Terry Nardin’s fine new book on Michael Oakeshott begins with the statement: “To read Oakeshott with care is to sense that one is in the presence of a peculiarly philosophical mind” (vii). It is on the peculiarly philosophical character of Oakeshott’s thought that Nardin focuses in his book. He claims that most discussions of Oakeshott up to this point, both popular and scholarly, have focused mainly on Oakeshott’s views on politics; “few have set out to understand Oakeshott’s philosophy apart from his thought as a political philosopher” (viii). Nardin aims to redress this imbalance. He devotes his analysis to Oakeshott’s more purely philosophical views on “the idea of truth, the various forms of knowledge, the relationship between theory and practice, the place of interpretation in the social sciences, the character and importance of historical explanation, and the definition of philosophy itself” (viii). Oakeshott’s ideas on these subjects, Nardin argues, constitute an important contribution to twentieth-century philosophy.

In order to bring out more clearly Oakeshott’s significance for twentieth-century epistemology and philosophy of mind, Nardin links him to the broad movement, composed of thinkers like Dewey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Rorty,
that rejects positivist and naturalist theories of knowledge. More specifically, he connects Oakeshott to twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics, which understands the world as constituted by meanings and understands knowledge as the interpretation of those meanings. The attempt here is to show that Oakeshott is not a marginal figure in the world of twentieth-century philosophy. But Nardin also wants to show that Oakeshott has something distinctive to offer as well. Though Oakeshott shares with thinkers like Heidegger and Rorty the antinaturalist premise that the world is constituted by meanings and rests on no foundation that is independent of human thought, he does not accept their assertion of the primacy of practical experience or of the Lebenswelt. For Oakeshott, such “pragmatism” represents another form of foundationalism and ultimately detracts from the pluralism of human activity and the autonomy of theoretical understanding.

Nardin elaborates his philosophical reading of Oakeshott’s thought through a careful exposition of Oakeshott’s texts, especially Experience and Its Modes, On Human Conduct, and On History and Other Essays. He claims that his book is a work of “philosophical reconstruction,” but for the most part he sticks closely to the texts, eliciting their underlying coherence and registering subtle shifts in Oakeshott’s thinking. Nardin also claims that he has tried to read Oakeshott both sympathetically and critically, but he is far more successful in the former regard. The criticisms he makes of Oakeshott are generally quite minor and always in the spirit of Oakeshott. One of the few disappointments of this otherwise excellent book is that it does not
engage very profoundly with the growing secondary literature on Oakeshott. Nardin defends his abstention from scholarly debate by saying that “my purpose is to understand Oakeshott’s philosophy, not to endorse or dispute what others have said about it” (ix). These two endeavors, however, are not so easily separated.

The first chapter of the book deals with Oakeshott’s basic theory of knowledge (or understanding, as Nardin and the later Oakeshott prefer to use) as set forth in *Experience and Its Modes* and slightly modified in *On Human Conduct*. The epigraph to the chapter, which comes from *Experience and Its Modes*, encapsulates the hermeneutic character of Oakeshott’s theory of knowledge: “Perhaps the only satisfactory view would be one which grasped, even more thoroughly than Hegel’s, the fact that what we have, and all we have, is a world of ‘meanings,’ and constructed its philosophy without extraneous conceptions which belong to other views” (EM, 61). Nardin provides a lucid account of the fundamental ideas of Oakeshott’s theory of knowledge: the idea of experience as a world of ideas; the idea of coherence as the criterion of truth; the idea of modality as an arrest in the concrete process of experience and the construction of an abstract world of ideas; and the idea of philosophy as the pursuit of complete or absolute coherence in experience. Nardin also tracks how these ideas are modified in Oakeshott’s later writings. The principal change involves Oakeshott’s abandonment of the notion of complete or absolute coherence, which alters his understanding of philosophy and its relation to the modes. Philosophy is no longer understood
to be the quest for absolute coherence and therefore cannot be distinguished from the modes on that basis.

I have only a few quibbles with Nardin’s analysis here. The first has to do with his dating of the change in Oakeshott’s conception of philosophy. Nardin suggests that Oakeshott’s renunciation of the idea of philosophy as the quest for total coherence begins to appear in his writings from the mid-1930s and late 1940s, for example, in the 1938 article “The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence” and the unpublished papers “The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics” and “Political Philosophy” (45). But I see little evidence of change here. In “The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence, for example, Oakeshott defines philosophy much as he did in *Experience and Its Modes* as “thought and knowledge without reservation or presupposition” (“CPJ,” 345); also as “the search for a context which does not require a further setting in order to be understood, a universal, self-complete context,” the “totality of experience” (“CPJ,” 350-51).

This suggests a second point. Though it is no doubt true that Oakeshott moves away from the idea of philosophy as the quest for absolute coherence or unconditional understanding in his later writings, he still characterizes philosophy as unconditionally critical and self-reflective. Nardin recognizes this when he comments that philosophy is distinguished from other forms of knowledge by being “more single minded in its commitment to the criticism of presuppositions” (45); that “philosophy is simply the effort to understand, theorizing, pushed to its limits” (53).
But he muddies this point when he further argues that philosophy “is not a unique activity” (53) and “is not, in fact, categorically different from other kinds of theorizing” (45). Oakeshott was concerned, early and late in his career, to distinguish philosophical inquiry from all other types of inquiry in terms of its radically critical and self-reflective character. In this regard, he diverges sharply from pragmatist thinkers like Richard Rorty, who seek to blur the line between philosophy and other disciplines.

In chapter 2, Nardin takes up Oakeshott’s well-known views on the subject of theory and practice. Like most interpreters, he sees Oakeshott as making a sharp distinction between theory and practice. The blurring of this distinction leads to the corruption of both theory and practice, politicizing the former and rationalizing the latter. Once again, Nardin sees this as Oakeshott’s distinctive contribution to twentieth-century antinaturalism. In contrast to existentialism and pragmatism, both of which assert the primacy of practice or the Lebenswelt, Oakeshott upholds the autonomy of both theory and practice. Nardin’s interpretation here is the standard—and I think correct—one. It is interesting to contrast it with another recent book on Oakeshott, Steven Gerencser’s The Skeptic’s Oakeshott (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), in which the author argues that Oakeshott eventually abandoned the rigid distinction between theory and practice in his later work.

The only flaw I discern in Nardin’s analysis appears in his treatment of what Oakeshott referred to in Experience and Its Modes as “pseudo-philosophy.” Oakeshott uses this term to designate inquiries such as ethics
and political philosophy in which the purely philosophical pursuit of an absolutely coherent world of ideas is arrested or qualified. Nardin suggests that ethics and political philosophy are pseudo-philosophical because they include practical considerations, they do not abandon practical aims, they insist on remaining practically relevant (see 97). But Oakeshott is quite clear that ethics and political philosophy are not practical inquiries at all, they are “nothing if not philosophical” (EM, 333, 344, 345). The error of ethics and political philosophy is not that they are in the service of practical aims—this is the error of moral and political ideology—but that they fail to recognize the world to which they belong, i.e. philosophy. It should be pointed out that Oakeshott later abandons this view of moral and political philosophy as incompletely self-conscious or pseudo-philosophical experience. In *On Human Conduct*, he remarks that the unconditional pursuit of an absolutely coherent world of ideas “may be arrested without being denied.” (OHC, 11). And he characterizes the political philosopher as a “self-consciously conditionally theorist” (OHC, 25).

The most illuminating chapters of Nardin’s book are the ones he devotes to Oakeshott’s thinking about history and the human sciences. Nardin does an excellent job of situating Oakeshott’s thinking here in the context of nineteenth-century reflection on the problem of historical knowledge and of the human sciences, the attempt by thinkers such as Droysen and Dilthey to find a logic for the historical or human sciences different from that of the natural sciences. In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott contributes to this
effort by bringing out the modal and categorial differences between history and science. The fundamental difference between history and science does not consist, for Oakeshott, in the ontological distinction between their respective subject-matters, man and nature; rather, it consists in the basic presuppositions in terms of which each organizes the whole of reality. Science is the attempt to understand the world \textit{sub specie quantitatis}, in terms of quantity and measurement. History is the attempt to understand the world \textit{sub specie praeteritorum}, in terms of the past, but a specifically historical past, not a practical past. Oakeshott thus allows for the possibility of a quantitative science of human beings; he cites economics, psychology, and political science as examples. But he rejects the idea of a science of history as a confusion of genres. There is no place for scientific causes in history because the idea of causality depends on isolating an event and rendering it generic. In historical explanation, on the other hand, an event is never understood as isolated from its environment or severed from its connections; nor is it understood as an abstract instance but only as a concrete particular. For this reason, Oakeshott claims that so-called sciences of history such as anthropology and sociology are history or nothing at all.

In \textit{On Human Conduct}, as Nardin brings out, Oakeshott refines the distinction between the human and natural sciences by arguing that the former are concerned with intelligent conduct, whereas the latter are concerned with non-intelligent processes. Once again, the distinction here is not an ontological one between two separate parts of reality; it is a distinction
between two categorially different modes of understanding. And as he was in *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott is concerned here to expose the confusion that inheres in inquiries that blend these two modes of understanding—psychology and sociology come under particular attack—attempting to explain intelligent actions and beliefs in terms of non-intelligent processes.

Nardin devotes an entire chapter to Oakeshott’s theory of historical understanding, going through the major discussions in *Experience and Its Modes* and *On History*. Nardin’s careful attention here is not misplaced, for Oakeshott’s account of historical knowledge is genuinely original and profound and constitutes one of the most enduring aspects of his thought. Nardin begins with the chapter on history in *Experience and Its Modes*—of which Collingwood wrote that “it is the most penetrating analysis of historical thought that has ever been written”—going through Oakeshott’s “cautious constructionist” account of historical knowledge, his recognition of a distinctively historical past, and his understanding of the historical individual. *On History* is seen as continuing the line of thought begun in *Experience and Its Modes*, but with an even more fluid conception of historical identity and an even more subtle understanding of historical explanation in terms of contingency. Nardin concludes his analysis by contrasting Oakeshott’s theory of history with Collingwood’s, focusing on Oakeshott’s rejection of Collingwood’s doctrine of historical reenactment and his historicist reduction of all knowledge to historical knowledge.
In the final substantive chapter of his book, Nardin takes up Oakeshott’s “political philosophy” — though he finds the latter expression misleading by putting too much emphasis on the practical or political implications of Oakeshott’s thought. Though Nardin has made much of his distinctive focus on Oakeshott’s philosophy as opposed to his political philosophy, in the end he finds it impossible not to address this central aspect of Oakeshott’s thought. Nardin suggests that his discussion of Oakeshott’s theory of civil association brings together the ideas he has examined in the rest of the book, but the connection is not strong, and this chapter could easily be read independently of the rest. This is not to say that Nardin’s discussion of civil association is unilluminating. As he does in the rest of the book, Nardin provides a very clear and uncluttered summary of the main lines of Oakeshott’s argument. He begins with Oakeshott’s idea of morality as a nonprudential, noninstrumental practice and goes on to discuss the rule of law as a special kind of moral (or noninstrumental) practice, the distinction between the authority of civil rules and their justice or rightness, the way in which individual freedom is preserved in civil association, and finally the tenability of Oakeshott’s distinction between instrumental and noninstrumental rules, purposive and nonpurposive association. All of this is well done, if not radically new. Nardin does not acknowledge many criticisms of Oakeshott’s theory, and where he does, he generally defends it.

In the conclusion, Nardin comes back to the peculiarly philosophical character of Oakeshott’s thought. He worries that the identification of
Oakeshott as a “political philosopher” risks blurring the categorial distinction between theory and practice in his thought, and he finds scholarly attempts to read Oakeshott as either a conservative or liberal theorist misleading for the same reason. In the final sentence of the book, Nardin warns that to “read Oakeshott narrowly as a conservative critic of the welfare state or liberal defender of individualism and pluralism, or even as a political philosopher or historian of political thought, is therefore to misunderstand, and seriously to underrate, his contribution to philosophy” (235).

While I am not unsympathetic to Nardin’s attempt to avoid reading Oakeshott as a narrow ideologue, I feel he may go too far in the opposite direction. Is it necessarily a distortion of Oakeshott’s philosophy to understand it in the context of conservative or liberal thought? Is it not dangerous, or at least marginalizing, to hermetically seal off this philosophy from the most important political questions of our time? Nardin tends to take Oakeshott too much on his own terms. Oakeshott may have had his own reasons for sharply distinguishing between theory and practice and denying the political or normative character of his work, but we are not obliged to follow him in this regard. Rather, we must ask ourselves whether Oakeshott has understood himself completely, whether he has accurately represented the import of his work, and whether he has not artificially simplified the relationship between theory and practice. When I read Oakeshott, it is the tension between the pure philosopher and the passionate, sometimes polemical, moralist that I find intriguing and energizing. Nardin has performed
a signal service in isolating the philosophical aspect of Oakeshott’s thought. But sometimes he seems to have done so at the expense of the flesh and blood thinker.