Oakeshott and the Idea of Freedom*

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Michael Oakeshott has been a celebrated political philosopher for the last three decades, but until the appearance of On Human Conduct, one might have legitimately asked: Where is his political philosophy to be found? Experience and its Modes (1934) explored the presuppositions of practice, science, history and philosophy, but contained only the most marginal remarks about politics. The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe (1939) is merely a linked anthology of modern statements of belief. After the war, Oakeshott wrote a number of highly influential articles in the Cambridge Journal; many of them appeared, along with his Inaugural Lecture at the London School of Economics, in Rationalism in Politics (1962). Some of the essays contained in Rationalism in Politics were political, but others (such as “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”) had nothing to do with politics. There had, of course, been a long and influential introduction to the Blackwell edition of Leviathan (1946) but that had been out of print for some time. Now at last we have a kind of Cheshire cat in reverse: starting with the smile, we are at last getting the cat. The various writings on Hobbes have been brought together in a single volume Hobbes on Civil Association (Blackwell, Oxford, 1975); a separate collection of essays is expected soon; and, most important of all is On Human Conduct (Oxford, 1975), which in a characteristically oblique way deals with all the traditional problems of political philosophy.

Philosophy is concerned with understanding politics, and it is entirely typical of Oakeshott’s mind that, instead of rushing on to deal with politics, he should begin with the question of understanding itself. It is equally typical that he should be concerned not with what is known, but with the actual activity of understanding. The centre of gravity of Oakeshott’s philosophy has always been human activity: not “Nature” but science as a manner of understanding; not “the past” but “the activity of being a historian”.

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In the first of the three long essays which compose *On Human Conduct* he is concerned with the activity of theorising, and particularly with theorising human life. Underlying what he has to say is a conception of human life as an adventure, and the various activities of human beings as “engagements” whose structure it is the business (or the “engagement”) of philosophy to explore.

Oakeshott’s view of politics as sailing a boundless sea without prospect of a final destination is well known. Readers will therefore not be surprised to discover that his view of theorising is fundamentally similar. Understanding is never absent from the human world, but it is also never complete. We do not set out from the coves of ignorance and aim for the port of knowledge. Even to begin to theorise, we must know something of our subject matter, and to understand it better is merely to make it more intelligible.

The engagement of understanding is... a continuous, self-moving, critical enterprise of theorising. Its principle is: Never ask the end... It is an engagement of arrivals and departures. Temporary platforms of conditional understanding are always being reached, and the theorist may turn aside to explore them. But each is an arrival, an enlightenment, and a point of departure.

Oakeshott’s metaphors, when not concerned with salon matters like conversation, have always had a salty sea tang, and in this comprehensive rethinking of what it is to theorise, he uses the analogy of casting one’s net from those conditional platforms of understanding. The movement of understanding is here taken as an ascent of increasing abstraction. The most primitive kind of understanding is the mere recognition of things in terms of simple marks. A more complicated kind is identification in terms of compositions of ideal characters. It will be remembered that Plato held a similar view, but Oakeshott emphasises one important difference from what is presented in the *Republic*. The more complex forms of understanding do not supersede or correct the simpler forms. Each move towards abstraction leads on to a new “platform of conditional understanding” from which the inquirer may cast his net for whatever illumination may be found in the surrounding waters. Beyond a certain point, however, understanding beings to concern itself not with the identities with which it began, but with the conditions of the “platform” itself. “To read the face of Big Ben (that is, to ‘tell the time’) postulates and therefore does not question the idea of ‘time’.” (p. 9) Theorising in its fullest sense appears as the interrogation of the conditions or postulates of simpler forms of understanding; and this kind of theorising has,
of course, its own conditions to be investigated if we should choose to move on to yet further “platforms of understanding.” Indeed, “the irony of all theorizing is its propensity to generate, not an understanding, but a not-yet-understood.” (p. 11)

Rather like T.S. Eliot, trying to get the better of words and ever beginning over again, Oakeshott is a man trying to get the better of reality, and always prepared to think through again matters he has often meditated before. The account of the activity of theorising presented in *On Human Conduct* covers much of what had earlier been discussed in *Experience and its Modes*, but covers it afresh, and links it to the subject matter of human conduct. All that a reviewer can do in a brief compass is indicate a few of the salient points, for whilst Oakeshott constantly reiterates his main themes in a series of subtly different restatements, much of his argument is highly compressed and cannot be summarised without distortion. Human conduct, he writes in one of his reiterative passages, is

Agents disclosing and enacting themselves in responding to their understood contingent situations by choosing to do or say *this* rather than *that* in relation to imagined and wished-for outcomes, in the exercise of chosen sentiments, and in terms of a multiplicity of arts and practices presided over by a practice of moral conduct and perhaps religious faith. (p. 86)

The bland surface of such statements as these derives from Oakeshott’s avoidance of academic technicalities. Most academic writing follows familiar shipping lanes and calls in at well-frequented ports of controversy: Oakeshott, with what may be regarded according to the flow of sympathy as either integrity or perversity, follows his own routes, finds ports of his own, and describes the ports of others only from oblique angles. Cross-referencing to the academic controversies of the twentieth century is virtually non-existent. But one of the things which gives a tough and disciplined structure to his thought is the fact that he is familiar with the literature and a practiced reader can often detect implicit currents of controversy moving under the elegant and idiosyncratic surface.

In his treatment of human conduct, there is no doubt what kind of view he is primarily concerned to confute. It is any attempt to understand human actions as if abstract patterning allowed them to be reduced to the processes and systems by which we understand Nature. Oakeshott is concerned to vindicate
the traditional view of the human world as irreducibly different from the natural world by virtue of the fact that it is an encounter of intelligent agents, rather than a field of things bouncing off each other; and it must therefore be theorised in suitably different terms. The fundamental “logic” of human explanation is that of history. Human conduct, being essentially contingent, cannot be understood in terms of systems and processes. Thus, while Oakeshott recognises the existence of viable sciences such as economics or psychology, he argues that they cannot help us to understand the actions of concrete human beings. An expression such as “the psychology of Henry VIII”, if strictly understood, must be rejected as the attempt to reduce the thoughts and sentiments of a human being “to the components of a process (commonly called ‘ego functioning’) to be understood in terms of a temperament, of a so-called ‘psychological type’, of the ur-experiences of infancy, biological urges, genetic inheritances, repressed anxieties, or of environmental pressures – anything but the ideas he has learned (but might not have learned) to think.” (p. 22) Oakeshott is no friend of psycho-history.

The moral life has always been one of his central preoccupations, and it is here discussed in terms of two constituent aspects of moral practice. Human conduct is understood as the transactions of intelligent moral agents seeking responses from one another, and the “diurnal rhythms” of this endless human concern are termed “self-disclosure.” But this utilitarian aspect of the moral life is incomplete unless we recognise that an agent understands the acts he performs in terms of the motives he has for performing them, and by which he understands his own character. This is termed “self-enactment”, and moral theorising may be characterised according as it stresses one or the other side of moral practice. “Aristotle from one point of view, and Kant from another” are writers who have understood the moral life exclusively in terms of self-enactment rather than in terms of self-disclosure.

Theorising, and moral conduct, are the avenues by which Oakeshott approaches his central question: What is the modern state? Such a question can only be adequately considered if it is seen as both historical and philosophical. It is historical because the state he seeks to understand is not merely an ideal type of political association, but the particular form which began to emerge in Europe in the fifteenth century, and which has subsequently spread, in varying forms, to the rest of the world. Oakeshott’s “platform of understanding” is therefore anchored in time and space, but it is constructed out of timelessly analytical materials. His historical question is: What sort of human association is the state? And this involves him in: What types of human association may we conceive of? Again, questions about the office of rulers of associations involve him in considering the offices which may be confused with that of rulers. But his fundamental concern is with the structure of association.
One type of human association arises from the transactional responses of human beings to one another, responses exemplified by anything from the relationship of lovers to that of a comedian trying to get a laugh from an audience. These transactions will almost inevitably be conducted in terms of rules, and these rules are “understood adverbial conditions to be subscribed to in making choices and they neither identify nor entail any particular action.” (p. 113) This notion of a “condition to be subscribed to” is central to Oakeshott’s argument, and it may well be found elusive by many readers. Its cumbersome formulation seems to be necessitated by Oakeshott’s insistence that such conditions cannot properly be construed as the “causes” of the actions of human agents. The traffic regulations of any city, if I may suggest a commonplace example, are conditions to be subscribed to by anyone who brings his car into the city. They prohibit (but do not prevent) him from going up one-way streets, or from parking for more than a certain time at certain places. But they do not cause him to bring his car into town, or prevent him from doing so, nor do they impel him to park at any particular spot. They are merely conditions “to be subscribed to” in whatever actions he may choose to perform. The general idea is perfectly familiar, and is often illustrated by the rules of games like chess or cricket. This conception of the relation between people and rules is developed in the second essay of the book, “On the civil condition”.

One form of possible human association is when human beings unite together in pursuit of a common objective:

…in respect of being seekers and therefore providers of satisfactions, agents may be related in the joint pursuit of some imagined and wished for common satisfaction. I will call this ‘enterprise association’, because it is relationship in terms of the pursuit of some common purpose, some substantive condition of things to be jointly procured, or some common interest to be continuously satisfied. (p. 114)

Enterprise association may be exemplified in business firms, churches, interest groups, universities and corporations of all kinds. Such an association has a common good, and (in a metaphorical sense) a common purpose. But the important point about an enterprise association “is that is members cannot be related merely in terms of a common purpose; they must be united in terms of what I shall call the ‘management’ of its pursuit…an enterprise
association is a ‘policy’, and enterprise association is a ‘managerial’ engagement.” (p. 115)

What Oakeshott calls “the civil condition” is, then, distinguished from an enterprise association by the fact that the associates are not bound together in terms of any common enterprise, but simply by the fact that they recognise the authority of rules which are “conditions to be subscribed to” in the actions they may choose to perform. Here, as often in On Human Conduct, Oakeshott avoids the Scylla of current rhetorical confusions and the Charybdis of academic technicality by recourse to the Latin vocabulary of earlier European self-understanding. His general concern is to theorise human conduct inter homines, and the civil condition may be understood in these terms as a civitas whose “watery” fidelity (p. 147) revolves around respublica, the public concern of cives. The distinctive thing about cives is that “they are related solely in terms of their common recognition of the rules which constitute a practice of civility.” (p. 128) The practice is one of being “just” to one another: “there is no game being played and there is no common enterprise: association begins and ends in the recognition of rules. Such rules I shall call ‘law’.” (p. 128)

The notion of an enterprise association is familiar to everyone from his schooldays onwards, and few problems arise in understanding it. It is so familiar that it is unlikely to determine our conception of any kind of human association. Indeed, given the constant philosophical enterprise of attempting to explain modern European states in terms of common goods and general wills, there is clearly a strong tendency even in the most sophisticated thought to assimilate the civil condition to some sort of enterprise association. It is clear that Oakeshott’s passion in this second essay is to explore the structure of the civil condition, for this, by virtue of its lack of focus, is something much more difficult to understand. Hence it is that Oakeshott, whilst dealing with many of the traditional themes of political philosophy in this essay, keeps rigorously to civil association as an ideal character. For he is very clear about the fact that neither it nor enterprise association can be identified with that highly ambiguous mode of association we call the “state”.

Amongst the many themes that might be taken up here, we have space only to glance at what Oakeshott has to say about the notion of politics. The very word itself has long been recognised as presenting difficulties, some of which explain why Oakeshott has chosen to go back to the more traditional word “civil” to characterise the particular form of association from which he considers the activity of politics to arise. In the civil condition, the cives become such solely by their recognition of the authority of the rules of the respublica in terms of which they are united. Recognising the authority of such rules does not, he emphasises, involve approving them, or even believing
them to be rational. One may well recognize an authority without approving of its activities, as Sidney Godolphin did in relation to Charles I; or one may dispute the authority of a government without disapproving of what it is actually doing, as Robert E. Lee did of the Federal Government of the United States. But rules may also be considered and thought about in terms of their desirability and their fitness for being changed. This need no, in principle, happen at all. One might well image a re\textit{spublica} whose rules were believed to be, over the generations, both authoritative and unchangeable. Such an association would have no politics. But the commonest situation is clearly that in which a rule of civil intercourse “has been notionally resolved from being an authoritative prescription into a conclusion in order that what it prescribes may be distinguished from its authority and thus be made available to be considered in terms of its desirability.” (p. 165) Politics, then, is deliberation and utterance concerned with civil desirabilities.

This will immediately be seen as an austere account of politics, one only justifiable, perhaps, in terms of the severely abstract ideal specifications of the civil condition. It excludes from the proper province of politics much that we should, in everyday life, regard as the business of politicians. But it is nonetheless instructive for being limited in such a fashion. For, whatever the words involved, Oakeshott is painfully bringing to light real structural relationships which the day-to-day impulsions of rhetorical convenience have long obscured. He recognises clearly that to talk of the politics of ants and baboons is merely metaphorical, for here we are not dealing with human conduct. It is when he also excludes such expressions as “the politics of the tennis club” that most readers will hesitate, and those who believe that everything is political will froth at the mouth. What is the crux of an argument which excludes from the field of politics everything that is involved in the management of an enterprise association?

The central point is that cives are associated together purely in terms of their subscription to lex, and therefore to consider the desirability of the rules thus subscribed to is central to their mode of association. It is, as it were, the uniting activity. The members of an enterprise association such as a tennis club, however, are linked to by their common involvement in tennis, which is not itself political; and the management of their affairs is thus a consideration secondary to what fundamentally joins them together. Indeed, management is often the preoccupation of those least involved in the explicit concerns of the association. Hence Oakeshott takes the activity of managing an enterprise association to be describable as politics only in a metaphorical sense. In particular, he argues that proposals for awards of benefit or advantage to ascertainable individuals or corporate interests are “not merely contingently excluded from political discourse; they are necessarily excluded by the character of re\textit{spublica}. (p. 169) The public concern of a civil association is
not a schedule of current awards to interests, and hence civil associations
cannot even entertain such considerations. It is not that Oakeshott does not
recognise that political proposals may not arise from desires for substantive
satisfactions, nor does it mean that benefits or disadvantages may not result
from the enactments of *lex*. What Oakeshott means is that a proposal which
may being in a want, a wish for a benefit, or a plea for the removal of a
disadvantage must lose this character and acquire another (a political
character) in being understood, advanced and considered as a proposal for
the amendment of the *respublica* of civil association. (p. 170)

The third and final essay constituting *On Human Conduct* descends to the
stickier ground of exploring in these analytical terms the historical experience
of the modern European state. One thing Oakeshott achieves in this section is
to bring out just how mysterious and difficult an idea the modern state is. His
use of a mediaeval Latin vocabulary in this particular discussion is less a
matter of intellectual hygiene than a response to the language actually used
by those who first tried to make sense of the modern state. From the time of
the revival of Roman Law onwards, medieval thinkers had available the two
notions of *societas* and *universitas* in order to construe different kinds of
human association, and these were used to interpret political entities. Neither
of these ideas is by itself an adequate account of the state, and the problem
of interpretation is set by the fact that, whilst both are necessary to account for
some feature of the state, the ideas themselves are in principle irreconcilable.
“A state”, Oakeshott argues, “may perhaps be understood as an unresolved
tension between the two irreconcilable dispositions represented by the words
*societas* and *universitas*” (p. 201) and he adds that it is this tension rather
than others celebrated in current writing that is central to an understanding of
states.

The idea *societas* is a particular legal and historical specification of the ideal
character which Oakeshott has already discussed as the civil condition. Each
*socius* is joined to others in a loyalty whose conditions are a kind of law, and
whose beginning was usually thought to be a pact or treaty of some sort. The
human race, friends or neighbours, suitors to a court, or speakers of the same
language may all in different degrees constitute a *societas*. Such an
association may have a ruler (though it need not have) but such an officer
would be a master of ceremonies, not an arbiter of fashion. “His concern is
with the ‘manners’ of convives, and his office is to keep the conversation
going, not be determine what is said.” (p. 202-3) One might perhaps say that
the ‘discipline’ holding such associates together is involvement in a moral
practice of mutual respect, or recognition of a skill such as speaking a
language. The important point about this kind of association is that it does not
involve management in terms of a common purpose. For that we must turn to
the complimentary idea of a *universitas*.
The idea of a *universitas* (from which, of course, the name of a university derives) was that of men incorporated together by virtue of some common purpose so that they formed an artificial Person. The idea itself is, as Oakeshott points out, paradoxical, for a Person cannot be composed of persons, any more than a Family can be composed of families. The difficulty may be avoided if we relax the conditions of personhood, and this is what Roman lawyers did. Corporations of this kind were always historically the creations of some higher authority (as Popes and later the Emperor created the *universitates* of *studia generalia*) and they had specific powers conferred upon them. Whereas a *societas* may arise either by choice or chance, a *universitas* was a chosen engagement of its members, and this is clearly one of the features of the idea which make it inappropriate as a device for understanding a compulsory association like the state. As the idea was developed by political theorists, the idea of personhood sometimes got out of control, and *universitates* were endowed with single collective Wills, Minds or Purposes; but some fancies are unnecessary to establish the necessary degree of association. “It is a many speaking with one voice, not because all the tongues have miraculously become one Tongue…but because…they are agreed, not merely to speak the same language, but to say the same thing and are equipped with the means of committing themselves to or acknowledging such common utterances as their own.” (p. 105)

These two ideas offered themselves (Oakeshott characteristically remarks) as “aids to reflection” on the character of the newly emerging form of association which came to be called a “state” from the sixteenth century onwards. Interpretation of the character of states is an extraordinarily confused story, and part of the confusion derives from the fact that each of these two central ideas imposed itself upon an existing vocabulary of politics and thus led to “the muddle in which we now live where ‘law’, ‘ruling’, ‘politics’, etc. each have two discrepant meanings.” (p. 201) Nor is the confusion diminished by the fact that the present currency of the word “social” expresses not (as one might expect from the word) an understanding in terms of *societas* but rather one in terms of *universitas*. Whenever the term “society” is used these days as a way of avoiding reference to the state as the agency which acts politically, the modern state is being constructed as an enterprise association. Oakeshott’s discussion pursues two lines of historical inquiry. Firstly, he is concerned with the actual features of early modern Europe which disposed Europeans towards each of these possible understandings. The sheer diversity of class, belief, local variation and other such variations clearly made an interpretation in terms of *societas* highly plausible. On the other hand, the enormous enhancement of the power of the apparatus of rule available to modern sovereigns, the almost continuous experience of war, the consolidation of the *auctoritas* fragmented in medieval times amongst secular and sacred bodies...
in the hands of the sovereign rulers, and the experience of managing colonies as if they were estates, were amongst the influences inclining the modern state to understand itself as a single corporation or universitas to be managed by its members.

The second area Oakeshott explores is the taking up of the two ideas for use in theories (greatly variable in sophistication) of the modern state. One of his major themes is that the evident features of associational life in modern Europe have been buried under layers of uncriticised inheritance and rhetorical debris, and that only the most careful archaeological work can uncover them. As we have already seen, he has a very precise notion of “politics” and thinks it important that politics should be distinguished from rule. One source of the confusion between these two activities derives, he argues, from the taking over into medieval Europe, of the Aristotelian vocabulary. The notion of a polity (politeia) was in that vocabulary partnered with democracy and monarch to describe a type of rule. But the word is also used more broadly to stand for a mode of association which, in contrast with the rule of a master (despotes), covers any kind of “political” rule. The word “democratic” is clearly the most spectacular exhibit in the confusion of vocabularies: it belongs to descriptions of rule, but may qualify politics as in what Oakeshott calls “the bastard expression” “democratic politics”; or, it may be used almost totally randomly to commend motives, policies or almost anything at all.

Oakeshott also detects confusion in the political vocabulary of Montesquieu who in most respects appears as one of the most acute analysts of the modern state. The terms Montesquieu used for the ideal characters of his analysis – despotisme, republique, and monarchie – signify constitutions of governments, whereas what Montesquieu actually describes are modes of association. Each of these terms refers to an “association of personae recognised in terms of a certain disposition, and in each ‘government’ is understood in terms of the performance of a certain office in relation to the association.” (p. 246)

Philosophy anatomises reality. Contingent connections fall away, the accidental is dissolved, and the artificially separated is united. The result is like viewing the world through a transforming pair of spectacles. This is what Oakeshott has done for politics in he three essays composing on Human Conduct. Some of his anatomising is close to the surface of discourse, as when he flicks aside the expression “nation-state” as corresponding to nothing real in political experience, or points to misuses of “democracy”. Other revisions are on a grander scale. No one has advanced the investigation of the state as a mode of association with anything like the acuity Oakeshott brings to it; and it is safe to say that anyone concerned with political
philosophy who does not come to terms with the anatomy of modernity to be found in this complex and subtle book will be wasting the time of his readers.

Can one discover any central thread running right through the book? At the risk of translating Oakeshott back into the commonplace which he takes such pains to avoid, I think that such themes can be found. The idea of freedom is nowhere explicitly treated, but it clearly underlies everything he has to say. It appears even in his treatment of theorising where, without falling into relativism, he insists upon autonomy of practical understandings in respect of more sophisticated scientific or philosophical thought. All understandings have a validity appropriate to their character, and those of one character cannot displace those of another. The legendary proprietor of the whelk-stall need not be intimidated by the sophisticated axioms of the economist. Similarly, when Oakeshott elicits the postulates of human behaviour, he vindicated the centrality of what people actually believe they are doing, the meaning an act has for them against the reductive abstractions of much social science. Freedom is an essential attribute of the human world, and much of the fashionable robothood thrust upon human beings allegedly conditioned by their circumstances or their chromosomes is repudiated as a mirage. This is a theme relentlessly pursued in Oakeshott's argument, even at times into areas where it is not appropriate. Thus to Jean Bodin is attributed the view that "in order to understand a man's actions, his thoughts | (not his so-called 'instincts' or his chromosomes) must be investigated..." (p. 252) The exclusion of chromosomes is, of course, Oakeshott, not Bodin.

But whilst Oakeshott's preoccupation with human freedom in a human world appears at all levels, it is most strikingly evident in his treatment of the state itself. The state is a compulsory association; a universitas by contrast is one in which the activities of the members are managed in accordance with the supposed requirements of some substantive end, and it must be the result of a voluntary commitment to that end. Hence, while the idea of universitas corresponds to many influential features of states, the widespread disposition to understand them exclusively in these terms incorporates a fundamental difficulty. In a philosophical argument, Oakeshott can merely note this difficulty, for it is obviously open to human beings to pursue whatever they choose; philosophy explains, it does not advocate.

But this brings up to one of the central criticisms likely to be made of Oakeshott's political thought. He is often described as a "conservative political philosopher". He has certainly given a brilliant account of a conservative political disposition in one of the essays in Rationalism in Politics. But in terms of his thought — indeed, in terms of any defensible understanding of philosophy — the expression "a conservative political philosopher" is self-
contradictory. To present conservative political arguments and to philosophise are radically different activities. And it is certainly true that nothing in Oakeshott’s political writing is logically incompatible with whatever radical programmes of any complexion the politicians or ideologues may espouse. Philosophy does indeed leave everything as it is. Even when he deals with that powerful current of thought which understands a state as being fundamentally an economy, the tartness of his tone does not mean that he is not making a properly philosophical point:

The contraction of all this into a history of so-called bourgeois market-society capitalism is a notorious botch. Of course, this disposition (i.e., individualism) displayed itself in commerce. But anyone who believes that Frère Jean des Entommeurs or Parini were ‘possessive individualists’, or that it was of such persons that Pico della Mirandola, or Montaigne or Hobbes or Pascal or Kant or Blake or Nietzsche or Kierkegaard wrote is capable of believing anything. (p. 242n.)

The disposition to which he refers here is that of individualism, a moral sentiment which has plausibly been seen as emerging powerfully in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. It is a disposition which recognises the postulates of human conduct as freedom and choice, and which takes the exercise of these capacities as being itself valuable whatever their consequences. The account Oakeshott here gives of individualism is similar to that he gives in an earlier essay (soon to be published along with a number of earlier uncollected pieces) called “The Masses in Representative Democracy.” It is “a historical disposition to transform this unsought ‘freedom’ of conduct from a postulate into an experience and to make it yield a satisfaction of its own, independent of the chancy and intermittent satisfaction of chosen actions achieving their imagined and wished-for outcomes: the disposition to recognise imagining, deliberating, wanting, choosing, and acting not as costs incurred in seeking enjoyments, the exercise of a gratifying self-determination or personal autonomy.” (p. 236)

Oakeshott’s view of individualism derives from a long tradition of European self-understanding which goes back at least to Montaigne and which was formalised in its current terms by the historian Burckhardt. It has been the theme of much sociological literature, by writers from Erich Fromm and David Riesmann, and what it generates is a kind of moral sociology, or what may more vulnerably be described as sociological moralism. Marx’s distinction
between bourgeois and proletarian is an essay on the same theme, and Australian readers will recognise in much though not all of what Oakeshott has to say a version of the producer’s ethic of enterprise, initiative and risk as elaborated by John Anderson at Sydney in the 1940’s. It is a romantic idea, from whatever angle it is described, and much depends on how the material is construed. The Marxist versions of it tend to distinguish individualism in terms of selfishness, competitiveness and what these days is vulgarly called “elitism.” Oakeshott, in common with Popper and most sophisticated writers, has no difficulty in showing that any connection between individualism and a moral term like “selfishness” is contingent and not necessary. His account of individualism is characteristically plausible and free from many of the confusions that more moralistic versions of the idea involve. A problem arises, however, in his account of the abstract type who must appear in all such distinctions as the other side of the European sociological coin. In Marx this other side is the proletariat, in Fromm the fearers of freedom, but in Oakeshott they appear as individuals manqué, and they are characterised in the first instance merely by deficiency: “The character we are concerned with is that of those who, for whatever reason, are disposed to prefer substantive satisfaction to the adventure and the risk of self-enactment.” (p. 276)

These are the people who “have no choices to make”, rather like school leavers who don’t know what next to do with themselves. The individual manqué has “feelings rather than thoughts, impulses rather than opinions, inabilities rather than passions. He require(s) to be told what to think, to ask for, and to do, and in the course of time his natural submissiveness prompted the appearance of ‘leaders’ to perform the service for him.” (p. 277) There are no doubt such characters, but the problem is whether they must inevitably be described in something very much like the language of moral polemic. For might we not interpret the amenable and co-operative character of those who are happy to have their lives managed for them on some sort of collective farm as a triumph of the co-operative human essence rather than as a deficiency of the moral imagination? The difficulty is a genuine hone, though it is mitigated to some extent whenever Oakeshott advances to a characterisation of the individual manqué in more decisively positive terms: He who seeks what Oakeshott calls a solidarité commune is | “intolerant not only of superiority but of difference, disposed to allow in others only a replica of himself and united with his fellows in revulsion from distinctions.” (p. 278) An association of such people could only be despotic, a point which makes it clear that Oakeshott is recognising the moral phenomena Aristotle described in terms of natural slavery. But whereas Aristotle was talking about a more of less specific class of people, Oakeshott is merely talking about an abstractly specified moral type.
On Human Conduct is a complex book which leaves little in human experience untouched. On Oakeshott’s view of moral practice as a language, or religion as a ‘graceful’ response to the conditions of human life, and of much else, we lack the space to comment. But the book is the outcome of a lifetime’s meditation on political philosophy, and it is worthy to stand beside its models, Leviathan and The Philosophy of Right.