

The Idealism of Young Oakeshott

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I

The purpose of this article is to interpret the intellectual development of Michael Oakeshott as a young man, drawing on his published and unpublished works written between 1924 and 1929, when he was in his twenties. Oakeshott's mature works are currently enjoying a wider readership, which attests to the growing interest in his thought. Yet their true significance will not be properly understood without appreciating the place of Oakeshott within the history of twentieth century philosophy. Such appreciation, however, requires a contextual analysis of his ideas. Contextualising Oakeshott is not a simple matter, not least because he himself was sharply opposed to this method, insisting that a truly great philosophy should connect us with eternity rather than be reduced to the banalities of its immediate context.¹ His mature writings were intentionally idiosyncratic, as he rarely paid debt to his contemporaries, and even where he mentioned the works of others, such references were often misleading. Furthermore, his idiosyncratic style was accompanied by immense erudition. All these features of Oakeshott's writings make any individual scholar's embrace of the comprehensive meaning of his philosophy a daunting task.

It is not surprising, then, that the contextual study of Oakeshott's ideas has been slow to develop. The first serious attempts at contextualisation were made in the 1960s by W.H. Greenleaf and almost twenty years later by David Boucher.² These early studies put Oakeshott's ideas in the tradition of Absolute Idealism, providing a necessary contextual framework for a deeper analysis of his ideas. Yet subsequent studies also revealed the limitations of this framework. The main problem was that Oakeshott's views did not fit well into many basic elements of Absolute Idealism. Thus, while all Absolute Idealists subscribed to at least the presupposition of the spiritual unity of experience, Oakeshott's

¹ Cf. Michael Oakeshott, 'Introduction', in T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. x.

² W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London: Longman's Green, 1966); David Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory* 23(2), 1984, pp. 193-214.

philosophy was characterised by a celebration of plurality as well as scepticism regarding the existence of monistic truth.

These features provoked doubts as to whether Oakeshott could be called an Absolute Idealist at all. Thus it was argued by Steven Gerencser that, although Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) professed a sort of Absolute Idealism, later in his life he abandoned this philosophy, having become a 'Sceptical Idealist'.³ This interpretation pointed to an important loophole in Oakeshott studies, yet it suffered itself from certain shortcomings. Firstly, it introduced the idea of a break in Oakeshott's thought between *Experience and Its Modes* and his later writings, thus failing to account for the strong continuity apparent in all of Oakeshott's published works. As a result, Gerencser's critics countered that Oakeshott preserved some elements of Absolute Idealism even in his later writings.⁴ Moreover, by concentrating on Oakeshott's scepticism, this interpretation did not draw enough attention to what was probably the core difference between Oakeshott and Absolute Idealism, that is, his rejection of philosophical monism. This opened the door to a counter-argument that, in fact, some Absolute Idealists, such as F.H. Bradley, already professed a great measure of scepticism.

It seems, however, that a new interpretation may resolve the problems posed by the previous ones.⁵ Under this interpretation, there is a continuity in Oakeshott's major published works, yet in none of them can he be seen as adhering to Absolute Idealism. If one is looking for this tradition in his writings, one should refer only to the period prior to the publication of his first book, *Experience and Its Modes*, since this work already indicated Oakeshott's break with Absolute Idealism.

Thus the period prior to the publication of *Experience and Its Modes* suddenly emerges as a very important phase in Oakeshott's intellectual development. This truly early period of his thought must be carefully distinguished from the mature period, which should be understood as encompassing all Oakeshott's writings from *Experience and Its Modes* onwards. It is also important to remember that in his mature period Oakeshott repudiated many of the ideas which he subscribed to in his younger years. At the same time, an attempt to understand the dynamic of Oakeshott's intellectual development as a young man is necessary in order to appreciate the significance of his later thought. I have discussed the major characteristics of his mature philosophy elsewhere.⁶ The aim of this article is to complement my study by taking a closer look at Oakeshott's early writings.

³ Steven Gerencser, *The Sceptic's Oakeshott* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁴ See, for example, David Boucher, 'The Idealism of Michael Oakeshott', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 8 (2001), pp. 73-98.

⁵ Efraim Podoksik, 'How Oakeshott Became an Oakeshottean', *European Journal of Political Theory* 4(1), 2005, forthcoming.

⁶ Efraim Podoksik, *In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2003).

II

To see the full extent of the influence of Absolute Idealism on the young Oakeshott, it is convenient to begin our account with a long essay entitled 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy' (August 1925).⁷ The essay deals not merely with political philosophy but also with the meaning of the philosophical pursuit as such and, therefore, provides a unique opportunity to understand Oakeshott's adherence to both sides of the Idealistic tradition: its philosophical aspect in general and its moral philosophy in particular.

Before writing this essay, Oakeshott had already spent four years at Cambridge (three years as a history undergraduate and one more as recipient of a prestigious studentship). Apart from familiarising himself with the usual curriculum of the History Faculty, which included courses in the history of political thought and hence an acquaintance with famous classical thinkers, Oakeshott seems to have undertaken a thoroughly independent study of philosophy. He is known to have attended lectures given by J.M.E. McTaggart, and he appears to have spent considerable time studying ancient philosophers. In the years 1923-24 he was checking out library books about Greek philosophy and history, and his notebooks of the same period contain material about Plato, Aristotle and Spinoza. This kind of learning could not have failed to affect Oakeshott's perception of philosophy, and in his writings of that period one can find much reverence for ancient thought and an adherence to the postulates of contemporary Idealism.

Oakeshott's understanding of philosophy in the aforementioned essay is briefly as follows: The task of philosophy is the knowledge of things. Words are merely significations of real things that exist in our experience. Such knowledge is achieved through the definition of a thing, but this definition is not arbitrary because some definitions stand nearer to the truth than others. True definition is classification through the purpose of a thing, whereby it is acknowledged as a member of a *genus*, this acknowledgement connecting a particular object of experience to a more comprehensive whole to which it belongs, and so forth until the totality of experience is achieved.⁸ Thus real knowledge turns out in the end to be knowledge of the whole.

Influences from three philosophical traditions are especially salient here. The first is Aristotelian. Oakeshott's terminology is ontological and essentialist. The purpose of philosophy, according to him, is to penetrate the true nature of things. One should distinguish between the essential and accidental qualities of a thing, and essential qualities should be defined in a teleological way. Secondly, Oakeshott mentions Spinoza, and indeed Spinozian pantheism is reflected in his holistic attitude towards reality, as he claims that the true self-sufficient thing, or substance, can only be the integrated whole. Finally, his rejection of any kind of dualism as well as assertion of the unity of experience puts him close to British Idealists.

This last connection becomes especially clear when Oakeshott approaches his main subject – political philosophy. He takes the middle ground between claims for a complete

⁷ Michael Oakeshott, 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy'. LSE Archives, Oakeshott, 1/1/3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12- 21.

detachment of philosophy from practical life and attempts to attribute to philosophy the task of guiding practical behaviour. According to Oakeshott, the task of philosophy is not to change the world but to understand it.⁹ Yet it appears that, for him, philosophy is not separated from the practical world of value as such. For, unlike history and science, which are value-free disciplines concerned merely with brute facts and offering only raw material, philosophy determines judgements aimed 'at giving a final and real meaning to things by the discovery of their final and real content and value'.¹⁰ This conclusion is not surprising, since for Oakeshott the task of philosophy is to determine the *purpose* of each thing within the totality of experience and hence give the thing its meaning. Philosophy is theorising about values within experience. And this middle position is not much different from that of Hegel and Bosanquet – on the one hand, the rejection of applied philosophy, and on the other, the recognition of a more subtle, indirect connection between philosophy and practical life.

Now, the specific subject of political philosophy is political life as a part of the totality of experience. Political life is described in the widest possible terms as life in society, in which 'we become subject to those sweet and profitable laws of conduct which bring with them such conditions of life as will answer to our real needs and desires'.¹¹ In other words, political life is understood in terms of the will 'to live a good life'.¹² Society is a moral relationship, 'a union of minds, and its solidarity... is a solidarity of feeling, opinion and belief'.¹³

The ultimate society is the state, the purpose of which is the good life. The state is a 'cultural unit'¹⁴ and 'culture' is the end 'a state sets before itself'.¹⁵ This means that the state 'possesses more than a mere unity of action; it must also have some degree of unity of purpose'.¹⁶ Oakeshott speaks about the state as a self-sufficient moral and cultural association and cites Burke, who sees in the state a 'partnership'.¹⁷ The more an association is a real unity with a common tradition, memory and purpose, the more it is a state in the true meaning of the word.

This view of the state is indeed congenial with the views of the British Idealists, for whom the state was 'not only the apparatus of governance', but also 'inclusive of the whole social organism'.¹⁸ And Oakeshott also follows this Idealistic view further when he comes to discuss the concept of the self. He rejects methodological individualism with regard to this concept, claiming that the self cannot be coherently understood as a combination of an individual body and its thoughts, although this view can serve some practical purposes. The self is a thing and therefore must be self-complete and, as no particular human being is self-complete, 'the only true, because the only perfect, self is

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁸ David Boucher and Andrew Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 11.

the universe'.¹⁹ Only the totality of experience can be absolutely self-complete and therefore possess individuality. Therefore 'a self *is* its society',²⁰ 'the self is the State, the State is the self'.²¹

There is no real conflict between the state and the individual. 'Individuality means finding our activity within a whole'.²² It is expressed in finding one's own place within society and 'only through his particular station and the faithful performance of its particular duties, can [man] take hold of this thing called "humanity"'.²³

The ensuing discussion of the role that government and law play in society also proceeds along familiar Idealistic lines, where a holistic framework is called upon to shore up liberal political convictions. Although, or because the state is an association with a clear moral purpose, government should not be equated with the state. In fact, its authority is self-limiting. The purpose of government is to serve the moral end of society, but government 'may not attempt that which it is unable to achieve'.²⁴ Government is only one of the associations within the state that serve the main purpose of the state. It is just a public service, although indeed 'a public service in scope and power far superior to other associations'.²⁵

Thus, to understand society is to understand it as a whole and to transcend the dualism of individual and society. It is to understand that in fact both constitute the totality called the state. This totality has its own purpose, which is to be a moral association, in other words to be a self-sufficient association of minds united in their common pursuit of the good life as they understand it. Oakeshott does not hide his scorn for contemporary critics of this holistic approach such as L.T. Hobhouse, and especially Harold Laski, whose ideas he twice dismisses as 'nonsense'.²⁶ In fact, Oakeshott's argument sounds perfectly Bosanquetian, echoing most of the ideas already stated by Bosanquet in *The Philosophical Theory of the State*.²⁷

How strongly Oakeshott's views were affected by that synthesis of ancient, especially Aristotelian, philosophy and the general postulates of British Idealism can be also seen in his essay entitled 'Some Remarks on the Nature and Meaning of Sociality',²⁸ another unpublished work dated the same year (1925). In it, Oakeshott sets upon the task of disproving the naturalistic approach towards the study of man as well as philosophical individualism, associated particularly with utilitarianism. With regard to the naturalistic approach, Oakeshott claims that when a contrast is drawn between society and solitude, 'sociality' becomes confused 'with mere sociableness'.²⁹ Society is then understood either in terms of mechanics or biology. Such an approach sees in man only a kind of

¹⁹ Oakeshott, 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy', p. 130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 148n.

²⁷ See Bernard Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (London: Macmillan, 1923).

²⁸ Michael Oakeshott, 'Some Remarks on the Nature and Meaning of Sociality', in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. T. Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 46-62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

social animal and reduces the analysis of his sociality to the types of organisation common to men and animals. It regards low forms of social organisation, which it considers to be the original ones, as more important for understanding the true nature of sociality. Thus, 'instead of saying with Aristotle, *τὸ φύσει κοινωνικὸν ἐστὶν*, we have persuaded ourselves that the most primitive, we sometimes call it, the original manifestation of a thing not merely shows the real nature of the thing but *is* its real nature.'³⁰ For Oakeshott, however, human sociality is no mere gregariousness, the ability to live in the physical proximity of other human beings and to enter into some kind of organisation with them. It is not and cannot be a natural fact at all. Rather, it is a moral fact, 'a feature of the life of minds in relation, not bodies in proximity'.³¹

As for utilitarianism, it does understand sociality as a moral fact. Yet it is mistaken in a different sense, for in all its versions it maintains a strict separation of self and society, dividing them into exclusive areas and thus destroying 'the idea of a whole except as a kind of average condition of being'.³² In contrast, for Oakeshott, self and society are integral parts of the same social unity and so 'moral obligation cannot be divided into exclusive areas, but is a single and self-sufficient whole'.³³ This social whole is a unity of minds, which may perhaps need some physical conditions of existence. Yet those physical conditions can only be an accidental feature. Thus the mind of the recluse can be perfectly social, and even more so than that of others, as when departing from living apart from society such a man passes his life 'in the closest communion with those people and things in which he can find his self most fully'.³⁴

Life in society therefore exists not for the sake of satisfying basic needs but in order to create a unity of minds and therefore give life a logical unity, in other words, 'to give it what it else had not – a meaning'.³⁵ Similar to Aristotle, for whom friendships based on utility or pleasure are inferior to the perfect kind of friendship, one based on goodness,³⁶ Oakeshott argues that people do not live together for reasons of economic necessity or for the sake of personal pleasure. The real principle of society is 'the principle of good'.³⁷ The unity of society is achieved through the highest goodness, and this is expressed in love and friendship, which are in turn the revelations of a single passionate devotion to the highest good. This leads Oakeshott to praise religion, saying that 'God is the only principle of sociability' and that 'society becomes possible by religion',³⁸ and to regard patriotism as 'the motive which should guide us in all our actions'.³⁹

Thus an Aristotelian emphasis on *telos* is again combined with methodological holism. No wonder that, apart from Aristotle, Oakeshott appeals to authorities of the past such as Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza and Rousseau, all understood as philosophical monists. One can also see in his rejection of the view of society as being composed of separate individuals

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 1155-1157.

³⁷ 'Some Remarks on the Nature and Meaning of Sociality', p. 57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60

his subscription to the basic ideas of many British Idealists. Moreover, the fact that methodological individualism is attributed to utilitarianism may by itself testify to the influence of British Idealism on Oakeshott. For, although individualism was characteristic not only of the utilitarians, it was they who were the constant target of attacks from the Idealists. In addition, his rejection of the biological approach towards man, combined with the preservation of a kind of organisistic thinking applied to the sphere of meaning and morality, was also characteristic of some British Idealists.⁴⁰

III

This is not to say, however, that Oakeshott was a typical British Idealist writer. He was younger than other Idealists, and his writings of that period should be regarded as a part of his juvenilia. Energetic, polemical, often extreme in their claims, they are characterised more by their literary qualities than by dry logic. He was capable of proclaiming St. Paul to have been ‘perhaps the greatest political philosopher...’⁴¹ Many British Idealists certainly espoused a kind of religious belief, but they would rarely bring it to the surface in such an innocently transparent way.

One should then beware of attempting to attribute to young Oakeshott a finished philosophical doctrine. Had he possessed one, he might not have needed further development and so would have ended up an obscure epigone of Bradley and Bosanquet in the history of philosophy. However, he felt that Absolute Idealism presented a more satisfactory philosophy than other schools of that time. Not necessarily adopting Idealism as his core doctrine, Oakeshott seems to have found in it something which appealed to the disposition of his mind. Absolute Idealism was not shy of proclaiming its quest for ultimate truth and the meaning of life. It was therefore akin to both ancient philosophy in the universality of its philosophical questions and to religion in its rejection of radical scepticism. Thus it did not succumb to a common twentieth century temptation of philosophy being reduced merely to questions of logic, and so getting lost in enquiries into subjects of marginal importance. In other words, Oakeshott was dissatisfied with secularised, mundane mutations of philosophy and was rather looking for something which would provide a space for a religious or quasi-religious meaning.

Yet, although the religious sentiment of the young Oakeshott seems to have driven him towards Absolute Idealism, this was not the only way of thinking open to him, and he was prepared to explore other possibilities. One such attempt is found in his paper entitled ‘An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry and Reality’.⁴² Though undated, it seems to belong to a very early period, perhaps in the early 1920s (when Oakeshott was

⁴⁰ See, for example, Andrew Seth (Pringle-Pattison), ‘Man’s Place in the Cosmos: Professor Huxley on Nature and Man’, in D. Boucher (ed.), *The British Idealists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 30-49. Also, two Idealists, Nettleship and Bosanquet, are favourably mentioned in the essay.

⁴¹ Michael Oakeshott, ‘The Cambridge School of Political Science’, in *What Is History? And Other Essays*, ed. L. O’Sullivan (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2004), p. 48.

⁴² Michael Oakeshott, ‘An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry and Reality’, in *What Is History? And Other Essays*, pp. 67-115.

himself in his twenties). Luke O'Sullivan suggests that the text may be his MA dissertation written circa 1925.⁴³ One consideration supporting this conjecture may be that, in a long bibliography attached to the end of the essay, no text in the original German is listed (whereas a number of original French texts are listed). By contrast, Oakeshott's writings of the late 1920s reveal his familiarity with many original German texts.

Therefore it is plausible to suggest that the essay was written before he became immersed in the study of German philosophy and literature – in other words, no later than 1925. This is the year 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy' was written. Yet the two works differ from each other significantly. They explore two different paths, not necessarily contradictory ones, but certainly leading in different directions. Their common aspects are the author's fascination with attempts to reach the totality of experience and his rejection of radical scepticism. For Oakeshott, every true thinking is at its source a philosophical activity.

Yet the texts differ sharply in their estimation of the ability of reason to reach such Reality. In 'An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry and Reality', Oakeshott claims that the purpose of philosophical activity is nothing other than understanding what is called in the history of philosophy by such names as 'Final Truth, Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, God'.⁴⁴ The best definition of Reality is expressed in Spinoza's description of substance as that 'which is in itself and conceived through itself'.⁴⁵ This quotation is accompanied by a phrase from Plotinus in which the word 'One' stands for Reality. Ultimate Reality is therefore understood in quasi-religious or even quasi-mystical terms. This presupposition drives Oakeshott far from his Aristotelian outlook as seen in 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy'. In 'An Essay,' he draws on Spinoza's definition to claim that Reality is the thing. This leads to the question of whether 'the "Thing" is its activities, or... it is something which subsists behind its activities, different in nature, and therefore not wholly knowable through them'.⁴⁶ Oakeshott attributes the former position to 'the English Hegelian school', among whose proponents he mentions Henry Jones, Nettleship and Green.⁴⁷ Among the advocates of the latter view one finds Schopenhauer, William James, Bradley and L.P. Jack.⁴⁸ Oakeshott is very critical of 'neo-Hegelians' and of Henry Jones in particular. He argues that, for them, 'God is exhausted in his creation'.⁴⁹ This is the position he is not prepared to accept, arguing, for example, that a view like this would make any thing, such as a man's character, only an unreal abstraction. Thus Oakeshott is led to adopt the second view, concluding that 'things and qualities must be clearly marked off from one another'.⁵⁰

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 115n.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 73n.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71n.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73n.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

It is worth stressing that, being familiar with the philosophical currents of his time, Oakeshott avoids the error of conflating neo-Hegelianism with the entire school of British Idealism. Certainly, his favourite Idealist Bradley is specifically mentioned as a non-Hegelian.⁵¹ The distinguishing criterion seems to be precisely a position concerning whether the Absolute is transcendent or whether it can be reduced to its attributes. Oakeshott knows that choosing the former answer means coming closer to Kant than to Hegel. Moreover, his adoption of the position of Bradley, perhaps the most sceptical of Absolute Idealists, points to a future sceptical turn in his own thought. And he is prepared to move even further, as he buttresses his view of Reality with an appeal to the authority of G.E. Moore, hardly an Idealist, let alone a Hegelian.⁵²

Having thus defined Reality as a thing which is separate from its activities, Oakeshott proceeds to the central question of the essay, namely how one may reach it. He distinguishes between two main methods through which such attempts were made, one belonging to philosophy, the other to poetry. It soon becomes clear, however, that those words are just labels signifying two general ways of human experience. They intimate the old and well-known rivalry between Reason or Intellect, on the one hand, and Faith or Mysticism on the other.

Philosophy is described as an activity of the intellect whose main method is characterized by analysis, classification and synthesis. It attempts to reach Reality by analysing the existing empirical data, approaching it with the help of doubt and detachment, and using a language in which words are supposed to have a clear and definite meaning. The final product of a philosophical investigation is synthesis, but such synthesis is never truly creative. Rather, it allows us to understand in a better and more defined way what we have already known.

Poetry (the word stands here for all arts) is also described as an activity pushing us to try to reach Reality, rather than just a diversion meant to please.⁵³ It is elevated to the highest role in human experience, for Oakeshott claims that 'all art is mystical, all art is religious – in principle'.⁵⁴ But the method of poetry in bringing us towards Reality is opposite to that of philosophy. Whereas philosophy involves reasoning, poetry acts through intuition and imagination. Instead of leading us to Reality gradually, poetry transports us to it all at once. Its requirements are faith and not doubt, the submission of self and not a reasoned argument. In the process of making contact with Reality, the distinction between the observer and the observed is cancelled, and both are absorbed into the one. The poet thus acquires an immediate knowledge of things, a knowledge essentially different from that of the philosopher: 'this knowledge of the poet may be called the knowledge of *being*, in distinction from the knowledge of knowing which belongs to the philosopher'.⁵⁵

Having thus juxtaposed two different methods of reaching Reality, Oakeshott gives his verdict which is, in fact, implied from the beginning in his characterisation of Reality as a transcendent object. To reach such otherworldly Reality, one cannot employ the usual truth of the intellect which operates only with the data provided by phenomena and is

⁵¹ Bosanquet is also mentioned favourably in a different context (*Ibid.*, p. 78n).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

incapable of moving beyond the phenomena themselves. Therefore, if any activity has the capacity to reach the Truth, it is poetry. As Oakeshott contends, 'our knowledge of God, as Kant clearly saw, is the product of the moral consciousness, and not of science or metaphysics. It is not reason but feeling which determines our idea of God. This is why religion and poetry, on this point, outweigh philosophy'.⁵⁶ For him, poetry is then clearly akin to religion, although he makes a certain distinction between the two, pointing out that 'where Religion goes beyond Poetry, as such, is that it declares its oneness with a God, not merely with a spiritual world'.⁵⁷

Oakeshott does not argue that poetry will actually succeed in reaching Reality. Yet at least it is in principle capable of doing so, while philosophy by definition will always fall short. This is what makes poetry a higher form of activity. At the same time, Oakeshott does not wish to deprecate philosophy. He claims that though philosophy 'cannot hope to know Reality, it yet has a place in the quest for Reality'.⁵⁸ It serves us, firstly, by strengthening our power to distinguish between fancy and imagination, thereby saving us from superstition and, secondly, by revealing its own true limitations. Moreover, the activity of reasoning is so inherent in the human mind that philosophy will continue to assert itself even if its final purpose is vain, so 'failure will not daunt, impossibility will not deter'.⁵⁹

The essay therefore reveals the twofold character of Oakeshott's view. On the one hand, one finds in it the quest for Reality in its fullness, characterised by an intellectual ambition and a religious passion. On the other hand, the essay contains the seeds of his future recognition of the futility of the entire enterprise. Moreover, behind the urge towards unity one can already notice a stress on diversity. Thus Oakeshott's insistence that Reality is one, final and ultimate, is accompanied by the recognition of the principle of 'differentiation'. Using the jargon of his age, Oakeshott derives this principle from man's natural tendency to the economy of faculties. The need for the economy of faculties is at the core of the 'universal process of differentiation which takes place in all our activities and ideas'.⁶⁰ Thus, through differentiation philosophy gradually came to establish itself as a discipline distinct and separate from other activities. A similar process happened to religion, so the history of religion 'is, in one aspect, the history of the differentiation of our idea of the sacred'.⁶¹ Yet in this essay, both the aspect of unity and the aspect of diversity are still at peace with each other. In a few years, however, the idea of differentiation will take on a more definite shape, turning into the famous Oakeshottean notion of modes of experience to proclaim radical plurality and introduce its inescapable tension with the idea of unity. In the end, the idea of unity will vanish almost completely from Oakeshott's writings.⁶²

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110n.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶² See Podoksik, *In Defence of Modernity*.

IV

The change in Oakeshott's views crystallised into an original system only in *Experience and Its Modes* (1933). Yet before this happened, Oakeshott's beliefs seem to have undergone a series of shifts. It appears that in the mid-1920s he experienced a certain intellectual crisis, connected with a gradual loss of his previous philosophical and religious certainty. Whether this crisis was also emotional is difficult to say. We know, at least, that his notebooks of the same period reveal a preoccupation with the question of mortality.

Thus, although his writings of the late '20s are still very much in the tradition of Absolute Idealism, some new feelings seem to be creeping in. As discussed above, already in 1925 such philosophers as Bradley and Bosanquet were guiding Oakeshott towards scepticism and an appreciation of the limits of reason. In 'Religion and the Moral Life' (1927),⁶³ he applies this growing scepticism towards the question of the connection between religion and morality. After rejecting the views that religion is morality itself or else the sanction of morality, Oakeshott suggests a more satisfactory idea, which is, in his opinion, that religion is the completion of morality. He attributes this view to Bradley and Bosanquet, and, structurally, his argument is similar to that outlined by Bradley in *Ethical Studies*.⁶⁴ His presentation is, however, somewhat more lyrical. According to him, the view of religion as the completion of morality is best summed up in Pascal's aphorism, already cited by him in 'An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry and Reality': '*Il est bon d'être lassé et fatigué par l'inutile recherche du vrai bien, afin de tendre les bras au Libérateur*'.⁶⁵ According to Oakeshott, morality is self-contradictory and, to some degree, abstract. The moral good is never finally achieved either individually or socially.

Therefore the moral life may look like something futile. There is no absolute end in it, and the abstract state of moral perfectibility does not exist in reality. Morality is 'a battle with no hope of victory, a battle, in fact, in which a final victory is the only irretrievable defeat'.⁶⁶ Religion serves as a completion to the moral life in an attempt to reconcile a man with the feeling of futility intrinsic in all his deeds. What distinguishes religion from morality is that its object must be real and not abstract. Religion gives us the feeling of a living, immediate awareness, without the need to wait for future results. It allows us to accept reality as it is. 'In religion we achieve goodness ... not by becoming better, but by losing ourselves in God'.⁶⁷ Religion therefore does not and is not supposed to lead us to the highest ideal. Its task is consolation and reconciliation with our condition. And personal experience plays a more important role in this experience than a harmonic synthesis of an individual self with the holistic unity.

In 'The Authority of the State' (1929),⁶⁸ Oakeshott is again very much of an Absolute Idealist, a follower of Bosanquet and Bradley. Similar to them, and following his own position outlined in 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political

⁶³ Michael Oakeshott, 'Religion and the Moral Life', in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, pp. 39-45.

⁶⁴ F.H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

⁶⁵ Oakeshott, 'Religion and the Moral Life', p. 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁸ Michael Oakeshott, 'The Authority of the State', in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, pp. 74-87.

Philosophy,' he defines the state as 'the social whole which is correlative to individuals who are complete and living persons' and 'the totality in an actual community which satisfies the whole mind of the individuals who comprise it'.⁶⁹ At the same time one can notice an increasing appreciation of the self as an independent entity. This especially becomes apparent in his discussion of the concept of authority. Authority is frequently conceived of as being both external and coercive. It demands obedience and submission without making any effort to appeal to the persons whom it obliges. It is thus contrasted with reason. Yet Oakeshott insists that one should make a distinction between *causes* and *grounds* of any action or belief. External factors, such as commands, violence and so on, may be regarded as causes, but they can never be the whole ground of a belief or action. Nothing can oblige us to believe that a given statement is true unless we have reached this conclusion by ourselves, and although such a conclusion may be caused by the words of a person whose knowledge we regard as authoritative, the whole ground of our judgment lies elsewhere. We can accept a statement as true only if it is coherent with our whole world of ideas, and such a world is always our own. In order to be real and truly coercive the whole ground of authority must therefore lie within the internal world of ideas. And if this is so, there is no tension between authority and reason. If only inner judgment can be considered as ultimately compelling, then 'that which is really authoritative in belief or action, so far from standing in contrast to reason, *is* reason in the full sense of our world of ideas in so far as it is a coherent whole'.⁷⁰

Thus, on the one hand, Oakeshott's ideas in this article belong to the tradition of Absolute Idealism. He considers the state to be an ethical community, and his criticism of the view of authority as something external is quite clearly directed against the utilitarian approach, an approach associated with Bentham and Austin and regarded by the British Idealists as their primary adversary. On the other hand, however, one can notice a certain change in emphasis, an intimation of the ethical individualism of his later writings. This aspect finds its expression in the assertion that authority is something belonging to an inner conviction of reason. Such a view does not necessarily contradict the beliefs of the British Idealists. Yet those Idealists would hardly consider an individual mind to be identical with reason and thus to entail a self-sufficient and final criterion. Rather, they would take care to integrate an individual mind into a community of minds. Bradley's treatise on history might have stimulated Oakeshott,⁷¹ but in that treatise Bradley himself was not necessarily an accomplished Idealist and was even somewhat influenced by positivism. Discussing authority, Oakeshott does not explicitly subscribe to methodological holism, and this is what makes him sound a more individualistic tone. Nothing in his article prevents us from understanding his position as considering individual conscience to be the criterion of our judgements.

Furthermore, in the late 1920s one can also take note of Oakeshott's growing interest and familiarity with German ideas, as he frequently quotes from German literary and philosophical texts. That Oakeshott at this stage became fascinated with German thought is no surprise. It was the German intellectual tradition that still maintained the philosophical aspiration to reach the absolute truth long after more scientific-minded and

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷¹ See F.H. Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (Don Mills: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1968).

sceptical trends spread through France and England. What is interesting, however, is that in the '20s a radical new movement appeared which transformed the old humanistic school of German Idealism into something very different. It called for a spiritual regeneration and at the same time conceived this regeneration in specifically anti-modernist terms. This movement, often associated with a so-called 'life philosophy', did not espouse one systematic doctrine, yet its basic position can be summarised as the view that 'life in its immediacy is man's primary reality'.⁷² Quite often this view entailed the rejection of all conceptual knowledge and consequently an emphasis on intuition, the immediacy of perception, freedom and creativity.

This worldview found many adherents, especially among the post-war generation of students. Oakeshott allegedly participated in one such German movement, *Wandervögel*, 'an informal student movement dedicated to nature-worship, camping out, and (according to D.H. Lawrence) "free love"'.⁷³ Some of Oakeshott's writings of that period are certainly influenced by this experience. The emphasis on subjective immediate insight is salient in his description of the meaning of religion, in which the experience of 'presentness' belonging to an individual self acquires primary significance, whilst God and the church disappear. Thus, in 'The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity' (1928),⁷⁴ Oakeshott criticises what looks like the German historicist approach, while preserving the principle of individuality or uniqueness characteristic of that school. Only for Oakeshott, this principle should be applied to present experience, not to an analysis of the past.⁷⁵ 'Life philosophy' would criticise the established tradition of German historicism in similar terms. As Oakeshott says, religion demands 'a consciousness of the individuality of present experience'.⁷⁶ Its new ideal is being contemporary to oneself, and its essential characteristic lies 'in its provision of the actuality of the object of religious belief'.⁷⁷ God is conspicuously absent from the entire essay, or rather transformed into a shapeless term, 'object'. Unlike the Aristotelian essentialism of his earlier essays, this article is preoccupied with the inward world of subjective experience rather than the world of things and their definitions.

This position is presented in even more radical terms in 'Religion and the World' (1929),⁷⁸ where Oakeshott outlines the dichotomy between worldly and religious values. He sees the difference between them being that the worldly system of values assigns importance to everything outside a self, be it career, earthly achievements or contributions to art and science, whereas the religious experience attributes value only to the insight of a self, appraising everything according to whether it contributes to the integrity of self at the present moment. Thus Oakeshott no longer speaks about the

⁷² Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 337.

⁷³ Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (London: Claridge Press, 1990), p. 13.

⁷⁴ Michael Oakeshott, 'The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity', in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, pp. 63-73.

⁷⁵ On German historicism see Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, Co: Wesleyan University Press, 1983). Oakeshott clearly bears this tradition in mind, as he refers to Ernst Troeltsch's *Historismus und seine Probleme* ('The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity', p. 69n).

⁷⁶ 'The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity', p. 72.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷⁸ Michael Oakeshott, 'Religion and the World', in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, pp. 27-38.

devotion to the highest ideal. It appears that under this view, morality, patriotism or attachment to God can be seen as merely 'secular' concepts valuing external objects rather than the present insight of a self. In a certain sense it is still possible to provide an interpretation of Oakeshott's view in which this dichotomy between the internal and external will be overcome. For he speaks of present insight as being 'a grasp of the thing itself',⁷⁹ without however mentioning God explicitly. A jump from extreme individualism to an idea of holistic individuality was, in fact, not uncommon among Romantics.⁸⁰ Yet such an interpretation would do violence to the essay's text. It is quite clear here that Oakeshott is less concerned with the question of totality, and that there are significant differences between this new mood and his writings of the mid-'20s. Previously the self was understood as something transcending an individual, now it is argued that 'the most permanent and stable thing in life' is 'our selves'.⁸¹ Previously religion was described as the true expression of the attachment to the eternal, the Truth, the Ultimate Reality. Now it is presented as being 'simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present, not merely in the past or the future'.⁸² Sounding almost like Ernst Jünger, Oakeshott invests his hopes in the young generation of his time (to which of course he himself belonged): 'Conscience has made cowards of some generations, history and tradition of others, but a generation which would be religious must be courageous enough to achieve a life that is really contemporary'.⁸³

This is how Oakeshott came very close to an extreme form of quasi-Nietzschean aestheticism and nihilism. Yet he never crossed the line which separated him from those trends. Having freed himself from the piety of his younger years, he did not go to the other extreme. Moreover, his religious belief seems to have been the factor which kept him from adopting an extreme nihilistic anti-modernist position. We have already seen how Oakeshott's adherence to Absolute Idealism can be partly understood in the context of his attachment to religion. Later, when he developed his mature philosophy and abandoned Absolute Idealism, religion gradually receded from his thought.⁸⁴ Perhaps he no longer needed it, especially as the tension between religion and the spirit of modernity grew more apparent. However, in the late 1920s religion still played a prominent role in his writings, although in a transformed way. It did not allow that the loss of his belief in unity would be replaced with despair or illusive activism. And Oakeshott kept some form of religious belief until, in the end, he found a positive answer of his own to the problem of modernity.

Another restraining factor was Oakeshott's philosophical disposition, which was so strong that he would never be able to suppress it. The 'life philosophy' movement played a liberating role in opening him towards an understanding of the limitations of his combination of ancient philosophy and British Idealism. Yet it did not lead him to reject

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸⁰ See Gerald Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787-1802* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁸¹ 'Religion and the World', p. 32.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸⁴ For other interpretations of Oakeshott's view of religion, see Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 251-82; Glenn Worthington, 'Michael Oakeshott and the City of God', *Political Theory* 28(3), 2000, pp. 377-98.

intellectual values in general. The initial version of his final response to the loss of both his religious belief in divinity and his philosophical attachment to totality appeared in *Experience and Its Modes*, and was to be refined in his later writings. This response was not some version of extreme subjectivism, but rather reconciliation with modernity by perceiving it as radical plurality. Although Oakeshott reiterated his view of religion as 'practical experience in its fullest' and 'the conduct of life',⁸⁵ he reduced practical experience itself to being one abstract mode of experience among others. He also rejected the claims of intuition as being able to constitute immediate experience,⁸⁶ and in a review published the same year he seemed to be critical of Lev Shestov's attempt to ground philosophy on irrationalist foundations.⁸⁷

He confronted the state of intellectual fragmentation and overcame the limitations of philosophy not with a rejection of reasoning and a praise of 'life', but with an attempt to solidify the presuppositions of the fragmented ways of understanding reality. His theory of modes thereby provided standards for channelling the mind's activities even in the face of a shattered unity. Modernity then came to be regarded as characterised by the coexistence of mutually irrelevant modes of experience. This became Oakeshott's final philosophical position, and in its major characteristics it was akin to the ideas of neo-Kantians, most of whom were staunch critics of 'life philosophy'. It entailed the rejection of that combination of Absolute Idealism, life philosophy and religious modernism that we find in his writings of the late '20s.

His affair with Germany also came to an abrupt end. Having learned from German thinkers much about the crisis of modernity, he refused to be seduced by the radicalism of the solutions proposed by many of them. The enjoyment of modernity, not its rejection, was at the heart of his philosophy. And when in 1943 he composed an essay about a future peace settlement with Germany, its extremely anti-German sentiments could be seen not only as a demonstration of wartime patriotism, but also as an expression of the feeling of someone whose love had been cruelly betrayed.⁸⁸ In a lengthy and extremely hostile discussion of the German national character, Oakeshott described one of its main traits as an exaggerated form of 'self-consciousness' as well as lack of irony. But was not that charge also an exercise in self-criticism, an admission of once having gone astray after something potentially dangerous? If one looks at Oakeshott's writings of the '20s one finds in them a great deal of pathos, often descending to religious narcissism, and a complete lack of irony. He never again repeats this mistake of being so earnest in his passions. From then onwards, all his writings bear the unmistakable imprint of deliberate ironic detachment.

⁸⁵ Micheal Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: University Press, 1933). p. 292.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-25.

⁸⁷ Michael Oakeshott, Review of L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, in *Scrutiny* 2(1), 1933, pp. 101-104.

⁸⁸ Michael Oakeshott, 'On Peace with Germany', in *What Is History? And Other Essays*, pp. 133-160.

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