The Skeptic's Oakeshott

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There are two central strands of arguments in this book. The first claim is that Oakeshott's early idealism was modified and to some extent abandoned in his later works; the second is that the sceptical strain in his thought (which earlier existed in awkward juxtaposition with the constructive elements of absolute idealism) became more dominant not only in his conception of philosophy but also in his understanding of politics and civil association. In particular, as a consequence of scholarly interaction with the work of Hobbes (in which he found in part what he was already predisposed to find) Oakeshott emerged in the 1940s as a sceptic in relation to politics and philosophy. Accordingly (and Gerencser shows this convincingly), Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes is somewhat contentious in certain points of detail, and most contentious, it would seem, at precisely those points where Oakeshott wanted Hobbes to be a proto-proponent of his own later claims concerning civil association and authority. The chapters on Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes are the strongest and most convincing in the book. The weakest chapters, to my mind, are those devoted to the presence and absence of idealism in Oakeshott's philosophy. This is not only because I remain to be fully convinced that Oakeshott jettisoned his earlier idealist position, but also because Gerencser's characterization of both idealism and of the philosophical background in the 1920s and 1930s leaves something to be desired. We have then, a book of two parts, each part containing a distinctive line of argument, but leaving open the question of the relation between the two parts. In other words, even if the first claim was true, does it have any necessary bearing on the second? I suggest that here we have an excellent book on Hobbes, Oakeshott, politics, civil association, authority and democracy concealed inside a book that overstretches its resources by attempting to fight a battle on two fronts.

Experience and its Modes is clearly a work of idealism, published at a time when idealism was losing its grip as a dominant academic force. Its year of publication, 1933, although it also saw the appearance of Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, also saw the founding of the journal *Analysis*. In my view, Gerencser is right to pay attention to *Experience and its Modes*; my objection is that he overstates the philosophical differences between this work and Oakeshott's later philosophical position, and also that he to some extent mischaracterizes the nature of the idealism of the time, and hence also

Oakeshott's idealism. He appears to be over-reliant on Anthony Quinton's British Academy lecture *an Absolute Idealism*, while ignoring work by authors such as Joachim and Collingwood. The omission of Joachim is significant because he was not only the author of *The Nature of Truth*, but also his help is explicitly acknowledged by Oakeshott in the preface to *Experience and its Modes*. *The Nature of Truth* is important in that it demonstrates how far the British idealists were from unproblematically accepting the coherence theory of truth. This alone shows the inadequacy of relying so heavily on Quinton's lecture. The omission of Collingwood is important because although Collingwood often argued for similar positions to Oakeshott's, he differed in important ways, for example, on the desirability of organizing modes or forms of experience hierarchically. However, one thing they clearly had in common was the view that the philosophy was the critical self-reflective moment of experience, a perpetual and never completed intellectual adventure (whose nature lay not in any goal achieved) unconstrained and unlimited activity.

Gerencser also has a tendency to run together idealist positions as different as (for example) Bradley's and McTaggart's. For example, he quotes Oakeshott arguing that 'experience is a single whole, within which modifications may be distinguished, but which admits of no final or absolute division; and that experience everywhere, not merely is inseparable from thought, but is itself a form of thought' (p. 20). There is much here about experience; but does it follow that for Oakeshott the nature of reality as such is spiritual or mental as Gerencser (following Quinton) claims? It would, if and only if Oakeshott also asserted that not only is thought experience, but also that thought was reality. However, nowhere does he state this.

Gerencser asserts that there is a key difference between the early and the late Oakeshott: in his early writings, Oakeshott believed that experience without presupposition, reservation or arrest was possible and actually achieved in philosophical experience, whereas in later works he became more sceptical of this possibility of soaring to such philosophical heights. However, it seems to me that Oakeshott always took the view that the difference between philosophical and non-philosophical experience was simply that the former was in principle unconstrained, whereas the latter was not. In the pages of *Experience and its Modes* and his later works, we find Oakeshott insisting that philosophy is a certain sort of activity or pursuit: in neither case is it easy to find any claim to the effect that it is some sort of transcendent attainment. In other words, scepticism (or its absence) on this point is not the peculiar province of either the early or the late writings. We also find the claim that there is another form of scepticism in the work of Oakeshott. There we can find, Gerencser claims, both absolute idealism (philosophical experience as experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification) and also 'a sceptical idealism, which investigates the implicit and often

unrecognized presuppositions that limit each of the modes, undermining their claims to absolute certainty' (p. 29). There is a distinction to be drawn here between moments of philosophical activity, but it is probably less significant that Gerencser suggests. First, this 'sceptical idealism' is commonplace in the writings of idealists, from Hegel onwards, through Bradley, Henry Jones and Collingwood. Second, as Gerencser himself says, the positive and negative phases of philosophical activity are linked through the conception of philosophy as experience become self-critical: in that self-critical moment it is necessarily going to engage in critique of the presuppositions employed in substantive forms of experience.

Returning, albeit briefly, to the more explicit political theory found in the book, I think Gerencser should be congratulated on an incisive and acute drawing out and examination of Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes and the themes of authority and consent in Oakeshott's later writings. It is here that the main value of the book lies, rather than in some of the other claims concerning Oakeshott's philosophical development; and the value of this part of the book is unaffected by the success or otherwise of the other claims made concerning Oakeshott's philosophical development.

It is a pity to end on a negative note, but it must be done. Unfortunately, the book is marred by many typographical and other small errors, for example, in the spelling of authors' names, titles of books, in the accuracy of quotations, and so on. Scarcely a page passes by without blemish and this detracts the reader's attention from the expression of the argument and lessens the enjoyment of an accomplished piece of work.

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