

**MOA Presidential Address: "Oakeshott and Conservatism"
(abbreviated version).**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As current President of the Michael Oakeshott Association, I am delighted to be here in Jena in the enormously prestigious Friedrich-Schiller Universität for the start of the first international conference on Michael Oakeshott to be held in Germany.

We are opening a new chapter in the critical reception of Oakeshott's ideas and we are doing so here in the heart of Mittleuropa, the cultural traditions of which meant so much to him. Were Michael here today, he may well have regarded this meeting as something of an "intellectual homecoming," a reinvigoration of some of his most significant philosophical and cultural roots. But then, again, he might not have done so. You could never predict what he would say on any occasion whatsoever. Certainly, though, his admiration for Hegel, German Romanticism and German Classicism went back a very long way. He would often say right up to our last correspondence how vivid his memories remained of his own student days in Germany, especially in Tübingen. It was there in the 1920s that he bought his copy of Georg Lasson's Hegel. It was there that he read Hölderlin, Schiller and Novalis. He would read them, especially on Sundays, wandering in the woods and villages around Tübingen.

I do not know whether he followed in Hegel's footsteps and came to Jena. No doubt, had he done so, he would have found it, like Tübingen in the mid-1920s, a wonderful place, (I quote): it was "a very much out of the world place, all philosophy and theology." Inexorably, though, Tübingen, Jena and all of the rest of those marvellous out-of-the-world places became very much part of the world. They all succumbed (some more, some less) to the relentless pressures of modernization and innovation. Oakeshott's love for them waned accordingly. In memory, they remained as alive as ever. But Oakeshott, more keenly than most, perhaps, felt a deep sense of loss as the cherished familiarities of the world were inevitably transformed into something different, something new. On occasion, he would admit to an element of sentimentality in these reminiscences. But there was, of course, very much more to the matter than this. And I want to address one important aspect of it by way of a preface to our conference proceedings. That is to say, I want to try to remove some obstacles that have frequently led to misinterpretations of his thought, by both friends and foes.

I refer to the nature of Oakeshott's often-noted "conservatism." Many people who have heard of Oakeshott (but who have seldom read him carefully) think that everything he wrote served a politically conservative agenda. It is far too common still, for example, to find Oakeshott praised or blamed for providing party political platforms, like Margaret Thatcher's "Conservatism," with their so-called "philosophical foundations." This is utter nonsense. Much, too, has been written about whether Oakeshott should be classified as a conservative or a liberal, whether he was a defender or an opponent of representative democracy, whether he was a republican, whether or

not he advocated the politics of “trimming,” and so on. But all this is a distraction that obscures rather than clarifies the significance of his work. There are in fact two different, erroneous views here: first, that political Conservatism permeated his thought; second, that the essence of his work was a conservative critique of modernity. Let me briefly address each in turn.

Oakeshott was, of course, conservative in several respects. But he published remarkably little about Conservatism itself. His one major essay “On being Conservative” (1956) explicitly avoids attempting to examine Conservatism as a political “creed or a doctrine.” It would certainly be possible, he says, to elicit the general principles of Conservatism from the conduct of acknowledged conservatives. But it would not be very rewarding to do so. So instead of a political doctrine, he examines what he calls the “disposition” to be conservative, a disposition that “appears in contemporary character.” Famously, this was the very general disposition to enjoy and explore our present world not for reasons of its utility nor because of its antiquity but for reasons, simply, of its familiarity. And when he came, in the last part of the essay, to consider how this conservative disposition might manifest itself in politics he argued against appeals to any supposedly foundational beliefs drawn from morality, religion, philosophy or any other repository of beliefs about “the world in general.” All that was required was something much less grandiose: it was to defend “our current manner of living” while being committed to the belief (in effect merely an hypothesis, he says) that “governing is a specific and limited activity, namely the provision and custody of general rules of conduct.” So this limited notion of government is

concerned with something that it is very appropriate to be conservative about.

The essay is highly unusual and it has by now acquired the status, in the English-speaking world at least, of a minor classic of Conservative political theory. But I think that this, too, misses the most important point. Certainly, Oakeshott's account of Conservatism in politics differs greatly from more conventional accounts both then and now. Quintin Hogg, for example, the future Lord Chancellor, Conservative Leader of the House of Lords and author of such catchy titles as The Left was Never Right (1945), published his famous The Case for Conservatism in 1947 just a few years before Oakeshott wrote "On being Conservative." Hogg's book begins with a rather grand-sounding chapter called "The Philosophy of Conservatism." But after muddling through a few pages, Hogg felt obliged to conclude that "Conservatism is not so much a philosophy as an attitude." And although this might have elicited an Oakeshottian nod of consent, what follows would not. For Hogg turned immediately to consider what he called "basic conservative ideas," foundational ideas. It turned out that there were no less than 24 of these, including religion, the organic theory of society, authority, continuity and natural law but he also listed progress, enterprise, trading for profit and two things which he called mysteriously the liberal and the socialist "heresies." In other words, Hogg (like so many others) promised a rather grandiose anatomy of Conservatism but as it turned out what he actually offered was little more than a jumble of diverse, incompatible and incommensurate ideas.

This, I think, illustrates Oakeshott's point in "On being Conservative." It is not very rewarding, intellectually, to elicit the general principles of political Conservatism from conservative political practice because that is simply to participate in the practice itself. Furthermore, intellectual confusion is guaranteed if we believe, as Hogg seemed to believe, that such general principles 'cause' or are the 'foundation' of particular political practices. As Oakeshott noted in The Listener in 1955, "all modern political activity has as its counterpart doctrines of some kind" but general "political ideas are not the 'cause' or 'foundation' of conduct; they are [the] conduct itself in another idiom" (RPML, 117-8). He seldom focused his attention directly upon practical political doctrines. But when he did, it becomes very clear why he found them all so confused and relatively uninteresting. In The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe published in 1940, for example, we learn that the proliferation of competing social and political doctrines in Europe since the French Revolution is "to some extent due to the egregious habit of modern communities of compounding for their policies, ambitions and experiments by elevating them into principles ... a fashion which has become a craze." But, more importantly, he takes the proliferation of political doctrines to reflect a growing dissatisfaction with Liberalism or Representative Democracy and especially with "the crude and negative individualism apt to be associated with Liberalism."

To be sure, some of these doctrines are more "profound" than others. Representative Democracy scores best here. Each of them also represents something significant in Western civilization. So it is pointless, though it may be "heroic," he says, to "regret" their existence, since that would amount to regretting that we have become

who we are. But the main point is that none of the doctrines have much at all to offer a philosophical critic. Certainly, their exponents "have not been able to deny themselves excursions into philosophical thought" but the excursions are always "remarkably unsatisfactory." In short, as Oakeshott intimates elsewhere, political doctrines tend to be the constructions of either the intellectually challenged or the intellectually dishonest: the intellectually challenged know no better; the intellectually dishonest do know better. But the logic of practical political argument is simply different from the logic of philosophical explanation and they should never be confused. The most useful thing a "philosophical critic" can do with such doctrines is free them "from the encumbrance of these largely parasitic philosophical and pseudo-philosophical ideas."

It is small wonder, then, that Oakeshott never engaged in the defence of such doctrines, including conservative doctrines. In fact, conservatism did not rise to the level of a doctrine *comme les autres* in the book. The ones that did were Representative Democracy, Catholicism, Communism, Fascism and National Socialism. All he had to say about Conservatism in the The Social and Political Doctrines was that so far as England was concerned "many of the principles which belong to the historic doctrine of Conservatism are to be found in [the] Catholic doctrine," a doctrine largely out of keeping with the modern world. But, more importantly, perhaps, it was the "doctrine of Representative or Parliamentary Democracy" which was the "tradition expressed, so far as this country is concerned, in the spirit of our laws." And so, in the terms of "On being Conservative" and also of the introduction Oakeshott wrote for a new edition of Reginald Bassett's The Essentials of Parliamentary Democracy (1964), Representative

Democracy constituted that “current manner of living” together politically about which it was appropriate for Englishmen to be conservative.

So if the doctrines of social and political Conservatism were hardly ever the focus of Oakeshott’s conservatism, what was? The answer, I think, is very clear and unequivocal: it is nothing less than tending to the traditions of Western Civilization. And here political traditions were just one set among many and then, as his essay “The Claims of Politics” (1939) insists, by no means necessarily the most important set. The proper *persona* to be conservative with respect to civilization was the philosopher; the proper institutional home for such conservation was the University, understood very much in the Humboldt mould. Time and again in his educational writings, Oakeshott emphasized the uniqueness of university education. A University, he always said, is the only institution we have for “caring for and attending to the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization. It is concerned not merely to keep an intellectual inheritance intact, but to be continuously recovering what has been lost, restoring what has been neglected, collecting together what has been dissipated, repairing what has been corrupted, reconsidering, reshaping, reorganizing, making more intelligible, reissuing and reinvesting.” And all of this conservation, restoration and reinvestment, he insists, must work “undistracted from practical concerns” (RP, 310).

But in the modern world, more so perhaps than in past worlds, Universities have been subject relentlessly to the pressures of practical political, financial, utilitarian, religious, and so on, concerns. In

resolutely resisting these pressures, Oakeshott's second, erroneous reputation as a conservative critic of modernity has been cemented. To be sure, there was much in the modern world which Oakeshott identified as superficial, self-contradictory and a falsification of reality. Everything he said about modern rationalism points in this direction. But this is misconstrued as a critique of modernity, and it is doubly misconstrued as a one-sided, conservative critique. And the reason why this is so is very straightforward. "Modernity" is a construction of modern minds, just as our social and political doctrines are. "Modernity" is constructed by selecting certain characteristics of the modern world and weaving them together into a more or less, but never completely, coherent concept. The critiques of "modernity," then, belong just as much to the modern world as the constructions of "modernity" do. So from Oakeshott's standpoint, as I understand it, such magnificent works as T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land are as much the artistic expressions of modernity as they are critiques of it. Oakeshott's work, then, is just as much a celebration of the modern world as it is a philosophical critique of it.

To conclude, let me return to Oakeshott's reading in the woods and villages of Germany in 1923, or thereabouts. I like to imagine that as he read Goethe he would have agreed that "Alles Gescheite ist schon gedacht worden." And he, too, would have added that our duty as civilized people is to think it all again. I am certain that he agreed with Hegel that to become "at home" in the world, our world, the modern world, the only world we have, requires recognizing "die Rose im Kreuze der Gegenwart." But I am equally certain that he would have added that we cannot just "recognize" this rose, our duty is to *cultivate* it. And all this, I think, in the form of conserving, cultivating,

augmenting and delighting in the rich and diverse, the troublesome and the exhilarating, the familiar and the not so familiar traditions of Western civilization was the only kind of "conservatism" that Oakeshott thought worth pursuing.

Thank you very much.