

# MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

## Oakeshott's Philosophical Legacy

Oakeshott has practically no direct philosophical legacy. *Experience and its Modes* is an uncompromising work of absolute idealism, in the tradition of Hegel and Bradley, and as such, excites little interest considered as pure philosophy in the current intellectual climate. But it has considerable indirect influence by way of its bearing on his political thought.

Kant was not an idealist but he prepared the way for modern idealism by talking not just of sensation and understanding as sources of knowledge but of reason as well. Sensation on its own is subjective and inarticulate. But in conjunction with understanding, with its outfit of categories and principles, it gives rise to experience, our knowledge of an objective world of enduring things, causally interacting. Reason, in his view, is the doomed attempt to exercise the intellect beyond the realm of possible experience, either to the altogether transcendent or to experience as a completed whole.

Hegel agreed with Kant's rejection of transcendence, while observing that in his doctrine of the thing-in-itself Kant had failed to abide by that rejection. Hegel saw understanding as the analytic use of intellect, yielding an abstract, practically useful, but cognitively inferior surrogate for truth and knowledge. Knowledge strictly so called is to be achieved only by philosophic reason which grasps things in their totality and interconnectedness.

Bradley's philosophy, from which Oakeshott's most directly derives, embodies a drastic simplification of Hegel. There are three levels of mental life: immediate experience, the analytic understanding, and reason. The first has unity and wholeness but is below the level of judgment or knowledge. The understanding mutilates it for the purposes of discourse, producing the abstract but useful falsities of common sense and science. The basic ideas with which it works – thing, quality, relation, the self – are all internally self-contradictory. But above the level of discursive thought is the apprehension of reality in its wholeness.

Hegel had arranged the various forms of discursive thought – common belief, science, history, religion and philosophy – on a scale of increasing adequacy with philosophy at the top as both

culmination and judge of the others. Bradley lumped all the works of understanding together, without distinguishing them. Oakeshott picked out science, history, practice and philosophy. But he was more concerned to emphasise their distinctness as self-sufficient, mutually impenetrable "worlds of ideas" than to establish any kind of order of precedence between them. (Collingwood, in the same line of business, was more Hegelian in assigning places in a hierarchy to his equivalents of Oakeshott's modes. But he was unHegelian in placing art and religion below science.)

Oakeshott is said to have attended and to have been influenced by, the famous introductory lectures on philosophy of J.E. McTaggart. But there is none of the solicitor-like precision of McTaggart in his writing, much more the remote scornfulness of Bradley, and none of the boiling enthusiasm for bits of old-time religion that rumbled beneath McTaggart's polished literary surface.

Politics makes no visible appearance in *Experience and its Modes*. (Government and the state are not mentioned.) It is firmly extruded from history. Presumably its place is in the world of practice. But it is, of course, the topic of the greater part of Oakeshott's subsequent work and it is the field in which his reputation was made.

Its most striking and most original component is his anti-rationalism. This is the view that political thought and action, rightly understood, are not any sort of technology or selection of means for specific preassigned ends. "Anti-rationalism" is perhaps misleading. Oakeshott is not an irrationalist, a devotee of instinct and the wisdom of the blood like Hitler or D.H. Lawrence. It is the use of abstract, technical rationality in politics to which he is opposed.

That idea has an obvious affinity with Bradley's disparagement of the analytic, abstractive operations of the discursive understanding. Oakeshott is more definite about what right political thought and action are not than about what they are. At one, rather diaphanous, end it is, in the famous phrase, "the pursuit of intimations". More concretely it is the exercise of experienced political intelligence, a variety of knowing-how rooted in tradition. The state has no abstract, ideal, utopian goal. Its task, if it must be assigned one, is the altogether unspecific, unsubstantive one of maintaining conditions in which individuals can flourish and pursue their own purposes in security, in which contingent circumstances inimical to that security are responded to by experienced political intelligence.

An alternative foundation for this point of view is the theory of concrete, non-mechanical judgment intimated by Pascal's *esprit de*

finesse and Newman's "illative sense". It is plainly absurd to suppose that sound estimates of the characters of the people we know or sound criticisms of works of art or a sound conception of the balance and principal ingredients of a happy life can be arrived at by the application of explicit general rules. In the human and social world there are deeply complicated matters of the highest importance – people's characters, works of art, the conditions of happiness – which can be assessed only by reflective judgment and not by simple calculation. Oakeshott's teaching is that politics too is a matter of judgment and judgment so understood is not non-rational, it is simply non-rationalistic.