THE PLACE OF ENLIGHTENMENT IN MICHAEL OAKESHOTT’S CONCEPTION OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

ABSTRACT There is now widespread suspicion of, and even hostility towards, the liberal educational ideal on the ground that it embodies an elitist ideal available only to the few. This article examines a radical revision of the classical ideal of liberal education by Michael Oakeshott, the essence of which is to respond to the charge of elitism by injecting into the liberal ideal of education a concept of enlightenment which, it is suggested, is somewhat akin to that sketched by Spinoza in his short *Tract on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*), in which Spinoza argues that the good for man consists in overcoming powerful illusions that inspire feelings of alienation (as we would now term them) from the world. The attempt to present Oakeshott’s vision of liberal education in a Spinozistic perspective – as a quest, that is, for enlightenment in the face of illusion – may be suggestive in so far as it links his educational ideal to the concept of a ‘way’, or path, found in ancient and oriental thought but uncommon in the modern European world.

1. THE CONTEMPORARY INCOMPREHENSION OF THE CLASSICAL IDEAL OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

One of the principal victims of contemporary democracy is the ideal of liberal education. Although attacks on the liberal ideal date back at least as far as the advent of mass democracy in the nineteenth century, when critics already condemned the ideal as elitist and exclusionist, the attacks have been intensified since 1945 by several
groups of opponents. One is radical feminists, who dismiss the ideal as a product of patriarchy. A second is defenders of multiculturalism, for whom it is the expression of Eurocentric values. A third is post colonial thinkers, for whom the classical liberal ideal is merely a cloak for Western imperial hegemony. Most radical of all the opposition groups, however, is defenders of the postmodern deconstruction project, the essence of which is the endeavour to reveal power as the reality at the heart of what the liberal ideal regarded as neutral, universally valid moral truths, with the result that the foundational texts of the classical liberal curriculum are dismissed by postmodern sympathizers as nothing more than carefully veiled strategies for social and political exclusion. The outcome is that the liberal educational ideal is now regarded not merely with incomprehension but with widespread hatred.

What then is to be done about the crisis in liberal education? Three main responses may be identified. The first is simply to reject the classical liberal ideal. In that case, the danger is that all that will remain of the liberal educational ideal is a multiplicity of specialized modules devoted to women's studies, gay studies, black studies, Islamic studies, and so on. While important scholarship may of course be carried out in this idiom, what is lacking is any coherent overall conception of education.

The second response is to try to shore up the liberal educational ideal by refurbishing its original foundations. Good examples of this response are Leo Strauss's attempt to overcome relativism by rehabilitating the concept of a natural order, and Charles Taylor's insistence that we have to discover 'new paths to God.' Unfortunately, it is not clear that there can be such a thing as a 'natural order', while the concept of God is only available to those blessed by faith.

The third response, which is the one that will be considered here, takes the form of a radical revision by Michael Oakeshott of the ultimate goal of the classical ideal of liberal education. The essence of this revision is the injection into it of a philosophical ideal of enlightenment somewhat akin to the one found in Spinoza's short Tract on the Emendation of the Intellect (Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione), which is the only work of Spinoza on which Oakeshott commented in detail. In that tract, Spinoza argues that the good for man consists in overcoming powerful illusions which inspire feelings of alienation (as we would now term them) from the world, and thereby achieving a sense of continuity with the whole order of being, in a way that assigns no privileged place to human beings. The aim of philosophy, from this point of view, is to identify various kinds of dualism which are created by the illusions in question and show that what appear to be basic separations or cleavages in man's relation to the world, to society and to himself, are in reality distinctions which may indeed create tensions in human life but do not warrant the sense of ultimate meaninglessness which the liberal ideal of education seeks to overcome.

It is against the general background of this conception of enlightenment that I now want to consider more closely what Oakeshott's reconstruction project involves.

2. THE CLASSICAL CONCEPT OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Despite the fact that Oakeshott is well known for his insistence that philosophy has no practical implications, Martyn Thompson has rightly remarked that everything Oakeshott ever wrote is nevertheless designed to defend the ideal of a liberal education. What, it may be asked, does Oakeshott think this ideal involves?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to begin by remembering that Oakeshott's intellectual sympathies are rooted in what may be called the classical conception developed by nineteenth century thinkers like Matthew Arnold, J.H. Newman and J.S. Mill. This immediately creates a problem, which is that the earlier thinkers could take it for granted that their contemporaries at least knew what they were talking about, even if some of those contemporaries disagreed with them, whereas that is no longer the case today. As David Conway has observed, 'What Arnold and other champions of liberal education meant by this term is no longer generally understood.' The reason for this incomprehension is not far to seek: it consists in the comprehensive assault on the classical conception already mentioned above. In this situation, it is necessary to recall the main characteristics of the classical ideal of liberal education before going any further.

3. THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CLASSICAL IDEAL OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

The first characteristic is an emphasis on active rather than passive learning. As Newman wrote, 'knowledge is something more than a sort of passive reception of scraps and details; it is a something… which will never issue from the most strenuous efforts of a set of teachers, with no mutual sympathies and no intercommunion… teaching… a set of youths who do not know them and do not know each other, on a large number of subjects, different in kind, and connected by no wide philosophy…'

As this quotation indicates, Newman's stress on active learning has two important implications. One is the need for close personal contact between teacher and student. The other implication is Newman's likely contempt for much of what is today imposed on students at schools and universities in the name of education, which he would re-
gard as mere drudgery. How much better it is, Newman wrote, ‘for the active and thoughtful intellect… to eschew College and University altogether, than to submit to a drudgery so ignoble!’ There are powerful echoes of this viewpoint in, for example, Oakeshott’s early revolt against the syllabus he had studied for his degree at Cambridge, expressed in his comprehensive critique of that syllabus as largely valueless.

The second characteristic of the classical concept of a liberal education, emphasized in particular by J.S. Mill, is that it is not restricted to cultivating the intellect but is equally concerned with moral and aesthetic education. ‘It is a very imperfect education,’ Mill wrote, ‘which trains the intelligence only, but not the will. No one can dispense with an education directed expressly to the moral as well as to the intellectual part of our being…’. It is worth noting that Mill immediately added that it is beyond the power of institutions like schools and universities to educate morally since ‘Moral… education consist[s] in training the feelings and the daily habits; and these are, in the main, beyond the sphere and inaccessible to the control of public education. It is the home, the family, which give us the moral… education we really receive; and this is completed… by society, and the opinions and feelings with which we are there surrounded.’

So far as the place of aesthetic education in the classical ideal of a liberal education is concerned, nothing could be more instructive than Oakeshott’s essay on ‘The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind’, as well as his related emphasis on the role of the non-instrumental concept of play in morality and civil association.

The third characteristic of the classical conception of a liberal education is that it is not narrowly confined to literature and the arts but is comprehensive, in the sense of requiring a knowledge of the natural sciences as well as of the humanities. ‘Short as life is,’ Mill observed, ‘we are not so badly off that our scholars need be ignorant of the laws and properties of the world they live in, or our scientific men destitute of poetic feeling and artistic cultivation.’

The final characteristic of the classical conception is its ultimate aim, which is the achievement of a synoptic or overall interpretation of human experience. This aim was acknowledged by thinkers like Mill and Arnold to be especially important in modern secular cultures in which religion no longer provides a comprehensive meaning for life. For Mill, ‘the crown and consummation of a liberal education’ is ‘a comprehensive and connected view of things… already learned separately’. From this point of view, then, the proper purpose of a university is not to provide vocational or

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6 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 221.
11 Ibid., p. 219.
professional training but to assist in the formation of a synoptic overview of life by building on preliminary knowledge acquired at school.

These, then, are the main characteristics of the classical conception of liberal education inherited by the twentieth century from the nineteenth. In the present context, attention will be concentrated mainly on Oakeshott’s interpretation of the last characteristic – that is, the overall interpretation of human existence offered by a liberal education. More precisely, it will be suggested that Oakeshott offers a radical revision of the earlier synoptic visions of Newman, Arnold and Mill that makes the liberal aim more appropriate to our own age and easier to defend against the various critics of that ideal.

4. OAKESHOTT’S REVISION OF THE OVERALL INTERPRETATION OF THE MEANING OF LIFE FOUND IN THE CLASSICAL IDEAL OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

The essence of Oakeshott’s revision, as was suggested above in connection with Spinoza, is his incorporation into the classical liberal ideal of education of a concept of enlightenment in the form of what may be termed a philosophy of modesty. I think this is a more accurate way of describing his philosophy than as simply sceptical, which is too negative a term. The scepticism label fails, in particular, to do justice to the way in which Oakeshott’s ideal of enlightenment enabled him to sustain a more positive view of human life than many of his contemporaries managed to achieve during a century marked by pessimistic visions of man’s condition as one of alienation from Being, or meaningless waiting, or some other equally nihilistic feature.

The best way of approaching Oakeshott’s revisionist project is by recalling the talks and essays he composed at various stages of his life on the purpose of a university education. In one talk, he told the newly arrived LSE undergraduates that ‘You are not here just to get a degree – that is a by-product’, adding that ‘Nor are you here to “follow a course” which would pass on information.’ Elsewhere, he told them that a university education is not just about ‘improving one’s mind’ by a general programme about culture, since that creates no more than ‘the vague and fragmentary equipment of the “culture” philistine.’ What then does Oakeshott think a university education is about?

In the first instance, Oakeshott wrote, it is ‘an education in languages rather than literatures’ – an education, that is, which involves ‘the use and management of explanatory languages (or modes of thought) and not prescriptive languages.’

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12 M. Oakeshott, ‘On Arriving at a University’ in idem, What is History?…, p. 337.
Learning explanatory languages, he emphasized, must not be confused with learning skills, which is now often considered to be the chief purpose of universities. There is, he wrote, ‘an important difference between learning which is concerned with the degree of understanding necessary to practice a skill, and learning which is expressly focussed upon an enterprise of understanding and explaining. In the one case, what is to be learned appears as a result detached from the process in which it was acquired; but in the other case, what is to be learned is a language, which alone permits us to participate in an enterprise of understanding which may or may not yield detachable results.’

In his first major philosophical work, *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott explained that ‘learning a language’ means mastering one or more of three ‘modes’ of explanation which he termed the practical, scientific and historical modes. To these he subsequently added a fourth mode, which was the poetic or aesthetic one. This familiar aspect of Oakeshott’s thought, however, provides no overarching purpose, beyond an unsatisfactory conception of philosophy characterized in *Experience and Its Modes* as unconditional or ‘non-modal’ understanding – a conception which Oakeshott later rejected. In order to understand his mature view of that purpose it is necessary to turn elsewhere in his writings. A particularly instructive place is the talk already mentioned above which Oakeshott gave each year to newly arrived undergraduates at the LSE around two decades after the publication of *Experience and Its Modes*.

In that talk, Oakeshott told the students he knew very well that nearly all of them arrive at university with ‘nothing but a few books, a few half-baked ideas and a few tunes in their heads’. In what way, then, does a liberal education seek to transform this rather poorly equipped self with which they begin? Oakeshott’s reply, as has been seen, was that it is not by the acquisition of facts, or skills, or training for a career: it is, he told them, by the acquisition of ‘what in the end, on [your] distant death beds, [you] will recognize as one of the things most worth having: a mind and some thoughts of your own’. This, then, is the ultimate aim of a liberal education: not just to understand a modal language but to have a voice or self of one’s own, rather than the semi-literate, off-the-peg one we pick up during the first two or three decades of life. But how exactly does Oakeshott think one goes about acquiring the mind of one’s own which he believes a liberal education seeks to encourage?

The answer we appear to get from many of his writings seems to be that the kind of self he values is mainly characterized by a quasi-existentialist process of choosing in an endless process of self-construction. Writing for example about the nature of individuality, he explains that ‘By the morality of individuality I mean, in the first

19 Ibid.
place, the disposition to make choices for oneself to the maximum possible extent, choices concerning activities, occupations, beliefs, opinions, duties and responsibilities. And further to approve of this sort of conduct – self-determined conduct – as conduct proper to a human being..."20

The voluntarist dimension of Oakeshott's thought has quite properly led one scholar to treat his view of man as in this respect comparable to Sartre's.21 Taking Oakeshott's writings as a whole, however, it is possible to identify another side to his thought, as Debra Candreva and Eric Kos have done, which echoes Plato, for whom acquiring a self of one's own involves not only choosing but, what is far more difficult, a process of enlightenment that involves escaping from illusion.22 An echo of Plato is heard when, for example, Oakeshott describes the world in which we live as a world characterized by 'the distraction of illusion', from which man's greatest need is to escape. It is on this side of Oakeshott's thought that we find an ideal of enlightenment which in certain respects echoes Plato's attempt to escape from the cave of ordinary existence, although Oakeshott greatly differs from Plato in his identification of the precise nature of the main illusions from which we have to purge the mind. Exactly what does Oakeshott believe these illusions to be?

Oakeshott's writings are concerned, I think, with four illusions in particular, all of which are based on various kinds of hubris or egotism from which nineteenth century defenders of the classical ideal of liberal education had failed to purge it. Very briefly, the four illusions may be described as:

- the anthropocentric illusion;
- the absolutist illusion;
- the voluntarist illusion;
- the ahistorical illusion.

Each illusion would of course require a volume to do it justice. Here, I shall say only a few words about them.

The first (i.e. anthropocentric) illusion consists of the belief that man occupies a privileged position at the centre of the universe which entitles him to regard it as little more than a set of resources for gratifying his wants.

The belief in man's central position in the universe remained intact in the classical nineteenth century defenders of a liberal education, despite the implicit attack on that belief in such developments as Darwinian doctrine. This belief goes back, of course, at least as far as the story of the creation on the first page of the Book of Genesis.

It is this anthropocentric view of the universe which Oakeshott rejected above all in the version of the story of the Tower of Babel contained in the last book he pub-


lished during his life, On History and Other Essays. The core of the anthropocentric illusion he identified as a fundamentally instrumental view of the entire external world most completely expressed in modern defenders of Bacon’s vision of the task of the New Atlantis as being the exploitation of nature for the improvement of man’s estate.

This instrumental outlook, Oakeshott believed, could not be overcome by philosophy: the only escape is through a kind of spiritual reorientation through which we become sensitive to the place of play at the heart of a civilized culture, and with it, to the ‘poetic’ character of all human activity.23 As his late version of the story of the Tower of Babel makes amply clear, however, he was not optimistic about such a development ever occurring.

The second (i.e. absolutist) illusion consists of belief in the possibility of absolute or unconditional knowledge, and the consequent possibility of a radical distinction between Appearance from Reality.

Together with the anthropocentric illusion, a fundamental feature of western intellectual life from the Greeks to our own age has been the belief that the ultimate task of human thought is to distinguish between Appearance and Reality. In the ancient world, this distinction was made by metaphysics. In the medieval world, it was made by theology. In the modern world, the distinction has been made by appealing to the methodology of natural science as the key to absolute reality.

The essence of the philosophical position Oakeshott developed in Experience and Its Modes, in contrast with traditional western philosophy, was to reject the distinction between Appearance and Reality on the ground that Appearance itself always has a certain reality, which means that the true problem is to distinguish different kinds of reality, rather than to engage in an arbitrary process of upgrading some kinds and downgrading others. Putting the same thought differently, Oakeshott’s central concern was to assert the conditional (or what he termed ‘modal’) character of all knowledge. There can, that is, only be different kinds of knowledge, since none is intrinsically privileged above the other kinds. The task of philosophy is to identify the principal kinds of knowledge, in so far as they constitute logically autonomous modes of understanding, in the sense that each has its own way of identifying what it takes to be real, and its own criteria of relevance for establishing that reality.

Oakeshott’s defence of the conditionality of all knowledge must not be mistaken for an advocacy of relativism. The very concept of relativism presupposes the existence of an absolute vantage point from which what is ‘relative’ can be defined, but for Oakeshott no such vantage point exists. This does not mean, however, that there cannot be objective criteria for determining what constitutes reality and what is rel-

relevant to validating knowledge of it, as relativism holds. For Oakeshott, acknowledge-
ment of the modal or conditional nature of all knowledge simply means acknowledging
the existence of different criteria in different modal contexts.

It is not, however, the more technical philosophical issues posed by Oakeshott’s
insistence on the conditionality of knowledge that is mainly of interest in the
present context. It is, rather, the fact that this insistence helps to overcome the
sense of alienation from the world in which we live fostered by the traditional assu-
ption that it is only a world of Appearance, devoid of ultimate Reality, and
hence inevitably a place of exile. From somewhat different philosophical angles,
thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger pursued a path resembling Oakeshott’s, but
amongst the thinkers who have tried to reconcile men to the idea that existence
here in this world is the only existence there can be for us, I think Oakeshott of-
fers the most persuasive argument, because it is the one most completely free from
the surviving metaphysical elements that characterize thinkers like Nietzsche and
Heidegger.

The third (i.e. voluntarist) illusion consists of the belief that the political and so-
cial order can be reshaped by rational planning in accordance with whatever vision
of well-being we may choose.

A major characteristic of modern western progressive political thought since the
French Revolution is a belief in the power of human will to shape history in accord-
ance with whatever visions of the good life we may entertain. It is this belief which
is the target of his critique of ‘rationalism’ or, in the more common phrase, of ideo-
logical politics. For Oakeshott, that is, rationalism is inspired by more than an epis-
temological mistake about the possibility of guiding practice by abstract rational
principles: it is inspired by the false belief that by doing so, human beings can detach
themselves from their embeddedness in tradition and thereby prepare the way for
them to become self-creators.

Oakeshott has not of course been alone in criticizing this powerful voluntarist il-
usion, according to which the social world is in principle at the disposal of human
will. Hayek, for example, has opposed to it a belief in the merits of spontaneous or
unplanned order, as against artificially constructed order. Underlying Oakeshott’s cri-
tique, however, there is not only an epistemological emphasis on the unformulabil-
ity of practical knowledge but a profound ethical belief in the virtue of piety – piety,
that is, in its pagan sense, in which it means a respect for the conditions of human
existence not of man’s making and not under the control of human will. In this re-
spect the concept of enlightenment which characterizes Oakeshott’s overview of the
final goal of a liberal education is closer to that of Burke and Santayana than to that
of Hayek, despite superficial similarities.

The fourth (i.e ahistorical) illusion is the belief that the self has a rational core
which transcends all specific contexts and creates the possibility of an universally
valid moral and political ideal.

Ever since Descartes, modern theorizing about the self has tended to assume the
possibility of an atemporal, disembedded core identity located outside all the exter-
nal relations. For Oakeshott, by contrast, human existence is permeated by an historicity which cannot be transcended. Failure to grasp the historicity of human existence, Oakeshott maintains, has had at least three unfortunate consequences in the modern world.

In the first place, it has entailed an inability to understand political and social institutions, which are frequently treated merely as tools for implementing human aims, rather than as expressions of human existence which cannot be fully understood as creations of consciously exercised reason and will.

Secondly, belief in a disembedded, ahistorical identity has been associated with a view of the self as divisible into two different parts, viz. a material and a rational part, with the implication that morality consists of bullying the material part into subordination. Oakeshott always rejected Christian and Kantian dualism of this kind in favour of a concept of the self in which the enlightenment of the passions, rather than their suppression, is the aim of moral education.

Last but not least, failure to grasp the historicity of human existence has encouraged the rationalist belief that the ideal political order is one constructed in accordance with universally valid moral principles that can be arrived at independently of the historical context in which we live. For Oakeshott, needless to say, universally valid moral principles are always an abstraction from, or what he terms an ‘abridgement’ of, tradition.

CONCLUSION

Such, then, are the four great illusions which have permeated the modern western world – illusions from which the classical version of the liberal education ideal failed to purge it. What the illusions have in common is various forms of human egotism or *hubris*. By targeting the illusions, and in that way purging the liberal educational ideal of *hubris*, Oakeshott reconstructed it by injecting into it an ideal of enlightenment which may be described, I have suggested, as a philosophy of modesty. Since a philosophy of this kind is what the western tradition has generally lacked, with the rare exception of attempts to provide it by such thinkers as Montaigne and Hume, we may be the more grateful to Oakeshott for doing so.

So far as the implications of Oakeshott’s philosophy of modesty for his revision of the classical ideal of a liberal education are concerned, the principal modification is that the ultimate purpose of such an education may be described as an enlightenment which permits life to be lived free from illusions about our relation to the world, to society and to ourselves – illusions which have fostered feelings of absurdity, an unthinking exploitation of nature, and a foolish faith in state planning as the answer to all human misfortunes. It is in this way, then, that Oakeshott’s reconstruction of the classical liberal educational ideal has sought to meet what he considered to be our greatest need, which (as was noted above) is ‘freedom (not supplied by nature) from the distraction of illusion.’
It remains to mention two aspects of the role of enlightenment in Oakeshott’s reconstruction project to which I have not done justice here. One is his insistence that this project cannot be a didactic one, as modern theories of liberal education tend to be. It must, rather, be conversational. In this respect, Oakeshott’s view of education stands, of course, in the Socratic tradition of western thought.

The other aspect not considered adequately here is the emotional content of the ultimate liberal aim. As Oakeshott remarked in his early essay on ‘Philosophy, Poetry and Reality’, at the times ‘when we are stirred by matters of our deepest concern, when we long for comfort, for assurance, for inspiration or for renewal of strength, it is not to the philosophers we turn, but rather to the poets’. After explaining that he used the term poetry in a broad sense to represent all art, Oakeshott added that ‘All art is mystical, all art is religious – in principle. The keenest appreciation of Beauty, the deepest understanding of the things of the spirit of which the artist always speaks, the most lively experience of the ‘realms of gold’ cannot be stirred within a man except he be, in the profoundest sense, religious.’

As this passage indicates, the emotional content of liberal education is provided partly by Oakeshott’s sympathy for art and religion, although the religion he ultimately favoured is, I think, a religion which favours pagan piety rather than the three central features of Christianity, viz. belief in man’s special position in God’s creation; in the possibility of salvation; and belief in the need for a special institution and an authoritative doctrine. The emotional content is also provided, however, by friendship, on which Oakeshott wrote one of his finest essays, and by love, to the practice of which (to his credit) he devoted much of his life. These, however, are aspects of a liberal education which must be left for another day. At the moment, it is more appropriate to return to my initial observation, which is that the classical concept of education has been dismissed in recent decades as largely irrelevant to the present day. I have suggested that this view is mistaken, at least in so far as the ideal of enlightenment in Oakeshott revised version of the classical concept is concerned. It must be acknowledged, however, that this ideal is only relevant to those who seek a self of their own, rather than a job, and in that sense inevitably remains an elitist affair – although the elite, in this case, is an essentially open one always ready to welcome whoever wishes to join it.

I will end by saying that although the substance of what I have said is familiar, my attempt to present Oakeshott’s vision of liberal education in a Spinozistic or Platonic perspective – as a quest, that is, for enlightenment in the face of illusion – may be suggestive in so far as it links his educational ideal to the concept of a ‘way’, or path, found in ancient and oriental thought but uncommon in the modern European world. This may at least serve as a reminder that his ultimate goal is not just the

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24 In: M. Oakeshott, What is History?..., p. 104.
25 In: ibid., p. 87.
26 For an example of a modern thinker who gives a central position to the concept of a way, see: J. Evola, Doctrine of Awakening. A Study on the Buddhist Ascesis, London 1951.
capacity for poetic delight, or play, or conversation, or some other non-instrumental enjoyment, but is, rather, the construction of a philosophy of modesty embodied in an ideal of liberation conceived of in terms of the enlightenment I have attempted to portray.

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