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THE CHEERFUL DISCOURSES OF MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

By DAVID KETTLER

Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics, and Other Essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1962, 333 pp. \$6.00.

"In our cheerful discourses, better than in the formal reasoning of the schools, is true wisdom to be found."—David Hume, *The Epicurean*.

KARL Mannheim closed his essay on the "Utopian Mentality" by forecasting a time when man will relinquish utopias and thus "lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it." "The disappearance of utopia," he asserted, "brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing." For Western thinkers, the problem raised by Mannheim is no longer a hypothetical one. Faith in utopias is everywhere discredited as illusion—naïve or disingenuous—and the pursuit of utopia condemned as the road to terroristic despotism. But this disillusionment has brought with it a great variety of attempts to show that, contrary to the tradition represented by Mannheim, human meaning in man's affairs does not depend on the striving for human perfection. And many of these attempts have rediscovered the anti-Promethean elements in the classical and Christian traditions, reasserting the claims of a natural or divine order against aspirations of reason now condemned as criminally presumptuous. In all spheres of life, it is said, man must accept the discipline of an authoritative order. To abandon utopias is to repent of pride.

Although such arguments now enjoy a great vogue, they continue to be pursued by the challenge which, in one form or other, has troubled Western thinking since ancient times: each pattern of order which men pretend to derive from nature or God actually reflects man's irrational needs and desires or the custom established in some particular and provincial civilization; neither reason nor faith can discover a true and authoritative pattern of meaning in the human condition. No interpretation of our situation which fails to meet this challenge can be taken seriously. The dilemma created by our disillusionment cannot be met by the resurrection of old illusion.

This is why the work of Michael Oakeshott promises a great deal. He is aware of all these issues. In his essays he undertakes to present a vision

of human experience which denies the dependence of meaningful human activity on utopian pretensions without calling on the assistance of principles alleged to be superhuman or supertemporal. He identifies himself with intellectual traditions teaching the need for and possibility of accepting with cheerful greatness of mind man's limited capacities. His dominant mood a blend of Skeptic and Epicurean themes, he draws heavily on the work of Montaigne, Hobbes, and Hume and praises the writings of St. Augustine, Machiavelli, and Pascal. These are attractive names to conjure with in our present state of mind, and Oakeshott's elegance of expression enhances the charm of his work. But this attractiveness does not sustain the work; the promise is not fulfilled. Oakeshott's essays merit serious consideration because they reflect our predicaments; but his thought does not comprehend and cannot master them.

As motto for these comments I have used a passage from David Hume which directs us to the central motif in Oakeshott's essays. The metaphor of a "conversation" governs his interpretation of man's situation. In society, according to Oakeshott, men's diverse activities each manifest a distinctive idiom. To partake of an activity is to speak in that mode, as it presents itself to the individual at a particular time and in a particular place. The paradigm of the "conversation," then, applies to two separate sorts of processes: first, the interactions among participants in each of the distinguishable kinds of activities; and second, the exchanges among the "voices" which together make up civilization. "In a conversation," writes Oakeshott, "the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no 'truth' to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another. . . . Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering" (p. 198). "Acknowledgment and accommodations," not "assertion and denial," mark the relationships among the voices in a conversation (p. 304).

Oakeshott identifies five idioms: the practical (incorporating both the enterprises of gratifying desires and those of moral judgments), the scientific, the historical, the poetic, and the philosophical. Each provides an appropriate mode for that activity which constitutes a man's self; but none can claim for itself a value higher than that of any other; and all are ultimately a dream. There are no absolute criteria of rele-

vance for any of the conversations; its state at any given time defines the approximate limits within which an activity must move in order to enter in. Oakeshott insists that this is not a static model of human activity. Habit and tradition do indeed constitute the basic elements of the circumstances within which a participant must act to be coherent; but every situation of this sort offers *intimations* of a suitable divergence from the existing—either the recalling of a theme sounded earlier and now neglected, or perhaps a real innovation. The conversations, then, move; but they do not “progress” or “develop,” because such terms presuppose some purpose, goal, or end towards which the movement might be seen to tend. And there are, in Oakeshott’s view, no such external or terminal points.

The false belief that moral or political conduct ought to be governed by “rational” criteria, derived from some source other than the “intimation” given by the appropriate “conversation,” Oakeshott sees as the primary contributor to incoherence in contemporary thinking and acting. At best, he contends, such an error simply disguises the fact that the “rational” criteria presumably being invoked are nothing more than abstract formulations of standards generated by the concrete activities in question; at worst, however, such “rationalism” leads to a pursuit of illusions—a pursuit which is futile, because it cannot attain its stated goal, and which could be vicious, because it threatens to destroy the regular processes of civilization.

The rationalism which Oakeshott condemns is exemplified whenever men define practical situations as problems to be dealt with according to some objective calculus of efficiency, moral principle, or political ideology. It has become the dominant style today, he contends, because men undertake to deal with situations whose idiom they do not know. Yet the worst does not usually happen, because the concrete character of activities tends to override the illusory conceptions men have about them. The diverse conversations are more halting than they might be and the overall conversation is more boring than it has been (because the practical and scientific voices all but drown out some of the others), but civilized society is sustained. So Oakeshott’s talks about civilization are really cheerful, after all. Priding himself on a cool temperament, disdaining presumptuous illusions, he upholds urbanity and cultivation. We can enjoy our activities, he explains, if we do not overvalue them, if we do not aspire to the unattainable. We must be sensitive to the idiom and intimations of the conversations we enter, and courageously accept the fact that there is nothing more.

Oakeshott is particularly concerned to apply this approach to the in-

terpretation of politics. In this activity, he contends, fallacious rationalism is most widespread and most pernicious. He writes: "Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community" (p. 123). Like other activities, it must be understood as a conversation properly carried on by those whose education and temperament equip them to learn the idiom and heed the intimations appropriate to their own time. More specifically, he contrasts a "jump to glory style of politics," operating on the principle that "to govern is to turn a private dream into a public and compulsory manner of living" (p. 186), with a conservative understanding, according to which "The image of the ruler is the umpire whose business is to administer the rules of the game, or the chairman who governs the debate according to known rules but does not himself participate in it" (p. 187). He leaves little doubt that his own understanding of his situation follows the latter pattern. The "legislator," he adds, "is understood to occupy a judicial office" (p. 193) and it is his task to introduce a detached, even ironical, voice into the sometimes passionate conversation which is civilized society.

Oakeshott's essays reflect the peculiar difficulties which face any serious writer who attempts to devise a comprehensive world-view today. The Utopian humanist vision has gone; the objective principles of universal order are not credible; and the only recourse appears to be flight into the relative securities of some socially defined role. This basic phenomenon provides the theme for that whole contemporary literature which alternately condemns the donning of masks and spurs us on to the search for identity. What is explicit in Oakeshott and implicit in so many other writers is that these are not alternatives at all: playing a role masks nothing; it defines the identity being sought.

On this foundation, a humane man like Oakeshott constructs a gentle and urbane liberalism. He accepts his own role, while conceding the legitimacy of many others. Liberty is the right to be what one is and to act accordingly. Civilization is a condition in which the plurality of social roles is acknowledged and respected. Mischievous meddling arises from the vain search for ordering principles behind or beyond the ongoing civilizational reality, from the effort of the barefoot to raise themselves by their bootstraps. With elegance, wit, and self-awareness, Oakeshott has set forth the assumptions underlying contemporary pluralism and its conservative implications. For him this perspective derives from the role of the academic man, and his work tends to disarm an

academic critic because it reveals a very nice appreciation of the humanistic traditions which play so important and creditable a part in university life. Thus Oakeshott appears as a writer who speaks to our condition: he seems to respond to the intellectual problems which face us in a way which uniquely reflects our integrity as men of letters.

But these appearances deceive: Oakeshott's way is ultimately an evasion. First, it falsifies our political experience; and second, it loses contact with the ongoing conversation concerning the interpretation of these experiences. In the final analysis, it becomes clear that Oakeshott really does not know where and who we are.

Oakeshott himself has written, in his perceptive appreciation of Hobbes, that for the political philosopher, "Human life . . . appears generally . . . as a predicament. . . . Every masterpiece of political philosophy springs from a new vision of the predicament, each is the glimpse of a deliverance or the suggestion of a remedy."¹ Oakeshott's own political speculations, however, reveal a vision donnish in the derogatory sense, one which fails to comprehend our predicament. Politics in our time cannot be portrayed as a genteel conversation; in our experience the play of words is too frequently broken by the scream of anger, the moan of pain, or the silence of perplexity. Continuity and compromise certainly form part of our political experience; but so do abrupt change and radical decision. We may be disillusioned with utopias; but our political tasks require us to comprehend an environment charged with revolutionary expectations. However things may have been in some golden age, political function today imposes the responsibility for choices which shape and do not simply maintain the arrangements of society. What every revolutionary challenge makes clear is that "order" is always purposively structured: it is an order according to some implicit principles, intended or not. Defense of a given order thus involves defense of one set of principles against others; the homely justification derived from familiarity ceases to have any relevance when those who feel victimized by some given order deliberately reject it. Political activity is not judicial. Precisely the integrating principles of existing orders are everywhere called into question, and the coercive, destructive, creative effects of power are thrust upon our attention. To portray all this as some sort of dreadful aberration arising out of bad breeding is to banalize our predicament.

Oakeshott's approach would appear to have particular appeal to students of international politics. No other area of study elicits so intensely the considerations which we have seen to underlie the attractiveness

¹ "Introduction" to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford 1957), x-xi.

of Oakeshott's argument: disillusionment with Utopian ideals, skepticism about the universal claims of competing schemes of "natural law" and the like, and an urgent striving after some ordering principle able to prevent intellectual and actual chaos. And a conception of international politics as a conversation among participants attuned to a peculiar idiom and dedicated to the maintenance of the conversation itself corresponds closely to the view implicit in the diplomatic tradition. But precisely the materials of international politics most clearly reveal the inadequacy of Oakeshott's framework. In the past, the international conversation has from time to time "intimated" a recourse to violence, and war has been an accepted and indispensable part of the "idiom;" in the present, at key points, this mode of conversation is incompatible with survival. A new language is being imposed on the discussants, and no one knows how to speak it. Moreover, there are new participants, revolutionary nations, who jeer at the established decorum and jibingly expose the premises on which existing orderly procedures rest. They deliberately reject canons of good taste and propriety. Those canons cannot define and comprehend the situation; nor can the conversation be adjourned to another place or time. Oakeshott provides a useful corrective to provincialism and oversimplifications of one sort, but he cannot deal with the critical tasks of our time.

Oakeshott opposes his own understanding of politics to a simplistic rationalism which no one takes seriously. We need not now examine whether even utilitarianism was ever as naïve as all that; we do know that no serious political thinker since the middle of the nineteenth century has doubted that a complex tension marks the relationship between continuity and innovation, that the new is in some sense generated by the old. In an interesting note to his essay on "Political Education," Oakeshott acknowledges this fact with regard to John Stuart Mill; but the same applies to the intellectual traditions associated with such names as Karl Marx and John Dewey. Oakeshott's fight against "rationalism" is largely a fight against straw men. Despite his many invocations of stern symbols of intellectual and moral courage, he has sought refuge from confronting the tensions and decisions which plague political life. And in this he has systematically bypassed the work of most of those now thinking about politics.

In considering the writings of Oakeshott, then, we discover a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, he is clearly marked as a contemporary by his attempt to fill the gaps left by the collapse of utopianism and dogmatism with a philosophy based on a courageous assessment of our identities and a respect for integrity. On the other hand, the vision

opened from this perspective strikes us as antique and irrelevant, ignoring the key questions we face and our efforts to deal with them. There is a radical disparity between the form and the content of his thinking. The source of the difficulty lies, I believe, in Oakeshott's failure to understand the nature of the activity in which he is engaged. The effort to seek orientation to the world of practice, the attempt to find meaning in reality, cannot be assimilated simply to the traditional role of the academic scholar.

The interpretive enterprise of social and political theory has been carried on by intellectuals animated by moral responsibility, and it makes no sense apart from that impetus. Unquestionably, that spirit has often led to grave errors: worship of illusion instead of sober appraisal of reality, intoning glib or murky moralizing slogans instead of the painstaking search for a human perspective, delusions of omnipotence instead of accepting the intellectual's place as gadfly, critic, and conscience. But the alternative to responsibility remains complicity. In postulating a radical disjunction between theory and practice, Oakeshott has misinterpreted his own task and misjudged the very considerations which lead him to argue as he does—or to argue at all. Thus the writings of a man doubtlessly honest, humane, and sensitive too often strike false notes of affectation, complacency, and moral callousness—particularly when we attend his words against the background of the great events of our time: the attempts to stave off thermonuclear devastation and the terrible efforts of suffering multitudes to obtain a decent human existence. His conception of his own activity derives primarily from the Epicurean tradition; his discourses are set in philosophical groves. Oakeshott's work dramatically raises again the question which was debated in Roman antiquity and which the Scottish moral philosophers reopened for modern thought in their violent attacks on their dear friend David Hume: how is it possible to eliminate illusion without becoming a "traitor to the cause of mankind"?