

Menaces of Liberal Education: M. Oakeshott

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Abstract

In the present text I discuss Michael Oakeshott's idea of liberal education and its main menace, authority. By identifying two ways of examining the issue of authority, I launch two different perspectives on this issue. The first one is abstract and it considers an early Oakeshottian essay and Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition, and allows me to formulate the following thesis: conversation precedes education. The second perspective is an application, and its concreteness allows me to employ the concept of authority in a more leisurely manner.

Keywords: conversation, liberal education, Michael Oakeshott, universitas, scholé

1. What Is Liberal Education?

In his famous essay “What Is Liberal Education”, Leo Strauss considers liberal education to be an “education in culture or toward culture”. He says that “liberal education consists in listening to the conversation among the greatest minds” as well as intervening oneself into their conversation, as liberal education also “consists in the constant intercourse with the greatest minds” (Strauss 1959).

Although I consider Strauss's idea about liberal education very appropriate to start my present essay with

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because it essentializes the relation between conversation and education that I examine in Oakeshott, I should mention that it implies a very distinct view from Oakeshott's. In Strauss's opinion, the student or the reader can get involved in a conversation with the greatest minds (authors), independently of their different historical context. Oakeshott would not agree with this because in Oakeshott's opinion our historical being cannot be ignored.

I think that there are also differences in the way the two of them use the metaphor of conversation. Firstly, Strauss has no problem with identifying conversation with argumentation – an “argument” (Grant 1990, 115) that enters the spiritual journey of the brilliant minds of mankind. Oakeshott, on the other hand, separates conversation from logical argumentation. Secondly, for Strauss the subjects who enter the conversation are “de-historicised” (Grant 1990, 115), while Oakeshott pleads for a historical subject who is temporal and also ‘fragile’ in the existentialist sense. To Oakeshott, there can be no “single argument across the centuries in search of perennial truth” (Grant 1990, 115) that circulates from “antiquity to present” (Grant 1990, 115) as Strauss seems to suggest.

Oakeshott's sense of play and irony goes dangerously far towards relativism, meeting the frightful dissolution of truth as an on-going pursuit. The conversationalists, in Oakeshott's opinion, are a “paradoxical mixture of both consequential and inconsequential” and they have a “disciplined mind that is also ready to give up all method, and never make a reason in itself out of a conclusion to be reached”. Those who enter the conversation that Oakeshott has in mind are “auto-ironically being able to laugh at oneself” and “skeptical even when it comes to [their] own opinions” (Oakeshott 2004, 193).

In Oakeshottian terms, by education we are initiated into a spiritual world, a capital of emotions, beliefs, images, ideas, manners of thinking, languages, skills, practices, and manners of activity, different from the things that are generated out of them (Oakeshott 1967, 303). By education human beings get free access to culture, to the *Geistige Welt*, that everyone carries on as a birth datum, but do not fully belong to until one enters the process of learning (Oakeshott

1989, 45). The *Geistige Welt* is an *inherited world of meanings* (Nardin 2001, 136). It is composed of interpretations of things, and not physical objects (such as books, paintings, musical instruments and compositions etc.) of expressions of human minds with meanings that require to be understood. By education we get initiated into this “whole of interlocking meanings which establish and interpret one another”, and it is the more important the more we come to understand that entering it is an essential condition for becoming a human being in its proper sense, and that to inhabit it, to possess it, and to enjoy it means to really be a human being.

The different human ways of understanding the world are in Oakeshott’s view “Voices in the conversation of mankind”. The conversation of mankind began ages ago when humans made their first utterances. It is a meeting place of the different modes of human intercourse, and where they all come together: “...It may be supposed that the diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse have some meeting-place and compose a manifold of some sort. And, as I understand it, the image of this meeting-place is not an inquiry or an argument, but a conversation” (Oakeshott 1967, 197-8). The conversation is composed of a number of voices. Every voice in the conversation is a tradition of thought and action and reflects a different human activity. Each of the voices in conversation (practice, science, history, and poetry) distinguishes itself by a character of its own.

By education we get acquainted to different human thoughts and expressions of thoughts and we learn how to speak the voices and the “voice of conversation in the education of mankind”. Through education we learn how to recognize the different human ways of thinking and how to participate in the conversation by choosing an adequate set of utterances. And Oakeshott makes it clear that it is through education that human beings are initiated into the conversation of the human world: “Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation” (Oakeshott 1967, 199).

As an initiation into the conversation of mankind, education has two different meanings. The former is an instrumental meaning of education: an initiation *in 'useful knowledge', knowledge which enables us to use nature to satisfy our wants* (Oakeshott 2004, 305). The latter regards education as an initiation into *the great explanatory adventures of mankind* (Oakeshott 2004, 311), namely philosophy, science, history, and poetry. Starting from this second sense of education, Oakeshott forges the concept of liberal education, originating in the Roman expression *liberalia studia*, meaning “studies liberated from the concerns of practical doing, studies concerned with all the activities, which belong to ‘play’ rather than ‘work’” (Oakeshott 2004, 314).

2. Three Types of Education. Karl Jaspers

In the *Idea of the University* (1923, revised 1946), Karl Jaspers distinguishes three forms of education (scholastic education, apprenticeship, and Socratic education) (Jaspers 1960, 62). While the former two work against the ideal of liberal education that Oakeshott has in mind, the latter, Socratic education, meets the requirements of liberal education.

Indeed, scholastic education is concerned with the uncritical and reproductive transmission of the impersonal tradition by the teachers, playing impersonal roles within the educational system. There is a systematized body of knowledge that is supposed to be passed on from teacher to student. The student’s freedom of thinking is limited firstly, by the authority of his teacher, then, secondly, by the authority of authors and books that he is supposed to read and thirdly, by the authority of the system of thought that he is subordinated to. When it comes to apprenticeship, there is only one element of authority that sets a limit to the student’s freedom, the unique personality of the master, to whom the disciple owes reverence and love and worshipping. Because of this intellectual distance imposed between the master and his pupil, and the disciple’s necessity to subordinate, there is this urge within the student to avoid responsibility, which derives out of our freedom of choice.

Without any doubt, liberal education started with Socratic conversation. The Socratic magister-disciple relationship is not based on the authority of the magister, but is a relation of equals, where both of them – magister and disciple – are equally giving and taking. That the student and the teacher ought to stand on the same level is, in fact, the main characteristic of Socratic education that Jaspers underlines. Student and teacher are equally free and none of them submits oneself to the other. Both of them, but especially the teacher, have an acute sense of their own mortality, and of their being only human. In this respect perhaps, Socrates did not accept neither glory nor honorific positions, and criticized the sophists for getting paid in exchange for their teaching.

I find Jaspers's and Oakeshott's positions very close to one another. As I have already hinted at, Oakeshott adopts an existentialist perspective when regarding the human condition. And conversation is, I think, essential when it comes to explaining our human condition in Oakeshottian terms. We relate to each other and to the world conversationally, and to become human is to become a conversational being. As human beings we are eminently capable of conversation, therefore we are as Oakeshott puts it *empathic* and not *dogmatic* beings, always interacting with one another, by *sharing ideas* and enjoying the exchange with *childish pleasure*, and by our readiness towards *equally giving and taking* – as in the Socratic magister and disciple relationship.

However, Jaspers mentions two different sorts of communication to be employed in a university: one is debate and the other is discussion. In the case of debate, there is a winner and there is a loser. The opponent is defeated by appeal to the principle of contradiction and sometimes even with some help from the sophisticated tricks of logical argumentation. The disposition of the debate is far from being what Oakeshott calls 'conversational', the more so as the debate is characterized throughout by the desire to vanquish one's opponent (Jaspers 1960, 77-8). And the communication is destined to interrupt according to the principle *contra principia negantem non est disputandum* (one must not argue against someone who denies the very principles of the argument).

Anyway, this is not the case with discussion. In a discussion there are no principles settled at the beginning of communication, but the premises assumed by the interlocutors are yet to be discovered. No one wins. Those who seem to be right, grow suspicious of their own rightness. There is no end and no permanent conclusions are sought, as any conclusion reached serve only as stepping-stones for the going on of communication. Among the rules that Jaspers gives for discussion, as well as the issues stated above, we may recognize some of Oakeshott's own ideas regarding conversation: one must not repeat oneself, one must not insist on the 'rightness' of one's opinions by repetition, one must not seek to have the last word, but be content to have one's say and listen to the others (Jaspers 1960).

3. The Idea of University in Michael Oakeshott

In his essays on education, Oakeshott idealizes the university by managing three relevant distinctions that will make history in the philosophy of education: vocational education vs. academic education, instructing vs. imparting (as two different ways of teaching), and information vs. judgement (as the external vs. the internal component of knowledge). As one enters a university one becomes part of a community of scholars, professors, researchers, or students. One comes across different theories, doctrines, ideologies, and one acquire different skills (as part of a *vocational education*). One also adjusts to the manner of thinking that generated the current 'literature' (as part of a truly academic or *university education*). On the one hand, students get *instructed* (teaching seen as an activity of communicating *information* – the explicit component of knowledge that can be itemized, and that can be found in manuals, dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopaedias) and, on the other hand, they are the subjects of *imparting* (teaching seen as an activity of communicating *judgement* – the implicit component of knowledge, the specific ingredient that cannot be caught in propositions, that cannot be resolved to information or itemized, and that cannot appear as a rule) (Oakeshott 1989, 57).

Correspondingly, learning means on the one hand the activity of acquiring information, and on the other hand, the activity of coming to possess judgement. I think that Oakeshott wants to act as a razor against the common view of the students as a depository of the pieces of information that each discipline in their curriculum presents them with. Instead, he considers that first of all students must learn how to think and, consequently, they should be taught by their teachers how to think – and this is exactly what imparting judgement means.

In a university education, knowledge is not passively acquired as pieces of information contained within the ‘texts’ of the day, and students are not expected to just inactively accept what they get, but to explore the manner of thinking that generated the respective ‘literature’. ‘Texts’ are studied not for their own sake, but as a means to decipher the mode of thinking that underlies them (Oakeshott 1967, 312-313). Therefore, it is never about teaching the student how to think in general, but about teaching him to think artistically, historically, scientifically, or philosophically. We study, for example, particular branches of science, some authors and philosophical theories, so that we arrive at the distinct manners of thinking that they represent. These manners of thinking are also representative of the specific and distinctiveness of a certain university from the others (it confers its traditional character).

In short, Oakeshott characterizes academic liberal education as a *universitas*, a community of scholars engaged in exploring, and in understanding the qualities and characteristics of different kinds of explanations of human conduct, undistracted by practical concerns. A university not only offers a time of leisure (from the Greek term *scholé*), but it is also a unique spot, an *interval between childhood and the ‘long littleness of life’* (Oakeshott 2004, 335). The different ways of explaining human conduct or modes of thinking are not related to one another by assertion or denial but by the conversational relationships of *acknowledgement* and *accommodation* (Oakeshott 1967, 304). They are different idioms and languages, equally employed, and that do not contradict each other. A university displays a conversation

between different ways of understanding – and this determines the character of the education it offers. A university is a community of scholars who get some practice in thinking historically, scientifically, philosophically etc. Moreover, an academic liberal institution has to offer some understanding of what it is to think historically, scientifically, philosophically, etc. Without disavouring any of the ways of understanding, but treating them as equal, a university is a place where we learn to think conversationally.

4. Conversation Precedes Education

I turn once more to Strauss's essay that I have already mentioned above, in the first section. Therein he states that liberal education is an endeavour to study the "great books" with "the proper care". It is the point where I would dare and introduce the issue of authority as the main enemy of liberal education.

Written by the "great minds", the "great books" may contradict one another. It is not an impediment as conversation itself is defined by Oakeshott as non-argumentative. Although any conversation contains pieces of argumentation, its goal is more likely playful and unconditioned, as it never sets a conclusion to be reached as its final end, and as it does not intend to demonstrate anything, or to convince anyone of anything. But it may become an impediment when conversation is taken too seriously, and any of the statements of the "great books" is not read "with proper care", but used as means of "indoctrination". It seems that liberal education is endangered by authority.

The Enlightenment not only opposes reason (freedom) to authority (blind acceptance), but subordinates authority to reason. In *Truth and Method*, H.-G. Gadamer shows that the disparagement of prejudices by the Enlightenment is not acceptable because to it reason and not tradition is the final ground for authority (Gadamer 2004, 277). By a rehabilitation of the prejudices, he also intends to offer a rehabilitation of tradition and authority. By the term "prejudice" the Enlightenment understood a judgement that was not pleadable.

Gadamer regains the concept of prejudice by underlining its positive meaning. He reiterates the critique of the Enlightenment by the Romantic Movement, and stresses on the importance of understanding authority as tradition of thought. But even the Romantics, who insist that tradition is to be grounded beyond argumentation, because it determines both our attitudes and our institutions, assimilate tradition with the opposition between authority and reason (freedom). In Gadamer's opinion history, freedom, and tradition are not antagonistic concepts. Tradition is not given, but something that should be held and cultivated by the human being, who is a free historical being. Prejudices are conditions of possibility of historical understanding. And our prejudices, more than our judgements, make the historical reality of our being. Once we understand this, tradition and authority gain their indispensable place within a historical hermeneutics. And this is not possible but if we also understand that we are historical beings, and that our reason and understanding have a historical character.

The idea of authority can be conceived of in a positive sense and in a pejorative sense. The common meaning of the term "authority", if conceived as both external and coercive, followed by blind obedience, submission, and implicit acceptance, the states of mind associated with this kind of authority, can be deeply challenged logically and philosophically.

In his essay "The authority of the state" (1929), Michael Oakeshott reveals that the concept of authority understood as both *external* and *coercive* entails a contradiction in terms. To him, authority cannot be both external and coercive (external and coercive are the marks of the common meaning of authority). If it is external, then it cannot be coercive but in a metaphorical sense, as an external authority can be assimilated only to the historical or psychological *cause* of a belief, but not to its whole *ground* (Oakeshott 1929, 75).

Oakeshott distinguishes between the cause of a belief (we may believe something because someone taught the respective statement to us or because everyone else believes it, etc.) and the ground or justification of a belief (an independent

judgement we make, based on our whole world of ideas, and that sustain that belief): “What compels me to believe is never the mere cause which produces the belief, but always the whole ground which sustains it” (Oakeshott 1929, 77).

Only the cause of the belief can be said to be external. The reason or the justification of a belief or of an action is in its ground, and not its cause. Such an authority’s “coerciveness is confined to its arbitrary refusal to explain or persuade; whereas all that can be really coercive of an opinion or action is its whole ground” (Oakeshott 1929, 77).

In Oakeshott’s opinion, the authority of a belief is not the external source that it derives from (a book, the teacher, tradition), but an independent judgement we make on that belief, on its value, a reason independent of its source. The authority of a belief or action is its ground and foundation, i.e. “our world of ideas as a whole” (Oakeshott 1929, 79). An authority is not a person or an institution, it is not a book or a teacher or a university, but the “whole ground upon which our acceptance or rejection of anything is based” (Oakeshott 1929, 79).

By making use within the present context of discussion of Oakeshott’s mellow term of “conversation”, which subsequently developed into a metaphor, I would say that *conversation* precedes education. Our understanding of the human world (education) takes place within the tradition that we are born into (a conversation made up of beliefs that we share): we already possess a pre-understanding of the spiritual world that we enter through education. This is why it is not only true that we are what we learn to become through education (human beings), but also that we learn to become what in a sense we still are (conversational human beings).

5. In Search of a Model for Education: The English vs. the American

I will consider Collingwood’s comparing of the perspective of the Americans on English university education (as “narrow”) to the perspective of the English on American university education (as “superficial”) in *First Mate’s Log*. I endorse Collingwood’s thesis

that mainly says that because education is exercised in a different manner in England and America, the type of man that each produces is different.

American education “seems to glide with ridiculous rapidity over a ridiculously large number of subjects, all imperfectly grasped” (Collingwood 1940, 84). As a consequence, it produces “a type of man who, when he settles down to serious work in any one of these subjects, is inadequately grounded in it and thinks himself an advanced student when in fact he is not. It seems to attach an altogether exaggerated importance to the production of ‘papers’ published or deemed fit for publication, so that the pupil sets before himself the ideal of becoming not so much a student of his subject as a writer upon it, and the learned world is flooded with publications whose intrinsic value is very small” (Collingwood 1940, 84).

English education “seems to consist in forcing a blinkered pupil to dig himself into a ridiculously small subject whose vital relations with other subjects he is elaborately trained to ignore” (Collingwood 1940, 85). Consequently, it produces “a type of man who can see nothing outside his own little ring-fence, and even inside that ring fence cannot distinguish what is important from what is not, because that importance depends on relations between the subject and broader human issues of which he knows nothing; so that the student wastes his energies in a pettifogging logomachy by which his subject is not really advanced. And it seems to attach an exaggerated importance to the technique of this logomachy, and no importance whatsoever to the publication of results; so that the general public derives no profit from the work of these specialists, and a fatal chasm exists between the learned world and the world of educated persons who are left ignorant of what the learned world is doing” (Collingwood 1940, 85).

Now I take into consideration the above-mentioned Oakeshottian distinctions between vocational and university (academic) education, the importance of instructing and imparting within the educational system, and the emphasizing of ‘language’ (manner of thinking), in the detriment of ‘text’ or ‘literature’ (what has been said from time to time in a language)

and consider, by comparison, American and English education as Collingwood started to see them.

First, it is clear to me that American education tends to stress less on the vocational, whereas English education is more specialized. Second, whereas the American scholar tends to establish a better relationship with the public, by communicating results, and creating new ‘texts’, offering his contribution to ‘literature’, the English specialist is more concerned with ways of thinking and speaking, and therefore he is of no use to the public. Third, the tutorial system based on communicating results of research and discussing with professors and fellow students or researchers is specific to the English educational system, whereas professorial lectures and seminars are more favoured within American university education.

However, in my opinion, liberal education is neither American nor English, but it accomplishes its goal if its enemies are neutralized as much as possible; among the enemies of liberal education I consider specialization and the authority of ‘literature’ (an already achieved body of information, recorded in encyclopaedias, textbooks, manuals, internet sources) or the authority of tutors.

6. The Enemies of Liberal Education

Liberal education is menaced when conversation is disrupted. I call these factors of disruption the enemies of liberal education. In his essay, “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind” (1948), Oakeshott himself points his finger towards certain enemies of the social activity of education, such as:

“the tedious pertinacious talkers, resisting the flow without being able to give it a fresh direction; those who, like a worn gramophone record, distract the company by the endless repetition of what may have begun by being an observation but, on the third time round, becomes the indecent revelation of an empty mind; the noisy, the quarrelsome, the disputatious, the thrusters, the monopolists and the informers who carry books in their pocket and half-remembered

quotations in their heads. Conversation cannot easily survive those who talk to win, who won't be silent until they are refuted, those who won't forget or who cannot remember, those who are too lazy to catch what comes their way or who (like men of putty) are too unresponsive to do anything but let it stick." (Oakeshott 2004, 189)

Apart from specialization, characteristic of vocational education, which trains us for particular jobs, and by which the student gets ready for a career, and which destroys one of the main attributes of liberal education, namely its being apart from practical concerns, the most powerful enemy of liberal education is authority. By authority I refer to imposed courses or lists of compulsory reading, or to the authority of the teachers. Generally speaking, I refer to authoritative education as the kind of education when we learn because we are told to and what we are told to (by our teachers), and although it has a certain role in a person's becoming until a certain age (school education), it is a disaster if employed for young adults starting their university years, and it strongly opposes liberal education.

As an illustration, I chose the contemporary play *Jenny Does Shakespeare*, written by the American playwright, GERALYN HORTON. The play focuses on the theme of the authority of educators and extrapolates it to a whole society. The pressure of the authority of the strong personalities of the teachers can become unbearable to the teenager, leading to extremely negative consequences (drug abuse, school failure, even suicide): "I know what Professor Heintz said wasn't directed at me personally, but in a way I'm supposed to speak for all students, particularly the students who aren't here because adults like Professor Heintz make them feel out of place and stupid and get big laughs when they make insulting jokes about laziness and Cliff Notes" (Horton 2003).

In between the book and its reader, there is the authority of the teacher who tells us how to understand it or the authority of the commentators, of the manuals, or of dictionaries and encyclopaedias, so that there is no free access to the great books anymore: "Between the author Shakespeare and the teen reader who might benefit from him stands Authority, in the shape of boring teachers with boring

examinations that turn Shakespeare's deep questioning of the human heart into the kind of questions that fit into multiple choice, and his poetry into a list of words to be looked up in the glossary" (Horton 2003). As Oakeshott would put it, there is no access to a way of thinking, particularly to Shakespeare's way of thinking, only to 'texts' or 'literature' in the pejorative sense that he uses the terms in.

It does not really have to do with Shakespeare, but with the wrong perspective from which the *world of human achievement* is reflected; the mirror was just placed upside down, and it now reflects the hideous mask of vanity: "Next time you're asking yourselves why young people today don't appreciate Shakespeare, look in the mirror" (Horton 2003). In the unfortunate case where authoritative education rules over liberal education, university degenerates into a *Court of Elsinore* where "it's all about seeming, seeming instead of being. Put on a happy face. Look up to the elite. Instead of looking in the mirror" (Horton 2003). At the end of the play, after uttering these words, Jenny collapses. It is a sign that personality edification is about to produce, rebuilt from the ashes like Phoenix

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