

CONVERSATIONS WITH MICHAEL OAKESHOTT – AN INTERLUDE TO OAKESHOTT SCHOLARSHIP

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A Companion to Michael Oakeshott (2012). Edited by Paul Franco and Leslie Marsh, The Pennsylvania University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania.

Research into Oakeshott's work really began in earnest soon after his death in the early 1990s. This sudden blossoming of studies, and those published since, have made him both a comparatively famous, as well as controversial, figure of twentieth century conservative political thought. These studies have also put a multifaceted perspective on the many different aspects of his thoughts. In addition to containing work that focuses on his major books (*Experience and its Modes*, 1933; *On Human Conduct*, 1975; and *On History*, 1983) the LSE archives also include letters and other manuscripts which continue to offer valuable material not only for research and posthumous publication, but also a wider audience today. Oakeshott's essays, polemical texts, book reviews, lectures and even radio talks have begun to command growing attention. In this respect, evaluations and interpretations of Oakeshott's overall work have to take into account his views on so many subjects (for example, art, education, history, morality, philosophy, politics and religion), that it becomes no easy task to argue the case for any one plausible perspective over another. *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott* nonetheless sees this variety instead as a positive case for introducing the results of research accomplished thus far, as these results provide the correct starting point for advancing any discussion in the field.

The editors emphasize from the start that *A Companion* is not just a book concerning Oakeshott's political thought, but also his views of "various forms of human experience". These views are covered in part I of the book, while part II is devoted to his reflections on politics and political philosophy (Franco & Marsh 2012, 6). In addition to the variety of themes, there is also a good mix of authors in the book - "some of them long-established authorities, others promising young researchers" (ibid, 1). This suggests there are a number of new contributions to the field which now fall into the 'must-read' category, and this works on a number of levels. *A Companion* gives a good example of how researchers with a variety of leanings, and who entertain very different kinds of methodological and theoretical approaches, fit well together between covers of the same book. The reader is given the impression, not that this is a miscellaneous collection of essays, but instead a proper conversation between authors about Oakeshott's work, as well as their own essays and earlier research concerning it. For the most part, the book is exceptionally elegant in style throughout, perhaps due to the fact that the editing process has been in the careful and capable hands of two prominent figures in this field. Paul Franco is the author of a groundbreaking piece of work called *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (1990); while Leslie Marsh is the founder of the Michael Oakeshott Association.

It is obvious that no single book or collection of essays could ever hope to do full justice to the entire range of Oakeshott research that exists, and nor is it the intention in this collection. For instance, instead of focusing on the commonly held disputes over Oakeshott's claimed conservatism and/or liberalism, the book leaves those in the background, and concentrates instead on other interpretational 'battles', such as those concerning the philosophical coherence of his oeuvre, or the importance and originality of his views on, for example, art, history, and religion. When it comes to the more political part II of the book, the majority of essays concentrate on specific aspects of a topic, such as Oakeshott's conception of law, rather than make sweeping statements about his political leanings, let alone political influence. This kind of editorial policy seems eminently reasonable when one takes into account that there are already a number of profiled, book-length in-

terpretations and collections concerning Oakeshott's political thought. But it also means that this book is best suited for readers already acquainted with primary and secondary sources in the Oakeshott literature, as only then can the reader effectively make use of the views in the book, by comparing them with their own informed opinions. This applies in particular to some of the arguments here which advocate a certain preference towards Oakeshott's 'unwavering' idealism. In my view this preference is over emphasized, and thus somewhat simplifies the nature of his thoughts, as actually there seems to be some tension between the 'detached' Oakeshott in part I - who appears to be more interested in the aesthetic, philosophical and religious aspects of life - and the more 'worldly' Oakeshott in the latter part of the book - engaged in the more practical levels of human experience. However, the collection does not try to gloss over the controversies that exist, but instead offers us valuable insights regarding Oakeshottian research and some of his own thoughts. Perhaps it is therefore best read in conjunction with other collections such as *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* edited by Efraim Podoksik (2012).

The anthology under review here, however, starts with a biographical piece immediately preceding part I itself. This is written by Robert Grant, author of an early, almost canonical biography of Oakeshott. While his book (*Oakeshott*, 1990) focuses more on the 'public' figure and his work, the essay featured here ("The Pursuit of Intimacy, or Rationalism in Love") instead concentrates on Oakeshott's love life, which was rumored to have been complicated and quite possibly also scandalous. This could be one of the texts that create the most strongly divided opinions among readers. In John Kekes' opinion, Grant's contribution is simply an unreliable glance at Oakeshott's sex life and thus it has no justified place in the book (Kekes 2013). In answer to this critique, Grant says that Oakeshott's love life "resembled the abstract utopian 'rationalism' which he so powerfully criticized in politics" and thus there would be some justification for considering the contrast between his private and public life, or at least the practice and thought in his life (Grant 2013). For me, Grant's contribution came first as a slight shock, even if I do not altogether agree with Kekes' harsh condemnation of it. It appears that Grant has had a chance to shed some more light on some in-

interesting points in Oakeshott's unconventional personality, and to correct a few mistakes that he perhaps felt he had made in his earlier book on the man. The latter was based mainly on only one interview with Oakeshott in 1987. It is also true that it is difficult to avoid retrospection with regard to public figures and to avoid making speculations (nowadays online) with regard to their character and personal life. We learn for example that Oakeshott was married three times and entertained an interest in astrology (Grant 2012, 36). This account should be compared with the chronology presented in Podoksik (2012, xvi-xvii). Grant nevertheless makes the case that no matter how much Oakeshott's life may have been at odds with his work, it "doesn't invalidate the work at all" (2012, 38). Still, the essay occasionally contains a certain judgemental tone that does not, in my view, do justice to Oakeshott's work itself. For example, Grant finds it surprising that Oakeshott "ever got any work done" since he seems to have taken love as the centre of his life (*ibid.*, 26). Grant also suggests that perhaps Oakeshott's work functioned as a "necessary anodyne" in such a context, but this would seem implausible considering the division that Oakeshott placed on "work" and "play", and on how he believed universities in general had no (direct) place in the world of utility (*ibid.*).

Part I of the book (or "The Conversation of Mankind") actually begins, after Grant's opening text, with David Boucher's elaboration on what he calls Oakeshott's "indebtedness to philosophical idealism" (Boucher 2012, 47). Boucher intends to place Oakeshott's philosophy in the broad context of British idealism, and sees F.H. Bradley as one of his main influences. Boucher also claims (referring to, for example, W.H. Greenleaf) that Oakeshott never completely abandoned his early absolute idealism, but instead made only slight changes to his vocabulary, which therefore merely nuanced his philosophy (*ibid.*, 48). The significance of Boucher's essay, is to place Oakeshott both within the earlier tradition of idealism, as well as from today's perspective: "Oakeshott's adoption of idealism was not in itself as radical or brave a move as may appear from the present vantage point" (*ibid.*, 66). Although I cannot wholly agree with Boucher's claim that Oakeshott consistently adhered to his philosophical ideals of unity or monism throughout a long career, it is nonetheless clear that Boucher defends his view in a well-informed

and elegant manner. Thus, even if one belongs to the ‘party’ which argues that there were in fact major changes in Oakeshott’s thought over time, one is nevertheless forced to accept the existence of this background idealism, for without this knowledge, Oakeshott’s philosophy would doubtlessly appear piecemeal and incomplete.

Kenneth McIntyre agrees with Boucher that changes in Oakeshottian terminology do not directly affect the basic tenets of his philosophy, or views regarding the modes of human experience¹. McIntyre has thus chosen to investigate Oakeshott’s work chronologically, to be able to draw attention to any continuities and discontinuities that might exist (McIntyre 2012, 71). In addition to Oakeshott’s idealism, McIntyre also mentions the similarities between Oakeshott, and for example, Austin, Polanyi and Gadamer. Compared with Boucher’s analysis, McIntyre’s seems somewhat shallower, but I agree with him that Oakeshott can more feasibly be thought of as a philosophical pluralist than monist. Yet, as is the case with other writers in this volume, McIntyre knows his subject profoundly², and by choosing to introduce Oakeshott via his three most important works – *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” (1959), and *On Human Conduct* (1975) – he also provides an essential introduction for the less-informed reader. But in the final analysis, I cannot agree with McIntyre’s main claim that Oakeshott remained committed foremost to the independence of various forms or modes of human experience such as art, practice and science. I concur that Oakeshott defended these forms “against reductionism of any sort”, but he also inferred that these forms or “voices” can benefit and learn from each other in a conversational mode (see e.g. Soininen 2005b, 229–30).

In “Michael Oakeshott’s Philosophy of History” Geoffrey Thomas delivers more of a critique of the man’s work than the previous two authors. From the beginning, with regard to his writings on history, he calls Oakeshott a “polemicist” and a “prince of skeptics” (Thomas

1 Unlike Boucher, McIntyre and other writers supporting the ‘consistency thesis’ of Oakeshott’s philosophy emphasize elements of a sceptical, rather than absolute, form of idealism.

2 McIntyre’s endnotes are worth a specific attention as they contain much additional information about both his interpretation of Oakeshott, and Oakeshottian discussions in general.

2012, 95). But in a more positive light, he characterizes Oakeshottian history as a form of constructionism in which the “nonreality of the past” can only be constructed in the “reality” of the present (ibid). Ultimately for Thomas, Oakeshott’s concepts of history and the role of historians stem from his idealist views, which were presented in their fullest form in 1933. In Thomas’s view however, this epistemology is unsatisfactory as a coda for historical research, if the only thing required from a proper historian is to follow certain professional standards in the process of (re)constructing and interpreting the relics of the past (ibid, 116–7). Thomas touches on a number of important points concerning Oakeshott’s concept of historical knowledge, but unfortunately his critique falls short in some cases. For example, his coverage of Oakeshott’s arguments against the existence of teleological processes and causality in history are all too short and superficial to work as a proper critical treatment of the topic. Nevertheless, within a limited space, Thomas does succeed in raising awareness of the topic itself as well as his own historico-philosophical thoughts on the matter.

Timothy Fuller’s thoughtful essay deals with Oakeshott’s views on the contingency and radical temporality of human life and the implications these have on the modern moral imagination. Fuller reminds us how *Fortuna* lurks behind every rational plan; this being one of the basic tenets for Oakeshott’s critique of rationalism and especially rationalist politics (Fuller, 2012, 125). The desire for ever-lasting peace and ever-increasing prosperity are mentioned as “two great moral aspirations of modernity” which have legacies that go back to Hobbes and Kant (ibid, 128). In a tone reminiscent of Oakeshott himself, Fuller asks if belief in the market economy, science and technology brings about material advancement but spiritual decline at the same time (ibid, 130). In Fuller’s view, Oakeshott suggests an alternative means to find respite from the “terrors of the radical temporality of the human condition” by being open to the “voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind” (ibid, 132–3). The non-utilitarian moments of imagination offer momentary releases from the endless “modern project to perfect ourselves in the realm of perpetual peace and infinite prosperity” (ibid, 133). Fuller alludes to how these poetic experiences, images and moments also foster richness in human culture and heritage. Although Fuller does not

actually go this far, the essay could draw the conclusion that friendship (and love), as a form of dramatic, conversational relationship, effectively expands the horizon of our moral imagination beyond the simple pursuit of benefits.

Elizabeth Corey's examination of Oakeshott's religious sensibilities complements Fuller's reflections on human mortality and the poetic imagination. Corey notes that Oakeshott returned to what he called a "poetic" or "religious" way of orienting oneself in the world at various times from his youth onward (Corey 2012, 135). But her more controversial idea is to propose that Oakeshott's practical essays, which always seem to aim at "placing some limits on our hopes and ambitions (especially in politics), can be understood as written in the service of a religious or poetic ideal" (ibid). Oakeshott would thus have placed poetic/religious experience as a kind of counterbalance to the never-ending quest for achievement that human life presents on the practical level. Interestingly, Corey notes that Oakeshott has also called this concept of achievement the "diabolic element of human life" (ibid, 138-9, the quotation appearing first in Tregenza 2003, 147). Oakeshott's early religious writings can be found in the anthology *Religion, Politics and Moral Life* (1993), and it is here that he develops his "existential" view of Christianity and religion, as an orientation towards the present (ibid, 140). Referring to this nowadays popular concept, Corey speaks of "mindfulness" in life, instead of constant anxiety about the future (ibid). According to her interpretation, Oakeshott sees religious experience as something close to a poetic experience - a kind of temporary respite from the practical demands of everyday life. And indeed, Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct* (hereafter *OHC*) does contain descriptions of religious experience in terms of art and poetry: "the fugitive adventures of human conduct [are] graced with an intimation of immortality [...] the deadliness of doing overcome, and the transitory sweetness of a mortal affection, the tumult of a grief and the passing beauty of a May morning recognized neither as merely evanescent adventures nor as emblems of better things to come, but as *aventures*, themselves *encounters* with eternity" (ibid, 146; originally in *OHC*, 85). Corey's take on Oakeshott's religious sensibilities is appealing and, I think, quite accurate. Corey does not seek a definite answer to the question as to whether Oakeshott was

Christian or agnostic, but rather draws attention to his opposition to any kind of “rationalism in religion” that might approach it merely as a set of rules (ibid, 140). And yet she also distinguishes Oakeshott from the “great debates over reason and revelation that engaged Strauss and Voegelin” (ibid, 148). Finally, she also tones down her earlier emphasis on the importance of these moments of poetic/religious relief, when compared to practical matters and the bigger picture. To me this seems justified, especially when we consider Oakeshott’s production in its entirety: “and yet sometimes those most carefully attuned to the practical are the ones who also recognize the virtue of an entirely different sort of experience, whether that experience manifests itself as philosophy or poetry” (ibid, 149). Oakeshott was not an escapist, but rather he cherished variety in human experience and understanding. To this end, practical “now-existence” is not just a “necessary evil”, but also a necessary condition (ibid).³

Corey Abel’s contribution, concerning Oakeshott’s views on aesthetic experience, carries on thematically from the two preceding essays. Abel clarifies in particular the specific nature of poetic images and the poetic voice as being “non-symbolic” and “not pointing to anything else”, thereby attaining a fictitious reality of their own (Abel 2012, 156). Most importantly, poetry or aesthetic experience in general has no place in it for any of the concepts of utility. Means and ends are irrelevant – it should be enough that a “poetic image delights” (ibid, 157). Nevertheless, Oakeshott’s examples of art are pointedly traditional and representational, with “characters, actions, events: Figaro, Romeo and Juliet, King David” (ibid). To explain this seemingly puzzling relationship between a non-realist epistemology, and representational examples of art, Abel emphasizes the different kind of aesthetic experience that exists. For example, poetry is ultimately not divorced from ‘real life’, and yet (to take another example) realistic sculptures are not imitations of real life characters (ibid, 157–8). This concept of art and aesthetics must leave room for ‘playfulness’ and has no place in it for “moralizing”, but fiction is as “real as any of the other modal dreams that compose the collective dream we call civilization” and art is not to be judged by the

3 Corey refers also here to Tregenza instead of the original text by Oakeshott which would have been a more reader-friendly solution.

criteria of other modes (ibid, 166-7). Abel's examination is profound and insightful, although I cannot altogether agree that Oakeshott's view of art and the poetic voice continues "the profound skepticism implicit in Oakeshott's modal idealism" in a wholly unproblematic way (ibid)⁴. Abel notes a certain similarity in the views posed in "The Voice of Poetry" (1959) and "Work and Play" (c.1960?) in which for example art and education are seen as leisurely activities as opposed to "work" (compare this with Grant's view). He also admits that Oakeshott connects ancient Greek politics with "poetic" activity, but not with more modern political activity (ibid, 169). Along with Corey, Abel sees religion in terms of "the culmination of practice", as a "place of poetic irruption in the worklike realm of practice" (ibid, 70). He also says that "religion, politics (in one of its modes), love, friendship, childhood" all include "playful and non-instrumental aspects of practical life", adding that what they have in common, is that they are "disinterested inquiries that pursue knowledge in their own way and for its own sake" (ibid). Abel neglects to mention, however, the cases alluded to in "The Voice of Poetry" and realized later in *OHC* where, for example, the conversational meeting point of *all* voices enables real interaction between different human activities; practice, poetry. Moreover, this can be done in less reductionist terms, without necessarily describing the relationship in terms of utility (see Soininen 2005b).

Paul Franco regards the difficulties facing Oakeshott's philosophy of education as representative of the difficulties that "run through his philosophy as a whole". These amount to "formalism, conceptual compartmentalization, and rigid separation of theory and practice" (Franco 2012, 173). Franco then examines Oakeshott's philosophy of education in more detail by moving chronologically through its development, suggesting only that "there are subtle differences" between the texts and their emphases from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s. In other words he claims that Oakeshott's ideas on education did not undergo any particular radical changes over that period (ibid, 174). Franco begins with a lengthy examination of the essay "The Universities" (1949), which is for the most part a riposte to Sir Walter Moberly's *The Crisis in the University* (1949). The discussion is nuanced and accurate, but here the most

4 Note the difference with Boucher's view, however.

important conclusion made by Franco is that Oakeshott's image of the university as a "conversation" among many different specialized studies contains many echoes of Newman's famous evocation of the university in the nineteenth century" (ibid, 178). While admitting this view is appealing, Franco also points out the elitism and outdatedness that is nonetheless inherent in it, referring as it does to a "leisured class". If this weakness is already apparent in that context, then it is perhaps more so in the present day (ibid, 181). Franco makes it quite clear that the Oakeshottian concept of education is "directed" first and foremost against the overwhelming ethic of productivity. He illustrates this with some advice that Oakeshott was quoted to have said in an undated speech to undergraduates upon their arrival at university - namely, to forget the propaganda that would urge them "to learn how to be a more efficient cog in the social machine" (ibid, 187). I sympathize with Franco's nuanced elaboration on Oakeshott's concept of education, but I disagree with his final analysis that, because Oakeshott is determined "to avoid utilitarianism and instrumentalism", he prevents education having "any sort of moral or practical or societal effect" (ibid, 192). It is true that Oakeshott's concept of "university" is somewhat old-fashioned and perhaps does not adequately address the issues in today's higher education (ibid, 173). Still, his strong arguments against education as a form of "socialization", because it is part of the bigger problematic process of normalization, can be seen as a practical statement' which suggests that learning to "go with the current" should simply be an option, rather than a requirement (ibid, 191).

Part II of the book, entitled "Political Philosophy", starts with Martyn Thompson's interpretation of Oakeshott's views on "the history of political thought". He does this by comparing them to Quentin Skinner's "theory and practice" (Thompson 2012, 198). Thompson argues that "ideal types, for Oakeshott, were the analytic tools of philosophers, not historians" (ibid). He also re-emphasizes the point made by Geoffrey Thomas earlier in this book, that the historical past is constructed by the historian of political thought (ibid, 201). Thompson then makes a comparison between Oakeshott's and Skinner's famous interpretations of Hobbes to clarify their differences. Whereas Skinner is seen as being "Laslettian", in that he considers *Leviathan* as a "partisan politi-

cal tract, albeit a large and ambitious one”; the Oakeshottian view of Hobbes, according to Thompson, would present him more as a great philosopher who is not primarily bound up with the contingencies of time (ibid, p.208). Thompson also discusses Oakeshott’s critical remarks (1980) regarding Skinner’s *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) and adds that Skinner’s response to these (both at the time and more recently) misrepresents Oakeshott’s position in a somewhat revealing way. “Skinner read into Oakeshott’s criticism much of the unhistorical or antihistorical baggage that marred the theory and practice of the history of political thought at the time he and John Pocock began revolutionizing the field in the 1960s” (ibid, 213). Suffice to say, without going too far into the details of this interpretation, Thompson would appear to be on the right track. Namely, Oakeshott actually made a distinction between ideology and philosophy by referring to whether the writer has a political or philosophical perspective foremost in his mind. The text never totally “escapes” the contingency and the “predicament” of time, but it can at least be intended to be read foremost as a philosophical treatise, a platform for thinking on a constant journey (to use Oakeshott’s terminology from the 1970s), or as an aspiration towards unconditional thinking in a conditional world. In a way, Oakeshott’s thought is therefore closer to Skinner’s views on (the philosophy of) history than is perhaps usually thought.

The essay after this, by Noel Malcolm, proceeds in a similar thematic direction, but with a more extensive evaluation of Oakeshott’s interpretation of Hobbes. Malcolm combines a close analysis of those texts by Oakeshott, which have Hobbes as their main topic from 1935 right up to the 1975 version of his “Introduction to *Leviathan*”. The latter contained significant conceptual differences when compared to the original version from 1946 (see also Gerencser 2000; Soininen 2005a). The main point of Malcolm’s essay is however, to show a disparity between Oakeshott’s interpretation of Hobbes as “non-teleological and anti-teleological in his entire pattern of thought”, and his perhaps wilful oversight of the very rationalist features in Hobbes’s philosophy (Malcolm 2012, 223). In particular, the 1975 revised version of the “Introduction to *Leviathan*” presents far more of an Oakeshottian view of Hobbes than what had been generally accepted up to that point. Malcolm adds that

“Hobbes’s whole cast of mind was much closer to that of the rationalist – as portrayed in Oakeshott’s essay on ‘Rationalism in Politics’ – than Oakeshott seems to have been willing to admit” (ibid, 230). Malcolm’s interpretation is plausible, but there is not much that is novel in it. Examining the relationship between instrumentality and non-instrumentality in Hobbes’s concept of state has been done before, especially with regard to the notions of peace, authority, and the transfer of rights when founding a state (ibid, 227–30; compare with, e.g., Gerencser 2000).

“The Fate of Rationalism in Oakeshott’s thought” by Kenneth Minogue finds its kindred spirit in Fuller’s earlier essay concerning the radical temporality of human life. Like Fuller, Minogue emphasizes the notion of contingency, and examines it in Oakeshott’s work, whilst simultaneously using Oakeshott as a platform for his own thinking. In particular, Minogue relies on Oakeshott’s separation between the “politics of faith” and the “politics of skepticism”. Whereas the faith position seeks “salvation” from the contingencies of life, in the form of rationalist planning and the concept of teleological progress; the sceptical one bases itself on rules, in terms of politics, style of government and the state (as a form of association). Minogue accordingly ponders why Oakeshott chose not to publish *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (1996) in his lifetime, and ends up with the credible conclusion that Oakeshott possibly found this dichotomy between faith and scepticism too simple (Minogue 2012, 243 & 246). Political life (and most political thought) is unavoidably ambiguous, but the poles between which it oscillates can be described in several other terms. Minogue’s own conclusions on the modern condition seem to be faithful to those of Oakeshott’s, and I cannot but agree with the view that we, at least in Western countries, perhaps find ourselves in a “rather paradoxical situation, in which for all our valuing of freedom, increasing numbers of Western people come to be subject to forms of supposedly enlightened despotism” (ibid, 241). Oakeshott’s concern for the ever-increasing emphasis on “socialization” in child care, education and elsewhere also seems topical (ibid, 243).

In this collection, Leslie Marsh’s presents a genuinely fresh stance on Oakeshott’s philosophy, albeit one he himself has held for a while (e.g., Marsh 2005). He compares Oakeshott with another critic of rationalism,

Friedrich Hayek, in terms of their views on cognitive science and the “philosophy of mind” (Marsh 2012, 248). Marsh draws attention to the concept of a “situated mind” and to constructionism in both theorists (ibid, 249). His essay ends up with a qualified defense of both theorist’s “libertarianism” and, although I would not use that particular terminology, I must admit that his argumentation is appealing. Marsh points out the irony that is inherent, for both Hayek and Oakeshott, in the concept of tradition “as advanced cognition” (ibid, 251). In other words, what we call a “free market”, for example, contains knowledge suspended in “traditions and practices” (Oakeshott) and “within a network as spontaneous or complex adaptive orders” (ibid, 251). But Marsh also seems to suggest that we should have a certain trust of the market since “individualism”, and liberty in its truest sense, are based on humility and the constraint inherent in the very cognitive nature of the human condition (ibid, 262–3). With regard to Oakeshott’s political philosophy and view of human intelligence and history however, Marsh’s view seems to lean perhaps too much on Oakeshott’s “libertarian texts” which are few in number and date mainly from the 1940s. Yet the comparison between Hayek and Oakeshott is creative, in a positive sense, and it contains seeds for a fruitful, new examination of Oakeshott’s *oeuvre* in particular. Perhaps Marsh’s perspective would allow Oakeshott’s *critiques* of socialization, and the very concept of “social” to be combined, for example, also with his critique of “capitalism”, but this is not explicit and the reader is left wanting Marsh to elaborate further.

Robert Devigne’s text on Oakeshott’s conservatism demonstrates an altogether more conventional kind of interpretation; however it defends its place in the book by warning the reader from associating Oakeshott too closely with Burke or Burkean conservatism. Devigne believes that “Oakeshott’s political philosophy moves in a decidedly more liberal direction” (though not “libertarian”), when we compare his earlier views in the 1940s with those of the 1970s (Devigne 2012, 273). Additionally, while “is” generally means “ought” to Burke, for Oakeshottian political philosophy the “is” should not be defined in terms of either good or bad (ibid, 272). And yet it is also clear that Oakeshott’s conservatism “centers on the realization that in modern European history the “is” approximates the “ought” and this “is” and “ought” are well worth un-

derstanding and preserving” (ibid, 282). The paradox contained in the last two sentences is, for the most part, due to Oakeshott’s inability and unwillingness to maintain the boundaries that he set out for himself, for example in his essay “Political Education” (1956), between levels of political thinking such as ideology and political philosophy. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, this contradiction in his work no longer exists as it once did. However, my interpretation is that he sees political *theorizing* as similarly conditional to other forms of knowledge and activities, but at the same time something quite distinct from a “philosopher king” style of instructing. The aspect that separates philosophy or theory from other “modes” or “voices” in the conversation of mankind, is the philosophical aspiration towards *unconditional* knowledge, but not its (im)possible attainment (e.g., *OHC*, “Talking Politics” (1975), and “The Vocabulary of Modern Politics” (1975)). Oakeshott’s accounts of contemporary modern politics and its probable future are also rather dark, so although not he is not a ‘Straussian’ in any sense, Devigne’s emphasis on modern European history largely as a “source of political good” in Oakeshott’s work seems somewhat misplaced to me.

Noël O’Sullivan’s essay on the Oakeshottian concept of civil association, in my view, gets the closest in this book to presenting an accurate description of Oakeshott’s political philosophy. O’Sullivan alludes to the “qualified sympathy” expressed by Oakeshott towards British idealism but emphasizes how he was “so disillusioned with the condition of modern political science as generally practiced at the time of World War II that he dismissed it as an almost entire disaster” (O’Sullivan 2012, 293). O’Sullivan also points out that Oakeshott never denied that the modern state more or less inevitably bears features of not just civil, but also “enterprise association”. Taxation and, more darkly, wartime are presented as examples of the latter, i.e., the state being directed for a purpose (ibid, 296). O’Sullivan describes the structure of (the ideal type) of civil association as being rule-based, and paying attention to its own shortcomings, and he speculates on the future of civil association in Western mass democracies (ibid, 310). O’Sullivan sees deep pessimism in Oakeshott’s view of the future, in terms of civil association, and he connects these aspects of his thought to the work of Ortega y Gasset and Huizinga (ibid, 309). Along with the trend that sees a diminution of playful activities in

our culture, O’Sullivan aptly asks if Oakeshott “may have clarified the requirements of civil association at the very time when the course of history has begun to turn decisively away from them” (ibid, 310).

The book ends with Steven Gerencser’s examination of Oakeshott’s concept of law. This viewpoint is also relatively new and rare. Gerencser uses both philosophical imagination as well as thorough knowledge of Oakeshott’s work to deal with this difficult topic, since all that Oakeshott says about law is closely associated with his “many other ideas” (Gerencser, 2012, 319). The basic dilemma for an interpreter of Oakeshott lies between the “traditionalist Oakeshott” who focuses attention on the traditional elements of a community and who is suspicious of attempts to create new arrangements, and the “formalist Oakeshott” who reflects on human conduct, agency and freedom in universal terms (ibid, 313). The conflict seems, in other words, to be between Oakeshott’s earlier and later works. Gerencser elaborates on the earlier decades (especially the 1930s and ’40s) by creating an imaginary essay “Rational Jurisprudence”. Oakeshott’s later view of law meanwhile, is examined in the context of civil association as a system based on authoritative, non-instrumental rules (ibid, 323). Gerencser provides both a convincing description and critique of Oakeshott’s concept of law, and he concludes his essay and indeed the whole book by bringing politics to the foreground because this represents Oakeshott’s own way of “resolving” the conflict between his traditional and formal understandings of law. Politics provides the possibility of conducting a *creative* activity in civil association. In other words, it consists of thinking about the arrangement(s) in *respublica* in either a new, or a conservative way. Thus, politics is one way to “adapt” to the changing circumstances of human life and its environment. At its best, politics contains a playful element in it while simultaneously giving – and saving – room for other human activities.

In all, *A Companion* is an ambitious endeavour, aiming to cover different aspects of Oakeshott’s philosophy and largely succeeding in this, by both covering the results of Oakeshott’s research and simultaneously raising awareness of their differences, which in turn leads to new questions. But for those who are interested mainly in Oakeshott’s understanding of *political* activity, or his *political* philosophy and thought, it

seems a bit curious that the following Oakeshottian thought is neglected almost entirely: he later alluded to politics being an activity which required such a “focus of attention and so un-common a self-restraint that one is not astonished to find this mode of human relationship to be as rare as it is excellent” (*OHC*, 180).

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