

Dr. Efraim Podoksik
Bilkent University, Political Science Department
Oakeshott: What Kind of Liberal?

Abstract

The interpretation of Oakeshott as a liberal is shared today by most commentators on his thought. Yet his reputation as a traditionalist conservative still persists among larger segments of the academic community. The paper argues that this impression is the result of a lack of proper contextualisation of Oakeshott's thought. Oakeshott can be seen as a conservative only if his ideas are put in the very narrow context of the transitional political and ideological struggles of his time and place. Yet it would be a mistake to juxtapose his writings only within their immediate intellectual environment for understanding of their meaning. Oakeshott was very familiar with European philosophy and history, he specialised in teaching the history of political thought and, therefore, a larger variety of political languages and idioms was available to him than to most of his fellow countrymen. These languages were reflected in his writings, and thus many of them, which are often perceived as offering a traditionalist worldview, should in fact be interpreted in the context of ideas prevalent in 19th century European human studies and especially in continental liberalism. Two specific traditions from which Oakeshott derives his ideas can be called 'Whig' and 'Romantic' liberalism. When seen in this perspective, Oakeshott's ideas appear to be clearly distinct from various conservative approaches.

I

The aim of my paper is to discuss in what sense Michael Oakeshott can be called a liberal thinker. The interpretation of Oakeshott as a liberal is shared today by most commentators on his thought. Yet his reputation as a traditionalist conservative still persists among larger segments of the academic community. One of the reasons why what seems quite obvious to Oakeshott scholars is not so obvious to others is that quite often those who maintain that Oakeshott was liberal usually fail to put the issue in a proper contextual framework.

The very issue of Oakeshott's liberalism begs for contextualisation. That is, in order to say whether Oakeshott was liberal, we need to know in what sense we use the word 'liberal'. And this meaning can only be derived from a wider intellectual context in which it is used. It is not enough to limit ourselves to the meaning in which the author himself used the words 'liberal' or 'conservative'. Whether or not Oakeshott called himself 'conservative', 'liberal', or 'socialist', we are interested not in his private language, but in how his ideas fitted into those significant traditions of thought.

The problem is, however, that labels such as 'liberal' or 'conservative' refer to different traditions of thought and do not possess a fixed meaning. Being liberal in China means something different from being liberal in the United States. Usually it would be right to assume implicitly that the appropriate context of one's political convictions should be the context of the time and place in which one lives. If an American evangelist

says that he supports 'tradition' we will be able to point relatively easy to the meaning of the word 'tradition' in this context. Yet the problem of contextualisation becomes more difficult when one speaks about such a refined thinker as Oakeshott. He was a person of immense erudition and of original mind. He absorbed various intellectual influences yet synthesised them to such an idiosyncratic level that contextualisation becomes a very difficult task indeed. An Oakeshott's scholar faces a dilemma. To make Oakeshott meaningful, it is important to show his relationship to the body of culture he was a part of. Yet such contextualisation will always be one-sided and may very easily corrupt the meaning of his work.

Furthermore, there is a particular difficulty with regard to the question of Oakeshott's political views, because he happened to be a scholar and teacher in the history of political thought. This means that a larger variety of different political languages and idioms was available to him than to most of his fellow countrymen, and that those languages are quite likely to be reflected in his writings. It would be then a mistake to juxtapose Oakeshott's writings only within their immediate intellectual environment for understanding of their meaning. Thus when Oakeshott speaks about 'tradition' in the late forties he may mean something quite different from what his fellow Englishmen might have understood by this word.

In the beginning of my paper therefore I would like to offer a few examples of how Oakeshott is mistakenly interpreted as a traditionalist and conservative and of how these mistakes partly follow from a lack of proper contextualisation. Afterwards, I will outline the main points of my own attempt in understanding Oakeshott as a liberal thinker.

II

Oakeshott's reputation as a conservative is based on a small number of essays written in the late forties and fifties. Only one of them, entitled 'Rationalism in Politics', has significant affinities with conservative thought. But I consider this essay to be untypical of Oakeshott. As for others, none can be regarded as genuinely traditionalist and conservative. Let me give you examples of two of them – 'Political Education' and 'On Being Conservative'.

'Political Education' is the inaugural lecture that Oakeshott delivered upon his appointment to the chair in Political Science at LSE. The lecture signified a striking departure from the style of his predecessor, Harold Laski, a committed socialist for whom political convictions were not separable from the process of education. Oakeshott introduced the spirit of scholarly detachment, a kind of Oxbridge academism into what had been before the bastion of progressive thinking. Yet it is not only this spirit of detachment which shocked the listeners. It is rather that the entire lecture was articulated in somewhat controversial terms. Political activity was described in what was perceived as a conservative statement *par excellence*: 'men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel ...'¹ True politics was called to be the pursuit of intimations of the tradition. This term, intimations of

¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993), p. 60.

tradition, invited fire from many directions and only strengthened the perception of Oakeshott as a conservative traditionalist.

But most of the criticisms were misplaced. No one seemed to notice a very plain fact that Oakeshott was not speaking about how to do politics. The common point of almost all critics was that traditions cannot be used as a guide in politics because all traditions are ambiguous, multiple and so on. Yet Oakeshott was giving advice not about how to act in politics, but only how to understand it. He always sharply distinguished between explanation and action, and in this particular lecture he was speaking about explaining politics, not doing politics. Even an ideological politics was in fact an intimation of a certain tradition, an intimation which simply was not aware of its own character. And Oakeshott was not trying to suggest what course a political actor should pursue but to recommend the way of understanding the actor's actions after he has done them.

Oakeshott's choice of words was indeed provocative but the ideas behind them were not. They were not new and could not be regarded as a specifically conservative way of thinking. First of all, the ideological understanding of politics was not the only target of Oakeshott's criticism. He distinguished between two extremes in the understanding of political activity. One was the view of politics as a purely empirical activity, by which he meant politics without policy, politics understood only as a power game. According to Oakeshott, such politics was impossible. This view of politics ignored the fact that human activity was not the function of a series of desires, but necessarily involved what might be called a system of beliefs. A certain trend in British conservatism indeed presents itself as opposed to intellectualism. One can think for example about Sir Lewis Namier and his rejection of intellectual history. Yet Oakeshott stood far away from this anti-intellectualism and he was very critical of Namier's work. It is then quite possible that in this lecture Oakeshott criticised a sort of Namierite approach which focused exclusively on interests and patronage and ignored the role of ideas and beliefs in human activity

The other extreme was of course that of politics as an ideological activity, springing from the attempt to implement some general principles. Politics as an ideological project was an illusion because the emphasis on some abstract principles prevented us from grasping political changes in terms of the character of a society as a whole. Thus the Russian and French Revolutions should not be understood in terms of their alleged ideological purposes but as modifications of the entire circumstances of Russian and French societies.² Now, this insistence on continuity in social change is not something peculiar to an alleged British conservatism. Oakeshott quotes Maitland in this respect, but the most probable source of his remark on the French revolution is Alexis de Tocqueville, a liberal 19th century French thinker, whose work Oakeshott praised as an example of a proper historical writing.³

Yet Tocqueville was only a representative of a wider trend of thought. His ideas in respect of the French revolution were characteristic of the approach taken by French liberals and English Whigs, the approach analysed in the works of Larry Siedentop and John Burrow. It was characterised by the change of emphasis from politics to society in

² *Ibid.*, p. 59n.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

general.⁴ These liberals conceived the French revolution as an attempt to impose politics on society, and partly as a reaction to this, they tried to give primacy to society in understanding the historical process, thereby laying down the foundations of classical sociology. Politics was perceived as an important, but limited activity, the main purpose of which was to adjust political institutions to changes in the overall social structure. Social development was conceived through the idea of progress, yet this progress was seen as a gradual continuous development, abrupt changes being regarded as merely superficial events often concealing the true significance of the social process. The politics recommended was usually that of an optimistic, moderate reformism as an alternative to the extremes of the reactionary attempt to abolish the achievements of the Revolution and of the ideological zeal calling for a leap forward. Both extremes were understood to be the expressions of an ignorance of social reality. Similarly to those liberals, Oakeshott rejected the ideas of seeing politics either in terms of a power game, or as an ideological project. Although he departed from them by rejecting any notion of a progressive direction in social development, yet, like them, he seemed to suggest that politics should be perceived as a function of the mores of a society, of the habits and the character of its citizens, and of their own understanding of themselves. These mores are the context which puts limits on political activity, though without determining its particular directions. And this is the kind of inquiry which was undertaken by thinkers such as Montesquieu and Tocqueville. Oakeshott's lecture 'Political Education' thus can be seen as the twentieth century restatement of those ideas of nineteenth century Whigs and liberals.

III

Another example of misunderstanding Oakeshott's position is the essay 'On Being Conservative'. To begin with the title, I know of a number of respectable universities in which decent teachers offer this work to their students as a major statement of conservative 'ideology'. Thankfully no one teaches today William Paley's *Views of the Evidences of Christianity* as a major statement of the Christian faith. I find it quite amusing that a certain text is regarded as a classic of conservatism just on account of the word 'conservative' in its title.

True, the aim of the essay is presented as outlining the general disposition of conservative conduct. The allusion will not escape an attentive reader – this is precisely how Karl Mannheim begins his own work on conservatism, which is, according to Mannheim, not an accomplished doctrine but a disposition of thought.⁵ Yet Oakeshott's account of conservatism is peculiar. The conservative disposition in his description is not backward-looking at all. According to him, it is centred upon 'a propensity to use and enjoy what is available'.⁶ It is attached to the present by virtue of its familiarity. It is

⁴ See Larry Siedentop, 'Two Liberal Traditions', in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 153-174; J.W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

⁵ Karl Mannheim, 'Conservative Thought', in *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 74.

⁶ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 408.

conservative because it enjoys what the present offers rather than what the future promises.

As for conservatism in politics, Oakeshott emphatically denies that it is necessarily connected with doctrines such as natural law, the organic theory of society, the pessimistic account of human nature, royalism or Anglicanism. In other words, he hardly leaves room for any serious world view historically associated with conservatism.⁷ What is it then to be conservative in politics? According to Oakeshott, it is 'the observation of our current manner of living combined with the belief ... that governing is a specific and limited activity, namely the provision and custody of general rules of conduct, which are understood ... as instruments enabling people to pursue the activities of their own choice with the minimum frustration ...'⁸

In other words, what we are offered here is the doctrine of minimal government whose function is the maintenance of order rather than the pursuit of a certain moral ideal. If anything, this view is typical of classical liberalism. Whence the word 'conservative' then?

For Oakeshott, 'conservative' activity is one engaged for its own sake. There are some activities which are inherently conservative, and they are those in which the enjoyment of the activity itself is sought, and not the outcome. These are friendship, conversation and patriotism. Others, such as fishing, can become conservative when pursued for their own sake. But even activities which are not engaged in for their own sake entail a conservative element. In most activities there is a distinction 'between the project undertaken and the means employed, between the enterprise and the tools used for its achievement.'⁹ The disposition towards tools is likely to be more conservative than the disposition towards projects, because, in order to use tools well, one needs to become familiar with them and this familiarity can be achieved only if the tools remain relatively unchanged. Sometimes there is a need to improve tools or to adapt them to new circumstances, yet tools will become useless if they are subject to continuous innovation.

General rules of conduct and, more specifically, civil rules can be regarded as such tools. Therefore, it is important that these rules are not being constantly changed. This attitude to rules is the essence of the conservative disposition in politics. But it is not necessarily connected to conservative conduct in other realms. Being conservative in politics can go together with being radical about everything else. Moreover, the conservative disposition in politics is even more appropriate for a society of passionate people. It starts with the acceptance 'of the current condition of human circumstances' which is 'the propensity to make our own choices and to find happiness in doing so.'¹⁰ The government must regard citizens as adults who 'do not consider themselves under any obligation to justify their preference for making their own choices.'¹¹ And the task of the government is merely to rule, that is, to enforce general rules of procedure upon all subjects, in order to prevent some collisions arising from the pursuit of the variety of beliefs and activities. The tools employed in this task are general laws, which are not

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

concerned with moral right or wrong but only with activities ‘in respect of their propensity to collide with one another.’¹²

And this is a liberal doctrine. By limiting the sphere of law only to actions which are likely to lead to a ‘collision’, Oakeshott simply repeats the thesis of Mill’s *On Liberty*. He accentuates the values of privacy and individual choice and advocates the style of government which is most favourable to the conduct of affairs by independent individuals.

IV

These examples do not exhaust the topic of Oakeshott’s liberalism. Many commentators have discussed it extensively and I would like to refer you also to my book on Oakeshott.¹³ I just wanted to give you a glimpse at still persisting stereotypes and show how misplaced the characterisation of him as a traditionalist conservative is, even with regard to those writings which earned him this reputation. And the main reason for this mistake is, in my view, a clash of two different contexts of ideas. The audience which listened to Oakeshott’s lecture or read his essay perceived them mostly in the context of contemporary British political ideas. Oakeshott, however, spoke to it in the language of a continental European intellectual of the nineteenth century.

To finish this presentation, let me show what I regard to be a more appropriate context of Oakeshott’s ideas concerning his alleged liberalism. In my view, Oakeshott’s thought combines in itself two varieties of continental European liberalism. These trends can be called ‘Whig’ and ‘Romantic’ liberalism. This distinction is partly recognised by Oakeshott himself in his treatment of individualism. In his essay on John Locke he distinguished between two kinds of individualism. The first traces its legacy to Locke who ‘served as the filter by means of which Puritanism was drained of its immoderation and its “enthusiasm” and was converted into what the 18th century knew as Whiggism and the 19th as Liberalism’. Locke believed in truth, progress, freedom, compromise, stability, and his main disposition was his moderation. The other is a radical, Epicurean individualism, which might rescue liberalism from its respectability, and ‘at one time it seemed that liberalism, under the stimulus of the romantic movement, might be transformed into something less boring and upholstered.’¹⁴ Yet, although in this essay Oakeshott was very critical of the both forms of individualism, both trends can be found in his thought.

Let me start with ‘Whig’ liberalism. Oakeshott attributed Whig liberalism to Locke, and his thought did contribute to the emergence of modern European liberalism. But the important point to notice is that Whig liberalism is predominantly a continental European phenomenon. Liberalism in its original historical sense is the political ideology that developed in the course of the nineteenth century in major European countries and its explicit major principle was the idea of freedom. ‘Putting liberty first,’¹⁵ constituted the

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 430.

¹³ Efraim Podoksik, *In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2003).

¹⁴ Michael Oakeshott, ‘John Locke’, *Cambridge Review* 54, 1932, p. 73.

¹⁵ George Armstrong Kelly, *The Humane Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 1.

political identity of European liberals. But liberty was understood by these thinkers not so much as an abstract ideal, but as the actual practice of two societies which were perceived as 'free': Britain and the United States. The explicit purpose of European liberalism was to implant new political institutions which would be similar to English or American ones. In other words, European liberalism advocated reform towards what was perceived as the successful Whig political settlement.

English Whiggism of the eighteenth century was not liberalism itself, for it lacked the self-awareness of having liberty as its major political principle. English political observers of the eighteenth century would not usually emphasise liberty as the sole and most important feature of the Whig political establishment.¹⁶ Liberalism emerged when what came to be perceived as Anglo-Saxon political practice was elaborated into a set of ideas about freedom.

This liberalism appeared only in the aftermath of the French revolution, although its intellectual foundations can be found in the thought of eighteenth century Anglophiles such as Montesquieu. It was a response to the lesson of the French revolution that political radicalism was not always a friend of the party of liberty. For a European liberal, Britain, and in some senses America, were the exemplars of how liberty could be achieved without the horrors of revolution, and how a system of laws and a political tradition could contribute to the stability of a free society. The main concern of this liberalism was how to turn freedom into a living tradition. Therefore, a genuinely liberal party simply could not appear in Britain and America, for Whig liberalism saw Britain and America as liberal *societies*, which liberal *parties* in Europe took as their model.¹⁷

This is why continental European liberalism was so intimately connected with the question of Anglo-Saxon political development. The programme of European liberalism often referred to existing British (or American) political institutions. Its central preoccupation was with constitutionalism, balance of powers, rule of law, and basic civil and political liberties. Liberalism was suspicious of Jacobinism, and was moderately conservative with regard to religion and morals. European liberals differed amongst themselves as to the degree of respect they showed towards religion, but they rarely went to the extremes of evangelical zeal, or of radical anti-clericalism.¹⁸ They also tended to emphasise the importance of a strong morality as the ground of political freedom.

Whig liberalism tended to recede where its programme had been implemented and society had become more liberal. This may explain the disappearance of liberal parties in twentieth century Western Europe.¹⁹ As a political philosophy, however, Whig liberalism was not confined to the nineteenth century. Its advocates are likely to gain prominence whenever a liberal society is challenged from within or from without, and in such circumstances this liberalism acquires the character of the defence of the general political settlement of the liberal society. Cold War liberalism is one such example.

¹⁶ Reed Browning, *Political and Constitutional Ideas of the Court Whigs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), pp. 201-206.

¹⁷ For America understood as a liberal society, see Hartz's notion of 'Grand Liberalism' and Shils' analysis of different strains within this liberalism. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).

¹⁸ See Kelly, *The Humane Comedy*, pp. 93-114.

¹⁹ Gordon Smith, 'Between Left and Right: The Ambivalence of European Liberalism,' in E.J. Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 18.

Oakeshott's liberalism should be understood as a part of this tradition. His favourite political thinkers, such as Montesquieu, Hegel, and Tocqueville, are directly associated with the variations of Whig liberalism. And what brings Oakeshott closer to Whig liberals is the importance that he attaches to British political experience, seen under the category of freedom. His thought cannot be reduced to British party politics, for what is important to him is the political consensus in his society. And if in the twentieth century this consensus is threatened, he attributes the responsibility for that to the collectivist policies of all parties.²⁰

This position is most explicitly stated in the essay 'The Political Economy of Freedom', written as a review of H.C. Simons' work *Economic Policy for a Free Society*. Mentioning that Simons is an American, Oakeshott describes him as 'a libertarian, not because he begins with an abstract definition of liberty, but because he has actually enjoyed a way of living (and seen others enjoy it) which those who have enjoyed it are accustomed ... to call a free way of living, and because he has found it to be good.'²¹

This so-called 'libertarian' view is outlined here in terms akin to those of moderate liberal constitutionalism. Freedom, for Oakeshott, is a peculiarly British experience, which is merely an abstraction for 'a Russian or a Turk'.²² British freedom finds its expression not in any specific feature of its constitution, like private property, freedom of speech or parliamentary government but in the principle underlying all those liberties – 'the absence from our society of overwhelming concentrations of power.'²³ The method of government in such a society is the rule of law which removes from the citizens 'the fear of the power of our own government.'²⁴ It protects many species of freedom, among which the freedom of association and the freedom of private ownership are seen as especially important.

This view contains all the major assumptions of Whig liberalism. It is a reflection on the peculiar character of British and American societies through the concept of freedom. Its discussion of economic policy is derivative of the implications that this policy is likely to have on the general experience of freedom in society. Its main concern is with the typically Whig problem of preventing the concentration of social power. Oakeshott himself names Tocqueville, Burckhardt and Acton as writers belonging to this tradition. His views are also similar to those of Cold War liberals, such as Hayek, Popper and Berlin who combine their adherence to freedom with the Anglo-Saxon socio-political model and thus follow the tradition of Whig liberalism.²⁵

The peculiarity of Oakeshott's position is that usually the most outspoken thinkers of Whig liberalism came from the continental European political tradition. Hayek, Popper and Berlin were all continental Anglophiles. Unlike them, Oakeshott is an English thinker, and nevertheless his liberalism is European, and not specifically English. His intellectual perspective is not narrowly partisan. His liberalism is an exercise in self-awareness, an ability to see his own society from without as well as from within. Yet this double

²⁰ Michael Oakeshott, 'Contemporary British Politics', *Cambridge Journal* 1(8), 1948, pp. 474-490.

²¹ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 387.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

²⁵ See Noel O'Sullivan, 'Visions of Freedom: The Response to Totalitarianism', in J. Hayward, B. Barry & A. Brown (eds.), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 63-88.

perspective enables him to adopt a more traditionalist rhetoric than the one characteristic of continental liberals. The rhetoric of European liberals was usually progressive and reformist, for their political ideal was external to their society. For Oakeshott, however, the same freedom is inherent in the tradition of his own society.²⁶

There is, however, another, more radical sentiment present in Oakeshott's writings alongside Whig liberalism, which can be called 'Romantic liberalism'. Although the Romantic element never came to dominate European liberalism, Romanticism did leave its mark on liberal thought. The Romantic movement is usually perceived as an adversary of liberalism. Indeed, its rejection of the petit-bourgeois values, fascination with heroism, flirtation with the glorious past, aversion to routine, and hence its rejection of the principle of legality, are all contrary to liberal consciousness. However, as Nancy Rosenblum has shown, there are some elements which are common to both Romanticism and liberalism. This makes possible the construction of a coherent Romantic liberal worldview.²⁷

This is especially true of proto-Romantic thinkers such as Herder and the young von Humboldt, or Romantic writers of an early generation such as Constant. They often combined an adherence to the idea of radical individuality with the cultural universalistic premises of the Enlightenment. They cherished the idea of diversity, originality and spontaneity stressing the ideal of human self-development achieved through the free and harmonious exercise of individual capacities. Nevertheless, they did not follow more radical Romantics in confining this ideal to heroic individuals who rebelled against society. Instead, they perceived this individual self-development as a social ideal, which should be applied universally. The main question was how to avoid the clash between such spontaneous individuals.

Thus, von Humboldt recognised that the return to the ancient ideal, in which the reconciliation of spontaneity and sociality had been performed through public activity and heroic warfare, was no longer possible. In modern conditions the only way to ensure the development of individuality was through the enlargement of the private sphere to the maximal extent so that an individual would be able to exercise freely his capacities without hindering the similar development of others. This is achieved by minimalist government, the only task of which is to maintain the security of its citizens by means of law.

Oakeshott was strongly influenced by this view. The main feature of his temperament is reported to have been an uncompromising and radical love of personal freedom.²⁸ His emphasis on individuality is well-known, so I will not go into much detail here. Just briefly, we are speaking about the perception of human beings as enjoying their freedom and developing their own capacities. This freedom is seen as inherent in human beings and valuable in itself. Oakeshott argues against the claim that freedom of speech, for example, should be based on utilitarian arguments. We cherish this right, he says,

²⁶ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 402-403.

²⁷ Nancy Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987).

²⁸ Noel O'Sullivan, 'In the Perspective of Western Thought', in Jesse Norman (ed.), *The Achievement of Michael Oakeshott* (London: Duckworth, 1993), p. 101. See also Patrick Riley, 'Michael Oakeshott: Philosopher of Individuality', *The Review of Politics* 54(4), 1992, pp. 649-664.

‘because we have become a people with a variety of opinions about all sorts of matters and we do not see why we should not utter them’.²⁹

This view of course is fully elaborated in *On Human Conduct*. There Oakeshott even employs Humboldt’s vocabulary, such as ‘human agency’, ‘spontaneity’ or ‘satisfaction of wants’. Yet the elements of this view can be found in Oakeshott’s earlier writings. The philosophical authority for this perspective is Hobbes, whose thought had interested Oakeshott since the thirties.³⁰ Oakeshott saw Hobbes as a moralist whose starting point had been ‘unique *human* individuality,’³¹ and who had offered the most profound philosophical exploration of the morality of individuality. Moreover, Oakeshott drew a direct line between the dominant element of Hobbes’ thought and ‘the romantic doctrine of personality with its assertion of the primacy of will.’³² Under his influence, Oakeshott became more and more concerned with the question of the emergence of the character of individuality.

This theme became a dominant one in Oakeshott’s writings from the late fifties onwards. He described the disposition to cherish one’s individuality as the recognition of one’s intrinsic freedom, a recognition which is being transformed into an experience and which is made to ‘yield a satisfaction of its own ... to recognize imagining, deliberating, wanting, choosing, and acting not as costs incurred in seeking enjoyments, but as themselves enjoyments, the exercise of a gratifying self-determination or personal autonomy’.³³ And thus Oakeshott proceeds to formulate his famous theory of civil association where such an association is understood as having no external purpose, and where, like in the theories of liberal proto-Romantics, independent individuals determine and pursue their wants and develop their individuality within strict limits of the civil order.

²⁹ Michael Oakeshott ‘The Customer is Never Wrong’, in *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 116.

³⁰ On Oakeshott as a commentator of Hobbes’ philosophy see Ian Tregenza, ‘The Life of Hobbes in the Writings of Michael Oakeshott’, *History of Political Thought* 18(3), 1997, pp. 531-557.

³¹ Michael Oakeshott, ‘The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes’, in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), p. 84.

³² Michael Oakeshott, ‘Introduction to *Leviathan*,’ in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), p. 65.

³³ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 236.