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R-J Winters, 'Plotica's *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought*'

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Plotica's *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought*

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L P Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015).

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We fill pre-existing forms, and when we fill them we change them, and are changed. – Frank Bidart

Not to detect a man's style is to have missed three-quarters of the meaning of his actions and utterances. – Michael Oakeshott

Proteus was an early Greek sea-god known for his ability to foretell the future. But he would often change his shape to avoid having to do so. Those who ascribe to him a specific domain call him the god of elusive sea change, which suggests the constantly changing nature of the sea or the liquid character of water in general. We derive our adjective protean from this Greek character, which means versatile, mutable and capable of assuming many forms. According to the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1901 – 1990) Proteus is the appropriate mythological image for human nature, which is characterized by multiplicity and endless powers of self-transformation.¹ That is why he called his 1975 masterpiece *On Human Conduct*, not *On Human Nature*. Oakeshott rejects, like his existentialist contemporaries, the idea that human beings have some kind of timeless essence. The self is not a given. We have to shape it into a coherent character by learning to speak and act in accordance with the various language-games that together compose our culture. Oakeshott argues for the importance of a kind of aesthetics of the self. The language-games that constitute the human world should, in his view, be understood as 'arts of agency'. This sort of argument threads a fine line between the view that we can create a self *ex nihilo* and that we are imprisoned in an iron cage of social convention. It concedes that we are inexorably part of the social world, but it denies that we are determined by its conventions. As Luke Plotica, the author of the book under review here, puts it: 'individual agency is premised upon, but not determined by a larger intersubjective background or network of shared concepts and practices.' His book is entitled *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought* [hereafter *CMPT*].² It is excellent. The aim of the book is to identify and trace several threads in Oakeshott's work that connect it to philosophical and political debates prominent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To show that Oakeshott, who has a reputation as an untimely thinker, still has something to say to us. Plotica's method is to take seriously what is perhaps Oakeshott's most famous concept – that of conversation – in order to draw his other ideas into a series of dialogues with major twentieth-century theories and thinkers. These staged dialogues show important and sometimes unexpected affinities between Oakeshott's work and that of, for example, Michel Foucault (in their respective analyses of the modern state, its history and character) and Chantal Mouffe (in their critiques of deliberative democracy). Furthermore, Plotica shows the philosophical character of Oakeshott's writings

¹ Michael Oakeshott, 'The Masses in Representative Democracy', in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 366.

² L P Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015).

on politics. Oakeshott is widely recognized as one of the more important political thinkers of the past century and his work is still primarily studied in departments of political science. However, as Terry Nardin has shown, his work goes far beyond this concern with politics to offer a critical philosophy of human activity generally and of the disciplines that interpret and explain it.³ Oakeshott was, like Plato and Aristotle, acutely aware that the subject matter of political science is ‘not institutions but *men*’.⁴ All political theories and models of the ideal state presuppose – often implicitly – a philosophical anthropology. It follows that no theory of politics can be sound unless it is based on the study of human beings. They are, after all, the raw material of politics. One of the great merits of Oakeshott’s work is that he took that idea very seriously and there is perhaps no book that *On Human Conduct* resembles so much as Plato’s *Republic*. As the image of Proteus suggests, Oakeshott thought – unlike Plato – that individuality is the most characteristic feature of human beings. But this individuality is always qualified by the social context in which individual agents find themselves. I want to divide Plotica’s discussion of Oakeshott’s philosophical theory of politics into two parts: (1) Oakeshott’s theory of agency (chapters 1 and 2 of *CMPT*), and (2) Oakeshott’s elaboration of a conversational ethos appropriate to the democratic government of a pluralistic modern society (chapters 3 and 4 of *CMPT*). I will discuss them in turn, but my focus will be on the foundation of Oakeshott’s political theory: his individualist theory of human agency. Of the conversations that Plotica stages between Oakeshott and other thinkers, my discussion will focus on Wittgenstein as interlocutor in part 1 and on the deliberative democrats in part 2.

I. Agency and Individuality

In the first chapter of *CMPT*, Plotica manages to resolve a long-standing question about the correct interpretation of Oakeshott’s theory of human agency: is it a social or an individualist theory? The controversy regarding this question is at the heart of many fruitless attempts to classify Oakeshott as either a conservative or a liberal. Plotica resolves it elegantly, by pointing out that Oakeshott’s work represents a subtle *via media* between the claims of tradition and those of individuality. The *locus classicus* of this question is an article by Shirley Letwin, Oakeshott’s good friend, companion about town and literary executor, which was published in the same year as *On Human Conduct*.⁵ In her article, Letwin presents a novel reading of Hume and she discusses a sceptical dilemma about the foundation of the social world that Hume tried but failed to resolve. Letwin argues that Hume is not just a sceptic, nor a logical atomist, nor a positivist, nor a founder of social science, and not a naturalist either, even though plenty of textual support can be marshalled in support of any of these readings. Instead, she aims to show us that he is engaged in an entirely different project: that of developing a new way of understanding human culture.⁶ His central purpose, she contends, was to establish that the social world is a human creation.⁷ He denied – as Hobbes had done before him – that the human intellect could directly communicate with nature and apprehend with certainty the essences of things. This amounted to a denial that human beings have *nous* – pure reason – in the classical sense developed by Plato and Aristotle. The unbounded rationalism of these ancient thinkers reigned supreme throughout the classical world and the Middle Ages. For St. Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, the

³ Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

⁴ Michael Oakeshott, ‘The Cambridge School of Political Science’, in Michael Oakeshott, *What is History?* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 52.

⁵ Shirley Letwin, ‘Hume: Inventor of a New Task for Philosophy’, *Political Theory* 3/2 (1975).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

whole natural world was still transparently accessible to human reason. The implication of Hume's attack on this idea was that the human mind is incapable of discovering an impersonal, indubitable, unchanging world as it is anyway (independent of us). He radically reduced the limits of human reason. Within those limits, Hume gave us a sceptical description of a world in which, as Nietzsche would put it over a century later, God is dead (the God of the philosophers, at any rate). In this world everything, however seemingly firm, is in continual flux. There are no indubitable first principles that can serve as a foundation for human knowledge. All experience is mediated through the human subject. This worldview leads to an obvious problem. If truth and right are not guaranteed by something 'objective' that exists independent of our experience, what meaning can they have? If everything is a matter of opinion, then the distinction between opinion and knowledge collapses and with it our faculty of judgment. Pronouncing some things – political arrangements, for example – to be better than others will be reduced to an assertion of mere taste. And why should other people accept any such assertion? After all, *de gustibus non disputandum est*. In short, Hume seems to condemn us to nihilism: the belief that all values are baseless. Nevertheless, and unlike some existentialists who obsessed over the same problem, this prospect does not seem to fill him with dread and anxiety. There is no sense of tragedy in Hume. Why not? Because he recognized that despite his sceptical arguments against the traditional concept of reason the social world was a fact and he felt no need to dismiss it as an illusion. He did think it had to be understood in a new way. On Letwin's reading, that is the new task he invented for philosophy: to reconcile the arbitrary, man-made character of our conventional standards (e.g. legal, moral, political and grammatical) with the apparent orderliness of human life. Hume answered his own question with the notions of belief and custom. Belief – for example that fire burns – is entirely a creation of the human mind, which custom has strengthened by repetition over time. This only indicated an answer in a very general sort of way, and it left many other questions unanswered. Having destroyed his enemies – Aristotelian science, scholasticism and theological speculation – Hume thought the exact working out of an answer could be safely left to others. Instead he occupied himself with history. And it is as an historian, according to Letwin, that Hume is best remembered, because in his history he could show what his 'new scene of thought', his novel understanding of the limits and the richness of human life amounted to.⁸ His famous *History of England* is permeated by his understanding of the human world, the grounds for which he had indicated in his philosophy.

Hume did, however, leave us with a dilemma. 'He invited confusion by emphasizing the destructive part of his project and leaving it unfinished.'⁹ It is hardly obvious how 'belief' and 'custom' can form a solid foundation for a culture in a world of ever shifting sands. It is Oakeshott who, on Letwin's reading, solves this dilemma by showing that although the human world has no cosmic anchor, it is nevertheless full of stable and objective standards for thought and conduct.¹⁰ But he does – and had to do – something more, because Hume's attack on reason also undermines our understanding of human nature. Throughout the Western philosophical tradition, man has been understood as the rational animal. Rationality was thought to be the essence of what made us human. If we have to reconsider our idea of reason it follows that we also have to reconsider our idea of human nature. Letwin argues in her book *The Gentleman in Trollope* that Oakeshott rejects the essentialism of the ancient outlook and places individuality at the heart of his philosophical anthropology. However, he does not fall into the trap of supposing that the customs and conventions that make up the human world must inevitably constrain or even determine that individuality.¹¹ For Oakeshott, human beings are neither infinitely plastic nor

⁸ Letwin, 'Hume', 154.

⁹ Shirley Letwin, *On the History of the Idea of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 307.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹¹ Shirley Letwin, *The Gentleman in Trollope. Individuality and Moral Conduct* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), ix.

mere linguistic constructs. That trap is set by the traditional theory of human nature. A theory that gave coherence to the great ancient and medieval philosophical systems: the theory of the self-divided man.

The central idea of the theory of the self-divided man is that human beings are an unstable compound of reason and passion.¹² Both elements of the human soul are connected to a different kind of being. The passionate element – which we share with the animals – is connected to the ever changing life of the earth, where people need to satisfy their needs, feel want, taste grief and ‘where all things alter, decay and perish.’ The reasonable part of the soul, on the contrary, supposedly links us with a transcendent realm beyond mortality, ‘where everything has a fixed place in an eternal unity.’ Each element pulls in an opposite direction, as Plato illustrated in the *Phaedrus*, where he compares the human soul to a charioteer (reason) and two winged horses, one ‘noble and docile’ (the will) and the other ‘an ugly, wanton brute’ (desire/passion) who constantly thwarts the charioteer’s efforts to reach the realm of Being. This image of man dominated our understanding of the human condition from the ancient Greeks all the way to Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. It was perhaps best summed up by the Elizabethan poet, dramatist and statesman Fulke Greville, the first Baron Brooke, in his play *Mustapha*:

Oh wearisome condition of humanity
Born to one law and to another bound
Vainly begot and yet forbidden vanity
Created sick, commanded to be sound
What meaneth nature by these diverse laws
Passion and Reason, self-division’s cause.¹³

On this reading, human life can only be made intelligible as a struggle between reason and passion. In lives where passion dominates, there can be no stability or order, because the grounds for distinguishing between true and false, right and wrong, cannot be discovered in the empirical world. That shadowy world is inferior to the reality obscured by it, because of the ‘changeable element in its composition.’¹⁴ It follows that not only life on earth in general, but human individuality in particular, which gives rise to the ‘transitory multiplicity’ of the human world, is something to be deplored. It is their separate, bodily existence which gives people their individuality, which is consequently incompatible with finding the order, fixity and unity that only reason can supply us with. We are cut off from the noumenal world and we can overcome our estrangement only by transcending our individual identity and losing ourselves in the world of reason. The question to ask of every man becomes ‘Does he choose reason or passion?’ In the modern world that question can be translated into a tension between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ self. Here we are back with Hume’s dilemma. He showed that the standards that govern our common life are mere social conventions, and the theory of the self-divided man encourages us to believe that these standards are nothing but constraints imposed on the passionate and authentic elements of our soul by the guardians of public order, who are either acting out of bad faith (the liberal view) or supplying a necessary public service (the conservative view). The possibility that we might recognize the conventionality of the standards that govern our shared, common world and nevertheless accept some of them *authentically* (while perhaps contesting others) is excluded by this understanding of human nature. Michel de Montaigne’s insight that whatever social role we undertake to play, we always play our own at the same time, cannot be accommodated within this theory. Every individual action becomes an instance of either submission or rebellion. The human world is reduced to a struggle for power between those who strive to impose a unity on diversity and those who resist. On this interpretation, an orderly social life cannot be reconciled with individuality. The task that Hume

¹² Letwin, *Gentleman*, 38.

¹³ Cited in *ibid.* 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 38.

bequeathed to Oakeshott was therefore to reconcile the stability of the social world with the exercise of individual agency, without recourse to some questionable metaphysical anchor to hold everything together. Following Hume, Oakeshott succeeds in making a complete break with ancient rationalism by redefining reason as a purely human, but creative power.¹⁵ Reason, for Oakeshott, is not a capacity for discovering indisputable truths, but neither is it merely the slave of the passions (as in Hume's famous aphorism, which nicely illustrates that Hume did not succeed in freeing himself from the vocabulary of the self-divided man). To avoid any such suggestions and to make a clean break with our philosophical tradition Oakeshott uses the word 'intelligence' instead of reason. Intelligence is understood by Oakeshott to be 'a faculty for inventing interpretations of and responses to experience.'¹⁶ This faculty is more akin to what we would normally call imagination than to reason. The product of exercising intelligence is an individual understanding of the world – an interpretation. Intelligence is an active power of the mind. It constructs an understanding of the world from the various impressions that we receive via the senses, by applying concepts and categories to those otherwise formless impressions. This is, of course, a fundamentally Kantian insight, and it shows Oakeshott's debt to the Idealist tradition. One other important characteristic of this intelligent capacity is that it is involved in all of our interpretations of the world, even those that seem to be purely emotional or desirous. To be conscious is always to think and therefore to interpret. Anger is, on this view, an interpretation, an intelligent response to a situation, and not merely raw feeling. So Plato's tripartite division of the soul is here reduced to one faculty of the 'self: intelligence, which is involved in everything we say and do. Once human reason is understood in this way, the diversity and variety of the human world ceases to be 'the sinister product of unruly irrational forces.'¹⁷ Indeed, individuality becomes the inescapable consequence of human rationality. And the social world does not need to be reduced to uniformity in order to make it rational and orderly. But what holds the human world together? This emphasis on interpretation seems to have got us back to the problem of nihilism. If everyone guides himself according to his own imagination, where do we find the standards we require to regulate our social life? These standards, for Oakeshott, are part of what he calls a 'practice'. A practice is a kind of tradition. It 'unifies those engaged in an activity without dictating what anyone does.'¹⁸ It explains how people can engage in orderly activity, where they recognize and accept common standards, without being reduced to uniformity or having recourse to an infallible or non-human source of truth. In short, it solves Hume's sceptical dilemma. How is this 'miracle' achieved? By separating the conditions or procedures of a practice from the activities in which that practice is expressed. These common conditions or procedures are objectivities given by the practice to those who share in it.

Although entirely produced by human choices, the conditions of a practice are nevertheless as objective as if they had been derived from a non-human source because they are wholly independent of the immediate purposes or interests of those who draw upon them and have not been designed to compel anyone to do or say anything in particular."¹⁹

Like Letwin, Plotica recognizes that the individual person is the locus of Oakeshott's philosophical and political analysis. At the heart of the epic of human conduct lies the individual as a thinking and acting subject. In other words as an *agent*. But this individual is not the abstraction used in so much liberal political theory. It is rather the individual as a concrete and historic person. Over the course of his career Oakeshott develops a systematic view of agency in which he emphasizes the interrelated roles of

¹⁵ Letwin, *Idea of Law*, 309.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 309.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 309.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 310.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 310-311.

concepts and practises in 'what and how individuals think and do.'²⁰ This network of concepts and practices forms the intersubjective background upon which individual agency is premised, but by which it is not determined.²¹ These practices can be understood as the grammars or languages of agency and it is in fact Plotica's contention that Oakeshott develops a theory of agency that is essentially a kind of language-use. He shares this linguistic perspective with, among others, the later Wittgenstein, and the first chapter of the book is devoted to a comparative analysis that is meant to bring out the way in which Oakeshott's work stands to inform and be informed by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In other words, this is an example of the various imaginary dialogues between Oakeshott and other thinkers that Plotica stages throughout the book. Plotica's aim in this chapter is two-fold. He wants, firstly, to construct an account of individual agency that recognizes its intersubjective, social conditions, yet views these conditions from an individualistic perspective. Secondly, he aims to challenge a common reading of both Oakeshott and Wittgenstein as essentially conservative thinkers, who present the individual as 'imprisoned within an edifice of convention that is itself beyond the reach of critical reflection and action.'²² Plotica succeeds in his aims and thereby shows how Oakeshott solves Hume's dilemma, while preserving the existentialist thesis that our existence precedes our essence and that a human being consequently has 'a "history", but no "nature".' That he is what he makes of himself.²³

Wittgenstein, as widely understood, and Oakeshott share a linguistic perspective on the human world. That is to say, they both think that the utterances and actions of persons are inexorably structured by the conceptual-practical frameworks that can simply be called *languages*.²⁴ Our experience of the world is mediated through the concepts and practices whose use constitutes language-use in the broadest sense. The human world is a world *in language*. Language is, in Heidegger's phrase, 'the house of Being' and, as Plotica puts it, the conceptual-practical structures that frame our understanding and agency are 'the air that understanding and agency necessarily breathe.'²⁵ This shared linguistic perspective has three characteristics:²⁶

- (1) The great diversity and complexity of conduct, different kinds of utterance and action in different kinds of circumstances, can be understood in terms of different idioms of language-use. Oakeshott called those idioms of speaking and acting 'practices', whereas Wittgenstein preferred to speak of 'language-games'. For simplicity's sake I will usually stick to 'practices'. A practice is a learned manner of thinking and acting. Oakeshott argues that practices specify 'arts of agency' that individuals employ in conduct as they craft themselves, their actions and their world. These practices are in some way constraining of individual agency, because they both constitute and regulate the idioms of an activity. Practices also unify the people who subscribe to them in a discourse community.
- (2) These practices have an important intersubjective, social dimension. They rest on what Wittgenstein called a 'form of life'.
- (3) The 'practical' aspect of practices as manners and techniques for thinking, speaking and acting and their conventional aspect as social institutions (an institution is simply a practice that has acquired a certain firmness) meet in the rule-character of practices. Mastery of a practice or language-game entails mastery of the rules that structure the game. That doesn't mean someone

²⁰ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 41.

²⁴ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

has to memorize the rules or that he self-consciously recalls and interprets them on every occasion. Two kinds of knowledge are involved in mastering a practice. Knowing *how* to engage in it (e.g. knowing how to speak and write in English) and knowing *that* you are following the rules that regulate the practice (in this example: the rules of English grammar). Oakeshott famously called the former practical knowledge and the latter technical knowledge.²⁷ The difference is that practical knowledge exists only in use, is not reflective and cannot (unlike technical knowledge) be formulated in rules (which is the characteristic virtue of technical knowledge, which is knowledge of a technique). These two kinds of knowledge are always involved in any actual activity. So while there are important differences between the two, they do not in fact exist separately. The implication of this rule-governed nature of practices is that there can be no private practices that ‘float free from intersubjective rules and conventions.’²⁸ Our utterances and actions get their meaning from a larger context which is conventional, i.e. intersubjective and social. Practices are, by their very nature, public.

This linguistic picture of human life provided by Oakeshott and Wittgenstein easily lends itself to misinterpretation. Many commentators attribute social theories of agency to them, which in turn enables them to draw conservative political conclusions. Plotica employs a distinction between individualistic and social theories of agency. Individualistic theories of agency generally emphasize the individual’s capacity to act, a capacity that is not reducible to or fully determinable by an individual’s context of action. Social theories of agency, on the contrary, generally stress the intersubjective conditions and context of individual agency and action. ‘Individual agency is treated as explicable in terms of conditions beyond the agent herself, and thus more or less derivative of some larger social field of traditions, systems, forces, and relations exogenous to the agent.’²⁹ Now, based on the linguistic perspective Oakeshott and Wittgenstein share, they appear to present – to some – a social theory of agency. One might infer that Oakeshott and Wittgenstein understand individual agency as the residue or side effect of social ‘structures’: ‘as an evanescent ripple on the surface of the deep water of community, custom, and convention.’³⁰ Such a reading is presented in David Bloor and J.C. Nyíri’s influential interpretations of Wittgenstein’s later thought. It goes something like this³¹:

- (1) Individual agency is conceptually and practically framed by language, such that agency and action are inseparable from language-use.
- (2) Language (in the formal abstract) and language-use (in the concrete) consist of social, that is, intersubjective and conventional, practices.

So far, so uncontentious. This is simply a summary of the linguistic perspective as such. However, according to Plotica, the conservative reading goes on to claim that:

- (3) Beyond the formal sense in which language-use consists in using ineluctably social practices, individual language-use consists in following the empirically settled and verifiable rules, customs, and conventions of some community; some ‘we’ of which the relevant ‘I’ is a member.
- (4) Meaningful individual utterance and felicitous individual action are the reproduction of custom.
- (5) Individual agency is therefore a rigidly if not exhaustively socially determined capacity to follow the customs and conventions of one’s community. Society is prioritized over the individual.

²⁷ Oakeshott, ‘Representative Democracy’, 12.

²⁸ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

On this conservative reading of Wittgenstein and Oakeshott, the – absurd – political implication follows that individual agents are as such incapable of criticizing the community they belong to.³² As Nyíri puts it:

Although any given form of life, mode of thought and behavior, can be superseded by or have superimposed upon itself other forms of life, it cannot actually be criticized. All criticism presupposes a form of life, a language, that is, a tradition of agreements; every judgment is necessarily embedded in traditions. That is why traditions cannot be judged.³³

Plotica summarizes the argument for drawing this conclusion as follows: to make an intelligible claim is to play a language-game; to play a language-game is to follow the rules and conventions of one's society; hence, a genuinely critical stance or act toward one's own society inveighs against its own conditions and undermines itself. That this conclusion is nonsensical can be established by pointing out – as Bernard Williams has done – that people (at least in modern conditions) have found *within* the rules and conventions that they share with others resources with which to criticize their society.³⁴ In much the same way in which Hume recognized that the human world had an obvious existence independent of him, but that it had to be understood in a new way, Williams points out that the practice of cultural and social criticism obviously does exist and he, like Hume, is in no mood to dismiss it as an illusion. As he memorably puts it: 'practice is not just the practice of practice, so to speak, but also the practice of criticism.' If the linguistic perspective Oakeshott and Wittgenstein developed is accepted – as it is by Williams – it does require a new way of understanding this practice of criticism. Traditionally, such criticism employs a criterion or standard drawn from metaphysically suspect notions like natural law. These notions are metaphysically suspect, because they appeal to a criterion or standard outside the human world. If we don't accept that there are such standards, we have to find room within our form of life for contesting our shared concepts and practices. And, to be sure, within the network of practices we use there exist spaces within which one practice may be used to challenge others. These critical spaces exist because we can distinguish between a core of agreement and a penumbra of contestation in our forms of life. Every communal life needs some measure of stability and that stability is provided by broad agreement about, for example, the importance of equality and freedom as principles to govern 'our' (i.e. Western societies with a modern outlook) political community. However, equality and freedom – like all our ethical and political concepts – belong to the class of essentially contested concepts. Essentially contested concepts are those concepts about which there exists widespread agreement that they are the appropriate concepts to use, but which, at the same time, invite endless dispute about their exact meaning and correct use. All political and ethical concepts fall into this category, because they are not purely descriptive, but inevitably involve value judgments. They straddle, so to speak, the fact – value distinction (another bequest of Hume's). To take the example of equality: most people in Western democracies accept that equality is one of the basic principles of their social order, but many disagree about whether it should mean equality of opportunity or equality of outcome. The point of this is that although a basic attunement is necessary for our practices to hold good, it does not follow that we need to conform totally in each and every individual instance to the social conventions of our society. We do not have to accept the entirety of the practices and language-games that make up our way of life. They do not – as that idea presupposes – 'fit smoothly into a singular edifice shared evenly and completely by the members of the linguistic community. Instead, the shared

³² Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 25.

³³ Cited in *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bernard Williams, 'Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism', in *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 35-36.

practices or language-games of a notional community are partially and complexly interrelated.³⁵ The other side of that coin is that instances of individual language-use do not have to fit smoothly into a singular, organic pattern of utterance and action shared evenly and completely by all the members of the linguistic community either. Here again, there is some space between the individual agent and the practices and language-games to which he subscribes. That space may be used to criticize or to conform to social conventions, but *that is up to the individual agent*. I think that Montaigne understood this space as well as Williams does when he said that it is possible to conform to social conventions authentically. Oakeshott did so as well, when he said that a language (or any other type of practice) is ‘an instrument to be played upon, not a tune to be played.’³⁶

Nevertheless, defenders of the social theory of agency might object that this space exists only in ordinary, unproblematic language-use or at best when only the edges of our shared concepts and practices are contested. When the core values of our common life become the objects of an individual’s political antagonism, it is the community that decides where the limits of truth and intelligibility are drawn. Thus, it would follow that the critical space amounts to what the community lets individuals get away with saying³⁷ (cf. Rorty’s infamous remark that ‘truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with’). Plotica’s argument would fall apart if this were true, because it would mean that ‘an individual’s critical agency comes apart when the rest of the community stops listening to her.’³⁸ He deals with this objection by offering a novel interpretation of the famous section 217 of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*:

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’

The adherents of the social theory of agency might read this and understand it as the inevitable conclusion: when the justifications we can articulate come to an end, the only explanation for why we individually act as we do is that others in our community also act this way. ‘This is simply what I do’ becomes shorthand for ‘I learned the ways of my community and cannot see or imagine beyond them; if pressed to justify my words and deeds, their deepest ground consists in the raw fact that members of my community speak and act in this way; I can and would do no other.’ This fall-back conservative position, Plotica argues, rests – like the rest of their interpretation – on a misreading of Wittgenstein. Even in cases of irregularity or dispute, ‘validation from the community is not necessarily the last word, or the judgment from which we have most to learn.’³⁹ For why should we accept that? In the final instance, when dispute over the use of a practice remains and explanations have been exhausted, ‘This is what I do’ means, on Plotica’s alternative reading, something like ‘This is how I take the world to be.’ Thus, both Wittgenstein and Oakeshott recognized that there is no ground to human community deeper than our attunement in practices, ‘but for each individual practitioner no ground is more fundamental than her own understanding of and ways of enacting the practices she has learned.’⁴⁰ The fundamental ground of the social world is not, as Hume thought, customs and beliefs, nor, as Letwin understood Oakeshott to be saying, traditions (practices/language-games), but our own individual understanding of the world. This reading is compatible with Hume, I would argue, who after all

³⁵ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 29.

³⁶ Oakeshott, *Human Conduct*, 58.

³⁷ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 31.

demonstrated that we cannot transcend our own experience. And it is perfect as an interpretation of Oakeshott, who wrote that for a human being the world ‘is what he understands it to be.’⁴¹

The critical space that opens up in this way must, however, still be limited to some extent. The question is, of course, where do we draw the line? I do not know the answer to that question, but some of the core values of our culture cannot be disputed. As Bernard Williams has argued elsewhere, there will be some elements in our outlook which are simply fixed points within it.⁴² For example, we believe that every citizen and in some sense even every human being deserves equal concern. In its most central and unspecific form, according to Williams, that belief is – in a lovely German expression – *unhintergebar*: ‘there is nothing more basic in terms of which to justify it.’⁴³ It is simply there. Williams argues that this doesn’t mean: ‘for us, it is simply there.’ It means: ‘it is simply there’, because ‘that is what it is for it to be, for us, simply there’.⁴⁴ But, as Plotica has argued, we should rather take it to mean, ‘it is simply there’, because that is what it is for it to be, for *me*, simply there. There is a more practical reason for this, which is that nothing will come of questioning everything at the same time. Both Wittgenstein and Oakeshott recognized this in their characteristically poetic ways:

If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.⁴⁵

And,

The theorist who interrogates instead of using his theoretic equipment catches no fish.⁴⁶

Calling an element of our practice into question requires a context in which the question is intelligible, and such a context is framed ‘by concepts, facts, and techniques that are not (and for the moment cannot be) called into question.’ The point is that, ‘to use our practices critically, we must at the same time affirm their conditionality upon other parts of our conventional practices.’⁴⁷ So criticism is unavoidably conditional, but at the same time an integral feature of linguistic community as such.⁴⁸

The space of criticism that Plotica has uncovered leads to the conclusion that while the individual agent is inexorably conditioned by the social world ‘in and in respect of which she learns and uses the practices that shape her as an agent’, the actions of individual language-users are nevertheless ‘the life of these practices.’⁴⁹ And in a perfect gloss of the line from Frank Bidart’s poem ‘Borges and I’ that I’ve used as an epigraph for this book review, Plotica says that ‘just as the individual is conditioned by the practices she enacts, her enactments shape the practices themselves.’⁵⁰ That is true, so long as we keep in mind that our individual agency must be accorded primacy in that creative process of self-disclosure and self-enactment.

This image of the individual as a self-fashioning, yet conditioned agent – neither a liberal nor a conservative – is the centrepiece of Oakeshott’s political thought and Plotica has done an excellent job explaining Oakeshott’s account of agency – i.e. his theory of human nature – in all of its nuance and subtlety.

⁴¹ Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 6.

⁴² Bernard Williams, ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’, in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 194.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1969), remark 343.

⁴⁶ Oakeshott, *Human Conduct*, 11.

⁴⁷ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 35.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 35.

2. The Ethos of Democracy

That individuality is at the heart of human nature, does not mean that people have always thought of themselves as individuals. During the Middle Ages the possible sum of self-knowledge available to the vast majority of people was to know themselves as members of a family, a group, a corporation, a church or a village community.⁵¹ All relationships and allegiances normally sprang from one's status as a member of a group. This started to change in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Western Europe. The modern state came into being as a modification of medieval conditions of life and thought and in tandem with it emerged 'the human individual in his modern idiom.'⁵²

That idiom was primarily of a moral kind, but it was translated into political terms later on. Morality is a practice, according to Oakeshott.⁵³ It is the most general practice of a society and therefore attracts to itself the generic name 'morality', from the Latin *mos*, which means custom. 'A morality is the *ars artium* of conduct; the practice of all practices; the practice of agency without further specification.'⁵⁴ A morality regulates the life *inter homines* and concerns the relations of human beings to one another.⁵⁵ And the various idioms of moral conduct which our culture has displayed are distinguished not so much in respect of their doctrines about how we *ought* to behave, but in respect of their interpretations of what in fact we are.⁵⁶ And what happened in the early modern period is that for a variety of complex historical reasons a morality of communal ties – the morality of the Middle Ages – was replaced by a morality of individuality. According to this new idiom of human character a human being should not be understood as a member of a group but as a person, an end in himself. This morality of individuality fostered in people a disposition to regard a high degree of individuality in conduct and in belief as the condition proper to mankind and in the vision of the good life that belongs to this morality the exercise of choice for its own sake becomes paramount.⁵⁷

Much of the work Oakeshott did after the publication of *Rationalism in Politics* in 1962 contributed to a history of this disposition of individuality, of the morality that belongs to it and of the ideal state that is appropriate to this human character. Those efforts would culminate in a historical description of the emergence of the modern state in the third essay of *On Human Conduct*. In chapter three of *CMPT* Plotica stages insightful dialogues between Oakeshott and Foucault, Oakeshott and Isaiah Berlin, and Oakeshott and Hannah Arendt on the history and character of the modern state. That state rests upon citizens who largely subscribe to the morality of individuality and a society characterized by plurality and diversity is its inevitable consequence. The only type of state that can deal with that diversity is a democracy and Plotica, in chapter four of *CMPT*, develops a conversational ethos that should inform the practice of our democracies out of Oakeshott's scattered remarks on this issue. This is fitting, because the word 'parliament' – the characteristic democratic institution – derives from the French *parler*, which means to talk or converse.

The concept of democracy forms the core of one of the most active and fruitful areas of contemporary political theory: democratic theory. Within that broad field, the most influential model of democracy developed over the last couple of decades is that of deliberative democracy. Plotica uses the conversational ethos he takes from Oakeshott's writings on democracy to criticize two fundamental

⁵¹ Oakeshott, 'Representative Democracy', 365.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 364.

⁵³ Oakeshott, *Human Conduct*, 60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Oakeshott, 'The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes', in Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, 295.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 295.

⁵⁷ Oakeshott, 'Representative Democracy', 366.

commitments that most deliberative democrats subscribe to. The first of these is the search for consensus. Facilitating consensus on political values, identities and questions is a regulative ideal of all models of deliberative democracy, even though many theorists of this persuasion will not want to eliminate difference or disagreement altogether. Secondly, many deliberative democrats rely on an underlying 'epistemic' premise: they believe that the procedures of democracy tend to lead to good and rational outcomes. 'Good' outcomes should be understood here as objectively better, as appealing to some independent notion of 'goodness' or rationality. Oakeshott's work neither refutes deliberative democratic theory nor supplies an equally systematic model or theory to supplant it (Oakeshott's definition of the concept of civil association in *On Human Conduct* is not a model of democracy *per se*), but his understanding of democracy provides, on Plotica's interpretation, a critical perspective that can inform our democratic sensibilities and practices.⁵⁸ How can it do that?

In his essay 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', Oakeshott uses the metaphor of conversation for the human condition as such.⁵⁹ Conversation is a communicative, dialogical activity in which a plurality of voices and idioms of utterance meet in a mutual exchange. It takes place both in public and in ourselves (when the fragmented aspects of our contingently-formed personal identities converse). A conversation is an open-ended adventure, which respects the interplay of perspectives, ideas and utterances.⁶⁰ In an inexorably pluralistic society political activity should ideally approximate to such conversation, in which diverse voices and identities are included in a non-instrumental way, so without some external end like 'consensus' or 'truth', but for their own sake.

Like other practices, conversation is a conditional activity. But it does not require consensus on important matters to take place. It presupposes only a minimal stratum of attunement, such as, e.g., speaking the same language, accepting the basic concepts in terms of which to discuss politics and a commitment to talk, argue and discuss instead of fight. But it always respects the individual perspectives that people have formed for themselves out of the capital of emotions, beliefs, images, ideas, manners of thinking, languages, skills and practices that constitute their culture. And modern Europe is characterized by various moralities, final vocabularies and preferred policies, so people can construct many different personal identities for themselves. This respect for the permanent plurality of modern societies brings Oakeshott close to agonistic democrats like Chantal Mouffe. They both regard plurality not as some temporary or contingent obstacle to the Enlightenment dream of ever-widening rational consensus, but as a permanent feature of modern democratic politics, which we should celebrate and enhance.

Plotica's discussion is much richer than I can do justice to here (this is already very long), but this is the heart of the matter: plurality is not a problem to manage and ultimately solve through the creation of rational consensus. Plurality is an end in itself, in the same way in which modern individuals don't value making choices for themselves because it will contribute to economic growth but for its own sake. And democratic politics should respect that plurality and reach temporary settlements about what laws to adopt or policies to pursue. Temporary decisions that can be put by for another day and revisited when the flow of conversation has taken a different turn. Conversation is an activity 'in which different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another.'⁶¹

Conclusion

⁵⁸ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 117.

⁵⁹ Oakeshott, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', in Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, 488-542.

⁶⁰ Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott*, 118.

⁶¹ Michael Oakeshott, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', in Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, 490.

To conclude, Luke Plotica's book *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought* is a rich, nuanced discussion of the philosophical theory of politics that can be found in *On Human Conduct*, Michael Oakeshott's magnum opus. It does justice to the philosophical foundations of Oakeshott's political theory and – through the lens of conversation and a series of imaginatively staged dialogues between Oakeshott and better known contemporary political theorists and philosophers – it shows the many ways in which Oakeshott's is an indispensable voice in the conversation of modern political thought. It elegantly resolves a long-standing issue in the secondary literature on Oakeshott – is he a liberal or a conservative? – and thereby contributes significantly to the field of Oakeshott studies. Furthermore, Plotica shows the deep affinities between Oakeshott and Wittgenstein, the modern thinker who is perhaps closest to him. I could have discussed any of the other dialogues Plotica sets up, but I chose Oakeshott's engagement with deliberative democracy because the critical perspective that the conversational ethos brings to the table is a good example of the non-instrumental character of Oakeshott's entire philosophy. John Gray has written that if one had to express the spirit of Oakeshott's thought in a single phrase, one might say that it is *a critique of purposefulness*.⁶² The image of human life that Oakeshott conveys to us is not that of a problem to be solved or a situation to be mastered, 'it is the poetic (and religious) image of our being lost in a world in which our vocation is to play earnestly and to be earnest playfully, living without thought of any final destination.' As Montaigne – who was held up by Oakeshott as the embodiment of his conversational ethos – said, 'life is an end in itself.'⁶³ The conditions of the modern world, with its moral idiom of individuality and its democratic political institutions are uniquely suited to an exploration of that protean individuality for its own sake, as an adventure. Life, in Oakeshott's view, should be lived extemporaneously and is 'whatever it turns out to be'. The same goes for our democracy, in which the seat of power is, in the words of Claude Lefort, always an 'empty space', in which endless conversation can take place. Oakeshott the man very much practised what he preached. And his writings and the better interpretations of those writings, of which Plotica's is certainly one, will always evoke the memory of his conversation, for those who knew him, like Gray. 'In [his conversation] intellectual passion commingled with a fathomless gaiety, and the dry reasonings of philosophy became, as in the dialogues of Socrates, dialectical, and at last lyrical.'⁶⁴

⁶² John Gray, 'Oakeshott as Liberal', in John Gray, *Gray's Anatomy* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 85.

⁶³ M. de Montaigne, 'Of Physiognomy', in M. de Montaigne, *Essays* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2005), 1357.

⁶⁴ Gray, 'Oakeshott', 86.