

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

Why read Oakeshott?

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I think it is probably safe to assume that the most widely read parts of Oakeshott's work at the present day are his critique of ideological politics in *Rationalism in Politics* and his treatment of civil association in *On Human Conduct*. I also suspect that these parts are the ones most likely to be widely read in the future. What I want to do here, however, is look beyond Oakeshott's individual works and sketch, very briefly, a possible way of interpreting the continuing relevance of his thought as a whole.

What I want to suggest, more especially, is that there is a broad vision of life underlying Oakeshott's thought which is likely to be of increasing, rather than declining, significance to his future readers. I will try to identify what that vision involves by breaking it down into its four main ingredients. These ingredients provide four interlocking reasons for reading Oakeshott.

The first reason for reading Oakeshott is that he was very different in one crucial respect from his contemporaries such as Heidegger, Sartre, Camus and Beckett. Unlike them, he was almost unique in achieving a fundamentally positive and affirmative outlook, whereas they are best known for such concepts as nothingness, absurdity, angst, despair and nihilism.

Is it possible to pinpoint the secret of Oakeshott's positive outlook? I think the key to it is contained in a brief conversation I once had with him late in his life. I asked him a large question, which was what he thought of human beings. He pondered for a moment, and then said that he thought the main thing about them is that they are like cats. I asked him if he meant domestic

cats, and he nodded but didn't say anything else. So I said, You mean that they sit in front of the door and expect someone to open it for them? It was his answer to this that sticks in my mind. He said Exactly, they take themselves very seriously.

I think this was the greatest human vice for Oakeshott - i.e. taking oneself too seriously. And I think he felt that a good deal of western philosophy, from Plato down to Heidegger, displayed this vice. I think he also felt that this vice was the main source of human unhappiness because it inevitably leads to disappointment not only with society but with the world itself, since neither is much concerned to humour our feelings of self-importance. Confronted by this vice, I think what Oakeshott wanted to do was to create what may be termed a 'philosophy of modesty'. I don't think he was unique in that respect, but I do think he was more successful than any other philosopher during the past century.

So: how did Oakeshott go about creating a philosophy of modesty? Since I think this kind of philosophy is exactly what we need not just today but for the next one or two million years at least, I want to sketch briefly the three foundations on which he constructs it.

The first foundation is in fact the core of Oakeshott's entire philosophy: it is his rejection of all claims to absolute knowledge. This is the central theme of Oakeshott's first philosophical work, *Experience and its Modes*. The language of that work, as many have remarked, was already unfashionable at the time Oakeshott wrote it - it was a language drawn from the idealist tradition of philosophy, and that tradition had become peripheral to English philosophy by the 1930s. But this should not obscure the continuing relevance of the main idea behind the book, which is that all human experience is inescapably *conditional*. This is what Oakeshott has in mind when he speaks of the 'modality' of experience. What he is saying is that we always look at the world from a particular standpoint - scientific, historical or practical. We can become aware what that standpoint is, but we can never have

a view from nowhere. Putting it slightly differently: we always wear conceptual spectacles when we look at the world. Although we can never get rid of them, we can become aware of them, and of the assumptions they make.

I think it is certainly true that, in this early work, Oakeshott sometimes gave the impression that philosophy itself could in fact offer an unconditional or absolute standpoint, or a 'view from nowhere', the nature of which he failed to clarify. In his later work, however, he made clear that philosophy can't in fact do that - all it can do is make us aware of assumptions we were making without being aware of them. Far from being a departure from his earlier work, this later position, I suggest, fully accords with the quest for a philosophy of modesty on which Oakeshott had embarked at the outset.

Perhaps the most striking expression of Oakeshott's rejection of absolutes of any kind is the importance he attaches to conversation as the only appropriate form for philosophical thought: the point about conversation being that it excludes the very idea of being able to say the last word about the nature of reality.

The second foundation of what I call Oakeshott's philosophy of modesty is a sense of *piety*, not in the Christian sense of being devout, but in the pagan sense of piety in which what it refers to is a respect for all those aspects of the human condition which are not of our making or choosing. Impiety is the theme of one of Oakeshott's favourite stories, which is the story of 'The Tower of Babel' - the story, that is, of how men scramble to get into heaven and loot it, without any regard for God's wishes. In its modern form, Oakeshott thinks that impiety is expressed above all in our rejection of everything we have not made and shaped ourselves, in order to live in a world entirely of our own creation. This is the project Oakeshott thought lay behind the radical ideologies of the twentieth century. Oakeshott regards this enterprise as impious because, like Swift, he admires the bee

rather than the spider: whereas the bee gathers the pollen from which its honey comes from flowers whose existence is quite independent of it, the spider spins its web from its own innards. Whether Oakeshott is right to have this preference is a hotly debated issue which I won't go into here: I merely note that it plays an important part in sustaining his intellectual position.

The third foundation of Oakeshott's philosophy of modesty links him with Nietzsche. This aspect of his thought is the crucial importance he attached to laughter, rather than reason, as a means of puncturing our sense of self-importance. The laughter Oakeshott admired is, however, of a particular kind: it is philosophical laughter, directed not at human suffering, but at intellectual vanity, and at grandiose forms of self-pity. It is the laughter found above all in the modern western cultural tradition in which Oakeshott felt most at home, which is the picaresque tradition.

I think it is relevant to mention here that Oakeshott was especially fond of one of the best known characters in that tradition, who is Don Quixote. What he admired is that Don Quixote doesn't think of his life in terms of success or failure: despite endless disasters Don Quixote is ready to pick himself up and sets off on his next adventure. I think this is how Oakeshott thought of his own life. He knew that what tempts the modern world is not the picaresque vision but the tragic one, of which he was suspicious because it easily lets self-importance merge into self-pity.

The second reason for reading Oakeshott is that he not only achieved an affirmative view of life: he also insisted that such a view is inseparable from an ideal of civilized living, of which he gave a very precise and exacting account. For Oakeshott, civility involves three closely related things which he believes are not now very well appreciated or understood. The first is education. In an age when most of the talk about the self is in terms of self-expression, Oakeshott held (like the ancient Greeks, and like Hume and Burke and Cardinal Newman in the modern period), that

the civilized self is essentially an educated self. The education he had in mind is not a matter of vocational training; it is, rather, a matter of critical induction into the on-going tradition of self-interpretation which constitutes a society's culture.

Civility involves, secondly, limits - or, more precisely, it involves moral and civil limits. The supreme expression of the sense of limits in the modern western world is the ideal of civil association, in which the limits consist of formal rules that are recognized as authoritative by fellow citizens who do not share common substantive values, and do not try to impose them on each other. For Oakeshott, however, the sense of limits upon which civilized life depends requires something extremely difficult to achieve. This is an ultimately non-instrumental or non-manipulative view of the world in which we live. Without this non-instrumental outlook, we can have no place for intrinsic values. The reason why this kind of outlook is difficult to achieve is that it depends on something Oakeshott thinks we no longer understand, which is the concept of play. This is the third concept upon which the civilization of a free society depends.

If the idea of play seems to trivialise the subject of civilization, it may help to recall that Oakeshott was sympathetic to a book published in 1949 by the Dutch historian Huizinga. In it, Huizinga argued that the past periods of civility in western Europe were only possible because of the existence of an outlook which refused to treat everything in instrumental or manipulative terms. The ancient Greek world, for example, possessed the Olympic Games, and the medieval world possessed the ideal of chivalry. The unique feature of modern industrial civilization, however, is the triumph of the work mentality, which pays no attention to intrinsic values but is concerned only with instrumental ones. It is against this background that Oakeshott wrote, in an early essay on play, that the complete character of a human being does not come into view unless we add to *Homo Sapiens* (intelligent man) the characters of *Homo Ludens*, man the player, *Homo Faber*, man the maker of things, and *Homo_Laborans*, man the

worker. (p.6 of manuscript essay). Oakeshott added that of these, it is not Homo Sapiens, Homo Faber or Homo Laborans, but Homo Ludens (man engaged in the activities of play) who is the civilized man. (Ibid., p. 9)

When Oakeshott's emphasis upon the role of play in civilized life is remembered, it is easy to understand the sense of despair which characterizes his late essay on 'The Tower of Babel'. As that essay indicates, he came to believe that everything he valued in education, social life and the politics of civil association was unlikely to endure for much longer in an age which has become almost completely devoid of any sense of play.

The third reason for reading Oakeshott concerns something which has generally been excluded from philosophical attention in modern western intellectual life. This is the role of imagination in disclosing the full texture and complexity of human experience. For Oakeshott, the place of imagination in our culture has been killed by our obsession with facts, or what the ESRC calls research. Because of this obsession he thinks we have failed, in particular, to understand the true nature of historical inquiry, to which Oakeshott devoted what he considered to be the most original part of his writings. The reason he attached such importance to this area of his work was that he felt history was the only satisfactory alternative to philosophy as a way of understanding human life. He thought history, however, could only be understood in terms of a particular kind of imagining.

What has happened is that we don't realize this because we now think of imagination as purely subjective fancy. The result is that we think of history in three mistaken ways. We think of it, like Marx, as facts human beings have made; or we think of it as unintended events which human beings haven't made, but which they can understand by getting inside the heads of those who involved in them in the past; or we think of it as a mass of facts which can be understood by formulating empirical generalizations

about them, in the way sociologists and political scientists try to do.

Oakeshott's alternative view of historical understanding involves breaking down the rigid line of separation that has long been drawn between the world of literature, on the one hand, and empirical study of the world of facts, on the other. In particular, he does not agree that while imagination is legitimate in literature, it merely distorts the objective study of facts, of the sort conventionally associated with the social sciences. On Oakeshott's view, imagination is crucial in both literature and the social sciences; the main difference is that it is subject to different constraints in each case. In the case of literature, the inner logic of a character or the likely consequences of a situation can be developed solely in the light of what seems plausible to the author. In historical explanation, however, the play of the historian's imagination is tied to making events intelligible in the light of whatever historical evidence the historian can produce in support of the linkages he seeks to establish.

I cannot do justice to Oakeshott's view of historical explanation here: all I want to do is emphasize that one reason to read him is for the grasp of the place of creative imagination in understanding life, and especially for its place in historical explanation.

The final reason I shall give for reading Oakeshott concerns an ideal of liberation which links his philosophy to his personal life. By liberation I mean here something more general than civil and political liberation: what is involved is an almost existentialist conception of life as the endless task of striving to acquire a distinctive self of one's own, not by rejecting the cultural tradition from which one comes, but by critical self-immersion in it. In this process, the secret of making liberation a positive experience, rather than an alienating one, is always to maintain an active rather than a passive identity. I think Oakeshott would have agreed in this respect with Spinoza, who said that all joyful thoughts and passions are active ones, and all

unhappy thoughts and passions are passive ones. The art of life is thus to maintain the primacy of the active over the passive.

When this ideal of liberation is borne in mind it is possible to understand the note of profound disillusion with contemporary western life in Oakeshott's later work. What has happened, he believed, is that modern mass democracies have forgotten that civilized life requires us to combine two different identities. One identity is the natural one which we all possess in so far as we are moved by our needs, wants and desires. This is our given or passive identity.

The other identity we possess, potentially at least, is a moral and civil one. This moral identity is an active one: it relates, not to the natural order of desire, but to our ability to construct a set of limits or, as Oakeshott called them, 'compunctions', which we freely impose on the ways in which we satisfy our desires.

What has happened, on Oakeshott's view, is that we have increasingly tended to forget the need for this second, active identity and to think only of the first, passive identity: we have become, that is, Faustian beings who mainly want to indulge our desires, and our culture has become, accordingly, a culture of gratification. Liberation, in a word, has now become almost exclusively associated with wanting and having.

Let me end by summarizing what I have said: the best reason for reading Oakeshott is that he offers us what we most need today, which is a philosophy of modesty whose intellectual, moral and political implications he works out in terms of a vision of civil association and the related ideals of liberation, play, civility and education necessary to sustain it. What Oakeshott offers is not a complete philosophy, especially when it comes to deciding on what social conditions are necessary to make it generally accessible. And it is not a philosophy which creates much optimism about the future of liberal societies. But I have never found a more relevant philosophy myself, despite this, and I like to think that others will come to see Oakeshott's work in this way in the future.