## Introduction

In this book I aim to introduce the main ideas associated with the philosophy of Michael Oakeshott, keeping in mind the whole context of his system of thought. In so doing I put forward the argument that a moral concern permeates his philosophy. Oakeshott’s moral concern is to be found in his theory of knowledge, his critique of rationalism, writings on religion and, of course, in his account of moral conduct. Moreover, it runs throughout his whole philosophical system. It is intertwined with his view that the boundaries of various human ‘practices’ ought to be understood in order to preserve what is important to them, but also to ensure that their claims are not exag- gerated. This was particularly important in relation to politics but it is also the case for the arts, education, science and even philosophy.

There is also something of a moral imperative in his thought. This is that individuals ought to reflect upon ‘all that was going-on’. This is analogous to Arendt who asked us to ‘do nothing more than think what we are doing’.1 In Oakeshott’s philosophy we find a similar moral sensibility. Of course, how he expresses this is partic- ular to his system of thought. As he often tells us himself, we ought to focus our attention not upon the conclusions that thinkers reach but upon the reasons that they have for reaching these conclusion if we want to assess the merit or otherwise of their work. This is what I aim to do here in relation to Oakeshott’s writings.

By maintaining this position I shall be arguing against the two most dominant interpretations of his work. First, those that propose the idea that Oakeshott is a philosopher whose theoretical system can be ‘semi-detached’ from his political and other writings in order to draw out what is most significant from his work. Such an interpretation is reflected in Nadin’s2 analysis where it is argued that Oakeshott is a moral ‘relativist’ who was not particularly interested in developing a moral theory until his later work.3 In contrast I maintain that Oakeshott offers us a specific understanding of philosophy, one

2 *Introduction*

where his politics as well as his essays on religion, education and ‘poetry’ are tied together by a general moral concern. While I would agree with Nadin that Oakeshott’s most important contribution as a thinker was as a philosopher, this can only be fully appreciated by demonstrating how what he has to say about politics is tied to that philosophical system. Here I hope to show the way that his philosophy, politics and moral concerns are more intimately bound together than Nadin and other recent commentaries suggest.

Second, in addition to this study being set apart from those authors who have previously tried to come to grips with Oakeshott as a philosopher, I also aim to avoid the inconsistencies of a purely ‘ideological’ or broadly ‘political’ reading of his work. It has been common to categorise Oakeshott either as a ‘conservative’ or a ‘liberal’. When Oakeshott was Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics (from the 1950s), politics departments at British universities tended to be dominated by politically engaged scholars who sought to situate each other ideologically along a Left– Right political spectrum. None of this was any good for a sophisti- cated reading of Oakeshott’s work by his contemporaries. Crick set the disparaging tone for the ‘conservative’ (and ‘Conservative’) analysis of his work by categorising Oakeshott as a ‘Tory pamphleteer’.4

At the same time, the first book-length account of his work, by W.

H. Greenleaf, presented Oakeshott as a liberal thinker.5 Over the last fifteen years or so, particularly since Oakeshott’s death in 1990, commentators have largely followed Greenleaf and stressed the liberal elements of his thought. For example, Franco argues that Oakeshott is a ‘classical liberal’ whose work can be set within the ‘liberal-communitarian’ debate.6 Even when authors acknowledge that Oakeshott’s work is not easy to categorise ‘politically’, they still often attempt to do so. This is the case with Lessnoff who argues that there is an ‘early’ and a ‘late’ Oakeshott, the former more or less conservative, the latter more or less liberal.7 Although such studies have their various merits, the desire to situate Oakeshott politically means that the authors either subsume his thought under their political categorisations, or miss significant parts of Oakeshott’s philosophical system because of the importance given to position him ideologically.

I wish to challenge the ‘political’ reading of Oakeshott’s work and in particular the new orthodoxy (coming largely from North America) that takes the defining characteristic of Oakeshott’s work as his liberalism. It is my contention that this perspective (like all attempts to label his thought in a political manner) reduces the overall content of what he has to say. In contrast I focus upon his

*Introduction* 3

radical revision of traditional Idealist metaphysics. I argue that he constructed a non-foundational philosophical system that provided a relatively consistent theoretical framework from his earliest writings until the end of his academic life. By taking Bradley’s notion of the ‘Absolute’ as experience, and associating it with Hegel’s view that this is knowable, Oakeshott stood Idealism on its head,8 focusing atten- tion upon the modes of experience, and ‘practical’ life in particular.

Some commentators have hinted at the non-foundational quality of Oakeshott’s philosophy but none have investigated its substantive character.9 By understanding the non-foundational character of his system of thought the contemporary significance of Oakeshott’s writ- ings can be appreciated. Oakeshott accepts the conditional and contingent character of human life, the impossibility of theoretical perfection and the uncertainty of political outcomes. It is these kinds of viewpoints that continue to inform the general academic atmo- sphere, and Oakeshott has a place among these debates.

I shall, then, illustrate how Oakeshott’s philosophy rests upon a non-essentialist understanding of the Hegelian ‘concrete universal’, and how this propels him into the contemporary scene. I argue that he contributes to current discussions in two significant ways. First, his philosophy defends the importance of traditional moral, religious and political debates, whilst being theoretically situated upon non- foundational terrain. Second, because there is a moral concern at the heart of his thought he avoids the relativism that plagues so many non-foundational theories. This point of view may give us an indica- tion of how to move beyond objectivism without falling into subjectivism.10

In terms of his political thought I argue that rather than under- stand Oakeshott’s political essays as ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’, what he has to say about political theory and political practice ought to be set within the context of his philosophical system as a whole. In addi- tion, I maintain that his political writings are intimately bound to his moral concern. So, for example, his challenge to rationalism is, above all, a critique of the potential closure of moral experience that the rationalist theory of knowledge implies. Such an argument does not infer that politics is, therefore, unimportant for Oakeshott. On the contrary, I argue that understanding the relationship between politics and morality in his philosophy indicates how significant politics is for Oakeshott. Politics is of great consequence for Oakeshott because it is intertwined with the general maintenance of the moral associa- tion that constitutes the civil condition. Moreover, politics provides a bridge between the private world of individuals and the public world

4 *Introduction*

of civil association. However, for Oakeshott all human activities have their limits and politics is no exception. Politics is important to prac- tical living but it is not the whole of life. Oakeshott’s work stands against the politicisation of all human activities (for example, in art and education) without denying that political thought and practice are legitimate and in specific ways rewarding endeavours.

In terms of explanation (rather than critique) there is one final dimension of Oakeshott’s philosophy that I would also like to put into perspective. This concerns what he has to say regarding religion.11 Oakeshott’s first publications were concerned with reli- gion, and I shall attempt to illustrate how far religion and morality are tied together in his work. I argue that what he says about religion in his earliest essays is, to a great extent, absorbed into his moral theory in *On Human Conduct* (OHC). Furthermore, I intend to highlight the connecting points between his religious and moral writ- ings and his political essays. In particular I argue that his critique of rationalism begins not with the well-known essays of the 1950s, but with the lesser-known works on religion written in the 1920s.

Given all that I have said so far involves taking Oakeshott’s ‘philosophy’ as ‘non-foundational’, these terms need a little further explanation. What is meant by ‘philosophy’ shall be taken to be what Oakeshott understands by this term, namely a form of human experience that aims to use thought to explain the presuppositions of all other areas of human life. These other areas Oakeshott calls (at various times) the ‘modes of experience’, the ‘voices of mankind’ or human ‘practices’. What is meant by each of these concepts shall be explained in turn. Suffice to say here that each of these terms are used by Oakeshott in a relatively consistent manner to capture the character of four main areas of human discourse: science, the arts, practice (which includes politics and religion) and history.

In his earliest work Oakeshott states that philosophy is able to undertake this explanatory task because it is the only type of experi- ence that has no presuppositions, being pure thought. However, as we shall see, this view is later revised. What remains the same for Oakeshott’s understanding of philosophy throughout is that philos- ophy is taken to be a critical theoretical standpoint from which to assess all other areas of human life. Philosophy cannot take the place of or ‘solve’ the ‘problems’ of any other human activity; rather, it has a theoretical location outside of the activities themselves. As an outsider philosophy can never subscribe any specific remedies, even though under its own terms it may see ‘errors’. The criterion by which philosophy seeks to explain science, history, practice and the

*Introduction* 5

arts is one of coherence. The notion of coherence is one that arises out of the Idealist tradition. Without coherence, Oakeshott argues, each of the worlds of human experience could not function. It is the role of the philosopher to illustrate how these worlds maintain their identities, even in the face of the Idealist-inspired critique that no one human activity can, in itself, be completely coherent.

Although his philosophical system underwent some revisions it stayed remarkably true to the original ideas set out in *Experience and Its Modes* (EM),12 the conceptual language may have changed but not the basic principles upon which these ideas were constructed. In this respect I argue against those who maintain that Oakeshott’s early philosophical thought is differentiated from his later work.13

As to the use of the term ‘non-foundational’ employed here, this refers to the manner by which Oakeshott took Bradley’s notion of the ‘Absolute’ as experience and associated it with Hegel’s view that this is knowable, thereby focusing philosophical attention upon the varied practices of life rather than an unknowable reality. For Oakeshott all human life is knowable, there is no-thing outside of thought that the human mind cannot grasp. In this way Oakeshott took the traditional Idealist focus away from reconciling all human life to a ‘One’ ‘Whole’ or ‘Absolute’, where truth, fact and reality resided, to focusing upon the actuality of everyday human activities, I have called this move non-foundational. For in taking Idealism down this path Oakeshott leaves all our experiences ultimately ungrounded in anything other than the conventional establishment of underling ‘rules’. This goes not only for politics, religion and the arts, but also, radically, for history and science.

Although a great deal of this text is taken up with a particular interpretation of Oakeshott’s work, I also aim to highlight where Oakeshott’s philosophy has some significant flaws. Many commenta- tors have attempted to criticise Oakeshott without setting out a clear interpretation of his philosophical system. In so doing they construct their critique on inappropriate ground, usually focusing upon Oakeshott’s political essays with little understanding of the philo- sophical thought that underlines these works. In order to avoid this type of analysis I have primarily addressed my criticisms to his philo- sophical system, particularly to his theory of modality.

First I argue that Oakeshott privileges the mode of ‘practice’. By taking Bradley’s notion of the ‘Absolute’ as experience, and associ- ating it with Hegel’s conception of the ‘Absolute’ as the totality of thought, Oakeshott implodes the ‘Absolute’ into experience itself (by identifying it with, simply, ‘experiencing’ and ‘what is experienced’).

6 *Introduction*

In so doing he throws attention upon the modes of experience. Although he states that there are an infinite number of modes he analyses what he considers to be the most coherent. These are history, science, poetry and practice. In the case of all of the modes except for ‘practice’ Oakeshott does not state *why* they are modes, merely explaining *what* they are. For example, history is described as emerging like a child’s game. The same is true of philosophy; no reason why it should exist is given. This would not be a problem were it consistent; however, in relation to ‘practice’ his position is somewhat different. He claims that without practice not only would practical experience cease, but so would all human life. Furthermore, without practice moral conduct and religious experience would not be possible. Whilst they are not essential to life, Oakeshott implies that morality and religion do give a profound meaning to human existence. All this provides a reason ‘why’ practice is a world of thought and, given its position in his philosophy, it seems to have required some further explanation.

Second, I enter the debate regarding one of the main criticisms that he has faced regarding his theory of modality. That is, he appears to presume fluidity between the ‘modes’, ‘voices’ or ‘prac- tices’ that is never theorised. I argue that there are strong reasons for concurring with this argument. At the very least Oakeshott leaves us with a degree of ambiguity around this point of discussion. This can, for example, be seen in Oakeshott’s explanation of historical experi- ence that indicates that the modes might, to a degree, overlap. He refers to the idea of the practical past where historical fact is put at the service of practical existence. However, he fails to say what a theory of the practical past might look like and how history and practice might ‘mix’. I also note how, in his historical analysis of the character of the modern European state, Oakeshott draws upon a philosophical argument to substantiate his position. Once more there is an implied movement between the modes or discourses that remains, at best, only partially justified. All in all, Oakeshott’s general philosophical system emphasises the distance between the modes while specific explanations imply that they do touch.

In addition to the criticisms relating to his theory of modality, I also point to a dilemma regarding the sovereignty of the self in his work. In Oakeshott’s philosophy we find a ‘fragmented’ notion of the self. However, this does not prevent him from placing a heavy burden of responsibility upon the self. It is always the responsibility of the self to construct a world of ideas: they construct meanings and identities, they constitute various roles for themselves and, ultimately,

*Introduction* 7

they determine what is real, true and fact. I acknowledge that this position is logical in the terms of his philosophy, but I raise a doubt as to its impact. That is, Oakeshott maintains the post-Enlightenment inclination towards the individualising of all human action. Incongruously this is a tradition associated with some forms of philo- sophical rationalism. Furthermore, embedded in Oakeshott’s thought is an individualism that is philosophically accounted for but which nevertheless theorises away the possibility of collective forms of knowledge, identity and morality. I argue that only by moving away from his terms might such a possibility be held open.

Related to this criticism is another that concerns his philosophical and literary style. I shall emphasise the way that his philosophy is ‘inward looking’, given its basis in a system of internal relations. That is, Oakeshott’s form of argument is such that he brings opposing positions under the terms of his own philosophical system without actually refuting their standpoints. This all-embracing style substantiates his philosophy but circumvents any genuine engage- ment with alternative schools of thought. This criticism is linked to what I have said above because it is only by moving away from his terms of engagement that it may be possible to theorise a less ‘self’- obsessed theory of knowledge and identity. Overall Oakeshott is well known for his engaging writing. In his essays he exhibits a lucidity that is rare in political thought. However, they are also at times frus- tratingly truncated theoretical texts. It is all too easy to be beguiled by Oakeshott’s enchanting phrases and seductive metaphors. But I hope to go beyond his honeyed language to see whether his theory is appropriately substantiated.

This, then, is the point of view that I wish to defend and the critique of Oakeshott’s philosophy I intend to set out. I have divided the text into three interrelated parts. Below I provide a brief summary of how I will proceed.

The first part of the book is concerned with the philosophical depth of Oakeshott’s work. I begin by setting out the historical context of his thought. In general the theoretical tradition that most influenced him might broadly be understood as Idealism. I shall summarise aspects of the work of Plato, Spinoza, Hegel and the British Idealists in order to highlight the philosophical pedigree of Oakeshott’s principal concepts. From this general review I turn in the second chapter to the inspiration of Bradley. I argue that we have to come to grips with his philosophy in order to fully understand Oakeshott’s work. Furthermore, by making this comparison I describe the radical move that Oakeshott makes under the terms of

8 *Introduction*

Idealism, setting it upon non-foundational ground. In the third and final chapters of Part One I analyse EM, Oakeshott’s first philosoph- ical tract. I maintain that by taking the ‘Absolute’ as experience, and combining this with Hegel’s conception of the ‘Absolute’ as the totality of thought, Oakeshott revises Idealism along non-founda- tional lines. I point out how, under Oakeshott’s terms, the Hegelian ‘concrete universal’ becomes a non-essentialist theoretical concept. I also begin to raise my concern about his ‘philosophical individu- alism’ and I point to his ‘inward-looking’ style that closes the possibilities of exploring communal forms of knowledge and identity. In the fourth chapter, which begins the section on politics and morality, I look at his earliest work on religion. I also indicate how politics is tied to practical experience and, therefore, moral conduct. In addition, I show how Oakeshott’s critique of rationalism is bound to his understanding of the relationship between practice, politics and morality. I shall also put forward my criticism that Oakeshott privileges the mode of practice. In Chapter 5 I further emphasise the close relationship between politics and morality in Oakeshott’s work. I begin by illustrating how Oakeshott’s radical revision of Idealism is maintained in his political essays. I look at the idea of the human world as a ‘conversation’ and argue that the terms used around this notion are tied to his non-foundational philosophy. My criticism that Oakeshott presumes fluidity between the modes also begins to take shape here. In Chapter 6 I present a systematic account of Oakeshott’s notion of historical experience in order to see how these ideas relate to his understanding of politics. I compare Oakeshott’s views to the influential account put forward by Skinner, that to understand the meaning of a political text we must grasp the linguistic action performed by the author writing it. I then make a comparison between Oakeshott’s work and that of Foucault. Following on from this I turn to the examination of OHC. The anal- ysis of this text is undertaken over two chapters. In Chapter 7, I present a detailed reading of Oakeshott’s understanding of human and moral conduct. I note some of the theoretical consistencies of this work with his earlier writings. In Chapter 8, I look at his theory of the civil condition that is presented in philosophical and historical terms. I take what Oakeshott is doing here as presenting two forms of moral association, one instrumental, the other an open-ended ‘practice’. I argue that politics is connected to the individual’s private moral concerns as well as to the wider public concern. This position gives politics a ‘positive’ character, and it is so because of its relation- ship to morality. From this analysis I move on to look at how

*Introduction* 9

Oakeshott understands the civil condition to be an ambiguous histor- ical relationship between two modes of association (universitas and societas) that constitute the modern European state.

In the last part of the book I look at how Oakeshott’s work is rele- vant to contemporary debates in political philosophy. Based upon my analysis of his philosophical system as non-foundational, I trace the significance of this when set against the work of the ‘later’ Wittgenstein. I maintain that Oakeshott’s theory ought to be placed upon the same philosophical terrain as Wittgenstein’s and I draw out the connecting points in their work, importantly pointing to their similar distinction between theory and practice. From this argument I go on to criticise the use of Wittgenstein’s work for what I argue is a ‘rationalist’ form of Discourse Analysis. In the final chapter I directly engage with commentators who take Oakeshott as a liberal. I main- tain that these authors reduce the overall content of his thought and misplace what is most central to his philosophy. I also look at the way that Rorty uses Oakeshott’s notion of ‘conversation’. I argue that this has little to do with Oakeshott’s understanding of the term and more to do with the expression of Rorty’s own pragmatism. However, I note that, because of the problem of the fluidity of the modes, Rorty can be said to justifiably use this concept in the way that he does. In conclusion I look at the impact that deconstruction might be said to have on Oakeshott’s philosophy. Derrida has argued that philosophy is not an unconditional form of thought but has postulates of its own. This view challenges Oakeshott’s under- standing and I shall assess whether or not it undermines his position.