

Reflecting on Michael Oakeshott

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM

by *Leslie Marsh*

Abstract. This paper introduces a symposium discussing Michael Oakeshott's understanding of the relationship of religion, science and politics. Essays by Elizabeth Corey, Timothy Fuller, Byron Kaldis, and Corey Abel are followed by a review of Corey's recent book by Efraim Podoksik.

Keywords: category error; creationist science; Stephen Jay Gould; *ignoratio elenchi*; modality; non-overlapping magisteria; Michael Oakeshott; politics; religion; science

Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) has the twofold distinction of being acknowledged as one of the greatest political philosophers and as one of the greatest philosophers of history of the twentieth century. He also made a distinguished contribution to the philosophy of education, philosophical jurisprudence, the history of political thought, and aesthetics. What is not widely known is that his earliest writings were centrally concerned with religion and theology and that this remained an implicit interest through most of his long career. In his first book, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), Oakeshott gave a metaphysical and epistemological account of the place of history, science, and practice in human experience, in which religion and politics are subsumed into the domain of practice. This modal conception (not to be confused with modal logic) is structurally key to all of Oakeshott's work. It is therefore no surprise that each of the five contributors in this symposium spends a significant amount of time on this aspect of Oakeshott.

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The motivation behind my suggesting this symposium had its source in the late writings of evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould. It struck me that Gould's "non-overlapping magisteria" (Gould 1997; 1999) bore a striking resemblance to Oakeshott's modal conception, presented some 66 years earlier. The resonance was ever so strong when examined in the context of the current hot topic of "scientific creationism." On both Oakeshott's and Gould's terms, scientific creationism is a star example of an oxymoron because it conflates subject matter that they believe ought to be kept distinct.

For Oakeshott, human experience comprises distinct spheres or modes of knowledge—practice, science, history, and poetry (aesthetics), each of these domains modal in the sense that each is constitutive of its own criteria of objectivity and standards appropriate to its own subject matter.¹ Oakeshott's modal conception sought to preserve the integrity of each and every mode, including science. Religion and politics, on Oakeshott's account, were consigned to the world of practice, the realm of agency characterized by the endless deliberation of reconciling *is* with *ought*. Thus, the fusion of *scientific* with *creationism* amounts to the politicization of science, or its corollary, the politicization of religion.

Oakeshott's modal conception is best known through his critique of "scientific politics." Scientific politics denotes the attempt to make political activity answerable or reducible to scientific criteria and is a canonical example of what Oakeshott took to be the misunderstanding of an activity and which he famously called *rationalism* (Oakeshott [1962] 1991). For him, this conflation of modes—the political (practical) and the scientific—is neither political nor scientific. The abstract apriorism implied in scientific politics is profoundly inappropriate to the complex manifold that is human conduct because it abstracts from the minutia of lived experience. The scientific perspective and the practical perspective are of completely different orders, and to allow one to bleed into the other is to generate at best irrelevance and at worst profound human misery. Practice, being ever present, constantly pressing up against human experience, beckons one on; its intrinsic malleability carries with it the greatest of consequence. Indeed a conflation of any of the modes (choose your permutation: history, science, practice, poetry) results in something that is neither fish nor fowl. The modes, for Oakeshott, are not and should not be conversable. To enforce conversability is to commit what Oakeshott terms *ignoratio elenchi*, which refers to any process of argument that fails to establish its relevant conclusion or any counterargument that fails to establish the contradictory of the proposition attacked. Gould (1997) marks this supposed modality: "No supposed 'conflict' between science and religion should exist because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority—and these magisteria do not overlap (nor do they encompass all inquiry)."

Conceived thus, any perceived conflict is a pseudo problem, an error of irrelevance, generated through either ignorance or a promiscuous, imperilistic, or immodest ideological viewpoint. Science covers the empirical realm (*sub specie quantitatis* in Oakeshott's terms), and religious experience extends over questions of moral meaning and value (*sub specie voluntatis*), and these two magisteria just do not overlap. Furthermore, they are not coterminous in some metamode. For Gould and for Oakeshott, it would be incoherent to posit the notion that these domains be separated by a no-man's land, and so it seems that magisteria, at least in Gould's view (1997), will inevitably "bump right up against each other, interdigitating in wondrously complex ways along their joint border."

This then is the crux of the matter. Is this inevitability to be taken as a hostile skirmish or welcomed as a benign and innocent dialogue? This is the question that animates the following discussion—and speaks directly to *Zygon's* aims and scope.

Many take Oakeshott's well-known invocation of *ignoratio elenchi* to be roughly coextensive with Gilbert Ryle's "category mistake" (Ryle [1949] 1990, 17–18).² It has to be admitted that Oakeshott's use of *ignoratio elenchi* is tendentious. It is so in five ways:

1. Only because Oakeshott holds *particular* views does he regard certain arguments as failing to establish a relevant conclusion.
2. The irreducible plurality of modal worlds forbids any commonalities—the use of relevant evidence, the use of logical inference, and so on. Oakeshott seems to rule out the notion that there are general virtues of evidence and inquiry that we appeal to regardless of the domain of inquiry (of course the standards of accuracy will vary between subject matters).
3. Given the irreducible plurality of the modes, Oakeshott has to rely upon some notion of coherentism. Coherentism in epistemology and metaphysics—that is, justification and truth—inherits several well-known difficulties. It invites transference to ethics, politics, and society—else we are incoherent in having coherentism in one sphere and something different in the other. Coherentism about ethics, politics, and society leads directly to relativism (Marsh 2005), because it is empirically and conceptually possible for there to be any number of sets of ethical, political, and social beliefs and activities that form equally coherent systems, with *ex hypothesi* no decidability on grounds of coherence between them.
4. How does Oakeshott handle the blending of religion and politics if they are both *intramodal*?
5. Oakeshott's later addition of poetry as a mode complicates matters—it is just a mode of *sensibility* and is devoid of evidence or inquiry. (Interestingly, Gould also mentions the magisterium of art).

With these points in mind, Oakeshott's modal conception plays a vital role in the discussion that follows. The authors, through their unique expository styles and particular substantive concerns, all contribute to getting a

grip on what may be for some a rather obscure notion. First up is Elizabeth Corey (2009), who makes a case for the view that although Oakeshott's writing is not conventionally religious, there is a religious sensibility that infuses all his philosophy. Timothy Fuller (2009) specifically offers an analysis of the relation of science and religion in Oakeshott's modal scheme, although he is not directly concerned with the public-policy implications of this view. Byron Kaldis (2009) presents a close-grained examination of Oakeshott on science, examining its internal consistency and locating it within contemporary discussions in the philosophy of science. Corey Abel (2009) looks at the implications of Oakeshott's modality for public policy, refracted through Oakeshott's metaphor of civil conversation. Abel focuses here on *the* hot topic of the day—creationist science.

By way of a postscript, Efraim Podoksik (2009) reviews Elizabeth Corey's book *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics* (2006). Her discussion of the relation between religion and aesthetics in Oakeshott brings to mind Ludwig Wittgenstein's gnomic remark "Ethik und Asthetik sind Eins"—Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same (Wittgenstein 1969, 24.7.16), both to be conceived as *sub specie aeternitatis* (from the standpoint of eternity) or, more loosely translated, as "free from considerations of time." The atemporality ascribed by Wittgenstein to ethics and aesthetics seems to have more than a faint resonance in the "delicate" noninstrumental link between religion and aesthetics that Corey discerns in Oakeshott. As is clear from the title of Corey's book, it is a perfect accompaniment to the main course.

NOTES

I want to thank all the participants for agreeing to contribute to this project. Elizabeth Corey, doubly featured, has been very helpful and patient. Timothy Fuller is a longstanding expositor and editor of several of Oakeshott's works including the posthumous *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (Oakeshott 1993). Byron Kaldis has published extensively on the history and philosophy of science, metaphysics, ethics, and social philosophy. Corey Abel is coeditor of *The Intellectual Legacy of Michael Oakeshott* (2005) and currently is editing a follow-up volume of new papers. Efraim Podoksik (2009) is one of the leading lights in what might be termed the new wave of Oakeshott theorists.

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1. There is no stricture as to the number of modes so long as it can be shown that each mode constitutes a truly distinctive way of apprehending an aspect of the totality of human experience.

2. For Ryle, the tourist wandering around the Oxford colleges, various institutes, the libraries and museums, administrative buildings, and so on, who then inquires as to where the University is, is committing a category mistake. Ryle specifically sought to illustrate the absurdity of the dualist's position—that mind and body can be spoken of in parallel ways.

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