On History

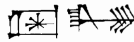
MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

On History

AND OTHER ESSAYS

Michael Oakeshott

Foreword by Timothy Fuller



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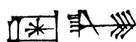

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To all who, over the years, have been members of the seminar on the history of political thought in the London School of Economics

Foreword

Timothy Fuller

Readers of this volume will wonder about Michael Oakeshott's intentions in collecting together three essays on history, an essay on the rule of law, and an essay on the Tower of Babel. The very precise title, *On History and Other Essays,* is not very revealing. Oakeshott was quirky and elusive about such matters. He often professed not to remember why he decided to do what he did, he was uninterested in catchy titles, and he felt no need to explain to his readers in advance what he wanted them to find in his work. However, I think these essays, taken together, represent important, constant features of his turn of mind and go together in an Oakeshottian way.

Oakeshott's disposition was, by his own admission, skeptical. It was forged in considering Socrates' dialectical probing of human ignorance, St. Augustine's skepticism about our pretensions to insulate ourselves from temporality and mortality, Montaigne's conviction that experience inevitably outstrips all efforts to classify and order it, and Hobbes's sober account of the motives, not of the most gallant or noble, but of the majority of human beings. One

encounters this outlook, Oakeshott thought, in absenting oneself for a while from immersion in the practical life, discovering thereby a more detached, even contemplative, perspective. To do this is not to eradicate the practical understanding, for that is always present from the beginning of life; rather, it is to attend to the less obvious and never dominant, but no less real possibility simply to understand the world, moved not by a felt need to alter or perfect it or to satisfy one's wants, but to explain to oneself the world's ways, to abate, without dissolving, the mystery of its puzzles and predicaments. This perspective is also present as a possibility from the beginning of a human life but it is perhaps not "primordial" as is the practical life in the sense that it does not demand satisfaction in the same insistent way.

Oakeshott's understanding of human liberty derives, in part, from his view that we are not condemned merely to "getting and spending," to the "deadliness of doing," to the "*danse macabre* of wants and satisfactions," or to the "search for power after power unto death"; we can respond to the world in more than one mode. Oakeshott elaborates on the idea that the world of practicality, while always with us, is not the foundation or origin of the alternatives of philosophical, historical, poetic, and scientific understanding. The latter, in Oakeshott's view, are not versions of the practical life translated into unusual rhetorical forms; they are genuine alternatives to the practical way of seeing the world, with which they coexist, and no one of them determines either what goes on in the others, or what they will have to say.

Oakeshott addresses this issue in the three essays on history in this volume by elaborating the argument for the possibility of a special, historical way of looking at the past, giving his reasons for concluding that the historian's "his-

torical" past is categorically different from the "practical" past. It was fundamental to Oakeshott's thought to show why assimilating the various modes of knowing into one comprehensive mode is a misunderstanding. This he had been arguing from his first major work, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), onwards. Thus a significant part of the first essay here counters the arguments for the primacy of the practical life against his insistence on a categorical separation of modes of knowing.

In other words, we have the capacity to understand the world in a variety of ways, modes, or languages, and, as a result, we enjoy the possibility of real conversation. Real conversation is an undirected engagement in which one distinctive voice is not reduced to another (there is, Oakeshott said, no "symposiarch" or "arbiter," no mode of all the modes), and by means of which *human* being discovers and distinguishes itself from all other being. The conversational prospect is where a glorious realization of the inherent freedom of the human spirit can appear.

One mode among the alternative modes particularly fascinated Oakeshott, and he wrote about it throughout his life: the historian's effort to understand the past without ulterior motive, that effort which distinguishes the historian as historian from all those who examine the past for the guidance they expect it to provide about their practical concerns, and distinguishes the persona of the historian as historian from his or her practical persona. Oakeshott's view on this is controversial, but he held to it consistently throughout his career. It is controversial precisely because of the widely held view that all human undertaking must be understood in terms of the practical concerns of life. For Oakeshott, however, there is no satisfactory way to distinguish what makes the historian an historian and not something else unless we insist on this separation. When histori-

ans adopt the historical mode of examining the past, he argued, they seek to set aside preoccupation with practical matters. As human beings, they do not, of course, cease to have practical concerns. Thus, achieving the historian's perspective requires an effort and represents a consciously considered accomplishment. This differentiates it from the effortless immersion in the practical life so far as that is "primordial." All the essays on history in this volume expound features of the understanding of the past for the historian as historian, elucidating an "impractical" past.

In the second place, the essay on the rule of law reflects Oakeshott's conclusion that, for the past five centuries, European civilization has engaged in the adventure to invent, and live in terms of, civil association, a set of arrangements in which we are associated with each other, not in terms of a teleological purpose or a uniform end for humanity, but in terms of agreed-upon procedures that secure opportunities for self-regulating individuals to pursue their self-chosen, widely varying forms of flourishing in voluntary associations, supported especially by the rule of law. In thinking of ourselves as temporal, individual beings, forever seeking satisfaction and self-understanding, we rely upon law as a means to make the uses of our freedom equitable, unpretentious, manageable, and secure. Oakeshott's most extensive and systematic treatment of civil association is to be found in *On Human Conduct* (1975), but the best expression of his idea of law is to be found in the essay in this volume.

Finally, Oakeshott thought that we human beings are prone perennially to misunderstanding ourselves, our possibilities, and our limits when we succumb to the temptation to try to erect structures we hope will bring us to a final perfection in a suppositious promised land. This tendency he thought a false appropriation of a concept of teleology

that is usually coupled with efforts both to surmount the constraints of the rule of law and to orchestrate the naturally diversifying tendencies of civil association. For him, all modern thought is affected by this tendency in the form of "modern rationalism." It particularly intrudes itself in modern ideological politics. His favorite presentation of this pathology was the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel. Indeed, the essay of that name included here is the second essay he published with that title; the first, originally published in 1948, he included in *Rationalism in Politics* (1962, 1991). I was present when Oakeshott originally read this second Tower of Babel essay at a meeting of the Carlyle Club (an intellectual society composed of members primarily from Oxford, Cambridge, and London) in Trinity College, Oxford, in October 1979. The reception was friendly but mixed since, as was often the case in responding to Oakeshott's views, many of his listeners found it hard to abandon with him the practical for a detached mode of talking about what it means to be human. In due course, comments on this essay tended to treat it as if Oakeshott's purpose were to defend some negating or pessimistic ("conservative" in a pejorative sense) political stance, whereas he thought of himself as describing, or explaining, something about the human condition as it reveals itself when we cease for a time to plunge into the self-forgetting tasks of practical life that always beckon us, and look at ourselves from a different angle. This is not only not negative, from Oakeshott's perspective, it is an affirmation of inviting human possibilities. It would only be negative, in his view, if we were forced to conclude that politics, or the practical life, is the only source of meaning for us.

In short, the essays in *On History and Other Essays,* taken together, comprise a series of complementary approximations to an Oakeshottian understanding of the human

condition when considered in historical and philosophical reflectiveness, detached from any practical engagement to make one's way in the world or to subject free human beings to the guidance of "superior insight."

II

All of these essays were originally lectures or papers that Oakeshott presented to his students and colleagues. In professing his subject as a university teacher, Oakeshott was never far from these ideas. The character of his presentations—as, for instance, on the "activity of being an historian"—revealed his understanding of what distinguishes study in a university from any other activity, and what marks the university as the place where the alternative modes of knowing are likely to be perceived and to flourish. He especially wanted to separate strictly the idea of university study from any notion that such study is the carrying on of politics by other means. The setting aside of places of learning is prompted by the recognition, implicit or explicit, that there is something important for us that emerges when we stand back from the world. This became clear in no uncertain terms in Oakeshott's inaugural lecture, "Political Education," at The London School of Economics in 1951 (subsequently reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics*, 1962, 1991).

In October 1964, in response to a mandate of the University of London, Oakeshott inaugurated the History of Political Thought program in the Government Department, one among a number of new one-year master's programs (leading to the MSc degree) which were to be alternatives to the traditional two-year, research degree. This new degree was to be completed in a twelve-month period (October to Oc-

tober) through course work taken during an academic year, followed by a period of summer study and a set of examination papers taken in the following fall.

The design of his program embodied Oakeshott's approach to the study of political thought in a university, his view on what a university education is, and how the study of politics fits into the university context. This for him meant considering politics historically and philosophically in detachment from engagements to resolve political problems or policy debates. The study of politics in a university is, for Oakeshott, an activity categorically different from the practices of political life. He rejected as inappropriate for the university "political theory" understood as the engagement to marshal general ideas in defense of political stands or policy recommendations. He also rejected as inappropriate studying history for its supposed lessons about what to do or not to do in current political circumstances.

Oakeshott knew, of course, that practical theorizing, the moralizing examination of history, and the ideological use of philosophy go on all the time; it is hard to imagine politics as we know it without these accompanying activities. But for him the university is a special place of learning, purposely set apart from the political life. It is a place where one can pursue a different understanding of what the practice of political life reveals to us about the human condition. It does not and cannot overcome, or substitute for, the ordeal of pursuing the intimations of practical life. The study of politics in a university can illuminate the goings on in political activity, but it cannot direct politics; on the contrary, when students of politics enter politics, politics will subdue them to its own contingencies.

When Oakeshott discussed the "history of political thought," he wanted to show what it means to study po-

litical thought in a university as an historian studying the history of thought on politics. Much of the work in the History of Political Thought MSc program introduced students to this understanding. The first term of the academic year addressed the question of how to see history; the second term addressed different kinds of explanation in science, philosophy, and anthropology; the third term addressed the question of what politics is.

The papers on history in the present volume are distillations of various versions of Oakeshott's presentations over the years to the general seminar of the History of Political Thought program. To those who are familiar with Oakeshott's earlier writings on history, it will be clear that the essays herein were intended both to summarize his thinking for his former students and to respond to criticisms of his previously published thoughts on history. Typically, Oakeshott did not respond directly to the critics of his work even though he was acutely aware of the criticisms they expressed. Instead, he thought about the criticisms and incorporated his responses in subsequent essays or subsequent versions of essays, often modifying his previous formulations, usually without identifying the critics to whom he was responding.

Oakeshott's thinking on the character of philosophy, on historical study, and on law are persistent themes which go back to *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), to his essays and lectures on the history of political thought at Cambridge in the 1930s, to his lectures at LSE in the 1950s, and to the 1958 essay, "The Activity of Being an Historian," later reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics*. Above all, Oakeshott wanted to avoid "a spurious academic focus for whatever political interest there might be about," and the use of the lecture hall to promote "ideal" programs or policies, that is, to propagandize (*Rationalism in Politics,* Liberty Fund,

1991, p. 208). He had no taste for the compromise of the university as university by the introduction of vocational education. He knew, of course, that all places we call universities in actuality strike compromises among the many conflicting aspirations held by their inhabitants.

The study of political thought typically centers on the study of major texts or great books in political philosophy. What made Oakeshott's program unusual is that it put off the examination of the great works in political philosophy until the investigation of the character of historical study and other modes of academic inquiry—as Oakeshott understood them—had been well established. He wanted students to learn a way of thinking and appraisal that did not assume they were doing so in order to equip themselves with practical injunctions about political conduct. He wanted them not to see the great works as repositories of information for practical use (although, of course, they can be and often are seen this way), but, rather, as introductions to ways of thinking—"languages" rather than "literatures," as he put it (*Rationalism in Politics,* Liberty Fund, 1991, pp. 209–10).

On the other hand, Oakeshott did not take the historicist view that the great works can be understood only as "products of their time." His interest was not to explain thought away or to reduce it merely to sociological evidence. Historicism is one particular doctrine about what the study of the past reveals to us, not the necessary conclusion of the historian's activity. He saw that works of the highest caliber spoke across the centuries in the perpetual dialogue of the philosophers—although occasioned by their time and place, they could not be confined to their time and place. For him, the most important point to establish is that philosophy and history seek to explain the world philosophically and historically, accepting that these inquiries succeed

insofar as they set aside claims of competence to interfere with the world or to transform it.

The "languages" proper to the university Oakeshott called "*explanatory* languages": history, philosophy, science, mathematics. By contrast, political activity, poetic expression, and moral conduct are languages expressing opinions, beliefs, ideals, aspirations, hopes, fears, strategies to preserve or to change, convictions and commitments, sentiments, desires and aversions. Of course these languages appear within the university, but they are not what distinguishes the university from other things. The explanatory languages may be used to explain the utterances in these other, expressive modes—to understand them in a way they do not themselves accept—but the arguments of politics, the expression of poetic sentiment, the promulgation of moral perspectives, are not themselves, in Oakeshott's view, "explanations." Thus the university student who wishes to study politics should learn the "modes of thought and manners of speaking of an historian and a philosopher" (*Rationalism in Politics,* Liberty Fund, 1991, p. 212). For example, to study Hobbes's *Leviathan* is to learn how to think philosophically about issues identified by Hobbes as central to politics, and to recognize that Hobbes is responding philosophically to Plato, Aristotle, and the Schoolmen as well as seeking to explain the circumstances of England and Europe in the 1640s.

It is thus incumbent on university teachers not to teach merely in terms of what happens to be of present practical concern to them, or, for that matter, to their students. We know that Hobbes and other philosophers did not hide their preferences for certain political arrangements, but, so far as they engaged in philosophic discourse, Oakeshott understood them to be following the implications of their explanations of goings on. A philosopher, Oakeshott main-

tained, "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 philosophical argument is its coherence, its intelligibility, its power to illuminate and its fertility" (*Rationalism in Politics,* p. 215). This may well mean that most or all works are a mixture of philosophic or historical explanation and practical concerns; this is the common condition of human utterance. But Oakeshott wanted to point to the difference between one thing and another, and to help his students develop the capacity for appraising the differing modes of human understanding.

For example, the historian's past is a special sort of past, produced as the result of a remarkable and relatively modern achievement requiring "emancipation from the primordial and once almost exclusive practical attitude of mankind" (*Rationalism in Politics,* p. 171). Indeed, to free oneself from the practical attitude is "an immensely difficult achievement," because "our predominant interest is not in 'history' but only in retrospective politics" (*Rationalism in Politics,* p. 181), and because the practical past and moral judgments about past conduct are "not the enemy of mankind, but only the enemy of 'the historian'" (*Rationalism in Politics,* p. 180). The practical past sought by most "repeats with spurious authority the utterances put into its mouth" (*Rationalism in Politics,* p. 181). By stark contrast, the historical past "is a complicated world, without unity of feeling or clear outline: in it events have no over-all pattern or purpose, lead nowhere, point to no favoured condition of the world and support no practical conclusions" (*Rationalism in Politics,* p. 182).

In Oakeshott's way of thinking such an "historian's conclusion" is compatible with the Platonic/Augustinian idea that meaning is not constituted in the interminable course of temporal events, but elsewhere. His is neither a nihilistic

nor a despairing conclusion; it might seem so to those who, preoccupied with the practicalities of life, hope that the flow of events must reach coherence or finality. But for Oakeshott this meant indirectly pointing towards or hinting at possibilities that are obscured by the dominance of the practical life and encouraging individuals to exercise their freedom to say what things mean for them. Beyond the practical liberties of political and economic order, a subject on which he had a good deal to say in such essays as "The Rule of Law" in this volume and "The Political Economy of Freedom" in *Rationalism in Politics,* there is the liberty associated with a deeper understanding of the elusive, often obscured human possibilities that are realized not alone in practical life, but beyond it and, often, despite it.

On History

Three Essays on History

I
Present, Future and Past

1

The word "history" is ambiguous; it is commonly used in at least two different senses. In one it stands for the notional grand total of all that has ever happened in the lives of human beings, or for a passage of somehow related occurrences distinguished in this grand total by being specified in terms of a place and a time and a substantive identity. This meaning appears in such expressions as "the history of the world," "the history of the Jews," "the history of Switzerland," or "the early history of the Bank of England." Here the adjective "historical" means what actually happened there and then, in respect of this identity, whether or not we know anything whatever about it. And the "makers" of such "history" are the participants in the occurrences.

In another meaning, "history" stands for a certain sort of enquiry into, and a certain sort of understanding of, some such passage of occurrences; the engagement and the conclusions of an historian. And this meaning appears in such expressions as "an historical dictionary of the English language," or "when reading Ranke or Maitland one feels