

# *Introduction: A Unique Voice*

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## **I.1. Oakeshott on Politics, History and Philosophy**

The purpose of this book is to interpret the works of Michael J. Oakeshott (1901-1990, the Professor of Political Science at the LSE, 1951-1969) as a substantial critic of the Enlightenment project by concentrating on his philosophy of politics and history. In this context, my ambition is to clarify some debated issues in Oakeshott studies by a fresh approach to understanding the philosopher's unique voice in the "conversation of mankind".

Oakeshott is, of course, best known today for his political philosophy, for which he has been acclaimed "the greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since John Stuart Mill – or even Burke", and "the most original academic political philosopher of this century".<sup>1</sup> Oakeshott's philosophical position on politics and morality, however, continues to be in dispute. Whilst the initial reception of *Rationalism in Politics* (1962) has been coloured by some scholars with a progressive attitude and labelled loosely as "pessimistic", "traditionalist" or "conservative" in a somewhat negative sense,<sup>2</sup> more recent scholarship, by contrast, has tried to show that with *On Human Conduct* (1975) Oakeshott's political philosophy can be treated as a comprehensive restatement of liberalism.<sup>3</sup>

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[1] *Daily Telegraph*, December 21, 1990, *The Guardian*, December 22, 1990; quoted by J. L. Auspitz, 1993: 1. See also J. Casey, 1993: 58; J. Hart, 1993: 82; R. Grant, 1990: 9.

[2] Cf. T. Fuller, 1991: xiv-xv. For the detailed charge of Oakeshott being a conservative, see, for example, N. Wood, 1959: 645-62; B. Crick, 1963: 65-74; H. Pitkin, 1973: 496-525.

[3] For the interpretation of Oakeshott as a liberal, see P. Franco, 1990a, and 1990b; J. Gray, 1989: 199-217, and 1993: 40-7; W. J. Coats, Jr., 1985: 773-87. Cf. D. Thomas, 1977: 454; N. O'Sullivan, 1993: 106; D. Manning, 1997.

It is my view that Oakeshott is not a doctrinal liberal any more than a dogmatic conservative,<sup>4</sup> but a sceptical philosopher who is the “*victim of thought*”.<sup>5</sup> Political philosophy, as Oakeshott understands it, is nothing if not philosophy, inasmuch as it is the application of a doctrine about the nature of philosophy to the study of the nature of politics.<sup>6</sup> Philosophical thinking, as established in *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), is the persistent re-establishment of completeness, which aims to transcend the abstractness of modes of understanding such as history, science, poetry and practice (mainly including morality and politics) for its own sake, but does not take the place of the modes. Hence, Oakeshott’s political philosophy is self-limited in the sense that it aims to *explain* rather than *suggest*, and it is self-critical in the sense that the explanation on which it embarks is a tireless consideration of the conditionality of the conditions of political practice.

In the course of this philosophical adventure, liberal ethics has been unveiled as an incomplete form of understanding politics that Oakeshott’s traditionalist, conservative or sceptical politics intends to transcend; and a notable concern of this book is to provide a platform for looking at Oakeshott’s criticisms of liberalism. For the moment, however, it is only significant to note that in addition to self-limitation and self-criticism, Oakeshott’s notion of philosophy also entails a Montaignean scepticism which contends that human understanding is “an engagement to abate mystery rather than to achieve definitive understanding”,<sup>7</sup> because it always involves a world of ideas, a tradition of behaviour which is too comprehensive to be totally grasped. It is without doubt that Oakeshott’s traditionalist politics, maintaining that politics is a way of living in which the participants are learning how to recognise plausible statements for given contingent circumstances through the “pursuit of the intimations” of a political tradition, is likewise a consequence of this philosophical scepticism. Moreover, as I hope to show, this non-foundationalist practical reasoning deeply embedded in Oakeshott’s thought is actually a re-establishment (which is somewhat uncritical, though) of Aristotelian rhetoric in association with

[4] For the differences between the conservative disposition in Oakeshott’s thought and conservatism as a political ideology, see, for example, J. Ryaner, 1985: 313, 316, 334-8. Cf. B. Barber, 1976: 446-50.

[5] *EM*: 321; *RP*: 150. Insofar as I agree with T. Nardin’s remark that “to read Oakeshott narrowly as a conservative critic of the welfare state or liberal defender of individualism and pluralism”, is “to misunderstand, and seriously to underrate, his contribution to philosophy” (2001: 235; cf. 225-6).

[6] See esp. *RP*: 236.

[7] *HC*: 2ff.

*phronesis*. Thus, in any event, it is intellectually arbitrary to depreciate Oakeshott's political philosophy simply because of his conservative identification, nor is it practically sound to regard his theory of *civitas* as one which "came down earth" in the practice of Thatcherism.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to politics, Oakeshott has also "done as much as anyone in the modern world to establish [history] as an independent manner of thinking".<sup>9</sup> "For anyone interested in the contribution of English idealism to the philosophy of history, Oakeshott's writings are an indispensable source".<sup>10</sup> Even though one may not agree that Oakeshott's theory of history "ranks with Vico's in its originality and scope",<sup>11</sup> it has been widely accepted that it "represents the high-water mark of English thought upon history".<sup>12</sup> It is more than clear that the current of historical thought against which Oakeshott argues constantly is positivist historiography. But I believe it would be a misconception to decipher Oakeshott as an historicist.

To transcend the positivist-historicist debate in favour of Oakeshott's historiography, it is advantageous if where appropriate we distinguish a number of different references related to the ambiguous term "history". To put it briefly, they are: (1) **history** as a mode of understanding, i.e. an enquiry; (2) **History** as "what really happened" in the Past, i.e. the Past in itself as a whole; (3) *history* as a habit of the human mind, i.e. the *historicity* or *historical consciousness* of human understanding, meaning that human knowledge involves a hermeneutic-self, a tradition of ideas, rather than a Cartesian-self, a set of principles; and (4) *the history* of a certain subject-matter which refers to the recorded evidence, *res gestae*, about such subject-matter that is surviving in the present and available to the interpreters.

Before examining these references in more detail, there are accordingly three types of historiography that can be concisely expressed in this way: First, positivist historiography is the view that history as an enquiry is the causal representation of the course of "what really happened" in History. Secondly, historicist historiography

[8] J. Hart, 1993: 83. As T. Fuller puts it, Oakeshott "never really became the guru of Thatcherism as some who lack subtlety have alleged" (1993a: 68).

[9] W. H. Greenleaf, 1966: 29.

[10] W. Dray, 1968: 19.

[11] A. Sullivan, *The New Republic*; quoted by T. W. Smith, 1996: 598.

[12] R. G. Collingwood, 1946: 158-9. Cf. J. L. Auspitz, 1993: 22. where he writes that "if R. G. Collingwood was correct in calling that earlier 'the high water mark of English thought upon history', the essays published fifty years later [i.e. *On History and Other Essays*] must be the flood tide".

raphy is the doctrine that since the human mind must be *historically* conditioned, only through the lens of the historical mode may we comprehend the genuine meaning of things; insofar as all knowledge proper is historical. Thirdly, compared to positivism, Oakeshottian historiography is the belief that the Past in itself is out of our reach in the present, instead there are several forms of reading past in terms of *res gestae*, corresponding to several modes of experience in the present (e.g. the historical past, the practical past, the scientific past etc.); on this view, not everything concerning the past is historical,<sup>13</sup> but rather, history as an enquiry is a *specific* way of narrating *res gestae*; in short, history exists only in the work of the historian. And, although Oakeshott would not deny that human understanding must be *historically* or traditionally conditioned, as we shall see, unlike historicists such as Collingwood, he does not intend to identify our *historicity* or traditional knowledge with historical knowledge without modifications.<sup>14</sup>

That is to say, regarding the map of human knowledge, it is Oakeshott's major point that reasoning appropriate to a mode of understanding or a tradition of activity (which may contain a certain type of *historicity*) cannot be applied to any others without being self-deconstructed.<sup>15</sup> As a result of this, we are approaching Oakeshott's objection to philosophical modernity, i.e. the conception of philosophy par excellence, which suggests that philosophy should be a master discipline that lays foundations for the natural sciences and authorises the validity of any other knowledge in terms of an objective scientific-criterion. In other words, philosophical modernity expresses the view that human reasons can be united in the form of Universal Philosophical Reason elucidated by science.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, nonetheless, Oakeshott's anti-foundationalist position likewise calls for a debate. For, inspired by the work of Rorty and other post-modern writers, many believe that the only way out

[13] Cf. D. Boucher, 1991: 721.

[14] Cf. T. Nardin, 2001: 172-5.

[15] Indeed, a significant aspect of Oakeshott's enterprise is to reconcile the sharp contrast between Reason and Tradition (rationality and *historicity*) led by the Enlightenment thinkers.

[16] T. Nardin also accentuates the anti-foundationalist character of Oakeshott's philosophy (2001: 10, 18, 24, 49). And although modern foundationalism is often related to scientism (or positivism), Nardin follows Oakeshott to contend that it can be equally expressed in the forms of pragmatism, some sort of hermeneutics, and historicism (2001: 5, 14, 81, 96, 111, 174, 192-3, 208). By interpreting Oakeshott as a critic of Enlightenment positions, the author shares with Nardin his major concern that what unites Oakeshott's ideas is "the idea of difference", not the idea of universality (2001: 230-1).

of philosophical foundationalism is to put an end to the enterprise of philosophy in terms of epistemology. Oakeshott's idealistic connection, however, has led him to believe in the possibility of a self-independent epistemological discourse. Additionally, it thus seems liable for some interpreters to maintain that there, in fact, exists a "shift in Oakeshott's philosophy from idealism to scepticism",<sup>17</sup> namely, from *Experience and Its Modes* where Oakeshott establishes his idealist epistemology to the latter purely sceptical works such as *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (1959).

Be that as it may, I believe that though Oakeshott takes traditional philosophical issues seriously in *Experience and Its Modes*, that does not necessarily make him into an advocate of foundationalism. For, influenced by Bradley, in that very work Oakeshott has viewed the absolute idealism of Hegel through a sceptical lens that may be hereafter referred to as "sceptical idealism". As a result, I shall argue instead that no *fundamental* change in spirit has ever occurred in Oakeshott's idea of philosophy in terms of a sceptical character.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, precisely because Oakeshott's sceptical idealism leaves his reflection upon the despotism of philosophical modernism at a philosophical level, it actually offers us an alternative answer to the self-image of philosophy without claiming "the end to philosophy". And so, I think, the clearer we become about Oakeshott's *philosophical* rejection of foundationalism, the less we should worry about Rorty's insistence on the necessary connection between epistemology and foundationalism. Consequently, if my interpretation of Oakeshott's philosophical thought is plausible, we may reach the understanding that Oakeshott may have successfully resolved Rorty's problematic proposal in a way which is safe from the charge of "total scepticism", a charge that scholars often make against Rorty's case.

[17] S. A. Gerencser, 2000: 7. Cf. T. Modood, 1980: 315-22; B. Parekh, 1979: 487-8; J. Gray, 1989: 202.

[18] This, of course, does not mean that there are no discernable changes at all in Oakeshott's later works. To take a few examples, in *RP* Oakeshott redefines "practice" from the world of values to be as a tradition of action or an idiom of performance, and in *HC* he actually comes to see the exhibitions of intelligence or non-intelligence as the different "orders" of research by means of which human sciences and natural sciences can be distinguished, and thus he opens a wider possibility for the idioms of enquiry within the same order to converse more essentially with each other. Since my purpose here is to examine the sceptical character that penetrates throughout Oakeshott's life-long critique of the Enlightenment, I shall not bring these changes into *special* consideration in the course of this study, although relative references will be stated where appropriate.

## I.2. The Structure of Chapters

Now, it is of little wonder to say that philosophical modernity, liberal ethics and positivist historiography, the three main targets to which Oakeshott's critique of Western intellectual fashion points, are exactly the elements that underlie the so-called Enlightenment project. By re-placing Oakeshott into this very context, it would then become possible for us to arrive at a new level of assessing Oakeshott's thought as a whole where his profound philosophical reflection upon politics and history could be better understood. And this, as already indicated, is presumably the major contribution to Oakeshott studies that this book wishes to make.

To achieve this goal, I therefore begin Chapter II with an examination of philosophical modernism, by means of which I shall unveil the Enlightenment project in terms of three positions: (1) foundationalism in philosophy, (2) formalism in ethics and (3) naturalism in historiography. The crisis of the Enlightenment project has indeed achieved serious attention from contemporary thinkers such as Foucault, Habermas, Derrida, Rorty and MacIntyre, to name only a few. Among these major figures, however, it is MacIntyre's position that I take to be closest to Oakeshott's, even though there are still significant differences between them.

Put briefly, in Oakeshott's case the Enlightenment ethical position in terms of formalism results in an *empty* concept of rationality, and the scientific attempt to generalise history has exactly obscured the possible route of returning us to traditions to which the concrete moral and political exemplifications belong. And further, since the Enlightenment positions constitute a whole package in favour of philosophy par excellence, to untie the bond that is required in the first place is therefore a non-foundationalist conception of philosophy itself.<sup>19</sup>

Here we thus come to Chapter III which takes Oakeshott's notion of philosophy into full consideration. The approach I am adopting to re-interpret *Experience and Its Modes*, the key text of Oakeshott's philosophy, is basically to see it as a response to the crisis of *philosophisme*, inasmuch as it contains a very clear sense of renouncing ideas from philosophical modernity that scholars used to follow. Although, with regard to his idealistic background, Oakeshott retains Hegel's understanding of philosophy as the perpetual

[19] Whilst in *VP* Oakeshott concedes that "to rescue the conversation from the bog into which it has fallen and to restore to it some of its lost freedom of movement would require a philosophy more profound than anything I have to offer" (*VP*: 15), it seems to me that earlier in *EM* Oakeshott has attempted to seek this philosophy.

re-establishment of coherence, yet at the same time he subscribes to Bradley's revised idealism which argues that "hence no total truth, only more or less of validity",<sup>20</sup> i.e. human thought (which can have a number of spheres or worlds) must be conditional: every idea refers to reality from a *limited* standpoint and has its own *degree* of truth. That is, Oakeshott has actually merged Hegel's notion of completeness and Bradley's idea of "degrees of truth and reality" into a form of sceptical idealism, which purports to maintain the following:

Even though philosophy is the self-critical thought which is concerned with the conditionality of human understanding for its own sake, i.e. to be complete, this pure thinking is so self-limited and sceptical that it contributes nothing to the fact that ordinarily we live in an abstract world, and that we have at our disposal a number of self-consistent but incomplete ways of understanding. In short, Oakeshott creates two themes in *Experience and Its Modes* which he has ever since retained throughout his whole academic career: a non-foundationalist philosophy characterised in terms of self-independence (or self-criticism), self-limitation and scepticism, and the self-consistency of modes of experience.

Having examined Oakeshott's philosophical idea per se, Chapter IV comes to terms with his philosophical understanding of morality and politics. In summing up, the central problem which concerns this chapter is this: Oakeshott's attack on Rationalism can be well understood as an extension of his criticism of the Enlightenment project, not merely because the quality Oakeshott gives to Rationalism fits perfectly with the assumptions of formalism in ethics that we shall disclose, but also because the philosophical foundations Oakeshott traces to Rationalism are nothing but the assumptions of foundationalism in philosophy that we shall unveil. It is on the interpretation of *Rationalism in Politics* that Oakeshott's endeavour to ponder the crisis of Enlightenment positions becomes most evident.

Moreover, given Oakeshott's position on formalism in ethics, a contradiction would at once become evident if Oakeshott is interpreted as a liberal.<sup>21</sup> For, formalism in ethics or rationalism in politics, as we shall see, is that which portrays Lockean natural law theory, the Kantian categorical imperative and Millian utilitarianism, the three main traditions of justifying liberalism. And yet, in contrast to the characteristics of liberalism in terms of (1) a set of

[20] Bradley, 1969: chap. xxiv.

[21] Here I am not denying that Oakeshott's rationalism in politics mainly embraces both socialism and liberalism. A qualified consideration about this matter will be provided when I come to examine Oakeshott's political philosophy in more detail.

principles, (2) radical individualism and (3) formalistic argumentation, Oakeshott basically follows Aristotle in comprehending conservatism in politics as (1) a “way of living” in which (2) the traditionalist-individual is engaged, (3) a “rhetorical form of reasoning” which deals with plausible statements in given circumstances through the “pursuit of intimations” of a political tradition. And if questioned thus: isn’t it true that Oakeshott has “a love of freedom”?<sup>22</sup> my reply is that his love of freedom does not have the same quality as the liberal’s.

But further, all this does not simply suggest that Oakeshott has tried to purge liberalism of whatever defects it may contain, in order to restate it in terms of a theory of civil association in *On Human Conduct*. In the first place, the conditions that Oakeshott employs to classify civil association consist in philosophical scepticism and the devotion to freedom, and these two elements are categorically inseparable. In this respect, civil association is a more sophisticated reconstruction of conservatism in politics, by bringing a Hobbesian legalistic character of civil authority into consideration. More crucially, although in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott keeps liberalism out of the most remarkable fountain of enterprise association or *universitas*,<sup>23</sup> he does not embrace it in civil association or *societas*, either.<sup>24</sup> The absence of liberalism in the work is because part of Oakeshott’s interests there is to show a *societas cum universitate* as the “unsolved tension” limiting the identification of modern European political character and consciousness.<sup>25</sup> To interpret Oakeshott as a liberal, it seems to me, is simply to impose on him a practical anxiety that his philosophy tries so hard to avoid.

The aim of Chapter V is to give a detailed analysis of Oakeshottian historiography. There are basically three main issues concerning contemporary historiographical debate that will be put forward here: first, the epistemological problem of historical knowledge; second, the autonomous problem of history; and third the problem of historicism. Oakeshott indeed battles with positivist historiography over the first two issues; but here, once again, Oakeshott’s contribution to this field can be more profitably perceived while understanding him as a critic of the Enlightenment historiographical position.

Epistemologically, it is my understanding that there are two intricate impasses inherent in scientific historical thought from the *philo-*

[22] N. O’Sullivan, 1993: 101. Cf. M. Cranston, 1967: 82.

[23] See *HC*: 136-313.

[24] See esp. *HC*: 245, n2.

[25] See esp. *HC*: 200-1, 320. Cf. *PFPS*.

*sophes* to neo-positivism. In the first place, it produces a “temporal dilemma in history”. That is, to say that historical study is the causal representation of “what really happened” in the Past, i.e. the course of successive events, is to identify history with a naturalised conception of History which shows the historical to be unrepeatable and past. And yet this identification must at the same time conflict with the modern epistemological conditions that neo-positivism adopts, namely, the view that genuine knowledge should be repeatable and present. In the second place, positivist historiography is unable to deal with the “epistemic tension in history” that bothered philosophers such as Descartes and Locke: the nature of history is particular and concrete whereas that of science is general and abstract. By way of contrast, in Oakeshott’s historical theory, as we shall see, there is a theory of time and a hermeneutic-like view of historical narration, both of which are capable of removing the naturalistic traps in historiography under consideration.

Again, if one of the main arguments that Oakeshott takes to impugn foundationalism is that the monopoly of the scientific voice will make our conversation “boring and insidious”,<sup>26</sup> it would appear that the meaning of rescuing the autonomous voice of history (and that of poetry) in the conversation of mankind is no less than to dissolve Enlightenment Universal Rationality. That is, the significance of history in Oakeshott’s thought lies in the important role of the historian in bringing out concrete knowledge to nourish our ability to converse. But, the theme of the autonomy of history is frequently related to the theoretical context of historicism, a school of historical thought to which Oakeshott objects. Consequently, to interpret the uniqueness of Oakeshott as a non-historicist critic of positivist historiography, part of my concern in this chapter will be directed to making a comparison between Oakeshott’s and Collingwood’s philosophies of history.

[26] See esp. *VP*: 12-4.