

Reading Task: Oakeshott on Education

Oakeshott, M (1972) 'Education: the Engagement and its Frustration' in Fuller, T (ed) (1989) *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press
(this can be downloaded from the Moodle page)
The particular focus is pp. 63-71

Reading Guide

Michael Oakeshott is a twentieth century political theorist, philosopher and historian who is widely recognised as a 'conservative' thinker. In this paper he develops a conception of education as a 'transaction between the generations' (elsewhere he calls it the 'conversation of mankind'), or a process of initiation into a 'world'. Education is a deliberate activity with a moral significance (it is something that we *ought* to do, and differs from the kind of growing up that children will do if left to their own devices).

Pay attention to how Oakeshott unpacks the notion of a 'world'; he intends something specific by his development of the term. Early on (p. 63) Oakeshott makes a distinction between the *aims* of education (what we hope to achieve through this initiation) and the *means* of achieving these ends (which he claims to say little about). This distinction between reflecting or deliberating on the ends of education as opposed to discerning the most effective means of bringing about a particular end is vital in philosophy of education, and will be picked up when we look at John White's aims based curriculum in Week 4.

Note Oakeshott's reference to 'contingent' (as opposed to 'necessary') situations; he means by this philosophical term the *particular* situations in which human beings find themselves – which may have been otherwise, and which in many cases differ widely. He claims that "there is no 'ultimate man' hidden in the womb of time or prefigured in the characters who now walk the world" (p. 64); you could read this as a rejection of the (e.g. religious) view that there is a particular preordained human nature of path down which human beings are destined to walk. Oakeshott's idea of a world is of a *social object or set of social objects*: 'a human being is the inhabitant of a world composed, not of 'things', but of meanings" (p. 65). If we do not understand these meanings, we are "not a human being, but a stranger to the human condition". Education thus opens up this world to the student: it makes possible all sorts of paths and possibilities, all sorts of conceptions of the value of human life and the ways in which human beings can flourish, that have been furnished by the prior history of human activity. These paths and possibilities are not contained within the child *by nature*, but have been established in history before the child's birth. It is the duty of the parent or teacher to introduce the child to the world that is their inheritance. (You might notice that 'inheritance' is something that we normally think of in terms of monetary wealth; not for nothing has the importance of education been linked to the idea of 'cultural capital' – as, for example, Gove does in the speech referenced below).

Oakeshott considers different ways that this inheritance passed on – through a mechanical process (which is not appropriate, since this is not a *physical* inheritance), through hypnosis or conditioning (which would certainly bring about certain states of mind, but not ones that had been *understood*) and settling finally on 'transaction': this is a process of 'learning to perform humanly'; the states of mind that constitute being human can only be enjoyed or achieved, *knowingly*, that is if you *understand* the activity you are involved in. For this reason Oakeshott rejects a conception of education as 'acquiring a stock of ready-made ideas, images, sentiments beliefs and so forth' (p. 66-67). Note (p. 67) that the achievement of this understanding is both a moment of 'self-disclosure' and 'self-enacting' (in other words,

the moment of coming to understand who you are as a human is also a moment of *becoming* human).

We will only successfully pass on this 'civilized inheritance' if we can demonstrate its desirability and inspire students to take pride in it and be grateful for it. This happens *after* the early years (where learning is equated with play, and largely happens by accident or according to circumstance, and depending on what children are interested in) and when 'schooling' begins: this is equated with the arrival of a teacher who has something particular, purposeful and valuable to impart, *whether or not the student happens to be interested in it yet*. Learning is therefore serious, orderly, limited in particular directions as opposed to limitless (it is not a 'seamless robe') and calls for effort and perseverance. Schooling is also characterised by 'detachment', being directed not by the interests or motivations that the child brings with them, but by 'intimations of excellence and aspirations he has never yet dreamed of' (p. 69) to which it is the teacher's task to introduce him (or her!); the idea is for the child to come to acquire new and valuable interests that are the hard-won achievements of human history rather than the first primitive passions of the child (note the familiar word 'barbaric' on p. 69). The purpose of school is to 'abate' or 'silence' the din of everyday likes and concerns.

Oakeshott emphasises the positions of teacher and learner. The teacher has some valuable understanding that the child does not and must impart this to the child through 'hinting, suggesting, urging, coaxing' etc. (p. 70). The process also has no 'extrinsic' end or purpose (i.e. qualification for a *particular* life or profession) outside the *intrinsic* end of becoming human.

Questions:

- (i) On p. 66 Oakeshott claims that 'nobody is born a human being'. What does this mean? Can you connect it to any of the discussions we have had so far? To what extent do you agree with this claim?
- (ii) Note Oakeshott's discussion of learning to 'read' on p. 68-69. How does it compare with Rousseau's account? How could you explain, resolve or evaluate these differences?
- (iii) Have a look at the 'further reading'. To what extent do you think Gove has been influenced by Oakeshott? How much of what he says accords or agrees with Oakeshott's account?
- (iv) "A teacher is one in whom some part or aspect or passage of this inheritance is alive". What does this mean? Do you agree? What would be the implications of this claim for teacher education or training?
- (v) Oakeshott argues that 'The marks of a good school are that in it learning may be recognized as, itself, a golden satisfaction which needs no adventitious gilding to recommend it' (p. 70). What does this mean, and what are the implications for how we judge or assess both schools and students?

Further Reading:

See '**Reading Task Two**' in the **Resource List** on the U71770 Moodle page (top right) for links to the works discussed below.

There is a video version (as well as a transcript) of Michael Gove's 'What is Education For?' speech, given at the RSA in 2009 prior to the formation of the coalition government. Gove makes significant reference to Oakeshott in this address.