blamed for an action) and substantive responsibility (who should 'pick up the costs or benefits that result' (p. 81)). Against a background of a common liberal reticence to commit on metaphysics, Matravers asks whether Scanlon's view is as free of metaphysics as he claims; in particular he assesses Scanlon's claim that the two kinds of responsibility are compatible with the Causal Thesis that all of our actions are caused in line with familiar causal laws (Scanlon, 1998, p. 250). Matravers's claim is that Scanlon's position is incomplete and that his account of substantive responsibility needs to be filled out before its compatibility can be determined, and so before its ability to meet the theoretical needs of these liberals can be assessed. His discussion is brief but persuasive.

Michael Pratt's paper on promising is an excellent exploration of the chief rival accounts of when and why we should keep our promises. He provides an effective critique of Scanlon's view that we should keep our promises because of the expectations we have raised in the promisee: he argues that this view is circular since the expectations are only raised because the promise obliges us to do what we have promised. Pratt then draws on Scanlon to develop a new position that avoids this charge. Not only does Pratt provide an excellent critique of Scanlon, he also makes a fruitful original contribution to the debate on promising.

The closing paper by Jonathan Wolff is something of an oddity in this collection, in that it has remarkably little to say directly about Scanlon. Instead it is an exploration of how virtue theory could be shaped and supported by contractualist reasoning. This suggestion will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Kant's emphasis on the virtues, but it is nicely, if schematically, presented here. In motivating his suggestion, Wolff also offers a very clear summary of some popular criticisms of virtue ethics.

The papers in this collection are variously stimulating and rewarding although, in general, they are provocative rather than conclusive. The papers by Marshall, Mendus and Pratt are especially worthy of attention.

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The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of the Enlightenment

Roy Tseng

Imprint Academic, Thorverton, 2003, vii + 302pp.

ISBN: 0 907845 22 3.

In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott

Efraim Podoksik

*Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2003, vii + 260pp.**ISBN: 0 907845 665.***Oakeshott on History**

Luke O'Sullivan

*Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2003, xii + 296pp.**ISBN: 0 907845 290.**Contemporary Political Theory* (2005) **4**, 211–217. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300179

If there is a theme common to all the books on Michael Oakeshott's thought recently published by Imprint Academic, it consists in the attempt to overcome a certain polarization in Oakeshott scholarship. Either Oakeshott was studied so as to work out what his 'political philosophy means for political life as we know it' (Franco, 1990, p. 236) or read 'as a theorist of knowledge, not a moralist (much less an ideologue), and as a philosopher of human experience generally, not only of politics' (Nardin, 2001, p. 230). Roy Tseng and Efraim Podoksik address this polarization directly. However, the exact character of the difficulty involved in bringing Oakeshott's philosophy and politics together becomes clearer in what seems to be an indirect engagement with it; that is, in Luke O'Sullivan's enquiry into Oakeshott's philosophy of history. The question arising out of reading the three books together is whether 'human conduct' is an abstract world of experience, defined as 'practice' in Oakeshott's earlier work, or is it rather 'a much more messy affair in which we come and go somewhat inconsequentially between a variety of the universes of discourse' (Oakeshott, 1999, pp. 25–26, n. 8)?

For Tseng, Oakeshott's thought is a tireless investigation of the conditions of the conditionality of human experience and thus an ongoing philosophical attempt at overcoming abstraction. At the same time, although contextualized mainly by reference to Hegel's absolutism and Bradley's scepticism, Oakeshott's philosophy differs from both in its acceptance of the fragmentation of experience into a number of modes, such as science, history or practice, specific to the condition of modernity. Accordingly, it is an engagement with the crisis of modernity and three specific responses to it: positivism, pragmatism and historicism, all of which are attempting, each after its own fashion, to impose a single idiom of enquiry onto the whole of experience (p. 72).

The main target is the Enlightenment project, with its foundationalism in philosophy, formalism in ethics and naturalism in historiography. Oakeshott is

read as a consistent critic of these three aspects, which also makes him a critic of liberalism and its conception of a self-made man independent of any social context. By contrast, Oakeshott's own appraisal of individualism is traditionalist, invariably related to a 'way of life' through 'conversation' with a given tradition of acting (pp. 169–179). Tseng stresses the 'knowing-how' aspect of traditionalist understanding, but he is sensitive to Oakeshott's insistence that such understanding is nothing without the appreciation of the detail. Drawing on the Aristotelian *phronesis*, Tseng introduces 'substantive conversation' *within* a given tradition of acting or mode of experience as a way of acquiring such knowledge. Engagements between different modes of experience, especially between practice and history, are described as communication (p. 179). This marks a departure from one of Oakeshott's characterizations of 'conversation' as a meeting place between the various universes of discourse, but the whole point of Tseng's conversation/communication distinction is to underscore the continuity of Oakeshott's thought by upholding the autonomy of the modes of experience in his later work and thus by arguing that a meeting place does not imply any overlaps.

This is a daunting task for someone who, like Tseng, places 'tradition' at the heart of Oakeshott's political philosophy. For, as Oakeshott suggests on more than one occasion, the knowledge of the detail required in traditionalist understanding is acquired through historical enquiry. Here Tseng argues that in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott employs two different 'idioms of enquiry' appropriate for two different modes of experience: 'an ethical study which explains the postulates of human conduct *as a whole*, and an historical enquiry which deals with *a* substantive human action in a contingent context' (p. 186, n. 190), while 'human conduct *as a whole*' is read as reflecting 'the conditions of the world of practice' disclosed by Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes* (p. 187). Accordingly, Oakeshott's theory of civil association presented in the second essay of *On Human Conduct* is divided into the investigations of the formal conditions and the practical procedure of the practice of civility, so that the former (influenced by Hobbes) is qualified by the Aristotelianism of the latter. In this manner, the 'practical' character of both civility and the mode of understanding appropriate to it is preserved (pp. 190–204).

When, in the third essay, Oakeshott turns to the unresolved tension, '*societas cum universitate*', between the two modes of human association, *societas* and *universitas*, already identified philosophically in terms of their postulates, he explores it historically. Yet this exploration 'leaves us with the impression that this history is in the service of the theory of civil association', while 'the communication between ethics and history functions only in the mind of the philosopher' (p. 205), as it should be according to the main thesis of *Experience and Its Modes*. Thus, if the last two chapters of Tseng's own

work (dedicated to Oakeshott's sceptical philosophy of politics and idealistic defence of history, respectively) appear to be somewhat unconnected, this is a vindication of Oakeshott's philosophy of experience as a critique of the Enlightenment project.

Podoksik's reading differs from Tseng's already on the level of contextualization. Oakeshott is an Edwardian Englishman attracted to continental thinking where he finds himself in the company of neo-Kantian philosophers and liberal political theorists. His understanding of philosophy does not undergo any dramatic changes, let alone reversals, but his interest in it recedes after the publication of *Experience and Its Modes*. This should not come as a big surprise once Oakeshott's first work is read as a defence of abstraction from philosophy and not the other way around (p. 45). Such reading leads to two further arguments. In *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott redefines the 'practice' of *Experience and Its Modes* as 'conduct' but no longer sees it as a homogeneous mode of experience. Rather, there is a heterogeneous realm of 'doing' that exists in parallel with that of 'understanding' (pp. 141–149). Whatever modes of experience remain at this point, they are irrelevant to each other, and so are the individuals in Oakeshott's theory of society where, as *cives*, they are related only to the system of *lex* and not to each other (pp. 157, 202–204).

Since Oakeshottian *lex* is a system of authoritative rules that does not constrain human freedom at all, Oakeshott is more liberal than those liberals who see the rule of law as merely the most tolerable of such constraints. At the same time, he differs from British Idealists in making a liberal distinction between society and government: 'The society is not perceived as an integrated whole, and the term 'sovereignty' is confined to the authority of the ruler' QJ;(p. 173). Consequently, Oakeshott's theory of society as composed of autonomous, homogeneous selves that are irrelevant to each other corresponds to his philosophy of experience as an arrangement of autonomous, homogeneous modes of experience, each organized in a manner which is irrelevant for all the rest, save for the fact that on the level of understanding nothing is holding the different modes together, whereas on the level of doing, *cives* are governed by the integrated system of *lex*. However, this discrepancy is more apparent than real, for *lex* itself has no grounding other than a certain kind of human character capable of defending the civil condition in virtue of possessing 'a special kind of pride which comes... from self-knowledge and self-respect' (p. 206). Since it is self-knowledge and self-respect that Oakeshott's general philosophy detects and defends in the characters of the modes of experience, 'defence of modernity' becomes a clearly specified activity that unfolds in doing and understanding.

There are two difficulties with Podoksik's attempt to assimilate 'individuals' to modes of experience. First, *cives* may be autonomous and irrelevant, for

each other indeed, but only as 'subjects', related to *lex* only in terms of their standing *vis-à-vis* the rulers of *respublica*. This specific characterization, however, does not exhaust their identity as *cives*, and in general, *lex* does nothing else but relates *homines* to each other as *cives*. Second, the homogeneity of *cives* also poses a problem. The question is in what idiom of enquiry this should be understood. In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott offers his arguments for the integrity of the practical self. However, Podoksik evacuates practice from the argument of *On Human Conduct*. Homogeneity of the self is then maintained through the continuity of its non-essentialist 'character' (p. 153). But continuity is the category of historical understanding and, once poetry is also removed from the realm of doing (pp. 103–120), history remains the only idiom of enquiry appropriate for the theorizing of intelligent goings-on. Since what an 'individual' is is how he is understood, heterogeneity at the level of doing evaporates: homogeneity of agents is achieved by making them uniformly 'historical'.

This means that 'practice' has to be re-introduced into the level of doing, and this is what O'Sullivan does, albeit in a manner different from Tseng's. It has to be stressed that 'human conduct' is not O'Sullivan's primary concern. In fact, one of the many virtues of his book is the amazing degree of discipline with which he confines his study to its subject: Oakeshott's philosophy of history. Given the character of the latter, this task is anything but straightforward. When Oakeshott himself writes 'on history', it is clear that he is exploring its postulates philosophically. In writing 'on Oakeshott on history', the idiom of enquiry is not given in advance of investigation. In a sense, O'Sullivan practices the kind of historical enquiry that Oakeshott explored philosophically. To use Oakeshott's terminology, he 'anatomizes' the available evidence of Oakeshott's thought into ascertained 'occurrences' (including many unpublished statements) 'authenticated' in their relation to specific 'situations' that are then assembled into an 'event': Oakeshott's philosophy of history as a difference composed of differences understood in terms of them gradually coming to compose a coherent identity. Put differently, the character of Oakeshott's philosophy of history emerges as an answer to the historical question: what is it, given how it has come about?

However, since the 'occurrences' in question are Oakeshott's attempts at ascertaining the place of history in human experience generally, O'Sullivan's book necessarily touches upon philosophical issues. Here, the overall coherence of Oakeshott's work hinges upon the idea of 'character' and 'event-making' as a kind of understanding appropriate to it. According to O'Sullivan (p. 164), Oakeshott believed that history, art and life all involved this kind of understanding. 'Life' here stands for 'human conduct as a whole' but not as a restatement of the conditions of the world of practice. 'Human

conduct' is an assumption of agency made in all idioms of enquiry appropriate for the understanding of intelligible and intelligent goings-on.

Oakeshott's understanding of 'event-making' receives its final theoretical form in the first essay of *On Human Conduct* and in *On History* which, in this respect, form one seamless argument. Since the world of practice is visibly present in the latter work (in the form not so different from that of *Experience and Its Modes*), it has to be present in the former as well. If it is not immediately visible on the level of understanding, this is so because 'practical understanding' is never theoretical.

This brings back in Tseng's emphasis on *phronesis*, but also his 'ethical study', as a theoretical idiom of enquiry, provided that non-normative ethics, as Tseng (pp. 129–130) following Oakeshott suggests, is a 'philosophy of practical experience'. Only now 'practice' and 'human conduct as a whole' have to be distinguished. On the level of doing, this distinction will cut through the individual so that the heterogeneity of this level will be due not to the simple plurality of agents but to the intrinsic diversity of human personality. This is what the following passage from 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' states: 'good behaviour is what it is with us because practical enterprise is recognized not as an isolated activity but as a partner in a conversation, and a final measure of intellectual achievement is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet' (Oakeshott, 1991, 491).

It is this diversity that is worthy of defending. Thus, Podoksik (pp. 56–78) demonstrates that Oakeshott believed good reasons could be found for doing positivist science. The exact worth of such reasons, however, is articulated by O'Sullivan (p. 271) in relation to history: 'Oakeshott thought that without the historical past, we would be severely impoverished as people, and this was reason enough to do history'. What would be lost with the loss of the diversity of the idioms of enquiry is the experience of 'escape', as 'something commensurate with the dignity of an immortal soul' (p. 163; cited from Oakeshott's unpublished paper).

In order to emphasize the continuity of Oakeshott's thought between the first essay of *On Human Conduct* and *On History*, O'Sullivan deliberately bypasses the second essay of the former work. Once turning to the third essay, he argues that 'Oakeshott's own efforts [at practicing the history of political thought] sometimes lacked the virtue for which he praised Shakespeare..., of creating characters who can stand alone and villains who "do not inevitably depend for their *raison d'être* upon... heroes"' (pp. 207–208). While granting this point, it would be interesting to re-examine Oakeshott's characterization of the civil condition from the standpoint of 'human conduct as whole', this time understood not as a redefinition (or rejection) of 'practice' but as a constellation of distinct identities and idioms of enquiry appropriate to each

of them, so as to see whether Oakeshott was more balanced in his account of the conversation between ‘practical’ and ‘historical’ individuals.

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Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox, 2nd edition

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Originally published in 1991, William Connolly's *Identity/Difference* is frequently cited, together with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, as a seminal work in agonistic democracy. Influenced by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Foucault, Schmitt and Arendt, theorists of agonistic democracy understand democracy in *political* rather than juridical terms and so aim to provide an account of democracy as ethos or practice rather than institution. Following from this, they emphasize the paradoxical articulation of liberal reason and democratic will, the centrality of conflict to democratic politics, the contingency of identities that are the outcome of this agonistic interaction and the assimilatory tendency inherent in the ideal of consensus.

The explication of these themes in *Identity/Difference* is somewhat oblique since the book begins with what Connolly calls the ‘second problem’ of evil. The first problem of evil has preoccupied theologians since St Augustine: ‘if a god is omnipotent and good, who or what is responsible for evil?’ (p. 1). The second problem of evil is inherent to attempts to deal with the first. The presupposition that there must be an agent that is responsible for evil feeds a politics of resentment that seeks to secure identity by ‘defining the other that exposes sore spots in one’s identity as evil or irrational’ (p. 8).