

Michael Oakeshott



Early Political Writings
1925-1930

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1925–30

Edited by
Luke O'Sullivan



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Preface

The fifth volume in the *Selected Writings* series returns to the Oakeshott archive at the British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES). Unlike the third and fourth volumes, which anthologised Oakeshott's widely scattered previously published essays and reviews, it consists entirely of previously unpublished work. It is also the first volume to concentrate exclusively on the first decade of his early career.

Specifically, it makes widely available for the first time a Fellowship dissertation from 1925, as well as the first version of a series of lectures Oakeshott gave between 1928 and 1930. The 1925 ms has been circulating informally for some years, and is strikingly different in style and content to anything he wrote later on. Yet it is an important work, because it was his first attempt at a systematic presentation of his ideas, and was more explicit about his sources than anything else he ever wrote.

Moreover, when the 1925 ms is placed together with the lectures which represent the state of Oakeshott's thought in the later 1920s and early 1930s, they allow us to understand more clearly than ever before the development of his ideas in this crucial and still under-explored first phase of his intellectual career. The lectures in particular, as the introduction will make clear, form an important bridge towards *Experience and its Modes*.

As is now customary, I am very happy to thank Imprint Academic, publishers of the *Selected Writings*, for their support. This was the first volume of the *Selected Writings* to be prepared almost entirely at the Political Science Department of the National University of Singapore, and I would like to acknowledge the generous funding which made possible a visit to the British Library and the London School of Economics in June and July of 2010 in order to finish off the research. I would also like to record my gratitude to Professor Terry Nardin for his comments on a draft of the editorial introduction.

The greater part of the work of turning typescript and manuscript into electronic text fell once more upon my wife Olga, but as usual, responsibility for the errors the volume doubtless contains rests entirely with the editor.

Singapore, 2010

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Editorial Introduction

I: The Early Oakeshott and Political Philosophy

Michael Oakeshott (1901–90) made his reputation as a political philosopher, but for a long time students of his work assumed that he had little interest in politics before 1945. His major pre-war work, *Experience and its Modes* (1933), an examination of the nature of philosophy and its relation to other forms of thought, made almost no mention of the subject.¹ However, it has become increasingly clear that this initial judgment was misleading. A posthumous collection of early essays, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life* (1993), proved that political philosophy was a lifelong concern.² Nevertheless, the belief that Oakeshott was relatively uninterested in politics, at least in the 1920s, has persisted.³

This volume dispels this notion for good. It contains two previously unpublished works, a manuscript entitled ‘A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy’ (the 1925 ms), and a course of undergraduate lectures on ‘The Philosophical Approach to Politics’ written between 1928 and 1930 (the 1930 lectures).⁴ Their titles alone establish that politics was a central concern in the first decade of Oakeshott’s intellectual career. Indeed, this introduction will show beyond any doubt that the ideas of *Experience and its Modes* actually grew out of Oakeshott’s prior philosophical interest in politics.

Moreover, the position Oakeshott had reached by 1930 explains why politics was virtually absent from *Experience and its Modes*. He concluded that political philosophy could never be true philosophy because of the inherently unsatisfactory nature of political activity itself. Thus, there was little point including politics in a work designed to present a model of authentic philosophy. Incidentally, this conclusion also explains the roots

[1] M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1933]), p. 316, identified politics as a form of practical experience but offered no extended discussion.

[2] M. Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, ed. T. Fuller (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993).

[3] See S. Soinen, *From a ‘Necessary Evil’ to the Art of Contingency: Michael Oakeshott’s Conception of Political Activity* (Exeter: Imprint Academic 2005), p. 3.

[4] See LSE 1/1/3 and 1/1/7, respectively.

of the negative view of politics that he held between the wars, something often remarked upon but never satisfactorily explained.

Together, the 1925 ms and the 1930 lectures transform our knowledge of the first decade of Oakeshott's intellectual development, bringing his mental horizons into sharp focus, allowing us to reconstruct the context of his early thought, and making the similarities and differences with his later work clearer than ever before. For instance, the nature and extent of his early commitment to philosophical Idealism can be more precisely evaluated, and also be shown decisively to be absent from his later work.

There are undeniably important continuities, as well as differences, between the early and the mature Oakeshott. He carried on asking many of the same questions throughout his career, but his approach to answering them changed radically, and even if he sometimes reached the same conclusions, his reasons for holding them were different. Hindsight makes clear that he moved towards an increasingly sceptical and minimalistic approach to political philosophy, and that he did so largely by way of self-criticism, gradually jettisoning more and more of his own early Idealist and Rationalist beliefs.

II: A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy

The 1925 ms may have been written as part of Oakeshott's successful Fellowship application to Gonville and Caius College.⁵ Notably dissatisfied with contemporary political philosophy, it enlarges on the theme of a previous essay, 'The Cambridge School of Political Science' (1924), which complained that the Cambridge syllabus of political science 'entirely misses "the real thing"' because it 'occupies itself almost exclusively with the passing forms of government'. Consequently, political science as studied at Cambridge lacked a definition of politics. Worse still, one 'never arrives' at the true subject of political science, the study of the State.⁶

An important argument developed in the 1925 ms, about which Oakeshott never changed his mind, is that political thought is not all of the same kind. He owed this view at least partly to Bosanquet's *History of Aesthetic*, in which works of art were classified into 'three main heads. First, the works of art themselves...secondly...all writing about art the aim of which is either to improve it, give directions for the creation of works of art, or to describe individual productions; [and] thirdly, aesthetic theory,

[5] It seems likely that the shorter 'Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality' was actually written for the MA rather than the Fellowship as stated in the Introduction to *What is History? and other essays. Selected Writings Vol. 1* (SW), ed. L. O'Sullivan.

[6] M. Oakeshott, 'The Cambridge School of Political Science': see SW, i. 56.

the aim of which is neither to describe, to improve or to direct, but simply to theorize'.⁷

Proposing that we can 'approach other human experiences in the same way,' Oakeshott concluded that the 'vast literature of utopias and practical suggestions in government' required separating from the 'genuine literature of political philosophy'. Many problems in political philosophy, he believed, stemmed from a failure to observe the differences between 'a serious theoretical treatment [of political thought and] the wildest scheme for the reform of the Franchise'.⁸ While canonical works like Plato's *Republic* or Rousseau's *Contrat Social* admittedly had a dual character as 'at once works of criticism and of theory', Oakeshott interpreted their authors as deliberately employing more than one genre without confusing them.⁹ In contrast, modern writers like Laski and Hobhouse failed to appreciate the distinction.

The 1925 ms was concerned with far more than questions of genre, however. Despite its self-proclaimed status as a propadeutic, it adopted an ambitious Idealistic and Rationalistic metaphysics. First, definition was argued to be the necessary culmination of all rational intellectual activity. Next, it proceeded to define politics, philosophy, the State, and the Self, or individual. Finally, it concluded (in the best traditions of Hegelian and British Idealism) that the State and the Self are mutually implicatory concepts united by the notion of a rational, general, will.

Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel, Bosanquet, and Bradley are all deployed in support of this position, though Bosanquet's presence perhaps looms largest. But the manuscript really only makes sense when read as a contribution to the debate then occurring in England between the British Idealists, who defended state sovereignty as the necessary outcome of a metaphysics of the rational will, on the one hand, and the so-called 'pluralists', on the other, who attacked sovereignty and its associated philosophy as a danger both to individual liberty and to associational freedom at large.

The pluralist theory of group personality (which the legal historian F.W. Maitland argued had received a kind of *de facto* recognition in English history under the law of trusts) seemed to offer a means of preserving the independence of non-state groups such as churches and trade unions against governmental interference.¹⁰ If groups had personality, they also had rights against the state. The appeal of such reasoning cut across 'left' and 'right'. While leading historians and political theorists including not

[7] p. 131.

[8] p. 69.

[9] p. 133.

[10] F.W. Maitland, 'Trust and Corporation', in *Group Rights Perspectives Since 1900*, ed. J. Stapleton (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), pp. 1–37. This edited collection and its editorial introduction is indispensable for the study of English political ideas in the early twentieth century.

only Maitland but J.N. Figgis, Ernest Barker, Harold Laski, and G.D.H. Cole, all found pluralist ideas attractive, they were by no means led to the same political conclusions. Figgis, for example, inclined toward syndicalism, Barker espoused a patriotic liberalism of a Whiggish sort, Cole favoured guild socialism, and Laski increasingly leaned towards Marxism.

The Idealist-pluralist debate was not, however, an outright clash. British Idealists often saw the state as an association that was only first amongst equals. Oakeshott in particular, though professedly hostile to Laski, was a lifelong admirer of Maitland, and had considerable sympathy for Barker, whose own political philosophy was also a fusion of Idealism and pluralism. Like most Idealists, Oakeshott regarded a varied associational life as a condition of metaphysical unity, and so was actually in tune with a major theme of pluralist thought.

Moreover, pluralists and Idealists shared a common enemy; both disliked legal positivism and the command theory of law, which they found exemplified in the writings of John Austin (and Hobbes). Admittedly, they disliked it for different reasons; Oakeshott because it involved too restrictive a conception of the state as simply the legal government of the day, Laski because it treated state sovereignty as indivisible.

Nevertheless, there was sometimes less difference between them than Oakeshott would have cared to admit. Certainly, he criticized Laski's view in *Foundations of Sovereignty* that government was the 'primary organ' of the state as too narrow, because the state was synonymous with society as a whole whereas 'government, rules or laws do not comprise the whole [of society]'.¹¹ All the same, he shared Laski's dislike of excessively interventionist authority.

This affinity between apparent opponents is unsurprising given that the socialist tradition which inspired Laski and Cole owed a great deal to Rousseau and Hegel, thinkers who were also major sources for British Idealism. Indeed, British Idealism itself was a continuation of the fusion of utilitarian, liberal, and socialist themes developed by Bentham and J.S. Mill, just with a more elaborate metaphysic bolted on. T.H. Green was probably the most sympathetic of the British Idealists towards socialism, but Bosanquet could still write that 'Socialism, at its best [challenges] the preconception that poverty must be recognized as a permanent class-function'.¹² Nor should we forget that Oakeshott himself had grown up with a Fabian family background which fostered in him an early sympathy for socialism.

Furthermore, both Idealism and pluralism shared some anti-democratic sentiments, insofar as 'democracy' was synonymous with laissez-faire

[11] p. 117.

[12] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1910), p. 318.

individualism. In both Europe and the USA, the outbreak of war in 1914 was widely regarded as the final failure of this type of democracy. In Germany, Carl Schmitt hailed the English pluralist critique of sovereignty and declared that parliamentary democracy was in crisis; in England, both Barker and Laski declared that the state was discredited, or at least relegated from its former position of pre-eminence.¹³ Once more, the meanings attached to this judgment varied widely. For Schmitt and Laski it provided a justification for radical political experiments in national socialism and communism, respectively; for Barker it was a positive development, insofar as too much emphasis on the state was not, from a pluralist perspective, a healthy thing.

Oakeshott actually held a similar position. At least, he conceived of 'the State' as something above and beyond the ordinary business of contemporary government and politics, about which he shared Barker's disillusionment. Discussing sociological theories of law in the 1925 ms, he declared that the views of Duguit (a colleague of Durkheim's) were representative of a 'new movement' which might 'succeed...in saying to government ... "Give place", and...will allow the true "State" to take its rightful place as sovereign.'¹⁴

Oakeshott thus shared the hope, which informed both left and right in the early 1920s, that a radical improvement in European politics was imminent. Ultimately, however, pluralism and Idealism failed to generate practical political alternatives to liberal democracy, and their anti-democratic sentiments ensured that after 1945 they were rejected along with National Socialism, fascism, and communism. Idealism was universally condemned as a form of German statism (always a common pluralist criticism); pluralism seemed odious because of the similarity between its emphasis on the real personality of the group and the völkish delusions of the National Socialists. The violent reaction to nineteenth-century ideas which the political thought of the inter-war years represented became subject in turn to an equally violent reaction, and the post-1945 welfare state became an unquestionable political norm. The inter-war era was forgotten for a generation, until historians of political thought began rediscovering it in the later twentieth century.

In keeping with this general trend, Oakeshott's post-war approach to political theorising changed profoundly after 1945. He concentrated on an essayistic approach that largely eschewed explicit talk of metaphysical first principles. The writings collected as *Rationalism in Politics* (1962) that brought him to public attention made no mention of definition and classification, or the basis of the philosophy of the state in a metaphysics of the

[13] C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1932]), pp. 39–42; E. Barker, 'The Discredited State', in *Group Rights*, ed. Stapleton, pp. 76–93; H. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968 [1917]), p. 14.

[14] p. 125.

rational will. Without some notion of this inter-war context, then, his early efforts can seem strange indeed when placed alongside his published works.

But in the 1920s, Oakeshott was convinced of the essential correctness of Idealism. The 1925 ms was prefixed with a quotation from Plato's *Phaedrus* emphasizing the necessity of correct definition. The declaration that definition was the basis of all 'systematic thought' was not merely rationalism; it was Rationalism of exactly the sort that he would later criticize in his own works.¹⁵ His language bespoke the vast ambition of Idealist monism; 'to see the whole of any one thing...is at once to have achieved a theory of the universe'.

In the pursuit of definition, Oakeshott argued, we necessarily realise that our object is only 'a part or a mode (that is, a modification) of something larger and more generic. In seeking significance the mind always advances from the part to the whole, from the merely actual to the real'.¹⁶ We may note both the specific influence of Spinoza's *Ethics* in the reference to modality, and the general impact of Idealism, which in both its ancient and modern forms relies on a distinction between appearance and reality.

F.H. Bradley's famous work of Idealist metaphysics, *Appearance and Reality* (1893), reflected this distinction in its title, as, indeed, did *Experience and its Modes*. There, Oakeshott insisted that the various modes were less actual than the fully real experience that only philosophy could offer. Yet even in his earliest writings he acknowledged a plurality of forms of thinking which laid claim to truth.¹⁷ How, then, was philosophy supposed to be superior to the various other possible approaches to truth? The solution suggested in 1925 was that the best definition or classification is 'that which tells us most about the thing or experience'.

This raised at least two major problems. First, unless we assume that the information our preferred classification contains is somehow self-validating, the fact that it yields more information says nothing about its veracity. It may just contain more abundant error. Second, Oakeshott's distinction between 'the essential qualities, purposes and conditions of a thing', and 'those qualities, purposes and conditions that are merely contingent' was inextricably dependent on the perspective of the agent. For instance, 'a classification of pictures by their date or painter' would be 'better than one according to their weight'. But by his own admission, 'a transport office would do well to adhere' to a classification of paintings by weight. Thus, the status of the painting as such is from this point of view a contingent rather than an essential feature of it. There is no independent position

[15] p. 46.

[16] pp. 46–7.

[17] See 'History is a Fable' (1923) and 'An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality' (1925), *SW*, i. 31–44, 67–115.

from which the priority of the identity of the painting *as* a painting can be asserted.

Indeed, Oakeshott's account of definition showed little awareness of contemporary philosophical thought on the subject. He distinguished several possible uses of the word 'is' to signify identity, predication, and existence in a way that indicates a passing familiarity with the discussions then going on at Cambridge in the philosophy of logic and mathematics, but there was no engagement with the work of thinkers such as Frege or Russell. All he really wanted to do was uphold Hegel's insistence that 'a definition should have only universal features' and the Aristotelian claim that a 'judgment of purpose underlies all our judgements as to the value in a definition of the true nature' of a thing.¹⁸

Thus, the question 'what is political philosophy' was to be answered by seeking a definition that would 'be true...not only now, but at all times'.¹⁹ The thought of different historical periods was to be judged according to the degree to which it had successfully approximated a timeless ideal of politics. But what was the purpose of politics? The answer given in the 1925 ms followed the arguments of Bosanquet's *Philosophical Theory of the State* particularly closely.

After examining Rousseau's notion of the General Will and Kant's and Hegel's uses of it, Bosanquet had argued that the nation-state was 'the widest organization which has the common experience necessary to found a common life', and that as such it represented an 'ethical idea' in the form of a 'faith or a purpose'.²⁰ Oakeshott took up these views, insisting that 'will, and not force or anything else, expresses the real nature of political life'.²¹ To support the claim that the realisation of statehood in a given society depends on the development of a common will, he contrasted philosophical and historical ways of thinking.

The 1925 ms contrasted history unfavourably with the philosophical search for 'logical order'. Philosophy eschewed the genetic approach allegedly common to the historical, social, and physical sciences in favour of 'a theory of the whole'. Even in *On History* (1983), Oakeshott would probably have agreed with his earlier claim that 'History postulates that at some time and in some place certain events happened, and then endeavours to discover how these events took place.' What he would not have agreed with was that this was a flaw rather than simply a characteristic of historical understanding.

Oakeshott always regarded philosophy as a distinctive form of thought. But while he later ceased to hold that all other studies simply 'present [philosophy] with nothing but the raw material of true facts, and so themselves

[18] pp. 54–5.

[19] p. 81.

[20] Bosanquet, *Theory of the State*, pp. 320–1.

[21] p. 58.

depend, in the fullest sense, upon philosophy', the 1925 ms persistently conflated the two positions. The idea of philosophical definition as the 'exploration of [the] elementary considerations which underlie all thought'²² – a conception of philosophy that he never renounced – was merged with the idea that other activities were not fully satisfactory until philosophy had validated them. 'The existence of political life brings with it certain assumptions...and until these are examined we cannot come at its meaning'.²³

The claim that 'Some conceptions of property will be found quite untenable because...they are discovered to deny themselves' did not mean, however, that such conceptions would be overthrown in practice. Even in his early work Oakeshott had no sympathy for Marx's thesis that the purpose of philosophy is to change the world; he was quite explicit that 'the philosopher never desires to change things, but to understand them'.²⁴ The State Oakeshott wanted to construct was a purely logical entity.

Such lack of interest in practical questions actually made Oakeshott rather unusual. The majority view at the time was that political philosophy and social science were of interest only as tools of social reform.²⁵ Utilitarians like Sidgwick and Idealists like Bosanquet disagreed profoundly over philosophical questions, but they shared a conviction that improving the lot of the poor was both necessary and desirable. In social science, a thinker like Graham Wallas, who was interested in developing a psychology that could 'forecast, and therefore...influence, the conduct of large numbers of human beings organized in societies', would probably not have been terribly perturbed to be told by Oakeshott that his project could never provide 'a philosophy of political life'.²⁶

Like Socrates, however, Oakeshott did not much care whether or not *kallipolis* represented a practical possibility. This Platonism extended to method; in an apparently deliberate imitation of the *Republic*, he remarked that the state could be approached as a whole, or via the individual selves from which the whole was constructed.²⁷ And like the *Republic*, the 1925 ms dealt first with the state from the point of view of society, defined as 'an association of minds'. The individual in such an association will find that 'his society has undertaken to educate him, whether or not he likes it'. The early Oakeshott assumed that this education (reminiscent of a Rousseauian process in which we are to be 'forced to be free') would be benign.

[22] pp. 39–40.

[23] p. 65.

[24] p. 68.

[25] R. Soffer, *Ethics and Society in England: The Revolution in the Social Sciences 1870–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), offers a comprehensive account of the connection between social science and reform.

[26] p. 63.

[27] Plato, *Republic*, 368e.

This view of the State (with a capital 'S') as 'a self-governing community whose purpose embraces a way of life' and as resting on 'a solidarity of feeling, opinion, and belief' established it as a very broad category, in contrast to 'government'. In part, Oakeshott was again following Bosanquet. The State was not merely a Hobbesian answer to the need for order. Rather, it 'exists because we need, in order to be ourselves, some unified whole which is...morally self-sufficing'. But there is also a clear Aristotelian influence in Oakeshott's declaration, practically a paraphrase of the *Politics*, that 'Every important movement in human history comes into being for the sake of life, but exists for the sake of a more abundant life'.²⁸ Finally, this classicism was filtered through Rousseauianism, and also through Hegelian Idealism. The metaphysical unity of the individual with the general will is one of the guiding ideas of the *Contrat Social*, and Oakeshott cited with approval Hegel's remark that 'The State...is the individual's substance'.²⁹

Multiple sources thus produced in Oakeshott the conviction that the state was the highest vehicle of human ethical purpose. On this basis he was prepared to state that 'in times of crisis...the degree of statehood possessed by an association will be abnormally great', so that 'England in August 1914 was more of a state than she was during the great industrial strikes of 1911-12'.³⁰ After experiencing a second war, he still saw in it a force for unity, but not a positive one; war, he came to think, was inimical to civil freedom. The unity it produced was the unity of an 'enterprise association' in which individuals were subordinate to the goal of the group; in this case, victory.

The discussion of the State concludes with a list of definitions that has no real parallel in Oakeshott's published writings, which almost went out of their way to avoid making specific reference to other writers. But this list reveals exactly who he had been reading. It is sorted into different classes, the majority of which failed to meet his criterion of philosophical adequacy. The most common confusion was mixing up a 'scientific' approach that addressed 'questions of origin and development' with a philosophical 'treatment of the whole and real nature' of the state.³¹ Writers either mistook a 'particular manifestation' or 'activity' such as territory or government for the 'real and essential quality of statehood', or took an empirical account of the origin of the state for a philosophical definition.

Of the thirteen examples of correct definition, seven were drawn from either Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* or Bosanquet's *Philosophical Theory of the State*. Burke's remark that the state 'is a partnership in all science, in all art, in every virtue, in all perfection' is also an understandable enough inclu-

[28] p. 76.

[29] p. 111.

[30] p. 80.

[31] pp. 86-7.

sion, given Oakeshott's conviction that the state was a comprehensive unity. The other more obscure writers, like Mary Follett, an American now mainly remembered as an early theorist of business management, and William Inge, Dean of St Pauls' Cathedral, were selected because they shared the contemporary hostility to existing forms of democracy and endorsed the creation of new forms of associational life (indicating once more the closeness of Oakeshott's Idealism to the pluralism of the day).

This discussion of 'the State', as we observed, was followed by 'the Self'. For the mature Oakeshott of *On Human Conduct* (1975), relationships with others were a condition of selfhood, and citizenship was one such possible relationship. There is a real continuity here with his early work, which also argued that it is impossible to be a self out of all relation to others. The 1925 ms was insistent that, just as the state could not be reduced to territory or force, so the self resisted metaphysical reduction to the body, however inevitable such an identification for practical (legal) purposes.³²

Nor was the self equivalent to 'a kind of constant average mass of experiences', a Humean bundle of sensations.³³ Oakeshott was not tempted by any variety of scepticism which called the reality of the self into question; quoting *Appearance and Reality*, he declared that its existence was self-evident. The problem was the criterion by which to identify it. For ordinary understanding, a thing was 'that which seems to stand out from its environment with a certain observable degree of self-subsistence and self-containedness'. But the distinction between a thing and its environment often turned out to be far from absolute. Just as we cannot absolutely separate a plant dependent upon soil and air from its environment, the self 'is largely, if not entirely, social'.³⁴

Such examples illustrated the more general truth that 'to suppose a "thing" entirely out of relation is to suppose nothing'. In Oakeshott's Idealist logic, which seems to owe something to the work of R.L. Nettleship as well as to Bosanquet, some important consequences followed from this position. Since knowing a thing fully involved a knowledge of its relationships, and since any given thing, *x*, must stand in some relation to everything else (all that is not-*x*), then fully to know the nature of *x* entailed fully knowing the nature of the universe as a whole. This view reinforced the Idealist conviction of a gap between sensible appearances and ultimate reality. The plant may look as if it is an entirely discrete object, but this appearance is deceptive; it is only a part of a larger whole. The self cannot be treated in exactly the same way as the plant is, for the self is both conscious and immaterial, but both are embedded in a network of relationships.

[32] p. 97.

[33] p. 98.

[34] pp. 99–101.

The self was therefore 'largely, if not entirely, social', and the division between 'self' and 'others' ultimately apparent rather than real.³⁵ Selfhood comes into being through an active and conscious process of co-ordination with an environment that includes other people. In technical terms, it involved 'making new experiences logically coherent with the present body of experience'. This idea that experience involves the construction of a coherent 'world' was central to *Experience and its Modes*, but we find it already articulated in the 1925 ms.

This theory of the self as active cognition was also intended to highlight its allegedly universal form. The ultimate outcome of all intellectual activity, we noted, was supposed to be a definition of some kind, and it was crucial for Oakeshott that in this respect the intellect was similar to the will, for 'the true object of the will is always universal'. In keeping with Platonic metaphysics which regarded the true and the good as two aspects of the same ideal Form, Oakeshott found little difference between cognition and volition. Both involved 'the whole self directed towards a universal object'. But if one had to identify one of these acts as more fundamental than the other, Oakeshott declared one would have to choose volition. Knowledge presupposed will, so that 'at least some form of willing seems to lie behind every act of knowing'.³⁶

Oakeshott's early thought thus also contained an element of compromise between Idealist rationalism and pragmatism. In philosophy, he was a thoroughgoing Rationalist; but he was also convinced that the world of thought depended on the world of action. This was, however, a practical rather than a logical dependence; without actors, there could be no scientific or philosophical or artistic activity, but action was not prior in the sense of being more important than intellectual or cultural activity. Indeed, the reverse was the case; like many Idealists, he was thoroughly prejudiced in favour of the contemplative life. Moreover, like Plato, he was convinced that earthly reality should approximate the world of Ideas. If the idea of the individual Self necessarily pointed towards its union with other Selves in the State, this union was still only a pale reflection of the idea of the unity of the universe as a whole. 'The only true, because the only perfect, self is the universe; for the universe alone achieves that unity of experience which is the essence of statehood'.³⁷

This attribution of selfhood to the universe as a whole, and the claim that the universe is capable of a unity of experience, would strike most contemporary philosophers—if indeed they accepted such statements as meaningful at all—as quasi-religious in nature, and it is worth remarking that in this period Oakeshott was a believing Christian. His Christianity

[35] p. 100.

[36] p. 105.

[37] p. 107.

was, admittedly, highly modernistic and anti-dogmatic; but it was nonetheless a significant factor in his thought. It is also virtually absent from the two works published here, though it is clearly visible in other essays that he published in the 1920s. This only underlines the importance of taking a comprehensive view of a philosopher's writings if one wishes to understand the full range of their ideas.³⁸

Oakeshott's metaphysical account of the Self entailed that the individual could only achieve an identity 'through his particular station and the faithful performance of its particular duties'. In saying this, of course, he was following Bradley's *Ethical Studies*. Through acquiring an identity in the obligatory performance of various social roles one came into contact with the State and with humanity as a whole. Neither could be encountered directly; 'The riches of the wider whole can reach us only through the (apparently) more limited loyalty'.³⁹

The conclusion of the discussion of selfhood, then, was the mutual identity of State and Self, from which it allegedly followed that the State could do no wrong as it was in fact only the real will of the individual. In fact, this argument that the 'real State...is liable to error only when it deserts its "statehood"' was supposed to *restrict* the types of activity the state could properly engage in rather than make it omniscient. Here again Oakeshott was following Bosanquet; but faced with actual states ruled by dictators claiming de facto infallibility, there would soon be little public sympathy for the metaphysical subtleties differentiating benign from destructive versions of the philosophy that 'The self is the State; the State is the self'.

For all that Oakeshott protested that Spencer's opposition of '"Man *versus* the State"' is sheer nonsense,⁴⁰ he could only dismiss conflicts between state and individual as illusory, and reduce all political conflict to logical error, so long as he retained the metaphysical contrast between appearance and reality. Only thus could any divergence between the will of the individual and the universal will be explained as a result of 'isolation and ignorance', in keeping with Rousseauian and Hegelian tradition.⁴¹ But in 1925 the problem of reliably ascertaining the universal will, never mind the even more fundamental issue of whether the concept of such a will made sense at all, was never really faced.

Oakeshott concluded by reiterating his desire to defend the specifically philosophical treatment of politics. The new social sciences of psychology, sociology, and anthropology threatened the autonomy of political philosophy, but the fundamental ideas of political life like 'the State' needed to

[38] See 'Religion and the Moral Life' (1927); 'The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity' (1928); and 'Religion and the World' (1929), all republished in *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*.

[39] p. 112.

[40] p. 110.

[41] p. 113.