

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

Oakeshott and His Contemporaries: Montaigne, St. Augustine, Hegel, et al.

By Wendell John Coats, Jr.

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Reviewed by Corey Abel

Coats' *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries* is the latest arrival in the growing number of publications on Oakeshott that have emerged in the past decade, and the most ambitious in placing Oakeshott in the context of the history of political thought. Coats aims to "illuminate Oakeshott's thought and show its importance by juxtaposing him with his true contemporaries across the ages." (p. 12) These include not only the figures announced in the title, but Hobbes, Constant, Rousseau, and Hume. Coats is careful to point out that this is not an exercise in tracing influences, an enterprise he rightly regards with skepticism, especially in the case of a thinker of Oakeshott's stature and style. Coats handles Oakeshott's seven contemporaries with remarkable economy, producing a book of 114 pages; this includes an appended discussion of the key points in Oakeshott's interpretation of Hobbes, which, at five pages is as brief as it is lucid.

Each chapter of the book can stand fairly well alone and may be of interest to scholars specializing in one or another of the thinkers Coats treats—those, anyway, who have some curiosity about Oakeshott. Taken whole, the book is a layered and interwoven series of reflections on several themes in Oakeshott's work that achieves its coherence through the internal harmony of its various parts. Coats focuses on the poetic character of experience, the nature of individuality, and the basis and character of civil association. He addresses several technical questions in Oakeshott scholarship, such as whether there is a shift in Oakeshott's thought from a Hegelian to a Hobbesian stance, or a reassessment of the relation between theory and practice. However, the question that is dealt with persistently is whether Oakeshott's conception of authority as resting upon assent is compatible with his account of will as intelligence in doing. In other words, is Oakeshott's account of the will closer to the late medieval and early modern view that postulates something like a faculty, or does it move in the direction of the later "rational will" tradition? What is at stake here goes beyond our understanding of the authority of civil association.

Coats is concerned with the character of human experience broadly conceived, and with Oakeshottian individuality as a manner of living. Coats does not explore Oakeshott's view of religion in a systematic way, but he does attend in several chapters to the religious aspect of Oakeshott's thought and shows both the poetic character of experience and individuality to be tied to his religious outlook.

Coats has a deep appreciation for the playful and poetic aspects of Oakeshott's thought. He emphasizes the unity or simultaneity of form and content, of what is done and how it is done, that is characteristic of all human experience, especially poetic experience. Coats' decision to call this feature of experience "poetic" follows Oakeshott's own usage in "The Tower of Babel," (*RiP* 1991, p. 479). This raises the question of Oakeshott's view of poetry, or aesthetic experience, in light of his famous "retraction of a foolish sentence," in "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." Coats does not explicitly tackle the issue of the place of poetry on the map of human experience, but, like most readers of Oakeshott, implicitly accepts the separation of poetry from practice while also recognizing that poetry does seem to be treated by Oakeshott as "a most refined modality of an aspect of all experience." (p. 45)

It is difficult to summarize all the interesting themes in a book that is so suggestive and at times elusive. The central question is twofold: "What is the nature of the individual, and how do individuals relate to one another?" The consideration of this question involves exploring the nature of friendship and conversation, law, obligation, the authority of civil association, creativity as a feature of human experience, historiography, religion, custom, the limits of reason, and the distinction between activities done for their own sake and those done for the sake of some end external to the activity. Here, I can only touch upon the central question, with some consideration of the other issues.

Oakeshott's view of the self and its relations to others is introduced in the first Chapter, on Montaigne, where Coats describes Oakeshott's view of conversation and friendship as more "aesthetic" and detached than Montaigne's. We might expect that from this it would follow that Oakeshott's individualism is also richer than Montaigne's, but Coats contrasts Montaigne's remarks that his belonging to himself has made him "unfit for the service of others" (p. 21) with perhaps the most Hegelian of all of Oakeshott's comments on the individual, from a 1949 review of J.D. Mabbott, in which he argues that the private individual is a social and legal creation. He notes that Oakeshott distinguishes between the views one has from atop a tower of reflection and from "ground level,"

and that the philosophic insight into the instability of the thing called "the self" has no place in practical life. It is not until the next chapter, on Augustine, that Oakeshott's emphasis on individuality emerges, in the context of the "Augustinian" contrast between the dispositions of the "religious man" and the "worldly man," and in the emphasis that Augustine and Oakeshott both place on the importance of history as providing an anti-reductive explanation of human conduct that can account for human creativity and the responsiveness of moral agents to the contingent circumstances of their lives. Coats moves rapidly from "Religion and the Moral Life" to "The Voice of Poetry," linking the religious life that finds its value in itself and in the present, with an insight into the creative character of all experience. This latter point is illustrated by contrasting Plato's view of poetic imagining as a kind of copying, with Oakeshott's notion of creating images of delight, in which what is said and how it is said are inseparable. Oakeshott's conception of the creative principle, Coats writes, is "a much secularized and truncated version of Augustine's idea of the 'creative principle' in history."

The next major step in the discussion of individuality comes in Ch. 3, which treats Oakeshott and Hegel. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to how "Hegelian" Oakeshott's view of the relation of the self to its historical context is, and to whether Oakeshott shifts in his later writings "on the status of both the self and philosophic thought, away from the idealistic perspective." (p. 39) On this last question, Coats shows that while there is a change of emphasis in regard to philosophy, the relation of philosophy to the modes, and the nature of the self, Oakeshott's thought remains consistently idealist. Coats investigates the question of the self and its relation to its historical context by looking at various statements of Oakeshott that "pull in different directions." (p. 39) Coats' first move seems questionable. Referring to Oakeshott's Introduction to the *Leviathan*, he quotes one of the well-known lines in defense of Hobbes' authoritarianism, that "it is Reason not Authority that is destructive of individuality," and continues: "If we may be permitted to identify Hegel with 'Reason'" we can ask where Oakeshott stood—closer to the "Will and Artifice" tradition or the "Rational Will" tradition. (p. 40) But Oakeshott meant for Reason here to refer neither to Hegel nor the Reason of the Enlightenment, but to the classical rationalism of Plato and Aristotle. This peccadillo aside, Coats' question, whether Oakeshott can coherently combine his view of assent as the basis of civil obligation. with a rationalist view of the will, retains its relevance. Coats also examines Oakeshott's Hegelianism in light of Foster's critique of Hegel in *The Political Philosophies of Plato and Hegel*. Coats points to Foster's claim that Hegel did not fully appreciate the implications

of the Judaic doctrine of creation. This doctrine limits teleological accounts of human nature and history: "Since a created object has no preconceived purpose, it is impossible to give a 'logos' or speculative account of its essence and end." (p. 42) Coats argues that "Oakeshott followed Foster in his critique of the rationalism of Plato and Hegel for its failure to grasp the idea of the 'creative principle' in history, yet did not follow Foster all the way back to nominalist theories about the opacity to theoretical reason of a distinct faculty of the human personality called the 'will'." (p. 41) The last clause of that sentence is crucial. Having linked Oakeshott's idea of the religious life with Augustine's "new man" and having shown these both to be rooted in a conception of creativity derived from the Christian revelation in opposition to classical rationalism, Coats appears to be pulling Oakeshott closer to the Hobbesian/nominalist position, without going so far as to claim, as Farr and Gerencser have done, that Oakeshott abandons his Hegelian conception of the self. Coats suggests that Oakeshott may have coherently combined features of the Rational Will and Will and Artifice traditions: "Oakeshott has modified the idea of the Rational Will and the concrete universal...by purging it of any more than the idea of intelligent employment of the possibilities within historically evolved practices." Coats adds that "the notion of history entailed here is a thoroughly contingent one, owing a debt to the medieval nominalist traditions of voluntarism and the autonomous will." (p. 41) In Chapter 4, on Hobbes and Oakeshott, Coats again recurs to the Mabbott review, along with Oakeshott's early essay, "The Authority of the State," to highlight the tension between these Hegelian moments in Oakeshott's thought, and particularly in his account of authority as based on assent.

Coats writes that "on the issue of what constitutes an individual and the grounds for his or her civic obligations, it would appear Oakeshott is closer to Hegel than to Hobbes." However, he goes on to say that "Oakeshott appears to accept *by implication* a faculty of the individual personality opaque to the light of reason," (p. 57) and this is shown in his accounts of poetic activity, of practical activities in which the end cannot be determined in advance of the activity itself, of history as without beginning or end, and in his preferences for formal legal systems. He argues that Oakeshott's position on these issues is consistent with "a view of the limits of the abstract rational capacity in the human personality to guide it in action, and, by implication, with a view of the human personality (like the God of medieval scholasticism) as a mixture of creative will and intellect." (p. 57) Coats admits that Oakeshott explicitly rejects a view of the will as an autonomous faculty, and authority as being a product of a sovereign will. He leaves Oakeshott on a limb of implications but refrains from sawing the branch off, arguing

instead that "something akin to an autonomous faculty" of will is needed to validate the choices of non-philosophic individuals and ground Oakeshott's preference for individual choice and his skepticism about human reason. Warning against a drift into an intellectualist or thoroughly rationalist position, Coats writes, "where is the importance in nonphilosophic individuals learning to 'belong to themselves' if it means no more than coming to a vague realization of their intellectual insufficiencies?" (p. 58)

Although Coats says that his chapter on Rousseau (to which I will turn shortly) makes a controversial claim that Oakeshott's account of civil obligation is superior to Rousseau's, his claim that Oakeshott may not have seen fully the implications of his embrace of both a rationalist account of will and a poetic/creative view of experience is even more controversial—or perhaps I am too ready to accept criticisms of Rousseau. Coats' formulation, that Oakeshott modified the idea of the Rational Will by purging it of any content beyond intelligent responsiveness to contingent situations, is on the mark. Coats fears that the rational will, its rational element reduced to a skeptical minimum, might lead to a "postmodern" perspective. (fn. 15, Ch 4, p. 122) Conversely, an over-emphasis on that element could lead to a full-blown Hegelianism. These are legitimate concerns, but the examination of Oakeshott's view of will and experience needs to include several things that Coats does not deal with. First, the characterization of rational conduct, in the essay of that name, in terms of streams of desire is a formulation designed to draw attention to the spontaneity of reason and the unity of what is usually separated into passion and reason, heart and head. Second, in "The Voice of Poetry," the self "appears as activity" and this activity is "imagining," (*VOP* 1991, p. 496) another strange formulation that either points to a radical shift away from Hegelian rationalism or an attempt to find a more suitable expression for it. Finally, in *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott is careful to point out the strange character of the "thought" that he is dealing with: it is not to be identified with "explicit, conscious inference" or limited to subject-predicate truth claims. It is possible that even taking these all into account we would end by concluding that Oakeshott's idea of assent and his view of experience as poetic require something essentially other than thought, or mind, or the "rational will," something like an autonomous faculty of will. Coats succeeds in showing that there is a tension in Oakeshott's thought, one with which future interpreters will have to go on wrestling.

At the end of the chapter on Hobbes and Oakeshott, Coats discusses "Leviathan: A Myth," the BBC address in which Oakeshott characterized Hobbes' masterpiece as a reinterpretation of the Augustinian and medieval Christian myth "that saw human life as

suspended between the poles of 'pride and sensuality'...and saw the fall of man as owed primarily to pride." (p. 62) In Hobbes' reinterpretation, human beings are reminded of their imperfection and mortality. He draws on the scholarship of Timothy Fuller, George Wright, and Joshua Miller, in depicting a Hobbes who "was arguably serious in his claims to be consistent with holy scripture." (p. 63) This attractive thesis links Augustine and Hobbes (also drawing on Herbert Deane), and Oakeshott to both. Coats notes the correspondence of political visions between Augustine and Hobbes (and a parenthesized Oakeshott) as "proponents of non-Aristotelian Christianity," for whom the state is "the embodiment of rules of conduct for minimizing the collisions and maximizing the forbearance among *individuals who cannot know one another's destinies.*" (p. 63)

Oakeshott's view of governing as a specific kind of activity limited to the narrow aims of preserving a peaceful order and maintaining an inherited tradition of political freedom also links him with Benjamin Constant. He is concerned, like Rousseau, to give an account of obligation that starts from individualist premises and employs a concept of "generality" to secure the freedom of those who are obliged. Coats notes several similarities between Oakeshott and Constant, demurring from any more ambitious critical examination. He uses Constant to "provide a point of mediation between Oakeshott and the traditional history of political thought, especially in the person of Jean Jacques Rousseau. (Both Constant and Oakeshott thought Rousseau's attempted synthesis of ancient and modern views a failure.)" (p. 65) This parenthetical comment is important. At the end of both the Constant and Rousseau chapters Coats briefly refers to Oakeshott's theoretical aims in respect to certain aspects of Aristotle's political thought. Coats thus rescinds the exile of Constant from the canon, and places Oakeshott in the context of two modern thinkers well known for their attempts to mediate ancient and modern freedom.

Constant and Oakeshott both endorse limited government and the rule of formal law. They both defend a "civilized" and "urbane" individuality and reject reductive explanations of human conduct (as did Augustine). They stress the irreversible historical changes that ushered in the modern era and created a new kind of freedom. Finally, they are skeptical of the powers of abstract reason to guide practical affairs and see political discourse as involving persuasive and not demonstrative modes of reasoning. Coats draws on Stephen Holmes' study, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, and notes that Constant endorses a somewhat more "positive" idea of liberty than Oakeshott, one that integrates "public action and private independence." (p. 73) Despite this

difference, Oakeshott does not disregard the importance of politics; indeed, he “attempts to hold onto the ancient (especially Aristotelian) idea that politics attend to the comprehensive arrangements of a large group of people but that it applies to individual, substantive acts only in so far as they have general consequences that fall within the purview of fundamental laws (*lex*).” (p. 74) In several other places, especially in the Rousseau chapter, Coats uses the term “comprehensive” to refer to the laws and character of civil association. He also introduces the idea of generality that serves as the focal point of his discussion of Oakeshott and Rousseau. The ideas that Oakeshott and Constant have in common link them with Montaigne, Hobbes and Augustine, too—a point that is quietly made in the title of Chapter Five, Oakeshott and Benjamin Constant on the ‘Civitas Peregrina.’”

Chapter Six contrasts Rousseau and Oakeshott, both of whom Coats sees as friendly critics of liberalism, who stay within its broad framework while trying to reformulate it. This is the only chapter in which Coats argues the merits of Oakeshott and his contemporaries. This may be because Rousseau is, to put it anachronistically, the least “Oakeshottian” of the figures, the one figure in the study who stands somewhat outside the sphere of Oakeshott’s wide ranging sympathies. Nevertheless, as Oakeshott himself notes, Rousseau does belong to that tradition of rethinking the will that runs through Hegel and on to Bosanquet and others. Coats argues that Rousseau and Oakeshott both use the idea of generality, in somewhat different senses, to handle the problem of showing how individuals can be at once free and obligated. Rousseau uses the general will to show how people give laws to themselves and thereby retain their freedom. Coats points out several problems with Rousseau’s theory, following John Charvet’s *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Rousseau*. The most important one is that Rousseau combines universal and particular kinds of interests in his concept of the general interest. By allowing that “seafaring or trade can also be a common interest or object of the will, the relationship of citizen to citizen becomes unequal and hierarchical, since all will not be equally benefited by its promotion.” (p. 81) Coats appears to say that Rousseau’s general will incoherently combines elements of what Oakeshott calls civil and enterprise association—willing in respect to the soundness and authoritativeness of the legal system is one thing, and willing in respect to a common endeavor such as seafaring or virtue is another. This is right; and it is a way of expressing the anti-liberal aspect of Rousseau’s thought more subtly than, say, Talmon’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The use of the idea of generality to account for Oakeshott’s view of civil obligation is interesting and very helpful in showing how

Oakeshott and Rousseau can be made to speak to each other. Coats argues that individuals' freedom can be preserved when the laws of "comprehensive, compulsory, authoritative association are sufficiently general as to be incapable of specifying and exacting particular promises and actions from citizens." (p. 82) It is this generality, on Coats' view, that accounts for the adverbial quality of laws. Because Coats does not give a more detailed discussion of "generality," it might

convey to some readers the sense of "neutrality," though that is not what Coats intends. The idea that the law commands no specific performances and thereby ensures mental liberty is clear and echoes

Oakeshott's treatment of Hobbes. However, where Coats speaks of "specific" and "particular," Oakeshott spoke of "substantive." The term "substantive" makes room for the fact that laws have differential impacts on citizens and are in that sense "specific." (e.g., *OHC*, p. 169-170, the Judicial Proceedings Act, etc.)

Of deeper concern is Coats' including "moral virtue" among the general purposes or concerns of civil association: "general purposes such as moral virtue, security, peace, *tranquillitas*." (p. 86, 87) Moral virtue, like peace, is too general to be obeyed and can only be taken into account as an adverbial consideration. Since Oakeshott rejected virtue as an end of civil association and criticized, for example, Calvin's Geneva as an example of enterprise association, I take it Coats means to point to the fact that civil association is among those kinds of practices that Oakeshott calls "moral," (i.e., non-instrumental activities of free, intelligent agents) and to the fact that law reflects a people's moral sensibilities, but without collapsing the distinction between morality and justice. ("The Rule of Law," *OH*, p. 1160) To call moral virtue a purpose, even a "general purpose" is potentially misleading. This is especially so when Oakeshott is said to have done "as well as can be done from individualist presuppositions in approximating the Aristotelian claim that politics is the master art, by insisting that civil association is comprehensive in scope, but general in its terms, and that what is assented to by individual citizens is merely the authority of its general terms." (p. 88) Of course, Coats points out that citizens in civil association are not obligating themselves, as they might within Rousseau's scheme, to the pursuit of substantive ends in which only the ruler or manager remains self-determining. (p. 83) And Oakeshott

himself likens the practice of civility to the "watery friendship" of the Aristotelian polis and invokes Aristotle on the "autarchy" of civil association, as well as in his discussion of contingency, sociality, and political discourse.

Coats focuses on Hume and Oakeshott's critiques of Rationalism, which are very similar, despite the different understandings each thinker has of philosophy. Coats identifies their skepticism as part of this critique, of course. More interesting is that he points out that Oakeshott criticized "the denial of the poetic character of all human activity" in a morality of reflection, and that Hume thought the rationalists of his day misread "the character of human experience." Coats shows that for both Hume and Oakeshott the character of human experience is historical, and for Oakeshott, whose view is "more 'aesthetic' (mystical, even)," it is poetic. Both Oakeshott and Hume take historical contingency seriously enough to be highly skeptical about "foundings"—Hume a little less so than Oakeshott. Their stance here is mentioned briefly to contrast them with Rousseau, who is more strongly influenced by "ancient Greek rationalist models of statesmanship." (p. 95) Implicitly, this reminds us of the "creative principle" of history, first introduced in respect to Augustine, reinforced in regard to Hobbes, and emphasized in the criticism of Hegel's teleological project.

In his Conclusion, Coats makes the effort "to convey an impression of the deeper insights of Oakeshott's work." (p. 103) He takes the distinction made in Oakeshott's early essay "Religion and the World," between the "religious man" and the "worldly man," to be the center of Oakeshott's thinking. This is the clue to "Oakeshott's idea of appropriate living." (p. 103) Oakeshott's idea of the "religious" life, a life he says is based on insight into the poetic character of human experience involves most of the main themes of Oakeshott's career: the importance of history and tradition, the inseparability of form and content, the rejection of teleological explanations, the value placed on the unreflective springs of action and detailed practical knowledge, the preference for activities that lend themselves to formal or ritualistic performance or those that can be done for their own sake. (p. 105) In a complicated page of argumentation, Coats considers whether the poetic character of experience necessarily implies individualism and formality in law and morality. He denies that there is a logically necessary connection between grasping the creative character of experience and embracing individualism or a formalized, procedural rule of law. It is not clear why he needs to make this argument, except perhaps to protect Oakeshott from a charge that he (attempts) to derive his political theory from philosophic principles, and perhaps also to distinguish Oakeshott from other figures who might embrace a poetic view of human experience (Heidegger?) by showing his unique embrace of individualism and the rule of law. Coats concludes his work by returning to the question of how individuals are related to others, with this twist. He asks what, if any, value the relationship between individuals or the social whole constituted

in such relationships has for Oakeshott. He notes that Oakeshott, in the Mabbott review and elsewhere, argues that “the individual was a social institution.” He concludes that “Oakeshott is not fully in the camp of either Hegel, or the later self-actualization theorists...[He accepts] the idea ‘that self-definition is necessarily in relation to another’...[but] he is far too Augustinian and Hobbesian to hold open the possibility of some sort of future Hegelian reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) of self with self and other selves.” (p. 109; internal quotation from Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, p. 424; Coats, fn. 20, p. 132.)

Coats might have softened this claim about the lack of reconciliation a bit by observing that the religious life, as Oakeshott describes it, and the importance he places on self-enactment allows an individual to achieve some degree of reconciliation with himself, and religion, understood as the completion of morality suggests that religious insight is connected, even if only evanescently, with reconciliation. Indeed, in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott describes religion as an intimation of immortality, where “the tumult of a grief and the passing beauty of a May morning” are recognized as “*aventures...encounters with eternity.*” (*OHC*, p. 85) Of course, this is a highly individual insight, one that a mystic or otherwise highly exceptional person might have, and that has nothing to do with those solidaristic dreams commonly called “community” or “social existence.”

I recommend Coats’ *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries* to both experienced readers of Oakeshott, who will be provoked to reflect on a cluster of central themes in Oakeshott’s work and to ponder Oakeshott’s role in the conversation of mankind, and to those who may need an introduction to Oakeshott that illuminates his ideas by referring them to better known thinkers. Placing Oakeshott in the context of several traditionally canonical figures does him a great service, by showing that his ideas, which are often expressed in a unique voice and often dissent from the received wisdom of the scholarly community, can be understood without a passage of initiation. As Oakeshott wrote, philosophy “must be counted the least esoteric of all forms of experience.” (*EM*, p. 347.) Coats has packed so many insights into such a brief study—or series of studies—that some points in his argument could bear elaboration—and I do not frequently wish that scholarly writings were longer. Coats’ sensitivity to the religious mood of Oakeshott’s writings puts the moral and political aspects of Oakeshott’s thought in an interesting light. It also reminds us that Oakeshott was one of the few modern thinkers to have seriously reflected on friendship and conversation—not simply as a hermeneutical metaphor, but as an activity and as an image of civilized conduct. The interweaving of themes through Coats’ seven chapters and his evocative style invites the reader to join him and Oakeshott in conversation.