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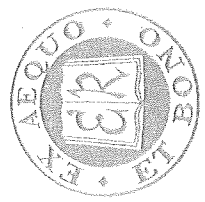
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Oakeshott and Conservatism

NATIONALISM IN POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS, by Michael Oakeshott.
 New York: Basic Books Publishing Co., Inc., 1962. 333 pp.
 Reviewed by **Francis G. Wilson**, Professor of Political Science,
 University of Illinois

IT is a pleasure to have Professor Oakeshott on my side, even though there are moments when I have trouble in understanding just where his verbal missile is directed. Curiously, his address in Madrid at the Athenaeum in 1955 on the functions of the state seems clearer than much of the writing in this volume. It is in part the problem one encounters in much of the behavioral discussion of values in our time: values are important, but though men may believe in them it is not the function of the political scientist to have any commitments as to truth in judgment; one needs only to be rigorously empirical. Thus, the author reduces nearly all things to "activity." Reason, civilization, education, politics, political theory, and so on endlessly are activities. In this sense he speaks like an American disciple of Arthur F. Bentley. Still, one is troubled, since the conviction will not down that after all Oakeshott does, in spite of iceberg language, believe something is true, and that some judgments about what human beings are doing are rational. But he tries hard to keep it a secret, since even when he slips and commits himself to a value judgment he does not say why a given virtue may be true.

Robert Schuettinger in *The Individualist* for January-February, 1963, refers to Oakeshott as a disciple of Burke, who knows that most social issues are moral and not susceptible of solution at the hands of the new breed of social engineers. He cites p. 35 [36] of the present volume, but in these passages Oakeshott is ridiculing the Rationalists for their "morality of the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals, and the appropriate form of moral education is by precept, by the presentation and explanation of moral principles." If he is a disciple of Burke he nowhere admits it, and he certainly does not admit that traditional behavior, as against moral ideals, should be defended on any ground of its truth or

philosophic validity. If morality exists, it is a form of activity, and thus it is the liquid in which existential moral ideals can float around. British tradition is not superior in its validity; it just is. Finally on p. 263, in discussing Thomas Hobbes' theories of morality, Oakeshott gets to the question that he would not discuss in relation to himself: "How did Hobbes bridge the gap between men's natural inclinations and what *ought* [italics mine] to be done about them? And with this question we reach the obscure heart of Hobbes' moral theory. For, not only is an answer to it the thing we would look for in the writings of any moralist, who normally takes his precepts from current moral opinion and himself contributes only the reasons for believing them to be true. . . ." His conclusion seems to be (p. 288) that Hobbes, like Plato, Machiavelli, and Bentham, wrote works containing both an exoteric and an esoteric doctrine. One wonders: Who are the others, and might it be true of Oakeshott himself? But this must never be confessed, for with such a confession there would be only lucidity of doctrine.

The theory of rationality which most irks the author is that one can behave in such a way as to seek to attain premeditated, pre-determined ends. "My view is that this is not a satisfactory notion of *rational* conduct because it is not a satisfactory account of any sort of conduct [p. 89]." One has sympathy for his attack on the modern cult of rationalism as social engineering. However Oakeshott seems to be affirming the organicity of all purposes, even to the difficulty of an infinite regression of experience. In contrast, I understand that the conservative is in general some sort of an Aristotelian in his theory of how one acquires knowledge. True, we act in contexts, but we also judge the context and obviously reorder it on occasion. Truth is ultimately to be authenticated not otherwise than through inference, or through nonsensory perception. Some science in its extremity has discredited logic as a biologically determined response to the environment, but any such dismissal must be organically conditioned if its premises are true; the irrationalists must see ultimately that their canons for testing facts are outside the category of the facts tested. Must we not say it is possible for some premeditation in purpose to be rational and that some inference is surely related to the context of experience from which our activity arises? The defense of traditional behavior may be its restoration, and the conservative may well say that the values of either preservation or

restoration as premeditated ends can be a high form of rational activity.

For Oakeshott, conservatism is not a credo, a body of principles, or an ideology. It is disposition to enjoy what is available rather than to look for something else (p. 168). Let innovation be within the limits of knowledge and probability, for people really seldom know what they are doing. Innovation under gradualism is the procedure of the conservative; the innovator must prove there will be some benefit; innovation should resemble growth; it should be aimed at a specific defect to be cured; it should be slow enough in pace for one to observe consequences and make adjustments; and finally innovation is important and it should be limited to what is intended (p. 172). Rules and their stability are important, and apparently they may be adopted in the sense of a premeditated goal (p. 181). For the conservative, government is limited in that it provides general rules of conduct or regulation, and people are permitted the enjoyment of making their own choices. Government should not be an instrument to inflame the passions of men; rather it must strive for moderation (not because moderation is a virtue or a truth about men) but because, pragmatically speaking, moderation is essential if men are to escape being locked in an encounter of mutual frustration (p. 192). Government moderation provides for us the skepticism for which we do not have the time or inclination (p. 193).

THE PROBLEM for the American conservative is whether conservatism is merely the disposition to enjoy, or as Bagehot suggested, the enjoyment of tradition. I began to understand Oakeshott, indeed, when on p. 200 he said, "philosophy, the impulse to study the quality and style of each voice (practical activity, science, and poetry), and to reflect upon the relationship of one voice to another, must be counted parasitic activity; it springs from the conservatism [of men], because this is what the philosopher reflects upon, but it makes no specific contribution to it." And then, though he concedes that the self exists (as activity) and that mind is also activity, he states the essence of the controversy about philosophy when he argues (p. 224 note) that "contemplation" alone survives from Plato's conception of "theory"; it is aesthetic experience, and it cannot be logical or demonstrative, which in fact Plato assumes unjustifiably for it. In another sense, thus, Oakeshott seems to re-

duce philosophy to the aesthetics of politics. Poetry, on the other hand, is the painless tragedies of politics.

In my lexicon of conservatism, poetry, science, and history all draw their meaning from the metaphysical ordering of the world. I suppose in fairness one should say that Oakeshott is the type of conservative like John Adams, who said against Rousseau: "Let's get some facts, for we have none from him." A Platonist would, no doubt, affirm that we start from some kind of data, and not from a premeditation *ex nihilo*, though the object implicates something in form or idea.

While Oakeshott affirms the function of a moral ideal, he does not, as Burke did, affirm its truth. He is an Englishman because he is an Englishman, and that is that. Thus, in education the tradition is passed on—not the text which tells how to do something technical, but the language of inquiry and explanation which we get from what some of us have called "the Great Tradition." Many comments on education run through the essays, and they suggest, indeed, that the author is not the sophisticated atheist that he sometimes intimates he might be (*e.g.*, on p. 197 he associates religious rites and magical spells in rather a loose manner). The educated man is thus more than a manipulator of tools; he is one who understands them and appreciates their stubborn resistance to change. Whether or not the tradition is true, Oakeshott believes, I think, that we should be initiated into the moral and intellectual habits and the achievements of our society, a partnership between the past and the present, and we should share such concrete knowledge as we may have. "Habit" is perhaps the word for the author, who, like Duns Scotus, might say that knowledge is in the will rather than in a Thomistic intelligence.

But Oakeshott has much in his favor when he shows his preference for traditional British education. His study of Hobbes is no doubt the most brilliant of the essays in the volume, but the most lucid, most damning, and most compelling is the final one, "The Study of Politics in a University." From this, it would seem that the British universities are beginning to drift into the superficiality of behaviorism and into the non-intellectualism of vocational training in political activity. Political Science becomes ideology; it is problem-solving outside of habit or tradition; its professors write the cookbooks for the young men who are wasting their lives in the bureaucracy. The

rationalists produce "cribs" or "ponies" for those who think politics is easy, like Isocrates at the end of Aristotle's *Politics*. No doubt, both England and America must start over their university teaching of politics.

If we should classify conservatives, our taxonomy would surely include people like Michael Oakeshott, a hard-headed man of activity and fact, a great critic of the illusions of liberal, copybook rationalism, and a defender of the tradition of freedom in his world of political experience. He is an empirical and factual conservative like Stanley Pargellis, and a civilized man to have in one's company.

From the earliest days of his emergence, the Rationalist has taken an ominous interest in education. He has a respect for "brains," a great belief in training them, and is determined that cleverness shall be encouraged and shall receive its reward of power. But what is this education in which the Rationalist believes? It is certainly not an initiation into the moral and intellectual habits and achievements of his society, an entry into the partnership between present and past, a sharing of concrete knowledge; for the Rationalist, all this would be an education in nescience, both valueless and mischievous. It is a training in technique, a training, that is, in the half of knowledge which can be learnt from books when they are used as cribs. And the Rationalist's affected interest in education escapes the suspicion of being a mere subterfuge for imposing himself more firmly on society, only because it is clear that he is as deluded as his pupils. He sincerely believes that a training in technical knowledge is the only education worth while, because he is moved by the faith that there is no knowledge, in the proper sense, except technical knowledge. He believes that a training in "public administration" is the surest defense against the flattery of a demagogue and the lies of a dictator.

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT, *Rationalism in Politics*