Oakeshott's Moral Vision

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Oakeshott's vision of a satisfactory and flourishing moral life appears in a variety of places throughout his corpus. A person who lives such a life has managed to elude (at least in part) the imperatives of ambition, achievement, and career. He has cultivated a habit of mind, a way of being, and a personal style that is uniquely his own. He appreciates things disinterestedly, which means that he does not see the world and its contents as material to be used, but instead to be contemplated and enjoyed. Important relationships with others are understood as dramatic, not utilitarian.

The aim of life, if there is an aim, is the cultivation of a sensibility that looks both outward and inward. It looks outward to appreciate the material and intellectual world. It points inward because such a sensibility is deeply grounded in one's own mind and character. The inward personality is continually constructed by exploring one's own tendencies, capacities, and predispositions in activities of self-disclosure and self-enactment, to use the terms of *On Human Conduct*.

A person's mind and character may certainly be developed and made more perfect, but perfection is not thought of as a goal to be achieved at the temporal end of life. Instead, it is an adventure of continual self-discovery. Noel O'Sullivan has called it liberation: "something more general than civil and political liberation: what is involved is an almost existentialist conception of life as the endless task of striving to acquire a distinctive self of one's own, not by rejecting the cultural tradition from which one comes, but by critical self-immersion in it" (O'Sullivan 2002, pp. 71-74). It is thus both conservative and creative.

Oakeshott's vision may appear as impractical, impossible of achievement, or, as he himself maintains, suitable mostly "for poets and women" (2011, p. 33). It is romantic, aesthetic, apolitical, and deeply countercultural. This vision contains echoes of Christianity, though his is not an orthodox Christianity. It is conservative in its appreciative outlook toward the world, but it does not necessarily accord with political conservatism as it appears now, or as it ever has. This vision is expressly opposed to all the things we normally take as primary goods—like career, investment, and planning—and it does not take its orientation from a set of precepts or principles.

Yet it is an attitude that is appropriate at all times and in all places. This view is never in or out of style. It will never be widely adopted, and it will never be fashionable. Nobody could constantly sustain it, but Oakeshott's understanding of a flourishing life—if even intermittently embraced—offers satisfactions that come with seeing gratefully and living boldly. This moral character embraces freedom with relish and is in love with individuality. It flatly rejects determinism, reminding us that "man is what he learns to become" and that nobody exists simply as a collection of identity traits. We are endowed with abilities to think, to choose, and to do.

The view has coherence as a whole; and it arises out of Oakeshott's lifelong meditations on love, mortality, learning, permanence, and change. But it also has particular facets, like a well-cut gemstone. In the

pages that follow, I explain this positive moral vision in more detail by considering discrete aspects or facets of the ideas Oakeshott expresses throughout his writing.

One aspect of this moral vision is its focus on life lived in the present. Even in his earliest writings, published posthumously, Oakeshott was concerned with living what he called a "religious" life in the present. In later writings this manifested as a concern with activities that could be understood as valuable in themselves: their entire significance is contained in their actual exercise. These include love, friendship, conversation, liberal learning, and contemplation. Someone with a disposition toward presentness simply cannot be an ambitious careerist and does not locate self-worth in achievement.

As a corollary to a focus on the present, this moral vision concentrates on life understood as a series of "performances" and "occasions" that are premised on contingency. Performances are significant not because they take place in front of others; their meaning lies in the fact that each performance (whether in drama, music, or human conduct) is unique and unrepeatable. Contingency is an unavoidable part of all performances; a performer must be fleet of foot and easily adaptable to catastrophes and good fortune alike. Performances imply creativity, as does human conduct in general. And occurrences and occasions signify that active intelligence is at work; they are not "things" that just "happened."

Moreover, every performer has a style, manner of conduct, and habit of mind. What matters in this moral vision is not so much *what* is done as *how* it is done. Adverbial conditions are vital for determining the significance of any action. Is care given generously or reluctantly? Are difficulties approached patiently or anxiously? Adverbs often say more about a person's character than do actions themselves, and the trick is to habituate oneself into a life where we can consistently approve the adverbs that accompany our activities. In other words, we develop style, sensibility, and insight.

Oakeshott did not come to this view on his own, of course. He was steeped in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Bradley, and also in the great works of literature in English, French, and German, as well as the work of Montaigne and Augustine, and hundreds of other authors. Several near-contemporary thinkers had a special influence on his thought: George Santayana, John Cowper Powys, and Walter Pater. Oakeshott records many quotes from these men in his notebooks, and together they comprise a view that may best be summarized in Pater's phrase, "life as an art." Tracing some of these influences yields a more capacious view of the moral life that he approves.

Finally, Oakeshott continually emphasizes the freedom that is requisite for the development of his positive moral vision. Character is formed through intelligent thinking and acting, and we are free to understand (or misunderstand) ourselves. Human beings are not a bundle of genetic predispositions or unchosen sexual and racial identities; we are free and responsible human beings who have the burden and blessing of making choices about our lives.

ON LIVING IN THE PRESENT

In an essay titled "Insouciance," D. H. Lawrence once wondered: "Why do modern people almost invariably ignore the things that are actually present to them?" (Boulton 2004, p. 96). This question is one of Oakeshott's most abiding preoccupations too. Why must we always be thinking of the past, he wonders, and of our mistakes, regrets and triumphs? And why do we alternately fear and eagerly anticipate the future? What is so difficult or unsatisfying about living in an actual present?

Perhaps living in the present would require us to set aside the dissatisfaction and perfectionism that preoccupy us. We could no longer find solace in thinking that our present faults will *surely* be remedied by a careful regimen of hard work. We would also have to set aside guilt and regret about past mistakes, as well as nostalgia for periods of time that are now gone. We would have to learn to enjoy the world as it is, not as it could or should be, cultivating gratefulness instead of criticism.

Oakeshott maintained in his notebooks that to become "friends with mortality, to defeat death, it is necessary to live an extemporary life." In this kind of life, he wrote, "there is no death, for there is no recognized change. Each moment, instead of being the successor to the last & the predecessor of the next, is

complete in itself. Life becomes continuous, without breaks or lacunae. We no longer move from point to point, but are complete at every point" (Oakeshott 2014, p. 235). He knew that this was a difficult outlook to cultivate and maintain, because the past and future continually break in upon the present. This constant passing-away of experience is one of his most abiding concerns.

Oakeshott admiringly describes a life lived in the present in his 1956 essay, "On Being Conservative," one of the most idiosyncratic descriptions of conservatism ever written. Crucially, he describes conservatism not as a set of precepts but as a disposition, a way of being. At the heart of it is "a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be" (1991, p. 408). Conservatism is an attitude of enjoyment and of gratefulness. It is "to be equal to one's own fortune, to live at the level of one's own means, to be content with the want of greater perfection which belongs alike to oneself and one's circumstances" (Ibid., p. 409). It is affection for what exists at present.

A more youthful expression of this same sentiment appears in his early essay, "Religion and the World," written in 1929, when Oakeshott was 28 years old, and published after his death. In this essay he sets out an idiosyncratic vision of religion as the antithesis of worldliness, where worldliness consists of investment and career. Religion, in contrast, is life lived in the present. Its aim is insight. In such a life, the future will not be allowed "any longer, to lay its withering hand upon the present, for, though to live in the present may appear frivolous, to live for the future is certainly vain" (2011, p. 33). The full value of life is to be found in each lived moment.

The most radical expression of this idea appears in Oakeshott's explication of poetry in "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," originally published in 1959. The essay is a belated retraction of a "foolish sentence" in his early book, *Experience and its Modes*, where poetry had been included as part of the mode of practice. In "The Voice of Poetry," Oakeshott describes poetry or contemplation as a mode all its own, separate from practice, and distinguished by its "presentness." Images in contemplation, poetic images, are "merely present; they provoke neither speculation nor inquiry about the occasion or condition of their appearing but only delight in their having appeared." The images that are the subject of contemplation are "both permanent and unique. Contemplation does not use, or use-up or wear-out its images, or induce change in them: it rests in them, looking neither backwards nor forwards" (1991, pp. 509-10).

In one sense poetry is a mode that has nothing to do with the mode of practice, where Oakeshott places religion, politics, and morality. Poetry is removed from the world of daily life. In poetry, and in practical activity seen poetically, "no premeditated achievement is pursued," the activity is "not inferential or argumentative," and there is no "restlessness to be overcome, no desire to be satisfied, or approval to be won" (Ibid., p. 513). Human conduct may sometimes be approached this way.

Oakeshott wrote these lines in his notebooks: "Dante met somewhere in hell a man whose crime was that he did not love the sweet light of day. It is the crime of our civilization. Instead of the sweetness of the present day, the light of today, we love what is gone or is to come. We despise all that is not productive, contributory: we do not understand what is simply for itself" (2014, p. 148). This is an eloquent summing up of his disposition to live, so far as possible, in the present. In *On Human Conduct* he describes this sentiment as religion, where "doing is delivered, at least in part, from the deadliness of doing" (1975, p. 74).

PERFORMANCE, CONTINGENCY, AND OCCASION

Oakeshott resists the notion that activity must constantly refer to a future end or purpose, which helps to explain his rejection of career and achievement as primary goods. Put differently, he does not see every action as valuable in terms of what it produces. Nor does he think that subsequent actions can be predicted from past events or states of being, as if people were wholly controlled by genetic patterns or biological urges. He therefore understands life as full of contingency. Each person plays a part that can be replicated by no one else, and chance and choice are fundamental.

The relationship of friends, for example, consists in the mutual enjoyment of another unique self, who cannot be replaced. Friendship implies a "ready acceptance of what is and the absence of any desire to change or to improve." A friend excites contemplation, and the relationship of friend to friend is "dramatic, not utilitarian; the tie is one of familiarity, not usefulness" (1991, p. 407). Friendship is also contingent in that one could never plan to "procure" perfect friends; these relationships often develop outside our conscious control and result from events that could have been otherwise.

In his later writing Oakeshott also describes moral conduct as "performance." Again, he does not mean performative in the sense that conduct must be seen, appreciated or judged by others; his notion of "self-enactment" has little to do with other people. Rather, performative conduct means that we enact ourselves creatively within the terms of practices—settled modes of doing things. As a participant in these practices, a moral actor may have the expertise of a virtuoso or the inexperience of a novice. Expertise and mastery depend upon what an actor has learned and practiced over time.

Crucially, a moral language is not a grammar but "an instrument which may be played upon with varying degrees of sensibility to its resources. There is room for the individual idiom, it affords opportunity to inventiveness." And this: "For an agent in conduct a practice is an instrument to be played upon, and to do this he must have the understanding of a performer. It is a language, at once responsive to and critical of his wants and aspirations, in which he discloses and enacts himself" (1975, p. 91). Like an artist or musician, who requires a medium or instrument in order to perform, a moral actor requires a set of practices that facilitate his moral performances. As Walter Pater observes in his "Essay on Style," a writer is like a moral performer in "dealing scrupulously with his instrument, and therefore, indirectly, with the reader himself" and he possesses "the science of the instrument he plays on, perhaps, after all, with a freedom which in such case will be the freedom of a master" (1915, p. 14).

This moral understanding implies not only the uniqueness of a particular occasion and a performance by a particular person or set of people, but also the contribution of each occasion to the larger whole of an ongoing life. As any performer knows, no musical piece is ever played in exactly the same way, even by the same violinist, in the same recital hall, on the same day. Thus, there is distinct value in each and every performance. Understood poetically, these discrete performances are complete in themselves and worthy subjects of contemplation. "A human life is composed of performances, and each performance is a disclosure of a man's beliefs about himself and the world and an exploit in self-enactment" (2001, p. 63).

Yet many performances also produce a certain kind of performer. The performer of twenty years ago is not the same as he is today; repeated actions have turned the musician into a very different—and hopefully more excellent—practitioner of his art. This is not so different from the *hexis* described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which comes only as a result of repeated, habitual practices. Over time, then, a person may come to possess a distinctive style, whether as a musician, poet, writer, carpenter, teacher, or moral actor. He learns more fully the "languages" of these activities and becomes more expert in speaking them.

This language of performance is in accord with Oakeshott's inclination to see the world aesthetically. An aesthetic outlook implies freedom—from purpose (teleology and the future) and from determinism ("causes" and the past). This aesthetic notion of morality depends upon contingency, which Oakeshott describes at the end of his first essay in *On Human Conduct*. A contingent relationship, he maintains, is categorically different from a causal relationship, or from a teleological relationship. Contingency is not mere accident, but rather "a sequential relationship of intelligent individual occurrences where what comes after is recognized to be conditional upon what went before . . . because they 'touch' and in touching identify themselves as belonging together" (1975, p. 104). This touching might or might not have taken place, and when it does it is often the result of free, intelligent action, though sometimes also subject to chance. Every action is a response to what has come before it, and subsequent "occurrences" result from prior actions. Ultimately, understanding any performance requires that it be placed in a story, which is concerned with the "topical and the transitory," with things that could have been otherwise (Ibid. p. 105).

Moral conduct is therefore an *intelligent* "ritual of utterance and response, a continuously extemporized dance whose participants are alive to one another's movements and to the ground upon which they

tread" (Ibid., p. 63). It is not a series of predictable events but of occurrences and "occasions," experienced and undertaken by intelligent agents. Occasions, after all, imply things that are particular or special, like events, ceremonies, or celebrations. They are chances or opportunities. Oakeshott hopes that, with the proper education, people will be inclined "to recognize everything as an occasion" (2001, p. 60). The world we inhabit, he writes, "is composed not of 'things' but of occurrences, which [we are] aware of in terms of what they mean" and to which we must respond in terms of our *understanding* of them (Ibid., p. 9).

STYLE, MANNER, ADVERBS: SENSIBILITY AND INSIGHT

So far, I have described Oakeshott's positive moral vision in terms of present experience and the disposition to appreciate the drama and occasions of life. His vision also encompasses the longer-term project of building a fulfilling human life as a whole, as I have suggested above in the example of the musician who develops skill and finesse over decades. At various points Oakeshott described a central concern of life as the cultivation of style, sensibility, and insight—of a particular "habit of mind." These are the precisely the qualities he thought liberal learning might yield. In another formulation it is Montaigne's challenge of knowing how to belong to oneself. In still another, it entails coming to terms with the "adverbial conditions" according to which moral conduct takes place. Are our actions governed by gracefulness or anger, kindness, pride or self-indulgence?

Oakeshott's essay, "Religion and the World" is concerned with just such questions of moral style. There, alongside his discussion of presentness, the words "insight" and "sensibility" appear no fewer than thirteen times in a nine-page essay. These terms are meant to convey the appropriation of experience into an original, personal philosophy. Oakeshott generally finds the world's templates for human flourishing reductive and boring; and he rejects the ideals of the "worldly man"—success and accomplishment—in favor of "the realization of a self" achieved through "insight." The worth of a life should be measured by its "sensibility, not by its external achievement of the reputation behind which it may have been able to hide its lack of actual insight" (2011, p. 33). He quotes, without attribution, Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*: "[the religious man] will maintain a kind of candid detachment in the face of the very highest actual achievement" (Ibid.). Like the magnanimous man of Aristotle's *Ethics*, this person never compares himself with others but is calmly self-possessed.

Oakeshott prizes this intellectual-moral cultivation of mind and character. The goal of life, he writes, "is always here and now in the achievement of a personal sensibility" (Ibid., p. 35). And again: "nothing is of final worth except present insight, a grasp of the thing itself" (Ibid., p. 37). This achievement of sensibility may also be understood as the acquisition of a personal style—not primarily in the superficial terms of dress and appearance, but as a habit of mind.

Every significant utterance "has a style of its own, a personal idiom, an individual manner of thinking of which it is a reflection." We observe the style of others, especially our teachers, and thereby come to see that styles differ and that there is no one perfect *telos* for moral and intellectual excellence. The most significant component of education is learning how to feel and think, and this happens in listening to and recognizing the styles of others. We copy and discriminate as we incrementally create our own habits of mind and conduct.

Such style is never explicitly taught; it is only imparted. In this respect the whole experience is slightly mysterious. Who knows what elements of personality will be compelling to a student, what turns of phrase or mannerisms he or she will pick up or reject? The process is also quasi-aesthetic, for conduct like this is "like an *art* in having to be learned, in being learned better by some than by others, in allowing almost endless opportunity for individual style, and in which virtuosity and mastery are distinguishable" (1975, p. 62). Many of us may master something; few will be virtuosos.

In the 1951 essay, "Political Education," he suggests a line of thought that will be developed more fully in *On Human Conduct*. In "Political Education" one finds the argument, actually somewhat unusual for Oakeshott, that the way we study politics has real implications for the *practice* of politics. Usually he is

keen to separate the explanatory and detached character of teaching and learning from moral and political conduct, but here he identifies a direct link between the two. At the conclusion of the essay Oakeshott quotes Ovid's famous maxim, "*Abeunt studia in mores*," or, "our studies have an influence on our characters and manners." Oakeshott admits here that an inescapable moral component accompanies all profound experiences of learning. This is not a direct undertaking to teach morality, as is the case in certain classical schools, which focus on virtue education. It is an oblique engagement. We may find that after a semester-long study of Aristotle, for instance, that we are inclined to think more deeply about (and even practice) temperance and courage.

Even the pursuit of learning for its own sake—disinterested learning—may inadvertently yield someone more capable of holding desires and aversions at arm's length, able to be slightly less buffeted by emotions and to remain calm amidst chaos. The cultivation of such a temperament, with its ironic or Stoic detachment from the turbulent goings-on of politics and daily life, is in fact a *moral* achievement. It requires recognizing other modes of experience besides the practical. And Oakeshott hopes that a proper education will yield political actors who understand politics for what he thinks it is: the pursuit of intimations about appropriate change and preservation, not the pursuit of ideological consistency or perfection.

Most important of all, what may be gained from education is a particular "manner" of conducting oneself. "The fruits of a political education will appear in the *manner* in which we think and speak about politics and perhaps in the *manner* in which we conduct our political activity" (2001, p. 184). This is quite different from operating according to "rules" of conduct; for what Oakeshott points to here is precisely what happens when rules are not received as inflexible guides or directives. Style is "the choice made, not according to the rules, but within the area of freedom left by the negative operation of rules" (Ibid., p. 59). Rules cannot tell people what to do; they announce "only conditions to be subscribed to in making choices" (1975, p. 58).

In *On Human* Conduct, this vision is described in terms of "adverbial conditions" that govern practices. Indeed, a practice is simply "a prudential or a moral adverbial qualification of choices and performances, more or less complicated, where conduct is understood in terms of a procedure"—not a process (Ibid., p. 55). The adverbs themselves—"punctually, considerately, civilly scientifically"—and so on, do not tell us *what* to do but rather how to do the things we have chosen to do. So-called "rules" of conduct, likewise, do not comprise a book of technique but are the ideas or nodal densities that have been distilled from an already existing practice. These can inform an agent, but what he actually does is "*illustrate* them in actions." Any action or speech "is an *illustration* (not an example)" of human conduct (Ibid., p. 92).

In his notebooks, Oakeshott observes the significant difference between "moral dispositions which are part of one's *amour-propre* and those which are 'principles' or 'ideals' or are recognized as independent virtues of a certain character" (2014, p. 430). A person must assimilate and appropriate virtues for himself, within his own life, for them to be authentic and deeply held. It is not enough to praise courage or moderation in words, or to desire them abstractly; they must be lived. He asks rhetorically, "Is morality entirely itself if its precepts are not part of one's *amour-propre*?" (Ibid.).

Oakeshott's language is precise, and it is easy to overlook the subtle differences in his chosen terms. He contrasts virtuosity with mastery, illustration with example; and he employs specific, aesthetically-inflected terms to talk about human conduct: performance, performer, style, manner, insight, sensibility. Are these ideas entirely Oakeshott's own, or do they owe something to other sources? If they do, as I believe, then an examination of some of these sources will better illuminate his understanding of desirable moral character.

LIFE AS AN ART

The publication of Oakeshott's notebooks has been a gift for scholars. This volume shows his astonishing breadth of intellectual interest as well as the particular authors whom he found compelling at various points in his life. Any careful reader of Oakeshott's early work will likely have already seen that he was a devoted reader of Walter Pater, the nineteenth-century author and critic, but the notebooks also reveal his debts to John Cowper Powys and George Santayana. Oakeshott appears to have read of most of Santayana's major works.

I have argued so far that the moral character Oakeshott admires prioritizes life in the present, sees events as occasions, and embraces the contingency, adventure and unpredictability of human life. The terms he uses to talk about moral conduct are strikingly aesthetic: performance, manner, occasion, illustration, insight, sensibility. This accords with the philosophy that Pater attributes to his main character in *Marius the Epicurean*, in the novel of the same name, which Oakeshott read and absorbed.

For Marius, as for Oakeshott, past and future are constraints on a vital and intense life. As Pater writes (in his somewhat convoluted prose): "And so the abstract apprehension that the little point of this present moment alone really is, between a past which has just ceased to be and the future which may never come, became practical with Marius, under the form of a resolve, as far as possible, to exclude regret and desire, and yield himself to the improvement of the present with an absolutely disengaged mind" (Pater 1909, p. 105). In other words, regret and desire mark someone who is fundamentally distracted, whose mind is taken up with things that are *not* happening at the moment.

If Marius's satisfactory moral life looks neither forward nor backward, it also does not locate fulfillment in mere pleasure. "Not pleasure, but fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fulness—energy, variety, and choice of experience . . . whatever form of human life, in short, might be heroic, impassioned, ideal"—these are the values that Marius embraces (Ibid., pp. 114-15). This view is echoed in Pater's conclusion to *The Renaissance*: "*Philosophiren*, says Novalis, *ist dephlegmatisiren, vivificiren*. The service of philosophy, and of religion and culture as well, to the human spirit, is to startle it into a sharp and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end" (Pater 1873, p. 210).

Like Oakeshott, who questions the value of career and accomplishment, Marius also finds refuge in an aesthetically-tinged philosophy that weighs "the claims of that eager, concentrated, impassioned realisation of experience, against those of the received morality" (Pater 1909, p. 113). Instead of conforming to that conventional morality, Marius "break[s] beyond the limits of the actual moral order; perhaps not without some pleasurable excitement in so bold a venture" (Ibid.). In other words, he tries to live a life of value in the present, by his own lights.

A reader might wonder how Oakeshott could square this language of heroic, impassioned ideals with his later praise of a morality grounded in habit and custom and with the conservative disposition. A commonplace (though mistaken) view of conservatism is that it produces a certain kind of temperament: the conventional, staid, somewhat boring, always moderate person, fearful of novelty and change, and desirous above all of protecting what he has. By contrast, Oakeshott believes that the conservative disposition can and often does coexist with energetic and even idiosyncratic lives, and it may appear among people who possess a wide variety of temperaments. One line in "On Being Conservative" has often puzzled commentators but nevertheless illustrates this point: "it is not at all inconsistent to be conservative in respect of government and radical in respect of almost every other activity" (1991, p. 435). What could this possibly mean?

First, it means that the conservative does not misunderstand the importance of politics. A conservative disposition is important in politics precisely *so that* politics itself does not intrude into the spheres of more important human activities. Political activity, in its ordinary sense of maneuvering, manipulating

to gain power, making alliances, gathering votes and producing policies, is a second-order activity that facilitates other, more personal and communal goods among people who relish the freedom to live as they wish. The aim of politics here is merely to protect this sphere of free human choice and enterprise. We are assumed to have freedom and ideas about what to do with it.

In contrast, when people understand political activity as their most important task, it is often because they are dissatisfied with their present lives and desire improvement or change—the antithesis of living in the present. They might even wish for the state to help, and sometimes they even aim at gigantic enterprises for utopian transformation (thus the significance of the Tower of Babel image). But the conservative disposition in politics is opposed to this, for on such a reading, government's aim is "not to inflame passion and give it new objects to feed upon, but to inject into the activities of already too passionate men an ingredient of moderation; to restrain, to deflate, to pacify and to reconcile" (Ibid., p. 432). This is not a common view of politics and government at present, but this does not make it valueless.

Second, this conservative disposition toward enjoyment and experience is itself quite energetic and alive. The world and its inhabitants are delighted in, appreciated, loved, examined, contemplated, discussed. A conservative may be skeptical about politics but passionate about music or poetry or motorcycles, or about building a business or evangelizing or doing scientific investigation. In short, we may be "radically" committed to a variety of activities and people. We could therefore approve Pater's vision of eschewing mere pleasure in favor of "fulness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fulness—energy, variety, and choice of experience" (1909, p. 114). The key, for both Pater and Oakeshott, is to make experience one's own through this insight, by appropriating it in a way that is unique, and in doing so not for an audience but because we know it to be good. This is knowing how to belong to ourselves. It is life understood as an art.

Similar views about the importance of personal insight appear in the work of George Santayana, whom Oakeshott quotes extensively in his notebooks: "In Philosophy itself investigation & reasoning are only preparatory & servile parts, means to an end. They terminate in insight, or what in the noblest sense of the word may be called theory, [GK *theoria*],—a steady contemplation of all things in their order & worth. Such contemplation is imaginative" (2014, p. 10).[1] Again, the terms are insight and contemplation, with imagination and poetry prioritized over logic and reason. Oakeshott does not, of course, disparage logic and reason, but the vital experience he seeks is somewhat different, and not merely intellectual. At three points in the notebooks he copies this line from Isak Dinesen: "When you know what things are really like you can make no poems about them." Practical knowledge of the world can often be an impediment to living a life full of poetic experience, insight, and sensibility. Or as Oakeshott glosses the line in one place, "To know what things are really like is an accomplishment from which it is difficult to escape again into the world of possibilities" (Ibid., p. 429). There is indeed a youthful, romantic streak in Oakeshott's thought.

One of the most intriguing sources for Oakeshott's view appears in the work of the essayist, novelist and philosopher John Cowper Powys, whose book, *The Meaning of Culture*, Oakeshott reviewed in 1930. Powys himself owes a great deal to Walter Pater, and observes (along the lines of both Pater and Oakeshott) the great difficulty of living in the present, and of rejecting both utility and the future: "For one does surely come at last to recognize that it requires as much effort, as much stoical austerity, to shake off those heavy vapours of use-and-wont which betray us into taking the passing moments for granted, as to devote ourselves to some great ideal cause" (1929, pp. 31-32). It is, however, Oakeshott's appropriation of this book in his review that best crystallizes the view of life I have been describing.

In the review Oakeshott delineates three understandings of what it might mean to be a cultured person. He rejects the idea that a cultured person is someone possessing "encyclopedic information"—someone who knows a lot about a lot of things and is thus able to provide limitless answers to factual inquiries. In the modern world, this is equivalent to the E. D. Hirsch *Cultural Literacy* view. The second view understands culture as the "acquisition of the best that has been thought and known in the world," *a*

la Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot. This is similar to the first view, except that there is a selection process at work. Instead of encyclopedia, we find "greats."

The idea of culture that Oakeshott and Powys favor is distinct from both of these. They reject culture as equivalent to mere acquisition—whether that be of indiscriminate information or of the best that has been thought and known. Instead, they emphasize the deeply personal character of all true culture, and the necessity of its being filtered through a person's mind and heart, made one's own in a process of digestion. In other words, it becomes part of our character, and this happens through not just in the intellectual faculty of knowing, but in the intellectual *and* emotional process of making it our own.

It is one thing, for example, to regurgitate Aristotle's doctrine of the mean on an exam; it is another to have tried to live it, to see how it does or does not account for our experiences of the moral life. Or as Pater puts it, "What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct *abstract* definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of *temperament*, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (1873, p. xii).[2] It is much easier to know all about a picture than to have acquired a sensibility for it. The real aim of education is not to make people into walking dictionaries; it is to enhance and make their experiences of life different, better and richer. How this happens is a mystery; *that* it sometimes does is indisputable.

A few remarks from John Cowper Powys illuminate this view. First as to its origins: the "art of self-culture begins with a deeper awareness," he writes, "borne in upon us either by some sharp emotional shock or little by little like an insidious rarefied air, of the marvel of our being alive at all . . . [i]t is clear that there must be a will to philosophize at the very start. This implies a desire to focus such *imaginative reason* as we possess upon the mystery of life" (1929, p. 8). The result is a person who lives his philosophy, and does not merely talk about it. "One always feels that a merely educated man holds his philosophical views as if they were so many pennies in his pocket. . . . Whereas with a cultured man there is no gap or lacuna between his opinions and his life . . . .They are *what he is*" (Ibid., p. 10). And the desirable effects of becoming cultured, of reading literature, and of thinking, are "to encourage one to learn the art of becoming a 'great author' oneself; not in the sense of composing a single line, but in . . . [catching] on the wing that fleeting loveliness of which no genius has the monopoly" (Ibid., p. 39). Again, this is life understood as an art.

Still further, the independent, free soul with integrity is perfectly content, "apart altogether from external success, or fame, or prestige, or any reputation in the eyes of others" (Ibid., p. 115). Ambition, Powys observes, is the "grand enemy of all peace." Real culture, in contrast, simplifies existence "down to bed-rock" and heightens "those great permanent sensations which belong, as Wordsworth puts it, to 'the pleasure which there is in life itself'" (Ibid., p. 119). To summarize: a rich and fulfilling human life requires both intellectual and moral experiences, mixed and digested in the mind and heart, all of which form an integrated, coherent character. This kind of cultural formation even has a quasi-religious character, as Matthew Arnold famously notes: "Religion says: *The kingdom of God is within you*; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality" (1903, pp. 10-11).

Also in the notebooks one finds a fascinating list of the moral types that Oakeshott approves: the 'superior man' (Confucius); the Magnanimous Man' the sapiens/apatheia [GK] of the Stoic—the good will of Kant; the elect of the Calvinist, the importance of 'living alone' (Epicurus, Chuang Tzu)—to be *free* (Spinoza); 'courage' of Vauvernagues: all manners of being superior to fortune, invulnerable; of being a 'moral god': Milton's Christ & his Satan. Unconquerable. Not by Platonic wisdom (contemplation, the *vita contemplativa*, Aristotle); and not by succeeding—by having *good* fortune; but by something else—the Platonic courage; the Hobbesian 'pride'. The hardness of it all; that is only Vauvernagues—'*coeur tendre et Stoique*' hits the right note (2014, pp. 425-26).

Vauvernagues, who concludes the list and is little-known today, was a French writer and moralist who corresponded with Voltaire and died at the age of thirty-one. Widely admired for his character and maturity, he was eulogized by the French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve: "Both proud

and modest, stoic and tender-hearted. . . . He set a rare example, that of a superior man, long humbled, restrained, overwhelmed by misfortune, and who, growing neither bitter nor resentful, took his revenge in a noble manner."[3] This is a succinct summary, too, of the character that Oakeshott admires: self-possessed, humble, ironic, Stoic; but also energetic, with a sense of honor, and fully engaged in living an intense and vital life.

FREEDOM

Finally, the moral character Oakeshott approves is defined by a love of freedom. Again in the notebooks, he writes: "Kant, Fichte, Hegel—'freedom' = being in control of one's own world & destiny—choosing." At its most basic level, this is the freedom Oakeshott praises: an individualist disposition that understands human conduct as entailing freedom and choice. This freedom is necessary for self-determination and self-creation, not undertaken alone and outside social structures, but within practices and among other people.

In addition to this most basic freedom, Oakeshott also prizes liberation from the constraints of determinism and scientific behaviorism—from notions that human beings are just like animals or any other natural phenomenon that can be studied statistically by social scientists. As he explains in *On Human Conduct*, we are "creatures of want" and not only of need. Our wants "are not biological impulses or genetic urges; they are imagined satisfactions, which have reasons but not causes, and are eligible to be wished-for, chosen, pursued, procured, approved or disapproved" (1975, p. 63). This view of freedom also opposes most of the conceptual apparatus of contemporary identity politics, for while Oakeshott does not dispute that personal characteristics like sex or race matter in a person's identity, what is far more important is how we choose to think about those characteristics.

The third kind of freedom that Oakeshott prizes may be designated, again following Walter Pater, as "liberty of soul." This liberty of soul is what Pater describes as "freedom from all partial and misrepresentative doctrine which does but relieve one element in our experience at the cost of another, freedom from all embarrassment alike of regret for the past and of calculation on the future: this would be but preliminary to the real business of education, insight, insight through culture" (1909, p. 107). It is freedom from the demands of the world and the future. In the terms of *On Human Conduct*, it is satisfactory self-disclosure and the even-more-satisfactory self-enactment, where conduct is undertaken not for any external rewards but in pursuit of what one knows as one's own "integrated" character. Liberty of soul offers freedom from the judgments of others as well as freedom "to achieve a homogenous way of living." Here, life is "integrate, single, satisfying only when we have freed ourselves from the temptation to produce, to achieve, to accomplish anything whatsoever save an integrated life" (2014, p. 152).

The seeds of this last freedom are found not just in Pater and the nineteenth century, but also in Oakeshott's musings on Stoicism and Epicureanism: "Among the Stoics to despise ambition & to be free from the world had become a cult –a negative cult. But with Epicurus it was a positive way of life—'Live Alone." The freedom of the Stoic was an escape; that of the Epicurean a fulfillment." It was also informed by the individualism of Chuang Tzu and his belief in "the supreme importance of cultivating *one's own powers*. No pursuing 'goodness', or obeying the Law. Freedom from reputation & a desire to exploit life" (Ibid., pp. 230, 423). All of this offers another way of expressing the focus on "presentness" with which this essay began. This view is grounded in an "improvident desire for freedom [and] integrity" and its essential requirement is "an integrated self whose purpose is not to remember, adopt or assimilate, but to live a life contemporary with itself" (2007, p. 32).

Taken as a whole, Oakeshott's musings about the moral life form a coherent picture. Yet the kind of character he praises cannot be easily or simply described, and it is not a single characteristic or set of characteristics. The facets I have described above—a focus on the present, the performative aspect of human conduct, the importance of style, and freedom to make choices—are all part of his overall vision of a flourishing life. These characteristics make up an essentially "aesthetic" morality, in which conduct is

understood as endlessly creative, performative, and subject to the intelligent choices of human beings who are what they have learned to become. This way of living is a challenge and a satisfaction at once.

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NOTES

1 Ouoting George Santayana, 1910, *Three Philosophical Poets Lucretius Dante and Goethe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, p. 10.

2 My italics.

3 Quotation from Sainte-Beuve in Lainey 1966, p. 22.