

THE LEGACY OF MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE MORAL LIFE by Michael Oakeshott, ed. Timothy Fuller. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993. 166 pp. \$32.00.

MORALITY AND POLITICS IN MODERN EUROPE—THE HARVARD LECTURES by Michael Oakeshott, ed. Shirley Robin Letwin. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993. 115 pp. \$32.00.

THE POLITICS OF FAITH & THE POLITICS OF SKEPTICISM by Michael Oakeshott, ed. Timothy Fuller. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996. 139 pp. \$32.00.

Like Thomas Hobbes, the subject of his well-received interpretive essay, Michael Oakeshott wrote his most comprehensive statement of political philosophy, *On Human Conduct* (1976), relatively late in life. Previous to this work, Oakeshott had written a major philosophical study, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), and published a collection of political essays, *Rationalism in Politics* (1962). The books reviewed here are essays and lectures prepared during the time spanning the two earlier works. Most of these writings come to us for the first time, as Oakeshott chose not to publish them during his lifetime. Many of the essays fill in or illuminate the primary arguments in his already-published work, but others analyze topics not previously addressed. Although *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* deepens Oakeshott's controversial discussion of the relation between philosophy and the practice of politics, it also contains a number of essays on religion, a topic that most analysts assume Oakeshott ignored. *The Politics of Faith & the Politics of Skepticism* and *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* show us Oakeshott attempting to identify the underlying political context of the seemingly heterogeneous forces that make up modern Western politics twenty years before his major statement on the Western political tradition in *On Human Conduct*.

While conservative thinkers in Britain have made the greatest claims to Oakeshott, different aspects of his political philosophy have made it possible



for him to be read as a liberal, pragmatist, historicist, existentialist, and post-modernist. The newly published books will not make it easier to fit Oakeshott's thinking into a concise political category. They also will require both critics and admirers of his work to reassess their understanding of his political philosophy. An introduction by Timothy Fuller in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* reports Oakeshott's notes included a close study of Plato, an influence on his thinking that has not been considered by most analysts despite Oakeshott's own statement in *On Human Conduct* that his understanding of philosophy is largely drawn from Plato (Oakeshott 1976, 27). And indeed, Oakeshott's discussion of religion evokes themes of the Platonic eros, while his appeals for political moderation follows Socrates' claim in Book 8 of the *Republic* that a regime based on a single principle will self-destruct. Most important, the recently published works contribute greatly to our understanding of Oakeshott's attempted reconciliation of the Hegelian and Platonic sides of his philosophy. On one hand, Oakeshott presents his largely Hegelian view that philosophers must overcome the limited intellectual resources required to engage in science, history, and other practices in order to understand experience in its totality. On other hand, Oakeshott tells his readers that we must learn from the Socratic dialogues how to identify and scrutinize the character of circumscribed thinking itself—the suppositions of the conditional thinking that animate different types of human conduct. Recognizing these complementary features of his thought enables one to see why Oakeshott upheld the importance of philosophical pursuits despite his “anti-foundational” view that philosophy fails to provide support for other types of understandings.

The opening four chapters of *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, a series of essays on religion written in the late 1920s, provide the most surprising feature of the newly published works. Until now, religion had been absent from Oakeshott's corpus. Indeed, Maurice Cowling, the conservative historian who has been deeply influenced by Oakeshott's views on Mill, politics, and history itself, regretfully points to Oakeshott as a contributor to the death of God in England. Oakeshott, claims Cowling, is England's leading conservative thinker of this century, yet he neglects to assess, let alone articulate, an understanding of religion and the place of God in his political philosophy (Cowling 1980). These essays respond to Cowling's complaint, though perhaps not in the way he would have hoped.

In his most comprehensive statement, “Religion and the World,” Oakeshott identifies two Christian attitudes toward life on this side of the heavenly divide. Early Christianity believed that the second coming was imminent and sought to overcome both the pleasures and necessities of this world in

preparation for salvation. Late Christianity, disenchanted by the delay of the new age, established a doctrine designed to provide spiritual guidance for a period of extended contact with the degraded reality of this world. In short, whereas early Christianity totally rejected the values of this world, later Christianity compromised. While dismissing the early Christian view of an approaching deliverance, Oakeshott identifies its quest to reject all worldly values as the truest, most insightful form of religion. The individual of the world and the religious individual represent two types of self. Worldly individuals lose themselves in the practices of society as they hope to find a better future; religious individuals come to terms with a fallen world and strive for moments of sincerity and integrity. What is required for religion today, Oakeshott argues, is a more credible view to uphold against external worldly values, a spiritual attitude that will allow for the complete autonomy of the self.

Oakeshott never really articulates this new religious outlook. At times, he seems to have the Platonic eros in mind, as when he discusses the religious individual's decision to seek perfection by avoiding the world of practice as this requires a commitment to and entanglement with the merely bodily appetites that this world caters to. At other times, Oakeshott's religious individuals seem less serious, evoking themes of Nietzsche's Jesus in *The Antichrist*; a kind of self-deification through innocent isolation from ordinary life and an instinctive disregard for external trappings. There are intimations throughout the essay that religion is related to Oakeshott's view that philosophy is a predisposition to overcome the assumptions that all beliefs and modes of thinking require. But Oakeshott identifies youth, not philosophers, as those with the courage to reject all assumptions and their concomitant worldly concerns. Timothy Fuller's introduction suggests Oakeshott understood theologizing at its highest as being related to philosophy, but the introduction also reports that no such analysis can be found in his writings. In short, Oakeshott's analysis of religion remains incomplete, and while these essays may lead Cowling and other analysts to reevaluate some of Oakeshott's views regarding religion, there is no need for Cowling to reassess Oakeshott's views on God.

A central theme of *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* is Oakeshott's claim that philosophy is incapable of contributing to the practice of politics. Deeply influenced by Hegel, F. H. Bradley, and other thinkers of the idealist tradition, Oakeshott asserts that human judgments require the subordination of reality to ideas. Consistent with *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott notes that philosophy analyzes the different types of understandings developed by the mind to create a coherent reality and organize behavior: scientists assume a body of knowledge when conducting experiments; historians do the same when explaining an event. Philosophy understands that the

suppositions underlying distinct activities are the sole basis for right and wrong behavior. Right and wrong, however, refer not to a correspondence with some objective truth but to their role in providing human activity with coherence. From critiquing and revealing the background assumptions of various kinds of being-in-the-world, philosophy turns on itself and critically assesses the premises it adopts in evaluating the assumptions of others. Philosophy, then, is boundless theorizing, the relentless critique of assumptions in the quest to ground knowledge in a comprehensive grasp of reality. Like Hegel (but not Bradley), Oakeshott argues that the philosopher attempts to comprehend an absolutely coherent and complete world of experience, the point at which the real is rational.

In these essays, Oakeshott also presents the same relation between philosophy and politics found in *Rationalism in Politics*. First, a philosophy of politics can identify, but not create, the assumptions upon which political activities are based. Indeed, a philosophy of politics is irrelevant to political practice as it stands beyond the assumptions and moods critical to that practice while relativizing the modified or partial reality of political experience within an understanding of reality as a whole. Second, a philosophy of politics recognizes that, as the assumptions intrinsic to an activity itself are the sole basis for right and wrong behavior, attempts to transfer the premises of one sphere of activity to another will destroy the only source of coherence available to human conduct. Rejecting the charge that opposition to the incursions of science into the political realm can only come from an irrationalist perspective, Oakeshott answers that distinct practices are animated by logics of legitimation that are radically alien to each other and to the presuppositions of science. Consequently, when a state or any centralizing power attempts to direct these patterns of activities toward rational political goals, the patterns lose both their coherence and their ability to set procedures for the pursuit of private, substantial goals.

Unlike *Experience and Its Modes* and *Rationalism and Politics*, however, the essays in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* go beyond the view of philosophy as the attempt to understand the limitations of the world's structures of meaning. Like *On Human Conduct*, these articles suggest philosophy's more positive contributions have to do with its ability to identify and examine the ideal characteristics that precondition modes of being-in-the-world. Here Oakeshott affirms the importance of the Socratic dialogues: philosophers are concerned to interrogate the character of conditional understandings and redefine them in terms of their assumptions; it is necessary for philosophers to present as fully as they can how their redefinition is connected with and arises from the less comprehensive understanding with which they began.

Accordingly, the crucial impulse in political philosophy is the drive to discover the permanent character of political activity. But this permanent knowledge is “not merely an extension and enlargement of what we are just acquainted with; the permanent *it* is what it *becomes* when given a place in an intelligible universe” (p. 151). A philosophy of politics, on this view, is identifying the context of assumptions that furnishes the text of political thinking.

To summarize, Oakeshott presents a two-sided view of political philosophy. The more philosophical a political philosophy, the more it questions its own assumptions and procedures and the less it has to say about political practice as it seeks to attain a total understanding of experience. From this angle, what distinguishes political philosophy from other types of philosophies is its origins in the world of politics. Once this starting place is out of sight and mind, political philosophy is indistinguishable from philosophic enterprises emanating from religious, scientific, artistic, or other experiences. The second focus of political philosophy is identifying and investigating the unacknowledged context in which political thinking is conducted, the anterior conditions of the many opinions that inform political practice. From this perspective, the political philosopher centers on identifying that process of mediation by which political understandings at one level pass into a political understanding at another and higher level. The unifying threads connecting both sides of political philosophy are the placing of political thought in “context” and the Socratic understanding that the philosopher pursues knowledge intimated in the opinions held by others. Oakeshott’s more positive view of philosophy’s unique role in understanding arrested or abstract thinking—which he presents as “theory” in the first essay of *On Human Conduct*—has led notable analysts such as Hanna Pitkin to suggest that the late Oakeshott had a different view of philosophy from the one found in *Experience and Its Modes* and *Rationalism in Politics* (Pitkin 1976). This discussion of an early and late Oakeshott has centered on whether the latter abandoned Hegel. The essays on political philosophy in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* point to the possibility that Oakeshott’s appreciation for Plato contributed to this shift. The essays also indicate that Oakeshott had been developing these new emphases as early as the 1940s.

The examination of Oakeshott’s views on philosophy in light of those of Richard Rorty—who points to Oakeshott as a key figure in “anti-foundational” philosophy—clarifies Oakeshott’s positions and highlights the importance of Oakeshott’s study of Plato (Rorty 1979, 1983). Oakeshott and Rorty reject the view that philosophy is a privileged form of knowledge which endorses, and decrees to, other kinds of understandings. Both suggest that philosophy should recognize a civilized society as a kind of conversation

among a variety of human activities, each speaking with a language of its own. Rorty and Oakeshott also see philosophy as a kind of parasitic activity; it primarily elucidates already existing practices. However, in contrast to Rorty's view of the philosopher as the "all-purpose intellectual," Oakeshott sees philosophy as a distinct discipline—the inquiry into the suppositions of the conditional understandings that animate human activity, an understanding that evaluates other forms of knowledge. Hence, while Rorty envisions the philosopher's voice participating in, and contributing to, the conversation among society's discrete spheres, Oakeshott warns that the philosopher's participation in this conversation will distort both philosophy itself and the other kinds of understandings. Finally, Rorty presents his view of philosophy as a radical rejection of a tradition stemming from Plato, namely, the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good. Oakeshott breaks from the conventional view of Plato that places the doctrine of ideas at the center of his thought. Declaring he shall "pass over" the difficult problems entailed in Plato's idea of an unconditional understanding, Oakeshott states that what is most important is to learn from Plato's critical inquiry into the modes of circumscribed thinking in which such an understanding is reached. To Oakeshott, the quest for wisdom itself is a kind of virtue that does not require positive visions of the Good or unconditioned and comprehensive theories of the world and truth to make its pursuit worthwhile.

In *Faith and Skepticism* and *Morality and Politics*, Oakeshott emphasizes the side of political philosophy that unearths and clarifies the ideal characteristics that condition modern Western political thinking. In both works, Oakeshott focuses on two opposed views—faith and skepticism or individualism and anti-individualism—about the proper tasks of government. Oakeshott insists that none of these views is to be associated with the differences, antagonisms, alignments, and parties that comprise the surface of modern Western politics. Rather, they are the context in which the many ideas of Western political thought become intelligible.

In *Faith and Skepticism*, which analysts have been unable to exactly date although it appears to have been written in the early 1950s, Oakeshott argues that the key impetus to modern political thought was the sudden and dramatic centralization of state power and concomitant availability of technology in the sixteenth century. One response to this vast expansion of power has been the politics of faith, an attempt to use the state to improve and ultimately perfect the material conditions of humanity. Francis Bacon's writings are identified as the most complete expression of this outlook. Oakeshott also suggests that the idea of employing government power to pursue the common good can take both religious and secular forms: seventeenth century English

puritans and the eighteenth century *philosophes* looked at state power with the same hopes. Another response to the enlargement of state power has been the politics of skepticism, the view that seeks to specify and limit the functions of government out of fear that such a large concentration of power is a threat to human freedom and dignity. The politics of skepticism fears that the government is far too blunt an instrument to utilize in the pursuit of something so complex, elusive, and perhaps even multifarious as perfection. Montaigne, Hobbes, Hume, the American Founders, and Burke are among the thinkers with this skeptical understanding of politics.

In *Morality and Politics*, a series of lectures given by Oakeshott at Harvard University in 1957, Oakeshott explains that the primary impetus to modern Western political thinking was the breakdown of late medieval communal organizations. As a consequence of this breakdown, a political division developed between moralities of individualism and anti-individualism, and Oakeshott traces out how each morality has established a disposition toward the tasks of government that is largely consistent with the contending outlooks of skepticism and faith. Indeed, notwithstanding differences in nuances, the view that animates *Faith and Skepticism, Morality and Politics*, and Oakeshott's later writings, most notably the third essay of *On Human Conduct*, remains consistent. That is, the underlying context of modern Western political thought is defined by two contending ideas that have fostered an ambiguous and ambivalent political tradition, creating confusion and conflict over the meaning of democracy, liberty, law, and the common language of politics.

Consistent with his position that philosophy must remain separate from political practice, Oakeshott does not urge the philosopher to contribute to the formation of a political outlook that will clarify and distinguish the equivocal character of Western political thinking. Instead, he argues that when left alone the contending views of faith and skepticism, or individualism and anti-individualism, are incomplete. Reminiscent of Socrates in Book 8 of the *Republic*, Oakeshott suggests that the leading outlook of a regime ceases to be an effective principle if it becomes the regime's sole guide. To Socrates, oligarchic attachment to wealth produces citizens with a set of vices that hasten the slide into democracy, while democratic love for freedom and equality encourages character traits that open the door wide to tyranny. To Oakeshott, the logic of the politics of faith and skepticism if left unmitigated also leads to self-destruction. For example, the politics of skepticism often centers on following formal rules to ensure public order, yet this outlook contributes to political decay as it responds too slowly to changing circumstances and emergencies. Here the politics of faith provides a needed

corrective as it tends to bring enthusiasm and energy to government. Oakeshott suggests that, while the self-destructive aspect of each outlook tends to create a movement back to the other, the post-World War II experience of Eastern Europe with the Soviet-style politics of faith indicates the possibility of aberrant periods where one outlook gains overwhelming predominance. In the wake of the fall of communism, as well as the decline of comprehensive theories of the world, one may question whether Oakeshott's understanding of modern Western political thinking remains relevant. But it is relevant. Oakeshott would characterize the post-cold war West as an aberration as well, precisely because it is being driven solely by the outlook of skepticism.

One does find a subtle and thought-provoking change in regard to the relation between political philosophy and practice when comparing the books under review here with Oakeshott's later works. In *Faith and Skepticism* and *Morality and Politics*, Oakeshott argues that all modern political philosophy has been written in the context of the contending ideas of the tasks of government. But in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott elaborates on the way key political philosophers—Bodin, Hobbes, Bacon, Kant, Hegel, among a few others—helped define this context and adds that “every . . . state may come to be better understood by using these ideal characters as instruments of inquiry” (p. 247). Similarly, Oakeshott's late writings on Hobbes discussed his strengths and weaknesses in defining the context of modern political thought. In his final essay, “The Rule of Law,” Oakeshott praises Hobbes as a “pioneer” for envisioning a civil association, that is, a society that does not pursue a telic goal. Nonetheless, Oakeshott regrets that Hobbes failed to define the standards for judging whether laws are contributing to either type of society, a lacuna in political philosophy that Oakeshott says in *On Human Conduct* he is attempting to overcome (Oakeshott 1983, 159-61; 1976, 161).

This shift in emphasis in Oakeshott's later writings regarding how political philosophers may contribute to the underlying assumptions of political thinking begs the question: Could the late Oakeshott be concerned with creating, and not solely understanding, being-in-the-world? Or did Oakeshott feel that the philosopher may contribute to the change of values posthumously, suggesting that his arguments for a separation of philosophy and politics was meant in the more narrow, prosaic sense? Oakeshott provides a hint of an answer to these questions in an essay in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* where he discusses that only limited changes can be induced through direct political means. Consequently, the artist, poet, and philosopher should eschew politics and remain true to their genius, thus creating conditions whereby they may contribute to the public good. “Societies,” in short, “are led from behind, and for those capable of leadership to give themselves up to

political activity is to break away from their genius” (p. 96). As to whether Oakeshott will lead us from behind remains to be seen. At the very least, we can be grateful that he has left behind three books that both amplify familiar themes and introduce new ones, and therewith, new vistas.

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