



The School and the State: A problematic relationship in Michael Oakeshott's philosophy of education

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EN Abstract. This essay considers a problem with Oakeshott's theory of civil society, namely, its impotence to support the robust form of education necessary to sustain civil association, which is one of the underlying postulates of his theory of political life. This reflects the significant disconnect between Oakeshott's political philosophy in *On Human Conduct* and his philosophy of education. Central to this philosophy is the cultivation of individuality. This character trait is required to enjoy a fulfilling life and to participate in civil association. The primary thesis of this essay is that the state must provide the resources to allow the poor the opportunity to acquire and exercise their individuality. The secondary thesis is that the extent to which such intervention is realistic or appropriate should not be exaggerated.

Keywords: civil association; autonomy; individuality; *Bildung*; class; poverty

ES La escuela y el Estado: una relación problemática en la filosofía de la educación de Michael Oakeshott

ES Resumen. Este ensayo considera un problema dentro de la teoría de la sociedad civil de Oakeshott, que es su inoperancia para apoyar una forma sólida de educación, necesaria para sostener la asociación civil, que es uno de los postulados subyacentes de su teoría de la vida política. Esto refleja la importante desconexión entre la filosofía política de Oakeshott en *On Human Conduct* y su filosofía de la educación. El cultivo de la individualidad es central para esta filosofía. Este rasgo de personalidad es necesario para disfrutar de una vida plena y participar en asociaciones civiles. La tesis principal de este ensayo es que ese estado debe proporcionar los recursos que permitan a los pobres la oportunidad de adquirir y ejercer su individualidad. La tesis secundaria es que no se debe exagerar hasta qué punto dicha intervención es realista o apropiada.

Palabras clave: asociación civil, autonomía, individualidad, *Bildung*, clase, pobreza.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 2. Civil association, enterprise association and income re-distribution. 3. Promoting individuality: The role of education. 4. The role of the State in education: Its necessity and its limits. 5. Conclusion. 6. References

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1. Introduction

This article is prompted by a desire to consider the plausibility and educational implications of a critique of a crucial feature of Oakeshott's *oeuvre*. In a long essay in *Political Theory*, Andrew Norris (2016) astutely identifies a significant disconnect between Oakeshott's political philosophy in *On Human Conduct* (1975) and his theory of education in many essays that he has devoted to the subject (Oakeshott, 1989a, 1989b). Part of Norris's critique takes issue with claims in my book on Oakeshott, and his essay led me to re-consider whether Oakeshott's form of civil association permits state intervention in support of under-resourced young people (Williams, 2007). Norris claims that I and other commentators espouse too flexible and generous a view of what Oakeshott's theory allows.

The first part of this article aims to appraise Norris's response to my view of Oakeshott's theory of civil society. A significant incompatibility is noted between Oakeshott's (1975) political philosophy in *On Human Conduct* and his philosophy of education. The second part of the article examines the conception of individuality that underpins his educational values. I argue that it is important for state intervention to redistribute resources to provide the education necessary to facilitate civil association and to cultivate the individuality required to sustain such association and for citizens to find fulfilment and to flourish. The third part of the article argues that the extent to which such intervention is realistic or appropriate must not be exaggerated.

2. Civil association, enterprise association and income re-distribution

First something must be said about Oakeshott's political philosophy. His philosophy is constructed on an account of civil life that aims to accommodate the maximum exercise of human freedom. The philosophy is based on a conception of the state that is in turn based on a theory about forms of human association. He argues that human beings can be joined together in two forms of association, one of which he calls enterprise or purposive association, and the other civil association. An enterprise association is made up of individuals joined together 'in terms of the pursuit of some common purpose, some substantive condition of things to be jointly procured, or some common interest to be continuously satisfied' (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 114). The other kind of association is relationship in terms of a practice rather than in terms of the pursuit of a purpose and Oakeshott calls this civil association. This refers to a form of relationship whereby people are joined together, not in the pursuit of a joint purpose or purposes, but rather in terms of the recognition of the authority of the social practice that is constituted by the rule of law. This is what he calls the practice of civility or of civil life or a 'practice of "just" conduct' (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 182).

Taxation and income distribution

It is important to consider the nature of the relationship between civil association and its system of taxation. As the principal mechanism for the redistribution of resources, the taxation code is a system of rules that can be altered through an activity of politics expressed through appropriate discussion and debate. In my book (Williams, 2007), I argue that imposing taxes is far from the politics of enterprise association because it does not involve the identification of a corporate purpose regarding how benefits might be most appropriately redistributed to a particular end. On the contrary, arguments regarding taxation represent the politics of civil association because they involve considering the desirability of laws or rules with a view to their conservation or alteration (Oakeshott, 1975, 162–63, 184; Oakeshott, 1976, pp. 361–62). Engaging in this form of politics demands acknowledgment of the authority of the law embodied in the taxation code and, consequently, an acceptance of the procedure whereby its provisions are enacted, amended, and repealed. Accordingly, it does not turn civil association into enterprise association.

Another strand of my argument is based on a comment of Oakeshott's in a footnote. It concerns the 'inner morality' of his ideal of civil association (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 153, note 1). This can be understood to permit the substantial shift in resources necessary to facilitate more extensive access by young people from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage to education. There is no reason in principle why this 'inner morality' should not accommodate a distribution of resources that would put participation in education and the cultivation of individuality within the reach of everyone in practice as well as in theory.

Norris, however, claims that the theory of civil association is incompatible with the distribution of resources required to allow the children from under-resourced families access to the education necessary to participate in civil association and to cultivate individuality. He comprehensively criticizes my argument that Oakeshott's theory of civil life is consistent with a distributivist project. He challenges this reading of Oakeshott's theory of civil association, arguing that it is not hospitable to the attribution to the state of a role in intervening to improve the conditions for teaching and learning in schools in disadvantaged areas if this involves substantial transfer of financial resources via the levying of taxes. This is because the attempt to improve significantly these schools will require the non-voluntary appropriation of income from taxpayers who have no say in the matter. As Norris represents it, for individual liberty to flourish within Oakeshott's theory of civil life, the domestic activity of the state must be radically curtailed, and it must refrain from the pursuit of a supposed common good.

Yet participation in civil association does require an appropriate education. It is 'not an independent, self-sustaining mode of association' and Oakeshott's account of the postulates of this form of life entails a robust form of education (Norris, 2016, p. 21). Such an education is necessary to enable young people both to come to understand, value and preserve civil association and also, what is equally important in this context, to enable all citizens to develop their individuality in order to allow civil association to flourish.

In retrospect, I would wish to accept Norris's claim that I exaggerate the hospitality of the theory of civil association to the redistribution of resources to promote more extensive access to education. I should instead have offered a different kind of argument based on a flaw in Oakeshott's thinking diagnosed many years ago by Josiah Lee Auspitz (1976) in the same journal in which Norris's article appears. This is Oakeshott's tendency 'insufficiently' to multiply 'essences' and to work in terms of a very restricted conceptual repertoire (1976, p. 288). This leads to the affirmation of dichotomies that are unacceptably stark. A notable characteristic of his conceptual mapping is to divide experience in an oppositional or either/or way into one of two categories, for example, between the worlds of art and of practical life. It would be like claiming that there are two only languages spoken in South America – Portuguese and Spanish. On the contrary, many indigenous languages are spoken – as well as French, Dutch and English.

In the context of social philosophy, the contrast drawn between the two forms of association, civil (*societas*) and enterprise (*universitas*) is too unequivocal and limiting. 'In the end', Norris argues, 'civil association is entangled with enterprise association not merely for accidental or non-essential reasons, but because it requires conditions that it itself cannot provide' (2016, p. 21). Norris is correct in his claim that a robust education is a condition of participation in civil association, and this requires the state to manage and redistribute resources in providing universal education and thus to act as a *universitas* or enterprise association.

But such an education can also contribute to the promotion of individuality, a personal quality necessary for civil association to be sustained and flourish. The notion of individuality is centrally relevant to Oakeshott's philosophy of the human person, although it has not attracted attention from philosophers of education. It is appropriate at this point to say something about this notion and its place in his conception of education.

3. Promoting individuality: The role of education

Oakeshott subscribes passionately to the ideal of individuality that lies at the heart of his vision of the aims of education. He offers an illuminating account of the historical emergence of this ideal and its counterpart notion, that of the "anti-individual" or of the "individual *manqué*" (Oakeshott, 1991a, 363-383; Oakeshott, 1975, 275-9). Individuality incorporates the notion of personal autonomy, but the concept is richer and more resonant, and it takes us beyond mere autonomy. In developing his notion of individuality, Oakeshott turns to an examination of moral life. He identifies three forms of moral conduct which, in his essay, 'The moral life in the writings of Thomas Hobbes', he calls 'the morality of communal ties; . . . the morality of individuality; and..., the morality of the common good' (Oakeshott, 1991b, p. 296). Each register of moral sensibility has a corresponding understanding of the appropriate office and task of the activities of government. The different forms represent dominant tendencies in the evolution of European moral consciousness, and these have been, of necessity, somewhat artificially extrapolated by Oakeshott from actual history. Communal morality identified good conduct with appropriate observance of one's role and duties in the life of the community. Moral expectations were prescribed and circumscribed by the individual's position in the feudal social hierarchy. Conditions of medieval life made the expression and the assertion of individuality very difficult, as any manifestation of moral eccentricity risked being interpreted as treason or heresy.

Feudal conditions of social organization were gradually modified, and a new social order emerged in which the individual's status as lord, vassal, or serf was no longer automatically assumed. In conjunction with the evolution of this new social order, Oakeshott argues that there also emerged a new and different kind of understanding of human nature. This was expressed in terms of general culture in what is called the Renaissance, and it took a specifically religious form in the Reformation. Calling into question the theological assumptions underlying the communal organization of the feudal social order, an awareness of moral identity in terms of individual personality revealed itself. This awareness first took hold in Italy, where Oakeshott, quoting Burkhardt, claims that at the end of the thirteenth century the human world "began to swarm with individuality"; where "the ban laid upon human personality was dissolved"; and where "a thousand figures meet us, each in his own special shape and dress" (Oakeshott, 1991a, p. 365).

According to Oakeshott people responded in two ways to the challenge posed by the demands of this new social order. Some welcomed the opportunity to create a personal moral identity for themselves, while others were satisfied to assume the attenuated moral identity of what Oakeshott scathingly describes as the "individual *manqué*", "the anti-individual" or even more dismissively, "the mass man", people with a herd mentality (Oakeshott, 1991a, 372-3, 363). This kind of personality rejected the challenge to exercise moral autonomy that followed the dissolution of the medieval social order. Freedom and its consequent responsibility were experienced as unwanted burdens that such individuals felt unable or unwilling to assume. They felt unhappy and insecure without the support of the feudal social order that prescribed their social and moral duties. Among the dominant personal qualities of this kind of character, Oakeshott alleges, are pusillanimity, lack of confidence, and also envy and resentment at those who derive satisfaction from the exercise of their freedom. According to Oakeshott, what this character type sought was a morality which would at once assuage her or his insecurity and curtail or proscribe the activities of the person who found happiness in a private sphere of action. Though it was not possible to reconstitute the feudal order, the anti-individual sought a form of morality which would reflect, as far as possible, the medieval 'morality of communal ties' (Oakeshott, 1991b, p. 296). The outcome of these efforts was what Oakeshott variously calls a morality of the "common good" (1975, p. 27); "the social good", "the good of all" (1991b, p. 297; or the "public good" (Oakeshott, 1991a, p. 378).

A contrary conception of human nature and of morality is expressed in the character of the individuals who embody Oakeshott's positive moral ideal. These individuals responded to the moral challenge that followed

the dissolution of the medieval social order by forging for themselves a moral law - an *auto-nomos*, namely, a self-made law, making of each individual a 'law to himself' (Oakeshott, 1991b, p. 366). Associated with the character of autonomous individuals was a profound self-understanding, together with a confident 'command' of personal resources (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 237). But the moral character of this person is very different from that of moral eccentrics who, in the idiosyncrasy of their moral choices, might also be considered a kind of law unto themselves. Leaving aside the plausibility of the bifurcation of moral types, yet another contrast that is too stark, Oakeshott's narrow conception of individuality needs extensive elaboration.

Individuality: Its multiple expressions

Individuality is more than a moral attitude. It also includes 'command of resources' (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 237), including what Jane Austen (1973, p. 64) calls 'resources for solitude', to make more positive and creative use of our lives. It is possible to develop Oakeshott's notion of personal resources in unpacking the notion of individuality. The disposition should not be envisaged as only a matter of making intellectual decisions, but it is also given expression in involvement in pursuits with which we identify. The absence of any activity that really engages them may arguably be found among disaffected young people or, indeed, among those who find themselves at a loose end following retirement. Identification refers to a relationship between a person and a chosen pursuit. The presence of a connection between human beings and their activities is a defining feature of their individuality.

Individuality finds expression in enjoyment of what life offers for its own sake or on its own account rather than for the sake of a 'profit, a reward, a prize, or a result in addition to the experience itself' (Oakeshott, 1991c, p. 415). Aspects of this experience are to be found in any activity that we engage in for the pleasure of it. Typical of such activities are enjoying human relations, skiing, surfing, mountaineering and all other activities that have certain purposes, ends or outcomes written into them. Such activities are not amenable to a means-ends logic. For example, the exhilaration and the sense of mastery, wellbeing and closeness to nature that a person can derive from skiing are not ends to which certain physical arrangements are the means. From the enthusiastic and practised participant's point of view, such feelings are what skiing is for her or him; they are not ends instrumentally related to participation in the activity itself.

It is necessary to uncouple the notions of traditional liberal learning from the cultivation of individuality. The development of individuality can be envisioned in forms that go beyond the purely academic or intellectual. Like the learning required in traditional liberal education, practical learning or craftwork can also be understood in a manner compatible with the shaping of individuality. In view of his valuation of academic pursuits, some readers may well be surprised to learn that Oakeshott is uncomfortable with the Greek distinction between the arts of music, poetry, drama and dancing and arts like sculpture and painting, which were perceived as mere crafts because they involved interaction with the material world (Oakeshott, 2004, p. 312-13). But these activities also belong outside the world of 'getting and spending', and we have, he argues, 'risen above' the distinction between arts and crafts (pp. 309, 313).² This points to the possibility of an expansive and generous conception of individuality that extends beyond what academic learning can provide and affirms the potential of practical learning to promote independent human flourishing.

The experience of Mike Cooley (1997), the environmentalist and engineer, is instructive here. Like other young people growing up in rural Ireland in the 1950s, Cooley learned to think with and through his hands. Skilled interactions between humans and their physical environment have a central role to play in the cultivation of individuality. It is a mistake, argues Cooley, to conceive a craft tradition as 'simply the transmission of manual dexterity, whereas it is actually the transmission of a great culture, of how to organise yourself, how to get materials, how to plan things' (1997, p. 59). In other words, it involves participating in the tradition in question. Embodied learning is a form of *Bildung* that allows us to 'to make something of ourselves' (Oakeshott, 1991d, p. 187) and even 'the most or the best' of ourselves (Oakeshott, 1989a, p. 47). The cultivation of individuality in contexts that extend beyond the forms of traditional liberal education espoused in the work of Oakeshott (and indeed in Norris's essay) is regrettably not foregrounded in the former's work.

4. The role of the State in education: Its necessity and its limits

Provision for the young people from under-resourced backgrounds to allow them to cultivate their individuality in different spheres is crucial. But Oakeshott has always had reservations about state involvement in education. He perceived this involvement, what he refers to as 'socialization' (Williams, 2007), as being both reductionist and manipulative. The reductionist aspect concerns his claim about the vocational dimension of education. He argues that vocationally oriented schooling was originally designed for the poor and peasant classes in order to equip them with the skills to make them more socially useful as citizens. With the emergence of industrial society, however, he maintains that vocationally oriented education has been gradually extended to include all social classes. Contemporary society emphasises this orientation to such an extent that it has come to dominate thinking about education, particularly as all stages of education have fallen increasingly under state control. In accordance with this conception of education, as Oakeshott characterizes it, human beings are seen primarily, if not exclusively, as 'intelligent components' of a state's 'natural resources, its human "capital"' (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 307). The school has thus become an arena in which young people

² 'Getting and spending' is a phrase from Wordsworth's (1966) poem "The World is Too Much with Us" that Oakeshott uses without seeming to realize its source. Using this phrase without attribution goes to show how our reading can become so much part of us that we are at times unaware of the provenance of some of our phrases.

are offered 'a systematic apprenticeship to domestic, industrial and commercial life in a "modern" state' (Oakeshott, 1989b, p. 82).

The manipulative aspect of socialization can also be described as the ideological, whereby the proper aims of education are subverted by the state in the endeavour to 'propagate beliefs favourable' to particular interests (Oakeshott, 1975a, p. 289). As a result of training in basic literacy and numeracy, it was hoped, writes Oakeshott, that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds would be able to make a larger contribution to the well-being of society and play their part in the state's economic project. He speaks in a critical tone of the self-appointed:

right and duty of the government of a modern European state 'to school the nation' in such a manner that each of its component parts might recognize himself as a member of the corporate association and be made fit to contribute to the pursuit of the corporate enterprise according to his abilities and in relation to the current managerial policy. (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 307)

Oakeshott's point here is consistent with the argument of those historians who suggest that the teaching of literacy was simply a feature of the endeavour to propagate approved social ideology. Indeed, according to Richard Johnson (1976) for example, the purpose of the introduction of compulsory schooling, after the Industrial Revolution, was to make the masses into more acquiescent and productive workers. Consequently, argues Johnson (1976, p. 47-8), supporting his argument with apposite quotations and illustrations from contemporary records, the promotion of literacy and of instruction in new labour skills was less important than the need of employers for workers who were willing to comply with the disciplinary regimes required in factories (Johnson, 1976, p. 48). More important than mere literacy was, therefore, the compliant and orderly disposition created by the authoritarian discipline of the schools.

These claims are debatable as I argue in Williams (2007), where I also explain that access to educational institutions may require significant state intervention. This intervention is an expression of interest of the community in ensuring maximum access to the intrinsic and positional advantages of education. The law of the market and the vagaries of philanthropy are highly unlikely ever to assure the full benefits of education (or of health care) for the population at large. It is one thing to tolerate private schooling, but it is misguided to think that private agencies will assume responsibility for the education of the under-resourced and the hard to teach, or those with additional learning needs. It is hard to envisage how the children of the poor or of immigrants will improve their opportunities in life without publicly supported education. This is an important motif in Alice Zeniter (2021)'s powerful novel *The art of losing*. The narrator reflects on the role of the school as an avenue to enhanced life chances and in lifting the children of immigrants 'out of poverty' (p. 204) and away from the *cités* or ghettos. The school is the '*open sesame*', the 'magic word', the 'font of all hope' (p. 204). Without state intervention, it is unlikely that a fulfilling and enabling education can become the legacy of every citizen in society.

Another reason to support the involvement of the state in education is to protect children from parental neglect. Often, though not always, parents know best what is in their children's interests, the community, however, also has a responsibility for the oversight of the welfare of its young citizens. This point is clear if we consider the practice of home schooling. The community has a duty to ensure young people can participate in normal social life, and schools are one site of social education. In the school, education is offered via the formal curriculum but also via the informal interactions with other children, with teachers and other adults who work there. Young people who are home-schooled may miss out on this aspect of learning – even if they are not sequestered from their peers and take part in sporting and cultural activities within the locality.

There are many versions of home schooling, from the extremely liberal and *laissez-faire* to the rigid and controlling. Each version is problematic in its own way. If home schooling is informed by a *laissez-faire* attitude, allowing children to learn whatever they are motivated to do at particular times, it may be difficult to ensure they receive the minimum education prescribed by law. The community has an obligation to ensure that young people acquire the intellectual skills necessary to contribute to their own economic independence and to the economic welfare of the community. This also applies to the other extreme of the beliefs underlying the practice of home schooling. These are the convictions based on a custodial impulse to secure the commitment of children to particular religious beliefs. Where young people grow up convinced that religious beliefs that they have been taught are incontrovertible, their ability to think for themselves will be subverted. Instilling such beliefs also misrepresents the nature of religious faith. The process is inconsistent with the promotion of the intellectual autonomy of children, which is rightly considered one of the principal aims of education in liberal democracies. The religious formation of children is not the responsibility of state agencies, but ensuring the capacity of children to think independently about life stances does come within public oversight. Moreover, it should also be borne mind that oversight of all versions of home-schooling is a charge on the financial resources of the state.

The limits of the appropriateness of state intervention

Despite the foregoing, it is possible to exaggerate the need for the state to be involved in cultivating individuality through institutions of formal learning. There are limits to the extent that state intervention in educational provision is realistic or appropriate. In the first place, it is not as if education were not already being supported by public funds. The possibilities for the rich cultivation of individuality are to be found in many schools and their presence in state schools should not be underestimated.³ It may well be true that in many countries

³ This underestimation is to be found in Norris's essay, pp., 2, 15, 16.

the condition of state-supported public schools compared to their fee-charging private equivalents makes the task of educating students in the former more difficult. Yet the quality of the experience of school is not confined to learners in upper middle-class schools. Even in the most unpromising of circumstances, imaginative and committed teachers can offer these possibilities to their students. Franco-Canadian author Nancy Huston reflects with admiration on the work done by teachers of literature in disadvantaged areas in France who, by managing to relate literature to life, succeed in arousing in young people a passion for reading (Williams, 2007, p.83). High culture is not the prerogative of the middle and upper classes and indeed this is something that Oakeshott feels very strongly.

Yes, no doubt my “school” is an ideal, but it is not the product of fancy & it really did & does still (almost) exist. Many years ago when I was in Dublin my taxi-driver turned around and quoted a line from Virgil. (2016, Williams, 2017) ⁴

This is not just aspirational rhetoric and wishful thinking – the memoirs of educators such as Frank McCourt (2006), Bryan MacMahon (1992) and John McGahern (2005) are replete with memorable examples of teachers who manage to connect with the lives of young people in difficult circumstances. The work of Pádraig Hogan (2010) provides compelling illustrations of possibilities of exciting, learner-centred approaches to teaching in difficult teaching environments. Hogan applies his metaphor of education as “cultural courtship” to show how young people who are very negatively disposed towards classroom learning can be reached.⁵

Secondly, the appropriateness of state involvement in sponsoring the forms of individuality embedded in classical forms of liberal education may well go against the wishes of parents and students. It is necessary to ask how many people would want the form of liberal learning defended by Oakeshott and endorsed by Norris. As noted previously, the development of individuality can be envisioned in forms that go beyond the purely academic or intellectual forms of traditional liberal learning. Some parents and students may want the vocationally oriented learning described by Frank McCourt (2006) in *Teacher man*. McCourt writes of the school choice made by working-class parents from Irish backgrounds in New York. They tell him that they would like to send their children to Catholic schools but that these ‘were not known for vocational or technical training’ and that this is what they want for their children (2006, p. 71). In Catholic schools, explain the parents, it was ‘all history and prayers, which was all right for the next world, but their kids had to think about this world’ (2006, p. 71). These parents were wise to value practical education of a vocational character.

Thirdly, there is a danger of overestimating the role of the school in forms of learning that support individuality. Not all learning takes place in school or within institutions of formal education. We need to have a wide conception of the contexts in which the cultivation of individuality can take place and many out-of-school forms of learning provide this. Education takes place in multiple contexts, and we enjoy many experiences that are educative in a more general sense. To be sure, education usually refers to that which has been designed in order to teach us something, and schooling refers to the normal environment within which the education of young people is conducted. But experiences may well be educative in the sense that we learn from them – for example, a visit to an art gallery, a place of worship or a hospital. Mike Cooley (1997) gives powerful voice to the possibility of learning within the community. He acquired his notion of the ‘cascade use’ of technologies by observing how women could adapt a wedding dress to serve as Confirmation and First Communion wear. He also learned much by observing the blacksmith and the stonemason at their work (Cooley, 1997, pp. 56-57. Admittedly today many young people are unlikely to experience the rich encounters with learning within the community enjoyed by the young Mike Cooley. Still learning within the community can be significant – after all, it takes a village to raise a child.

A fourth and final issue concerns the obstacles that absence of cultural capital puts in the way of achieving rich versions of individuality on the part of children from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage. Although not impossible, it is difficult to engineer significant improvement in the life chances of the less well off. These young people are at a serious disadvantage compared to young people who come from affluent backgrounds where learning and the affirmation of individuality are valued. This applies both to young people with wealthy parents who provide access to multiple forms of cultural capital and also to young people who come from communities, like that of Mike Cooley’s, with rich and living craft and trade traditions. The children of rich well-connected parents are equipped with what Elena Ferrante (2013) describes as a ‘map of prestige’ that furnishes them with ‘magical weapons before the battle’ (pp. 403, 411). To draw on a metaphor from poetry, the children of the less well-off are not versed in the “secret Scripture” of the rich.⁶ In any case, we live ‘in servitude to scarce resources of the world (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 45, note 1) and these include the number of prestige-bearing, ego-involving occupations available to people. There is only a limited number of high-status employment opportunities in society. No amount of social engineering can allow everyone to become be a CEO of a company, a surgeon or medical specialist, or a university professor.

5. Conclusion

As this article is quite wide-ranging, it may be useful to draw together the threads of the argument in conclusion. A significant incompatibility is identified between Oakeshott’s (1975) political philosophy in

⁴ This is part of a letter from Michael Oakeshott to Kevin Williams. It can be found in Oakeshott (2016) and it also is reproduced in Williams (2017).

⁵ The work of Hogan is examined in Williams (2014a, pp. 56-57) and Williams (2014b, pp. 139-140).

⁶ This phrase is taken from the poem ‘To My Daughter Betty, The Gift of God,’ by Tom Kettle (1920) where he refers to the “secret Scripture of the poor.”

On Human Conduct and his philosophy of education articulated in his many articles on the subject. This incompatibility is a consequence of a deficiency in his conceptual repertoire, which derives from his offering a very limited number of mutually exclusive definitions. As a result, Oakeshott affirms dichotomies that are unacceptably stark. In his conceptual mapping, he divides civil life in an oppositional or either/or way into one of two categories. There are, he claims, only two forms of organization of civil life, namely, civil association and enterprise association and these are separate and exclusive one from the other. His preferred form is civil association, but this excludes the state from a role in the distribution of resources. This has implications for his philosophy of education and the central concept of individuality that underlies it. In brief, therefore, the primary thesis of this essay is that Oakeshott fails to recognize that it is almost impossible for the poor to acquire the opportunity to exercise a rich and fulfilling individuality without government intervention. The secondary thesis is that the extent to which such intervention is realistic or appropriate must not be exaggerated.

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