The paradox of Michael Oakeshott, one might suggest, is that he was a crusader who hated crusades. As a don at Cambridge in the 1920s, he judged that modern thought was becoming sterilized by the dominance of practice and by inappropriate science. Some on a parallel track criticized “scientism” while others deplored technology. In 1933 Oakeshott published what must be the most readable book of metaphysics ever written. The Cambridge University Press printed 1,000 copies of Experience and its Modes and it took three decades to sell them all. The instant wisdom of those days of the positivist ascendancy assimilated what he had to say to F. H. Bradley. When he wrote about politics, one or two incautious references to “tradition” had him pinned down as a latter-day Edmund Burke. But a combination of intellectual precision and tenacity brings rewards, and today Oakeshott’s immensely careful analyses of civil life and of history have vastly outpaced mid-century banalities about facts and values.

Luke O’Sullivan’s study Oakeshott on History appropriately mixes an account of Oakeshott’s ever-developing exploration of history with intellectual biography – appropriately because Oakeshott’s intellectual trajectory exhibits a remarkable evolution in its focus on a few central questions of philosophy. His concerns sometimes resemble those of a social philosopher, but he disliked the term “society” because it so often turned into a “system”, another of those prevalent attempts to replace the human world by mindless causality he so disliked. Against the fashion for explaining human life in terms of organic drives, genes, conditioned reflexes, historical trends, interests and other such aliens from science, Oakeshott distinguished the human world as one of agents responding to their situation as they understood it with such intelligence as they could muster. Human beings are, he wrote, what they understand and misunderstand themselves to be. One might discover, of course, all sorts of interesting regularities and logical connections in what people did, but human conduct was a different kind of thing.

Against all attempts to reduce human intelligence to non-rational drives he invoked a regress: a theory that human actions are caused by genes or evolutionary drives entails,
absurdly, that the theory itself is also the effect of these genes or drives. His conclusion was that understanding the human world was essentially a historical enterprise.

The problem of a critical philosophy of history had emerged in the nineteenth century in the work of German neo-Kantians, and had been taken up by Idealists in France, Italy and Britain. The great English exponent of this search was R. G. Collingwood, whose philosophical life can be seen as a set of probes into this problem culminating, as he thought, in *The Idea of History*, posthumously published in 1946. Collingwood and Oakeshott admired each other, but seem only to have met casually on one occasion over tea. They shared the same conception of what was at issue.

History is a problem because it refers to events for which all direct evidence has disappeared. How can we know that someone called Caesar was assassinated at Rome in 44 BC? If truth is correspondence with the facts, then there aren’t any: no body, blood, dagger or witnesses to be interrogated. We can only infer such a fact from records, but such records are (it is said by rather unsophisticated critics) riddled with bias and error. Again, from one point of view, history is merely a vast assemblage of facts in search of something to glue them together. One unifying theme might be relevance to our current practical concerns: “The understanding of the present is always the final goal of history”, wrote Ernst Troeltsch. Another tempting view was to conclude that history was really social science with the general laws left out because they are obvious enough to be taken for granted. Caesar’s assassination was an instance of the generalization that dictators threatening freedom in republics will under some conditions be assassinated.

Invoking relevance to policy, or general laws as the conditions determining how the facts of history became coherent, had the effect of turning history into the servant of other interests. Such ideas expressed the epistemological one-worldism of the positivists. In *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott presented an unambiguous epistemological pluralism, in which experience is analysed in terms of logically distinct modes such as practice, science and history. Later, he added poetry or art as a further mode. Later still, he loosened up the whole structure of modes, talking of “conditional platforms of understanding”. Anything might be understood in terms of general ideas but no explanation could avoid being itself an invitation to further inquiry. In the early writings, philosophy was, as it were, the queen of the sciences because it explored the logic of the modes themselves. This was a powerful bit of machinery, because it diagnosed irrelevance, or jumping from one mode to another, as the basic error in reasoning. No general rule could be derived from history, for example, because turning a historical circumstance into the instance of a law was a logical jump that left history behind. As we respond to the world, of course, we often shift imperceptibly from one mode to another – admiring the Victoria Falls at one moment in terms of its beauty, thinking in practical terms the next moment that this was a colossal waste of valuable energy. What we see, as he put it elsewhere, depends on how we look.

Actual historical writing, of course, was likely to exhibit the miscellaneous character of lived life – real history being cheek by jowl with bits of legend and the odd didactic bid for practical relevance. The logic of these forms of discourse was diverse, and Oakeshott never gave way in his insistence that conclusions were all modal, and could only follow from modal premises. Genuine history could teach no practical lessons. Elaborating this view led him to distinguish between the practical and the historical past. Current life
requires many practical bits of the past, just as remembering (and often misremembering) is the basis of personal identity. Title deeds, analogies and pretexts for nationalist aggrandizement all invoke the past, but none is the conclusion of historical enquiry. Oakeshott insisted that the past was not one vast archival flatland of available facts, as positivism and common sense would have it. When Bismarck said he would not go to Canossa he was not contributing to the Investiture Contest but using a convenient metaphor; whether he got the meaning of Canossa right was entirely beside the point. It has always been a problem for Oakeshott that saying that Our Island Story is “not history” seems pejorative, when all that Oakeshott means by it is that it is a different kind of thing, no doubt with merits appropriate to that kind of thing.

Oakeshott made a complete sweep of historical realism in order to save history from scepticism. As O’Sullivan argues, he cast off a false claim to objectivity in order to argue for objectivity of another kind. Instead of history being “what really happened”, it becomes “what the evidence obliges us to believe”. The loss of certainty, however, is not at all the loss of objectivity. Understood in this way, history can accommodate the uncomfortable truth that Collingwood formulated as “all history is contemporary history”. Neither Oakeshott nor Collingwood meant that it merely serves current prejudice.

In blocking the reduction of history to science or practice, Oakeshott denied the most obvious ways of commending history as valuable. The commonest view was that history, in revealing the past, also teaches us about human nature and about the dangers of various kinds of public policy. There is a sense in which this is plausible, but Oakeshott was mistrustful of any conclusions that seemed to stretch the evidence.

His view of history was as difficult to popularise as the view of rationalism he took in the late 1940s in a series of articles that caught the public attention enough to make him, for a time, a public intellectual. It was not a role he enjoyed greatly. In the essays published eventually as Rationalism in Politics he criticized rationalism as mistaking the technical component of knowledge for the whole of it. For the rationalist, every frustration was a problem to be solved. This restless insistence on attempting to make the world conform to our changing fancies (attempting perfection as the crow flies, as he often put it) resulted from a complete misunderstanding of the human condition. Many of his readers, in a somewhat puzzled way, were prepared to agreed to the diagnosis, and demanded to know he we could do better. They merely illustrated the treadmill character of the cast of mind Oakeshott was criticizing.

Alternative ways of responding to the world are very largely “unthinkable”. This particular collision with his critics reinforced the popular idea that Oakeshott was a conservative philosopher, though he himself regarded that very expression as a solecism and disliked being labelled this way. It is rather closer the mark to say, as Lee Auspitz remarked in a brilliant account of Oakeshott’s thought in the 1976 volume of Political Theory, that “his technical achievement is to have drawn upon the categories of German Idealism to elucidate and vindicate the minimal postulates of British Liberalism”. It is one of O’Sullivan’s achievements to bring out clearly the extent to which a concern with freedom was at the centre of Oakeshott’s political philosophy.
O’Sullivan is particularly useful in disentangling the intricate lacework of Oakeshott’s final conceptual rearrangements in the philosophy of history; and also in the distinct sphere of the history of political thought. Oakeshott referred to the most basic elements of experience as “goings-on”, some among which could be recognized as the doings of human beings. What are the postulates by which we may understand this thing? On Human Conduct postulated human conduct as the ideal character by which we may philosophically understand human thinking and doing. One cannot “do” human conduct, but one may think and act. In later work, emerging from papers Oakeshott gave to the LSE seminar on the History of Political Thought in the 1960s and 70s, he explored “history” as the ideal understanding of human conduct. This character was analysed in terms of the ideas of past, of occurrences and events, and of contingency.

It is perhaps Oakeshott’s rejection of the idea that history deals with causes which most collides with received opinion. Causes, strictly speaking, invoke laws and thus assimilate history to science, as contemporaries such as Carl Hempel (with his “covering laws”) and Karl Popper were explicitly doing. Oakeshott, by contrast, presents historical understanding as event-making: survivals treated as evidence are assembled together so that by “touching” each other they become intelligible, a process he compared to building a dry wall. The basic idea comes from Aristotle’s argument (in the Physics, Book Five) that “the continuous is a kind of contiguity”. O’Sullivan plausibly attributes the generation of this idea to Oakeshott’s reflections on Machiavelli’s fortuna.

Oakeshott toyed at one point with the idea of using Machiavelli’s remark (in a letter to Soderini in January 1513): “Ciascuno secondo la sua fantasia si governa” (“Each man guides himself according to his own imagination”) as an epigraph to On Human Conduct. The idea is evidently related to Oakeshott’s preoccupation with conversation as a basic structure of human life, for speech and action in a narrative make sense as responses but not as reactions.

Oakeshott’s later philosophy is immensely dense and intricate, and is already provoking a notable literature of interpretation. O’Sullivan’s Oakeshott on History is a most impressive contribution to it. He is the first to make extensive use of the Oakeshott archive at the LSE, which is indispensable because Oakeshott was remarkably modest about going into print with what he wrote. The Oakeshott who emerges is one who, having solved a problem, proceeded to question the terms of his own solution. And, in bringing out the centrality of human freedom in his thought, Luke O’Sullivan has helped to liberate Oakeshott from the confines of being regarded as a “conservative philosopher”.

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