

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S CRITIQUE OF MODERN POLITICAL SCIENCE

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I have been asked to comment on Oakeshott's critique of political science. In thinking about it I have come to the conclusion that Oakeshott was not terribly interested in offering a critique of political science as such, although he provided many of the elements that must enter into a critique of political science as it is today: We all know his critique of rationalism which can be translated into a critique of certain forms of policy science, especially those involving the belief that politics is about constructing permanent, trans-political solutions to problems of political life. We also know what he thought about the integrity of the university as a special place of study for its own sake, and how that directed his thinking about appropriate ways of studying politics as opposed to engaging in politics. And we know his effort to distinguish categorially between "conduct" and "behavior" in the first essay of *On Human Conduct*, which is perhaps the most sustained argument he gave us that would contradict those aspects of the modern social sciences which seek to explain human conduct in terms that deny human agency.

Moreover, we must consider what the term "political science" refers to. I shall interpret the question of this essay to mean, What sort of critique might be derived from Oakeshott's writings of the political science, and generally the social science, that came to dominance in American universities in the mid-twentieth century, in the era of the behavioral persuasion? But even then things are not effortlessly clear. Insofar as we are considering descriptive political science which accepts the distinction between scientific observation and practical evaluation, we may be dealing with a form of political science which, although not perhaps of great interest to Oakeshott, did not inevitably do violence to his idea of the explanatory study of politics in the university through historical and philosophical investigation; the latter is also critical and descriptive, disengaged from the advocacy that necessarily characterizes political participation. In addition, we cannot forget that, at the same time as the so-called behavioral revolution was underway, the revival of political philosophy was proceeding in the second half of the twentieth century. There were several different so-called revolutions going on at once.

Let us consider briefly the following statements by two major representatives of political science of the mid-20th century, David Truman and Robert Dahl: According to Truman, the term "behavioral sciences"

...is sometimes used as an equivalent for the social sciences...More narrowly, and perhaps more accurately, the phrase refers to those bodies of knowledge, in whatever academic department they may be found, that provide or aspire to provide '>verified principles' of human behaviour through the use of methods of inquiry similar to those of

the natural sciences. (from "The Impact on Political Science of the Revolution in the Behavioral Sciences" 1955)

According to Dahl,

the behavioral approach is an attempt to improve our understanding of politics by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of political life by means of methods, theories, and criteria of proof that are acceptable according to the canons, conventions, and assumptions of modern empirical science...the purpose is scientific. (From "The Behavioral Approach in Political Science: Epitaph for a Monument to a Successful Protest" 1961)

And Dahl explains, behavioralists share(d)

A mood of skepticism about the current intellectual attainments of political science, a mood of sympathy toward 'scientific' modes of investigation and analysis, a mood of optimism about the possibilities of improving the study of politics. (Ibid.)

This approach and mood was exemplified by the adoption of sample surveys, voting analysis and prediction, small group experiment, game theory and content analysis of communications. The study of political behavior opposed the traditional institutional descriptive approaches. Both Truman and Dahl, who accepted but were not swept away by the behavioral revolution, concluded that the "revolution" was more in the employment of technique than in the enlargement of insight, a judgment which makes sense today as well. They saw that especially at the level of large scale organizations and institutions these methods did not signally add to our understanding beyond what traditional intelligent appraisal had provided. Nevertheless, it was "pragmatism, factmindedness, confidence in science" that reigned (Dahl). What was meant by "improving" the study of politics remained ambiguous given that the improvement might mean becoming more "scientific" or it might mean becoming more relevant and influential in policy-making - or, often, it seemed to mean both of these at once with whatever contradictions the combination might entail.

The movement was "anti-Ivory Tower" and increasingly included direct interaction with and participation in government and national politics. What was sought was a "science of the political process" (Dahl quoting Truman) in an effort to surmount the "impressionistic." In all of this there was a strong emphasis on the scientific necessity to separate the "what is" from the "what ought to be" while, at the same time, there was also a growingly intense desire for what we now fashionably call "civic engagement" or bringing enlightenment to the ordinary citizens who still live(d) in a world of mere impressions. According to Dahl,

The behaviorally minded student of politics is prepared to *describe* values as empirical data; but qua "scientist" he seeks to avoid prescription or inquiry into the ground on which judgments of value can properly be made.

The task of evaluation might, Dahl thought, properly belong to the political philosopher,

But the problem of the political philosopher who wishes to engage in political evaluation in a sophisticated way is rendered ever more formidable by the products of the behavioral mood.

What Dahl was saying is that the more data aggregated to describe what is going on in politics, the more difficult it becomes to make judgments as to what ought to be done and the political philosopher, as Dahl understood the political philosopher, is caught between a "sterile medium free from contamination by brute facts" and the kaleidoscopic swirl of all that is going on at any given moment. Is the political philosopher engaged in politics in a peculiar way or is he doing something else? Ultimately, Oakeshott offered his own quite clear answer to this question when he asserted that the philosophical study of politics is not the continuation of politics by other means. In this respect, an Oakeshottian student of politics is not caught in the way Dahl describes because his aim is not to "unify theory and praxis" in the first place.

Yet it does not seem that Oakeshott's position need reject careful empirical description of political activity or deny the distinction between the "what is" and the "what ought to be" for the observer. After all, when he famously asserted that politics is the "pursuit of intimations" he was attempting a non-evaluative description of what is going on in politics. He wanted to express what politics must involve no matter what claims to the contrary may be made. The flaw in ideologies and in sciences of policy is that they constitute a misunderstanding of what the character of political activity actually is. Oakeshott did not need to engage in arguments over the preferred policies as a philosophical student of politics. His overt criticism of particular policies was directed principally towards identifying this misunderstanding and not towards offering his preferred alternatives. This reveals also the basis for the common critique of his skeptical conservatism by neo-conservatives.

In short, I do not think Oakeshott was offended by the prospect of more detailed and accurate descriptions of the realities of politics, and he clearly rejected the view of the political philosopher as a special kind of political activist who can produce sophisticated judgments of what ought to be done without being contaminated by the partisanship involved in prescription. Implicit in the formulations of Truman and of Dahl is, I believe, an admission of the need for a more profound rethinking of political science than they were to undertake but which, in his own way, I believe Oakeshott actually achieved - not by participating in the standard political science of his day, but by identifying the fundamental confusions that are at the heart of the enterprise of modern social science as a manifestation of modern rationalism.

The two most important contributions to a critique of the social sciences we get from Oakeshott are: 1) The identification of human beings as intelligent agents responding to their circumstances, who must be understood in terms of the reasons they have for what they do; 2) The explanation of what distinguishes a university as a place of learning from anything else, which leads to

designating what the university study of politics can be qua university study. There is much in modern political science that is not incompatible with what Oakeshott argued. The difficulty lies more with the weakness of philosophic understanding within modern political science. What follows is a brief outline of elements of Oakeshott's thinking on the basis of which a statement of the advantages and disadvantages of modern political science might be attempted.

II

Here I wish to explore what Oakeshott had to say about university education, with attention to the study of politics in the university, and also in connection with his remarks on the concept of "human nature." As we know, Oakeshott wrote a number of occasional essays both on school and university education and on learning and teaching. Much of what he said was occasioned by the dramatic changes that began to overtake education both in Britain and in North America after World War II. The changes, and the confusion they have wrought in thought about education, affected all that he wrote on these subjects.

Among the changes, was the growing prominence of an autonomous discipline of political science, or politics or government as it has been variously called. This carried with it a desire of the practitioners in the field to carve out a special identity for themselves, in part in emulation of the study of economics. Oakeshott pointed us to the fact that, when a disciplinary inquiry intrudes either newly, or more prominently than in the past, the issue of "appropriateness" arises. That is, What does it mean to study something in the way that things are studied in the university? By stating it this way, Oakeshott was insisting on the integrity of the university as a place whose character was to be determined by something other than current issues and controversies. Thus we must reflect on what is the animating spirit or idea of the university as a special sort of institution. What makes a university a university and not an adjunct of something else? Oakeshott's comments on the study of politics in a university are a good test of his philosophy of university education generally. In what follows, I intend also to tie these considerations to his remarks on the concept of a human nature; they illuminate each other. Let us begin with the study of politics.

Politics is to be studied in a manner appropriate for a university. If a university is to include the study of politics, it should be in the manner that studies in universities generally have. If that is to occur, we must have a clear idea of what distinguishes a university education from any other kind of education. We need to grasp the idea of a university in order to understand in turn what the university study of politics might be. Over the years, Oakeshott asked himself a number of questions: How does university education differ from school education, from vocational education, from professional training? Briefly, he answered as follows:

School Education is the acquisition of elements necessary for further learning before it can be clear to what purposes or ends they may be put. It is learning to say things before one has anything significant to say. Vocational education is acquiring one or a related set of skills to perform tasks of current interest and value to one's society. For example, to learn how to make

use of the technological fruit of science without necessarily engaging in scientific inquiry which may well be appropriate to university study. Professional training involves the acquisition of skills and techniques at an advanced level that may often presuppose university education but is separable from it and directed to different ends.

Oakeshott offered a variety of ways of thinking about the character of university education in "The Study of Politics in a University" in *Rationalism in Politics* (the following quotations refer to pages in the New, Expanded Edition (Liberty Fund, 1991):

He said, university education is 1) initiation into a civilization: the "emotions, beliefs, images, ideas, manners of thinking, languages skills, practices and manners of activity out of which [cultural artifacts] are generated" (187) University education is 2) "a conversation being carried on between a variety of human activities, each speaking with a voice, or in a language of its own...the relations between them are not those of assertion and denial but the conversational relationships of acknowledgment and accommodation." (187) University education is 3) where we learn "to recognize ourselves in the mirror of this civilization." (188) University education 4) provides, Socratically, for "teaching people how to be ignorant...the recognition of something absent." (192) University education 5) is education in languages rather than literatures, explanatory not prescriptive languages (193). University education 6) is where teachers are also learners, engaged to learn something other than what they teach.

These thoughts taken together offer us a tricky combination of engagement and disengagement: The activity of the university is that of "continuously recovering what has been lost, restoring what has been neglected, collecting together what has been dissipated, repairing what has been corrupted, reconsidering, reshaping, reorganizing, making more intelligible, reissuing and reinvesting. In principle, it works undistracted by practical concerns..." (194) It is a "manifold of different intellectual activities, a conversation between different modes of thinking..." (196) "What a university has to offer is not information but practice in thinking...some understanding of what it is to think historically, mathematically, scientifically, or philosophically." (197) This means learning what it is to explain something historically, mathematically, scientifically, or philosophically.

From this perspective Oakeshott sets forth, we can also see that it is inappropriate in the university to speak of education as explaining something politically. "Explaining politically" is not, in the university context, explaining at all. By its nature, to speak politically is to speak prescriptively and practically, and not explanatorily.

Thus, if we are to study politics in a university, we must find a way to do so that is distinguishable from the practice of politics. The university study of politics is inappropriately understood if it is taken to be learning how to succeed in politics, or to be developing abstract arguments in favor of political opinions held in the practical sphere of human activity. University study, in short, is not the carrying on of politics by other means, but something categorially different. It is not a vocational education, nor an exhortation, nor speech making.

"The language of politics is the language of desire and aversion, of preference and choice, of approval and disapproval, of praise and blame, of persuasion, injunction, accusation and threat. It is the language in which we make promises, ask for support, recommend belief and actions, devise and commend administrative expedients and organize the beliefs and opinions of others in such a manner that policy may be effectively and economically executed; in short, it is the language of everyday, practical life." (206)

Nevertheless, for Oakeshott, politics can be an object of study. The study of politics would examine the activity from a vantage point that is not that of its practitioners. And, for Oakeshott, the most promising ways to study politics are to study it philosophically and historically. The philosophical study of politics is not, then, the shoring up, or undermining, of political opinions. Rather, it involves the effort to identify the distinguishing characteristics of political activity. This is consistent with Oakeshott's understanding of philosophy: to identify the distinguishing features of an organized activity, the features without which the activity being examined would look different and be something else altogether. All human activities are mixed together in some degree. Every distinguishable mode of activity will have numerous adventitious features. The philosopher's task is to distinguish what is indispensable to identification of an activity from the extraneous features that are always present. A philosophical description of an activity will thus never be merely a description of all that is going on among those who engage in the activity. Rather, it will show what is presupposed necessarily and unavoidably in the activity for it to operate as it does. This is Oakeshott's version of the "What is..." question famously associated with the Socratic inquiry as portrayed in the Platonic dialogues.

We can see how Oakeshott approaches this in such remarks as when he says that much of what goes on in the name of the study of politics bespeaks the "insatiable curiosity of a concierge...A spurious academic focus for whatever political interest there might be about." (208) Others who have noticed this, and with whom Oakeshott could be expected to be in sympathy, have counseled us to return to the Great Books, suggesting perhaps that we might be saved by reading them. But Oakeshott offers a sober warning about the manner in which such reading often has been conducted: "as a mixture between the manner in which one might read an out-of-date textbook on naval architecture and the manner in which one might study a current election manifesto. The result was that we were alive only to the political quaintness (or enormity) of these books, and our attention was narrowed down to listening either for the political *faux pas* or for the echoes of political modernity." (208-9)

In short, Oakeshott counsels against reading the great books for ideological purposes. Somehow we must read them, as he would say, explanatorily, not prescriptively. We must acknowledge, of course, that the works of political philosophy often have in them a mixture of explanation and prescription. Human beings being what they are, it is rare to avoid this confusion of categories, to mix together the practical and the philosophical. But this consideration itself is one by which Oakeshott looks to measure the greatness of a work of

political philosophy: its greatness is proportional to the degree it maintains clarity regarding this distinction and seeks to honor it. He thought that only a few had made great achievements in this way: Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas on law, Hobbes and Spinoza, Hegel - these were exemplary for him. They are so because in encountering them, Oakeshott thought, we encounter offered explanations not of what politics should be but of what it must be, and we encounter, at the same time, efforts to think in a genuinely philosophical manner.

Also, with respect to the study of history, the aim is to study the past as the historian studies the past, not as the politician may choose to make use of the past for his present purposes in recommending or opposing alternative courses of action. In his essays on the study of history, from the famous chapter in *Experience and its Modes* to "The Activity of Being an Historian" to the essays in *On History*, Oakeshott spelled out a distinction between the practical use of the past for such things as the drawing of moral lessons, and the study of the past "for its own sake," a distinction which Hegel first worked out in the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Hegel also, of course, tied his reflections on philosophy to his reflections on history.

The philosopher is ever conscious of the fact that to act in the world of practice one must suspend criticism in respect of assumptions that underpin the action. Philosophy is not everything, practice is not everything; the two cannot be one thing. They are categorially distinct. One cannot serve the other without compromising its distinctive activity. This is not to say that philosophers cannot act. Nor is it to say that politicians cannot philosophize. But what is often missed is that they cannot do both at once. Needless to say, the austerity of Oakeshott's view of the matter is not widely acknowledged, and it remains controversial.

The historian's activity is to understand the past, so to speak, for its own sake, and to do so by confining himself to explaining what past actors thought they were doing in terms of their understanding of their circumstances and how to respond to them. Further, the historian will seek to say what can be supported by as complete as possible consideration of the surviving evidence of past actions as knowable to us in the present.

Of course, we know that many people approach philosophy and history as if they were special forms of practical life. Such has always been the case and such very likely will always be the case. Here we see part of what, for Oakeshott, makes the university a unique institution. For the university is a place set aside for examining the world in explanatory modes such as those employed by philosophers and historians. The university uniquely offers the opportunity for the disengagement which permits this to happen. It is significant because no other place is peculiarly set aside for this purpose although there are many other places where important forms of reflective activity occur. Actual universities are always mixtures of the prescriptive and the explanatory because they are congregations of human beings, not just of scholars qua scholars. But if we wish to specify what it is that the university offers uniquely, Oakeshott is proposing that it must be what he has described. In short, he seeks to elucidate the "idea" of a university as its guide and anchor amidst all the distractions and cross purposes of life, and in the face of the changes to university curricula of the past half century.

Importantly, Oakeshott is arguing that the study of politics is not a "science" as we commonly understand the word today and it is not "retrospective politics," or a vocation. As he puts it, "a philosopher is never concerned with a condition of things but only with a manner of explanation, and of recognizing that the only thing that matters in a philosophic argument is its coherence, its intelligibility, its power to illuminate and its fertility." (215)

And, he concludes, "our proper business is not with politics at all but with teaching, in connection with politics, how to manage the 'languages' of history and philosophy and how to distinguish them and their different sorts of utterance." (218)

Often, at this point, the question is raised whether we are not in such desperate straits that we must set aside these austere limits and set the crooked paths of our world straight. To this sort of comment Oakeshott used to respond by saying, first, there has never been a time when we were not in such straits and we should take care not to think that we uniquely can exempt ourselves from the considerations he is discussing; second, if there is a danger in thinking politics is everything, or that all important human activities must serve politics, then the distinctions he is making help to remind us that politics is necessary, but it is not everything; that there is every chance for disillusionment if one thinks that meaning must reside only in the sphere of political action. Politics must be attended to, but it also should be kept in its place. The continued existence of universities - more importantly, the continued presence of the idea of a university within those institutions we call universities - keeps alive this possibility, and thus what Oakeshott took to be the genius of our civilization.

III

I have purposely begun with Oakeshott's views on the study of politics in a university rather than with his thoughts on human nature, but I intend to turn to the latter now and to connect them with what he has to say about universities. What connects them is his idea that human beings must learn to be human, they must learn how to become something they can imagine becoming, and that this is a major aspect of what it means for us to claim that we are free beings.

After many years of discussing Oakeshott's thought both with his admirers and his critics, I have learned that one of the great stumbling blocks for many is his denial that there is something called "human nature" and, allied with this, his denial of a teleological view of human beings. The question of human nature and that of teleology are complex and not, I think, obvious.

For example, Oakeshott certainly does think there are features that distinguish human beings from any other kinds of being. They are, for instance, reflective, interpreting beings who respond to their environments according to what those environments mean to them. Indeed, he thinks they cannot do otherwise. Freedom, he thought, was intelligent response. And he thought that this faculty of intelligent response is true of every human being without exception. This does not mean that there are not more and less successful responses, wider and narrower

understandings of the circumstances eliciting response, better and worse judgments, and so on. But it does mean that there is a common denominator of being human. It means also that to be a human being is to be free because intelligent. One could dramatize it by saying we are condemned to the ordeal of freedom because we are conscious beings and thus must endlessly respond. We cannot escape being free. This is important in those aspects of Oakeshott's work where he defends the achievement of the modern European state as a civil order of individuals able to live with each other satisfactorily, without agreeing on everything, but yet abiding by the rule of law established in the acknowledgment of an authority entrusted with law-making power. In this respect, Oakeshott thought that modern European history was the story of how the ancient relations of command and obedience were gradually transformed into the relationship of authority and acknowledgment, a vision of an orderly existence which was possible without massive threats of force, and, moreover, a vision which was, at least to a significant degree, made real by the imaginative efforts of modern people to shape institutions appropriate to their aspiration.

But when we start speaking of human nature, he thought, we quickly get into making check lists of abstractions which in and of themselves are unlikely to give us much guidance in practice, although it is often thought that we might deduce important lessons from them. For Oakeshott, this is a mixing of the categories of explanation and prescription. At times, the invocation of a doctrine of human nature almost resembles an incantation as if to recite it is to ward off evils. Some forms of this idea of human nature are incompatible with the full recognition of the radically free character of human beings understood as intelligent respondents to their surroundings. Such beings, even if they adopt a doctrine of human nature, must still figure out what they are going to do here and now in specific circumstances with certain resources and not others. How they are to do this has to be learned. Adopting such doctrines cannot guarantee success. It seems to follow that rejecting them is not a guarantee of failure. In fact, Oakeshott tended to think that there is a certain mystery to the living of life which no doctrine, no theory, can explain away. And I believe that he thought he was not far from Aristotle in this if you consider 1) that Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, criticizes the idea that we can deduce from the Good what to do in practice and that 2) the study of moral conduct is not a substitute for the making of moral decisions; there is no formula for making moral decisions even if there are considerations that enter into making moral decisions that we would be wise to keep in mind. In this respect, I suppose Oakeshott thought that Aristotle was observing the distinction between explanation of the observable features of all moral action and trying to prescribe abstractly to people what they ought to do here and now in this case under these conditions. One can understand the difference between a human being trying to act in a morally responsible way and a judgment we might make as to what he actually does and what we think of it.

Oakeshott was not, in other words, targeting Aristotle or classical political science when he questioned the idea of a human nature or a teleology. I am not saying they would have agreed, but I am saying that they could have recognized what they were talking about. Oakeshott's real opponent was those modern reductionists who try to show that human conduct can be reduced to behavior which can be explained in terms of genetics or sociobiology. He did not think

Aristotle wanted to do this. But Oakeshott also wanted to trace out what one really has to accept if one acknowledges the intrinsic freedom of human beings.

Oakeshott said that a human being is "in himself what he is for himself." ("A Place of Learning" in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 1989, p.19) He meant that each of us, without exception, acts in accord with what we understand ourselves to be and with what we imagine to ourselves we might become. This is an undertaking which goes with being human, and from birth to death we cannot avoid it. We are never fixed or finished, although we might have the good fortune to reach a certain stability of self-understanding which allows us to navigate the sea of life on a more or less even keel. Moreover, if the modern era is the era in which we explore the farthest possible reaches of individual human expression - the era, as Hegel famously proclaimed, in which all are free - we also must learn how to live with the staggering diversity of human possibilities that has been unleashed. No two of us are identical and no single abstract model of what it means to have a fulfilling life will cover all cases. The fecundity of human goods cannot be contained in any single doctrine. The range of our experience outstrips every effort to organize and control it once and for all. The fundamental issue of modernity, from this perspective, is to learn what might be called the right use of our freedom. But that cannot be resolved by any single model for to insist on such a model is to deny the truth about what universal human freedom really represents. Oakeshott thought that this truth about us was always true but that only in recent history have we begun to appreciate the full impact of this truth.

A human being can certainly have ends, but those ends must be chosen and subscribed to, and continually interpreted throughout the time of our lives. Such ends cannot be understood to have been dictated or imposed from some other source than human self-understanding. It is in the choosing of ends that we order ourselves to a point without ceasing to be the free beings of intelligent response. Indeed, to want such an independent base is to want not to be free which is to want not to be human.

Thus, even if there is a final end for man - and I myself do not rule that out - for it to be meaningful to us we must continually interpret it for ourselves. What this may produce is sets of individuals associated in conversation which, as we have seen, is, for Oakeshott, perhaps the most distinctively human activity: What he calls the conversation of mankind.

The university as the place uniquely attached to conversation among voices of different modes of knowing the world is the place where the fullest possible recognition of humanity can occur, albeit the university cannot encompass the full range of human activity without losing its identity. It is also important for Oakeshott that we avoid the conclusion that practical action, the practical life, is the definitive life and that all other forms of knowing and acting are peculiar offshoots of the practical life. The university is not, for him as we saw, a place for continuing the practical life by other means; rather, it is the place where categorially different activities such as history, philosophy, science may flourish on their own terms as voices different in kind from the voice of politics. And there are other voices that may flourish in the university but may also arise

elsewhere such as the voice of the poet or of the musician or artist. For Oakeshott, the world is as much play as it is work.

For Oakeshott, the modern constitutional state with the rule of law, and the modern university when true to its idea, are the institutions that sustain a world of people who have learned to think of themselves as free and capable of self-regulation. It is a world both astonishing and disturbing, and many are prone to despair or apocalypse or utopian expectations. But there is in it also, perhaps, a profound revelation of what it is to be human. There are those who would rip it apart and burn it down, those who would unify what is intrinsically diverse, those who believe it has all been a terrible mistake. But for Oakeshott it is the way we live now and, so far as possible, if we respond to it conversationally, we will have a prospect of rational freedom - which is not the same as a life without mysteries - and the occasional experience of the grace of life. These considerations might constitute a start on a proper critique of modern political science.