

PEDAGOGIES

RETURNING HOME TO POLYPHONY: MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S MODAL PLURALISM AND THE RECOVERY OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

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In her landmark philosophical work *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt identifies the integrity of the public sphere with pluralism. Arendt defines pluralism as irreducible diversity, the ‘simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects . . . for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised’ (57). These days, Arendt’s invocation of ‘innumerable perspectives and aspects’ is likely to be understood as meaning *cultural plurality*, the public presence in various cultures of ‘diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic groups’ (Kateb ‘Notes on Pluralism’, 22). But this is not what Arendt means by pluralism. So habitual is our current association of diversity with cultural pluralism that we rarely consider the existence of alternative pluralities. As George Kateb reminds us, there are at least four broad kinds of plurality: ‘the inner plurality of every individual human being; the pluralism of diverse individuals in a given society; social or cultural pluralism, which is the existence of plural groups within the same society; and global pluralism, which is the existence of numerous diverse societies in the world’ (‘Flathman’s Pluralism’ 11). The type of pluralism Arendt invokes adds a fifth kind which might be called *modal plurality*. On this conception of plurality, diversity signifies the potentially limitless differentiation of conditions of humanness, the creative elaboration of what Michael Oakeshott calls ‘modes of experience’. For Arendt, pluralism does not refer to ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity, but rather to the categorical difference between the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, and within the latter mode to the subdivision of active life into distinct conditions of work, action, and labour. Thus, when Arendt warns that the development of modernity threatens to destroy the ‘many aspects in which [the common world] presents itself to human plurality’ (58), she does not mean the destruction of racial, ethnic, religious, or linguistic diversity. What Arendt laments is the gradual erosion of modal plurality as distinctive of humanness, the reduction of the *vita activa* to the meaning and condition of labour (human activity aimed at satisfying bare life processes) and the utter extinction of the *vita contemplativa* as an intelligible, compelling mode of human experience.

I shall return in a moment to our current preoccupation with cultural pluralism, but to prepare that return I want first to discuss some perceptions of Michael Oakeshott, an important thinker who (like Arendt) is committed to maintaining

modal pluralism as integral to a healthy condition of humanness. Oakeshott refers plurality to an ideal of ‘conversation’ wherein ‘thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions’ (‘Voice of Poetry’ 489). The relation obtained between these diverse modes or voices is radically egalitarian: ‘Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present. . . . There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials . . . [the] voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy’ (‘Voice of Poetry’ 489–90). A culture, Oakeshott writes, is best understood as a pluralistic ‘conversational encounter’, a vital and variegated stream of ‘feelings, perceptions, ideas, engagements, attitudes . . . pulling in different directions, often critical of one another and [only] contingently related to one another’ (*Liberal Learning* 16). The cultural conversation of the West, for example, ‘accommodates not only the lyre of Apollo but also the pipes of Pan, the call of the wild; not only the poet but also the physicist; not only the majestic metropolis of Augustinian theology but also the “greenwood” of Franciscan Christianity’ (16). Culture as conversation is an ever-increasing ‘manifold of invitations to look, to listen and to reflect’ (17). Most importantly, culture as conversation is ‘impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices’ (‘Voice of Poetry’ 490). As with Arendt, however, we must not translate Oakeshott’s phrase ‘diversity of voices’ into our current familiar idiom of cultural pluralism. By ‘diverse’ Oakeshott does not mean ethnic, racial, or religious plurality, but rather the plurality of modes or idioms defining human experience, the most common of which are practical activity, science, and poetry (491).

Oakeshott also maintains that pluralistic conversation is integral to a properly liberal education. Liberal education is first and foremost ‘an initiation into the skill and partnership’ of conversation, the essential aim of which is to ‘learn to recognize’ the various distinct modes, and to acquire thereby the ‘intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation’ (491). With respect to learning the appropriate manner, Oakeshott appeals to the ‘arts of agency, to *savoir-faire*, *delicatesse*, and other refined sensibilities to prevent dissonances from becoming deafening, disagreements and conflicts from becoming mutually destructive—in short, to maintain a viable as well as an abundant pluralism’ (Flathman 135). Liberal education imparts skills of discrimination and tolerance, the capacity to recognise and affirm the distinct character of each mode or voice. An ability to accept with equanimity the incompatibility of modes—the ability to suspend one’s desire for resolution, harmony, synthesis, unity—is crucial to avoiding the harmful confusion of aims and ends that Oakeshott calls *ignoratio elenchi* (the error of irrelevance). The pluralistic integrity of liberal education is maintained, on the one hand, by avoiding monism, a circumstance in which one voice (practical activity and science are the usual suspects) seeks to monopolise the meaning and manner of conversation. As Oakeshott remarks, ‘each voice is prone to *superbia* . . . an exclusive concern with its own utterance, which may result in identifying the conversation with itself’ (492). On the other hand, the

pluralistic integrity of liberal education requires vigorous opposition to postmodern methods of ‘deconstruction’. A deconstructive hermeneutics is fundamentally hostile to the categorical distinctions sustaining Oakeshott’s notion of pluralistic conversation. But in denying the stability of modal distinctions between science and poetry, practice and contemplation, politics and aesthetics, deconstructive method negates the plurality of voices which, for Oakeshott, animate the egalitarian ideal of liberal education. As Richard Flathman observes in his recent book *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, there ‘neither is nor could be . . . a genuinely pluralist theory that does not feature more or less sharply drawn and vigorously defended distinctions’ (152). Because the deconstructive method cannot accept Oakeshott’s categorical discrimination of the voices or modes comprising conversation, it is not a method conducive to sustaining the pluralistic ideal of liberal education. Monism and deconstruction are inimical to modal pluralism, and consequently to liberal education and culture understood in Oakeshott’s terms as conversation.

Of course, our actual practice of conversation (as of liberal education) falls short of the pluralistic ideal. Oakeshott observes that the conversation ‘both in public and within ourselves has become boring’ (493) because unduly preoccupied with the voices of practical activity and science. The voice of practical activity, which includes political and moral experience, is especially prone to *superbia* as it expresses the ‘commonest manner of imagining’ (497) of human beings. The ‘practical attitude’, Oakeshott writes, is ‘our most constant mood’ (*Experience* 248), the ground notes of which are rudimentary sentiments of ‘desire and aversion, approval and disapproval’ (‘Voice of Poetry’ 504). The voice of practical activity is oriented firmly toward action, informing at the level of inchoate assumption our economic and political efforts to ‘alter existence or to maintain it unaltered in the face of threatened change’ (*Experience* 256). At its deepest level, then, the voice of practical activity ‘implies and depends upon an unrealized idea’ (257), a longed-for state of affairs that is ‘not yet’ based in the ‘felt discrepancy between ‘what is’ and what we desire shall be’ (259). The moral-political character of this voice is clear and compelling, hence the ‘force of the temptation to reduce all experience to practical experience’, as if thinking and knowing were valuable only for the ‘sake of action’ (247).

Oakeshott’s practice of modal pluralism is quite illuminating when placed in conversation with the current hegemonic voice of cultural pluralism. Oakeshott’s perspective brings to view the irony of a pluralism that apprehends experience exclusively in the mode of practical activity. In other words, an unquestioned commitment to practical action as the *sine qua non* of human experience is the monistic assumption animating the voice of cultural pluralism. The discourse of cultural pluralism, like that of practical activity, is motivated by a transformative orientation toward the ‘not yet’, a deep (and often indignant) sense of the discrepancy between exclusionary social practices and an ideal condition of inclusiveness. Advocates of cultural pluralism are not concerned merely to contemplate the fact of diversity, but to advance the formation of a social

environment more tolerant and affirming of ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic diversity. But insofar as advocacy of cultural pluralism tacitly asserts the unqualified primacy of practice in human affairs, it also threatens the radically egalitarian plurality expressed in Oakeshott's notion of conversation. In refusing to invest the voice of practical activity with superior authority, Oakeshott contests the view that advancing social and political justice ought to be the primary aim of intellectual endeavour. Needless to say, Oakeshott's challenge in this regard has received very little support from contemporary political theorists. Moreover, those few theorists who have found Oakeshott's notion of conversation attractive tend to violate the radical plurality of his vision by tacitly privileging the voice of practical activity.

A recent violation of this kind occurs in Fred Dallmayr's article 'Conversation Across Boundaries: Political Theory and Global Diversity'. Dallmayr, a highly respected interpreter of continental philosophy, remarks the singular value of Oakeshott's model of conversation to developing a much needed global or transnational conception of diversity. 'In our global (or globalizing) context', Dallmayr writes, 'it becomes urgently important to extend [Oakeshott's] paradigm beyond the domestic arena . . . to explore the prospects of a similarly non-coercive global discourse conducted across national and civilizational boundaries' (331–32). There are, however, 'formidable obstacles facing global conversation' embedded in contemporary politics and political thought, specifically lingering expressions of 'Orientalism' (as in Samuel Huntington's apocalyptic vision of a 'clash of civilizations') and a troubling 'professional fascination' among theorists with the operations of political power at the expense of concern for 'justice, ethics, and legitimacy' (334). With respect to Oakeshott, the point I wish to make here is that Dallmayr's essay aggressively subordinates the polyphony of conversation to the sole authority of practical activity. Because Dallmayr himself assumes the sovereign value of moral-political concern and the voice of practice, Oakeshott's notion of conversation is made the instrument of this particular voice. Dallmayr politicises the non-political mode of conversation, forcing it to serve, against its playful polyphony, the single voice of practical activity. In Dallmayr's thinking, Oakeshott's ideal of conversation occupies the practical role of the imagined 'not yet' in contrast to the impoverished 'what is' of contemporary political theory. For Dallmayr, Oakeshottian conversation expresses the transformative ideal toward which political thinking should strive in order to become authentically global in manner and perspective. The upshot of this transposition is to harness Oakeshott's notion of conversation exclusively to imperatives of moral-political transformation, thus violating the understanding, integral to Oakeshott's conception, that the voice of practical activity is just one among other voices in conversation, neither superior nor inferior to its partners.

It is fair to say, I think, that our current discourse of cultural pluralism is suffering from *superbia*, a preoccupation with the sovereign importance of its own practical voice which, in monopolising the interests of cultural and academic

conversation, denies value to voices that speak against or outside the idiom of moral-political activism. The consequences of this for Oakeshott's understanding of liberal education are obvious, for if liberal education is increasingly compelled to adopt the aims and ends of cultural pluralism, it is also compelled to adopt and to speak only the voice of practical activity. In other words, cultural pluralism threatens the integrity of liberal education conceived as a rich polyphony of voices not all of which are practically oriented toward moral-political transformation. From the perspective of Oakeshott's modal pluralism, liberal education depends on preserving and cultivating voices (aesthetic, contemplative, non-political) 'unencumbered with the mood and postulates of practical experience' (*Experience* 320). For it is not 'until we have become wholly indifferent to the truths of this world of practice', says Oakeshott, that we 'find ourselves once more turned in the direction which leads to what can satisfy experience' (310); that is, in the direction of a non-hierarchical flow of conversation unreservedly responsive to the playfully civil polyphony of voices, modes, and idioms. Liberal thinking, as Amanda Anderson has recently urged, must 'remain open to a plurality of characterological and expressive modes, rather than seek to elevate a specific temperament or persona' (184). The difficulty, however, of maintaining a sense of plurality which avoids privileging the practical temperament is dramatised in Anderson's subsequent remark that the 'accommodation of plural modes of expression still requires procedural elaboration if it is to have any political meaning or effectiveness' (184). The point of Oakeshott's conception of modal plurality as conversation is precisely to allay this habitual need to validate concepts and ideas solely with respect to their political (practical) significance and efficacy.

It would appear, then, that the future of liberal education as conversation depends upon our willingness to suspend, in the interest of opening room for impractical contemplative and aesthetic voices, the domineering voice of practical activity. In our current academic environment this requires the courage to set aside, to be sometimes indifferent to, the predominant understanding of diversity as cultural pluralism. At the very least we need to remind ourselves that a sincere commitment to plurality must always oppose a cultural milieu in which pluralistic thinking itself assumes, or is permitted to assume, only one form or disposition. Placing Oakeshott's modal pluralism in conversation with cultural pluralism reminds us that plurality is itself plural and speaks in a variety of modes.

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