Michael Oakeshott and the History of Ideas Seminar

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The Master's degree seminar in the History of Political Thought, starring Michael Oakeshott, has become widely recognised as a notable academic institution. It had distinguished visitors, and many of its students went on to academic success, but above all perhaps it was the workshop in which Oakeshott developed many of the formulations which later appeared in On History and other essays (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1983). Yet the seminar was not Michael Oakeshott's natural habitat, and students in the 1950's at the London School of Economics had sometimes grumbled that he did not hold a regular graduate seminar. He always preferred the informality of conversation to the self-consciousness of academic discussion. His main teaching activity at the School in the decade after his appointment in 1951 (apart from supervising graduates and undergraduates) was lecturing on the history of political thought. Then fate took a hand. About 1960, the University of London set up a scheme of one-year Master's degrees. Convenient for economists and practitioners of other technical subjects, who could always put an extra year to good use, this innovation was virtually an embarrassment in more discursive subjects. One year threatend, in practice, to reduce to the nine months between October and June, a

threat to which historians and others responded by scheduling the examinations in September. Their students were thus doomed to spending the summer in the libraries, and failing to get their results before the autumn in which they were launched upon the next stage of their careers. Still, overseas students, especially American, found the one year M.Sc. a useful diversion on their way to graduate research.

Oakeshott characteristically responded to this administrative dictat by making the best of things. In devising a course, his principle was to find a point of entry quite different from anything students would have met in their undergraduate study, and he found it in focussing on the assumptions of intellectual history. Academic imitation and problem convergence is such that innovations of this kind rapidly lose their novelty; method in intellectual history now enjoys a vogue it did not have then. In the seminar, each of the basic terms: history, thought, and political, in that order, was subjected to sustained discussion at weekly meetings throughout the year. A slowly changing set of books was steadily digested. In addition, students were required to study a text in depth, and to write an essay on some general topic under exam conditions. Elie Kedourie rabbinically trawling his way through the Philosophy of Right was one of the great theatrical experiences of those days. Kedourie was a regular presence at the seminar, as were Robert Orr and myself. Ernest Thorp, John Charvet, Maurice Cranston, William and Shirley Letwin sometimes attended and gave papers. A changing cast of available luminaries in London at

the time also alternated with student presentations, ranging from Robert Lane and Brough Macpherson to Quentin Skinner and John Pocock.

The central preoccupation of the seminar was entirely coloured by Oakeshott's own philosophy, for in it he returned to think and constantly rethink what history was. Until the later seventies, he always gave a number of papers himself, and the end process of this developing thought finally appeared in 1983. On History and other essays is typical late-Oakeshott in that his earlier simplicity and wit is qualified by a determined attempt to block all possible misunderstanding, howevever densely qualified his style might have to become in order to do so. The actual seminar papers he gave were a good deal more conversible. The talk was inevitably dominated (in spite of frequent good intentions to the contrary) by the older members, and also by many graduate students who, being for one reason or another able to attend for several years running, had acquired confidence, and also some feel for the rules of this particular game.

Oakeshott was very good with students, always treating their comments and questions with the utmost courtesy. Absorbing a question, he would often take a puff on his cigarette and gaze into the far distance for a minute, and then say: "you mean ..." The reformulation that followed was, inevitably, a good deal more profound than the original question, and sometimes bore little relation to it, but the flattered student would usually accept the switch, and what would emerge would be an interesting development

of the topic in question. One of the most striking virtues of these responses was their exhibition of Oakeshott's fertility in finding exemplifications interesting in their own terms. Whether it was Zachary Brooke's brilliant reinterpretation of Canossa, or the barrister who had recently attempted to derive from Magna Carta the implication that a Black defendant could only be judged by a Black jury of his peers, Oakeshott was a dab hand at the pedagogic marriage of universal and particular.

His papers, on the other hand, presented a smooth surface which students often found difficult to fight their way into. Oakeshott characteristically began on the heights of the universal and slowly descended towards his central subject. He seldom made explicit reference to the existing literature on the subject, though he was usually familiar with it. Every paper was a wholly new attempt at a coherent and rounded account of the subject, the criticism of other positions usually emerging implicitly or in discussion. Nothing dangled for instant criticism to grasp. The only real way in was to ask: What exactly is it that we mean by ... the past (etc.)here ? Along these lines, we would often succeed in getting down to the area where the postulates of history, practice or politics were to be found.

It was both problem and opportunity that Oakeshott was swimming not only against the current of social science, but of common sense itself. That past "as it actually was". in the imagination of Ranke, the average man, and the average philosopher such as A.J.Ayer, was dissolved, as a result of Oakeshott's relentlessly

epistemological attentions, into a set of inferences drawn from present artefacts, themselves recognised as performances within a certain language or idiom, but capable of yielding historical interpretation in almost any sphere on which the historian might concentrate: a love letter, for example, might reveal something about the history of philosophical argument, a piece of scupture about politics, and so on. What was generally revealed was far from anything the performer had intended to reveal. The last thing a historian was looking for was a direct narrative voice telling him what had actually happened; in these sophisticated terms, the fashionable concern with bias is simpleminded.

Common sense is often parsimonious with categories and generous with values; Oakeshott went in the reverse direction. Faced with The Revolution Betrayed or Our Island Story he would refuse to regard them as bad or "biassed" history. They were simply not history at all. They were political utterances cast in the form of a description of notionally past events, and ought to be judged as such. Those who had read Experience and its Modes knew well that judging something in irrelevant terms was the very model for him of intellectual error. Nonetheless, whole generations of students passed through the seminar without ever quite understanding that "it isn't history at all" is in no way a condemnatory judgement. It is in this way that sceptics can sometimes be reported as dogmatists.

The basic distinction on which this argument rested was that between a historical and a practical past. When Hollywood made a

film about the French revolution, or a lawyer delved into some long established property rights, or a politician referred to Canute and the waves, or to Nelson putting the telescope to his blind eye, the past was being used merely as decor; it served present purposes and in no way represented an attempt to understand some passage of past life. The expression "Canute" might refer either to an uplifting fable, or to an eleventh century Anglo-Norwegian king, and context determined its significance. To treat the expression as referring to one single object about which true and false statements are made was for Oakeshott the very model of a narrowing practical attitude. History is a complex practice arising from asking, and persisting in asking, certain types of questions about present objects, and is in no way licenced, as one might say, to correct other uses that might be made by people not engaged in historical investigation of these expressions.

Oakeshott never doubted that actual historical writing is somewhat miscellaneous, and that it often contains political argument and other modes of looking at the world. What he sought was to isolate the specifically historical and to exhibit it as a certain type of inquiry. Typically, he could only do this by thinking about types of understanding in general, and his eventual solution to this problem is to be found in the first essay of <u>On Human Conduct</u>. It is a matter of taking off from present experience and rising to what he called a "conditional platform of understanding."

In the early years of the seminar, this concern emerged in a

phenomenology of understanding. In an era when the philosophy of science, bestriding the entire field of social science, focussed attention on a single logic of explanation, Oakeshott was concerned with the different questions that might be asked about the world. What distinguished expounding from construing, diagnosing, the Democritean project of resolving complex wholes into their constituent parts, translating, classifying, etc.? Oakeshott always insisted that explanation ends in the unexplained or (more likely) the inexplicable. By continuing to ask the same type of question, a point would sooner or later be reached when the inquirer would run into final causes, or God. History in these terms began with a mystery rather than a problem, and the aim of the historian was to make it more intelligible by an assemblage of circumstances constituting an event. Each of these basic terms was closely examined.

A little later, Oakeshott took to exploring this theme on the basis of German work on the character of theory. The Greek metaphor from which the idea of theory emerged was visual. The theoros was a spectator sent to observe the religious festivals of other cities. Thea was an experience to be contemplated, theoria the enterprise of contemplating or inquiring, and theorema the theorem or product of this activity. Such an etymological taxonomy from a language better equipped for this investigation allowed Oakeshott to recast his distinctive view of what it is to understand something. A thea is already something identified, and is distinguished by its relative isolation. It cannot be absolutely

distinguished from the theorema into which it might grow. Nevertheless, the movement towards a more theoretical understanding involves passing through a barrier in which the object of understanding changes its character. A theory of laughter, he observed, is no joke. It cannot be verified by trying it one someone and seeing if he laughs.

Understanding is thus a development of intelligibility, and it has no terminal point. In all thinking, except perhaps in mathematics, we simply exchange one puzzle for another. A favourite example was the development of Christian doctrine. An initial experience focussed on Jesus had soon turned into a praxis: a notion that Christians ought to live in a certain manner. But in the next generation, this practice of faith, hope and charity had to be developed, partly for those who had never had the initial experiences, and partly because of the frustration of the hope of an imminent Second Coming. The exigencies of Roman citizenship also had to be accommodated. Before long, certainly with Augustine, the parousia had turned into a theorem about salvation and grace - a manner of thought quite unkown to the first generation. "The odd thing about thinking," Oakeshott once remarked, "is its tremendous conatus to an inconvenient level of thought." What it tends to generate is orthodoxy, a dogma: perhaps that is all that clarification means.

One of Oakeshott's basic concerns was to protect the valuable but limited insight of history (which he thought the key to understanding human affairs) from being destroyed by the blinding

light of scientific laws, which could only distort our understanding of the human world. The dominant view of history in those days was the covering law theory of Carl Hempel and the Popperian view that history was just science with the laws left out. Hempel thought that the historian, in order to get from the fact that Louis XIV bankrupted his subjects by war to the fact that he died unpopular, must implicitly ride some such universal law as that kings who bankrupt their subjects die unpopular. A lot of time at the seminar was spent hammering this nonsense into the ground. But what was dissolved with it was the idea of a cause in history. Oakeshott agreed that historians used this term all the time, but he insisted that they could not possibly be talking about causes in any scientific sense, because such causes referred to necessary relations between abstract objects, and no such relations could rest on historical evidence. Gallie became a hero for making clear the fact that it is only when historians lack any real historical evidence for a connection that they have recourse to bits of theory from anthropology, psycho-analysis, sociology etc. Oakeshott sometimes compared the place of social science in history to the use of captions in silent movies: only invoked when the sequence of images could not tell its own story.

How then were historical events connected ? The answer to this question can be found in the essays on historical events and historical change in <u>On History</u>. The basic answer, we have seen, is that the historian dissolves the mystery of his material by assembling circumstantial detail which fits together in such a way

as to make an intelligible event. The prevailing metaphor in the later days of the seminar was that the historian was like the builder of a dry stone wall, adept at seeing how the materials lying to hand can be fitted together into a coherent shape. This metaphor should not be confused with that of a jig saw puzzle, in which all the pieces must fit together in the one right combination. The doctrine explicitly takes off from Aristotle's treatment of contiguity in the Physics as an account of how things may be connected together merely by touching each other. Oakeshott was particularly keen to dissociate history from any of the accounts of change which assume an underlying structure of organic development, even though terms like "evolution" and "development" are commonly used to emphasise some element of pattern in the writings of actual historians. But the last thing "the development of modern France" is is a development: Oakeshott, like H.A.L. Fisher belonged to the one damn thing after another school of historical understanding.

The same, almost deconstructionist, tendency to pluralise hard fixed identities led him to reject Lovejoy's idea of unit ideas. These powerful entities seemed to lead a life of their own and, originating perhaps in philosophy (as with the great chain of being) advance through the history of Western civilisation, hopping into poetry here or politics there, transforming theology in one place and throwing off little shoots, like science fiction, in another. Lovejoy's work supplied the seminar with all the joy of a luminous and unmistakeable error, and he was accorded an

appropriate status in its discussions. A certain amount of attention was accorded to the tendency of historians of political ideas to arraign earlier philosophers such as Plato, Rousseau and Hegel before the bar of morality. Here too was a practice of intellectual history which invoked hard nuggety ideas surviving intact the passages of time and context, and exerting a malign grip on human conduct. Real intellectual history, by contrast, was the history of men thinking, responding to their circumstances in terms of ideas which did indeed have an abstract and universal aspect, but which were never without a determining local colour. Levinson's account of Confucian China and its Modern Fate was a model of such work quite self-consciously undertaken, as was the work of Eric Stokes on the utilitarians in India.

The character of politics must necessarily be central to such an inquiry, and Oakeshott was always aware of "that glassy film which tends to form when we have gazed too long at the word "politics" and wondered what it meant." He regarded the term as a kind of albatross round the neck of clear thinking. Nobody ever had politics except polis-people, he once remarked, and added that the expression "political thought" is an unfortunate nineteenth century invention. But in any case, the historian is concerned not with a definition of politics which, being the abstract product of theory, would lose all connection with the contingencies which concern him. He is concerned simply with marks of recognition appropriate to the business he has in hand. That politics is a human activity, for example, is no very big jump of understanding. Bees and ants have

no politics, and Caligula's horse is relevant because of Caligula's nomination as a Senator and not because of his equinity. Politics must be recognised not only as a human activity, but also as a contingent one. Attempts to show that man is not properly human unless he engages in politics are philosophical rather than historical understandings. That politics is a realm in which a public sphere may be distinguished from a private was sometimes useful, but the word obviously has a multitude of uses, and Oakeshott sometimes quoted from the memoirs of a nineteenth century British ambassador in Athens who had been robbed by the son of the Embassy's porter. The son had taken up brigandage. "My lord," said the porter, "I always begged him not to go into politics."

It was above all the miscellaneous character of politics which became unmistakeable after these discussions. Politics was written, practised and theorised in a great variety of ways and there was often no connection between them. Lee Harvey Oswald and Hegel were both in one way or another engaged in politics: where did they touch ? Without a clear focus on the genuine object of inquiry, studies of politics easily became incoherent. Sabine's famous history of political thought was accorded a certain perverse grandeur, but regarded as a scrapbook rather than a history. The older he got, the more Oakeshott tended to regard the very enterprise of a history of political thought as an impossible one.

It will be clear that some of this was pretty explosive stuff in the atmosphere of 1968-9, but the seminar flourished throughout this period, with the odd stand-off but no disruption. Bringing

Vietnam or the capitalist system into these inquiries was soon universally recognised as a time wasting solecism. In the early 1970's, the seminar was held in the East Building, and occasionally sounds of revolutionary revelry would float up from Houghton Street below, but the dialectic continued uninterrupted. Many people, including Oakeshott himself, smoked in those days, and it is somewhat embarrassing now to recall the blue haze which shrouded us all towards the end of the two hours.

Oakeshott in mid-seventies was less imaginative than he had been, but he remained the star of the show. Students still treated the doctrine that there are different kinds of past as if they were responding to some kind of zen puzzle, like one hand clapping, but most of them absorbed the notion in the end. What never ceased to be a bone of contention was Oakeshott's unyielding defence of philosophy as having no practical implications. The idea that you cannot descend the ladder of theory offended every instinctive bone in their rationalist bodies; perhaps it suggested to them that studying philosophy was nothing but an irrelevant frivolity. But Oakshott took Wittgenstein's view that philosophy leaves everything as it is. (He never met Wittgenstein, but once remarked "there were a lot of Viennese commedians around Cambridge in those days.") One seminar broke into a passionate discussion of what would follow if some cannibal tribal chief from a Pacific island read Kant's ethics and brought the categorical imperative to bear on the inherited customs of the tribe. For Oakeshott, the answer would depend on those people at that time, and any idea of the categorical

imperative that touched practice would have entirely ceased to be a philosophical idea. Such a view denied the students the single manageable world in which they wanted to lived. Oakeshott by contrast lived to the end in a plurality of worlds, but being a philosopher, never ceased to seek their coherence.