

The Voice of Liberal Learning

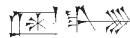


MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

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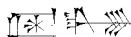
Michael Oakeshott

FOREWORD AND INTRODUCTION
BY TIMOTHY FULLER



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Foreword to the Liberty Fund Edition

The idea for collecting the essays in this book arose in 1987 in discussions I had with Shirley Letwin. At that moment, Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch were dominating discussions of education in America with their recent publications of *The Closing of the American Mind* and *Cultural Literacy*. Shirley Letwin urged me to approach Michael Oakeshott to let me bring his essays on education together in a volume that, we felt, would contribute a different, complementary voice to the debates about education. Oakeshott was agreeable, and Yale University Press in London, under the leadership of Yale's London editor, Robert Baldock, agreed to take on the project. The reception accorded *The Voice of Liberal Learning* was gratifying. The book was widely reviewed and used in many courses and seminars dealing with the philosophy of education or with Oakeshott's work as a whole. It has now been out of print for several years, but I continue to receive numerous inquiries about its becoming available again. It is our very good fortune that Liberty Fund has undertaken a new printing of the book, for Oakeshott's voice remains central to a proper debate over the current and future state of liberal learning.

Anxiety over the state of education is inherent to the American republic. The debates about education in the 1980s were new versions of long-standing issues, persisting throughout the twentieth century and destined, it appears, to continue unabated in the twenty-first. In the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, American educational issues were classically and representatively joined by John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins. In numerous variations of those debates, the following themes emerged: on the one side, there is the critique of inherited traditions in an age with progressive aspirations fostered by the rise of modern science and the triumph of democracy. Here we are asked to see the human condition as an endless, fascinating experiment in continually adjusting ourselves in ways that will make us more and more effective in advancing our health, well-being, social equality, and community. Education must serve democracy and make it progressive. The resources of the past are to be assessed and used for their current value to solve current social problems. History is of interest insofar as it serves our purposes. To the extent such resources are not helpful, they are to be relegated to the periphery. The past must serve the present. The goals of humanity are immanent and must be achieved visibly in the world. We must take a scientific and experimental attitude toward social relations, and we must expect educational institutions to foster and enhance our capacity to do those things. Individuals are to become both community minded and yet, at the same time, critical appraisers of existing social relations, contributing to their communities by combining criticism with commitment.

On the other side, we are to seek, through the pursuit of learning for its own sake, the perennial truths of the human condition. This view endorses the principle that education must serve democracy, yet insists that we require a significant degree of disengagement from the here and now of current life and,

further, promotes the study of the great works of the Western tradition as the primary means to encounter perennial wisdom. In that view, the contingencies of our historical existence no doubt continually alter, and no doubt we must attend to the arrangements we have with each other, but the basic principles of understanding do not change. The great expositions of those principles, found for instance in Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas, are forever pertinent and fresh. Newer works add to what we can know, but they do not supersede the older works in helping us to think about questions of human fulfillment.

Both views typically pledged their allegiance to American democracy but differed on what the commitment means and on the question of the educational requirements for a democratic society. In the first case, the commitment means advancing the tendency of democracy toward equality in all respects; in the second, it means adopting the role of friendly critic, discerning where the egalitarian impulse is appropriate, and where it is not. In practice, many Americans find themselves between these two positions, not happy strictly with either view, uncertain as to the resolution of the argument.

Oakeshott rejected the idea that we can once and for all choose one side or the other of this dichotomy between the so-called static, or traditionalist, view and the “dynamic,” or progressivist, view. In his way of thinking, one must acknowledge that each of these opposed views has noted something that is real in our experience but that neither view by itself will satisfactorily illuminate the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In thinking about politics, Oakeshott considered himself a skeptic. By this he implied that politics is characteristically torn in these ways, caught between two poles of thinking. Our public life is shaped, and has been shaped for several centuries, by the tension between faith in infinite improvement and the

conviction that politics is a servant of what people wish to do for themselves, not an instrument for leading people to a theoretical perfection. He thought that the philosophic examination of our situation shows that this polarity is what we take as natural, even though it has a history, and we rarely imagine fighting our battles in any other terms.

Oakeshott has thus been criticized for being both an elitist conservative and a postmodernist and relativist. Oakeshott's thinking cannot be confined to, or explained by, either of those positions. He was unquestionably committed to the importance of the great tradition of Western thought and was a lifelong student of the greatest works within that tradition. One need only read his essay "A Place of Learning" in this book to see his devotion to the traditions of humane learning. At the same time, he was not nostalgic about the past or any particular past period. He thought that efforts to construct a checklist of books to be read and skills to be acquired are misguided, especially at the level of university education. At some point in the educational venture, students need an interval in which they are neither simply learning school lessons nor looking to their future careers. In this interval is to be found the full flowering of liberal learning, the blossoming of a human life. This is an education in imagination and the specific elements of such an education must serve that end, which is a kind of end in itself. Such education is, for Oakeshott, an adventure in discovering what there is to be learned and in discovering what one understands oneself to be, and to do it for oneself. What do I understand myself to be? And what amongst the array of offerings and invitations spread before me do I find meaningful? This adventure is open-ended. One cannot know where it will lead. It is a quest that might or might not become a pilgrimage. It held, for Oakeshott, something of the quixotic: the nobility of it lies not in victories or defeats, prosaic or spectacular, but in the way

one conducts oneself through both victory and defeat and in the capacity, finally, to see further and more deeply.

Oakeshott thought that the modern world had genuine accomplishments for which it had no need to apologize, but he also thought we often mistake what they are. He thought that moderns pride themselves excessively for their supposed rationalism, a way of thinking that he famously criticizes in numerous essays collected in *Rationalism in Politics*. He thought that we too frequently build our own versions of the Tower of Babel while, in our forgetfulness of ancient wisdom, we fail to recognize what we are doing. Although he was not prone to use such terms as “perennial truths,” he saw clearly that there are characteristic ways in which, as he liked to put it, human beings can both understand and misunderstand themselves. The educated person learns to recognize this in its many guises.

Oakeshott believed that we might consider becoming less preoccupied with the world of getting and spending, less prone to measure our well-being in quantitative terms, allowing ourselves to find delight in the poetic interstices of the daily world. This means looking for the possibilities available to us in the present, not always thinking that we must commit ourselves to what may come in the future. Abstracting ourselves from present circumstances, a liberation that is at best partial, for the sake of an idyllic future, moves us toward constant dissatisfaction and anxiety, thinking that all present accomplishments are of little value compared with a hypothetical perfection that we have taught ourselves forever to seek. Change, of course, is inevitable. We need not be committed to change as good in itself to have the experience of change. We are mortal, temporal beings and change is ineluctable. Fixity is not our earthly fate, even if we long for it. Yet to subscribe to the idea of change as intrinsically good (and not to think of it as simply a necessity), and to couple that idea with efforts to engineer change in the

hope that someday we will be content, is a recipe for oscillation between utopian expectations and disillusionment.

This outlook characterizes his thought on education. To Oakeshott, we human beings are “in ourselves what we are for ourselves.” That is, we must, as Aristotle also taught, learn to be human; we must be brought up in families so that we acquire a way of being human. There is no way to be human in general. Our existence must be concrete and actual within some human community with an actual way of life. But what we learn in this way allows us eventually to reflect on what we have learned, to consider it, and to decide how we stand in relation to it. The original communal experience is the precondition for the emergence of the individual who, in maturity, is capable of self-regulation and thus of relating to others through chosen forms of association. One might say, as we often do, that all of human life is a learning experience. But there are also places set aside for learning in a peculiarly self-conscious way what it means to lead a human life, places where we are offered the chance to think that out for ourselves. For 2,500 years places of learning have been founded in our civilization. They appear in a dizzying array of forms, but always, whatever adventitious tasks they may acquire or have imposed upon them, explicit attention to becoming fully human is at their core. Whatever practical, professional, or vocational undertakings they may acquire, what sets them apart from other places, activities, and agencies is the acknowledgment, explicit or implicit, that we will not realize the fullness of the human spirit, nor realize deliverance from the realm of necessity, if we are deprived of the opportunity to experience learning for its own sake. Most of the time we are preoccupied with the practicalities of life and, because of this, many people conclude that the practical life is fundamental and all activities departing from concern for practicality are secondary and derivative.

This is a conclusion Oakeshott rejected. In this he was inspired in part by the ancient wisdom of Aristotle that the fulfillment of life is to be found in the life of the mind afforded by leisure. It is, to quote Josef Pieper, leisure that is the basis of culture. In Oakeshott's version of this wisdom, the opportunities for philosophy, poetry, and historical and scientific research reveal that these pursuits are no less important to humanity than is the unavoidable immersion in the dailiness of existence. These activities are not secondary but as close to the heart of humanity as the pervasive, intrusive political and social activities. Part of the evidence for this is the permanent presence in our civilization of places of learning that have always been understood to be set apart from the here and now of daily life, set apart not because those who spend time in such places will remain — most do not. Rather, as Oakeshott taught, what is being acknowledged is the centrality of the encounter with that which provides what working necessity cannot, and the worth of acquiring resources for reflection, that capacity to catch sight of the poetic in the midst of the ordinary, which is the grace of life.

Timothy Fuller
Colorado Springs, 2000

Introduction

TIMOTHY FULLER

A Philosophical Understanding of Education

Those who know Michael Oakeshott will insist that first and foremost he is a great teacher. He, on the other hand, has always thought of himself, first, as a learner. His schooldays, he will tell you, were the happiest time of his life. And it was his never forgotten experience as a schoolboy that led him to become a teacher and the kind of teacher he was: unavoidably a lecturer and a critic of his pupils' work, but more at home in the conversational give-and-take of a class or a seminar; a guide rather than an instructor, a fellow-traveler rather than a leader.

Being philosophically disposed to consider what he was doing as well as doing it, it is not surprising that he should often have reflected on the engagements of teaching and learning and from time to time have published these reflections. For the most part, what he has written on these subjects was composed for specific occasions, was published locally, and is now out of print. The present purpose is to reprint the more significant of these pieces in the belief that what was prompted by particular occasions has more than local value for those who are committed to liberal learning.

How teaching and learning are characterized in these essays springs from, and presupposes, the philosophical understanding of human experience which Oakeshott explored in his first major work, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), and which was elaborated in the first part of *On Human Conduct* (1975).

The quest to identify the distinctive features of important human activities has always been central to his philosophical investigations. He is most widely known for expounding the central features of the political life, for elaborating his ideal of civil association, for his work on the nature of the historian's activity and on the idea of the rule of law. The essays collected here should reveal that seeking the distinguishing features of teaching and learning are inseparable from his work as a whole.¹

Oakeshott's essays evoke the elusive features inherent in good teaching and learning without obscuring the great variability in manners of teaching which defy generalization. Contemporary efforts to simplify teaching into a set of technical functions, so that it might become "fail-safe," is a disastrous misunderstanding, however well-intentioned, threatening to destroy the possibility of genuine learning.

Both in Britain and in the United States there are great debates about the future of education at every level. It is widely accepted that there are fundamental derangements within the educational establishments, and proposals for reform or revolution abound. Opinions range from denying that there is any

1. Oakeshott is well known in intellectual and academic circles for his remarkable introduction to Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1946), for *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), *On Human Conduct* (1975), and *On History* (1983). However, with the exception of two essays included in *Rationalism in Politics*, "Political Education" and "The Study of Politics in a University," his reflections on education have not as yet gained wide circulation. For more complete bibliographical information, the reader should consult *Politics and Experience, Essays Presented to Michael Oakeshott*, edited by Preston King and B. C. Parekh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), and Josiah Lee Auspitz, "Bibliographical Note," *Political Theory*, vol. 4, no. 3, August 1976, pp. 295–300.

particular thing that should be learned to asserting that there is a canonical shortlist of great books to which teachers and students should confine themselves exclusively. Educational experts try their hand at drawing up checklists of general information which purport to describe “what every student should know.” Programs for making education socially relevant abound. Arguments rage over the place of Western civilization in the curriculum as if a civilization were an offering we could choose simply to accept or reject, an object of detached investigation.

Liberal learning as Oakeshott understands it has been confused with, or displaced by, “behavior modification” in the minds of many: sex education, drug education, values clarification, peace studies, suicide prevention (“death education”), consciousness raising and much else that enjoys current celebrity.

In such a potpourri there is no clear judgment of the distinguishing features of teaching and learning, nor of the character of the places where those activities have traditionally been undertaken. Proposals for curriculum reform often take no account of the existing practices into which they must be fitted. We are in peril of forgetting that it was the perception of their special qualities that inspired the setting apart of places of learning, and justified their special privileges of leisure and free discussion, in Europe and North America over the past eight centuries.

It is often alleged that there is no longer any basis of agreement, apart perhaps from features of technique, to aid reflection on what teaching and learning are about. Academicians alternatively feel liberated or coerced to pick and choose among the vast array of alternatives before them. More and more options arise not from the mutual self-exploration of those who are intimately and continually engaged in the academic enterprise —

teachers and scholars—but from those who wish to mine the academy’s “mental resources,” whether to perfect or to undermine current social policies, and who give or withhold support of the academy for these reasons. Under such conditions, it ought not to surprise anyone that educational institutions, both in Great Britain and in the United States, have become less distinguishable from pressure groups seeking protection for their interests.

Academic institutions nowadays are often little more than weak alliances among intellectual entrepreneurs who welcome the intervention of extrinsic goals and “values,” and the money that supports them from foundation and government grants. This must alter the conversation among academics. Frequently, they cooperate entirely with a view to mutual protection, through studied indifference, of their separate intellectual interests. This is not the agreement to disagree, which has always been essential to academic life; it is an agreement to be ignorant of each other, and to avoid reflections that might carry them beyond the plying of their respective disciplinary trades.

Academic institutions, it would appear, are in varying degrees disintegrated communities of scholars. They remain places physically set apart for teaching and learning, but entering their premises no longer guarantees encounter with a self-understanding, however mysterious and complex it may initially seem, that gradually discloses a distinctive manner of activity that really does set them apart. What has been obscured, if not lost, is the *idea* of a school, a college, a university.

It is important to emphasize the danger this loss entails. Many mistakenly assume that what is missing is an organizing, energizing purpose or goal for education. It is characteristic of our time to look for ulterior purposes, and to design programs to achieve them, rather than to recall what we have already learned how to do and to take that as our guide. Since the world

is overflowing with purposes and programs, it is an increasingly irresistible temptation for academic institutions to submit to the world's inevitably contradictory judgments.

Yet, for Michael Oakeshott, the idea of an activity is necessarily, inevitably, interwoven with, and emergent from within, the continuous practice of the activity. If we do not now find it easy to pick out the salient features of teaching and learning, it is in part because we do not now enjoy a clarifying experience of them.

We are sorely tempted to focus our attention on techniques rather than on the qualities that inhere in those whose mastery of a subject is such that, without doting on abstract techniques, perhaps without ever having even tried to conceptualize techniques apart from the practice of an activity, they appear before us as masters whose conduct we may imitate as apprentices, absorbing the idea and the practice in a harmonious whole.

Oakeshott's reflections on teaching and learning uniquely attend to just these neglected features. He offers no checklist of things that every educated person ought to know. The checklist approach must narrow the sense of adventure into uncharted intellectual seas, obscuring the point that one is educated not merely because of what one knows, but as much or more for the manner in which one learns.

In saying the latter, one runs the risk of confusing emphasis on the manner of learning with Deweyite emphasis on skills and the accompanying de-emphasis on the content of learning. But for Oakeshott the aim is to enter a relationship of "conversation" informed by familiarity with the traditional literary, philosophical, artistic and scientific expressions of European civilization. There is no plausible distinction for him between "essence" and "accident," and thus no true learning that separates the "how" from the "what" of knowing. To try, therefore, to correct the last several generations of training in abstract

skills, by creating a great debate over lists of books to be inserted in curricula, is to perpetuate an uncivilizing dichotomy (already evident in faculty debates), a bifurcating conflict unmediated by intimacy with a comprehensive tradition within which one can live and move, holding skill and knowledge together in a natural, experiential unity.

E. D. Hirsch in *Cultural Literacy* exemplifies this difficulty in continuing to defend the Deweyite aspirations to universal, democratic literacy while rejecting exclusive emphasis on skills he traces to Dewey and Rousseau.² He finds himself compelled to employ the great books as resources for creating “cultural literacy,” a facility in recognizing the use of literary allusions in contemporary writing that falls between mere functional literacy and expert knowledge of any subject. Such facility, Hirsch argues, will promote success in making one’s way through life, and can also serve to create a common body of discourse among the diverse groups that modern polities must comprise. Laudable as the emphasis on rediscovering the great books and their memorable expressions may be, Hirsch has liberated himself very little from the technique orientation.³

Contemporary education is hard-pressed to distinguish formality and civility — the general rules of “conversation” — from manipulative, managerial techniques which are designed to

2. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987).

3. Speaking of the need for cultural literacy in a modern, technological society, Hirsch writes: “The complex undertakings of modern life depend on the cooperation of many people with different specialties in different places. Where communications fail, so do the undertakings. (That is the moral of the story of the Tower of Babel.)” *Cultural Literacy*, p. 2. Hirsch converts the Tower of Babel story into a parable for creating global unity through a joint technological enterprise requiring a universal form of literacy (communications skill). One might have taken the story to be a warning against such pretensions. Cultural literacy here means facility in employing a story from the past for a present purpose at odds with the original moral point. This perhaps illustrates something about “cultural literacy” that should concern us.

achieve goals of apparent specificity such as “cultural literacy.” The project is to harness technique to an array of cultural artifacts, justified by reference to a certain conception of social improvement. Here we see the premises upon which much of the contemporary advocacy of “general education” rests. Hirsch undoubtedly hopes students will discover, in the process, the experience of learning as an end in itself, but his justification is couched in terms of practical success. This approach lends itself particularly well to rhetorically powerful formulations by governmental agencies, promoting the prospect of solving educational “problems” by “educational policies.”

For Oakeshott, the conversation of liberal learning is mistakenly characterized when set in terms of “progress” or of political programs and policies. Nor does he think that real conversation can be “general.” He speaks out of an experience of teaching and learning which is specific and yet broad in scope; this is not “general.” “General” education is a notion developed in response to “specialized” or vocational education, and often implicitly understood to mean an adornment to practical training. The defectiveness of the term lies in the fact that it is spawned in reaction to the dominant tendencies of a culture prone to express itself in terms of “pragmatism,” “utility,” “technology,” “social design” and “public policy.” It is now common, for example, in American colleges and universities, to speak of “nonscience majors” when referring to students of the humanities. Nowhere will one hear of science students as “non-humanities majors.” This colloquialism is symptomatic of a cultural barrier to liberal learning, which is neither “general” nor “specialized” in the sense of “vocational” or “professional.”

In the essays that follow, Oakeshott evokes the idea of liberal learning, offering a corrective to those who, finding it difficult to set out quickly what education is about, wish to assuage their fears about its relevance.

If philosophical reflection on education is reduced to arguments solely about which books or concepts must be taught, we will remain in the impasse between confusion and dogma. It is characteristic nowadays to be so caught, in education, in politics, and in every important activity.

Oakeshott, seeking to circumvent these impasses whenever he encounters them, portrays an alternative vision which might help us to pass between anarchy on one side and the imposition of false doctrines of salvation on the other. That is why the metaphor of conversation is so central to his ideas of philosophy and of education. To see this, we must examine the general contours of his thought in relation to his educational reflections.

2

In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott argued for the radical unity of human experience in thought.⁴ He criticized as misleading all lingering dualistic distinctions such as immanent-transcendent, temporal-eternal, mediate-immediate experience; all efforts to postulate experience that is not within thought.⁵ Our world, he asserted, is what we understand it to be; a “world” emanates from human reflection and is thus a world of ideas. We are born and grow up in a world of ideas already present and understood in various ways by those preceding us on the

4. *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933). For example: “experience is a single whole, within which modifications may be distinguished, but which admits of no final or absolute division; and that experience everywhere, not merely is inseparable from thought, but is itself a form of thought.” p. 10.

5. “It is, indeed, nonsensical to speak of reality as if it belonged to a separate world of its own. Either it is a character of the world of experience, or it must confess itself a nonentity. It is not a unique substance, but a predicative conception appropriate only to a world of experience. And the thinker who demands a reality beyond experience is certain of disappointment.” *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 54.