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Oakeshott's life and time: a philosophical memoir

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Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) was born at a time when the principal characteristic of European culture was optimism about progress in the form of the spread of representative democracy, national self-determination, mass education and industrialization. The outcome, it was widely hoped, would be universal freedom and prosperity, even though some radical critics of the existing order argued that revolutionary violence might be necessary to bring about that end. In the event, the mood of optimism was to be severely dented during Oakeshott's lifetime by two world wars, by the rise of totalitarianism, by the spread of mass culture, by the constant expansion of collectivist states exercising powers more likely to curtail the freedom of their subjects than enhance it, and by fear about the adverse impact of industrialization on the environment.

Unsurprisingly, as the twentieth century unfolded optimism was replaced by deepening disillusion amongst many of Oakeshott's contemporaries. Shortly after the First World War, for example, R. G. Collingwood, a fellow English philosopher, aptly summarized the change of mood when he wrote that 'Today we can be as artistic, . . . as philosophical, . . . as religious as we please, but we cannot ever be men at all; we are wrecks and fragments of men, and we do not know where to take hold of life and how to begin looking for the happiness which we do not possess.'[1]

In contrast with the pessimism of Collingwood and other notable contemporaries, what distinguished Oakeshott's response to the traumas of the twentieth century was a view of the human condition which always remained fundamentally affirmative: he was never in doubt about 'where to take hold of life', as Collingwood put it. The secret of his positive response, which is of continuing relevance, lies in three ingredients: in a humorous modesty that is both temperamental

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[1] R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: London, 1924), p. 35.

and philosophical; in a sympathy for human imperfection expressed in an attitude that is at once conservative, libertarian and wholly devoid of moral censoriousness; and in a love of freedom as the opportunity to create a self uniquely one's own, regardless of the pain which this may at times bring upon one.

The modesty which marked Oakeshott's temperament is evident, for example, in the relish with which he quoted Marivaux's dictum, '*A mesure que l'humanité se perfectionne l'homme se dégrade*',[2] while the humour with which he viewed life is evident in his remark that a British author whom he admired was fully at home in a world in which 'minds which contemplate the universe . . . also catch buses, lose their luggage and buy shoe laces'.[3] Oakeshott's sense of humour about the human condition meant, in particular, that he was devoid of what he considered to be the principal vice of human beings, especially in their intellectual aspirations, which is a tendency to take themselves too seriously. When asked, for example, whether he sympathized with the French philosopher, Albert Camus, who claimed that existence is absurd, Oakeshott smiled and asked, What did he expect? He gave a similar reply when asked what he made of Martin Heidegger's description of life as being 'flung into being'. Of course he was, Oakeshott remarked. When a very alienated and somewhat truculent postgraduate dressed as a goth in black from head to toe, complete with chains, button-holed him after a drink too many at a faculty party and accused him of systematically evading the main problem of existence, Oakeshott asked him what that problem was. When the goth replied, despair, Oakeshott glanced at him and said: I think you will find you get used to that.

The intellectual basis of Oakeshott's modesty is not far to seek: it is a sceptical commitment to the conditionality of all knowledge, including philosophical knowledge, which was developed in his first major work, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933). What is chiefly notable about this early work, which laid the foundation for his subsequent intellectual career, is that he drew on the Idealist tradition in order to stand much previous Idealist philosophy on its head by depriving philosophy of any connection either with the pursuit of wisdom or with the meaning of life, confining it instead to the relatively restricted task of explanation. In this respect Oakeshott had

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[2] 'The Tower of Babel', in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Liberty Press: Indianapolis, 1991), p. 466.

[3] The author was Logan Pearsall Smith. See M. Oakeshott, *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 74.

something in common with contemporaries like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper, even though his own philosophic idiom was completely different from theirs. Whether his sympathy for the Idealist tradition involved significant indebtedness to German philosophy is arguable. Although Oakeshott visited the universities of Marburg and Tübingen before publishing *Experience and Its Modes*, his only explicit acknowledgement of German influence was a reference to Hegel. When asked what he had learned from his visits to Germany, Oakeshott said he did not really understand Germans until he was taken into the woods in the evening to sit in a circle and sing songs. He said he then realized that Germans wanted to be like birds. He may well, however, have been concealing his tracks.

For Oakeshott, the insistence on the conditionality of knowledge which always remained fundamental to his thought permitted him to overcome the alienation from modernity of twentieth century thinkers who saw it as a story of the increasing fragmentation of experience. In place of their negative view, he was instead able to embrace modernity positively, as an increasingly sophisticated identification and disentangling of what he termed (drawing on Spinoza's terminology) 'modes of experience' which had previously been confused with one another or else inadequately specified.[4] Oakeshott's disentangling, in particular, of the practical (which included moral and political experience) and scientific modes, however, meant that his philosophy placed him at odds with the tendency of twentieth century social scientists, economists and psychologists to apply the method of the natural sciences to the study of society. Because human beings are free agents, he maintained, they cannot be understood exclusively through empirical generalizations about their conduct which aim at predicting their future behaviour. He did not, however, dismiss all social science as worthless.

Oakeshott was still further distanced from contemporary social studies by his claim that it is historical rather than scientific understanding which is required for the study of man. In particular, few understood his seemingly paradoxical contention that historical explanation is not simply a record of past facts but is, rather, the imaginative creation by historians of a past which was not, and could not have been, experienced by those who lived in previous ages. Machiavelli, for example, is rightly regarded as a leading representative of the Renaissance. He could not, however, have

[4] On Oakeshott's positive response to modernity see in particular Efraim Podoksik, *In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott* (Imprint Academic:Exeter, 2003).

known that he was living through the Renaissance since the concept of the 'Renaissance' is an invention of historians (in particular of Jacob Burckhardt).

Although Oakeshott's stress on the conditionality of all knowledge accorded with the conservative side of his temperament, he did not discuss politics in *Experience and Its Modes*. The life of politics, indeed, was one he dismissed with contempt in 1939 in an article in *Scrutiny*. It has therefore often been thought that Oakeshott only developed an interest in politics after 1947, the year in which he became editor of the *Cambridge Journal*. Thereafter, he published a series of article on politics until his editorship ended with the demise of the journal in 1954. The posthumous publication of a collection of his essays on *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life* in 1993, however, made clear that his interest had in fact been lifelong[5].

Although Oakeshott is remembered by many as the outstanding conservative philosopher of the twentieth century, the fact that he restricted philosophy to explanation meant that his conservatism could never assume the form of a philosophical doctrine, the pursuit of which by Burke and his successors he dismissed as 'rationalism', the term by which he described what others call ideology. In his best known book, *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), he characterized rationalism as the belief that political activity is most successful when it is guided by an independently premeditated plan or set of principles. He rejected such a view as logically absurd on the ground that putatively independent plans or principles are in reality merely 'abridgements' of existing practices which are intelligible only in the context of the practices from which they have been abstracted and for that reason cannot guide conduct beyond their confines.

Oakeshott's refusal to allow that theory can guide practice meant that his form of conservatism never fitted comfortably into the ideological simplifications required by party politics. He was never, that is, an 'establishment' conservative of any kind. Attempts to enlist him in the ranks of New Right intellectuals during the heyday of Mrs. Thatcher, for example, were doomed to failure. Although he was often bracketed in particular with F. A. Hayek, who had also taught at the LSE, as a fellow defender of capitalism, and attended at least one meeting of the Mont Pelerin society founded by Hayek, Oakeshott himself rejected the affiliation on the ground that Hayek's instrumental attitude towards civil association reduced it to a means of

[5] M. Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, ed. T. Fuller (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993).

promoting progress, instead of attaching intrinsic value to the freedom it made possible. He also rejected attempts to bracket him with libertarian New Right thinkers like Robert Nozick, on the ground that his concern was not with the minimal state as such but with the constitutional state. In a longer perspective, his conservatism was much closer to that of David Hume than to that of either Burke or his New Right contemporaries, always remaining, like Hume's, an highly individualistic, open and undogmatic expression of his temperament.

So far as Oakeshott's conservatism has a specific political content, this is not to be found in an uncritical commitment to tradition, habit and custom, nor in an unconditional advocacy of the free market or the minimal state, but consists, rather, in an ideal of civil association which received its fullest development in his masterpiece, *On Human Conduct* (1976). As that work made clear, the ideal of civil association cannot be reduced to the doctrine of any political party, let alone to conservative projects such as the defence of capitalism, or of a minimal state, or an organic society. The core of the civil ideal is, rather, a commitment to constitutional government and limited politics which may just as properly be described as a non-rationalistic form of liberalism as a conservative commitment.

The intellectual modesty which led Oakeshott to reject philosophical system building and political ideologies alike is especially evident in his preference for conversation as the appropriate idiom of civilized discourse. 'People say life's the thing', he wrote, 'but I prefer conversation.'[6] For a man 'satisfied with the delights of conversation', he remarked, there will be no question of pursuing 'indisputable conclusions'.[7] To such a man, all absolutes will be alien. It is a little hard, however, to reconcile Oakeshott's commitment to conversation with his concept of 'modes of experience' since each mode possesses its own concept of explanation or understanding, expressed in its own distinctive logic of inquiry. The modes, in other words, involve completely different perspectives which are wholly independent of each other. But if that is so, it is difficult to see how they can converse with each other, rather than simply talk past each other.

The intellectual modesty characteristic of Oakeshott's conception of philosophy was equally evident in his personal life, although there it could occasionally verge on an asceticism which made things a trifle hard for his friends.

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[6] M. Oakeshott, *What is History? and other essays*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 87.
[7] M. Oakeshott, *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 74.

An illustration is provided by the way he sometimes accommodated guests at his cottage in Dorset. In the small back garden was a deep pit, roughly ten feet long by three feet wide and eight feet deep, which had been a sewage tank. After the cottage had been connected to the local sewage system, however, the tank was no longer needed for its original purpose. Oakeshott had therefore lined the walls of the pit with a rough coat of cement and put a glass frame over the top which, from a distance, looked like a cloche for germinating seeds. He had completed the transformation of the sewage tank by securing a cut-off section of ladder to one wall and squeezing a rickety bed into the bottom. On the first occasion when the author visited the cottage Oakeshott showed him the reclaimed sewage tank and asked for advice about how to make it more comfortable. When the author asked what the pit was to be made comfortable for, Oakeshott said he put guests down there when there was no room in the cottage itself. The author suggested that the only approximation to comfort for guests placed down there would be to put a glass of water beside the bed along with an edifying spiritual work like Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. Oakeshott, who showed no awareness of the almost medieval monasticism of what he inflicted on less fortunate guests, pondered but did not reply.

So far as Oakeshott's view of human imperfection is concerned, men's weaknesses, he observed, are more interesting than their virtues, and those who are not ashamed to admit to those weaknesses are to be esteemed.[8] Any hint of what he deemed to be arrogance, posturing or pretentiousness could provoke a cutting response. An instance occurred during an LSE weekend school at Cumberland Lodge in the early 1960s. Oakeshott, who had given a paper, was guest of honour at a dinner presided over by one of the Queen's Ladies in Waiting who was sometimes resident there. The Lady in Waiting evidently felt she needed grander company and paid no attention to the attempts at conversation made by those at the table. So far as any subject interested her, it was the decline of religion, which she felt was unsettling servants and making modern life impossible. After listening to her for a long time in silence, Oakeshott finally leaned forward, caught her attention, and said: I think that what you say is exactly what a Spanish peasant woman might have thought in the late fifteenth century. He said it with such a mixture of kindness and detachment that she

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[8] M. Oakeshott, *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 74.

was at a loss to know whether it was intended as a compliment or an appalling put down.

If Oakeshott could be cutting in the face of pretension, his generally indulgent eye for human imperfection helps to explain, in particular, his remarkable gift for friendship, to which he assigned a central place in his conception of the human good. Friendship, he wrote, is a dramatic, not utilitarian, relationship which 'subsists in a mutual sharing of personalities', the friend being 'somebody who engages the imagination, who excites contemplation, who provokes interest, sympathy, delight and loyalty . . .'[9] The key to friendship, he once remarked, is a concern to ensure that neither oneself nor one's friend should ever feel able to let him or herself down when in each other's company: one's first concern, in other words, must be to protect the pride of one's friend.[10] Pride, he believed, makes all things bearable, although he also believed that Hobbes was right to find in pride which becomes mere vain glory the principal source of social and political disorder.

To Oakeshott's regard for conversation and friendship as key components of the human good must be added a third, which is love. Of marital love, which he had experienced three times, Oakeshott wistfully remarked that he did not think he was very good at it. At love more generally, however, he was undoubtedly adept, once informally defining it as 'a kind of souped up friendship'[11]. Although Oakeshott wrote little about the philosophy of love, his conception of it may be gleaned from some remarks he made when asked what being in love meant. In reply, he suggested that there were three possible answers, inspired by three different philosophies of love.[12] The first is that to say 'I am in love' means, in effect, to declare: 'Until now I have been incomplete. Now, having found you, I am at last complete.' The interpretation of love in terms of personal completeness, he indicated, is what characterized the Platonic view in the ancient world, and certain kinds of romantic philosophy in the modern one. The second answer is that what 'I am in love' means is that 'Until now my need for understanding and affection has been unsatisfied. Now I have found you, you will be able to satisfy my need, and in return I will satisfy your

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[9] 'On being conservative', in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Liberty Press: Indianopolis, 1991), pp. 416-7.
[10] In conversation with the author.
[11] In conversation with the author.
[12] An eloquent development of Oakeshott's tripartite division of philosophies of love is provided by Shirley Robin Letwin in an article on 'Romantic Love and Christianity' in *Philosophy*, 52, 1977, pp. 131-145.

own need'. This interpretation he identified with more egotistical kinds of modern romanticism such as that of D. H. Lawrence. Finally, to say 'I am in love' may mean, not that I am complete, nor that my need is satisfied, but that 'My appreciation of your existence is profound.' This third view, in which an aesthetic element is fundamental, Oakeshott found exemplified in Montaigne's concept of friendship, to which his own view of love was akin, and more recently in Ortega y Gasset's book *On love*. The place Oakeshott assigned to love in his conception of the human good was qualified, however, by his sympathy for F. H. Bradley's aphorism that 'To love unsatisfied the world is a mystery, a mystery which love satisfied seems to comprehend. The latter is wrong only because it cannot be content without thinking itself right'.[13] Perhaps a gnomic remark of Oakeshott's own may be added, made in response to a question about what he considered to be the main difference between men and women. Women, he replied, are not fated.

To the modesty and acceptance of human imperfection which were notable features of Oakeshott's temperament must finally be added his profound love of freedom, which he regarded as the precondition for all other goods. Freedom alone, he believed, can give the opportunity for forging a self uniquely one's own, even if that means going to hell (to use a Christian idiom to which Oakeshott did not in fact subscribe). He had a particular affection, in this connection, for the late medieval story about the love of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, in the course of which Aucassin proclaims that if his love for the pagan Nicolette condemns him to hell then that is no bad thing, since hell is the place to which anybody at all interesting has always gone.[14] In a similar vein, when Oakeshott was once asked whether he would not ultimately place salvation above freedom, were salvation to be possible, he smiled and said that salvation was not an appropriate concern for human beings. When asked why, he replied that it would be undignified.[15]

Oakeshott emphasized that the freedom he valued is not a natural endowment of human beings. It is, on the contrary, an extremely difficult achievement which relatively few individuals or nations ever attain. Of the individuals who have done so, most of those he admired were male, although he had a particularly high regard for two female contemporaries in this respect. One was Shirley Letwin, to whom he

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[13] M. Oakeshott, *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 75.
[14] This was mentioned by Oakeshott in a conversation with the author.
[15] In conversation with the author.

dedicated *On Human Conduct*. What Letwin (who was American) shared with him was a conviction that the most civilized form of freedom is found in the English ideal of the gentleman.[16] The other was Isak Dinesen, amongst whose short stories he had a particular admiration for 'Babette's Feast'[17] and with whom he shared a conviction that freedom is intimately linked to pride. Mention of specific individuals, however, should not distract attention from perhaps the most striking feature of Oakeshott's conception of freedom, which is that it as much dramatic as moral, as is indicated by Oakeshott's conception of life as an adventure.

Oakeshott's sense of adventure was prominent early in his life. He was born into an educated middle class family and went, unusually for the time, to a co-educational school (St. George's School, Harpenden) which encouraged intellectual curiosity, individual initiative, aesthetic sensitivity and a sense of social responsibility. Although not too much is known about this early period, one incident from it indicates the adventurous side of his character just referred to. Shortly before the First World War, when he was eleven, Oakeshott attempted to join the Royal Navy, which it was then possible to do at that age. He was turned down on the ground of colour blindness, which was a matter of lifelong regret for him. At a still earlier age he had developed an intense admiration for Nelson which he retained throughout his life, being fond of quoting Nelson's remark that he was completely at home when at sea and completely at sea when on land. For many years, Oakeshott said, he had intended to write a biography of Nelson, and a special position amongst his books was accorded to the seven volume set he owned of Nelson's complete despatches and letters published during the 1840s. It is not surprising, in view of his taste for adventure and esteem for Nelson's wayward private life, that one of Oakeshott's favourite modern authors was Cervantes. In the story of Don Quixote, who got up, dusted himself down and resaddled Rosinante in readiness for another adventure each time he was knocked off his horse, Oakeshott found an exemplar of freedom as he

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[16] See S. R. Letwin, *Trollope's Gentleman*.

[17] Oakeshott indicated to the author that what he especiallyadmired about Dinesen is her assumption that at some point in their life, everyone confronts the opportunity to give significance to his or her existence through proud and passionate commitment to some project. In ' Babette's Feast', Dinesen tells the story of the extraordinary dinner she gives, when reduced to working as a servant to four elderly sisters who do not appreciate her inner greatness, after she wins the national lottery. In practice, however, Oakeshott believed that relatively few people rise to the occasion: Dinesen's stories are all concerned with the few exceptional ones who do. Nevertheless, Oakeshott shared Dinesen's conviction that we have to treat others *as if* they are capable of some notable expression of personal identity, since we cannot tell in advance who is and who isn't.

himself understood it. When Don Quixote died, Oakeshott was fond of recalling, a short poem was pinned to his bedhead of which the last line was, He lived a fool and yet died wise.

Oakeshott always emphasized that the freedom he valued is inseparable from a liberal education – a kind of education that he believed is becoming increasingly difficult to acquire in modern mass democracies. In a talk he gave to new students at the LSE at the beginning of each year, he explained to them what a university education is about. This, he said, has nothing to do with acquiring transferable skills and professional qualifications: it is about 'acquiring 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'.[18] So far as political freedom is concerned, of the nations which have achieved it, Oakeshott was impressed by three in particular, viz. the Romans, the Vikings, and above all the English, in whose conception of the common law he found 'a living method of social integration, the most civilized and the most effective method ever invented by mankind'.[19] An important feature of the English tradition was that, unlike the Roman, personal freedom was not subordinated to political freedom. English life permitted, in consequence, the untrammelled enjoyment of the Epicurean conception of life with which, so far as he can be categorized at all, Oakeshott sympathized most deeply.

In accordance with the Epicurean tradition, the world of public life and public honours was one Oakeshott for the most part shunned. In 1981, for example, he declined an appointment to the Order of the Companions of Honour. In academic life, he accepted a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1966 but declined honorary degrees, with the exception of ones awarded by the universities of Durham (UK) and Colorado (USA) which he accepted only to oblige friends of long-standing who taught there. A notable expression of the mainly private nature of his passions was the publication in 1936 of *A Guide to the Classics or How to Pick the Derby Winner*, a book he wrote jointly with a colleague, Guy Griffith, who specialized in Hellenistic studies. The book was sufficiently successful to warrant a second edition in 1947.

In 1951 Oakeshott finally achieved widespread international recognition when he took over from Harold Laski as Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics. Twenty six years earlier (in 1925) he had been elected a Fellow

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[18] M. Oakeshott, *What is History? and other essays*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 334.
[19] M. Oakeshott, *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan, p. 219.

of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, a position which he retained for the rest of his life although he departed from Cambridge in 1949 and spent a short time (1949-50) at Nuffield College, Oxford, before moving to the LSE. His period at Cambridge had been interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, at the start of which he enlisted (1940) in the army, originally in the ranks but rising rapidly to join 'Phantom', a unit devoted to research on artillery targetting. As Hobbes wrote of his ideal citizen, Sidney Godolphin, to whom he dedicated the *Leviathan*, it may perhaps likewise be said of Oakeshott that he combined 'clearnesse of Judgment, and largnesse of Fancy; strength of Reason, and gracefull Elocution; a Courage for the Warre, and a Fear for the Laws'.[20] Unlike contemporaries such as Ernst Jünger, it may be added, Oakeshott's experience of war did not lead him to acquire a strong taste for martial virtues: his primary commitment was always to the peace of civil association and the freedom it alone permits.

In accordance with Oakeshott's conception of conversation as the most civilized mode of intellectual exchange, those who attended his lectures and seminars at the LSE found him the least didactic of teachers and the most approachable of dons, regardless of their intellectual ability (or lack of it). None left without sensing his affirmative view of life, his toleration of imperfection and his love of freedom. After retiring, Oakeshott continued to teach at the LSE, publishing during that time the masterpiece already mentioned, *On Human Conduct*. Although it provided the most rigorous exploration of the postulates of civil association to be found since Hobbes, the reception was cool, in part perhaps because the fashionable themes of human rights and social justice were assigned no place among those postulates.

The concluding section of *On Human Conduct* echoed de Tocqueville's misgivings about the future of liberal democracy, when Oakeshott identified the principal characteristic of modern western politics as an ambiguity which has too often been complacently ignored. This consists in the possibility of interpreting any political term either in formal and non-instrumental terms or in substantive and purposive ones. Since this ambiguity can readily be exploited to destroy civil association by those claiming to offer a better kind of freedom, Oakeshott was able to avoid, in particular, the naivety of contemporaries who dismissed interwar totalitarian movements as an unfortunate aberration without any roots in the liberal democratic

[20] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (J.M. Dent: London, 1962), p. 386.

tradition itself. The ambiguity of that tradition, whose democratic defenders have often failed to appreciate that the doctrine of popular sovereignty can just as readily be used to defend populist tyranny as to defend liberal democracy, inevitably means that civil association is always a precarious human invention.

In the final book he published during his lifetime, *On History and Other Essays* (1983), Oakeshott's misgivings about the future prospects of liberal democracy found expression in a melancholy retelling of the story of the Tower of Babel which gave the impression that his clarification of the ideal of civil association might prove the truth of Hegel's well-known remark, to the effect that the owl of Minerva takes wing only at dusk.

Amongst those who have learned from Oakeshott, the three great themes of his thought continue to be central to their own work: his insistence, that is, on the conditionality of all knowledge; his vindication of history as an autonomous mode of experience; and his elaboration of the postulates of civil association. At Oakeshott's memorial service his colleague, Elie Kedourie, expressed the sentiments of those indebted to Oakeshott in moving terms when he concluded by recalling Goethe's description of what reading Kant had meant to him. It was, Goethe said, 'like entering a room filled with light'. To those who were 'able to enjoy the sunlit and well-ordered domain of Michael's mind', Kedourie added, 'the fortunate experience will remain with them, always'.

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