

EFRAIM PODOKSIK

Introduction

A few years ago a commentator referred to Michael Oakeshott as ‘the greatest English philosopher of the twentieth century’.¹ This rather unremarkable suggestion provoked a small storm among the readers, including even some Oakeshottians. The idea that someone who was often regarded as a philosophical outsider could be more profound and interesting than his peers apparently offended, or at least peevd, many people. Their reaction showed that even after the tremendous surge in interest in Oakeshott’s thought over the past decade, it is still a ‘niche’ interest.

One of the purposes of the current volume is to make it less so. This is not a book written exclusively by and for Oakeshottians. Rather, it is the enterprise of a diverse collection of scholars who wish to understand the broad meaning and impact of Oakeshott’s philosophy and share their understanding with others. Not all contributors will subscribe to my conviction regarding the exceptional greatness of Oakeshott’s philosophy (though all, I believe, would agree that it offers something of value to the modern mind); yet as the editor I feel obliged to confess that this is my view and to offer a few general accompanying remarks.

In philosophy, as in art, an opinion about greatness cannot be proven. The recognition of the value of a philosophy is in the final account always a matter of inner conviction, of immediate and sincere acknowledgement of the quality of thought displayed. Therefore, no text about Oakeshott (or any other philosopher) can ever offer an irrefutable demonstration of his alleged value. Commentary can never offer more than assistance in interpreting the philosopher’s works. Only by reading Oakeshott himself can the reader make up his or her own mind regarding the value of his

thought. Yet I believe that most of those who will take the advice to read him will not be disappointed. The growing popularity of Oakeshott's ideas is not, in my opinion, a matter of fashion. It is a sign of something inherent in his thought, of its inner vitality.

Oakeshott thought and wrote in a manner unusual among his contemporaries. This was a contingent historical circumstance, which prevented the significance of his ideas from being immediately recognized. It is due to this contingency that during his life he was often considered an 'unserious' thinker.² Historical circumstances made his thought appear 'untimely'. Yet circumstances can never abolish what is essential in every philosophy worthy of its name: drive, passion, a vital force that (to paraphrase Oakeshott himself) connects the personality of a philosopher with eternity. Whenever this vitality exists, the philosophy will in the end find its readers. And, indeed, this is what has been happening to Oakeshott's philosophy in recent years.

Not all philosophical enterprises in the history of European thought have suffered from such initial indifference. Many great philosophies have swept the intellectual life of their times apparently without difficulty. But it is wrong to assume that power and clarity of mind always enjoy an easy path to glory. In this respect, Oakeshott's case can be compared to those of Aristotle, Hobbes or Schopenhauer.³ Hardly anyone who immersed himself in these three philosophers can deny their power of mind. Yet there were times when Aristotle's works fell into obscurity; Hobbes was always known and respected, but only in the twentieth century was his place in the major political philosophical canon ensured; Schopenhauer's ideas were notoriously ignored at the time of their publication, and even now his philosophy is often underestimated.

Like Oakeshott, all three were great stylists (though Aristotle's brilliance is less noticeable at first glance due to the fact that most of his extant writings seem to be fragments or notes). The sceptical observer often rightly mistrusts a philosopher who is also a rhetorician. Yet in these cases the style does not obscure the meaning; on the contrary, it is the effect of the clarity of the message. In true philosophy what is said and how it is said are one and the same thing.

Those who met Oakeshott often noted his modesty, his nonchalant attitude towards worldly recognition. But I would not necessarily

interpret this indifference as modesty. Rather, its true spring appears to be a profound confidence in the vital powers of his own mind, combined with the awareness that these are undeserved. The ability to philosophize is often experienced as something not achieved, but rather bestowed. Oakeshott regarded philosophical accomplishment as entirely different from typical petty bourgeois personal achievement, from 'success' through hard work. For him, it is a result of the mind's own drive, the force of which makes the whole personality unable to resist it.

There was an element of daring in Oakeshott's philosophical modesty, which distinguished it from the timid modesty of the leading currents in British philosophy of the twentieth century, such as logical realism and analytical philosophy. This is what set his philosophy apart from the mainstream, but what also made it potentially greater. Whether this intellectual adventure paid off, whether Oakeshott achieved philosophical greatness, must remain a matter of personal judgement. I myself believe he did; others may disagree. But what cannot be denied is the unusual attraction of the challenge presented by Oakeshott's philosophy: the challenge of considering what it means to philosophize (in his own phrase) 'without reservation' in a philosophically timid and confused age.

The Companion is a cooperative enterprise. It brings together Oakeshott scholars and experts in other branches of study relevant to the subject; committed Oakeshottians and those who observe his ideas from a certain distance. Some articles are pieces of commentary; others conduct a dialogue, friendly or critical, with Oakeshott's ideas. Some deal with the texts themselves; others embark on contextual research.

Despite this variety of approaches, however, or perhaps informed by it, the book is designed as a coherent volume. It has a plan and a direction, and its chapters can be read in sequence. There are unavoidable overlaps between the chapters, yet on the whole each, taken individually, deals with its own specific question, whereas all the chapters taken together provide (one hopes) a more or less comprehensive outlook on the main aspects of Oakeshott's thought.

The volume is divided into three parts. It begins with an overview of Oakeshott's general philosophy. In the first chapter James Alexander presents his interpretation of Oakeshott's vision of philosophy and offers a general classification of worlds of experience

at different stages of Oakeshott's intellectual development. The final (fifth) chapter in this part, written by Kevin Williams, also deals with the general notion of worlds of experience, but does so from the standpoint of Oakeshott's philosophy of education. For Oakeshott envisioned various worlds as coexisting in the condition of 'conversation' and emphasized the role of proper education in maintaining this conversation. Chapters 2 to 4 analyse three of these worlds: Luke O'Sullivan outlines Oakeshott's philosophy of history, arguing that his 'real achievement ... was to establish history as an autonomous mode of understanding'. Byron Kaldis focuses on the unjustly neglected topic of science. He asserts that Oakeshott's philosophy of science can be understood as a form of 'dialectical constructivism', and compares it to views of science in other philosophical currents, such as Neo-Kantianism. Elizabeth Corey writes on the role of aesthetics in Oakeshott. She describes possible and actual criticisms directed against his view of aesthetics, and deals with the question of how Oakeshott's aesthetics relates to his philosophies of religion and practice.

The second part of the book discusses aspects of Oakeshott's theories of human conduct, society and politics. Steven Smith opens this part (Chapter 6) with an analysis of Oakeshott's notions of practice and practical experience. He also touches on the subject of politics, arguing that, in the light of Oakeshott's philosophy of practice, his politics appears 'not so much that of a Burkean conservative looking to the past than of a Cold War liberal hoping to disenthral his readers of the charms of perfectionism'. In the seventh chapter Andrew Gamble offers a somewhat different perspective. He analyses Oakeshott's notion of ideology in the context of what appears to be his most explicitly political period, marked by a considerable number of polemical essays and book reviews: the late 1940s and 1950s. In these writings, Gamble argues, Oakeshott clearly positions himself within the tradition of conservative thought. Terry Nardin, in turn, focuses on Oakeshott's relatively neglected essays from the late 1950s and 1960s (Chapter 8). These writings already contained the conceptual seeds that he later developed in *On Human Conduct*. At the same time, the essays are valuable in themselves, as it is in them that Oakeshott provides the most detailed account of his approach to political rhetoric. *On Human Conduct* itself is analysed in Chapter 9 by Paige Digeser and

Richard Flathman. The authors describe the theoretical framework of Oakeshott's major treatise on social thought, putting special emphasis on the notions of freedom, individuality, civil association and law. Finally, in Chapter 10 William Galston presents a general overview of Oakeshott's political theory. He addresses it from the standpoint of its contemporary significance and offers a number of criticisms regarding what he sees as its inadequacies.

The third and final part of the volume, unlike the first two, which deal mainly with Oakeshott's ideas themselves, attempts to place his ideas in their context (or contexts) so as to enrich our understanding of them and to examine parallels between Oakeshott and other thinkers. One way to understand Oakeshott is to locate him within the philosophical tradition of British Idealism. This is the subject of David Boucher's chapter (Chapter 11), which examines Oakeshott's debt to the British Idealists of previous generations. Boucher also sheds light on the debate between 'Absolutists' and 'Personalists' within the big family of British Idealism, arguing that Oakeshott took the side of Absolute Idealism. Another important context is that of German Idealism, which left an indelible mark on Oakeshott's thinking. This is the subject of Chapter 12, where I argue that Oakeshott's ideas are fully intelligible only in the context of German thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I focus especially on the previously unexplored theme of Oakeshott's debt to Schopenhauer. The next chapter (Chapter 13), by Ian Tregenza, deals with Oakeshott as an interpreter of Hobbes. This subject can be seen as implying two contextual elements: first, Oakeshott's debt to Hobbes's philosophy; and second, Hobbes scholarship in the mid twentieth century. Tregenza examines Oakeshott's contribution to this scholarship and compares his interpretation of Hobbes with those of Strauss, Warrender and Brown. Finally, in Chapter 14 Dana Villa juxtaposes Oakeshott's critique of Rationalism with that of famous Cold War liberals such as Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin. Villa argues that Oakeshott's understanding and critique of Rationalism differed in many important respects from those of Arendt and Berlin, and he finds their approaches more adequate than Oakeshott's in grappling with the demons of the twentieth-century past.

The volume, of course, cannot find room for a detailed exposition of all Oakeshott's writings or every topic in his philosophy. Yet one

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76467-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott
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can hope that this cooperative work will become a useful guide for those who would like to acquaint themselves with the central themes of his philosophy.

NOTES

- 1 J. Alexander, 'Smooth Sailing on Endless Hostile Sea', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 8 August 2005, 27.
- 2 A. Sullivan, 'Taken Unseriously', *New Republic*, 204 (6 May 1991), 42.
- 3 His fascination with the first two is well known, whereas the Schopenhauerian moment in his philosophy is addressed in this volume.

Cambridge University Press

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PART I

Oakeshott's philosophy

Cambridge University Press

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JAMES ALEXANDER

1 Oakeshott as philosopher

All understandings are conditional.¹

INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy now means more or less anything done by philosophers. But the history of philosophy suggests that there are four points of the philosophical compass, which I would like to call wonder, faith, doubt and scepticism. That is to say, any philosopher is likely to have an attitude that involves one or more of these views:

1. that there is a world and no words to explain it, so that words and world are part of one undifferentiated reality – and our response is wonder,
2. that there is a world, and one word to explain it, which is not itself of this world, and so explains it on authority – and our response is faith,
3. that there is a world, and many words which appear to explain it, of which we, by some method or other, must examine to establish the certainty we suppose is there – and our response is doubt,
4. that there is a world, or worlds, and many words which appear to explain it, or them, none of which have any greater authority or reason or status than any other, so that we are left with uncertainty – and so our response is scepticism.

All of these views were there at the beginning and will be there at the end. The classical philosophers established philosophies with all these orientations. But for the last five centuries or so

philosophers have tended to ignore wonder, dismiss faith and rebut scepticism. Philosophy, in modernity, is doubt and nothing but doubt. There are modern philosophers who have not agreed: but they are usually errant figures – Heidegger, Jaspers and Arendt, say, or Barth, Brunner and Balthasar, or Chesterton, Weil and MacIntyre, or Nietzsche, Foucault and Rorty. Ever since Descartes, philosophers have been philosophers of doubt. Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Reid, Kant, Mill, Russell, Wittgenstein, Popper, and so on, all attempted to maintain the expectation that certainty of some sort could be established without collapsing into speechlessness (wonder), without falling back on religion (faith) and without admitting that any claim has as much truth as any other (scepticism). Most academic philosophers, especially in the twentieth century, have been philosophers of doubt. But Oakeshott was not.

Oakeshott was a philosopher of scepticism and faith. As we shall see, the scepticism was an axe that cut at the faith, until, by the end of his life, faith was cut down to the root.² So he was, above all, a sceptic. And this meant that he had no patience at all for epistemological questions, which come down to the question of whether we can know anything. (No philosopher of wonder, faith or scepticism would consider this an important question: the important question is what we know or do not know and what consequences this has for us.) After Descartes, philosophers supposed that certainty – that which could not be doubted – could only be found in a priori understanding or a posteriori experience. But when Berkeley and Hume doubted that our knowledge of the world a posteriori was certain, philosophy was left with what seemed a formidable difficulty. One way of avoiding it was to suggest, with Berkeley, that the existence of the world depends on God, but this was a capitulation to faith. Another way of avoiding it was to suggest, with Hume, that we could, despite scepticism, depend on probabilities and habits. Yet another way was to suggest, with Kant, that some third alternative to analytic a priori and synthetic a posteriori knowledge might give us certainty. Most philosophers since – including Russell and Popper – have hesitated between variants of Hume's and Kant's suggestions. But there was another possibility, which was that of Hegel: and this was to say, as Oakeshott said, that 'a priori and a posteriori are