**Michael Oakeshott and the “Deadliness of Doing”**

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“that closed circle of ‘latent dread and anxiety’ where work and unemployment are the two inescapable poles of existence…”

-Pieper quoting Goethe on the “world of work”

“what can we find in …, the toil of millions, other than the drive to exist at any price… the same … drive which makes stunted plants push their roots into arid rocks”

Nietzsche, “The Greek State”

In this titular poetic Oakeshottian phrase is contained a view of human life which does not prioritize practical existence (including labor), but rather employs poetic imagining and philosophical exploration as ways of superseding it without negating it (“the splendors of the firmament of time may be eclipsed but are extinguished not”). This essay explores the relevance of Oakeshott’s arresting phrase, “the deadliness of doing,”1 to the theme of this edited volume on the place of labor in a human life. The steps in this exploration include:

(1) Oakeshott’s view of the limited place of all practical activity in a human life, distinguished from the view, for example, of a materialist philosopher such as Karl Marx that all human thought and abstraction is derivative from practical considerations;

(2) Oakeshott’s view that the most intelligent approach to human satisfaction is to nurture a life which as much as possible engages in activity which can be done largely for its own sake, rather than for some other, external benefit; that this is an intelligent approach to living because it mirrors the structure of human experience which is creative or poetic rather than prosaic; and how Oakeshott’s view on the meaning of activity done for its own sake compares and contrasts with the views of Aristotle and Montaigne (one of Oakeshott’s “heroes”);

(3) a discussion of the importance of ritualistic practices as an intelligent approach to achieving necessary and unavoidable practical outcomes in a less burdensome (and less “deadly”) fashion, since rituals arguably are practices most amendable to being performed for their own sake, while also yielding some residual practical benefits; and

(4) a brief reply to critiques of this approach to contented living as bespeaking a “loss of nerve,” or moral and political quietism.

**I. Practical Activity**

In Oakeshott’s rather Daoist take on reality, human activity consists of being active in various ways, in which a fluid relationship between self and non-self defines and divulges itself. In practical activity the images are those of desire and aversion, approval and disapproval, and have a utilitarian definition of “fact” and “non-fact.” Practical activity for Oakeshott is the most common way of creating mental images, and although it does not constitute the totality of human experience, it is “unavoidable.” Other ways of being active for Oakeshott are the scientific, historical, poetic, and philosophic.2

For our purposes here, it is not required to delve into Oakeshott’s various modes of experience. What is important in this instance is that for Oakeshott there are important forms of “non-laborious” activity, which have evolved over time and which offer us different avenues to what is satisfactory in experience. These are not primarily concerned with desire, aversion and utility, and the most important of these for our purposes is poetic imagining, which offers an escape from the “deadliness of doing” in unavoidable practical activity, and as well from the quantitive language of modern science which (along with practice) has come to dominate the civilized conversation of the species.

For Oakeshott poetic (or aesthetic) imagining is the most realistic escape from the deadening voices of practice and modern science largely because, on Oakeshott’s view, it involves the creation of unique images for their own creative sake, distinguished from the practical symbolism of contemporary quotidian languages. Oakeshott even asserts that poetic images are all that can remain of Plato’s forms, which were a matter of copying putatively pre-existing models in intellective space, not the creation of unique images with no meaning outside themselves. For Oakeshott, for example, what may have been crafted a millenium ago as a practical, religious symbolic image of worship, could for contemporary viewers become simply an image of contemplative delight. Nor need such images be bounded by frames or marble pedestals. Any image or landscape which delightfully arrests contemplation is a poetic image for Oakeshott.

**II. Activity for its Own Sake**

Oakeshott takes from Aristotle the idea of activity done for its own sake, without Aristotle’s teleology. For Aristotle of the Nicomachean Ethics and The Metaphysics, the only activity which, carefully speaking, can be does for its own sake, is activity in which intellect acts upon intellect, as in the case of the Unmoved Mover which thinks itself. For the ontological dualist, Aristotle, activity in which thought acts upon matter (e.g,. shoemaking) is always for some other, utilitarian purpose (e.g., to wear and walk in the shoes). Politics, to illustrate further for Aristotle, is a hybrid activity, existing both for its own sake (justice) and for some external sake (public order).

Oakeshott, follows here the 16th century essayist, Montaigne, in the view that all sorts of mundane activity can be done for its own sake, such as conversation, friendship, and so on. Arguably, it took the long, historical influence of the symbolism of the incarnate logos to displace Aristotle’s view that only the theoretical life could be for its own sake, with no extraneous purpose (though mundane activities could have residual practical and productive benefits).3

This seems especially true of ritualistic practices in which the delight comes not so much in the outcome, but simply in getting the practice right. As Oakeshott observes, one lights another’s cigarette, not because they cannot do it themselves, but simply because “it is the practice.” Oakeshott also observes of fishing that it can become a practice done for its own sake if one is indifferent to actually catching fish. (Though we may observe that fish caught even indifferently can still be consumed for nourishment). In general, Oakeshott’s view of contented living in a very practical and technological age and civilization, is (as with Montaigne) to structure one’s life insofar as possible, around doing as many things as intelligently possible and appropriate, for their own sake, and in the present moment rather than for complicated future projects requiring the extensive use of others as mere means for one’s own projects.

**III. Implications of Oakeshott’s Escapes from “the Deadliness of Doing”**

In my view Oakeshott’s view of contented living and the limited place of labor and meaningful work in the contemporary world is discerning, intelligent, and persuasive. Unlike Nietzsche, he does not simply view the idea of the “dignity of work” and the “dignity of human beings” as attempts to reconcile ourselves to the slavery and regimentation accompanying modern mass production, which are to be rejected wholesale by discerning superior individuals. Unlike Rousseau who, like Nietzsche and the ancient Greeks, views a laboring life as slavery, yet offers as an antidote the romantic, “either-or” choice between a life of private reveries, or Spartan-like devotion to the common, political good. Unlike the neo-Calvinist, Locke, Oakeshott does not praise human labor, only then to degrade it as merely a means to ownership. Unlike Marx, Oakeshott does not promise the fantastic overcoming of all human alienation from itself and its products through huge economic surpluses to be generated by the syntheses of capitalist egoism and medieval “Gemeinschaft.” And unlike Pieper who appears to want a general recognition of the importance of leisure in the generation of higher culture without attention to the economic surpluses necessary for this, Oakeshott simply offers (like Montaigne) an intelligent, private approach for individuals so inclined to navigate the obstacles to contented living in whatever novel historical circumstances.

As for the common sense charge that this approach bespeaks a timidity and lack of ambition in eschewing laborious engagement to better one’s social status (“the American dream”), the best reply is that this choice need not be either the cause, nor outcome of a lack of nerve, but rather simply the preference for a private over a public life, grounded in the insight that the private things are the most appropriate for creatures such as most of us situated in a world of contingency and flux. Such an approach to contented and appropriate living allows one to suspend judgment on such speculative questions as to whether there is a purpose to the whole or cosmos to validate a laborious life. (Oakeshott appears to have thought there is none4, and he also appears not to have thought it necessary to have taken Pascal’s wager).

By way of illustrating in more detail what such a life would look like, let us look at Oakeshott’s approach to friendship, conversation and ritual, and how it resembles and also differs from Montaigne’s more Lucretian/Epicurean approach to an appropriate human life. We shall see that Oakeshott’s is a more aesthetic and ritualistic approach for combatting the monotony and “deadliness” of a life of “doing,” grounded in Oakeshott’s acceptance and embrace of the structure of reality as the poetic (vs prosaic).5

Oakeshott’s description of friendship is the most aesthetic known to me, and differs from the Aristotelian, the Epicurean/Lucretian and even the Montaignian account in not privileging the worthiness of a friend. Consider this unique Oakeshottian account of friendship:

But there are relationships … in which no result is sought and which are enraged in for their own sake … This is so of friendship … Friends are not concerned with what might be made of one another, but only with the enjoyment of one another … and the absence of any desire to change or improve … A friend is not someone who … holds certain acceptable opinions: he is somebody who … excites contemplation … and delight and loyalty on account of the relationship entered into. One friend cannot replace another. (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 177)

Consider also in the context of this highly stylized and aesthetic Oakeshottien account, his discussion of conversation, which for Montaigne, by contrast, is praised for its instruction in the search for truth. Here is Oakeshott’s account of conversation as purged of any purposes which would qualify its being done solely for the delight of conversing:

In conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no truth to be discovered … Of course, a conversation may have passages of argument … but reasoning is neither sovereign nor alone … In conversation thoughts of different species take wing and play around one another …. And enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another. (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 198-99)

Oakeshott is also more explicit than Montaigne on his characterization and valuation of “ritual” in a human life. In my view, Oakeshott separates out the formal from the substantive aspects of an activity as an alterative to the monopoly and deadening of an orientation exclusively focused on practical existence. Oakeshott’s formalist orientation entails respect and appreciation for/of the ritualistic aspects of activity – that is those aspects done solely for their own sake, literally (even if they also have some residual practical benefits). Here is an instance of Oakeshott’s thinking on this score with regard to fishing:

There are activities that may be engaged in, not for a prize, but for the enjoyment they generate … Consider fishing … Fishing is an activity that may be engaged in, not for the profit of a catch, *but for its own sake*. [W]here this is so, *the activity has become a ritual* and [W]hat matters is the enjoyment of exercising skill (or merely passing the time) … (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 177-78)

Now, in my view this expansive Oakeshottian account of ritualistic practice is based on Oakeshott’s ontological claim that structure of reality is “poetic” (not prosaic), that is, that the form and content, the how and what, of activity and thought arise simultaneously and condition one another reciprocally. This Oakeshottian claim about the importance of formal rituals as well as informal rituals (such as fishing to pass the time) has broader cultural and political implications which it is instructive to note, and which prefigure much recent assessment on the costs of loss of ritual in contemporary life.6 Oakeshott’s account of these costs is a part of his general critique of the baneful affects of the modern rationalist invasion of politics and morality since Bacon and Descartes, and they include the deterioration and loss of genuine skill and moral balance, as well as an increased prevalence of war and conflict generally.7

By way of concluding this exploration of the implications of Oakeshott’s beguiling phrase “the deadliness of doing,” let us make a most unlikely comparison on the effects of loss of ritual in especially Western religious culture in contributing to the disastrous wars of the first half of the twentieth century. Let us look an account of the causes of especially the first world war in the thought of a thinker Oakeshott never discussed, but who shared the view that the loss of (especially religious) ritual in the cultural monopoly of the rationalist Weltanshauung had led to moral and political chaos. Let us look briefly at the thought of the depth psychologist, Carl Jung, on the deeper causes of the first world war.

In some lectures on psychology and religion given at Yale in 1937, Jung made the following claim, especially with reference to “the adventurous German tribes.” In brief, Jung argued that the rationalist monopoly of modern science and technology had forgotten the unaccountable forces of the unconscious mind, and, in combination with the Protestant suppression of daily, ritualistic religious reflection (the rosary) in the lives of millions of European Catholics (which he thought a safe and stable way of moderating these hidden forces), had produced the “dragons which devoured the earth.” (Jung, 1939, p 57-58)

Now, while Oakeshott would never have accepted this kind of general “covering law” psychological explanation of major events, his conclusions about the disastrous and chaotic moral and military consequences of the modern rationalist project to eliminate as much as possible the influence of ritual and custom in the lives of millions of people by mandating more rationalist solutions to rationalist-generated chaos (especially war) parallel Jung’s psychological explanations for the wars of the twentieth century. Additionally, Jung’s claims suggest a more literal meaning to Oakeshott’s phrase “the deadliness of doing,” a phrase which Oakeshott apparently borrowed from a 19th century Victorian hymn, possibly meant as a dramatic critique of the doctrine of salvation through works alone, or perhaps simply as a warning of the unsatisfactoriness of a life of doing *without still reflection* on the being behind it, an addictive temptation ever-present in the feverish Baconian scientific project to master and exploit the resources of the physical world as an end in itself.

**Notes:**

1. This phrase occurs only twice in Oakeshott’s work, in the essay on the voice of poetry, and in On Human Conduct, as a path of intermittent escape from the monopoly of practical and scientific discourse in the modern world. The phrase “the deadliness of doing” has been discovered (by Noel O’Sullivan) in a Victorian hymn, perhaps intended (?) as a dramatic critique of the doctrine of salvation through works alone.
2. Oakeshott acknowledges that philosophy is parasitic on practical human life, and often is under the illusion that it can replace, rather than merely transcend, practical experience (to include a life of physical or intellectual labor.) This is a recurring theme of Oakeshott’s 1933 book Experience and its Modes.
3. The argument has been made that Augustine’s trinitarian reflections on the human personality as a mixture of belief, thought and will, bridged the unsatisfactory gap in ancient idealism and ancient materialism, between thought and matter. (Cochrane, 1946) Oakeshott’s constructivism owes something to the medieval nominalism of William of Okham for whom human beings could imitate God’s creativity in “Speaking” the beings, of the world (*universalia sunt nomina*). For more on this, see deMuralt, 1991.
4. Oakshott, (1933). P. 287. “The valuable never even appears to be the whole, nor the universe … to be valuable.” For Oakeshott, the valuable is confined to the realm of practical experience.
5. For a demonstration of this theme, see Coats (2020).
6. For a summary of some of them, see Stephenson, 2015.
7. For development of this theme, see Finn, 2013.

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