On Human Conduct at 50: Editorial Introduction

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It has been fifty years since the publication of Michael Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct*, and *Cosmos + Taxis* is pleased to offer this special issue of the journal devoted to a reconsideration of Oakeshott's now classic work of practical, moral, and political philosophy. When it first appeared, it didn't actually fall stillborn from the press, to steal a Humean locution, but it certainly did not receive the attention and adulation that greeted Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, or even the vitriolic anger that Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* managed to garner. However, the publication did manage to attract a modicum of special attention from *Political Theory*, though not exactly by a friendly set of readers, with the exception of Josiah Auspitz (1976). If Rawls' work was considered as a major statement of welfare liberalism and Nozick's a defense of classical liberalism or libertarianism, Oakeshott's didn't seem to be a statement or a defense of any kind. Instead, *On Human Conduct* offered, first, a different sort of political philosophy which was temperate, non-normative, and traditionalist; second, a conception of the modern state and its ambiguities; and, finally, an historical account of the emergence of the modern state. Oakeshott's *magnum opus* presented a deflationary sort of political philosophy compared to Rawls' attempt to create a decision procedure meant to dissolve/resolve one of the central conditions of human existence, which is conflict between various conceptions of a good human life. Instead, in the Hegelian tradition, the work presented a rational account of what actually exists informed by an Aristotelian account of the unalterable alterability of practical life.

In Oakeshott's preface to *On Human Conduct*, he noted that the "most appropriate expression [of philosophical reflection] is an essay…, an intellectual adventure which has a course to follow but no destination" (p. vii). The essays that follow reflect Oakeshott's sentiment well, in that they have no single telos but share both a common subject matter and an inclination toward theoretical reflection. Oakeshott also wrote that "a philosophical essay leaves much to the reader,…it does not stay to cross all the ts of the argument" (Ibid.). The contributors to the present issue of *Cosmos + Taxis* offer a modest attempt to cross a few of those ts, but each has his or her own 'course to follow'. The editors have arranged the essays according to Oakeshott's own division of the three essays in *On Human Conduct*, but this arrangement should not be understood as a heuristic device, but as the result of an impish sort of reflective equilibrium.

In the first section, "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct," the first essay, which is written by Quinton V. Peralta-Greenough, is titled "Reconsidering Michael Oakeshott's Development: Practices and the Unified Plurality of Human Conduct." Peralta-Greenough's essay seeks to clarify the coherence of Oakeshott's work on modality and practice, and to contribute to ongoing debates about development, continuity, and normativity in his thought. This is followed by William Church's essay "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct: Understanding, Conduct and Agency." Church's essay explores Oakeshott's understanding of theorizing and its connection to his conception of human conduct. Kenneth B. McIntyre's essay "The Philosopher as Proteus: The Varieties of Oakeshott's Epistemological

Pluralism" examines the character of epistemological pluralism and, more specifically, Oakeshott's brand of epistemological pluralism. Eric Kos' essay "Adventures in Human Conduct" concludes the first section. Kos' essay focuses on Oakeshott's distinction between practices and processes, and the connection between that distinction and Oakeshott's nuanced picture of freedom.

The second section, titled "On the Civil Condition," begins with Elizabeth Corey's essay "Oakeshott's Moral Vision." In it, Corey examines Oakeshott's vision of a satisfactory and flourishing moral life. This is followed by Samanta Stecko's "A Common Practice and a Collective Dream" in which Stecko offers an explanation of Oakeshott's understanding of civil association as an ideal type. The section closes with Michael Adamo's "The Development of Michael Oakeshott's Poetics," which, as the title suggests, traces the development of Michael Oakeshott's conception of aesthetics from his earliest writings through the publication of *On Human Conduct*.

The final section, "On the Character of the Modern European State," opens with Thomas Cheeseman's essay "The Genesis of the Modern World: Oakeshott, Machiavelli and the Roots of Individualism." Cheeseman questions Oakeshott's account of the relationship between the individual and anti-individual, as well as Oakeshott's placement of Machiavelli in the former camp. This is followed by "Oakeshott on Corporations' by Steven Gerencser. Gerencser's essay focuses on Oakeshott's understanding of human associations, specifically corporate associations, and the implications and limits of Oakeshott's contention that corporations are best understood as enterprise associations. The final essay, by Attila K. Molnar, is titled "The Non-skeptical Oakeshott on the Ideal Regime," and examines Oakeshott's conceptions of individuality, the rule of law, and civil association.

REFERENCES

Auspitz, Josiah Lee. 1976. Individuality, Civility, and Theory: The Philosophical Imagination of Michael Oakeshott. *Political Theory* 4(4):533-536.