

MEETING
in memory of
PROFESSOR MICHAEL OAKESHOTT
1901 - 1990

*Professor Emeritus of Political Science, LSE
Fellow of the British Academy*

L.S.E.
Founders' Room
Friday 17 May 1991
5.00 p.m.

ORDER OF PROCEEDINGS

Tributes to the life and work of Professor Michael Oakeshott will be paid by:

Professor Elie Kedourie
The London School of Economics

Mr John Morgan
G.H.Q. Liaison Regiment ('Phantom')

Mr John Casey
Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge

Professor Timothy Fuller
Colorado College

Professor Kenneth Minogue
The London School of Economics

Concluding reading by
Dr Shirley Letwin

Chairman: Dr Robert Orr
The London School of Economics

After the tributes, participants and guests are invited to the Senior Common Room for refreshments

On Youth, Old Age, Mortality

Everybody's young days are a dream, a delightful insanity; a sweet slip-slip-slipism. Nothing in them has a fixed shape, nothing a fixed price; everything is a possibility, and we live happily on credit. There are no obligations to be observed; there are no accounts to be kept. Nothing is specified in advance; everything is what can be made of it. The world is a mirror in which we seek the reflection of our own desires...urgency is our criterion of importance; and we do not easily understand that what is humdrum need not be despicable. We are impatient of restraint; and we readily believe, like Shelley, that to have contracted a habit is to have failed....

For most there is what Conrad called the 'shadow line' which, when we pass it, discloses a solid world of things, each with its fixed shape, each with its own point of balance, each with its price; a world of fact, not poetic image, in which what we have spent on one thing we cannot spend on another; a world inhabited by others besides ourselves who cannot be reduced to mere reflections of our own emotions.

"On Being Conservative" 1956

The myth of the Fall of Man, says Berdyaev, 'is at bottom a proud idea.... If man fell away from God, he must have been an exalted creature, endowed with great freedom and power'. But in the myth of our civilization as it appears in *Leviathan*, the emphasis is on the opposite pole; it recalls man to his littleness, his imperfection, his mortality... what makes *Leviathan* a masterpiece of philosophical literature is the profound logic of Hobbes's imagination, his power as an artist. Hobbes recalls us to our mortality with a deliberate conviction, with a subtle and sustained argument. He, with a sure and steady irony, does what Swift could do with an only intermittent brilliance, and what the literature of Existentialism is doing today with an exaggerated display of emotion and a false suggestion of novelty.

"Leviathan: A Myth" 1947

On Friends and Lovers

Friends and lovers are not concerned with what can be made out of each other, but only with the enjoyment of one another. A friend is not somebody one trusts to behave in a certain manner, who has certain useful qualities, who holds acceptable opinions; he is somebody who evokes interest, delight, unreasoning loyalty, and who (almost) engages contemplative imagination. The relationship of friends is dramatic, not utilitarian. And again, loving is not 'doing good'; it is not a duty; it is

emancipated from having to approve or to disapprove. Its object is individual and not concretion of qualities: it was for Adonis that Venus quit heaven. What is communicated and enjoyed is not an array of emotions-affection, tenderness, concern, fear, elation, etc. - but the uniqueness of a self. But while there is nobody incapable of being loved, there is nobody who singles himself out as pre-eminently proper to be loved. Neither merit nor necessity has any part in the generation of love; its progenitors are chance and choice - chance, because what cannot be identified in advance cannot be sought; and in choice the inescapable practical component of desire makes itself felt.

"The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" 1959

On Conversation

In conversation, 'facts' appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; 'certainties' are shown to be combustible, not by being brought into contact with other 'certainties' or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions. Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present; nobody cares what will become of them when they have played their part. There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. And voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering.... As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries.... It is the ability to participate in this conversation, and not the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world, or to contrive a better world, which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian.

"The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" 1959

On Liberal Learning

Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation....

"The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" 1959

And when with inky fingers a schoolboy unpacked his satchel to do his homework he unpacked three thousand years of the fortunes and misfortunes of human intellectual adventure. Nor would it easily have occurred to him to ask what the sufferings of Job, the silent ships moving out of Ithaca in the moonlight, the terror, the complication and the pity of the human condition revealed in a drama of Shakespeare or Racine, or even the chemical composition of water, had to do with him, born upon the banks of the Wabash, in the hills of Cumberland, in a Dresden suburb or a Neapolitan slum. Either he never considered the question at all, or he dimly recognized them as images of a human self-understanding which was to be his for the learning. All very innocent, perhaps even credulous; and in many cases soon overlaid by the urgencies of current engagements. But however superficial they might be appreciated, these were not circumstances which generated a positive resistance to the invitation of liberal learning in a university. Indeed, their very innocence nurtured a disposition to recognize it.

"A Place of Learning" 1974

But further, a university has something else to offer the undergraduate, and I take this to be its most characteristic gift because it is exclusive to a university and is rooted in the character of university education as neither a beginning nor an end, but a middle. A man may at any time in his life begin to explore a new branch of learning or engage in fresh activity, but only at a university may he do this without a rearrangement of his scarce resources of time and energy.... The characteristic gift of a university is the gift of an interval. Here is an opportunity to put aside the hot allegiances of youth without the necessity of at once acquiring new loyalties to take their place. Here is a break in the tyrannical course of irreparable events; a period in which to look round upon the world and upon oneself without the sense of an enemy at one's back or the insistent pressure to make up one's mind; a moment in which to taste the mystery without the necessity of at once seeking a solution.

On Politics

The project of finding a short cut to heaven is as old as the human race. It is represented in the mythology of many peoples, and it is recognized always as an impious but not ignoble enterprise. The story of the Titans is, perhaps, the most complicated of the myths which portray this *folie de grandeur*, but the story of the Tower of Babel is the most profound. We may imagine the Titans drawing back after the first unsuccessful assault to hear one of their number suggest that their programme was too ambitious, that perhaps they were trying to do too much and to do it too quickly. But the builders of the Tower, whose top was to reach heaven, were permitted no such conference; their enterprise involved them in the babblings of men who speak, but do not speak the same language....

The pursuit of perfection as the crow flies is an activity both impious and unavoidable in human life. It involves the penalties of impurity (the anger of the gods and social isolation), and its reward is not that of achievement but that of having made the attempt. It is an activity, therefore, suitable for individuals, but not for societies. For an individual who is impelled to engage in it, the reward may exceed both the penalty and the inevitable defeat. The penitent may hope, or even expect, to fall back, a wounded hero, into the arms of an understanding and forgiving society. And even the impenitent can be reconciled with himself in the powerful necessity of his impulse, though, like Prometheus, he must suffer for it. For a society, on the other hand, the penalty is a chaos of conflicting ideals, the disruption of a common life, and the reward is the renown which attaches to monumental folly.

"The Tower of Babel" 1948

A university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, when its teaching has become mere instruction and occupies the whole of an undergraduate's time, and when those who came to be taught come, not in search of their intellectual fortune but with a vitality so unroused or so exhausted that they wish only to be provided with a serviceable moral and intellectual outfit; when they come with no understanding of the manners of conversation but desire only a qualification for earning a living or a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world.

"The Idea of a University" 1950

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.

"Political Education" 1951

On Philosophy

An interest in philosophy is often first aroused by an irrelevant impulse to see the world and ourselves better than we find them. We seek in philosophy what wiser men would look for in a gospel, some guidance as to *le prix des choses*, some convincing proof that there is nothing degrading in one's being alive, something to make the mystery of human existence less incomprehensible. Thinking is at first associated with an extraneous desire for action, and it is some time, perhaps, before we discern that philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life, and that it has certainly never offered its true followers anything which could be mistaken for a gospel. Of course, some so-called philosophers afford pretext enough for this particular misunderstanding. Nearly always a philosopher hides a secret ambition, foreign to philosophy, and often it is that of the preacher. But we must learn not to follow the philosophers upon these holiday excursions.

"Experience and Its Modes" 1933

Poetry has nothing to teach us about how to live or what we ought to approve. Practical activity is an endless battle for noble or for squalid but always for illusory ends, a struggle from which the practical self cannot escape and in which victory is impossible because desire can never be satisfied: every attainment is recognized to be imperfect, and every imperfection has value only as an incipient perfection which is itself an illusion.... Poetic activity has no part in this struggle and it has no power to control, to modify, or to terminate it. If it imitates the voice of practice its utterance is counterfeit. To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment.... Poetry is a sort of truancy, a dream within the dream of life, a wild flower planted among our wheat.

"The Voice of Poetry in Conversation of Mankind" 1959

On Eternity

Philosophical reflection is recognized here as the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands and in which the understanding sought (itself unavoidably conditional) is a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it. Its most appropriate expression is an essay where the character of the utterance (a traveller's tale) matches the character of the engagement, an intellectual adventure which has a course to follow but no destination. A philosophical essay leaves much to the reader, often saying too little for fear of saying too much; its attention is concentrated, but it does not stay to cross all the ts of the argument; its mood is cautious without being defensive; it is personal but never merely 'subjective'; it does not dissemble the conditionality of the conclusions it throws up and although it may enlighten it does not instruct. It is, in short, a well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquillity.

On Poetry

The gift of a religious faith is that of a reconciliation to the unavoidable dissonances of a human condition, a reconciliation which is neither a denial, nor a substitute for remedial effort, nor a theoretical understanding in which the mystery of their occurrence is abated or even dispelled, but a mode of acceptance, a 'graceful' response. The general character of a man's religion, like the language he speaks and the poetic utterances evoked from it, is a historical contingency, and if it were not so it would be worthless; he is himself a 'history'. It is composed of sentiments, beliefs, images, etc., from which he may draw something particularly his own, answering to his own understood situation. He is fortunate where he has a religion, a *traditio*, of notable imaginative splendour to draw upon; and while this reconciliation may be no more than that of a somewhat anxious equanimity or a patiently nurtured hope, it is as complete as it may be when it is a release from care and generates an unostentatious, unaccusing serenity in conduct. Like anything else, a religion may evoke a reflective consideration of its postulates and a theology may emerge from this engagement; but, although a faith is an understanding, a theoretical understanding of faith is not itself a faith.... Religious faith is the evocation of a sentiment (the love, the glory, or the honour of God, for example, or even a humble *caritas*), to be added to all others as the motive of all motives in terms of which the fugitive adventures of human conduct, without being released from their mortal and their moral conditions, are graced with an intimation of immortality: the sharpness of death and 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.

"On Human Conduct" 1975