
Given the stylistic and substantive diversity of Oakeshott’s writings, it is no surprise that his thought has been the subject of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Adding to the complexities here is that, throughout his career, Oakeshott returned to similar questions concerning the nature of human understanding, but each time from a slightly different perspective, using a different or expanded terminology and sometimes with a new purpose in mind. One of the challenges of interpreting Oakeshott’s philosophy lies in pulling together (or at least finding a place for) the threads that don’t always seem to run in the same direction.

Some commentators have concluded that there are important shifts or alterations in Oakeshott’s view of philosophy and its relations to the various modes of experience as well as the relations of the modes to each other. Others have argued that, despite the change in vocabulary and focus, there is a fundamental consistency in Oakeshott’s thought as a whole. One of the aims of Tseng’s work is to address this debate and in so doing he comes down firmly on the side of those who affirm the consistency of Oakeshott’s views. Though the work probably provides more exposition of Oakeshott’s writings than is necessary to make its case, it is nevertheless a searching and insightful analysis which makes an important contribution to Oakeshott studies.

Tseng finds a unifying interpretative framework for Oakeshott’s philosophy by viewing it as a response to the Enlightenment. Specifically, this means foundationalism in philosophy (or *philosophisme*), formalism in ethics, and positivist historiography. In the first of the book’s four sections, Tseng tells a familiar story about modern philosophy’s search for certainty through reason and science. In the realm of general philosophy this has resulted in the modern obsession with epistemology; in ethics, in the search for bedrock principles (or, as MacIntyre has it, the attempt to justify morality *an sich*); and in historiography, in the search for scientific history. As I understand it, Tseng’s case is that one of the consequences (if not aims) of Enlightenment thought is to limit the range and diversity of human experience by bringing it within the purview of a homogenizing and universalizing conception of reason. Or, to put it in terms of Oakeshott’s critique, it is to impoverish the human conversation by restricting the range of voices that can legitimately participate in it.

Tseng aims to show that Oakeshott’s lifelong concern with clarifying the *differentia* of the various modes of experience, defending their autonomy *vis-à-vis* each other, and indicating what it is that makes them all distinct from philosophy as a form of human experience can be understood not only as a challenge to this Enlightenment legacy, but as Oakeshott’s distinctive contribution to modern philosophy. He shows that, while Oakeshott’s
thought has much in common with other counter or anti-Enlightenment schools of thought — historicism, pragmatism, continental hermeneutics and post-modernism, Oakeshott (on Tseng’s reading) consistently rejected the assimilation of some forms of knowledge into other (usually) more privileged forms — the pre-eminence of history in the case of historicism, practice in the case of pragmatism and hermeneutics, and the ‘death of philosophy’ as in versions of post-modernism. For Oakeshott, each mode is what it is, and is to be enjoyed for its own sake; and though philosophy, by refusing to rest upon unquestioned presuppositions, transcends the conditional viewpoint of the modes themselves, it is incapable of saying anything to them without becoming something other than what it is.

One of the real virtues of Tseng’s approach is that it enables him to make connections between Oakeshott and other trends in modern philosophy, as well as to tie together some of the seemingly diverse strands within Oakeshott’s thought itself. For instance, Oakeshott’s well-known use of the idea of tradition has attracted a good deal of misinterpretation over the years (‘Burkean’, ‘reactionary’, ‘anti-rational’), but when it is seen in terms of the modal theory of human experience and the claim that the world of practice has its own distinctive modal form, then his use of the term becomes much clearer. Sensitive interpreters of Oakeshott have generally recognized this, and Tseng is covering familiar territory here, but few have done it with such thoroughness. In a similar way, Oakeshott’s philosophy of history has often been criticized for being so highly circumscribed as to make the writing of history almost impossible. But Tseng points out that Oakeshott’s strictly demarcated account of historical understanding stems from the insight that history is a distinctive mode of human experience and its autonomy as a mode is something worth defending. Moreover, the problem with a naturalist or positivist historiography, as with the case of rationalism in relation to the world of practice, is that it represents a denial of this autonomy.

While Oakeshott’s philosophy undoubtedly constitutes a serious challenge to some of the dominant motifs of the Enlightenment project, this did not translate into a criticism of modernity as such. I think Tseng could have made more of Oakeshott’s basic affirmation of the modern condition, perhaps by paying more attention than he does to someone like MacIntyre. For instance, both MacIntyre and Oakeshott use the concepts ‘tradition’ and ‘practice’ to criticize rationalist or Enlightenment ethics, but, unlike MacIntyre, Oakeshott does this while simultaneously affirming the modern experience of individuality as well as developing a theory of human understanding that roughly parallels the early modern separation of faith and reason which signalled the decline of scholasticism. Hence Oakeshott’s esteem for (and MacIntyre’s criticism of) such sceptics and fideists as Montaigne, Pascal and, of course, Hobbes. In other words, what Oakeshott affirms reveals as much about him as a philosopher as what he rejects.
The final reservation I have concerns the limited nature of Tseng’s presentation of Oakeshott’s thought. Tseng depicts first and foremost the philosophical Oakeshott. This can be seen as part of a recent reappraisal of Oakeshott’s work that is to be welcomed. Whatever else Oakeshott is, he is one of the most original and subtle philosophical voices of the recent past. But he was also an intellectual historian of great acuity who constructed a certain reading of Western civilization with strong moral or normative overtones. It would be misleading to characterize Oakeshott as a moralist in any simple sense, but it seems to me that his moral concerns profoundly shaped his philosophical or theoretical reflections on politics specifically, and the modern condition more generally. This includes both the theory of civil association and the critique of rationalism, the politics of faith, and the morality of the mass man. Oakeshott’s use of the story of the Tower of Babel in two separate essays to reveal the folly of rationalism says much about the nature of this moral mistake. Though Tseng deals with these themes, he does so in relation to Oakeshott’s philosophical agenda, giving us very little of the rhetorical or polemical Oakeshott and thus overlooking something that makes Oakeshott’s voice the distinctive one that it is.