

# PHILOSOPHERS AND KINGS

BY JUSTIN SHUBOW

WHEN MICHAEL OAKESHOTT DIED IN 1990 the *Daily Telegraph* hailed him as “the greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since Mill—or even Burke.” “Oakeshott was one of the few outstanding political philosophers of the 20th century,” echoed the *Times* of London. Even the left-wing *Guardian* called the self-described conservative “perhaps the most original academic political philosopher of this century.”

Yet, in what would appear to be his only obituary in an American newspaper, the *New York Times* allotted Oakeshott a mere 425 words, perfunctorily describing him as “an iconoclastic British political scientist who was widely embraced by Conservatives though he rejected any ideological label.” That the American paper of record could offer no more praise than this, while at the same time mistakenly calling him a “political scientist”—Oakeshott had mocked the very possibility of there being a science of politics—bespeaks his poor reception in the United States. Regrettably, his work has always been little known in the States, and, to the extent it is known at all, has been frequently misunderstood.

Discussed in this essay:  
*Michael Oakeshott:  
An Introduction*  
By Paul Franco  
Yale University Press,  
224 pages, \$30

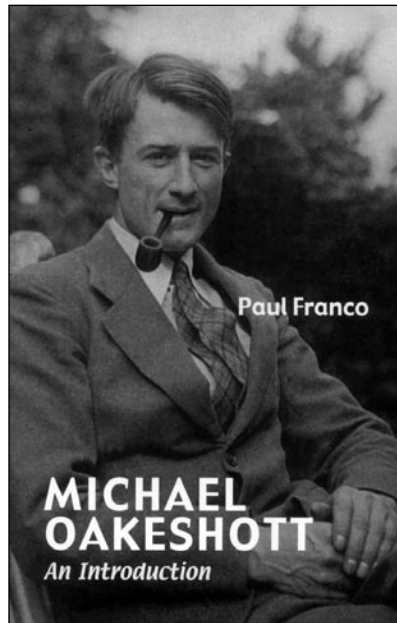
Illustration by Jacob Weinstein



With this book, the first major introduction to Oakeshott's work, Paul Franco hopes to remove some of that ignorance and confusion. A former student of Oakeshott's, he has served his teacher well. With clarity and authoritativeness, Franco uncovers Oakeshott's main influences (which he notoriously hid), details how his ideas evolved over time, and places his work in the context of contemporary political thought. Endorsing the plaudits found in the Fleet Street obituaries, the author—a professor of government at Bowdoin College—convincingly lays out the evidence for Oakeshott's originality and continuing relevance. Comprehensive yet accessible, his book will serve as an excellent resource for anyone looking to learn more about the unduly neglected philosopher.

Born in 1901, Oakeshott was an idiosyncratic thinker who never became part of any establishment, whether academic or political. At a time when philosophy in the English-speaking world was taking an analytic turn under the influence of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, Oakeshott remained under the influence of G. W. F. Hegel and his nineteenth-century British followers, called idealists. While academic philosophy became increasingly ahistorical—with philosophers showing little interest in the history of philosophy, or in history at all, for that matter—the young Oakeshott was for twenty years a lecturer in history at Cambridge University. Even his elegant, discursive writing style jarred with the austere academic norm. He penned few argumentative treatises, and was best known for his allusive essays written for a nonspecialist audience. (Even more unforgivable by academic standards, he coauthored a book about how to bet on horse races—titled *A Guide to the Classics*, no less.) Oake-

shott also made light of the solemn and self-important pretensions of so much philosophy. Alluding to a



quip of Samuel Johnson's, he would say toward the end of his life, "And although I too have tried to be a philosopher, happiness kept breaking through." But perhaps nothing better demonstrated his outsider status than the shock that greeted his appointment, in 1951, as the replacement for socialist guru Howard Laski as the chair of political science at the London School of Economics, then a bastion of leftist thought.

Always out of place in academia, Oakeshott was likewise never part of the political "in-crowd." Though he was sometimes wrongly thought to have been the philosopher behind Thatcherism—in large part because of his individualism and his opposition to monopolistic labor unions, which he thought imperiled the freedom of *non*-association—he never allowed himself to become a party man, and he held a dim view of politics generally. Despite living in an age suffused with ideology, he refused to become an ideologue.

(His detractors, likely not knowing that he was the son of a civil servant, interpreted this as aristocratic aloofness.) Oakeshott believed that philosophy had little if anything to contribute to practical, let alone political, life: "What is farthest from our needs is that kings should be philosophers." At best, political philosophy could help articulate, not justify, our shared political intuitions.

Though Franco covers every aspect of Oakeshott's wide-ranging thought, including his profound reflections on poetry and liberal education, he justifiably devotes the greater part of the book to the thinker's political philosophy, which has had the greatest influence. It was not until 1947, with the publication of his essay "Rationalism in Politics," that Oakeshott first gained significant public attention. Writing polemically during a time of creeping socialism in Britain, his enemy is not just centralized planning but the very Enlightenment mentality that underlies it. The rationalist, he writes,

is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual . . . [T]here is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls his "reason" . . . [He] never doubts the power of his "reason" (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action. . . . He has none of that *negative capability* (which Keats attributed to Shakespeare), the power of accepting the mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness . . . [H]e cannot imagine . . . politics which do not consist in solving problems, or a political problem of which there is no "rational" solution at all.

Above all, the rationalist adheres to an ideology; he subscribes to a simple set of abstract principles that are to be applied automatically in all situations. "Political activity," for the rationalist, "consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect." Advocating the politics of creation and destruction over those of acceptance and reform, he prefers the "consciously planned and deliberately executed" to "what has grown up and established itself unselfconsciously over a period of time."

Though this sounds a lot like Edmund Burke, the rationale behind Oakeshott's condemnation is more explicitly epistemological. To expose the mainspring of rationalism, he distinguishes between two types of knowledge: technical and practical. Technical knowledge is that which can be formulated into precise, articulable rules; examples of it are found in recipes and instruction manuals. By contrast, practical knowledge is unreflective and exists only in use; it cannot be captured by rules or in a book. The sort of knowledge typified by skills, habits, and tradition, it can be imparted and acquired, but not taught or learned. Practical knowledge is *knowing how*, in contrast to technical knowledge, which is *knowing that*. The cardinal error of the rationalist is to believe that only technical knowledge exists, and hence that political activity is simply a matter of technique. Such a belief is destructive, since political knowledge is paradigmatically practical knowledge. Hence, despite its pretensions to certainty, rationalism blinds itself where it matters most.

As Oakeshott elaborates in a later essay, "Political Education," the rationalist fails to recognize that ideologies—whether found in the

second of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* or in the Declaration of Independence of the United States—are necessarily mere abridgments of current practices; they are properly understood as at best

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postscripts, not prefaces, to political action. When rationalists engage in their ideological style of politics, they foolishly attempt to substitute a simplified abstraction for complex reality, with pernicious results. (The worst ideologies, which include Marxism, confuse one domain of life for another. Even though they are intended for political implementation, they are actually abstracts of nonpolitical activities such as war or industry.) Though ideologies, like any abridgments, can occasionally be useful, Oakeshott urges us to recognize them for what they are: cribs for politics. Thus he parts ways with F. A. Hayek (with whom he shared much in common)—"A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics"—as well as with those who wish to ground politics in natural law or any other moral ideology. (Though he himself was a religious Christian who studied theology at the bookends of his intellectual life, Oakeshott never sought to connect religion to politics.)

As an alternative to ideological politics, Oakeshott advocates a "politics without a policy," an open-ended activity based on "pursuing the intimations of our tradition." That pursuit requires that political discourse be "a conversation, not an argument;" its language is that of a discussion, not a demonstration from first principles. Without a lodestar, nonideological politics has no choice but to strive for continuity between past, present, and future. In the most famous passage from all of Oakeshott's work, he employs an extended metaphor to depict a politics that does not aim at a particular end: "In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion."



For the relative few who are acquainted with Oakeshott's thought, the above summary typically encapsulates the extent of their knowledge. Franco takes great pains, however, to show that Oakeshott's views later evolved, and that he ultimately replaced his epistemological critique of rationalism with a more explicitly moral and political one—one in which he evinces an affinity for both conservatism and classical liberalism.

In “On Being Conservative” and *On Human Conduct*, his difficult magnum opus, Oakeshott attempts to make the case for the conservative disposition in politics without appeal to “highfalutin metaphysical beliefs.” Siding with the “conservative skeptic” David Hume against the “cosmic Tory” Burke, Oakeshott rejects the need for—and the very possibility of—a metaphysical foundation altogether. Rather than seeking a universal ground for politics in a conception of the universe or human nature or morality or religion, he instead simply looks at what would be appropriate for the present, contingent circumstances.

The two distinguishing features Oakeshott finds in the modern world are its individualism and its pluralism: It is an inescapable fact that not only do people exercise “an acquired love of making choices for themselves,” but there is an incredibly wide diversity in the opinions they hold and the ends they pursue. In order to give these features the respect they deserve, the proper role of government must be very limited: simply to secure the conditions for individuals to pursue their various ends peacefully and with minimum frustration. What is needed is a method of limiting and softening the inevitable collisions between free persons, one that moderates rather than inflames passions and that is to be found in the rule of nonteleological law. A society’s laws are to be somewhat like the rules of a game, and it is the office of government simply to umpire.

Oakeshott calls a peaceful society that has no substantive collective purpose a “civil association,” and contrasts it with society conceived as an “enterprise association,” one that aims at a common end, such as wealth maximization, salvation, or “social justice.” Though admittedly

no state ever has been or could be a pure civil association, it is this ideal, foreshadowed in the work of Thomas Hobbes and Hegel, that Oakeshott finds at the heart of our political tradition.

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It is striking to note just how different Oakeshott’s defense of individual liberty is from that of the leading classical liberals of his time. In avoiding an appeal to metaphysical beliefs—such as an ethic of economic productivity (as found in Hayek) or the existence of Lockean natural rights (as found in Robert Nozick)—Oakeshott should be seen as blazing a new path to a similar destination. And the great benefit of carrying no metaphysical baggage, Franco argues, is that Oakeshott has an easier time getting there.

Intriguingly, Oakeshott thinks that the classical-liberal state he is defending requires its citizens to be conservative in at least one crucial respect. Speaking of life in general, Oakeshott notes that any sort of activity undertaken for its own sake and not for some goal separate from the activity itself (think, for example, of friendship or fishing) requires the conservative disposition, which esteems present enjoyment over the potential for future profit. Given that the politics he is advocating is

likewise noninstrumental, it follows that that disposition—“to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss”—is the appropriate approach to have toward it. In other words, when a state is a civil association, it is essential that its citizens, and particularly its rulers, maintain a conservative disposition toward politics. But that disposition, Oakeshott makes clear, is not required for every area of life, and he even goes so far as to say that conservatism in government and moral conduct is compatible with radicalism in nearly every other activity.

Though eager to spread these ideas to a new audience, Franco admits that any American coming across Oakeshott’s political thought for the first time must be struck by its foreignness. After all, it is a truism that the United States is a creedal nation founded on an ideology of unalienable rights. Oakeshott himself notes with (perhaps Tory) disdain that early American history was dominated by the influence of rationalism. And it certainly was the case that some of the founding fathers believed that a society could be successfully organized afresh from abstract principles. John Jay, for example, wrote in 1777,

The Americans are the first people whom Heaven has favoured with an opportunity of deliberating upon, and choosing the forms of government under which they should live. All other constitutions have derived their existence from violence or accidental circumstances, and are therefore probably more distant from their perfection.

(Although Oakeshott does not do so, an Oakeshottian might argue that the founders’ success points to the tacit political knowledge they inherited, whether they realized it or not.) Yet precisely because of Americans’ national history and character, it might be all the more worthwhile to warn them against the temptation to substitute the crib of ideology for the hard work of good political judgment. In fact, an excessive reliance on unbending ideology might explain the current pervasiveness of intractable political conflicts, especially when they are clashes of so-called fundamental rights.

Oakeshott’s philosophy, and all the more so Franco’s fine introduction to it, is also eye-opening insofar as it offers an approach to politics without the need for a settled view of religion, morality, or human nature. Against the widespread assumption that political practice must follow from some foundational theory of the world, Oakeshott defends the coherence of a politics without metaphysics. Obviously, his philosophy will have a special appeal to those who are skeptical of achieving reliable knowledge in this abstruse area. Such doubt, Oakeshott assures us, need not lead to a despairing nihilism or an “anything-goes” relativism. Indeed, perhaps the best evidence of this is to be found in his own example: A conservative who embraced modernity, Oakeshott was, like Hume and Montaigne, a skeptic wholly reconciled to the world. •



## OPENING HIS MAIL

BY PAULA SERGI

Four little plastic men arrive today, in a cushioned brown envelope addressed to my husband. He never said a word about the playing field, the game table or how his original men had cracked while tackling the ball those nights here with the guys while I was away.

Two wear red shorts, and two are in blue. The blue boys have blond hair, while the reds have dark (team Italy perhaps?) but all sport the same waved-backed style from my husband’s grade school photos,

all have very red lips, a complexion of high orange, and only one leg to stand on. I did hesitate to open his mail before struggling with the industrial strength staples poking through the padding,

which, from inside, was already loose, as if these men had tried to chew their way out. I wonder if they’re curious, too, about their journey to our address, these uniformed gents, armless, with tiny circles punched into their puffed-up pigeon chests, a bolt where a heart might otherwise have been.