

## MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ON LIFE: WAITING WITH GODOT

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Until quite recently Michael Oakeshott has been widely regarded as a political thinker.<sup>1</sup> So clearly has he been taken to express his political views that there is often little question as to where he lies in the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup> He has been perceived by both ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ as one of the most eloquent twentieth-century exponents of the conservative cause. His best known work is a collection of essays first published together in 1962 as *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. The title, which is drawn from the first essay in the volume, belies a much broader agenda than one might at first expect. These ‘other essays’ broach a diverse selection of subjects ranging from the idea of the university and what it is to be a historian to the part played by poetry in human experience. This might reveal something about the way in which Oakeshott works as well as what his project might be. He is not only interested in politics (this, if anything, is peripheral): he has a more general concern about a way of thinking which is encroaching upon how we understand ourselves. Oakeshott calls this way of thinking rationalism, and he identifies in rationalism an intellectual disposition to view the world as a series of problems to be solved by appeal to Reason. The rationalist reduces experience to instrumental relations, that is, he views all other objects in this world as means to his ends. Oakeshott identifies

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<sup>1</sup> For the most comprehensive treatment of Oakeshott’s political philosophy see Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven, 1990). Franco places Oakeshott’s thought in the context of the debate between ‘deontological’ liberals such as Robert Nozick and F.A. Hayek and ‘communitarian’ liberals such as Charles Taylor. In the following piece I take as my lead recent work by Timothy Fuller on Oakeshott’s religious thought. See the introduction to Michael Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, 1993). Fuller’s work reveals Oakeshott to be concerned with a much broader area than politics or political philosophy — Oakeshott is concerned with nothing less than what it is to conduct oneself.

<sup>2</sup> See the symposium held in *Political Theory*, 4 (1976), reviewing his *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975). Oakeshott has found cause to complain about the continual accusations that his politics are conservative or that politics is of primary importance to him at all. ‘I am concerned not with “politics” in general, or with what it might be in some other association, but what it must be in this kind of association [i.e. the one discussed in *On Human Conduct*]. And politics here is necessarily a secondary consideration.’ See Michael Oakeshott, ‘On Misunderstanding Human Conduct: A Reply to My Critics’, *Political Theory*, 4 (1976), p. 356.

other hallmarks of rationalist thought but my present purpose leads me to concentrate on this particular aspect of rationalism. I mention rationalism only to give an indication of the type of thinking that Oakeshott has in his sights.

Oakeshott's tone and style vary in intensity as regularly as his target is broad. He finds, in varying degrees, rationalist tendencies in thinkers as politically far apart as F.A. Hayek and Karl Marx.<sup>3</sup> The rationalist's ability to proffer a plan for attaining a desired human condition implies an essential humanity which, in the course of events, we have either fallen away from or not yet attained. Oakeshott describes this situation as one in which 'the lion and the ox are distinguished from one another, but there is not only one law for both: the lion shall eat straw like the ox'.<sup>4</sup> Humanity is reduced to a single fixed ideal condition. Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is less concerned with the political conclusions which a thinker may reach about the most desirable conditions for a particular society (whether these favour the individual or the collective) than with the way an argument arrives at these prescriptions.

Rationalism's collectivist *assumptions* (rather than its conclusions) rail against Oakeshott's own account of what it is to be human. Humans are distinguished from other forms of life as beings which are capable of exercising agency. By agency Oakeshott means the ability to choose between different courses of action.<sup>5</sup> A belief in agency, then, is anathema to the rationalist doctrine that one can be more or less than human according to how much one's choices coincide with objective reason which defines humanity. For Oakeshott the act of choosing is precisely being human.

Throughout his career Oakeshott devoted a great deal of attention to understanding the history of Western political thought. The figures who one encounters among Oakeshott's historical exegeses have thought beyond the merely mechanical relation of state and subject and the differing pursuits open to state enterprise. Oakeshott understands many of these thinkers to have provided 'an analysis of the dispositions of current political character[s]'. Montesquieu, for example, writes

in the manner of a medieval allegorist . . . who personifies the dispositions of a single character and each speak in utterances appropriate to the mood it represents. [He] discloses in three simple and ideal types of government

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, 1991), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Oakeshott, 'A Place of Learning', in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, 1989).

what he believes to be the dispositions of a single complex political character . . .<sup>6</sup>

Also, we find in Oakeshott's account of Hobbes's *Leviathan* 'a work of art in the proper sense, one of the master pieces of our language and civilization'.<sup>7</sup> For Oakeshott a study of the history of Western political thought cannot provide us with perfect models of the state, rather it is edifying for what it might reveal about the qualities which are present in our own characters. In this respect Augustine is as perspicuous as Hobbes and Cervantes as insightful as Burkhardt and Nietzsche. The light in which Oakeshott casts so many of the thinkers he notices is, I think, not unsuited to illuminating the images present in his own work. His work too may be regarded as the record of a literary exploration. It is full of some of the most potent emblems and images from the collective dream which is our civilization.

Some commentators have noticed a theme in Oakeshott's thought which he shares with continental existentialism.<sup>8</sup> But while this common thread is noticed it is never acknowledged more than in passing. In what follows I explore this confluence of images for the new aspect it might provide in reading the images which occupy Oakeshott's pages. The most telling (but certainly not sole) difference between Oakeshott and many existentialist writers is his more human scale of expression. Oakeshott notices the similarities between a thinker whom he greatly admires and existentialism, making sure his reservations about the style of the latter are not missed. Thomas Hobbes 'with a sure and steady irony, does . . . what the literature of Existentialism is doing today with an exaggerated display of emotion and a false suggestion of novelty'.<sup>9</sup> I shall follow my course, then, avoiding the grandiloquent 'expressions of alienation, absurdity, angst and nausea associated with Heidegger and Sartre'<sup>10</sup> and preferring the all too human doubts and quandaries of two tragicomic characters imagined in the literary genius of Samuel Beckett.

The opening scene in *Waiting For Godot* finds a tramp sitting upon a roadside mound struggling, unsuccessfully, to remove his boot. The tone of what is to follow is set with his first utterance addressed to his companion who has just arrived: 'Nothing to be done.' As subsequent dialogue unfolds it becomes

<sup>6</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures*, ed. S.R. Letwin (New Haven, 1993), p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford, 1975), p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> See Kenneth Minogue, 'Michael Oakeshott: The Boundless Sea of Politics', *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, ed. A. de Crispegnny and K.R. Minogue (London, 1967), pp. 121–2; and Noel O'Sullivan, 'In the Perspective of Western Thought', *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott*, ed. Jesse Norman (London, 1993), p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association*, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> O'Sullivan, 'In The Perspective of Western Thought', p. 102.

apparent that the two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are in fact doing something; they are waiting for Godot. Herein, I think, lies the crux of Beckett's presentation of the human condition. The tramps *are* waiting but they are waiting *for* the arrival of their purpose personified in the character of Godot. A tension is cast between the activities of, on the one hand, doing nothing, that is, waiting for, and on the other doing something, that is, the very activity of waiting itself or if you like, waiting with one another.

In terms of discovering a purpose upon which to act the tramps fail dismally. At the penultimate moment in the final act they are presented with a chilling image of life: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.' Shortly after the initial presentation of this image Vladimir recalls it infusing its pointlessness with yet further angst. He laments: 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener.' Life is no longer even an instantaneous gleam of light — it is only a pointless and painful struggle (perhaps not to be born).

In what follows I shall develop this image of life as pointless and painful struggle and further regard what such an attitude might imply when considering what it means to conduct one's life (if this is deemed to be possible at all). In this I shall have recourse to the tandem ideas of waiting for and waiting with. Now, while the poet has the leisure of delighting in the beauty of his moribund image of life the moral theorist does not. Beckett's play serves as a highly successful medium for his portrayal of the human condition as tragic and absurd — he need go no further. A moral theorist, when confronted with a similar spectacle, must take this haunting image of an unknown and draw from it some conclusions about the character of human conduct.

One need not look too long into Oakeshott's work before encountering a view of the human condition tantamount to that given voice by Vladimir and Estragon. Oakeshott finds in religion 'practical life in its most concrete mood'.<sup>11</sup> This highest expression of the practical mode of experience, or life, can further be described as a

human condition [which] is but rarely recognized as one of totally unrelieved agony, 'a city of dreadful night'; but its commonly felt dissonances are disease, urgent wants unsatisfied, the pain of disappointed expectations, the suffering of frustrated purposes, the imposition of hostile circumstances, the sorrow of unwanted partings, burdens, ills, disasters, calamities of all sorts, and death itself, the emblem here of all such sufferings.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 292.

<sup>12</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 81.

This catalogue of the trials and tribulations of life experienced at its highest intensity could be read, ironically, as a synopsis of the activities and experiences of Vladimir and Estragon — the tramps who seemingly do nothing and go nowhere! Confronted with the pointless suffering of existence what might one reasonably be expected to do? Estragon might answer: ‘Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer.’ Yet, once again, the moral theorist must find such responses unsatisfactory. He seeks to define the good or authentic life. By doing nothing one is in danger of becoming nothing. It would appear that merely waiting for Godot is not an authentic pastime.

Oakeshott recommends what he calls a conservative disposition as one way of ameliorating the entropic tendencies of the void upon the self and this

centre[s] upon a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish or to look for something; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be . . . What is esteemed is the present . . . [not] because it is recognized to be more admirable than any possible alternative but on account of its familiarity.<sup>13</sup>

For present purposes this passage is to be taken as an attempt to describe the conditions required to understand what might be meant by human or moral conduct. The concern here is with the broader endeavour of inquiring after what it is to live rather than the social consequences of such attempts; it is a philosophical inquiry into morality rather than an inquiry into the specifics of what a morality ought to contain.

This conservative disposition entails a denial of both any ideal past from which an essential human nature can be derived as well as any possibility of a teleological schema in which a future ‘true’ humanity might be realized. In short, any claim that humanity is in an alienated condition is nonsensical by this account of life — there is no grand purpose independent of what we are in this present moment. Making use of the Godot analogy — Godot will not come, nor has he been and left — this is so because he has always been with us. Godot is under constant construction and alteration; he is not a product of some grand metaphysical insight but of the conversation between two tramps. So without knowing it they are waiting with Godot as well as one another. Oakeshott is quite capable of furnishing his readers with illustrations of his own invention:

Consider fishing. If your project is merely to catch fish it would be foolish to be unduly conservative. You will seek out the best tackle, you will discard practices which prove unsuccessful, you will not be bound by unprofitable attachments to particular localities, pieties will be fleeting, loyalties evanescent . . . But fishing is an activity that may be engaged in, not for the profit of the catch, but for its own sake; and the fisherman may

<sup>13</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 408.

return home in the evening not less content for being empty-handed . . . What matters is the enjoyment of exercising a skill (or, perhaps, merely passing the time), and this is to be had with any tackle so long as it is familiar and not grossly inappropriate.<sup>14</sup>

It should be noted that the above passage does not invalidate the activity of fishing *for* profit. Oakeshott accepts the practical necessity of instrumental relations between the self and its world but he is identifying a relationship which differs from such business nexus. The type of bond under consideration is non-instrumental and approaches the delight one finds in friendship. The joy one finds in an activity need not result from anticipated benefits at some future point in time. One might extract just as much pleasure from fishing by simply being at one's favourite spot with its familiar scenery as from a vulgar utilitarian urge to fill one's pot this evening.

The activity of a self delighting in the present is an image which can be traced to some of Oakeshott's earliest essays on religious experience. In an essay which until very recently remained unpushed Oakeshott contraposes two ideal characters — the worldly man and the religious man. Of the former he says: 'The future is the Moloch to which the present is sacrificed, and the life which leaves behind it actual accomplishments is more highly valued than that which strove to be its own achievement',<sup>15</sup> and the latter 'is simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present . . . that if we lose ourselves, we lose all'.<sup>16</sup> Now at first glance this may strike one as a rather odd reversal of the usual opposition of religion and the world. We are accustomed to find the religious life sacrificing its present comfort in the hope, to use Oakeshott's phrase, of a Good Time Coming. For Oakeshott, however, religious values do not reject the world; they are part of the world and reject an alternative set of values he designates worldly. It is:

The man of the world [who] is careless of nothing save himself and his life; but to the religious man life is too short and uncertain to be hoarded, too valuable to be spent at the pleasure of others, or of the past or of the future, too precious to be thrown away on something he is not convinced is his highest good.<sup>17</sup>

The man of the world and the man of religion are emblems of two types of self. The worldly man displays a shadowy self dwelling in a twilight betwixt an illusory past and a not yet existing future. The religious man reveals a self accepting of its present predicament. The religious self may find its condition

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>15</sup> Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and The Moral Life*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.

unsatisfactory, perhaps even intolerable, but it accepts that these incommodities are the conditions of its existence and the type of self it can bring into being.<sup>18</sup>

The relation between the practical self and the world conceived in terms of practical experience (this could be expressed as the relation between the self and life) is far from tranquil. Familiar surrounds and situations facilitate a feeling of identity for the individual. One delights in the familiar because it provides an opportunity in which to construct an identity or self. The self invests itself in its world through its construction or understanding of it, that is, its activity in the world. The self is more surely reflected in a familiar world. The character of life, however, is far from conducive to the establishment of any such familiarities. The existential angst described by Oakeshott derives from the mutability of the self to which it must submit if it is to live. The very essence of life is:

Mortality . . . death is the central fact of life. I do not of course mean merely human mortality, the fact we must one day cease to be; I mean the far more devastating mortality of pleasures and pains, desires, achievements, emotions and affections.<sup>19</sup>

Oakeshott finds in a conservative disposition an attempt, if not to stay the on-going stream, at least to slow it down. A delight in familiarity strengthens the image of self which, in turn, allows a greater or fuller capacity for delight. The ‘city of dreadful night’ comes about when it is realized that we as living beings who seek identity are confronted with inevitable change. Life shows herself to us only as a creature of constant transfiguration and it is for us, who wish to live, to establish some principle of identity. Far from the maternal images of nurture that we usually associate with life; on this account she is pathologically bent on the destruction of her children.

The lived or practical world posits change as its central principle. It follows that any entity dwelling within this world must also be infected with change or, to use Oakeshott’s term, mortality. An agent ‘has a “history” but no nature: he is in conduct what he becomes’.<sup>20</sup> But to speak of a ‘historical’ entity (as opposed to a natural process) at all under such conditions begs the question of how such an individual might be constituted as a unity in the first place. Oakeshott suggests that ‘the principle on which practical thinking establishes its conception of the self is a principle of separation or distinction . . . The self,

<sup>18</sup> Hence we may make sense of F.H. Bradley’s aphoristic description of optimism as ‘The world is the best of all possible worlds and every thing in it is a necessary evil’. F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (London, 1893), p. xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 273.

<sup>20</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 41.

in practical experience, is what is separate, unique and self contained.’<sup>21</sup> The practical self is an identity which is constructed in terms of its otherness to the world in which it lives, that is, a world of other individuals and things. The self, or subject, can only be understood, and understand itself, through its capacity to divorce itself from the very world out of which it might generate a self-understanding, that is, its object.

I began by specifically referring to religion when discussing Oakeshott’s conception of life, for it is in this frame of reference that the dissonances between the self and its lived world are most poignantly felt. The full impact of the realization of ‘always becoming and never being’ may cause one to become dispirited but such

depression springs from the exclusion of hopes that were false and the discovery that guides, reputed to have superhuman wisdom and skill are, in fact, of a somewhat different character. If the doctrine deprives us of a model laid up in heaven to which we should approximate our behaviour, at least it does not lead us into a morass where every choice is equally good or equally to be deplored . . . [This] should depress only those who have lost their nerve.<sup>22</sup>

The practical mode of experience is made up of a world of ideas which designate doing so that ‘[t]he self appears as activity. It is not a “thing” or a “substance” capable of being active; it is activity’.<sup>23</sup> (Viewed in this light the strangeness of Estragon’s assertion, ‘nothing to be done’, becomes clearer. For the very act of uttering — this denial of self — is a denial of that which, at the same moment, the utterance is bringing into being — that is, the self.)<sup>24</sup>

Morality, then, does not have its referent in the product of an activity but in the activity itself which, as we have seen, is the self. It is with this in mind that we can appreciate the observation that ‘Cervantes created a character in whom the disaster of each encounter with the world was powerless to impugn it as a self-enactment’.<sup>25</sup> Activity, which is the coming of a self into existence, specifies an identity which acts. The self and activity are not conditions of one another, they are co-existent. So the poet might understandably ask: ‘How can we tell the dancer from the dance?’<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 269.

<sup>22</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 496.

<sup>24</sup> See Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 257: ‘he who determines to do away with his life is no more conducting his life than the man who conducts it satisfying his ambition’. Cf. Schopenhauer’s essay ‘On Suicide’, in *Essays and Aphorisms* (London, 1951).

<sup>25</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 241.

Here the dance is used as a metaphor for life which Oakeshott has himself had occasion to use.<sup>27</sup> But Oakeshott's more genteel style lends itself to a metaphor more sober than the passionate imaginings of pagan dance in Yeats, and it should not be surprising to find Oakeshott more often preferring to sit and converse than to dance. The altered image does nothing to change the point of the metaphor — one has merely problematized the distinction between the speaker and his speech or, even more generally, the actor and his action.

Oakeshott's metaphor of 'the conversation' is central to his presentation of the lived world. It invites a more detailed consideration of the character of this mode of experience.

In conversation 'facts' appear to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made, 'certainties' are shown to be combustible not by being brought into contact with other 'certainties' or with doubt, but by being kindled with ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another.<sup>28</sup>

In conversation the self is compelled to undergo constant transformation yet it escapes destruction:

The disposition to cultivate the 'freedom' inherent in agency (and not to regret it) and to recognize conduct in terms of its authenticity . . . [has assumed] the proportions of a new image of 'human nature', not Adam, not Prometheus, but Proteus — a character distinguished on account of limitless powers of self-transformation without self-destruction.<sup>29</sup>

Godot has become, not an essential expression of human purpose or being as was Adam, nor humanity's friend and saviour as was Prometheus, but the very thoughts and significations by which humanity constitutes itself. The self, or the subjective side of meaning, can be recognized as a procedure of becoming but a horizon of meaning has now established limits within which a self can be contained.

Oakeshott distinguishes two levels on which the self discourses, that is, comes into being. The first could be described as a self's conversation with itself and the second more conventionally refers to a self's communication

<sup>26</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', *Collected Poems* (London, 1933).

<sup>27</sup> See Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 63: 'Every such vernacular of moral converse . . . emerges as a ritual of utterance and response, a continuously extemporized dance whose participants are alive to one another's movements and to the ground upon which they tread.' Oakeshott also occasionally makes use of Yeats. An instance of this is the complete rendition of 'All Things Can Tempt Me' in his essay 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind'. See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 540–1.

<sup>28</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 489.

<sup>29</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 241.

with other selves. Oakeshott calls these respective activities self-enactment and self-disclosure. These terms do not refer to a dichotomy dividing an act into internal and external sides, as one might speak of an agent's intention and its resultant consequences. Neither do they consist in one's own opinion of one's behaviour in contrast to the opinions of others. Self-enactment and self-disclosure are not moral abstractions designating the 'subjective' and 'objective' sides of an action. Each is a particular type of activity and as such each is to be taken as activity in its full sense (that is, each type of activity has both a subject and an object).

These types of activity may be explicated by continuing Oakeshott's metaphor of conversation. Oakeshott describes self-disclosure as 'the intercourse of agents, each concerned with procuring imagined and wished for satisfactions (which need not be self-gratifications) and in seeking them in the responses of another or other selves'.<sup>30</sup> Because of this social or inter-subjective referent self-disclosure is 'immersed in contingency, it is interminable and it is liable to frustration, disappointment and defeat'.<sup>31</sup> Self-disclosure bears the full force of the ever-changing character of life — an agent may be sure of his desires (both for himself and his world) but can never be sure of satisfactorily securing these wants. The wants and satisfactions of other agents which lie outside an individual's sphere of influence must be taken into account.

In terms of self-disclosure Beckett's tramps are of the utmost importance to one another. Each must wait with the other even if neither party recognizes this as a performance. Further, both characters have an extensive acquaintance with the difficulties associated with self-disclosure whether these spring from one's innocent misunderstanding of the other or from the sheer, bloody-minded intransigence of his fellow. There is also a problem of adequately comprehending one's own circumstance, and this is made no more certain considering the longed for end to their waiting for Godot.

Acknowledging the profound degree of uncertainty which surrounds self-disclosure does not preclude one from noticing some of the conditions which encourage this activity. Oakeshott follows Hegel's famous dialectic of lordship and bondage in finding that an essential condition of self-disclosure is a recognition of one's fellows.<sup>32</sup> This consists in 'a genuine and unqualified recognition of other selves. All other selves are acknowledged to be ends and not merely means to our ends.'<sup>33</sup> Oakeshott's notion of recognition is exemplified by Vladimir and Estragon and this stands in stark contrast to the relation of a lord to his bondsman characterized by the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind* (New York, 1967), pp. 228–40.

Even in their exchange of outlandish insults the tramps recognize each other as fellow subjects. Estragon hits upon this new game and announces: ‘That’s the idea, let’s abuse each other.’ The ensuing banter provides a forum in which conventions develop. This situation lends a greater possibility of success to the activity of disclosing oneself. Familiarity with and investment in a common practice contribute to the effective self-disclosure of an agent by

stipulating general conditions for . . . establishing relationships more durable than those which emerge and melt away in transactions to satisfy a succession of contingent wants, and in articulating rules and duties which are indifferent to the outcome of the actions they govern, it may be said to endow human conduct with a formality in which its contingency is somewhat abated.<sup>34</sup>

This is a distant cry from Pozzo’s derisive ordering of Lucky to ‘Think pig!’ and Lucky’s subsequent soliloquy of nonsense.

The disclosure of selves which occurs between Pozzo and Lucky must be expressible in moral terms. Oakeshott would call such a relation inauthentic or disingenuous.<sup>35</sup> Pozzo, on the one hand, experiences the world through his bondsman — his bondsman whom he holds in contempt becomes his world and so his world becomes contemptible. Pozzo is for himself but not in himself. Lucky, on the other hand, experiences the world not for himself but for his master — in himself he is a mere means to another’s ends. Self-disclosure is inhibited in both these instances because incomplete selves are being disclosed.

A moral action is carried out by a ‘human being [who] is “free” not because he has “free-will”, but because he is *in* himself what he is *for* himself’.<sup>36</sup> Now while Vladimir and Estragon are not in and for themselves in their wait for Godot — the relation they share with one another is precisely that of two autonomous and mutually recognizing subjects. Each affirms the agency of the other even in the demands they place upon one another and the obstructions they place in each other’s way. In self-disclosure the courses plotted by agents will invariably collide and this accounts for Oakeshott’s description of the civil condition thus recalling the words of the Daoist sage Chuang Tzu:

When the springs dry up, the fish are altogether on dry land. They will moisten each other with their dampness and keep each other wet with

<sup>33</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 502.

<sup>34</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> See Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 499–501.

<sup>36</sup> Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, p. 19.

their slime. But this is not to be compared with their forgetting each other in a river or a lake.<sup>37</sup>

The civil condition, in terms of self-disclosure, requires that participants occupy a non-hierarchical relation to each other, and this is exemplified in the activity of waiting with another. The activity of waiting for presumes a hierarchical relation. One agent is a condition for the other's activity. The agent for whatever reason (real or imagined) cannot see his activity for what it is and this is not conducive to a full and authentic expression of self.

In self-disclosure the central fact of life, that is the inevitable mortality of the self, is somewhat mollified; an identity, in spite of its susceptibility to change, is brought into being. There is, however, a level of activity at which the self is afforded a greater degree of shelter from the vicissitudes of life than in self-disclosure. Oakeshott designates this moral category self-enactment and he means by this 'conduct in respect of the sentiments or motives in which actions are chosen and performed'; and

by a motive I mean, not an antecedent drive or tendency or disposition to choose one action . . . in preference to another, but an agent's sentiment in choosing and performing the actions he chooses and performs . . . the motive of an action is the action itself considered in terms of the sentiment . . . in which it is chosen and performed.<sup>38</sup>

Motives are not intentions but actions and they are concerned 'not . . . with recognizing agency in others but with an agent's exercise of his powers in respect of himself'.<sup>39</sup> In self-enactment we explore what or how it is to wait with or for *oneself*. Waiting for, whether we realize it or not, is always a performance — it is always a waiting with oneself or another; and I have already had occasion to point out that waiting for is an activity which denies itself. Waiting for, in this sense, is inauthentic activity. Further, an activity which does not recognize itself as an activity is tantamount to a self not understanding itself. 'Waiting for' is a failure in self-understanding. What is going on here is a philosophical and not a moral critique of the inauthentic activity of waiting for. Waiting for is inauthentic because it is a failure of the self to *understand* itself — and not enact itself — it cannot help but enact itself.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Michael Oakeshott, 'Introduction' to *Leviathan* (Oxford, 1946), p. lxvi.

<sup>38</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, pp. 71–4. Cf. Oakeshott's interpretation of the use Hobbes makes of the term endeavour: 'Introduction' to *Leviathan*, p. xxxi.

<sup>39</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 75.

It might seem on the above account that there can be no 'objective' criterion by which an agent's enactment of himself can be judged. Further, one might find oneself recommending some notoriously despicable characters as exemplary cases of self-enactment ('men of action' such as Mussolini, Lenin and Hitler). After all they were 'larger than life' enactments of a self. Inauthentic self-enactment occurs only in as much as an agent's 'enactments and re-enactments of himself . . . may so far forget himself as to affront his own integrity'.<sup>41</sup> Such a condition might be tested by using a device akin to Nietzsche's eternal recurrence.<sup>42</sup> If the self one enacts is a hostile, xenophobic or capricious being the theorist has nothing more to say on the matter providing that self is content with its situation. This self, in the theoretical terms of self-enactment, must be considered satisfactory. The sentiments and motives which manifest the self have no extra-moral appeal. One's sentiments may be more or less conducive to conversation (or whatever else one might value) but at the end of the day one's enactment must be deemed contingent, that is, morally equal with those chosen by any other acting self. The sentiment in which an agent chooses to act may determine how others view him; they may add gravity to or ameliorate a breach of duty or convention. The pity or compassion with which one might kill, say in a case of euthanasia, has been offered as mitigating the moral heinousness of the 'crime'; and it should not be surprising to find Oakeshott joining with other Idealists in attacking moral utilitarianism in all its guises.

Beckett's tramps must be found inauthentic in their wait for Godot. Their waiting for is a tragic forgetting (or Heidegger might say covering-up; *verdecken*) of waiting with oneself. But this is a philosophical and not a moral failing. In terms of self-enactment they stand beyond reproach as indeed must all selves. Any theoretical condemnation would require a 'meta-discourse' which at once participated in and stood outside the world of practical experience and this is impossible.

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger makes a similar point about the inescapability of activity from judgments of its authenticity. See M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford, 1962), Div. 1, ch. 1, sect. 9: 'As modes of Being *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* . . . are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness. But inauthenticity does not signify any "less" or "lower" degree of Being.'

<sup>41</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, pp. 73–4.

<sup>42</sup> See F.W. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Sect. 341; and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 'On the Vision and the Riddle', *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth, 1954). Cf. R.W. Emerson, 'in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted.' Cited in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, 1911), p. 32.

Oakeshott may begin to sound like something of a nihilist in his rejection of any hard and fast system of objective moral values. It pays to notice a subtlety which is often overlooked and may do much to deliver Oakeshott from such a charge. This important qualification is noticed by Oakeshott's early contemporary, R.G. Collingwood, who cautions against possible misunderstandings of his own, very similar, moral theory. Collingwood summarizes his moral arguments as

To say 'that act is good' is to say 'that act is the act I choose to do. [But] this doctrine is capable of the most disastrous misunderstanding if its essential subjectivity is forgotten . . . I say of some great criminal . . . when asked what I think of the rights and wrongs of it, 'I can form no idea; I can't [place] myself in the position of these people clearly enough to judge of their motives. Some people have got to do it: the judge . . . and so on, are bound to make that effort: but I haven't the leisure and I begged to be excused.'<sup>43</sup>

Collingwood makes several points here which pre-empt Oakeshott's notion of self-enactment, not the least is the great uncertainty which must surround one's judgments of another's motives.<sup>44</sup> Oakeshott is aware that some may find his moral theory to be unacceptable but insists that this is not his failing but, if it can be called a failing at all, lies within the nature of morality, that is, the language of morality. He concludes his account of self-enactment by acknowledging that:

Our moral language may often be confused in its identification of 'virtuous' or 'vicious' sentiments, but it is not undecided whether or not to applaud malice or to disapprove a motive of good faith or generosity . . . The compunctions of self-enactment are, then, demands an agent makes upon himself . . . [and] which cannot be required of him by another . . . but which are not merely his own good opinion of himself: the requirement of thinking about himself as he should while doing as he ought. Conduct which notably fails to observe this condition is *shameful*.<sup>45</sup>

If Oakeshott is found to be wanting in providing a solution to the constant crisis which is the human predicament this is only in keeping with his wider cautiousness and scepticism at those 'rationalists' who find in the human condition only problems to be solved. It may reveal not a little of what Oakeshott is about by noticing what he once wrote of Nietzsche:

<sup>43</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy for M-T-1921: Written at Various Times, May–October, 1921* (1921), Mss. Bodleian Library, V446. B4., pp. 110–12.

<sup>44</sup> See Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, pp. 76–7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

In art . . . diagnosis, is an end in itself. The remedy is not something that *follows*; if it is anywhere it lies in the diagnosis itself, in the removal of the corrupt consciousness. And if we are to understand Nietzsche, we must understand him as, in this sense, an artist.<sup>46</sup>

The diagnosis which Oakeshott wishes to offer the self who is confronted with the abyss of constant flux might sound like one of Wittgenstein's concluding propositions from the *Tractatus*: 'If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.'<sup>47</sup> Attending to the religious and poetic dimensions of Oakeshott's thought shows it to be somewhat more substantial than a series of sporadic complaints about the current state of Western culture and politics. Oakeshott's philosophical thought occurs in terms far beyond these local contingencies; he is commenting upon the supreme task of 'making the difficult exchange of hope for faith'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> M.J. Oakeshott, Book Review of Janko Lavrin, *Nietzsche: an Approach*, *The Cambridge Journal*, 1 (1947–8), p. 450.

<sup>47</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1922), Prop. 6.43 1.1.

<sup>48</sup> Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, p. 65.