

# OAKESHOTT'S PILGRIMAGE PAST J. S. MILL

Timothy Fuller

Students of Michael Oakeshott's thought will remember that his 1951 inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics, "Political Education," was the occasion of much critical comment, not least on his use of the phrase "pursuit of intimations" to describe the conduct of politics. He replied to his critics with an appendix to the 1962 publication of the lecture in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. In that appendix, he included a brief remark about John Stuart Mill that, to my knowledge, is rarely if ever commented on. As was often the case in his writings, Oakeshott allowed this somewhat cryptic remark to stand for itself. In the appendix, Oakeshott quotes from Mill's *Autobiography*, elaborating a reference in the body of the lecture to Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*. I have long been curious about this—I wrote my doctoral thesis on Mill under the influence of Oakeshott's thought in the midst of the controversies spawned by Gertrude Himmelfarb and Maurice Cowling alleging that Mill

was less a liberal than his reputation had long suggested. I want to explain as I see it what Oakeshott meant.

Here is Oakeshott's comment from that appendix:

J.S. Mill (*Autobiography*, OUP pp. 136–7, 144–5), when he abandoned reference to general principle either as a reliable guide in political activity or as a satisfactory explanatory device, put in its place a "theory of human progress" and what he called a "philosophy of history." The view I have expressed in this essay may be taken to represent a further stage in this intellectual pilgrimage, a stage reached when neither "principle" (on account of what it turns out to be: a mere index of concrete behaviour) nor any general theory about the character and direction of social change seems to supply an adequate reference for explanation or for practical conduct.<sup>1</sup>

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**Timothy Fuller** is professor of political science at Colorado College and past president of the Michael Oakeshott Association. A collection of essays, *Machiavelli's Legacy: "The Prince" after 500 Years*, edited and introduced by him, is to be published in the spring of 2015.

What was Oakeshott's intellectual pilgrimage? To understand better what Oakeshott meant, I want to consider some features of Mill's thought compared to Oakeshott's, especially Oakeshott's use of the term "pursuit of intimations" as an explanatory description of politics. Here are his words: he says of the phrase the "pursuit of intimations" that "it is neither intended as a description of the motives of politicians nor of what they believe themselves to be doing, but of what they actually succeed in doing" (*RIP*, 67). And Oakeshott goes on to say that, if this is an accurate description, it should have some "bearing upon how we study politics" (*RIP*, 67). This is consistent with his argument that the study of politics is categorically different from the practice of politics, a distinction Mill had made between the art of politics and the science of politics in his "Logic of the Moral Sciences," and that was later elaborated upon by Max Weber. Oakeshott concludes,

If this understanding of political activity were true, certain forms of argument (e.g. arguments designed to determine the correspondence of a political proposal with Natural Law or with abstract "justice") must be considered either irrelevant or as clumsy formulations of other and relevant inquiries, and must be understood to have merely rhetorical or persuasive value. (*RIP*, 67)

Oakeshott argues that the precepts of natural law are background considerations in the formation of laws and policies, but they do not dictate exactly what contingent circumstances require in acknowledging them in practice. For that, judgment is required and cannot be avoided.

To study politics in the way proper to a university study, Oakeshott also thought, requires us to maintain this distinction.

University study is not the carrying on of politics by other means. Like Weber, Oakeshott distinguishes the lecture hall from the political stage. The teacher qua teacher is not to engage in persuasive speech. Oakeshott means not merely that teachers ought not to do this, but that as teachers, in the precise sense, persuasive speech is irrelevant to the pedagogical task. "Political Education" was thus an essay instantiating his approach to the study of politics, and the phrase "pursuit of intimations" tries to express adequately what this approach to the study of politics reveals. This also fits with what Oakeshott understands to be the aim of the philosophical study of politics, or, more generally, the study of the practical mode in human experience, as he set forth in *Experience and Its Modes* (1933). As he would later say in *On Human Conduct* (1975), Oakeshott wanted to understand better what he already understood in part. To understand is to describe what one observes going on in a particular area of human activity. Philosophy, he says, achieves its proper expression in the indicative mode. This understanding also informs Oakeshott's idea of academic education on politics. Thus he also says that the proper texts for such study are historical and philosophical, where the standard for the texts is how closely historians or philosophers adhere, in the texts they offer, to their tasks in the precise sense. The philosopher observes what is going on in detachment from it. The activity of the historian qua historian is to study the past "for its own sake," not to pronounce moral lessons or defend political arguments.

As a student of both history and philosophy, Oakeshott finds that politics operates as he describes it. The strong form of his argument is not that politicians "ought not" to act merely according to abstract principles but that they cannot so act regardless of what

they claim or believe themselves to be doing. Even in revolutionary moments, the actors on the political stage will inevitably fall back on practices, customs, and ideas they claim to have superseded. Of course, turmoil and mayhem may follow given the capacity of political actors to misunderstand what they can do—witness the French and Russian revolutions—but the revolutionaries no less than any others are feeling their way forward on an uncertain path the end of which is not in sight, and which is likely to be quite different from anything they imagine in advance. They are pursuing intimations of the situation that befalls them. They may extrapolate theoretical formulations from their experiences, but the experiences come first, constraining their theoretical formulations of experience.

In this respect Oakeshott has absorbed an ancient, Aristotelian lesson: action always requires appraisal and judgment; there are better and worse, more and less fortunate, judgments, but there is no formula to guarantee success; there is never a conclusion that will not be subject to argument, reconsideration, and revision; politics is interminable, an ineluctable aspect of the human condition. There is no Ideal Form from which to derive guidance or to replace judgment and decision making. Modern political idealism that imagines an end to politics, say in perpetual peace, uses politics in the hope of transcending politics, but, as we have repeatedly seen, fails to achieve the hoped-for result. This, as we know from *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott identifies as the incoherency of the practical life that both defines the sort of activity it is and limits its possibilities. And in other essays, Oakeshott expresses his Augustinian skepticism about endless Babel-like construction projects to immanentize the heavenly kingdom, and he explores political skepticism in *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*.

However, Oakeshott's remarks on Mill in "Political Education" do not invoke Aristotle or Augustine. Instead he admits some inspiration from Mill, who was no Augustinian and only distantly Aristotelian. Let us consider further what Mill said in his *Autobiography*. I mention in passing Mill's description of his father's abandonment of traditional Christianity and his own education devoid of religion. J. S. Mill eventually advocated the religion of humanity, a humanistic moral commitment to progress in the human condition, grounded in no inherited dogmas. He learned from his father the firm conviction that moderation is the crucial practical virtue. Mill describes his father as a Stoic, and his father's morals as Epicurean/Utilitarian, "taking as the exclusive test of right and wrong, the tendency of actions to produce pleasure or pain."<sup>2</sup> Like the Epicurean, James Mill advocated curtailing indulgences, was suspicious of passionate emotions, and sought to avoid misery by refusing pleasures that bring suffering and disillusionment in the long run.

Mill's position with the East India Company gave him the opportunity to learn "by personal observation the necessary conditions of the practical conduct of public affairs" (*Auto*, 87). In his capacity as a speculative writer, Mill could contemplate visions of order without obstruction, but in practice he had to justify everything to those who saw the world differently:

I became practically conversant with the difficulties of moving bodies of men, the necessities of compromise, the art of sacrificing the non-essential to preserve the essential... I have found, through life, these acquisitions to be of the greatest possible importance for personal happiness, and they are also a very necessary condition for enabling anyone,

either as theorist or as practical man, to effect the greatest amount of good compatible with his opportunities. (*Auto*, 87)

Both as a theorist and as a practical man, Mill wanted to achieve the greatest good. Mill retained his political idealism and guide to the future, which in his thinking had an integrity independent of the necessary compromises through which to promote that good as much as and whenever possible. Oakeshott rejects Mill's residual dualism—its implicit Platonism as Nietzsche would insist—in favor of the view that the ideal itself changes with the changing circumstances, even if the vocabulary employed persists so as to suggest a continuity that is superficial or illusory.

To pursue intimations, then, would mean not merely compromising with others but actually altering our understanding of what we are pursuing even as we pursue it. Ideals and contingent circumstances are inseparable. Politics is what happens at the intersection of these. By contrast, in *On Liberty* the ultimate justification of absolute freedom of thought and discussion is the convergence on truth in what Mill called the spontaneously improving society. Of course, Mill also prefers Socrates to the fool. Opinions will vary from better to worse, wise to foolish, and Mill's regime would facilitate sorting this out. Mill believes that absolute freedom of thought and discussion will eventually reveal the best opinions, that there is a method for uniting power and wisdom that precludes direct dictation by the wisest while, in the long run, satisfying their aspirations. Everyone, he believes, will come finally to see what the best among us had already seen long since.

From Oakeshott's perspective, this is Mill's last-gasp effort to preserve some fixity in a world of radical temporality, or to find a

substitute for the old natural law and revelation, and to avoid the skepticism for which Oakeshott is well known and for which he is frequently criticized. When Oakeshott says that we have set sail on a boundless and bottomless sea without anchorage or safe harbor, at best keeping the ship afloat, he is taking the step that Mill would not take but that Oakeshott took to be implied in Mill's thought. A philosophy of history, in this case, is a narrative of how the good will necessarily prevail ultimately. It cannot be explicated in terms of abstract principles if it is fully to respect the temporal-historical character of human conduct, but in the absence of abstract principles, it is also impossible to assess the alleged progress of the human condition.

If Oakeshott had retained his religion, he would have been a strict Augustinian because the doctrine of the two cities allows both for the radical temporality of the human condition and for faith in a transcendent salvation. Occasionally, when Oakeshott talked theology, he would invoke Augustine's view that we live in the interim between the Incarnation and the Second Coming, more or less free on our own recognizance to do the best we can. But Oakeshott was himself enough of a Hegelian to think that one's historical time and place dictated the terms in which to express oneself. There are not two cities but only one world of experience within which imaginative characterizations of the human predicament may be formulated: Augustine's was a work of imaginative genius to be appreciated in that sense.

Oakeshott understood that modern religiosity had come to be associated with the idea of immanent historical improvement or progress, and he saw no way to go back to an earlier understanding. If the age of dualism is over, then one might find solace in the evanescent delights of poetry or music (Mill's

reliance on poetry to bring him out of depression also symbolizes this) but no release from the hard realization, evocatively described by Montaigne, that the flow of experience undermines every effort to frame it in permanent meaning. Ours is an age suspicious of permanency. In vulgar terms it is the age in which the many shout, in hope and fear, that change is good. Yet Mill was convinced that, even though feeling is indispensable, analysis trumps feeling (*Auto*, 147).

We come then to the turning point in Mill's thought that Oakeshott quotes in the appendix to "Political Education." Considering what Mill said in the full context of the *Autobiography*, we learn that he admired the historical narratives of the Saint-Simonians and the Comteans, and, while he never adopted their views entirely, he was intrigued by the threefold scheme of historical development and the distinction of historical periods as "organic" and "critical." Mill adopted the latter distinction as the movement from organic ancient polytheism to critical Greek philosophy to organic Christianity to the modern critical era spawned by the Reformation. He thought the critical era emergent in the Reformation was still powerful in his time but was threatened by the rise of the tyranny of opinion, the tyranny of the majority, by conformism, and the uncertain future of democratization. Mill wanted to perpetuate the critical era or to forestall as far as possible a new organic period. Much of his political thought is explained by this. From the French literature, Mill said,

I derived, among other ideas which the general turning upside down of the opinions of the European thinkers had brought uppermost, these in particular: That the human mind had a certain order of possible progress, in

which some things must precede others, an order which governments and public instructors can modify to some, but not an unlimited extent: That all questions of political institutions are relative, not absolute, and that different stages of human progress not only *will* have, but *ought* to have, different institutions: . . . That any general theory or philosophy of politics supposes a previous theory of human progress, and that this is the same thing with a philosophy of history. (*Auto*, 169–71)

Mill then reaffirms the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers even while absorbing the perspective of the nineteenth-century thinkers. Mill seeks to preserve the aspirations of the Enlightenment but with heightened sensitivity to the evolutionary complexities of political life in historical existence. This is not far from Hegel's assessment of the French Revolution in its achievements and its failures. Mill did not think this precluded continued progress in the long run. Mill sees the obstacles but remained committed to progress.

Mill was a methodological Stoic and a constrained utopian. He saw the constraints that inevitably attend political action, though he resisted what he called fatalism. From Oakeshott's perspective, moderation is too weak a qualifier to the utopian aspiration to save it from radical critique. Mill, like many less sophisticated than he, was caught between two worlds. Characteristically, he saw value in both. With Oakeshott, however, philosophy is uncompromising and thus alien to the political world. Oakeshott takes as his task to explicate the assumptions each of the parties makes in order to clarify why they see the world as they do. His analysis places him outside the alternatives as a nonpracticing observer. Oakeshott's philosopher disarms

himself and is of little use to either side. He seeks to understand, but not to change, the world.

Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* further illustrates that from which Oakeshott took his leave. Speaking of forms of government, Mill says,

Like all things, therefore, which are made by men, they may be either well or ill made; judgment and skill may have been exercised in their production, or the reverse of these. And again, if a people have omitted, or from outward pressure have not had it in their power, to give themselves a constitution by the tentative process of applying a corrective to each evil as it arose, or as the sufferers gained strength to resist it, this retardation of political progress is no doubt a great disadvantage to them, but it does not prove that what has been found good for others would not have been good also for them, and will not be so still when they think fit to adopt it.<sup>3</sup> (*RG*, 111)

Oakeshott, in describing politics as attending to the arrangements of a set of people brought together by chance or choice, could be paraphrasing a part of Mill's thinking. The pursuit of intimations involves correcting perceived evils as they come to sight. But Oakeshott's point is that the "evils" themselves are defined variously from different perspectives. Oakeshott thinks that there would be no end to arguments over the identity of evils needing correction, nor over what the correctives should be. A "tradition of behaviour," Oakeshott says, "is not susceptible of the distinction between essence and accident. Knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail: to know only the gist is to know nothing. What has to be learned is not an abstract idea, or a set of tricks, not

even a ritual, but a concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricateness" (*RIP*, 62). "In politics, then, every enterprise is a consequential enterprise, the pursuit, not of a dream, or of a general principle, but of an intimation" (*RIP*, 57). And,

The most insidious current misunderstandings of political activity—the misunderstanding in which institutions and procedures appear as pieces of machinery designed to achieve a purpose settled in advance, instead of as manners of behaviour which are meaningless when separated from their context; the misunderstanding, for example, in which Mill convinced himself that something called "Representative Government" was a "form" of politics which could be regarded as proper to any society which reached a certain level of what he called "civilization"; in short, the misunderstanding in which we regard our arrangements and institutions as something more significant than the footprints of thinkers and statesmen who knew which way to turn their feet without knowing anything about a final destination. (*RIP*, 63–64)

Political rhetoric may justify correctives as contributing to progress, but for Oakeshott philosophic understanding stands back from such pronouncements. When he discusses women's right to vote, for example, Oakeshott explains it as the elimination of the absurdity in which women were treated increasingly as citizens in every other respect except this. He does not assert that this significant change in our arrangements is progress, even though most say that it is (*RIP*, 57).

Generally speaking, those who pursue political philosophy feel an affinity with Mill

more than with Oakeshott at this point. It is not that Oakeshott stands in the way of change; on the contrary, he accepts change as natural to humanity; the real objection is that he does not glorify change, or indeed particular changes, and that he is skeptical about proposals for change. The pursuit of intimations is a description that avoids endorsements.

Of course, Oakeshott had strong views on some political questions, and there are discernible tensions at times in his writings between his philosophic understanding and those views—the inevitable consequence of living while seeking, philosophically speaking, to die. For him, thought about experience separates itself from the vitality of experience. Philosophers, he says, are the “victims of thought.” Mill himself asserts, in his *Autobiography*, that analysis is the enemy of feeling. Weber says that choosing a method of knowing is choosing a way of life; science is, after all, a vocation, as is politics. To choose one path is to leave another behind. Oakeshott accepts this. But Mill pursues both analysis and feeling. He could describe political conduct consonant with Oakeshott’s description but with the proviso that there is, however distant, a goal for history. Like Weber after him (but Weber, with Nietzsche, was profoundly more skeptical than Mill), Mill hopes that analysis could be employed to assist the formation of rational political opinions without dictating them. He seeks fruitful alliance between the art and the science of policy. There is an analogy in this to Marx’s project to align theory and practice, superseding the division of labor between intellectuals and workers. Mill’s virtue is to recognize the danger of that revolutionary impatience that abolishes debate and argument, imposing an arbitrary unity, and that dismisses procedural limitations on the exercise of power.

But even so, Mill subscribes to progressive improvement and perfectibility. In *Representative Government*, Mill says,

The capability of any given people for fulfilling the conditions of a given form of government cannot be pronounced on by any sweeping rule. Knowledge of the particular people, and general practical judgment and sagacity, must be the guides. There is also another consideration not to be lost sight of. A people may be unprepared for good institutions; but to kindle a desire for them is a necessary part of the preparation. To recommend and advocate a particular institution or form of government, and set its advantages in the strongest light, is one of the modes, often the only mode within reach, of educating the mind of the nation not only for accepting or claiming, but also for working, the institution (*RG*, 115).

In a society enjoying absolute freedom of thought and discussion there is, nevertheless, an intellectual elite that understands better what the society as a whole implicitly understands. To exercise intellectual responsibility is to make the implicit explicit:

They who can succeed in creating a general persuasion that a certain form of government, or social fact of any kind, deserves to be preferred, have made nearly the most important step which can possibly be taken towards ranging the powers of society on its side. . . . It is what men think that determines how they act; and though the persuasions and convictions of average men are in a much greater degree determined by their personal position than by reason, no little power is exercised over them by the persuasions and convictions of those whose

personal position is different, and by the united authority of the instructed . . . the maxim, that the government of a country is what the social forces in existence compel it to be, is true only in the sense in which it favours, instead of discouraging, the attempt to exercise, among all forms of government practicable in the existing condition of society, a rational choice (*RG*, 117–18).

In discussing “Order” and “Progress,” Mill defines “Order” as the preservation of all kinds and amounts of good that already exist, and “Progress” as consisting in the increase of them” (*RG*, 121). Mill values Order for providing stability and preserving what good had already been attained. But Order is the staging area for subsequent advance. Both Order and Progress are good, but Order is subordinate to Progress in that Order keeps open the way to the next stage of improvement.

The movement from organic to critical periods is progressive and cumulative in principle. While it remains possible to fall back, Mill believed that we had reached a moment in civilizational history wherein we could grasp the dynamics of historical development sufficiently to guide the way into a future of continual and spontaneous improvement. The danger is that we will relax and be content with what we have so far achieved. Human beings, left to their own devices, tend to slack off. Christianity was once a catalyst for aspiring to a new level of moral achievement, but it is now exhausted.

What will encourage advancement in our era? It is the belief in progress or the religion of humanity, the commitment to taking charge of our destiny and keeping open the way of Progress, employing Order as an instrument in the service of Progress.

It is the responsibility of the intellectual community to evangelize the religion of humanity:

it would be more philosophically correct to leave out of the definition the word Order, and to say that the best government is that which is most conducive to Progress. For Progress includes Order, but Order does not include Progress. Progress is a greater degree of that of which Order is a less. Order, in any other sense, stands only for a part of the pre-requisites of good government, not for its idea and essence. . . . Order, thus considered, is not an additional end to be reconciled with Progress, but a part and means of Progress itself. (*RG*, 123–24)

Compare these remarks to Oakeshott’s description—composed around the same time as “Political Education”—of the “politics of faith” and the “politics of skepticism.” Oakeshott describes these as poles achieving identity in tension with each other, in their polarity ordering a charged political field. Note the difference in his choice of terms from Mill’s “Order” and “Progress.” The politics of faith and the politics of skepticism began to appear more or less simultaneously at the beginning of modern European history about five centuries ago. In their dialectical opposition—for example, whether the power of governments should be aggregated or dispersed—they spawn a long-developing manner of argument forming the background conditions in which the particular struggles of modern European politics are interpreted and play themselves out.

The politics of faith claims to be progressive and seeks to dominate in much the way Mill describes and approves. But for the political skeptic, this is a faith in things unseen and unseeable. The politics of skepticism



resists the politics of faith: it does not seek to put an alternative political faith in play but recognizes politics as a necessary evil, something we cannot do without but that is commonly overrated both as to its claims for the future and its claims of accomplishment in the present. Oakeshott, in describing the claims of progress and improvement, accepts their continual presence as claims but does not endorse them. They are indigenous to modern political life, but there is no foundation for their claims apart from a strong commitment to them among the intellectual

elite. The claims of progress provoke dialectical opposition from political skeptics and portend disillusion among those who invest themselves in such claims.

Thus Oakeshott, in speaking of the pursuit of intimations, summarizes both his thinking about the appropriate approach to political education or the study of politics, as well as his conclusion about what politics is and can or cannot be, and what politics, upon reflection, shows about the human condition in the modern world. †

- 1 Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. New and expanded edition. Foreword by Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 69. Hereafter cited as *RIP*.
- 2 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 49. Hereafter cited as *Auto*.
- 3 J.S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. R. B. McCallum (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 11. Hereafter cited as *RG*.

## ARE JIHADISTS FIGHTING FOR A FICTION?

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*Jihadists in Syria announce, “This is the war Muhammad promised” . . .*

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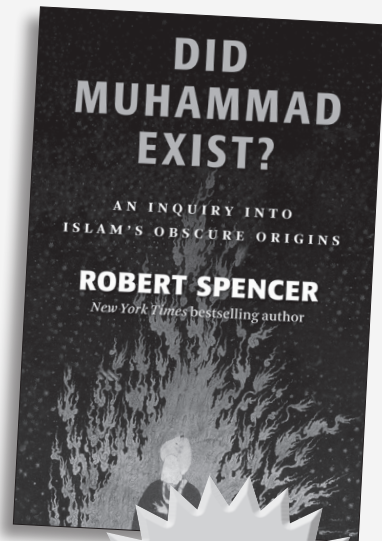
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