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Michael Oakeshott: A modern conservative thinker

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Abstract

The underlying article briefly introduces the modern conservative British philosopher Michael Joseph Oakeshott who presented the world a new and different thought. It showcases his political philosophy as well as his works and contribution. It presents his views on important terms like government, democracy, freedom.

Keywords: Experience, rationalism, traditionalism, retirementism

1. Introduction

Modern conservative British thinker Michael Oakeshott was born on December 11, 1901 in Chelsfield, London. He got his education from St. Georges School Harpenden and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He served in British army during second world war (1940-1945). He was appointed as Professor of Political Science at London School of Economics in 1951. Earlier this position was held by Harold Laski. Michael Oakeshott is mainly known for the contribution towards revival of traditionalism in England. Oakeshott has opposed the rationalism of western culture. Oakeshott flouted on the fact that controlled and limited rational grounds can be used to understand important political relations.

Oakeshott gives more importance to historical medium which provides us assumptions, traditions and acquired knowledge which are more important than reason and intellect. Oakeshott believes that political knowledge can't be attained by merely reading books rather it can be attained from participating in political activities and previous experiences. Unlike history, science, and practice, politics is not a *sui generis* world of experience¹. Oakeshott focusses on experience in his analysis. He was died in 1992.

2. Works

Political philosophy of Oakeshott can be referred in his works. His major works include:

- Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays, 1962
- Experience and its Modes, 1933
- Introduction to Thomas Hobbes Leviathan, 1959
- Political Education, 1951

Oakeshott's early political philosophy include works like The Authority of the State, 1929 along with The Concept of Philosophical Jurisprudence, 1938. The book Experience and its Modes is also written by Oakeshott in youth. The earlier works of Oakeshott are purely philosophical and interpretive. Experience and its Modes published in 1933 is a methodological base to study all his future works.

In late 1940s, Oakeshott turned towards political writings. He wrote 'Political Education' in 1950 upon accession of head position in Political Science at London School of Economics. His inaugural essay contained elements of critique of ideology of Laski, the previous head. The marvel of Oakeshott's philosophy came in front of world when his masterpiece 'Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays' published in 1962.

Oakeshott also worked in the editorial board of the Cambridge Journal from 1947 to 1954. Oakeshott's work can be seen as a defense of traditionalism and a kind protest against ideologies of modern politics.

Oakeshott used phrased and poetic style which is very ornamental and classic in essence but making it difficult for the scholars to apprehend.

Oakeshott considers traditions and experience more important than ration. In his philosophical analysis, Oakeshott has emphasized on the restoration of those dimensions which are rejected by the other political thinkers of twentieth century.

Oakeshott illustrates in his book "Experience and its Modes" that philosophy and science are fundamentally two different activities and there is no point in using the methods of one of them in the other, philosophy is something like the methods of scientific thinking cannot learn. Experience is a world of ideas and in it there is "always the coordination and completion of a given world of ideas." [2] Behaviouralists are of the view that political philosophy is a progressive science. They believe that it accumulates solid results and on the basis of them reaches such results which can become the basis of future researches. But Oakeshott completely disagrees with this opinion. According to him political philosophy is accepted only with closeness to history. History refers not only to the history of theories, but also to the history of the problems found by philosophers and the methods of solution propounded by them. "Historical experience is a specific, homogeneous world of experience, an organized whole." [3]

3. Political views of Michael Oakeshott

3.1 Design of Politics: In Oakeshott's view, political activity is based on civic association. In politics, the prevalent practices of the society are closely followed. According to him, what to do everyday in politics? How to do? How does it attempt to implement abstract principles. He considers the goal of political activity to be 'keeping the boat of the state afloat' which does not include increase in wealth and prosperity. Presenting the concept of civil association in his works *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* and *On Human Conduct*, he has coordinated respect for tradition, customs and prejudices in a conservative society with liberal values. He is of the opinion that 'civil association' is neither due to any contract nor is it a means to achieve mutual objectives.

Oakeshott explains the conversational model as appropriate to explain civic association, saying that just as in conversation the talk goes on and the talk reaches somewhere, in the same way the movement of the society keeps the society moving. Oakeshott believes that every 'human association' is made up of practices. Practices are related to ethics and behavioral skills. While practices based on behavioral efficiency serve common material purposes, ethical practices are not a means to any other end. Thus both the ways of building human associations are clearly different from each other. Thus two types of associations are found in the society-

- 1) **Enterprise Association:** This association is based on behavioral efficiency. They are made for the attainment of any concrete or material objectives of the individuals.
- 2) **Moral Association:** These associations are not means to any other end, rather they are ends in themselves. Moral companionship interdependence recognize the authority of the laws of being.

Politics recognizes the power of 'civil association' but it does not aim at the creation of an all-round developed society or the upliftment of mankind, because this goal is not based on enterprise or behavioral efficiency. Its goal is

also not distributive justice because the civil rulers are neither the owners of anything nor do they have anything to distribute. According to Oakeshott, formal distribution of rights and entitlements does not lead to immediate distribution of power, opportunities and wealth. In Oakeshott's view, in every modern European state, the tendencies of building both moral and entrepreneurial associations are found from the very beginning. The predominance of one type of association has been found in different states and at different times, although the other type of association was not completely absent.

3.2 Idealism: Oakeshott's views related to idealism are as follows-

- a) **Philosophical Empiricism:** Cote has given more importance to the tendency of human imitation. He is clearly a strong proponent of the idea that the conception of philosophy is to be considered as an experience without reservation or binding, which is not distracted or hindered by partial, secondary or abstract ideas. Oakeshott himself has agreed that his philosophical empiricism is ever-changing, ever-critical and obscure. His ideas related to philosophical empiricism were historical, scientific and functional. Its philosophy strives towards a perfection-oriented Absolute.
- b) **Ruling is Art:** In Oakeshott's view, ruling is an art, not an applied science. He is of the opinion that it is not possible to teach or acquire statecraft like technical subjects. He has his own lifestyle, his own environment and influences. Giving examples for the same, he says that one cannot become a good cook just by studying cookery books. Oakeshott believes that every situation and action has its own distinct characteristics, has its own internal logic and can only be known from experience.
- c) **Decision Making Process:** According to Oakeshott, the basis of policy-making is also the traditional beliefs, actions and practices. It is only in a well managed society that one does not feel alienated, jealous and disenfranchised. Oakeshott regards mindless functionalism as the discipline of alienated or uprooted individuals. He is of the view that under the rule of prudent politician, man leads an integrated, peaceful, stable, balanced and harmonious life.

3.3 Rationalism: Oakeshott's ideas related to the rationalism are as follows:

- a) **Special Type of Rationalism:** Oakeshott is a supporter of a special type of rationalism. He judiciously believes in traditional values and institutions like work. Its political conscience and cultural pride are traditional. Oakeshott neither opposes irrationalist ideology like-impositivism, empiricism etc. nor is he opposed to experiments and science.
- b) **Importance to Tradition:** Oakeshott is a supporter of tradition. Disregarding or violating tradition in thought is dangerous. Abbreviations of the Oakeshott Tradition also opposes According to his opinion, selection and sorting is done in summarization and such in doing, the original ideology gets distorted.
- c) **Political Rationalism:** Oakeshott integrates tradition and customs in politics by considering it to be based on civic association. According to him, politics does not

try to implement abstract principles or ideas. He considers 'political intellectualism' to be the biggest threat to the natural political order because political intellectualism creates a system of abstract thought. In Oakshott's view, the political intellectual is oblivious to the realities of history and not only refuses to accept historical obligations, but he also manipulates the people by raising slogans in favor of his ideal world.

- d) **Rationalism is the cause of many evils:** According to Oakshott, rationalism is free from the limitations of philosophy or thinking. Its attitude is immature and it does not even understand the natural love in a person for an established and orderly life. It wants to suppress or crush this natural tendency of the person. A rationalist commits many errors, faults and crimes in the name of rational freedom, due to which he becomes a ruthless tyrant. His actions are fatal for the society. The Rationalist would believe that human conduct can be rational when it "[springs] from an antecedent process of 'reasoning'" in which case man "must be supposed to have the power of first imagining and choosing a purpose to pursue, of defining that purpose clearly and selecting fit means to achieve it; and this power must be wholly independent, not only of tradition and of the uncontrolled relics of his fortuitous experience of the world, but also of the activity itself to which it is a preliminary."^[4]

According to Oakshott, this view is false because of its underlying assumption that the "mind [is] an apparatus for thinking" which for him is "the error at the root" of this notion of rational conduct^[5].

- a) **Support of historical politic:** Oakshott does not consider the use of intelligence or logic in politics appropriate. He believes that politics should be centered on 'tradition'. Oakshott suggests a way to go deep into history to know and understand the tradition. He says that a deep study of the history of our state or nation should help us in politics and answer questions such as "What is possible to be done?", "What is practical?" and "What should be done?" Study of existing systems and institutions provides guidelines.

Oakshott's view is that political intelligence lies in acting within the limits of the given possibilities and respecting the possible, and by this the dimensions of public morality are known. He is of the opinion that the real freedom of the individual and protection of the afterlife of the society is possible only with the knowledge of moral unanimity and institutions. He does not consider the abstract ideas of justice-injustice as the basis of acceptance of this moral unanimity, but understanding.

3.4 Freedom Related Thought: In the concept of freedom, Oakshott gives importance to protecting the freedom of a person from heavy concentration of power. He considers it necessary to establish a suitable governance system to protect this freedom. He has defined democracy as, "method of governing distinguished by its probable products, a utilitarian device, a piece of machinery designed not to express certain beliefs about authority but to fabricate rules and arrangements that promote certain interests"⁶. Keeping this objective in mind, Oakshott has clarified the difference between two systems of government

- i. Parliamentary Government and
- ii. Popular Government.

3.4.1 According to him

1. Parliamentary system of government protects the freedom of man while popular system of government destroys it.
2. In the parliamentary system of government, the legislature makes laws in the interest of the individual and establishes spheres of personal activity or freedom within which the individual can act without being influenced by any external interference, whereas in the popular system of government, the individuality of the individuals is destroyed, it converts them into masses.
3. In the parliamentary system of government, the government acts only as a judge or umpire, that is, like an umpire in a game, it implements the rules despite being competitive itself and intervenes only when there is a conflict in the interests of individuals. On the contrary, in the popular system of governance, the representative or leader of the people imposes his mandate on them by saying his choice to the electorate.
4. Individuals use their personal choice to choose their leader in a parliamentary form of government. On the contrary, people are not able to exercise their personal choice in the popular system of government. Because they, like a member of the masses, receive an influential signal that they begin to think of as their choice.
5. In the parliamentary system of government, the person who receives the mandate from the people (public) is their representative or leader, but in the popular system of government, the leader does not actually receive any mandate, but by saying his choice to the people, he makes them his puppet.

In the words of Oakshott, "masses are not formed by the combination of individuals, but by the combination of opposing units." Oakshott's views on the freedom of the individual prove him a liberal at heart.

3.5 Political retirementism Oakshott's arguments regarding political retirementism can be understood as follows

- i. The ideas of the idealistic trend Oakshott also do not accept the power of moral truth and conscience arising from past experience like irrationalist thinkers or pessimistic thinkers, as a result of which they become skeptical about the ultimate values or goals. They create new concepts, new utopias, etc. on the basis of practical utility and keep people away from prevailing traditions and inspires to break the status quo. Oakshott is of the opinion that the repeated use of power, propaganda, coercion works for the establishment of an authoritarian monarchy.
- ii. Behind Oakshott's political retirementism he is supporter of the reservation of liberty. His thoughts consider man to be an effigy of traditions and habits. According to Oakshott, if a person is sure of the integrity of his traditions, customs and manners in the future, then this is the true proof of his being well-governed. Oakshott is of the opinion that the freedom of man is derived from tradition and established by history. It lies in the right to get order.

According to him, politics can happen in any group, but it is mainly used in the context of states. He believes that the rules and institutions of the state are most suitable only when they are familiar to the individuals and no significant changes are made in them, but if there is any incoherence in the existing arrangements then reform is necessary.

To explain his point of view, Oakeshott gives the example of the franchise of women in Britain. He says that this act was not the result of allegiance to any natural or human right of equal suffrage by the British Parliament, but the main reason for this was that as a result of the changes during the First World War, by the year 1918, many British women had achieved equality with British men in the fields. Circumstances had become such that it was not only inconsistent but also difficult to keep them away from voting rights. Thus this act at that time was only an attempt to remove an inconsistency of the situation. Oakeshott's thought was initially an idealistic philosophy in which over time the concepts of political society and allegiance combined made it complex. He considers the work of a statesman to be the 'art of choosing the least evil'. He lays equal emphasis on 'politics of repair' along with maintenance of traditions.

Oakeshott's opposition to political rationalism is local. In Britain, where harmony is found in culture, morality and way of life, it is natural for a thinker to have such a mood. There is also the influence of British society against the rationalism of the occasion, absolutist ideas and times. Political activists in nations whose society is different from the British society may consider Oakeshott's skepticism redundant.

Oakeshott does not consider philosophy as a complete knowledge system, but only as a way of thinking, whose goal is only to understand and explain. Contemplation can be a futile thing for businessmen and it can be painful for those who aspire for happiness. He does not even consider philosophy as a means to improve life. In his view, philosophy is an attempt to understand and follow the essence of social life.

He is a conservative who is not bound by any traditional belief, and at the same time an idealist who is more sceptical than many positivists. He is a lover of liberty but critique of liberalism. It is an individualist who prefers Hegel to Locke. He is a philosopher who does not approve of rationalism.

4. References

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3. Ibid,111
4. Ibid,105
5. Ibid,109
6. Oakeshott M. Talking politics. National Review. 1975 Dec 5.