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# Michael Oakeshott, 1901–1990

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**Abstract:** Michael Oakeshott, one of the most important political thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century, has been understood to be a skeptical conservative, a romantic, a liberal individualist, an historian of political thought, a philosopher, a charismatic teacher. Each of these characterizations conveys something to be found in his life and work. This essay offers an intellectual portrait of his life's work from early to late through consideration of his major works from *Experience and its Modes* (1933) to *Rationalism in Politics* (1962; 1991), to the culmination in *On Human Conduct* (1975). His understanding of political philosophy is examined. The usefulness of the aforementioned characterizations is assessed.

Michael Oakeshott was born on December 11, 1901 in Kent, England and died on December 19, 1990, at his cottage in the village of Acton on the Dorset coast. He distinguished himself as an undergraduate at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, returning there as a fellow of the college and lecturer in history. From the 1920s he remained at Cambridge, except for service in the British army in World War II, until the late 1940s. Thereafter he spent a brief period in Oxford before appointment as professor of political science at The London School of Economics and Political Science in 1951. There he taught in and convened the Government Department, introducing the Master of Science degree in the History of Political Thought. This one-year degree program attracted students from many parts of the world, especially Canada and the United States. The program provided an opportunity for students to do further study in political thought, often to give them time to decide whether to pursue an academic career. A number of my students from Colorado College took this program, and have, in fact, pursued academic careers, although a number also went on to excellent careers in other directions. They remember fondly their encounters with him.

Though officially retiring in 1968, he participated in the fall term of the program, presenting papers in the general seminar of the History of Political Thought program until 1980. Oakeshott was an extraordinary teacher and lecturer. He enjoyed exchanges with students that faculty half his age could not match. In his old age he never forgot what it was to be young. He was charmed by the exuberance of undergraduates as they were charmed by him. The period from the 1950s to the 1980s was also a fertile period for the study of political theory in the Government Department at LSE. Oakeshott had attracted an illustrious group of scholars and teachers: John Charvet, Maurice Cranston, Elie Kedourie, Wolfgang Von Leyden, Kenneth Minogue, Robert Orr, and others.



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Trained in modern history and an admirer of such greats as Frederick Maitland, Oakeshott was devoted to the study of political thought. In his Cambridge lectures in the 1930s, he examined the history of political thought. Two eminent scholars, the distinguished medievalist Brian Tierney and the great Locke scholar, Peter Laslett, have related to me their vivid recollections of his lectures even after fifty or more years. In the 1930s, Oakeshott lectured on Plato and Hobbes in the course of developing his own approach to the subject. His notebooks, which go back to the early 1920s, show that he studied the works of Plato and Aristotle with care. He thought of himself as a philosopher more than as an historian, although sometimes he said he was neither. He assessed thinkers in respect of the degree to which they escaped preoccupation with merely practical questions. He was deeply interested in the study of politics but decidedly not attracted to political activism. As we can see in his celebrated introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan*,[1] he singled out Plato, Hobbes, and Hegel as exemplary thinkers. The 1946 statement builds on arguments he had made in his Cambridge lectures. He speaks of three great moments: Plato exemplifies the tradition of "reason and nature"; Hobbes, that of "will and artifice"; and Hegel, that of the "rational will." It might be expected that Oakeshott would eventually have written a history of political thought using this as a framework, but he never did. If he changed his mind about how best to approach the task, we shall never know. The published record of his actual lectures on the history of political thought that he gave regularly at LSE does not conform to this structure. But what we do see is that Oakeshott studied the highest expressions of political philosophy. He said in his 1946 introduction that such thinkers as Plato, Hobbes, and Hegel examined politics as the intersection of time and eternity—they were interested in understanding the character of politics and the human condition as such even when addressing themselves to the pressing contingencies of their time and place.

In essays he wrote on the nature of philosophy and political philosophy in the 1930s and 1940s, he insisted on the open-endedness of thought.[2] He referred to philosophy as "radically subversive" questioning that shuns ideology and political advocacy. He did not mean by "subversive" attempting to revolutionize regimes or public policy. He meant rather that the aspiration of the philosopher is to grasp experience as a whole without an ulterior motive other than to understand better what one already understands in part. For such a person political allegiances will be weak. Philosophy is not

[1]Introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott. Blackwell's Political Texts Edition, 1946. I refer to this version because when Oakeshott published a collection of his Hobbes essays in 1975, *Hobbes on Civil Association*, he revised the original introduction substantially. Comparison of the two versions is instructive for those who wish to follow Oakeshott's thinking on Hobbes.

[2]*Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. with introduction by Timothy Fuller, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

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the carrying on of politics by other means. The philosopher may be deeply interested in what is to be learned by examining political life, but ultimately his inquiry carries him beyond politics in the realization that interminable incoherencies unavoidably arise in pursuing politics. If the philosopher's vocation is to pursue wisdom—or as he put it—to understand better what one already understands in part—then one's allegiance must accept the implication of that pursuit.

This is clear in his first major book, *Experience and its Modes*.[3] This remarkable work, which remains in print to this day, established him as an important and original philosophic voice. The work was praised in the highest terms by such established thinkers of the time as R.G. Collingwood. In the work Oakeshott acknowledges the influence of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. He did not mention, what his notebooks show, that he had read deeply in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Spinoza, among others. *Experience and its Modes* is ostensibly a work in the tradition of British Hegelianism, but anyone who reads it will see that it is the work of a most creative mind which has absorbed and digested much, making it his own, and offering thoughts which are distinctive to the author.

The gist of his argument is this: The distinction between "the world" and our "experience of the world" is untenable. The world and our experience of it are interrelated so tightly that all efforts to treat them as separable fail. The world and our interpretation of the world are the single world of our experience. The world is a whole and is a world of thought. We have no access to anything which is not in our thought, no access to anything that cannot be thought. We invent—often over a long period of time—different modes for getting an angle to make sense out of experience. We try to comprehend experience as a whole through varying and partial interpretations that fasten on some feature or features of experience as if they were sufficient to explain the whole. In 1933 Oakeshott thought that the most prominent modes of experience were "science," "history," and "practice." He admitted that there could be many modes, that these were not exhaustive. But he thought they were the most prominent. Science makes sense of the world by interpreting all experience in terms of stable, quantitative relationships that are fully transparent (a world understood *sub specie quantitatis*); History makes sense of the world by treating all experience as past experience (a world understood *sub specie praeterito*); Practice—which is not limited to politics since it includes religion—understands the world as the tension between "what is" and "what ought to be" or *sub specie voluntatis*, a world defined by will and desire.

Each of these modes attempts to make sense out of experience as a whole from the point of view of its own assumptions about what is central to

[3]*Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

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experience. However, each achieves coherence to its own satisfaction only by excluding elements of experience, inclusion of which would confront it with difficult, ultimately intolerable, contradictions. For this reason the philosopher's investigation does not correct a mode's deficiencies of abstraction by amalgamation with other modes since this will only add to the insoluble contradictions. The philosopher, whose aspiration is towards experience as a whole, eventually will abandon reliance on any of these modes to achieve philosophic satisfaction; he will discern in every mode he encounters characteristic ways of abstraction from the whole. Abstraction is explaining the whole of experience through the partiality of a particular mode. It is not the philosopher's task to improve a mode, but rather the philosopher must depart from these abstractions in quest of the whole unmodified.

Moreover, the use of one mode to explain the others creates categorical irrelevancies. History may offer a history of science but this is not an alternative to scientific investigation. Practical life can try to draw lessons from history but this involves using past events to confirm perspectives or positions we already hold, wherein we invoke historical examples to justify, or to demythologize, a current political ambition. This practical past is not the historian's past. Historians can describe political decisions in the context of the complex of conditions in which they were made, but politicians have to make decisions here and now, pursuing the intimations of their situation, often forgetting the inconvenient features of past experience. The complexity of the past studied for its own sake constrains or can even paralyze practical judgment. Nor can science and politics be integrated. There is much talk about the "politics of science" or the politics of historical research as we also talk of the "science of politics."

It is out of this thinking that Oakeshott eventually arrived at his notion of the "conversation of mankind," which he worked out in the 1950s and celebrated in a small book, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*.[4] His point is that if the various modes of experience cannot finally subdue or absorb each other—if there is no hierarchy of modes—their practitioners nevertheless might talk to each other, even occasionally stumbling onto the vocation of the philosopher to seek beyond these abstractions. Oakeshott thought that conversation was the most human thing, that which distinguished human beings most clearly from other creatures. Universities, he thought, were the "places of learning" where the conversation might be celebrated as an end in itself.

How does all this affect his understanding of political philosophy? According to Oakeshott, philosophy is the "radically subversive" questioning

[4]*The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1959). This was reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962). A new and expanded edition of *Rationalism in Politics*, ed. with introduction by Timothy Fuller, was published in 1991 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund).

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which he associated with the Platonic Socrates. Political philosophy is the philosophic investigation of politics. This means examining the character of political life without political attachments. The idea of political philosophy as the supplying of intellectual support for political positions or policies is, in Oakeshott's terms, to abandon the philosopher's task for the politician's task, or for ideology. The political philosopher is neither a would-be philosopher-king nor a policy scientist.

For Oakeshott, no mode of experience is, philosophically speaking, privileged over any other. This will seem odd to some since the practical life is so dominant and intrusive. One is tempted to think that practical life is the foundation from which all the other modes must spring. Oakeshott did not think this. He did not wish to confuse intrusiveness with priority. In ordinary terms this confusion seems reasonable but not to the philosophically minded Oakeshottian. Since there are numerous modes which try to explain our experience, the choice of a mode is a choice to understand in a certain way. Oakeshott thought there is no hierarchy of modes, and he did not think philosophy itself is a mode. Rather, philosophy is a quest critical of the "arrest in experience" that every mode instantiates. To say we ought to look at the world scientifically, or historically, or that we ought to take the view that everything is politics is, of course, an exhortation prompted by the recognition that one need not adopt a particular one or the other of these.

The philosopher in principle chooses none of these alternatives and thus, qua philosopher, he does not examine politics as if it were the key to experience as a whole, even if it is highly revealing of humanity when engaged to pursue "imagined and wished-for satisfactions," and to resolve the interminable tension between "what is" and "what ought to be." This, incidentally, suggests why Oakeshott was not an historicist. He has not infrequently been accused of this by some students of political philosophy and, alternatively, praised by those who wish to cite him as a postmodern. Insofar as historicism exemplifies the thought that the historical mode takes priority in explaining experience, Oakeshott cannot be an historicist. The Oakeshottian will show what assumptions the historical point of view must make (to see the whole of experience as past experience) and thus achieve liberation from the thought that history is the basis for everything else.

But there are still other considerations in clarifying what political philosophy is for Oakeshott since he was mindful of the politics of his time and place. In 1939 he produced *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, which comprised documents and commentary on liberalism, Catholicism, communism, fascism, national socialism. The latter three he called the "modern authoritarian doctrines."

> To the Liberal and the Catholic mind alike the notion that men can authoritatively plan and impose a way of life upon a society appears to be a piece of pretentious ignorance; it can be entertained only by men who have no

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> respect for human beings and are willing to make them the means to the realization of their own ambitions.[5]

After World War II, upon returning to academic life, Oakeshott edited the *Cambridge Journal* and, from 1947 to 1960, wrote a series of remarkable essays, most of which he collected together and published in 1962 under the title *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*.[6] The title essay, "Rationalism in Politics," together with such essays as "Rational Conduct," "Political Education," "The Political Economy of Freedom," and "On Being Conservative," constitute a powerful critique of ideological politics, of the attempt to model the social sciences on the physical sciences, and of the disregard of traditional wisdom and insight in the belief that a kind of Baconian/Cartesian methodology could free us from reliance on our traditions.

For Oakeshott, ideological politics asserts an independently premeditated (abstractly idealistic) program for guiding our decision-making towards a suppositious perfection or end state. Oakeshott, calling himself a "skeptic who would do better if only he knew how," famously commented that in politics we are set sail on a boundless and bottomless sea and the principal task of politics is to keep the ship afloat. By this Oakeshott did not mean that life has no meaning or there is reason to despair—some of his critics asserted this, one even calling him a "lonely nihilist." What Oakeshott saw was that meaning may be found elsewhere than in politics—more likely in religion, art, poetry or philosophy. Oakeshott was avowedly Augustinian in this respect. Ideological politics asserts that political action is the source of meaning rather than a means to provide the background conditions for us to seek our meaning in more promising ways.

Oakeshott was skeptical of the pretensions of politics, especially in their exaggerated modern forms. He sometimes spoke of politics as a second-rate activity, a "necessary evil." He was, nevertheless, guarded in how he spoke of transcendence even though he had a lifelong interest in religion. He looked for the poetic in the midst of the quotidian experience. Politics—attending to the arrangements of a set of people brought together by choice and chance—is an instrument in maintaining equilibrium but not something to put one's faith in. He was a skeptical conservative; he was not, to the regret of some American conservative critics, a "movement conservative." The latter for him is an oxymoron. To him to be conservative is to look for the possibilities of enjoyment in the present moment. He invokes Augustine, Pascal, Montaigne, Hobbes, and Hume. He was not an enthusiast for Burke or Russell Kirk, nor was he anything like a neoconservative as Irving Kristol liked to emphasize in criticizing him. In early essays from the 1920s, Oakeshott wrote explicitly about the religious character as living in the

[5]*Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).

[6]See note 4.

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present (collected in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*).[7] He later wrote explicitly about the tension between the "politics of skepticism" and the "politics of faith" (by which he meant political faith of the ideological/utopian sort) in his posthumously published *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, Yale 1996 (probably written 1950–1952).[8]

In the idealist philosophical tradition from which he began, Oakeshott dismissed dualistic versions of experience, and specifically the duality of worldliness and other-worldliness. He spoke rather of different motives of self-understanding in a single world of experience. To reject worldliness meant to him to reject the current confusions and preoccupations which distract one from the effort to penetrate the mystery of life without imagining that it can be explained away. To be religious meant to him to live, so far as possible, without anxiety for past actions or about future uncertainties. To be distracted by what has been or by what we imagine may come to pass is to lose the religious understanding of life, and also promotes susceptibility both to ideology and to using the powers of government to "pursue perfection as the crow flies." Oakeshott understood that the longing for an orderly world is likely, through political excess and concentrated power, to turn ideologies into recipes to produce graveyards. He had said in *Experience and its Modes* that the philosopher might have a heavenly home but is in no hurry to get there. This may be taken in two ways: On the one hand, there is no point in "hurrying" because there is no plan, program or map—no short cut—to speed one on the way; on the other hand, the enjoyment and careful exploration of the present possibilities are ruined if one is preoccupied with the sense that one ought always to be somewhere else than where one is. Oakeshott once told me of his great admiration for *Don Quixote*, a work which he thought anticipated both modern rationalism (the crusade to set the world right—whatever that might mean) and the critique of modern rationalism (when the Don abjures his crusade, deviating into sanity).

Among Oakeshott's favorite biblical stories is the Tower of Babel. He wrote two essays by this title. The first, written in the 1940s, appeared in *Rationalism in Politics*; the second appeared in *On History and Other Essays* (1983).[9] In both, Oakeshott shows that this tale is a permanent insight into the peculiar human proclivity to storm the heavenly kingdom and occupy it, that the disaster that follows is eventually forgotten in the renewed attempts to succeed where all before us have failed. Modern rationalism, and the preoccupation with technology that goes with it, are our versions of this primordial experience.

[7]See note 2.

[8]*The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. with introduction by Timothy Fuller (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[9]*On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). New edition with introduction by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999).

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But Oakeshott was, in fact, something more than a mere skeptic. His positive political theory appears in *On Human Conduct* (1975).[10] Oakeshott considered this his magnum opus, the book by which he might hope to have a permanent place in the history of political thought. In the portrait of him in Caius College, Cambridge, he sits at a table with a copy of *On Human Conduct* prominently displayed as the centerpiece of the painting. Oakeshott thought of himself as an essay writer, not a writer of books. Of course, he wrote books. But a major inspiration for him was Montaigne's apparently unsystematic essay style. Oakeshott's work that most resembles the conversational, essayistic character of Montaigne is the original edition of *Rationalism in Politics*, which is a collection of occasional essays written between 1947 and 1960, presented in chronological order with no introduction to explain the author's intent. It bespeaks a disposition of a certain kind, but not a systematic exposition. Oakeshott thought of this as a series of conversational gambits, disclosing his self-understanding—why he thought what he thought—and inviting responses. Its structure differs from *Experience and its Modes* and from *On Human Conduct*.

Nevertheless, *On Human Conduct* is presented as a set of three essays, and Oakeshott described it this way. Readers of the book will see that the three essays, in fact, constitute a tightly structured systematic effort to summarize Oakeshott's considered political philosophy. The first essay is "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct"; the second is "On the Civil Condition"; the third is "On the Character of a Modern European State." This structure corresponds to the structure of Hobbes's political philosophy, the political philosopher on whom Oakeshott published more than any other. Oakeshott's first essay explores what it means to be human; he goes on to discuss in the second how human beings of the sort he describes interact in the civil condition; he concludes with an historical essay on the achievement of the modern European state as the structure most suited to these human beings, who understand themselves as individuals, to come to terms with each other under modern conditions.

What is a human being? Oakeshott addresses this question most systematically in *On Human Conduct*, but he considered this question also in his essays on liberal education (most of which are collected in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, Yale 1989).[11] For Oakeshott, a human being is an agent engaged to learn to become something in terms of a self-understanding. We are, he said, "in ourselves what we are for ourselves." The presupposition of human conduct is that "conduct" is not "behavior" where behavior is understood as exhibitions and emissions determined by and emanating

[10]*On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

[11]*The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed with introduction by Timothy Fuller (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); new edition with foreword by Timothy Fuller, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001).

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from underlying processes in which human beings have no choice. We engage to understand ourselves and the world we inhabit, and we remain active in this endeavor from birth to death, responding to the world in terms of how we understand ourselves and the circumstances in which we must operate.

Like Hobbes, Oakeshott was a radical individualist. Every human being is an essay in self-understanding; every human being thinks, interprets and responds to the world. Freedom, Oakeshott thought, is "intelligent response." We are not autonomous, for we are constrained by the preexisting world into which we are inserted. We enter into a world of goings-on, which emerged and developed long before us and will likely go on long after us. We cannot live without this background inheritance—whether we like it or don't—because we have to learn everything, and we need to start someplace. On the other hand, what we acquire from this inheritance does not determine how we appropriate and respond to it. Every human action is "free, an intelligent response, in which we are neither autonomous nor predetermined." Oakeshott, of course, does not mean that every human action is sensible or successful, but every action for good or ill is the response of a being reasoning about a situation, pursuing imagined and wished-for outcomes, avoiding what is thought to be undesirable or dangerous. All human beings, no matter how bizarre their actions, are agents in this sense.

The civil condition is to be understood in terms of such human beings. Oakeshott replaces the familiar term "civil society" with the term "civil association." Oakeshott's Hobbes (and his Hume) qualifies his Hegel. He wishes to express the thought that individuals associate but do not compose a society that, for Oakeshott, is an abstraction which obscures the fact that individuals do not cease to be individuals even if they wish to escape from the ordeal of consciousness. The Latin root *societas* has connotations about which we must be clear. A human being is *homo inter homines*, a self among other selves, inescapably a for-itself. "Civil association" acknowledges ineluctable individuality, and points to the question of what formal structures may be appropriate to a set of human beings associating with each other in this way. Oakeshott does not, as does Hobbes, resort to a contractarian idea. He receives Hobbes in light of Hume's critique of the "original contract" and Hegel's critique of abstract rights.

In the third essay, on the origins of the modern European state, Oakeshott argues that political authority based on consent is a European achievement emerging from a long process of trial, error, and accommodation, a history representing the gradual transformation of the authority relationship from command and obedience to acknowledgment and consent. The theory of the social contract is a summary statement of what in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was believed Europeans had already achieved in the transition from the medieval to the modern world, including the identification of individuality, and involving a new concept of authority and of the

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state as the organizing principle in modern politics. If in antiquity the central object of investigation was the polis, the central object in modern times is the state. The theory of the social contract, which offers explanation of the modern European state, comes at the end of a long historical development which it does not initiate.

There is, however, a revolutionary implication in contract theory that lurks in the insistence that existing regimes must be continually re-formed to con-form to the shape some imagine they would have if they had originated in a pure contract in which all residual alternative forms of human relationship are also transformed. One need only think of John Rawls's work to see this. Contract theory is thus a sophisticated argument criticizing both the past and the present in terms of a model for an imagined and wished-for future. It is philosophizing to change, not only to explain or describe, the prevailing order. Like Hume, Oakeshott is a political skeptic about a world suffused by the ideological deformation of philosophy, and is, in this sense, a skeptical conservative. But his is not the usual kind of conservatism. It is not a prudential argument that it is better for us to be cautious, nor is it an argument that what is older is better than what is newer. There may have been a romantic streak in Oakeshott—there certainly was an attraction to the poetic—there is nothing romantic in his arguments. Oakeshott simply did not think the universal could replace the local, or the abstract the concrete. He thought this even though the idea of the universal dominates political discourse in our day.

Politics is important to us because it is intrusive and unavoidable, an intractable feature of human existence. It is interminable because it must try to make the temporal manageable. Yet politics is itself the very emblem of temporality and thus cannot extricate itself from temporality's endlessness. The conflation of what is with what ought to be forever eludes us. The primary focus of Oakeshott's criticism was not so much of specific beliefs, programs or actions, but more of what he thought to be a pervasive and mistaken modern understanding of the function of reason in practical life: to imagine perfection and to gather the power necessary to put it into practice. This to him contradicts the character of civil association.

A civil association is a set of people bound together by a recognized authority and rule of law. Oakeshott distinguished being "an authority" from being "in authority." Officeholders who are in authority govern not by claims to special knowledge or insight, but because they have been acknowledged to have a right to exercise the office of authority through which they establish law for all, and adjudicate disputes impartially. They have authority because they are recognized to have it.

In the modern state, the holder(s) of an office of authority are authorized by those whom they govern to make rules to which those associated within the bounds of a given territory are expected to subscribe. They are expected to subscribe because the laws emanate from those whom they have entrusted with the task to make them. Both the makers of law and the subscribers to

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the law can understand the basic purpose of law; reasons can be given for the particular laws that are made. This does not preclude argument about the merits of the laws, but such argument occurs within a structure acknowledging that they are authoritative.

Because authority is exercised in respect of individuals who are civilly associated, such rules as proceed from that authority are not intended to transform or override individuality, or to define for individuals who they are for themselves. A large proportion of their activities will consist in private, voluntary transactions supported by the rule of law which facilitates such transactions. In civil association there may well be more incessant arguments over the scope of the government's powers than over the question of how authority is established in the first place.

Nevertheless, there is an alternative image of the modern state that sees it as a joint enterprise to achieve a common goal within a community which transcends civil association, and in which the governors are understood to be the managers of a productive enterprise, and in which the member citizens are understood to be role players in a cooperative effort to achieve a joint final end: Not an association but a corporation. This might be called the administrative/regulatory bureaucratic state. Oakeshott thought that these alternatives, civil association and managerial enterprise, constituted a continuing dialectic in modern European—and North American—history, explaining a good deal about why modern politics carries on as it does. He thought that modern politics has long been constituted in a dialectic between those who are skeptical of the power of governments to reconstruct and perfect social life and those with faith in our power to do exactly that. In our time the rationalist voice of the politics of faith seems dominant. But he hoped that, even if modern rationalism is not in retreat, its pretensions, which will always be prey to disillusion, might be restrained by the continuing presence of the skeptical voice. In terms of his own understanding of political philosophy, he could not, qua political philosopher, simply prescribe one of the alternatives, but he could show reasons for thinking carefully. Philosophically speaking, he must remain skeptical even of his skepticism. There is no doubt, however, as to what direction his own inclinations tend. He said in "Political Education" (1951), his inaugural address at the University of London:

> Political philosophy cannot be expected to increase our ability to be successful in political activity. It will not help us to distinguish between good and bad political projects; it has no power to guide or to direct us in the enterprise of pursuing the intimations of our tradition. But the patient analysis of the general ideas which have come to be connected with political activity—ideas such as nature, artifice, reason, will, law, authority, obligation, [and so forth]—in so far as it succeeds in removing some of the crookedness from our thinking and leads to a more economical use of concepts, is an activity neither to be overrated nor despised. But it must be understood as an explanatory, not a practical, activity, and if we

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> pursue it, we may only hope to be less often cheated by ambiguous statement and irrelevant argument.[12]

This is a decidedly constrained role which many students of political philosophy will argue is too limiting. It may be useful to remember, however, that the modesty of his refusal to lionize political activity is reminiscent of the Socratic admonition that the beginning of wisdom lies in "not knowing" what everyone around one claims to know. It is also a means to avoid opposing one "rationalism" with another.

*On Human Conduct* (1975) not only summarizes his political philosophy but is also Oakeshott's philosophic valedictory in which he expresses the serenity of one who, inspired by Socrates and Montaigne, is learning how to die:

> Philosophic reflection is recognized here as the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands and in which the understanding sought (itself unavoidably conditional) is a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it. Its most appropriate expression is an essay where the character of the utterance (a traveller's tale) matches the character of the engagement, an intellectual adventure which has a course to follow but no destination. A philosophical essay leaves much to the reader, often saying too little for fear of saying too much; its attention is concentrated, but it does not stay to cross all the ts of the argument; its mood is cautious without being defensive; it is personal but never merely "subjective"; it does not dissemble the conditionality of the conclusions it throws up and although it may enlighten it does not instruct. It is, in short, a well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquility.

One of Oakeshott's favorite stories was of the Chinese wheelwright who could not, at seventy, turn over his craft to his son because his son could not get the hang of it. The wheelwright generalized from his son's failure to learn more than the abstract rules of the craft in remarking to his Duke, who was reading the works of the sages, that books are the "lees and scum of bygone men." "All that was worth handing on," the wheelwright said, "died with them; the rest they put into their books."[13] I suppose Oakeshott was also thinking of the Platonic Socrates who refused to write philosophy down. We recall, however, that Plato devised a method of writing it down without writing it down. I think Oakeshott's intent was along those lines: In the lees and scum there may linger something of the essence which is a blessing in disguise. In his preference for the essay, he locates himself in a line of British authors (not to mention Montaigne and Pascal) extending from Bacon to Hume to Macaulay to John Stuart Mill. His voice is his own,

[12]From the essay, "Political Education," in *Rationalism in Politics*. This was Oakeshott's inaugural address in 1951 as professor at the London School of Economics.

[13]Oakeshott's account of this story from Chuang Tzu is found in the title essay of *Rationalism in Politics*.

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distinguishing himself among the others as a most worthy conversational entrant in the great conversation of mankind in which they, and he, continue to speak to us.

Oakeshott's writings are extensive and much has been published in recent years. The following are fundamental expressions of his thought:

*Experience and Its Modes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933;
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited with an introduction by Michael Oakeshott, Blackwell's Political Texts, 1946;
*Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, New York: Basic Books, 1962; *Rationalism in Politics, New and Expanded Edition*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991;
*On Human Conduct*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975;
*On History and Other Essays*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975 (new edition with foreword by Timothy Fuller, Liberty Fund, 1999);
*Hobbes on Civil Association*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975 (new edition with foreword by Paul Franco, Liberty Fund, 2000);
*The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, edited by Timothy Fuller, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989 (new edition, Liberty Fund, 2001);
*Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, edited by Timothy Fuller, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993;
*Morality and Politics of Modern Europe, the Harvard Lectures*, edited by Shirley Letwin, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993;
*The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, edited with introduction by Timothy Fuller, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

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