medieval order, the second and third are the crucial ones for understanding the thought and experience of morality and its reflection in politics in modern times. As a philosopher of the morality of individuality, Hobbes is recognized to be a master. A similar framework is also employed in his essay "The Masses in Representative Democracy" as well as the recently published *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* and *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*.[18]

All of these works touch on themes which were given expression in the last essay of *On Human Conduct* where the history of modern understandings of the state in terms of the opposition between the ideal characters civil and enterprise association (or *societas* and *universitas*) was fully developed. What I want to suggest here is that this triadic framework was different from the former in that it was deployed for a different purpose and dealt with different subject matter. Where the former dealt with the whole history of political philosophy — a history conceived philosophically, not historically — the focus in the latter is primarily on the *history* of modern political *thought*. For Oakeshott, reflection on politics occurs on one of three, not always readily distinct, levels and political thinkers rarely attain that level of abstraction whereby the link between politics and the whole of human experience is made. Plato, Augustine, Spinoza, Hobbes and Hegel undoubtedly qualify here, but the status of others such as Locke, Burke and Mill is less clear.

Oakeshott, of course, despite what he says about the importance of studying the classic texts of political or legal philosophy, has no intention of compiling a list of 'Greats'. Rather, his account of the

[18] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), ed. Timothy Fuller.

modern history of political reflection in terms of the opposition between individualism and collectivism enables him to cover a broader category of thought than the purely philosophical. As he pointed out in his first essay on Hobbes, the interpreter who approaches a past philosopher from a philosophical perspective must leave to one side everything he said of a non-philosophical nature.

There seems to me to be two ways of understanding these later writings. It is possible to argue, as Boucher has done, for the basic consistency of these works with the modal conception of experience laid out in *Experience and its Modes.*[19] On this reading the past invoked in his account of the respective moral idioms or ideal characters is a philosophical past with no connection with the determinate mode of experience Oakeshott terms history. The other approach, which seems to me the more likely explanation, is to leave the ambiguity and suggest that Oakeshott's later attempt to give an historical account of the modern state in order to buttress his philosophical account of civil association actually breaks out of the rather rigidly defined map of experience set out in *Experience and Its Modes* and which informs much of what he wrote elsewhere. This suggests that his modal account of experience was simply inadequate to deal with the range of concerns he wanted to cover in his later writings. In these later works, especially *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* and the last essay of *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott makes it quite clear that he is offering a form of historical explanation, even if it is not quite consistent with his other writings on the nature of history.

These questions will be discussed further in the first chapter as well as the conclusion. For now it is enough to stress that a theorist who has laid his cards on the table and insistently urged the independence of philosophical and historical modes of understanding, is liable to drift into ambiguity when attempting to make the past intelligible without any reference to a form of historical explanation. For someone like Oakeshott who throughout his long career consistently returned in a fundamental way to the nature of understanding it would be unusual to expect complete consistency on all issues. Moreover, the temptation for a historically aware philosopher (as indeed, for a philosophically inclined historian — Quentin Skinner, for instance) to combine the role of the philosopher with that of the

---

[19] "Politics in a Different Mode: an Appreciation of Michael Oakeshott 1901–1990", *History of Political Thought*, vol. xii. no.4, Winter 1991, pp. 717–728, at p. 723.

historian, however the relationship between these modes is conceived, is always great.

In this study I will explore the tensions in Oakeshott's account of modality through his substantial philosophical teaching. As will be seen as the study develops, his reading of Hobbes is never far from the center of this project. Hobbes continually surfaces in his work as a figure from the philosophical past who has something important to add to our conversation. But the voice of Hobbes as it is relayed through Oakeshott is a distinctive one which closely mirrors the preoccupations of its creator. As Ken Minogue has aptly put it, "Oakeshott's engagement with Hobbes has been a central feature of his own philosophy, and is a model of what one philosopher can do with another."[20]

---

[20] "Hobbes and his critics", in *Leviathan* (London: Everyman, 1994), ed. K. Minogue, p. 448.