Education, Skepticism, and Conversation in Michael Oakeshott

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A concern that has been faced for hundreds of years relates to education. How to educate, what capacity human beings have to learn, which methods are most effective, the position and condition of teacher and student in the educational relationship, what content should be taught, how education should deal with the speed of changes that have occurred in recent centuries, from the emergence of the printing press (Gutenberg) to the newest technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, and all the other sciences that directly or indirectly contribute to education: psychology, psychoanalysis, physiology, nutrition, neuroscience, information and communication technology, etc?

Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) helps us reflect on these questions from a standpoint we call a skeptical position, in this case modern skepticism. Influenced by thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) and David Hume (1711-1776), his skepticism leads education to be viewed in a peculiar way. The object to be addressed here—education—is not, therefore, to present what an ideal education would be (nothing could be further from Oakeshottian thought); on the contrary: it is to offer a prudent perspective,[1] typical of skepticism; an education in its various domains, without any claim to exhaust the subject.

Therefore, it is important to understand that Oakeshott does not debate such themes from a metaphysical, teleological, partisan, or moral standpoint. Oakeshott seeks to assess, based on his essayistic reflections, the empirical data of reality and to deepen the inquiry in search of objective results, not necessarily a definitive solution to problems, but rather by indicating a direction: a liberal education.

Michael Oakeshott, born in England, was one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, a political theorist and historian, well versed in a wide range of subjects. He presented his thought in a unique and distinctive manner, whether in philosophy, history, politics, education, religion, etc.[2] He taught at major institutions, including Cambridge and Oxford. Influenced by the events of the Second World War, Oakeshott devoted much of his time to philosophy and politics, which did not prevent him from addressing important themes such as education. One of his works translated into Portuguese is *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, in which Oakeshott presents education as he understands it to be liberal (self-consciousness), never losing sight of its skeptical foundation. Michael Oakeshott's philosophical and political position is often controversial: some see him as a conservative, others merely as a liberal (not in the progressive sense), and others still as a modern skeptic; producing various nuances in his thought.[3] What matters here is to recognize that, with regard to education, Michael Oakeshott (2021, p.10) holds a well-defined position:

> Liberal education as Oakeshott understands it has already been confused with, or replaced by, behavior modification in the minds of many: sex education, drug education, values clarification, peace studies, suicide prevention (education for death), consciousness-raising, and many other subjects that are currently fashionable",

Timothy Fuller[4] makes it quite clear that "for Oakeshott, the dialogue of liberal education is erroneously characterized when framed in terms of progress or of political programs and public policies" (2021, p. 15). This means that Michael Oakeshott understands education as something far more than educational practice, its methods, and its theory. He defends it as an intrinsic form of human existence itself: the development of language and its mode of use (motivation). For this reason, for Oakeshott, in Fuller's words, "no one will be surprised that educational institutions, both in England and in the United States, are becoming confused with pressure groups seeking to protect their own interests" (2021, p. 11),[5] since Oakeshott repudiates education as an anchoring of purely political and ideological interests.

The much-acclaimed scholars in the field of education increasingly restrict themselves to personal and institutional interests. They create closed groups (bubbles), which makes it a herculean task to present our ideas when they are based on facts and practical evidence. "It is therefore not surprising that professionals view without enthusiasm the philosopher's skepticism, which draws attention to the limits of a mode of experience." Unlike education professionals, the philosopher seeks to demonstrate to scholars not a judgment on their theses and works, but rather to "force the professional of an activity to become self-aware (…) of self-criticism" (Ibid., p. 23).

Returning to the initial point, thinking about education for the future, thinking about education in terms of its historical development and what we understand by education—is the fragile point of this exposition. It takes little effort to understand that education, in its methods, epistemological proposals, ideologies, objectives, effectiveness, and efficiency, is always chasing changes that occur before it namely—new technologies. Yes, education changes slowly when compared to technologies and the sciences as such. When we succeed or fail in the way we educate individuals, the effects appear in the long term, and the time required to correct them is also long. And it could not be different. Education is part of the human constitution, and, when considered historically, the manner in which we deal with education is relatively recent in comparison with what we understand as the history and evolution of humanity.

Education will never be an easy field for debate and assertiveness because, as Oakeshott himself maintains, education is intrinsic to the human being. Consequently, understanding human complexity constitutes the central challenge of education, which renders education itself complex. To speak of education is therefore to speak of what is "ontological" and "epistemological" in the human being.[6] With regard to education, Oakeshott takes a step back insofar as he understands that it is not possible for someone to be considered "human" if they are incapable of developing language,[7] that is, engaging in "conversation" (self-consciousness). Throughout his work, Oakeshott (1991, p. 5) consistently sought to present his skeptical thinking as epistemologically open to all possibilities, guided by prudence.

> The themes explored here have been with me for as long as I can remember; but I left the task of organizing my thoughts until very late, and the reader must forgive me if, as a result, I proceed slowly in order to avoid confusion.

The concern of Oakeshott is that "contemporary education is under strong pressure to distinguish formality and civility—the general rules of conversation…",[8] thereby confusing an education oriented toward goals with one aimed at the formation of the human being in its full breadth. Oakeshott identifies a serious problem when education is used as a form of individual and social improvement. Not that education does not enhance the human being in various respects; rather, for Oakeshott, the problem lies in understanding education as a type of engineering directed toward human perfectibility (nothing more antithetical), which would amount to mere utopias[9] and ideologies (the "politics of faith") in social and political terms, a disaster. This is even more so when education is viewed merely as a political lever and a means of pure economic gain, consequently leading to the mismanagement of resources that are already exceedingly high.[10]

This is why the concept of "conversation" is so frequently used by Oakeshott, since education should not be seen as a dogma, a set of concepts and rules from manuals to be memorized and mechanically applied, much less as an incentive to anarchy through the abandonment of basic standards of relationships,

purposes, and objectives. Education, above all, must be liberating.[11] It should allow the human being to expand all of their infinite potentialities. This expansion occurs primarily when education is oriented toward the questions of emergent reality, in consonance with the positive outcomes of the past (conservative), while looking to the future and acting with restraint. This is not in a merely pragmatic or utilitarian sense, but in the sense that reflection should be directed toward concrete needs, without losing itself in ideologizing theories. Experience and theory cannot constitute a duality in education—as in Cartesian thought[12]—but rather two sides of the same coin. There is no educational theory prior to experience, and human experience is of no value if there is no theoretical reflection upon it, which renders experience and reflection univocal.[13]

Oakeshott argues that human freedom lies in the subject's capacity to consider their own existence in a self-reflective manner. Education will be a consequence of this human capacity to perceive oneself as human (to reflect upon oneself in relation to the world). Paraphrasing the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1970, p. 20), man is not born with an essence; man produces it. In other words:

> (…) nevertheless, it is history that makes individuals; it is their own history, from the moment they are conceived, that ensures individuals are not born and do not appear in a world that grants them an abstract condition, but rather emerge in a world of which they have always been a part, to which they are conditioned, and which they themselves help to condition (…)

It is through the capacity to reflect upon the world and upon oneself that human beings become human. "Human beings are what they learn to become in a world of existing ideas, discovering themselves immersed in them without having been solicited" (Oakeshott 2021, p. 18). If those who reflect on education lack the awareness that human beings are born free and becomes human insofar as they acquire knowledge of their reality and of what surrounds them, education will be nothing more than the mere reproduction of political and economic interests, whose purpose is not the development of the human being and society, but rather the immediate interests of private groups and individuals, even within public institutions. The individual "has a history, but not a nature; he is not what he becomes in conduct. His history is not an evolutionary or teleological process" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 40).

It is redundant to state that education is directly linked to human intelligence; however, how has this intelligence been shaped by those who claim responsibility for this matter? Oakeshott points to the problem that institutions create for education when they view it not as a means to freedom—a basic condition for individuals—but as an usurpation of political, social, ideological, and even moralistic power.

In line with these criticisms that Oakeshott directs at institutions and their agents,[14] he also extends them to those who should examine such matters in a more impartial or, at least, more fruitful manner. Philosophers, epistemologists, psychologists, historians, and many others who deal with issues related to the advancement of human knowledge should, at a minimum, adhere to the limits of their own conceptions of education, grounding them in concrete and lived reality. To claim knowledge of and to theorize about the entirety of human experience is a pretense and an arrogance that exceeds any reasonable limit for those who possess even a basic understanding of the foundations of skepticism. It is precisely this skepticism that permeates the critique Oakeshott directs at intellectuals, politicians, and others. Philosophy itself, as such, should not confine itself to moral, teleological, or ideological questions regarding education; rather, it should contribute to analyzing, explaining, conceptualizing, and problematizing the development of education itself, never placing itself in the position of a judge, but rather as an auxiliary to those who make the final decisions. For Oakeshott (2021, p. 23), philosophy must stand above and beyond these disputes.

> The philosopher potentially compels the professional (…) in such a way that he may submit himself to the same experience of perplexity as the philosopher". This stance that the philosopher

> must adopt in relation to the various areas of knowledge - education, is the "skeptical disease of the philosopher"[15]

What Oakeshott is telling us is that, if we wish to think about a well-grounded education, we must weigh everything that surrounds it: whether it is presented as a space for dialogue (conversation) or merely as a mode of social and individual control.[16] For Oakeshott (2021, p. 27), there is no single way of dealing with multiplicity and the possibilities that human life existentially proposes.

> It is the description of the experience to which he constantly returns. He does so because, regardless of which metaphysical basis one may use to explain experience, it is the recognition of experience in itself that can be shared and delimited through a dialogue among those who partake in it, despite disagreements that may arise concerning the origin of experience and where it may lead.

EDUCATION AND SKEPTICISM

"In practice, skepticism is never absolute: total doubt is simply a contradiction in itself (…) skepticism should not be identified either with anarchy or with radical individualism (…) " (Oakeshott 2018, p. 68). Oakeshott takes as a premise of his thought—regarding philosophy, politics, and education—that skepticism should manifest itself as a balance,[17] as a guiding light, a way of seeing, analyzing, and acting with regard to all practical conditions, favorable and unfavorable, involved in any decision-making process. Education, insofar as it is directly linked to the fact that the human being becomes human through an act of freedom, must be viewed through skeptical lenses in order to dispel the idea of perfect and utopian solutions. For this reason, "government should not be the architect of a perfect way of life" (2018, p. 69), even more so in the case of education, which is part of human constitution itself - imperfection. Education does not exist to make the human being perfect; it exists to explore their potentialities.

As the well-known phrase goes: "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results". In Oakeshott's view, especially in modern times, education has lost its real purpose, since there is an attempt to turn it into a prosperous science, treating it in the same way as bureaucracies, academicist theories, ideologies, politicking, and so forth.

In Oakeshott's conception, when education ceases to be in the hands of the Church—whether Catholic or Protestant (and other religions)—and becomes an arm of the State, it takes on a disposition that is no longer humanistic—aimed at understanding the human being - but rather one oriented toward merely "national"[18] interests, that is, toward the interests of local governments. He cites France as an example, referring to it as an "emblem of the central doctrine of enlightened government". By "enlightened", Oakeshott refers to an education for the nation, not for the individual, oriented toward "enterprise association"[19] (1991, p. 449), which is entirely associated with a "politics of faith".[20]

Oakeshott (2018, p. 139) identifies the error of what he calls the politics of faith when rulers make decisions grounded in theoretical abstractions, thereby directing the population toward the production of greater problems, in this case, in education.

> The politics of scepticism understood that its contemporary task must be: first, to detect what is happening; second, to understand how government can most economically perform its perennial function of preserving the order and balance appropriate to the condition and ongoing activities of society; and third, to ensure that political activity is directed toward this purpose and applies its creativity in that direction.

It means that, unlike a "politics of faith", Oakeshott understands that rulers, in their political actions, should act with restraint, especially when it comes to education. Even outside the European sphere, of which he was part when making these analyses, it is not difficult to perceive this problem as it occurs here on our South American continent, exclusively in Brazil. The idea of a "Brazil, an Educating Homeland"—a slogan of Dilma Rousseff's government—merely demonstrated the distance between political actions that are concrete and effective and the educational reality of our country in recent governments, regardless of their political or ideological spectrum. Brazilian national education has shown itself over recent years to be a set of empty bravado and propaganda, such as "School without Party".

For this reason, Oakeshott (1991, p. 489) understands that "conversation" is the best path for decision-making, even if such decisions later prove to be mistaken. "In a conversation, the participants are not engaged in an investigation or a debate; there is no truth to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion to be sought". Oakeshott starts from the principle that improving the conditions in which we find ourselves, in this case, education, depends on a relinquishing by the parties in favor of the art of "conversation". At best, this leads to results that benefit everyone, not just one side, without losing sight of the individual. Discussing education policies depends on a "disposition"[21] toward open and broad dialogue. "Conversation is not an enterprise designed to generate extrinsic profit, a competition in which the winner receives a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is the space of freedom" (1991, p. 491).

Brazil is are not only one of the worst countries in the PISA ranking (Programme for International Student Assessment), but we have also regressed in recent statistics, especially in the post pandemic period.[22] That Brazil has had emerging problems in education for years is more than a recognized fact, including as a theme in political debates, especially during election periods. However, what kind of education are we talking about? What has been argued so far is that there is no way for governments to systematize education in a homogeneous and comprehensive manner based on purely political-ideological decisions (cabinet ideas), even more so at the national level.[23] This is especially clear when we understand that human beings need self-understanding, the development of language in all its aspects, and a dialogical relationship with others and with society. Education requires a moderate perspective that allows it to encompass past, present, and future based on the demands of the present.

> This is the most economical method of governing in the use of power: it involves an association between past and present, and between governors and governed, which leaves no room for arbitrariness; it encourages a tradition of moderation and resistance to the emergence of dangerous accumulations of power (…), freeing us from vain and dangerous expectations, as well as from exaggerated ambition (Oakeshott 2018, pp. 142-143).

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 states:

> Art. 205. Education, the right of all and the duty of the State and the family, shall be promoted and encouraged with the collaboration of society, aiming at the full development of the person, preparation for the exercise of citizenship, and qualification for work (Federal Constitution 2008, p. 121, emphasis added).

The idea that education is both a "right" and a "duty" at the same time raises a question: what does this right encompass? And is this scope being contemplated by the duty? The various official documents and the different instances that comprise education in Brazil, as well as the federal, state, and municipal levels, would in a certain way claim that these rights and duties are being fulfilled. However, a quick look at national and international indices reveals that this is far from being true.[24]

Few would disagree that education is a duty of the State, families, and society; however, few know what states, municipalities, and the federal government have actually promoted in relation to education. And, as previously presented, a large part of education specialists move more toward educational policies of "faith"

than of "skepticism" (cf. Oakeshott 2018), that is, they place under an umbrella called education a series of demands that are impossible to put into practice. This is evident when we observe the various institutional Brazilian bodies that fall under this umbrella called the Constitution/LDBEN (Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education). Here, education is not treated merely in an epistemological sense, as initially outlined, but as formal education (schooling), which should be concretized in the daily lives of families and in basic, technical, and higher education institutions. Concepts such as civic education, formation of the self, preparation for the world of work, continuing education, constructivist education, critical education, etc., become empty concepts when confronted with political actions and the reality of educational institutions, both public and private. "Individuals are not rational abstractions; they are historical personalities (…) " (Oakeshott 2021, p. 91).

Returning to the initial point, for Oakeshott (2021, p. 39) these forms of "politics of faith" are of no use if the human being is not understood in his or her "nature", which is freedom—an education for freedom.

> They postulate what I shall call the free human being. A human being may become free in many different respects, and I should suggest, moreover, that being educated is in itself an emancipation; and human beings may also achieve various other degrees of what may be called 'autonomy'. But I am concerned here with the 'freedom' (so to speak) from which a human being cannot alienate himself or be deprived without ceasing to be human, whether temporarily or permanently.

We can notice that the freedom invoked by Oakeshott is not simply freedom understood as free will, but the freedom to understand oneself. To understand that what makes one human is one's capacity to develop language, dialogue, and "conversation", and thus to understand the world, experiential manifestations, and oneself: "none of us is born human; each becomes what he learns to be" (2021, p. 44). The human being is the only one capable of this self-reflection and reflection upon the surrounding world; this is what makes one human and the author of one's own history, which makes us unique. Thus, education should follow this path: that of self-reflection inserted within the world of conversation—not defining what the human being is in a metaphysical or ontological sense, but the path by which one becomes human.

Thus, "a human being is not free because he has free will, but because he is, in himself, what he is for himself" (2021, p. 41). This human freedom entails a responsibility: learning—this is the (intrinsic) human condition. It means that the human being is free to learn, not merely to exist, unlike a stone, a plant, or an animal. Human learning is not the mere development of a living organism; it is self-awareness in the face of life. "Human learning is a self-reflective process"; it is not an adaptation to the world for the survival of the species, but rather "perceptions, ideas, beliefs, emotions, sensibilities, recognitions, discriminations, theorems, and everything that comes to constitute the human condition" (2021, p. 46).

However, we must not fall into the error of thinking that learning is a potential that develops naturally (Aristotle); learning requires effort. Jules Payot (2018, p. 174) states that without "will", education does not exist.

> It is first necessary to weaken or, if possible, destroy the forces that tend to undermine energy, and to give as much strength as possible to those that tend to increase it. The causes of the weakening of persevering will are numerous: (…) vague sentimentalism, so frequent among the young (…), the pernicious influence of companions who abandon all effort at self-improvement, life spent in bars and restaurants, sadness, discouragement, the terrible court of sophisms used by the lazy as excuses for idleness (…).

Regardless of any moralistic interpretation of this passage, the focus should be on the necessity that learning requires effort, and that this effort can only be achieved if those who claim responsibility for education demand that it occur in their students, individuals, and society. For a human being, then, learning is a task for an entire lifetime. For there to be such learning—leading to self-awareness and awareness of

the world through effort, "the school and the university are unmistakable; they are successive stages of this deliberate commitment to learning, and it is this that interests us". In these environments the subject must recognize himself as a learner, not an incidental learner of everyday occurrences, but a specific learner, recognized as engaged in a "specific task to be faced and pursued with attention, patience, and determination, with the learner being conscious of what he is doing" (Oakeshott 2018, pp. 49-50).

If we wish to develop the learning potential of each learner, schools and universities must not limit themselves to the dictates and local interests of individuals; they must go beyond them. Since each subject is limited by the geographical and cultural context in which they are situated, these institutions should be places of emancipation from ordinary routine life. And the more human beings associate with one another, the more this learning becomes vigorous, practical, and liberating. Schools and universities should not limit themselves to teaching repetitive manual practices, but should present the diverse human manifestations, "those identities transmitted from parents to children; until recently, schools and universities were the proper places for this, sufficiently protected from the demands of utility" (…).

This is the core of what came to be called liberal education—liberal in being free from the need to satisfy "contingent desires"—and it is for this reason that Oakeshott argues that the human being is not a mere specialist in some function or activity; rather, he is a "historical adventure" (Oakeshott, 2021, p. 56). The human being, even in his individual contingencies, is part of something ancient that seeks the new and that often returns to the old.

If we consider the present day, we may gain a certain perception that Oakeshott's ideas are almost utopian, if not outright so. On the other hand, Oakeshott is not telling us what educational methods should be, nor how each ruler ought to act,[25] much less presenting a manual or even a list of moral rules. Oakeshott invites us to understand that education is intrinsic to the human being: a being of language, dialogue, and constant learning that transcends contingencies without ignoring them. To educate a subject is to grasp what his free dimension is. The art of education is part of this process of making the human being what he ought to be: human.

On the other hand, a closer look shows that, in general, this is not the type of education we observe, including here in Brazil. Inger Enkvist (2019, p. 135) argues that "the old supporters of the new pedagogy continue to be 'neophytes', in the sense that they remain interested in what is 'new'".[26] And by "new," she means "technologies" intended to rescue "their ideas". For those who have had the opportunity to work in Basic Education, this is not difficult to perceive. Public and private schools attempt to compensate for the very poor results (previously demonstrated by PISA) of national education through the use of the most diverse technological devices possible. Indeed, many parents naively believe that their children are learning more and more effectively the more a school unit speaks about its technological paraphernalia. This does not mean that technology should be ignored or set aside; it simply means placing it in its proper place: as a means, not education itself, as we have observed from Michael Oakeshott thus far.

"The most frequent educational use of new technologies has come to be the use of the *internet*. At the same time, freer forms of work have been introduced, making an ordered classroom environment increasingly difficult" (2019, p. 136). This is what Oakeshott calls contingencies. Schools and universities increasingly open themselves to the individual, local, and immediate interests of students rather than to an education oriented toward human freedom and self-awareness.

> The global expression of this current of thought is related to postmodernism and is characterized precisely by the idea that reality as an objective fact does not exist, but rather that each of us constructs our own reality, a theory that has come to be called constructivism or constructionism (…). It is therefore not surprising that parents do not understand much of what is going on, since even teachers themselves do not fully understand what has happened. This philosophy has spread throughout the West despite its contradictions (2019, p. 13).

It is enough to observe the daily life of a public or even a private school to see that words such as effort, learning, self-awareness, and formation are far removed from what Oakeshott understands as the recognition of an education oriented toward freedom. Inger Enkvist argues that the school has lost its formal aspect. Even if this concept may involve ambiguities, what she means is that the school should present to students that which will enable them to grow by equipping them to "better understand the world and make better decisions", when in fact they "divert the discussion of learning toward the social use of school certificates" (2019, p. 14). "Learning is the comprehensive activity through which we come to know ourselves and to know the world around us" (Oakeshott 2021, p. 83).

The psychiatrist and writer Theodore Dalrymple is another incisive commentator on education.[27] "In the past, ignorance was purely passive: a mere absence of knowledge. Recently, however, it has taken on a more positive and malignant quality: a profound aversion to anything that smells of intelligence, education, or culture". Drawing on his experiences in prisons and in his psychiatric practice, Dalrymple witnessed various situations, including that of a young man who took an overdose for feeling morally harassed in "secondary education" (upper secondary school), when he was told: "you are stupid because you are inteligente". No, this is not, as previously stated, an experience unique to Dalrymple. In Brazilian schools, many students are morally and physically harassed because they study or make an effort. They are even told: that if they do not correct their ways and join the group, we will beat you".

> What did they mean by this apparent paradox? To suggest that anyone who makes an effort to learn and performs well at school is wasting time, when they could instead be engaged in the true things of life, such as skipping classes in the park or wandering around the city center (Dalrymple 2014, pp. 91-92).

In the case mentioned above, "skipping classes" (not entering the school) in public schools takes the form of not entering the classroom. Yes! Many students go to school because it has become a meeting point: *the point*. Schools, especially in peripheral areas, are surrounded by drug trafficking in their immediate surroundings. Children, adolescents, and young people are seen as the perfect clientele, easily seduced. Others attend for basic social reasons: access to food that is lacking at home, escaping family violence, loneliness, access to the internet, etc. Speaking about violence in schools is more than well known. Education professionals, outsourced workers, and students all suffer, directly or indirectly, from school violence, which has been growing at an alarming frequency. Is this the environment Oakeshott had in mind when speaking of education for freedom and space for dialogue?

As in Brazil, what Dalrymple (2014, p. 95) denounced also occurs in Europe:

> simple semi-literacy and ignorance do not necessarily prevent these young people from passing public examinations, at least at the lower levels. Since failure is now seen as inevitably harmful to self-esteem, anyone who presents themselves to take the exams will probably leave with a diploma.

What is being reported here concerns the diplomas of those who graduate from schools and universities. The number of graduates who lack skills and competencies in their training is alarming.[28]

Many will, as they already do, diagnose the various reasons why education in Brazil, and elsewhere, is in poor condition. However, most remain confined to the well-known "cabinet theses": methodological changes, investments in so-called innovative areas, salary increases, and so on. Yet what continues to happen in real life is that education and learning have declined in quality over recent decades.

> Unfortunately, it is very difficult to overturn these pedagogical (or anti-pedagogical) innovations even today, when the central government has belatedly realized their disastrous consequences. Why? First, teachers and teacher educators in faculties of education are deeply imbued with the educational ideas that brought us to this point. Second, a vast educational bureaucracy has grown

> in England (one bureaucrat per teacher, leaping about like an admiral in South American navies), which uses every subterfuge to prevent change—from falsifying statistics to deliberate misinterpretation of government policy (Dalrymple 2014, p. 97).

Any resemblance is purely coincidental. This is the bureaucracy that Oakeshott denounces in his book *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (Cf. Oakeshott 2018), in which he draws a contrast with a form of politics (bureaucracy) based on theoretical, political, and academic inventions that, year after year, prove ineffective, in this case, in relation to education.

> Therefore, the activity of governing persists not because it is good, but because it is necessary. Its primary function is to reduce the severity of human conflict by reducing the occasions on which it occurs (…). In the skeptical understanding, strong government should not be seen as a step toward the politics of faith, for it is not a meticulous government: its power is always limited by the narrow field of its activity. Nevertheless, it is clearly an attribute of the skeptical disposition to consider economy in the use of power in governing, and most of our practices and ideas on this matter originate from this style of politics (2018, p. 70).

The "politics of faith" does not lead individuals to promote their freedom or learning beyond contingencies and specificities, on the contrary, it leads each individual to submit to a government of abstract ideas that assault lived reality and the human condition itself. There is no conversation in the politics of faith, only submission to academic manuals and occasional political actions, which often become confused with one another. For Oakeshott, the government's primary function is to maintain order, improving systems of rights and duties. The problem is that a government guided by the politics of faith believes it will improve people, subjects, students, by making use of the most absurd educational theories. The skeptic, by contrast, is more concerned with the actions that rulers may take to the point of harming society and education. Actions arising from ambitious, arrogant men who believe in their own enlightened wisdom. It takes little effort to recall what such "enlightened minds" were capable of doing in modernity, bringing about all kinds of calamities despite great scientific advances.

UNIVERSITIES

Oakeshott understands that, in every problem surrounding education, universities are those that suffer most from the politics of faith, this is because, while in basic education there is a failure to initiate students into the world of formality, removing them from the immediacy of everyday life, in other words, enabling students to contemplate forms of knowledge that go far beyond their local contexts; universities, on the other hand, fail precisely through an excess of formalism, bureaucracy, and technicality. This excess prevents, as previously noted, conversation, debate, contradiction, discovery, and knowledge that is "uncommitted" to ideological agendas and, as he puts it, to prescriptive handbooks.

In this case, universities should approach knowledge and science not as the "pursuit of a predetermined end; no one knows or can imagine where it will lead" (Oakeshott 2021, p. 179). However, in general, this is not what Oakeshott perceived in European universities, and the same can be said of Brazilian universities. When examining curricula, syllabi, research proposals, and the like, one observes a flood of research that largely departs from Oakeshott's idea of what a university should be. With some exceptions (professors, students, institutions), the majority merely seek to comply with bureaucratic guidelines that come nowhere near what Oakeshott understands as the production of science. "A university is a group of people participating in a particular kind of activity: in the Middle Ages this was called *Studium*, we may call it the pursuit of learning" (2021, p. 181). This is the same criticism Dalrymple makes when denouncing the interests of educational bureaucracy in his own country and in many others. Education is treated as "rapid and superficial movements of exciting images on television; these young people discover that sustai-

ned interest in anything is beyond their reach" (Dalrymple 2014, pp. 96-97). In other words, the education offered is increasingly oriented toward entertainment disguised as "science".[29]

"A university is not a machine designed to achieve a particular purpose or to produce a specific result; it is a mode of human activity" (Oakeshott 2021, p. 181). It is the place where individuals flourish and present what is valuable and intrinsic, namely, their freedom. For Oakeshott, to use universities for particular ideological or political purposes is to "use them as one would use a baby language" (Ibid.). The university must distinguish itself from other forms of learning. It cannot be compared to familial learning, basic formal education, or technical training; the university occupies a special place. Each university, according to its specialties, should be a cooperative pursuit. It is a place where learning and tradition go hand in hand. It should be a place where knowledge is shared, not to prove who is best or most gifted, but to contribute to human society.

> Those who come to attend classes at a university must offer indications that we are not mere beginners; and they are not only presented with the knowledge of their professors, but are also offered a curriculum of studies, followed by an examination and by the reward of a diploma (2021, p. 183).

Here lies the clarification of the difference between the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of information. This does not mean that it is simple to define what constitutes the world of learning, but it does mean that it cannot consist of mere repetitions of so-called scientific statements for the sake of completing a degree. For this reason, an intellectual truly committed to learning and knowledge will rarely confine himself to his own specialization without engaging with other scholars from different fields—this is conversation. "The world of learning requires no cement to hold it together", it is unified by the purpose of knowledge. "And the peculiar virtue of a university (as a place of many studies) is to exhibit it as such, each study emerging as a voice whose tone is neither tyrannical nor melancholic, but humble and sociable" (2021, p. 185).

Thus, an intellectual cannot be regarded as a preacher or an instructor; rather, he is an encourager of the pursuit of knowledge, including knowledge that goes beyond his own, without vanity, pettiness, or narcissistic flattery. A true intellectual will never be satisfied with being merely a means by which students obtain their diplomas. The university should be seen as a place where the knowledge present there surpasses the knowledge of any individual intellectual taken in isolation. The university does not speak of a single intellectual; it is concerned with the cooperative knowledge of all intellectuals. It is a space for knowledge, not for isolated individuals entrenched in their pedantries; for this reason, its faculty comprises the most diverse types of intellectuals, with their different academic and scientific approaches.

"A university, therefore, is an institution particularly well adapted to the frailty and ignorance of humankind because its excellence does not depend on the emergence of a universal genius—although it knows how to make room for one, should he appear" (2021, p. 187). The university is a place for the manifestation of freedom, but not a freedom without demands, "if freedom were something that cost nothing (…) we could once again emphasize the concept of maturity, a maturity that grows when students encounter demands" (Enkvist 2019, p. 139). Those who enter undergraduate education are neither children nor fully formed adults; they are beginners in a new space of learning, a place like an open sea in which possibilities are infinite, even though their choices limit what they seek to know.

There is nothing new in criticizing universities; the question is whether universities are concerned with such criticisms and act upon them. "In short, the problem of integrating the world of knowledge is profound and difficult, but the fact that at present we do not see how to do it does not destroy the possibility of a university" (Oakeshott 2021, p. 250).

For many, Michael Oakeshott, although grounded in skepticism, conservatism, and freedomis, utopian in imagining a place of learning that promotes diverse minds and their manifestations of knowledge through conversation, contradiction, cooperation, and the understanding of knowledge as an unceasing

pursuit, expressed in different forms and at different moments and places of learning. Oakeshott should not be read merely as a thinker who harshly criticizes rationalism, bureaucracy, and prescriptive intellectualism; he should be seen as a thinker who recognizes in human beings potentials that can and must be continually explored in the most varied ways.

Education as seen from Oakeshott's perspective in which freedom, the development of language through conversation and the constant challenge placed upon individuals to improve themselves and generate new knowledge, grounded in history, acting in the present with an eye toward the future, always with prudence, is what Liberal Education proposes to us. There is no doubt that Michael Oakeshott is a salutary voice for our times.

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NOTES

1 One of the principal virtues identified by Aristotle and absorbed by skepticism.
2 He was strongly influenced by the events that occurred during and after the Second World War. He even became part of the British Army, in the Phantom intelligence unit.
3 In the book *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, it is possible to perceive the aspects of Michael Oakeshott's conservatism.
4 One of the leading scholars, analysts, and commentators on the works of Michael Oakeshott.
5 This is what occurs in the majority of research institutions here in Brazil.
6 The concept of ontology employed here is not used in the metaphysical sense of the philosophical tradition, but rather in the sense of what is constitutive of the human being—that which is necessary for us to affirm that someone is human.
7 Oakeshott understands that, upon coming into contact with the world, we are already inserted into a range of symbols, culture, and norms—everything that constitutes a society and provides the conditions for the individual to become who he or she is: unique.
8 Oakeshott offers profound critiques of the thought of Bacon, Descartes, and Rousseau: the first two for excessively rationalizing the nature of knowledge, and the latter for conceiving human beings as possessing an already given nature (the "noble savage").
9 Already in the Renaissance (16th century), the growth of utopias revolving around different forms of knowledge was overwhelming, "utopias that flourished in the effervescent environment of new ideas" (…) utopias such as those of Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella (NUNES 2018).
10 "Brazil invests as much as OECD countries in higher education, but allocates three times less to basic education." (CNN Brazil, 09/12/23). "Brazil ranks as the third worst among 42 countries, according to the OECD education report" (Jornal USP, 09/26/23).
11 Not to be confused with liberating education in the progressive, constructivist, critical-social sense.
12 Cf. Descartes, René. *Discourse on the Method*, 2005.
13 For Oakeshott, something can only be considered a fact if it is produced by the human being; therefore, there is no fact given in nature—it must be a relationship between experience and human reflection.
14 It is worth recalling that Oakeshott directs his critical analyses primarily toward his historical and contextual environment, namely Europe.
15 The Socratic–Platonic model permeates Oakeshott's thought, as well as that of David Hume.
16 "(…) it would be appropriate for a mode of governing in which the pursuit of perfection requires not only obedience or submission from the governed, but also approval and even love" (Oakeshott 2018, p. 66).
17 Oakeshott uses "maritime symbolism" to address the need to constantly maintain balance in the face of changes occurring in politics and, consequently, in education. Those who deal with institutional issues should be like the "trimmer" who, "during navigation, shifts the vessel's weight according to the circumstances of sea and atmosphere in order to keep it in constant balance" (Oakeshott 2018, pp. 48-49).
18 A critique he makes of regimes that emerged in modernity, such as Nazism, communism, and fascism, which turned education into a propaganda channel for their leaders and political allies. Nothing could be more contrary to Oakeshott's "Liberal Education".
19 Institutional interests, which would be the opposite of civil interest.
20 Cf. Oakeshott,2018, pp. 55-85.
21 "Disposition" is a concept used by Oakeshott to distinguish it from ideological and utopian motivations, typical of the conservative stance (cf. Conservatism, 2016), following in the footsteps of Edmund Burke's critiques of the French revolutionaries.
22 About 1% of Brazilian students achieved high performance in mathematics, meaning they reached Level 5 or 6 in the PISA mathematics test (OECD average: 9%). Six Asian countries and economies had the highest proportions of students with this performance: Singapore (41%), Chinese Taipei (32%), Macao (China) (29%), Hong Kong (China) (27%), Japan (23%), and Korea (23%) (INEP 2022, p. 8).
23 Oakeshott favored a more decentralized, municipalized institutional education.
24 Brazil saw a small improvement from 4.9 to 5.0 compared to the pre-pandemic period; however, the target was 5.5, and before the pandemic it stood at 5.1 (Agência Brasil). The number of students leaving basic education with poor training is absurd. "About 90% of the goals of the National Education Plan are unlikely to be met within the deadline, according to the 2023 PNE Assessment" (National Campaign for the Right to Education, 06/20/23).
25 The more decentralized, the better.
26 "New School, activist pedagogy, pragmatism and instrumentalism (John Dewey), Marxist pedagogy (Paulo Freire), Christian pedagogy and personalism, pedagogy in Italy and the USSR (totalitarianism), cognitive pedagogy (educational technologies), feminism, ecology, interculturality—a universe in fermentation at the frontier" (cf. Cambi 1999).

27 Dalrymple's name is Anthony Malcolm Daniels. Although he deals primarily with the context of the United Kingdom and Europe in general, he offers a similar diagnosis of several other regions of the world, including Brazil (cf. Roda Viva Program, 12/29/16).

28 "The study Future of the World of Work for Brazilian Youth heard 34 organizations working on the productive inclusion of young people. For 67.6%, there is a lack of qualification opportunities, and 58.8% believe that the available courses are not aligned with existing job vacancies" (Agência Brasil, 2023).

29 It is enough to carry out a quick search on the internet to see the deterioration of several universities across Brazil. As one example, see: The destruction of federal universities—O Globo, 06/01/2024.