

OAKESHOTTIAN MODES AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE EVOLUTION DEBATES

by Corey Abel

Abstract. I examine Michael Oakeshott's theory of modes of experience in light of today's evolution debates and argue that in much of our current debate science and religion irrelevantly attack each other or, less commonly but still irrelevantly, seek out support from the other. An analysis of Oakeshott's idea of religion finds links between his early holistic theory of the state, his individualistic account of religious sensibility, and his theory of political, moral, and religious authority. Such analysis shows that a modern individualistic theory of the state need not be barrenly secular and suggests that a religious sensibility need not be translated into an overmastering desire to use state power to pursue moral or spiritual ends in politics. Finally, Oakeshott's vision of a civil conversation, as both a metaphor for Western civilization and as a quasi-ethical ideal, shows us how we might balance the recognition of diverse modal truths, the pursuit of singular religious or philosophic truth, and a free political order.

Keywords: apology; Augustine; authority; Christianity; civil association; Francis Collins; conversation; Richard Dawkins; evolution; Stephen Jay Gould; history; mode; nonoverlapping *magisteria*; Michael Oakeshott; practical experience; religion; science; theism

Reading selectively through the spate of popular work on evolution and intelligent design by scientists and theists, as well as those such as Francis Collins who are both, one notes a strong current of bewilderment and annoyance with the "other side," whoever that may be. (To Collins's credit, he is annoyed with many on his own side.) Many nonscientists are bewildered by the advances of science whenever they stop to consider the ethical and political ramifications of our knowledge—how to make a human ear

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grow on the back of a mouse, for example. They are annoyed by the churlish attacks upon religion made by such figures as Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007). Many scientists are bewildered when nonspecialists offer impertinent and ill-informed criticisms of work that is intensely self-disciplined, or offer “alternative” theories as if having a theory required nothing more than a flight of fancy (a diorama of *Homo sapiens* playing among the dinosaurs). They are annoyed by the efforts of evangelists or think tanks (The Discovery Institute is a favorite target) to change school curricula or advance alternative theories of cosmology seemingly for political and moral ends.

Both sides are right. Their bewilderment and annoyance is justified, even if their distempered rhetoric is not. A scientist who has lost the ability to be horrified by a human ear growing on the back of a mouse seems to have lost something vital to his or her humanity. For the scientist *qua* scientist, there is nothing horrifying here; to the contrary, such an experimental outcome represents a significant and scientifically exciting advance. But when the scientist leaves the laboratory and returns to being a practical man or woman, we would expect at least a mild unease: What if this knowledge were used against me and my loved ones instead of for purely theoretical ends or in pursuit of some human good? Such a scientist may be a theist or even an orthodox believer at home in some religious tradition, who nonetheless would find strange some of his or her fellows’ claims about what the Bible requires. A person whose piety requires the belief that God has played an elaborate trick on archaeologists and paleontologists (along with the physicists and chemists whose work supports their dating methods) would be a prime candidate for a Flannery O’Connor pillorying, had the good Georgian only managed to enjoy a biblical lifespan.

Amid the noise and confusion of our public debates, some, including Collins (2006) and Stephen Jay Gould (1997; 1999), have made pleas for a reasonable and civil balance or harmony between the voices of science and religion. Collins thinks these voices may actually be harmonized, while Gould thinks they are “nonoverlapping” and incompatible but both important for full human flourishing.

Michael Oakeshott offers a valuable and truly philosophical perspective on the problem of Gould’s “nonoverlapping *magisteria*” (1997) and other formulations of the problem of incompatible and competing ways of knowing. He would say to Collins that the harmony he seeks is admirable but impossible—and demonstrated in Collins’s own arguments. He would instead offer a multivocal conversation as the model of civilized discourse. He would give the nonoverlapping *magisteria* of Gould a deeper philosophical foundation at the cost of deepening the rift between them.

CREDULITY AND CRITICISM

Perhaps the best place to start an examination of Oakeshott's views of the relation between religion, science, and politics is in some of his early notebooks. He was intensely interested in religion throughout his life, although never in a doctrinaire way. In one early notebook he even outlines an "apology" that he wishes to write for Christianity. He never formally wrote it, but his sketch lays out some key principles such as intellectual integrity and respect for different ways of seeing the world taken in their own terms.

For instance, in *Notes XI*, which the archivists at London School of Economics and Political Science date between 1925 and 1934, Oakeshott sketches a work treating present Christian doctrine and practice under the heading of "Modern Christianity." He identifies this as "a work of *Apologetic*; but, with a new principle of apology — i.e., to admit everything that must be admitted" (1925–1934, 13). Oakeshott envisions "an attempt to restate the doctrines of Christianity for the contemporary mind. And see where the Christian festivals, worship, prayer, etc. fall into place. Popular theology—to remove from it that appetite for absurdity which Hume found there" (p. 7).

Modality is in many ways central to his thinking, so we should not be surprised to find that he thinks of the apologetic task partly in terms of the modal plurality of modern knowledge. "Science and history has [sic] shot their bolt—under their influence, Christianity has been cleansed of irrelevancies—but, by the nature of these studies—it has not been reconstructed for the modern mind" (p. 8). We explore below Oakeshott's theory of modes of experience, but note here that he accepts both science and modern critical history as legitimate disciplines that have made real contributions to the stock of human knowledge, that represent flourishings of human possibility. Also, these disciplines have purged Christianity of "irrelevancies." Sadly, he does not elaborate on them here. Also note that, unlike some scientific atheists, he does not think that scientific knowledge has simply superseded religion and rendered it useless.

In another notebook, Oakeshott quotes from Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*, in which the latter notes that "for two centuries religion has been on the defensive" and that (Oakeshott, paraphrasing) "Each new development has found religious thinkers unprepared." Oakeshott then responds, "But what is religion? How far does this unpreparedness show them to have been *not* 'religious thinkers?'" (1927, 15). Because for Oakeshott religion is a way of life and not a body of doctrines, a religion that fails to steer the lives of its adherents through the turbulence of new times is a failed religion.

Thus, his is no attempt to turn back the clock, to reject modernity's turn to life-endangering knowledge. Characteristic of his whole attitude, we find the line "To accept historical facts upon insufficient evidence is

not faith, it is incredulity" (1925–1934, 8v). This is across the page from a remark on the historical criticism of the gospel. "Instead of asking about the reliability of this-or-that passage of the [New Testament], we ought to enquire into the general character of the N.T. What the N.T. says, and what it is silent about; and the value of these, depends upon the general character, the purpose for which its books were written. Etc." (p. 9).

Among many interesting points in these passages is that Oakeshott sees "irrelevance" as not only an epistemological problem but as having practical effects. Christianity has been purged of irrelevancies, but Christianity has been attacked irrelevantly. While Oakeshott says little in his notebooks to explain what Christianity needed to be purged of, there are clues in passages of *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) where he discusses the problem of religious "authorities," the historical character of Christianity, and "God" as an explanatory principle.

Near the beginning of his discussion of historical experience, Oakeshott rejects the view that history is a "tissue of mere conjunctions," pointing out that historical events are first of all based on and "constructed from" records. But he immediately clarifies that records are not, simply by their existence, material for history, and he illustrates with the example of religious history, which often "accepts, without criticism" concepts such as the miraculous (1933, 90).

Oakeshott is not simply rejecting the miraculous; he is trying to elicit the general character of historical explanation. He quotes from Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* to point out the absurdity of certain lines of interpretation that fail to be sufficiently critical.

Osiander (1498–1552), in his *Harmony of the Gospels*, maintained the principle that if an event is recorded more than once in the Gospels, in different connexions, it happened more than once and in different connexions. The daughter of Jairus was therefore raised from the dead several times, . . . there were two cleansings of the Temple, and so forth. (1933, 90 n1)

Oakeshott describes this as an absurdity. What we have here is a primitive and stunningly deficient exercise in criticism. Osiander is able to see that the Gospels contain redundancies but is unable to find a better explanation for them than that events referenced twice happened twice.

A lack of criticism in religious writing means that such references to the past are not truly historical in character. Oakeshott adds:

The mistake here is not mere credulity, but a failure to realize that the so-called "authorities" (better called "sources") of history are frequently not themselves the product of historical thought and require to be translated into the categories of history before they are used. What is a "miracle" for the writer of any of the gospels cannot remain a miracle for the historian. (1933, 90)

He notes, in terms very similar to his discussion in the 1928 essay "The Importance of the Historical Element in Religion" (1993, 63–73), that Christianity is held to have an "historical" element, that is, to be based on

certain events that occurred in the past. He stresses the role of this idea in reinforcing and giving imaginative power to Christian beliefs. In 1933, he writes that the language of history “magnifies the intensity of sensitive affection” (p. 105). In “The Importance of the Historical Element” he even comes close to identifying the attachment to sensible events in history with a form of idolatry. He asserts that whatever the meaning of the past for Christianity, “it is not an historical past” (p. 104).

Oakeshott goes on to discuss the postulates of historical experience, which I do not discuss in detail here. But one additional and significant point concerns the rejection of general causality in history. Oakeshott denies that historical explanation can properly be subsumed under general laws or universal causes, and comments on the inadequacy of God as an historical explanation: “He explains everything and consequently affords no rational explanation of any one thing. . . . ‘God in history’ is, then, a contradiction, a meaningless phrase. Wherever else God is, he is not in history, for if he were, there would no longer be any history.” Oakeshott also denies a “proper” historical consciousness to the Hebrews and rejects Polybius’s attempt at a “back-door” introduction of the gods when there is no other cause evident—a sort of “god of the gaps” theory of history (1933, 127).

These passages from *Experience and Its Modes* were published around the time of his planned “apology” and form part of a stream of writings on religion from the 1920s to 1930s. Oakeshott is not maintaining that there is no god, only that the historical mode of apprehending reality has no room for supernatural causation or miracle or for any kind of merely authoritative records not subject to rational criticism.

Around this same time, Oakeshott was very far from being a simple-minded or literal-minded believer or reader of the Bible. As noted above, his projected apology would admit “everything that must be admitted,” by which he included the “bolts” shot by science and history. There cannot be an intellectually dishonest or sham apology. Also, the epigraph to an early writing, “An Essay on the Relations between Philosophy, Poetry and Reality” ([1925] 2004), indicates that, although a self-identified Christian, he was a philosopher with a highly independent turn of mind.

I understand Reality (*substantia*) to be that which is in itself and is conceived through itself: I mean that, the conception of which does not depend on the conception of another thing from which it must be formed. Spinoza. *Ethics*. I.

The principal cause of our uncertainty is that the only comprehension we may have of Reality (The One) comes neither by scientific observation, nor by the strivings of the mind—as come our understanding of other things—but by an immediate Presence, which far transcends all learning. . . . This is why Plato says that Reality is ineffable and indescribable. Yet we speak and write of it; but only in order to arouse our souls and to start ourselves on the way to that Divine Vision: like as when one showeth a pilgrim on his way to some shrine that he would visit: for our words may show us the way and guide us thereon, the Vision itself is the sole work of him who hungers to see. Plotinus. *Ennead*. VI.ix.4.

It is good to be tired and wearied in the vain search after the Ethical Reality (*le vrai bien*) that we may stretch out our arms to the Redeemer. Pascal. *Pensées*. 422.

In a note at the end of the essay Oakeshott explains his grouping of these three quotations: “The three passages quoted at the front of the essay are intended to sum up the whole position. The first defines Reality. The second describes the only true way in which Reality may be expressed. The third gives the true sense of the intellect in the search after Reality. As will be seen, they logically follow one another” (2004, 72).

We see from this combination of Spinoza, Plotinus, and Pascal that Oakeshott firmly believed in pursuing the truth and just as firmly believed it to be an arduous, wearying occupation, fraught with uncertainty and risk. Reality does not give herself up to the casual passer-by; nor is there a single method by which she may be made to yield up her secrets on some Baconian rack. She is not amenable to being discursively rendered. It is not difficult to see that a conception of modal plurality would appeal to Oakeshott as a way of grappling with the legitimate and yet incompatible claims of various ways of knowing.

Although my main interest in this essay is science and religion, I have touched upon historical experience in order to show that Oakeshott can speak to another dimension of the religious dogmatism of our times:

In view of the way in which science and religion have been set over against one another, it is, however, a matter of some surprise that more has not been heard of a collision between history and religion; there are certainly grounds for such a conflict. The notion of deity is one which both history and science must reject or neglect. (1933, 315)

As always, when he speaks of conflict, he points out that these conflicts are, strictly speaking, unnecessary and empty.

No conflict, of course, can arise between history and religion so long as each mode of thought confines itself to what it is competent to conclude. Science, history, and practice, as such, cannot collide; they are merely irrelevant to one another. Yet it might be supposed that the invasion of religion by historical thought, and the consequent error and confusion, is not so rare that we should expect them to pass unnoticed.

And then he makes a striking claim: “Christianity . . . has perhaps suffered more and has more to fear from the incursions of history than from those of science” (1933, 315–16).

Because modern methods of historical criticism emerged alongside modern natural science and in a shared spirit of humanistic inquiry, we should expect that the literalism that demands that scientific findings conform with biblical passages would also lead to a general lack of appreciation for or even awareness of problems of historical interpretation—or, rather, to an historical literalism as well, to claims like the one Oakeshott ridiculed, that an event recorded twice must have happened twice.

Here, it is apposite to mention some passages from Augustine, quoted by Collins in his plea to fellow believers to be more sensible, decrying the damage done to religion when it sets itself up in opposition to science.

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world [concerning natural phenomena: stars, seasons, plants, animals] . . . and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience.

Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of the Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show a vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. (Augustine, quoted in Collins 2006, 156–57)

Augustine goes on to complain that because of outlandish or foolish ideas being maintained by believers, those “outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and . . . the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men.” This, for Dawkins, is exactly what the Young Earth creationists and, to a lesser extent, intelligent-design movements have done. Although Dawkins’s writings are repellently harsh and dogmatic, it is understandable that he and others are appalled by what people seem willing to believe. Even more temperamentally moderate scientists, including Collins himself, can hardly suppress their irritation at the apparent determination of some believers to stake the authenticity of their belief on the strangeness of their ideas.

Rather than going further into our current debates here, I want to briefly examine some of the key claims of Oakeshott’s modal epistemology, which lies behind his strong irrelevance claims about the modes of experience, and then explore his ideas of religious experience more deeply.

NONADJUDICABLE CLAIMS

Oakeshott’s master conception is *experience*.

“Experience” stands for the concrete whole which analysis divides into “experiencing” and “what is experienced”. Experiencing and what is experienced are, taken separately, meaningless abstractions; they cannot, in fact, be separated. Perceiving, for example, involves a something perceived, willing, a something willed. The one side does not determine the other; the relationship is certainly not that of cause and consequent. The character of what is experienced is, in the strictest sense, correlative to the manner in which it is experienced. (1933, 9)

The given world possesses a certain degree of unity, and experience consists in pressing toward a greater degree of unity. The striving for unity that Oakeshott says characterizes all experience is aimed toward the achievement of a fully coherent world of ideas, and this is the work of philosophy: “experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest, or modification,” experience that is “critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial or abstract” (1933, 2, 3). He says this “concrete”

experience is “necessarily fleeting and elusive,” and he nowhere claims to have achieved such final or total coherence. Fully coherent, “unhindered” experience is rare. Recalling the critique of book learning in the opening pages of *Experience and Its Modes*, it is easy to hear resonances of Plotinus in Oakeshott’s view of philosophy, where we gain insight not by “learning” but by an “immediate Presence.”

Ordinarily, experience is filtered through presuppositions, through which abstract worlds of ideas come into being, worlds of knowledge built up by “strivings of the mind.” These are *modes*, which Oakeshott defines as arrests or modifications of experience. Modes are abstract not in the sense of being kinds of experience or pertaining to parts of experience, because *there are no such separate kinds or parts of experience*, but in being the whole of experience “from a limited standpoint,” a “limited view of the totality” (1933, 71).

This cannot be overstressed. *The modes are assertions of truth bearing upon the whole of experience*. This means that modes are essentially incompatible. Also, although modes are strictly speaking irrelevant to each other, they are always prone to encroaching on each other by denying the claims of the other modes as obvious falsehoods. Oakeshott points out, wisely, that to make an historical assertion in the domain of science, for example, is not to make a mistake; it is to utter nonsense. It is irrelevant, not “wrong.” Of course, this has not kept scientists from sneering at the inadequacies of historical narrative, or moralists from abhorring science’s inhumane “reductionism.” But what can a philosopher do? Epistemological arguments are not vested with police powers.

The major modes are Science, History, and Practice. In a later work Oakeshott adds Poetry or Art as a distinct “voice” (1991, 488–541). Still later, he turns to a looser framework of “practices” or “idioms” of activity, which are akin to “languages,” but the three major modes still represent something like the largest groupings of experience under distinguishable and irreducible presuppositions (1991; 1975).

Because the modes are assertions of the nature of the whole of reality from a limited point of view and not expressions of specialized knowledge of a part of reality, the common view that science, for example, is concerned with nature, fact, or matter is misconceived. Unfortunately, in today’s debates, especially in the popular literature, this is exactly what scientists themselves often say—for example, in nearly every contribution to *Intelligent Thought: Science versus the Intelligent Design Movement* (a title that announces the nonscientific character of the work!) (Brockman 2006). If the scientists who claim that science is exclusively concerned with fact reflected for a moment on the jurisdiction some courts have over matters of “fact” in addition to law, they would see that there is some question about what a fact is. For Oakeshott, as I have mentioned, each mode asserts something about the whole of reality and thus carries its own view of fact and

truth, its own view of reality. No mode suffers the indignity of self-consciously pursuing error.

Science conceives the whole of experience, and tries to explain everything, *sub specie quantitatis* (under the category of quantity) (1933, 169–246). Energy, matter, and other verbal and everyday concepts—friction, wetness, density—are eventually rendered in terms of quantity, as elements in a mathematical expression. Science has no need to form an opinion or position on questions such as whether there is a soul or a god. It is not that science requires atheism, *pace* Dawkins. Rather, as we saw above with God as an explanatory principle in history, science simply asks different questions. It does not limit itself to asking questions only about some things, or some parts of reality—the factual part or the natural part. It asks about everything, as do both practice and history. If science can find a way to quantify (measure) a phenomenon, it can speak about it in a scientifically coherent way. As Gould has said, “Science simply cannot by its legitimate methods adjudicate the issue of god’s superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can’t comment on it as scientists” (quoted in Collins 2006, 165–66). But even this formulation falls short, insofar as it suggests an area “outside” science’s competence. Rather, what there is (for science) is a single, fully measurable reality. What is not quantifiable for science simply does not exist. Similarly, for history it would be a scandal to posit things for which there is no narratable past; for practice, a scandal to suggest a world void of ought and ought not. For each mode, it is scandalous for there to be some reserve, some leftover part of reality that answers to another master or is unmastered.

Oakeshott goes considerably beyond Gould, then, by calling irrelevance “the most crippling of all forms of error” (1933, 5). He might have added that it is an almost unavoidable temptation. The issue of irrelevance may seem trivial. At one level, we easily understand the difference between the sunrise and the revolution of the earth and would regard as absurd a claim that a chemical reaction is punishable conduct. But we continually fall into the awkward position that there are different parts of reality, or different points of view on the same subject. Oakeshott’s distinctions between the modes are designed to protect each mode from the irrelevant intrusions of the other, including the incursion of practice into history or science.

In *Experience and Its Modes*, when he is considering some of the implications of his modal theory, he takes up the incursion of science into the world of practice. He points out that for the modern mind, to think of science as not relevant to practice is difficult, because we have for so long thought of science as a guide to life. But he lays to one side the application of what he calls pseudoscientific ideas—technologies or applied results of science that may have increased our happiness—and focuses on whether scientific and practical ideas can cogently be united. He thinks this breeds only confusion. “The importation of [practical] concepts into the world of

science is the source of almost every departure of scientific thought from its true path,” he says, probably thinking of ideas of teleology in biology, or the infusion of ethical values into an account of evolutionary change in a way that suggests that “better” or “fitter” organisms survive. Oakeshott’s point is that applied results of science may indeed be useful, but they are not scientific because they have been rent from their place in the activity of disclosing reality in terms of science’s presuppositions. If a scientist tries to think scientifically by using practical concepts—self, will, motive, good, bad, authority, freedom—the result must be disastrous, even laughable. To ask whether or not the laws of thermodynamics should be waived in this case is absurd, there being no analogue in scientific experience for jury nullification and no electrons or molecules being acquitted or convicted.

Oakeshott goes on, referring to the ignoble episodes of religious persecution of science, “In the past the attempt to limit methods and conclusions of science to those acceptable, not only to the particular religious beliefs of the time, but to religious beliefs in general, has always bred false science. . . . At the present time” (and how much more true in our time, some seven decades later!) “there would appear to be some danger that science in attempting to become popular, in attempting to translate its conclusions into the language and conceptions of practice, should do for itself what it had previously suffered from other antithetical modes of experience” (1933, 311–12).

A better warning for those engaged to show us that economic life, psychological development, social patterns of all kinds, morality, and everything else are “evolutionary” would be hard to find. The justification of evolution is an internal matter for science and one pretty well settled. Extending the idea of evolution metaphorically to areas where we are no longer talking about random genetic mutation and differential rates of adaptation introduces confusion. Organisms adapting are undergoing a nonself-conscious process that can be, and is, described mathematically.

A fine example of this is given by Collins in his discussion of the “tree of life” when he points out that the relationships between different species “are inferred solely by a comparison of their DNA sequences” and that “this analysis does not utilize any information from the fossil record, or from anatomic observations of current life forms” (2006, 128 Fig. 5, and 139). This is an excellent illustration of what Oakeshott means by describing science as experience *sub specie quantitatis*. It is not reliant upon observation or experiment even if it often uses these techniques of inquiry. What is being described is a set of quantitative relations between quantitatively specified objects.

As if anticipating the debates of our time—which are not so different from debates William Paley engaged in, or David Hume—Oakeshott writes that if we accept the view that only science provides a means of understanding reality, “it is not unlikely that some of our ideas about morality

and religion would require revision.” He adds, a little cryptically, “Those who have undertaken to consider the nature and grounds of our moral judgments have long ago faced this problem of the relationship between the scientific and moral world, and with what success it is not for me to say.” He must be thinking of Immanuel Kant, Hume, and G. W. F. Hegel, among others, possibly as far back as Epicurus, whom he cites in this very passage of *Experience and Its Modes*. Without pausing to pass judgment on the effort of philosophical giants past, he adds, recalling his criticism of religious thinkers as unprepared, “Those responsible for our theological thought have not, I think, been equally successful in distinguishing the roots of the problem” (1933, 314–15).

RELIGION AS THE CONCRETE MOOD OF PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

It may seem, going back to Oakeshott’s desire for an intellectually honest apology (à la Augustine), his view that science and history have cleansed Christianity of irrelevancies, and his staunch effort to protect science and history from the incursions of practice, that he would end up with a fairly nonreligious conception of human experience. Yet he gives a robust defense of practice against the incursions of science and history and makes religion the key to practical life as a whole. He defines religion as practical experience “in its most concrete mood” (1933, 292). In his essay “Religion and the Moral Life” ([1927] 1993) he sets his view in opposition to two other common views: religion equated with morality, and religion as the sanction of morality.

The first view equates religion with morality. Oakeshott calls this a familiar and absurd view, “a travesty of human experience expressed by means of an abuse of language” (1993, 39–45 at 40). After this brusque dismissal Oakeshott moves on. But there is logic to the brusqueness, as we shall see when the second view is criticized, after acknowledging its merit.

This second view defines religion as the sanction or condition of morality. Oakeshott cites John Oman’s *Grace and Personality* as articulating this view (1993, 40). Oman’s idea, with which Oakeshott agrees, is that religion is an activity of human beings, so it must be an activity of “moral personalities . . . and no religious doctrine or notion can properly be called ‘religious’ if it does not accord with the requirements of moral personality” (1993, 40). This implies that the relationship between God and human beings, especially, must recognize both humans’ nature as intelligent beings capable of self-determination and the essential link between belief and conduct that constitutes moral agency. The religious life must be consistent with the notion of self-determination. Thus, “all notions of irresistible grace operating mechanically are impossible . . . [and] nothing is morally observed which is done as the exaction of God’s will. It must, even if it be only in submission, be the expression of our own [will]” (1993, 40–41).

Up to this point Oakeshott agrees with Oman, but he attacks the view of religion as the sanction of morality because its recognition of human agency is imperfect. It accepts the importance of moral personality but poses against human will an external law, from God, as a sanction. This means that what is lacking is some account of human assent to God's law and authority. "If the moral law is the command of God which has merely to be obeyed blindly, then we are moral immorally—which is absurd. If morality consists in the autonomous moral personality choosing and understanding for itself, then the notion of an external moral law, the will of God, is an immoral notion" (1993, 43). What is needed is a view of religion as the completion of morality. Religion, Oakeshott might have said, must satisfy the mind of the believer, not simply posit an external authority before which the believer bows down in abject submission.

The key to Oakeshott's idea of religion as completing morality is that religion overcomes the abstractness of morality. All modes are abstract by virtue of some logical inconsistency at the core of the presuppositions that give rise to and articulate the meaning of that mode. In practical experience, the essential contradiction is the positing of a gap between is and ought, which is the ground of the notion that conduct is the introduction of change into the world by virtue of an agent pursuing and, with varying success, attaining some (or the) good. But the good never can be finally attained or secured in the realm of conduct without altering the very meaning of human conduct.

Oakeshott writes that the good that is sought in morality is logically undermined by the fact that "out of every moral success the further 'ought' springs up to condemn you once more." In his later works he expresses this idea with lines from a hymn, invoking the "deadliness of doing." Religion resolves the incompleteness of morality by making real what in morality is only a shadowy aspiration. "In the religious consciousness there is a belief in an object other than myself; an object, moreover, which is real. What in morality was a mere 'should be' in religion becomes an 'is'" (1993, 41–42).

This directly relates to Oakeshott's later view that religion depends primarily upon faith, the belief in the real object. As he expresses it in *On Human Conduct*, action is always composed of an agent's disclosures, specific performance in terms of acknowledged rules and hoped-for outcomes, and enactments, the choice of motive in which to act. To return a borrowed book grudgingly, out of fear that failure to do so would jeopardize one's social standing with an acquaintance, is different than giving back a book because one wishes to honor the unstated agreement of the loan and keep one's acquaintance from suffering any inconvenience. Faith, Oakeshott says, is the motive of motives; it is not an act or a succession of acts; it is not demonstrated in the observance of pieties. Faith is a deeply grounding self-understanding, which reflects an agent's character and ineluctably stamps her acts as her own.¹

Because religion is concerned more with faith than with actions—with the quality of actions more than their results—it is concerned to link individuals to that object outside themselves and to give relief from the deadly engagement of enacting and disclosing themselves in a world of contingency. Religion, then, is a mode of being active. “In religion,” Oakeshott writes, “we achieve goodness, not by becoming better . . . that is the self-contradiction of morality . . . but by losing ourselves in God” (1993, 42). The loss of self in God describes religious experience and also explains why it is a rare achievement. A graceful acceptance of the conditionalities of conduct and a consoling belief in the final resolution of all moral gaps, contingencies, qualifications, and dissonances may, for most people, be something only momentarily glimpsed or felt in times of joy, grief, or meditative calm; perhaps for some this religious sentiment is sustained over a lifetime in every waking (and dreaming) moment. But in either case, a religious sensibility is the overcoming of the otherwise ineffaceable gap between is and ought.

As mentioned earlier, each mode is the assertion of reality, not a territorial grab for much or little, fertile land or scrub land. As assertions of reality, each mode possesses its own variety of truth and error, fact and value, certainty and doubt. We will be led seriously astray if we equate science with knowledge or fact, and morality or religion with opinion, subjectivity, or uncertainty. The scientist who faces an unexpected experimental result or a discrepancy in a data set is in a state of doubt, and exercises imaginative faculties. He or she opines or imagines in searching for a new and more satisfying hypothesis. He or she does so scientifically, within the canons of science. The discrepancy, after all, while causing doubt and calling forth imagination, is also mathematically exactly specified. That is why it can be a problem. It is not a bad feeling; it is a number—an unexpected number. If the scientist’s mind turns to magical or supernatural explanations, it has turned away from science. He or she conjectures, but always in terms of how a method of measurement or an alternative set of inferences might resolve the discrepancy.

Similarly, the theologian or apologist takes the doctrine of the Trinity as essentially true when defending Christianity against, say, the Muslim charge of polytheism. He or she asks if there is a way of rationally satisfying the critic by elucidating this difficult concept more clearly. The concept is never quantified or made subject to a scientific method of examination, but it is subject to critical scrutiny, review, and clarification. The idea of the Trinity is a belief, not an as-yet-nonfalsified statistical generalization. It is a mistake for scientists to accuse religion of thoughtlessness, of operating on adaptive falsities, and the like. However, it is equally errant for critics of science, whether they be evangelicals or the postmodernists with whom they have lately allied themselves, to assert that science, because it embraces uncertainty,² because it allows the operation of imagination, is therefore no different from a religion or indefensible as a claim of truth.

A POLITICS OF THEOLOGICAL HUMILITY

I can now press further into what Oakeshott means by defining religion as the completion of morality or practice in its most concrete mood, and explore how his idea fits with his view of political association and with today's politicized science-versus-religion contest. He makes a twofold assertion of "the sovereignty of moral and religious truth in the practical world, and the abstract and defective character of moral and religious truth from the standpoint of the totality of experience." Accompanying this is his claim that in religion "subordinate attempts to establish the harmony . . . [of the world] . . . such as politics and morality . . . are swallowed up and superseded" (1933, 309).

To unravel this relationship between religion and "subordinate attempts" to establish practical harmony, it is helpful to recall Oakeshott's criticism of the view that religion is the sanction of morality. His objection is couched as an authority problem—how to reconcile the authority of God with the will of the human agent. Even "submission" must not violate the moral personality of human beings. What Oakeshott says about authority in both early and later works echoes Thomas Hobbes's view, tersely laid out in chapter 13 of *Leviathan*: "The desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions that proceed from those passions till they know a law that forbids them; which till laws be made they cannot know, nor can any law be made till they have agreed upon the person that shall make it."

Hobbes is asking whether the conduct of human beings in the state of nature is "sin," so the theological context is obvious. What Oakeshott takes from Hobbes is not so much the idea that men must agree among themselves; that is a secondary matter. He notices the epistemological claim: Law requires a known and acknowledged lawmaker. It is acknowledgment that grounds authority. Individuals' agreement in what Pascal said may be only *une erreur commune* (a common error) is not a choice but an epistemological necessity. Because we do not know and are wearied in our search for the Redeemer, we assent to authority. In both religion and politics, Oakeshott insists, we accept a lawgiver, but without thereby surrendering our status as self-legislating beings.

"The Authority of the State," first published in 1929, contains a link between Oakeshott's epistemology and his idea of authority in both politics and religion. Authority, he notes, is commonly understood to be something both external and coercive. He takes issue with these notions. "An external authority can refer solely to the historical or psychological cause of belief, opinion or action, never to its whole ground," and it is this whole ground that sustains belief ([1929a] 1993, 75). The ground of belief "is an independent judgement we make about the fact proposed," in the context of "the whole body of evidence" (p. 76). Until the individual accepts and believes a fact, maxim, or rule, it is not truly authoritative.

A simple illustration of this idea is the grasping of any item of knowledge in what teachers sometimes call an “Aha!” moment. The student accepts something no longer because the teacher says so but because she actually sees it—grasps internally that the teacher’s claims are true, that they could be established independently of the teacher’s personality or power. What is in a sense an inward and personal moment is at the same time a merging of the individual’s mind with an outward, impersonal world of ideas.

The “Hegelian” view of the state and its authority that Oakeshott goes on to put forward in “The Authority of the State” needs to be seen in this context. This is the essay in which he famously calls secular society an abstraction, then claims that “this is not a question of the so-called establishment of religion, or of the so-called ‘modern’ state; society as it organizes itself apart from God is an abstraction, and the state cannot be identified with this secular whole without becoming an abstraction” (1993, 82). Oakeshott writes, “the real authority of all belief and action is that which can show itself to be absolute, irresponsible, self-supporting, and inescapable” (1993, 78). Such is the individual’s internal assent, as opposed to an external cause of belief. When I “see it,” the Pythagorean theorem attains something akin to sovereignty—it is self-supporting and inescapable, not merely something taken on trust.

Oakeshott’s argument that the state is a whole composed of society and government and that it is an abstraction apart from God appears absolute and holistic. However, on this idea of authority, it is the state that must satisfy the mind of the citizen and not the citizen who must submit to being bound up in some collective social fasciae. The state may satisfy the minds of its citizens and thereby be truly authoritative only when it accords with their self-understanding as autonomous agents. Oakeshott is very clear that he is speaking about neither a religious establishment nor the government’s power. His concern is more broadly with the nature of all authority—religious, moral, political—and with what Augustine would call a people’s “agreement as to the objects of their love” (*City of God*, XIX, 24). Nonetheless, the claim about God and the abstraction of secular society allows us to ask (1) if Oakeshott radically changed his views between 1929 and 1975 (the date of *On Human Conduct*), and (2) how religion and politics fit in Oakeshott’s view of the modern state.

I do not argue the first point in detail here but merely assert that I do not take his position to be radically changed; it is qualified but still recognizable. In support of this I identify consistencies by drawing from texts, published and unpublished, written across several decades. This leaves room for the more interesting and substantive second point.

The self-sanctioning character of authority is an idea that stands behind Oakeshott’s criticism of Oman and of any idea of grace operating mechanically. It resurfaces in Oakeshott’s later view of political authority as

assented to and not legitimized by some principle of right or by the desirability of the law. The system of law, Oakeshott says in *On Human Conduct*, is self-validating. This idea of political authority preserves the link between belief and conduct. It may seem that if political authority does *not* require belief in the desirability of law, the authority of law is purely external. However, Oakeshott's criticisms of enterprise association for holding a theory of state power that at once is coercive and breaks the link between belief and conduct comes down to the same point he made decades earlier.

In enterprise association, citizens are like students who have not yet grasped the point, which is why such regimes give intense attention to education—or reeducation. The same reasoning supports Oakeshott's criticism of Plato and Aristotle for drifting toward this idiom of government when they argue that politics is largely an educational endeavor.³ Another way of putting it is when Oakeshott says in 1975, in "Talking Politics," that because civil association does not require conformity of belief in the ends of the state it is "the only morally tolerable form of compulsory association" (1991, 460). It is the only case in which compulsive state power can be joined logically with individual volition, because there is no claim by the state on the minds of its citizens. They are not under tutelary control.

This view of authority and its centrality to Oakeshott's views of the state in both early and later works shows why he spends significant energy in both "Current Ideas about Government" ([c. 1959] 2004) and *On Human Conduct* analyzing the assumption by secular "reformed" states of the Pope's sacerdotal authority, calling this a major contribution to the idiom of enterprise association in modern European politics. Aside from war, the circumstance that most contributed to the idea of the state as a *universitas*, Oakeshott says, was the repudiation by secular rulers of the Pope's *plenitudo potestatis*, his claim "to be the custodian of law . . . the guardian of faith and the enunciator of Christian doctrine . . . [as well as] the director of the education of Christendom. Of these the last was incomparably the most important: it was the authority under which a Christian culture was to be imparted to each successive generation" (1975, 220).

This change, Oakeshott says, is not properly understood merely as "an accession to the 'sovereignty' of a civil ruler, the extinction of a competing authority." Instead, "sacerdotal authority" fell to secular rulers, transforming both the powers they already enjoyed and the authority on the basis of which they enjoyed them. The acquisition of this new authority, "at least the shadow of a *plenitudo potestatis*," suggested that "the 'sovereign' was the manager of a *universitas* and responsible for the *animae*, no less than for the temporal peace, of his subjects." With responsibility for his subjects' *animae* came a corresponding control over education and "jurisdiction over causes such as heresy, blasphemy, moral delinquency, and intellectual deviance" (1975, 222).

Oakeshott notes that this transformation involved attempts to impose “cultural and religious homogeneity.” He lists “the destruction or expulsion of communities with eccentric cultures, the extrusion of populations defined as ‘alien’ (like the Jews and the Moriscos from the Iberian peninsula), the extirpation of ancient paganisms, of novel antinomian cults, witchcrafts and sorceries, the erection of censorships, the control of entertainments, the suppression of languages and divergences of all kinds.” These are the crude and violent aspects of the quest for homogeneity. “The positive side of the undertaking,” he says, was “a mobilization of teachers and preachers to speak with one official voice” (1975, 220). This involved the use of the *auctoritas docendi*, authority to teach, appropriated from the Papacy by governments concerned with “the religious and cultural integration of their subjects.” “In a confusion of complicated changes,”⁴ princes formerly concerned with orderly conduct acquired responsibility for teaching righteousness and, ultimately, virtue. This change, Oakeshott says, “was most marked in those states in which a ‘reformed’ Christianity came to be established by civil law . . . the ‘godly prince’ . . . was not only a civil ruler who carried out a ‘godly reformation’ in his dominions, but also a prince who ‘commanded for truth’ among his subjects” (2004, 294). Eventually, the religious idiom of “righteousness” was replaced by the secular idiom of “virtue” as the aim of a common political endeavor (2004, 294).

In 1959 Oakeshott uses Calvin’s Geneva as an example of a political association organized for the collective pursuit of righteousness. He returns to the example of Geneva again in 1975 in discussing the roots of enterprise association and its style of governance:

Governing included the continuous exercise of supervision, courts of morals, sumptuary regulations, inquisitions, informers, secret agents at home and abroad, censorship of art, literature, and entertainment, curfews, overseers of schools and universities, tests, accusations, warnings, threats, excommunications, penances, suppressions, and expulsions . . . [and] . . . appropriately, recognized no distinction between public and private. (1975, 284)

It hardly needs to be mentioned that Calvin’s Geneva is the polar opposite of civil association where “politics,” the activity of deliberating changes to the system of laws, excludes the promotion of “orthodoxy of belief” (1975, 172). The state as a civil association, by virtue of its not including orthodoxy of belief, can be recognized as authoritative by a collection of individuals of diverse moral and religious temperament. Adventures in godly reformation include attempts to impose cultural and religious homogeneity on diversified populations. Thus politics in civil association, which Oakeshott famously called a “second rate activity,” has an important place on the map of human experience, not despite but because of its limitation to the narrow range of concerns with orderly conduct and temporal peace. As Oakeshott says of civil association, “authority is the only conceivable attribute it could be indisputably acknowledged to have” (1975, 154).

To clarify and resolve some possible objections, I should note that the authority of belief, as I have analogized it to the “Aha!” moment, seems affirmative—the grasping or acknowledging of something—while the authority of civil association seems to involve no such affirmation but to be rather a lack of affirmation, a not believing in any orthodoxy or joining in any shared purpose enforced by the state. But civil authority is affirmative in at least two senses that counterbalance this apparent negativity. First, it is the affirmation of oneself, the assertion of a mature (in Kant’s sense) individual capable of living without the need for the detailed superintendence of political rulers. Second, it is an affirmation of intellectual humility, of being wearied in the pursuit of truth. Just as Socrates crafted a way of life and a sort of wisdom from not knowing, the *civis*, the citizen of civil association, lacking *superbia*, or pride, is humbly unwilling to assert private dreams on his or her fellows. I do not elaborate the Christian (and Epicurean) resonances here, but support of this view is found abundantly in recent writings by Elizabeth Corey (2006), Debra Candreva (2005a, b), Glenn Worthington (2005), and others who stress Oakeshott’s anti-perfectionism, anti-Pelagianism, and anti-Gnostic tendencies. Oakeshott would have agreed with Nicolas Berdiaeff, in his epigraph to *Brave New World* ([1932] 1989), that the world needs a vision of society that is “*moins ‘parfaite’ et plus libre* [less ‘perfect’ and more free].”

The account of authority in religion and politics I have offered may seem to connect religious and political sensibilities too closely. Oakeshott, especially in such early works as “Religion and the World” ([1929b] 1993), seems to favor an extremely individualistic sort of religiosity, a Bohemian cultivation of personal insight, sensibility, and embrace of “the New,” while we await Godot, or Montaigne, or whoever will come to confound the Gnostics. It seems a fitting style of religion for a solitary wanderer but not for a civil or political animal. However, recall that whatever form the religious life takes, whether that of a mystic, a hermit, or an orthodox adherent, it is not possible without personal insight and acceptance. Even submission to God’s will does not, for Oakeshott, vacate the moral personality or will. In fact, the free-spirited kind of religiosity Oakeshott describes is precisely what is called for in civil association, where a more tutelary, top-down style of religion would seem more fitting for those moral types found in enterprise association.

As for the relation of religion and the state, it would be easy to think that Oakeshott simply dropped his early outlandish ideas about the abstractness of secular society. However, he does not write like a committed secularist at any stage of his life. He plans his “apology” in the mid-1920s; in the 1930s he identifies Catholicism as the leading political doctrine of Europe; in the 1950s and 1970s he dwells on the way papal powers are absorbed by secular rulers. He condemns the Rationalistic turn of medieval Christianity in “Tower of Babel” in 1946 (1991, 481–87) and re-

writes the Tower of Babel tale in 1983. In 1956 in “On Being a Conservative” he returns briefly to the subject of established religion, saying that a liberty-loving people “might even be prepared to suffer a legally established ecclesiastical order; but it would not be because they believed it to represent some unassailable religious truth, but merely because it restrained the indecent competition of sects and (as Hume said) moderated ‘the plague of a too diligent clergy’” (1991, 435). Most interestingly, he includes the profound and arresting passages on religion in his account of human conduct in 1975, and later in the same book he remarks on both the “theological analogue” of civil freedom and the Augustinian God of the individualist, whose character is suited for the loose community of adventurers that is civil association. I hope that what I have laid out in this essay helps to put these seemingly strange remarks in better perspective as serious points with close relevance to what Oakeshott is saying about political life and not simply throwaway lines, however witty and brilliant.

Oakeshott comments that the “theological analogue” of civil freedom is the freedom enjoyed when God is understood to be a “law-giver” and the believer is not only necessarily left to subscribe to his obligations as best he may but can do so only in self-chosen actions, in contrast to a divine Will to which he must submit himself and his conduct or join the party of the devil, or to a divine Purpose to which his conduct willy-nilly contributes. (1975, 158)

And later:

Since men are apt to make gods whose characters reflect what they believe to be their own, the deity corresponding to this self-understanding is an Augustinian god of majestic imagination, who, when he might have devised an untroublesome universe, had the nerve to create one composed of self-employed adventurers of unpredictable fancy, to announce to them some rules of conduct, and thus to acquire convives capable of “answering back” in civil tones with whom to pass eternity in conversation. (1975, 324)

How far this is from the self-understanding of today’s anti-science ideologues! They have made god in their own pallid image: whimpering, tedious, confined to labor-union work hours, fetidly literal-minded and without imagination—an unmajestic, pedantic, conniving, frightened god (afraid his creatures may one day storm his kingdom successfully), setting down not general rules of conduct—love and do what you will—but detailed and minute prescriptive orders for his well-managed *team*.

It is not hard to understand that in today’s debates many will find Oakeshott wanting because he provides no personal confessions, confession being the required genre of religious discourse today, and because he never speaks of the need to inject religion into public life. On the contrary, he excludes orthodoxy of belief from political debate and theorizes a state open to all who merely assent to its authority. I have tried to show that this is not necessarily the same thing as a secular theory of the state and that,

even in his later work, something of the early religious view remains. Whatever the status of Oakeshott's own religious practice, he seems to have thought that God could not be made to go away simply on account of intellectual fashions. We also must remember to think of religion as a way of life (a *traditio*, as Oakeshott says) and as an agreement among a people as to its objects of love, as what is professed in the conduct of life, and not as confessed at the pulpit or over the airwaves.

REVOLUTION IS *NOT* A DINNER PARTY?

I have perhaps moved too quickly over too much ground in order to show Oakeshott's reasons for stressing irrelevance as a crippling error and provide a sense of how his thinking of seventy-five years ago bears upon problems actively and heatedly debated today. Gould's nonoverlapping *magisteria* combined with his appeal to decent conversation and mutual respect would be regarded by Oakeshott as on the right track but as philosophically naive. Gould relies, as do many, on a simple view of science as the domain of facts and religion as the domain of values or meanings. But if this were so, we would find ourselves stuck with no clear way to use science's facts. We would not know, unless it were disclosed as itself another scientific fact, the end toward which we should put our efforts in the use of amoral facts. Should we grow human ears on the backs of mice? By the same token, what is religion if it is just a collection of shoulds divorced from any conception of what is? Gould's separation may leave him vulnerable to the charge that he has equated religion with morality, but even if he has not, it still leaves religion floating free from the demands of actual concrete existence. It seems at least possible that a set of shoulds could exist that is identical with the current state of things, and just as possible that a set could exist that specifies conditions impossible for human beings to attain. Would the first set be better or worse than the second?

Oakeshott's modes, as expressions of the whole, provide a much more ambitious and satisfying way of addressing the problem, although the modal path is not without its difficulties. Among the greatest is the psychological or existential problem of living in a world of competing and nonoverlapping truths. This existential problem is front and center in Collins's work—as, for example, when he appeals to the operation of different worldviews in our “daily lives” or as “coexisting in one person.” He accuses Gould of allowing “internal conflict” (Collins 2006, 3–6). But why there should be conflict is not clear, especially if we are able to recognize the boundaries of our different pursuits and keep them properly compartmentalized, just as the fisherman who is also an accountant suffers no breakdown from stopping one activity and starting another.

Indeed, what Collins proposes in his scheme of theistic evolution, a way of bridging and uniting the diverse worlds of science and religion, seems destined to produce just the sort of internal conflict he wants to avoid. For

example, he tries to address the problem of how a scientist can deal with miracles. He suggests, quite soundly, that miracles ought to be regarded with a high degree of skepticism and a natural explanation preferred whenever it is available. He then uses Bayesian probabilities to suggest how a miracle might be identified: by virtue of its low statistical probability. However, this is to be determined by the individual calculator of probabilities. In other words, Collins leaves the statistical threshold for judging “This may be a miracle” in the hands of each subjective observer. But this is precisely how not to identify a miracle (Collins 2006, 47–54). An improbable event is just that—improbable. It is not on account of its improbability a divine intervention.

Collins would like to bridge the gap between science and religion but fails to do so. In his greatest effort to link these two modes, he explores the concept of a theistic god behind evolution, “BioLogos.” But this adds nothing to his analysis of the human genome. For example, when he affirms six major premises of theistic evolution, it is difficult to see how they help his science. They would (I assume they must) fall short of what he really believes as a Christian.

1. *The universe came into being out of nothingness approximately 14 million years ago.* [Check: good science.]

2. *Despite massive improbabilities, the properties of the universe appear to have been precisely tuned for life.* [Collins himself disposes of strong variants of the improbability and gap theories but falls back on this view here, and God has been reduced to a passive past participial formation, a merely apparent “tuner”—not quite the real presence of a God who suffers on the Cross. Imagine poor St. Theresa, if this had been her lover!]

3. *While the precise mechanism of the origin of life remains unknown, once life arose, the process of evolution and natural selection permitted the development of biological diversity and complexity over very long periods of time.* [Check: good science, although Collins waffles here about how life “arose”—another passive construction.]

4. *Once evolution got under way, no supernatural intervention was required.* [Check: good science, except for postulating a supernatural beginning.]

5. *Humans are part of this process, sharing a common ancestor with the great apes.* [Check: good science.]

6. *But humans are also unique in ways that defy evolutionary explanation and point to our spiritual nature. This includes the existence of the Moral Law (the knowledge of right and wrong) and the search for God that characterizes all human cultures throughout history.* [Science has no room for postulating this sort of human uniqueness, and if it did Premise 5 would be impossible. If we are unique, it needs to be expressed in terms of evolution or some other science—that is, as a quantifiable difference from other organisms, such as the already known and mapped differences in our genetic codes.]

These six key premises of *BioLogos*, developed in chapter 10 of *The Language of God* (2006, 200), may provide Collins personally with solace or comfort (although it is hard to see how), but *BioLogos* does not introduce a scientifically useful concept. To resolve a discrepancy in his scientific

findings he would never, as a scientist, turn to God—precisely because, as Oakeshott said of God in history, God explains everything and nothing. He is the ultimate nonfalsifiable hypothesis. And, as for BioLogos as a religious view, it is strange to see an admirer of C. S. Lewis falling back on such a thin, rationalistic idea of god, even though this is probably about as much as can be affirmed by reason alone.

Psychologically, it may be difficult at times to fathom a world of mutually contradictory truths, but we do not have to do this in the manner in which it may at first appear. The modes are not making propositional claims that the other modes evaluate. The Sunday sermon is not articulating a theory that a scientist must verify or refute. The scientist's theory is not making a sermonic recommendation or a theological argument. Inference between modes is an error. Yet every day we hold mutually conflicting "truths." We distinguish a baseball player's talent from his character; we use statistics to define a problem that is to be dealt with nonstatistically; we cosponsor legislation with a party adversary. The way Oakeshott can help us is to make us aware of the need to be careful and discriminating and also of the need to be civil—accommodating, respectful, and moderate rather than argumentative.

Although Oakeshott never wrote on evolution, his theory of modality can speak to our current debates. First, he can help us see how confused the debate is. More important, he can help debunk the most common, well-intended but confused efforts to promote a reconciliation that would serve neither science nor religion, the solution that assigns different territories and begs for a truce. In Oakeshott's theory, the concerns of science are categorically distinct from those of practical life and religion—a view he developed in detail over sixty years before the world heard of Gould's nonoverlapping *magisteria*.

Also, Oakeshott's view of enterprise association and the efforts of rulers to take over an *auctoritas docendi* (or teaching authority) may be as much a tendency of the Right as of the Left, of evangelicals as of socialists. Civil association appears at least to allow room for speculation about the place of God and religion in the modern state without making this a matter of public support for explicitly religious policies and without making the "household of faith" look like a club for those afflicted with resentment toward the modern world and an incurable naivete in matters scientific.

Finally, Oakeshott's model of civilized conversation, which he deploys both as a metaphor for Western civilization and as a quasi-ethical ideal, may illustrate the balance that Gould, Collins, and other moderates hope for. Oakeshott has no recipe for how to avoid irrelevance, and only the most indirect advice on how to live amid the current welter of competing truths, but his theory of modality is a useful diagnostic and prophylactic tool, and his notion of a "conversation of mankind" is an inspiring vision of human interaction and a kind of criteria for true education. This is

apposite because the evolution debate is most heated when it most directly concerns what we are to teach our children or suffer the children to be taught. As in Gould's appeal for a civilized and respectful discourse between *magisteria*, Oakeshott characterizes the liberally educated and civilized person as one who is capable of a restrained and respectful discourse among "voices" in the great and unending "conversation of mankind." Undoubtedly the most beautiful and evocative passages Oakeshott has written on conversation are those in the opening sections of "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," where he writes that the distinct voices of science, practice, history, and art may be supposed to "compose a manifold of some sort" and suggests conversation as the appropriate image for a "meeting-place" of modal voices. What this conversation involves is puzzling to anyone who tries to take the image literally or who expects the scientist, the artist, and the historian to learn from one another or contribute to one another's various engagements. They cannot do that. Oakeshott does not expect it.

There is a faint suggestion of voices somehow interacting when Oakeshott says that "in conversation, 'facts' appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; 'certainties' are shown to be combustible, not by being brought into contact with one another, but by being kindled in the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another." But they do not come into contact. Instead, "thoughts take wing and play around one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions." The idea of provoking to fresh exertion should bring to mind the very best of our educational encounters, and not solely those that take place in schools but anywhere there is learning and teaching. Conversation, Oakeshott says, is "an unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (1991, 489–91).

Many readers of these passages have thought that Oakeshott meant somehow to rescind his strong modal stance developed decades earlier. I think this is a mistake. The noncontact of voices seems to me to reinforce and restate the modal differences. The claims that conversation is not an argument, not an inquiry, not an effort to produce profitable results or to make a better world, not an enterprise, and so on all suggest he is striving to say something different, to provide an idea of that place where different worlds of discourse meet.

To put the matter in prosaic, quotidian terms: We can imagine a gathering, a dinner party perhaps (but one without a symposiarch), where those gathered come from different backgrounds and have different interests. We can imagine how things often go, where the lawyer tries to reduce all matters to explicitly legal questions, insisting "That's really a matter of property rights" when the discussion topic is that one's tastes in music can be expanded by all the artistic production now available on the Internet,

legal or not. The scientist or engineer pipes up that with a specially encoded algorithm (which of course *he* is developing) stealing music will be a thing of the past, and the local entrepreneur shows her stuff by making rapid-fire calculations of how much money there is to be made in peer-to-peer networking. The artist rolls his eyes and sulks.

Or it could be a gathering of civilized folk who have pursued their own modal interest with enough *seriousness* that they have learned how to *play*. At this dinner, each participant uses what he or she knows to seek hidden analogies, displays the modesty that true learning gives, and encourages others' modesty. Rather than offer examples, which must fall short of the flow of true conversation, let me say that trying to describe it seems to me like trying to recount a flirtation—a task for fools or novelistic geniuses (and while I have hopes of not being one, I fear I may not be the other). It is not just a matter of sharing information: "So, explain about the file sharing," says the lawyer to the engineer. The possibility of combustion through kindling appears because there are deep structural regularities across the different modes, not such that inference and argument is possible between them but such that mutual respect can be generated by acknowledging genuine achievement and knowing how to recognize it. For example, a deep familiarity with rock climbing—its traditions, internal arguments, and styles—may give one the ability imaginatively to enter into the alien world of ballet, by supposing that analogous subtraditions, fierce proponents of one style or another, and highly developed vocabularies might exist in it. Without deep experience in that "other" world the imagined analogies remain merely formal, but this sort of oblique insight may provide an opening for that conversational dance in which thoughts "take wing and play round one another," may provoke the climber and the ballerina to fresh exertions in the effort to clarify afresh what has long since settled into the merely given, without the need for defensiveness, in an effort to teach each other and in teaching to relearn, to reinscribe one's own predispositions and experience. In this sense, Oakeshott's comment that "education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation" (1991, 490) may be extended outside the boundaries of the academy and applied to any and all human encounters. Where there is a fellow intellectual adventurer there is opportunity to continue learning what to become.

Oakeshott's image of conversation is also a quasi-ethical ideal and not merely a formal description of how modes might interact. Conversation, he believes,

is the appropriate image of human intercourse. . . . As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. . . . It is the ability to participate in this conversation, which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian. (1991, 490)

When so much of our public debate, especially as it concerns the *superbia*-laden claims of evolutionists and antievolutionists, is far from this ideal it is not easy to see how to change things. Indeed, as noted above, the philosopher has no police powers, and telling people they *ought* to converse would be both otiose and impolite. One can, I think, only adopt the stance that Oakeshott suggests as a resistance to “the now common belief that there are other and better ways of becoming human than by learning to do so,” which is not by making some “grand gesture of defiance” but by “a quiet refusal to compromise which comes only in self-understanding” (1990, 42).

Because it will be of great interest to the reader to know just exactly where Oakeshott stands on this whole question, it seems appropriate to end with the one remark he made on human evolutionary roots (aside from some dull footnotes here and there)—a remark typically playful, ironic, mock-Lamarckian, and unliteral: “It seems not improbable that it was the engagement in this conversation (where talk is without a conclusion) that gave us our present appearance, man being descended from a race of apes who sat in talk so long and so late that they wore out their tails” (1991, 490). But, of course, they left no fossil traces of the in-between interlocutors of the half-tail. *Tant pis*.

NOTES

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1. Without weighing in on the theological question of grace as a gift of God, Oakeshott uses the term *grace* in describing a religious self-enactment (1975, 80–86 and *passim*). As a student and admirer of Augustine, presumably Oakeshott would not commit the solecism of treating grace as a merely human achievement.

2. I mean here just the process of confirming or disconfirming hypotheses. The imbecilities to which Werner Heisenberg has been exposed are another matter entirely.

3. See recent works by Corey Abel (2005), Eric Kos (2005), and Debra Candreva (2005a) as well as Oakeshott’s LSE Notebooks on Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (1923a, b, c, d; 1924a, b).

4. Oakeshott traces this “confusion” in a complex account of the emergence of national churches and nation states (1975, 220–31, 278–86). Here, I follow the brief version in “Current Ideas about Government,” written about 1959 (2004, 293–94, 299).

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