

Michael Oakeshott: 21st Century Radical?

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If one seeks a radical text that will help to change the world and offers solutions to the most pressing political issues facing us today, *Rationalism in Politics* is not the book to read. First published in 1962, this series of essays by Professor Michael Oakeshott (often known for his contributions to conservative thought) explores topics ranging from reason, considerations of Thomas Hobbes and reflections on politics, to what it means to be human. In none of these essays is there a radical and angry man writing to revolutionize politics or offer a Machiavellian blueprint of how to fix a society constantly on the brink of crisis. Instead, *Rationalism in Politics* simultaneously provides calm and sober reflections on questions about politics and society, and yet contains within it a frustrating lack of clear answers to the questions it raises.

Frustrated was certainly how I felt first reading *Rationalism in Politics* several years ago at the age of 22. I recall a distinct feeling of righteous indignation as I worked through the collection, but especially when Oakeshott disparages the young as having an unsuitable disposition for politics (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 436). At a time when youth engagement in political discourse is a constant feature of the news, and engagement in political discussions has never been easier given the internet, the young have demanded their voice to be heard and for their future to be considered. In some quarters we even hear the suggestion that the vote should be given to the young. Why, then, should the young bother with Oakeshott's ideas now? What could he possibly offer in a book with no answers to the problems which concern them? How could his writing address, or even understand, the issues salient in their current time and circumstances? A middle-aged man writing from a study in the London School of Economics in the 1960s might seem to be generations removed from a twenty-year-old growing up amid unprecedented technological changes and an urgency for action swarming their every consideration. So, the question is, can Oakeshott contribute *anything* to the current political moment, outside of the halls of the university and scholarly debates in the history of political thought?

Despite my initial aggravation, over the years I've come to strongly hold that *yes*, he does have something to offer the young scholar and activist who wants to make a difference. But much like most of Oakeshott's writing, what he has to offer is far from obviously stated in his works. When one first picks up *Rationalism in Politics* and looks at the table of contents, one of the most political titles appears to be "On Being Conservative." Attention might be drawn to essays whose titles contain the word politics in it, such as

“Political Discourse” or “Talking Politics,” but there is a certain appeal to an ideological category, especially one so frequently under attack. Perhaps here there will be answers for young conservatives and republicans looking to gain a sense of purpose and understanding of their ideology, to better guard themselves against those who disagree with them! Alas, the essay offers no such thing. What Oakeshott *does* provide in “On Being Conservative” is a reflection of the disposition which he thinks defines conservatism: a fundamentally cautious nature. He writes of the conservative man that “He is not in love with what is dangerous and difficult; he is unadventurous; he has no impulse to sail uncharted seas; for him there is no magic in being lost, bewildered or shipwrecked” (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 412).

Oakeshott’s portrait of conservatism is quite bleak, seemingly not suitable to the anger felt about a constantly changing world out of one’s control. It is almost the image which those opposed to conservatism would portray of it: outdated and out of touch with the requirements of contemporary political life. Perhaps the young conservative might relate to the need for a calm and measured attitude towards politics, but when discourse entails screaming rather than discussion, moderation is an attitude easier achieved in theory than in practice. While Oakeshott provides an interesting theoretical account of conservatism and its conduct, he does not help to motivate an increasingly disenfranchised movement of young conservatives who constantly feel their voices unheard. Much less does this speak to those who are not conservatives at all.

Where, then, should one turn for advice on dealing with political life? The answer is found at the end of book, in the essay which initially seems the least political of all. Oakeshott concludes *Rationalism in Politics* with “The Voice of Poetry and the Conservation of Mankind,” a work which he describes in his 1962 Preface as “a belated retraction of a foolish sentence in *Experience and Its Modes*” (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. xii). Granted it takes Oakeshott 53 pages to explain just how wrong he thought he was. He begins the essay by defining conversation, and lamenting how much of it has become boring and dull (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 493). It is a conversation where people value their own voice over the voices of others, only caring about what they have to say and not listening to those around them. Oakeshott, following Augustine, called it superbia; we might call it social media. Hearing only the sound of one’s own voice strikes against what Oakeshott perceives to be the fundamentally egalitarian and sociable nature of engaging in conversation in the first place. Not only is there a tendency to obsess about one’s own positions, but also a desire within both scientific and political conversation to always find an answer, a solution, a resolution. An obsession with meaning in conversations has made us lose sight of something intrinsically important, which Oakeshott wants to remind us of: namely, delight (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 493). He writes, “And if what is now needed is some relief from the monotony of a conversation too long appropriated by politics and science, it may be supposed that an inquiry into the quality and significance of the voice of poetry may do something in this interest” (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 494). Oakeshott thinks he has found a mode of conversation to enter into, which can rescue people from the drab and utilitarian conversations which constitute those fixated on science and politics.

By revitalizing conversation through poetry, Oakeshott hopes to remind individuals subsequently of how delightful conversation can be (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 521). Poetry is not reserved for the reading of Shelley and Byron, however; rather, Oakeshott uses the term to refer to the poetic image as he understands it, found in numerous forms of art ranging from sculptures and paintings to dancing (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 520). What makes it possible for people to delight in great works of art is the ability not to overthink it, and to simply participate in the viewing of it. It is not *thinking* at all in the rational sense. It is contemplation, wonder, delight: Socrates in a catatonic state, possessed by his *daemon*, the glorious *thaumazein* which the ancients thought was the true origin of philosophy. It is a moment where one is captured entirely by what they are experiencing. It does not need a purpose or a cause, the creator need not to have intended it to elicit emotions or make a call for action. Rather it exists simply to inspire delight in the viewer. This is why Oakeshott uses the example of works of architecture which have lost their history as being more suitable to engaging the poetic imagination than buildings erected with particular purpose. He rejects the desire to find a utility in art and poetry, in favor of a simple delight in it.

These poetic images engage us in an act of contemplation, allowing these works of art to be discussed in conversation—for not their value or hidden meanings, but merely for their own sake (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 525). Oakeshott thinks that if people stared at Monet more often, perhaps they would have more to say to one another than just what to wear under bad weather and conveying disappointment in the currently elected government. By looking at a great work, one is momentary relieved of any obligation to discover or find or solve something. Rather the objective is again, merely to contemplate and to delight in that contemplation. By ‘more to say’ I do not mean scholastic reflections on Monet: I mean a suspension of the need to assert anything with an instrumental purpose in mind. The texture of the canvas and the purpose of Monet choosing this shade of blue fade away as concerns, and indeed the very exercise in asking those questions takes us away from delight into scientific analysis. What Oakeshott wants is for us to simply say ‘x’, and delight in it, and for it to be delighted in, where it may: he wants us to suspend our inclination to say ‘x’ in order to get ‘y’.

Oakeshott’s assertion that conversation needs a focus on art more than anything else may seem an aggravating presumption, feeling like a statement of an elite on their way to galleries or the opera, or those privileged with the leisure to partake in these activities. It also encourages an escape from reality, to step away from the affairs of purposive life simply for momentary delight in something in the world around us (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 531). He admits this is exactly his intention. Oakeshott does not think the world would be better if people went around quoting Keats and explaining the meaning of Dante to those who would find such subjects boring. As has already been mentioned, it is exactly boredom in conversation that Oakeshott wishes to avoid. Rather, he implores us to take a break from the constant searching for answers and the anger which often accompanies not finding them.

This appears to be a difficult suggestion, especially given how uncertainty has felt ever present throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: and also since we have seen that the very conditions which make conversation possible have been threatened. It may appear as if any break from advocacy and thinking about politics could result in the collapse of political society as we know it. It almost seems as if Oakeshott is stepping in as a proverbial mentor or teacher reminding their incredibly high achieving student to “chill out” -- which, once again, is a frustrating proposition with an air of condescension to it. Yet it is also a desire which is already around us. Just as technology has changed how we converse; it has also changed the medium by which we can appreciate and delight in art. Art could very well be a great movie or even a thirty second video. One can debate the meaning of art all they want, but what is significant is the shadow of a desire for being present and delighting in something more than the never-ending challenges currently confronting us. Oakeshott is stating bluntly what many of us already long for. Contemplation offers a way to understand that longing. It simultaneously allows for an engagement of the poetic imagination and a greater appreciation for what is in front of us. The longing which Oakeshott describes is one which is still relevant today, especially given all of the potential distractions which can take away from being able to delight in what is there. The internet simultaneously serves as the source of the greatest distractions from delight but also a way for us to engage in forms of art which allow us to delight. The desire for delight has remained constant from Oakeshott’s time into our own, the potential sources of it have just increased and changed.

There is a reason why Oakeshott thinks one can glimpse this desire for delight in love and friendship, two concepts which modern life has not in any way eradicated. He writes that “friends and lovers are not concerned with what can be made out of each other, but only with the enjoyment of one another” (Oakeshott [1962] 1991, p. 536). He thus critiques the temptation to assign everything a use and every word a definition, and the impulse to solely focus on the end of a path rather than how one walks along it. Those who fail in love and friendship see people merely as instruments to be used, rather than appreciating and taking delight in them for what they are.

In one of the concluding lines to “The Voice of Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind”, and indeed to the end of *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott writes: “To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment” (p. 540). Where the conversative disposition which Oakeshott describes stands on guard against bewilderment, here Oakeshott is actively advocating for it. Far

from a contradiction, it is rather a firm reminder that there is more to life than politics—which is perhaps ironic coming from a professor of political science. In a young generation so politically involved, it is easy to be obsessed with the news and the latest journal publication and to only want to debate and argue in order to dominate discourse. The more the issues seem to matter, and the more urgent they appear, the less one can justify taking even a step away from them. What the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed to many is both the desire for more conversation and a constant feeling that having conversations is difficult because of both distance, and a lack of enjoyment in them. Now is the time to re-evaluate how we converse in the first place. What does it mean to have a conversation with others, and how can we ensure those conversations are both meaningful and interesting?

At a time when there is a constant desire for radical change, the radical position is that which invites us to take a moment to rest. In that light, *Rationalism in Politics*, far from being an outdated and antiquated book, is comparatively radical in what it has to offer to the present political moment and the conversations in which one is routinely engaged in. Oakeshott does not profess to offer a solution; in fact it is the desire for always seeking solutions which he warns against. An appreciation for bewilderment and humor was also how Oakeshott lived his own life. Those who reflect on Michael Oakeshott and his legacy don't describe him as someone who only ever spoke about Hobbes and had no interests beyond the ivory towers of academia. He was an adventurer in a very meaningful way. He sought to enjoy what was before him, and to delight in what he found (Riley 1991, p. 335). He was able to step away from politics, not at the expense of understanding it, but in order to understand what else there was to being human. Which is the message which young scholars need to hear today.

This edition of *Cosmos + Taxis* makes the case for many of the interesting and compelling political ideas which one finds in *Rationalism in Politics*. The purpose of this article has been to convince young skeptics that it has something to offer in the first place and to our current time. To those passionate and excited students and scholars who are unfamiliar with Oakeshott and struggle to find a justification for why they should read *Rationalism in Politics*, this work offers you a way to think about how you think and engage with ideas and what those ideas are. Given the animosity present in so many conversations today, Oakeshott offers a refreshing and necessary perspective on the subject. To those encountering him for the first time, or encountering him again after a decade or two, by looking at how he assesses conversation and discourse he invites us to pause and reflect on what we are doing when we subsequently study and discuss politics. Sixty years on, when reading through *Rationalism in Politics* again, it becomes clear that Oakeshott has much to offer every scholar who goes through his work. But what Oakeshott particularly has to offer the young scholar, is to show them the adventure which conversation itself can be, and that a genuine interest in political questions requires thinking about more than simply politics.

REFERENCES

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