Subversive without knowing it and without knowing anything: Michael Oakeshott's approach to education

by *Paola Mastrantonio**

Abstract

A sceptical philosopher and long-time professor of politics at the London School of Economics, Michael Oakeshott always showed particular interest in education and teaching as fundamental aspects of human life and conduct. His ideas on these issues, while appearing nostalgic at times, are really "subversive" and unconventional, precisely to the extent that the "sceptical humanism" which distinguishes them is the opposite of teaching exclusively envisaged as the transmission of "technical" and utilitarian knowledge. In the first part of the paper, I try to demonstrate the genuine nature of Oakeshott's scepticism, nurtured by a close relationship between the English philosopher and the tradition of ancient and modern scepticism, *via* Hobbes and, above all, Montaigne. Using Oakeshott's own words as much as possible, the second part examines this attitude or philosophical impulse at work.

Keywords: Sceptical Humanism, Education, Teaching, Learning, Conversation of Mankind.

Schools and universities, to Oakeshott, are places apart, where the traditions of different disciplines encounter one another in a conversational way, without losing their own internal coherence and nature. In an educational conversation of this sort, each voice, without assuming eristic tones, may contribute to a common discussion, where doctrines and their "certainties" are always questioned and studied as contingent and historical products of diverse cultures. This education

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also consists in an initiation into the adventure of human self-knowledge and self-disclosure.

Widely acknowledged as one of most relevant and original political philosophers of the twentieth century, Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) is the author of a rich corpus of essays on various subjects and of two important philosophical books, a literary output written in a flourishing, brilliant, sometimes astonishing and somewhat elusive style.

Among Oakeshott's multifarious philosophical contributions are a series of provocative essays on teaching, learning and education, drawn up from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s, which can still contribute to a critical reflection on contemporary theories and practices in this field, even with regard to the situation of educational institutions in our time. While Oakeshott's reflections are sometimes bitter, they offer not only a diagnosis of the illness, but also an effective cure for our schools.

As I will try to demonstrate, Oakeshott's ideas on these issues, while appearing nostalgic at times, are really "subversive" and unconventional. Indeed, his "sceptical humanism" is only critical of any theory or project that considers teaching essentially as the transmission of "technical" and utilitarian knowledge, and learning merely as this acquisition. It is true that much attention has been paid to pedagogical and psychological aspects of the educational processes, but Oakeshott's concerns were not at all exaggerated.

Even today, despite the ongoing debates and attempts to resist such a trend, schools still run this risk, particularly in the midst of the digital revolution and in times of emergency like the Covid-19 pandemic, when learning, the personal growth of young people and their need for social interaction have often been placed in the background and sacrificed to health and safety requirements. In many European countries, these institutions, from primary schools to university, have been closed to prevent contagion, while training has been limited to distance learning. In any case, the pandemic has brought out the contradictions of educational models that have lost much of the value that Oakeshott attributed to them.

Oakeshott was not only a philosopher, but he knew the English educational world in depth: much of his time during the 1950s was taken up by his teaching duties at the London School of Economics, where he taught political science and ran a seminar on the history of political thought whose legendary lectures continued even after his retirement, until about 1980.

So, being himself a teacher, one who carried out his duties with the same coherence, the same «passionate thought» which guided Hobbes' philosophy, in his famous interpretation of it (cf. Oakeshott,

1975a, p. 16), Oakeshott was genuinely interested in education, despite the ironic detachment he sometimes showed. In particular, he thought that educational institutions, especially at university level, should be places open to the «conversation of mankind»[1], where training is not only functional to the acquisition of skills in a specific field of knowledge. During school attendance there must be a space and time to practice the adventure of knowledge for knowledge's sake, to discover one's human vocation. Education, for the philosopher, is ultimately an open-ended adventure «in discovering what there is to be learned and in discovering what one understands oneself to be, and to do it for oneself» (Fuller, 2001, p. x).

But, since I have referred to Oakeshott's "sceptical humanism", before considering the issue of his approach to teaching and education, it is necessary to explain briefly in what sense he can be considered a sceptic.

First of all, it is worth noting that Oakeshott himself was one of the few contemporary intellectuals so brave as to explicitly declare his scepticism, a label very hard to accept or display for many philosophers on account of the alleged nihilistic and paralyzing attitude of this philosophical stance and its subversiveness with respect to all doctrines or dogmas, both past and present[2].

The first place in which we find this reference is the essay *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, written in 1938, where Oakeshott says: «philosophical enquiry is peculiar merely because, in the pursuit of this process it is governed by a radical scepticism with regard to every stopping place that it suggested; it is suspicious of every attempt to limit enquiry» (Oakeshott, *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence*, in Id., 2007, p. 172).

Other declarations of scepticism date back to 1950, when he was offered the prestigious chair of political science at the London School of Economics. In *Political Education*, his celebrated inaugural lecture, referring to the two reform-minded Fabians, Graham Wallas and Harold Laski, his predecessors at LSE, Oakeshott spoke of himself in this provocative way: «And it seems perhaps a little ungrateful that they should be followed by a sceptic; one who would do better if only he knew how» (Oakeshott, *Political Education*, in Id., 1991, p. 44).

Again, further on, Oakeshott noted that his definition of politics as the pursuit of the intimations of a concrete tradition of political behaviour,

1. See the title of Michael Oakeshott essay, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (in Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 488-541), hereafter abbreviated and cited as *VP*.

2. For a contemporary paradigmatic example of hostility to scepticism, see Nussbaum (1994, pp. 313-5). For a useful survey see also Spinelli (2018, pp. 617-32).

could have been judged «unduly sceptical» (ivi, p. 60, n. 7). The same expression is also used in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (1959), where, introducing the idea of human practice as "conversation", Oakeshott acknowledges that this interpretation «will, perhaps, appear both frivolous and unduly sceptical» (*VP*, p. 493)[3].

But, at this point, we have to clarify whether these affirmations are only a rhetorical device, as contended by John Christian Laursen, and, in a similar way, by Efraim Podoksik, in which case Oakeshott has nothing to do with scepticism, or whether they correspond to a true sceptic philosophical attitude, as I think[4].

If this is the case, then, it is necessary to ask ourselves what kind of scepticism we are dealing with and what its method and its target are.

As a matter of fact, the broad debate about this aspect of Oakeshott's philosophy presents different positions, even among the many commentators that agree to consider him a sceptic. Most of them, however, offer a generic reading, without really defining his scepticism (cf. Wood, 1959, pp. 647-62; Franco, 1990, pp. 140-56; Tseng, 2003; Botwinick, 2011).

Some scholars, on the other hand, focus on the evolution of Oakeshott's thought, from the absolute idealism of his early days – expressed in *Experience and its Modes* (1933), where he explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Hegel and the British idealist Francis Herbert Bradley[5] – to more clearly sceptical positions (cf. Gerencser, 2000; Alexander, 2012, pp. 9-41).

I believe that the real nature of Oakeshott's scepticism has often been misunderstood. Almost no scholars have highlighted the links with the sceptical strand that connects Oakeshott to ancient scepticism, especially the Pyrrhonian view, *via* Hobbes and, above all, Montaigne – a link that I will try to clarify later.

3. See also the posthumous long essay, Oakeshott (1996), for the extensive references to scepticism that are present there (although it is not explicitly qualified as such).

4. Cf. Laursen (2005, pp. 37-55); Podoksik (2003, pp. 35-6). In an interesting article Davide Orsi defends the authenticity of Oakeshott's scepticism, drawing on both published texts and archival material, to explore what forms of this philosophy influenced his thought. In particular, Orsi disputes the claim that Oakeshott was unaware of ancient sceptical philosophy, a thesis contended by Laursen (2005, pp. 40-4); cf. Orsi (2015, pp. 575-90). The reading of these articles was very stimulating for me, and is one of the reasons behind my decision to study this matter in depth (cf. Mastrantonio, 2020). Another scholar who argues that Oakeshott never described himself as a sceptic, is Luke Philip Plotica (2015).

5. Oakeshott (1933, p. 6); hereafter abbreviated and cited as *EM*.

In any case, apart from the "dialectical" Hegelian relation with scepticism[6], the contiguity between Oakeshott and Bradley, who did not hesitate to call himself a «sceptic» (Bradley, 1916, p. 559), is evident.

Even though, unlike Bradley, Oakeshott does not believe in the possibility of grasping an unattainable Absolute through direct, immediate, metaphysical intuition, both place the cognitive limits of reason at the center of their reflection, while at the same time rejecting the negative dogmatism that affirms the impossibility of all knowledge or truth.

If our experience and our thought are only conditional, partial and relational, then, according to Oakeshott, philosophy is an activity «critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial or abstract» (*EM*, p. 3). In *On Human Conduct* (Oakeshott, 1975b, hereafter abbreviated and cited as *HC*), his mature masterpiece, he maintains that in philosophy «what is important is the critical inquiry into the conditions of conditions» (*HC*, p. 29).

Philosophy is not a doctrine to be defended or a body of knowledge to be pursued, but an attitude, a particular impulse devoted solely to analysis, inquiry and radical criticism of the different modes of human life[7]. It is experience «become critical of itself» (*EM*, p. 82), or – as we read in *The Voice of Poetry* – an «activity» merely «parasitic» on all the various universes of discourse (*VP*, p. 491). In the same sense, in *On Human Conduct*, philosophy, i.e. «the engagement of understanding» is described as «a continuous, self-moved, critical enterprise of theorizing» whose principle is «never ask the end» (*HC*, p. 2).

Also in political philosophy, Oakeshott's "limited" engagement is never realized through the use of abstract categories such as ideologies, which he calls – in a decidedly unconventional way – «the formalized abridgment of the supposed substratum of rational truth contained in the tradition» (Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics*, in Id., 1991, p. 9).

Rather, his sceptical understanding of politics emerges in a memorable (and to some, nihilistic) image:

> In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion (Oakeshott, *Political Education*, in Id., 1991, p. 60).

6. On this topic see Westphal (2003, pp. 149-78); Trisokkas (2012).

7. This view is expressed in *EM*, p. 82; Oakeshott (2007, p. 181); *VP*, pp. 491-5; and *HC*, p. 3, n. 1.

The other celebrated metaphor of politics – and, more generally, inter-human relations – as «conversation»[8] leads us to a fundamental point of reference for Oakeshott's scepticism, namely Michel de Montaigne.

Indeed, I think it is the French philosopher who is Oakeshott's most important and beloved travel companion in the adventure of philosophy, perhaps even more so than Hobbes – whose philosophical coherence certainly Oakeshott admired, considering *Leviathan* the greatest English-language philosophical masterpiece of all time[9].

Before entering more specifically into the relationship between Montaigne and Oakeshott – a closeness that is also detectable with regard to the issue of education – some clarifications are needed concerning the interconnections between Hobbes and Skepsis.

While Montaigne received and assimilated ancient scepticism in its Academic and, above all, its Pyrrhonian version in such a clear and profound way as to become a fundamental point of reference for its diffusion in modern philosophy, the influence of this movement of thought on Hobbes is not so obvious[10]. Nevertheless, in his *Introduction* to *Leviathan* Oakeshott also presents an interesting reading of Hobbesian scepticism, whose origins, according to him, are in the «profoundly sceptical doctrine» (*Introduction*, p. 62) implied by late medieval Scholastic nominalism. Here Montaigne is identified as one of Hobbes' sources, in particular as a model for his negative anthropology, in which human beings are creatures conditioned by passions. To Oakeshott, indeed, it was precisely Montaigne who had influenced Hobbes's idea that

8. Cf. Oakeshott, *VP*; *The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind*, a 1948 typescript, now in Oakeshott (2004, pp. 187-99). Oakeshott's original idea of conversation between human beings as a fundamental aspect of civilization, education and politics may have inspired other philosophers who are much better known than Oakeshott himself. On these affinities see Luke Philip Plotica (2015), who uses the Oakeshottian metaphor of conversation to detect significant similarities between Oakeshott and Wittgenstein, MacIntyre, Foucault, Berlin, Arendt, Mouffe and Cavell. Richard Flathman, instead, deals with education and conversation for a comparison with Arendt and Cavell (cf. Flathman, 2010, pp. 233-62).

9. Cf. Oakeshott (1975a, p. 3); hereafter abbreviated and cited as *Introduction*. In 1946, after serving in the Second World War, Oakeshott published this brilliant and philosophically relevant essay as the introduction to the Blackwell edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The text was reprinted in 1975 in a collection of Hobbesian essays. Here he places the *Leviathan* between Plato's *Republic* and Hegel's *Philosophie des Rechts*, defining them as the best expressions of the three European traditions of thought, respectively Reason and Nature, Will and Artifice and Rational Will (see *Introduction*, p. 7).

10. On Montaigne's neo-Pyrrhonian phenomenalism, see, for example, the different positions of Dumont (1972, pp. 44-5); Conche (1996, pp. 27-42); and Laursen (1992, pp. 94-124), who also explores the application of scepticism in politics. On the relation between Hobbes and Montaigne, see Paganini (2008, pp. 171-227).

the starting point of philosophy is introspection, which, alone, allows us to know the true nature of man.

Both Montaigne and Hobbes perceived that, regardless of their truthfulness, «the fact of our having sensations seems […] the only thing of which we can be indubitably certain» (*Introduction*, p. 19); and it is from this observation that Hobbes's civil philosophy begins.

Through the influence of Sextus Empiricus's neo-Pyrrhonism, the awareness that sensitivity and phenomena are the foundation of human cognitive processes unites the French philosopher with Hobbes and Oakeshott, their contemporary interpreter.

However, in identifying the peculiarities of Hobbes's scepticism about the nature of reason and its powers, Oakeshott underlines that Hobbesian reason only has the capacity to establishing «true fictions»:

> From beginning to end there is no suggestion in Hobbes that philosophy is anything other than conditional knowledge, knowledge of hypothetical generations and conclusions about the names of things, not about the nature of things. With these, philosophy must be satisfied, though they are but fictions. Indeed, philosophy may be defined as the establishment by reasoning of true fictions (*Introduction*, p. 25).

Given these premises, it seems odd that Oakeshott does not mention the ancient sceptics among his sources. And yet, hidden in his writings, the names of Carneades[11] and Sextus Empiricus appear once, the latter being mentioned above as the main source of Montaigne's scepticism.

In *On Being Conservative* (in Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 407-37), one of his most famous and most widely discussed essays, Oakeshott provides a "political" quote from the neo-Pyrrhonian doctor and philosopher. It is taken from *Against the Rethoricians*, the second book of the treatise against the "professors", which is much less known than other works by this ancient author. This striking fact demonstrates that Oakeshott certainly knew the writings of Sextus, the only philosopher he names in the entire text:

11. The reference to Carneades, the founder of the Third Academy, may be found in his *Lectures in the History of Political Thought,* which were given at the London School of Economics. There, Oakeshott presents the episode described in Cicero's *De republica*, 3.6-7.14, showing the equal strength and hence insubstantiality of the Stoic and Epicurean arguments about justice: «No doubt he intended to confuse, and had a certain Athenian contempt for these unlettered Romans. It is reported that he succeeded in annoying Cato. […] and in this year a decree was issued banishing Greek philosophers from Rome» (Oakeshott, 2006, pp. 163-4).

Now, the disposition to be conservative in respect of politics reflects a quite different view of the activity of governing. The man of this disposition understands it to be the business of a government not to inflame passion and give it new objects to feed upon, but to inject into the activities of already too passionate men an ingredient of moderation: to restrain, to deflate, to pacify and to reconcile; not to stoke the fires of desire, but to damp them down. And all this, not because passion is vice and moderation virtue, but because moderation is indispensable if passionate men are to escape being locked in an encounter of mutual frustration. A government of this sort does not need to be regarded as the agent of a benign providence, as the custodian of a moral law, or as the emblem of a divine order. What it provides is something that its subjects (if they are such people as we are) can easily recognize to be valuable; indeed, it is something that, to some extent, they do for themselves in the ordinary course of business or pleasure. They scarcely need to be reminded of its indispensability, *as Sextus Empiricus tells us the ancient Persians were accustomed periodically to remind themselves by setting aside all laws for five hair-raising days on the death of a king* (Oakeshott, *On Being Conservative*, in Id., 1991, pp. 432-3, italics added)[12].

Apart from this, however, it can be said that in Oakeshott's critical and anti-dogmatic approach, in line with issues such as the importance given to common life, tradition, phenomenal contingency and prudential rules, there is an introjection – if one may call it so – of the sceptical model, regardless of the direct quotations of this philosophical approach.

A familiarity with Montaigne emerges throughout Oakeshott's reflection and is particularly evident if we look at his notebooks in the archives of the British Library of Political Science, partially published in 2014 (cf. Oakeshott, 2014). As already said, among the Montaignean themes resonating in Oakeshott's thought, the most interesting for its ethical, political and educational implications is that of "conversation".

A Conversation is also the title of one of these notebooks, composed between 1944 and 1945, in which preparatory material for many of the following writings is collected: here Montaigne appears as Oakeshott's philosophical *alter ego*, a "natural" point of reference for his thought, precisely by virtue of the sceptical *habitus* characterizing them both, as a sort of self-evident "phenomenal fact".

The metaphor of conversation is so powerful in Oakeshott's philosophy that, in its regard, there has been talk of an «expressivist and conversational theory of action» (Parekh, 1979, p. 500): human experience itself is made

12. Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Against Those in the Disciplines*, in Bett (2018, p. 136): «Hence the smart Persians have a law that when their king has died, they are to act lawlessly for the next five days; the point is not to suffer, but to learn in real life what a bad thing lawlessness is, bringing on slaughter and rape and, if anything, worse, in order for them to become more faithful protectors of their kings».

up of an unfixed number of voices which engage in conversation; the most familiar are those of practical activity, of science, of history and of poetry (or aesthetic experience).

And the impulse of philosophy, which also springs from conversation, is to recognize these voices, analyze their quality and style, reflect on the relationships of each voice with the other, warning of the risks of using them improperly. Philosophy, however, cannot make any specific contribution to this conversation, except that of a radical criticism (cf. *VP*, p. 491).

In this context, the role of education emerges vividly: in Oakeshott words, «the ancient Greek exhortation Know Thyself meant *learn* to know thyself» (Oakeshott, *A Place of Learning*, in Id., 2001, p. 16). If agents are historical persons, man's culture is a historical contingency. We all are

> composed of acquired beliefs, understandings, sentiments, imaginings, aptitudes, arts, skills, etc., and capable of self-disclosure in action, themselves emerge in a transaction between the generations called education, in which new-comers to a local human scene are initiated into its "mysteries"; that is, into practices which human beings have invented for themselves. And like every other transaction inter-homines, this engagement to educate is itself utterances, actions and responses governed by a practice in which a relationship distinguished from all others, is articulated: the relationship of teachers and learners. And what is learned in this transaction is languages of self-disclosure and self-enactment; not what to do or say, but the arts of agency (*HC*, p. 59).

Oakeshott's philosophy of education overlaps with his later political thought, which is highly critical of the idea of the state as an "enterprise association" primarily devoted to economic exploitation. Instrumentalist educational policies are considered the counterpart to this conception of the state, in the sense that they value only those intellectual activities that can be turned into "useful knowledge".

In *Work and Play*, an essay perhaps dating back to the early Sixties, the philosopher identifies the activities most inherently satisfying to human beings, such as those that belong to *homo ludens*, which he sees as an essential part of the patrimony of *homo sapiens*, *faber* and *laborans*[13]. «The chief of these activities are understanding and explaining the world and the activity of poetic imagination» (Oakeshott, *Work and Play*, in Id., 2004, p. 311): insofar as the study and the practice of philosophy, science, history and poetry are regarded as ends in themselves, they are "play", free from the anxieties which belong to the satisfaction of wants. On the

13. Probably, the distinction invoked by Oakeshott between work and play is inspired by the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (cf. Huizinga, 1949).

contrary, instrumental education regards them only as mere "recreation" – "relaxation" from work, the proper business of life.

Thus, addressing first-year college students, Oakeshott urges them to forget they are there «to learn how to be a more efficient cog in a social machine» (Oakeshott, *On Arriving at a University*, in Id., 2004, p. 333). Being a student does not have to become a kind of profession that prepares you to place yourself at the service of a productivist society; rather, his provocative invitation is for students to enjoy their university years and the good fortune of being able to live them, before being sucked into the most practical and prosaic occupations in life. Students should take the chance – where universities still offer it – «to get acquainted with what may be called the "academic" attitude to things», whose positive side «is being concerned, not with prescriptions and injunctions, not with learning what to do and how to do it, not with discovering merely how things work and what they can be used for, but with *explanations*» (ivi, p. 337), knowledge in itself, the principal way to self-knowledge. But learning takes place in a relationship in which

> [a] learner is not the passive recipient of impressions, or one whose accomplishments spring from mere reactions to circumstances; nor is he one who attempts nothing he does not know how to achieve. He is a creature of wants rather than needs, of recollection as well as memory; and he wants to know what to think and what to believe as well as merely what to do. Learning is conduct, not behaviour. In short, these analogies of clay and wax, of receptacles to be filled and empty rooms to be furnished have nothing to do with learners and learning (Oakeshott, *The Character of a University Education*, in Id., 2004, p. 374)[14].

The other pole in the educational conversation is, of course, the teacher. He plays a crucial role in accompanying the students in their *début dans la vie humane*, as Oakeshott, quoting Paul Valery, calls the process of identity construction of men and women, whose selves, in this never-ending process, are not rational abstractions, but always historical, contingent personalities. In this regard, we may still read:

> Teaching is the deliberate and intentional initiation of a pupil into the world of human achievement, or into some part of it. The teacher is one whose utterances (or silences) are designed to promote this initiation in respect of a pupil – that is, in respect of a learner whom he recognizes to be ready to receive what he has resolved to communicate. In short, a pupil is a learner for whom he has taken specific responsibility; and teaching, properly speaking, is impossible in his absence (ivi, p. 378).

14. Here, for example, we can detect a clearly Montaignean tone: cf. Montaigne (1993, I, XXVI, p. 54).

Obviously, as in all human relationships, it is impossible to avoid imprecisions and misunderstandings. Nevertheless, the teacher's task is to study his pupil, whose initiation has to have a deliberate order and arrangement. And, in addition to the knowledge of what he designs to transmit, it is up to the teacher to consider the manner of transmission.

Today, when teachers are especially expected to have expertise on all bureaucratic aspects of educational enterprise, Oakeshott's voice resonates as a genuine exhortation to remember that a teacher is primarily an «agent of civilization» whose «engagement is, specifically, to get his pupil to make the most of himself by teaching him to recognize himself in the mirror of the human achievements which compose his inheritance» (Oakeshott, *Learning and Teaching*, in Id., 2001, p. 41).

At all levels, from education to politics and moral practice, then, conversation is not only the meeting-place, but also the instrument allowing encounters and reciprocal exchanges between people and different disciplines. Here is how Oakeshott puts it, in his famous exposition on this subject:

> In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no "truth" to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing. Of course, a conversation may have passages of argument and a speaker is not forbidden to be demonstrative; but reasoning is neither sovereign nor alone, and the conversation itself does not compose an argument. […] In conversation, "facts" appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; "certainties" are shown to be combustible, not by being brought in contact with other "certainties" or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions. Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present; nobody cares what will become of them when they have played their part. There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. And voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a win nor gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering. Properly speaking, it is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices: in it different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another. […] 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 (*VP*, pp. 489-90).

This synthesis, which expresses the deepest sense of Oakeshott's view on education, is built on the same philosophical background as a lengthy essay dating back to 1949, ten years before the publication of *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*.

The essay entitled *The Universities* (in Oakeshott, 2001, pp. 118-58, hereafter abbreviated and cited as *U*) is an extremely critical review of Sir Walter Moberly's book, *The Crisis in the Universities* (Moberly, 1949), published that same year; it is also an opportunity to address the philosophical problem of the inevitable disintegration of knowledge due to the proliferation of increasingly specialized disciplines. In this context, Oakeshott reflects not only on the problem of teaching and learning at a university, but also on the life of the undergraduate.

Concerning the latter aspect, Oakeshott recalls, in a decidedly nostalgic tone, that in the very recent past, British universities still had to offer «undergraduates who came with a variety of tastes, bents, predispositions and ambitions, something recognizably appropriate to themselves» (*U*, p. 145), regardless of their social class or economic status.

The limited number of studies, «easily recognized as belonging to the single world of learning» (*U*, p. 146), enabled a kind of conversation in which each of them had a distinctive voice, recognized and respected as such. Whether undergraduates already had a clear idea of their future careers or not, in the study courses offered at universities they could find something that interested or even captivated them, if they had an inclination towards scholarship. These universities were places where an atmosphere of study went hand in hand with a high number of extra-academic activities within the traditions of British life. But, according to Oakeshott,

[t]he great and characteristic gift of the university was the gift of an interval. Here was an opportunity to put aside the hot allegiance of youth without the necessity of acquiring new loyalties to take their place. Here was an interval in which a man might refuse to commit himself. Here was a break in the tyrannical course of irreparable events; a period in which to look round upon the world without the sense of an enemy at one's back or the insistent pressure to make up one's mind […]. Here, indeed, was the opportunity to exercise, and perhaps to cultivate, the highest and most easily destroyed of human capacities, what Keats called "negative capability" – "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable racing after fact and reason" – an opportunity to practice that "suspended judgment" of which "neutrality" of liberalism is so pale a shadow. And all this not in an intellectual vacuum, but surrounded by all the inherited

learning and literature and experience of our civilization; not as a sole occupation, but combined with the discipline of studying some recognized branch of learning; and neither as first step in education, for those wholly ignorant of how to behave or think, nor as a final education to fit a man for the day of judgement, but a middle (*U*, p. 148).

Perhaps the creation of this opportunity, which cannot be planned in any way on an abstract level, depends on the presence at universities of people who can make the most of it. At all events, Oakeshott thinks «it was the one thing that every university in Europe, in some measure, provided, and in virtue of which, more than anything else, it was a university» (*U*, p. 149).

While there are still young men and women willing to practice this "sceptical" approach, the hyper-specialization of scientific languages, the fragmentation of knowledge into miscellaneous forms of expertise and the utilitarian demands of the outside world put this sort of university in danger. «To avoid destruction at the hands of men who have no use for [its] characteristic virtues, men who are convinced only that "knowledge is power"» (*U*, p. 152) and to preserve its own identity,

university should select the specialism which it offers for undergraduate study so that there is some chance that each may be seen, even by the undergraduate, as a reflection of the whole. The pressure to provide a technical training for a great variety of professions makes this difficult, but a university of the sort we are considering will disappear unless it is prepared to resist this pressure (*U*, p. 155).

Despite the increasingly pervasive technical drift, a university therefore shouldn't renounce its «objects of education», which consist in enabling men and women «to make [their] own thoughts clear and to attend to what passes before [them]» (*U*, p. 156). And this is not an abstract mental capability but a commitment to «participating in and handling the civilized inheritance of our society» (*ibid.*).

Thus, the kind of university that Oakeshott has in mind provides a close study of a particular branch of learning, which allows one to know not only a *techne* but also something about its limits and assumptions. «And when to this is added, as it is added in a university, the presence of other special studies […] the invitation to conversation is compelling» (*U*, p. 157), Oakeshott concludes.

In the 1961 essay *The Study of "Politics" in a University* (whose subtitle is *An Essay in Appropriateness*, in Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 184-218), Oakeshott's position is even clearer: in distinguishing between a "language" (by which he means a manner of thinking) and a "literature" or a "text" (or what has been said from time to time in a "language"), the philosopher somewhat provocatively claims:

What a university has to offer is not information but practice in thinking; and not practice in thinking in no manner in particular but in specific manners each capable of reaching its own characteristic kind of conclusions. And what undergraduates may get at a university, and nowhere else in such favourable circumstances, is some understanding of what it is to think historically, mathematically, scientifically or philosophically, and some understanding of these not as "subjects", but as living "languages" and of those who explore and speak them as being engaged in explanatory enterprises of different sorts (Oakeshott, *The Study of "Politics" in a University*, in Id., 1991, p. 197).

The "subversiveness" of Oakeshott's position here lies in its identifying the specific character of university education as the possibility «to enjoy the "leisure" which is denoted by thinking without having to think in the pragmatic terms of action and talking without having to speak in terms of prescription or practical advice». But this is not enough. Oakeshott believes that «to spend three years in which attention (so far as their studies are concerned) is expressly abstracted from prescriptive manners of thinking in order to concentrate it, not merely upon explanations, but upon the understanding of explanatory enterprises» is a kind of education that university as such must provide «even for those who are to pass their lives in practical occupations of one sort or another and for whom (in that connection) a "vocational" education may also be appropriate»[15].

Meanwhile, the 1968 protests brought with them educational theories, the goal of which Oakeshott identified as the suppression of the school as a place apart. In an essay from 1972, *Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration* (in Oakeshott, 2001, pp. 62-104), he saw in these projects for the renewal of education the paradoxical foreshadowing of an apparatus which, in order to free children from the prison of the "classrooms", forced them – almost Orwellianly – even more strictly. After illustrating the relatively less dangerous projects of those who conceived of school as a «homely vision of an amusement arcade and playground for all ages», Oakeshott attacks those planners who are even more visionary and more confident about the effectiveness of their methods:

Inspired by the promise held out by recent mechanical invention, they foresee a future in which each home will become "the basic learning unit". It will contain "an electronic console connected with a central computer system, a videotape and a microfilm library regulated by a computer and with a national television network". All "education" will be dispensed from a "central educational hub". No longer will children have to "go to school", or have "to jostle their way into class". Each child, at the touch of a button, will have access to a "learning

15. All the last quotations are from Oakeshott, *The Study of "Politics" in a University*, in Id. (1991, p. 199).

package" programmed for individual use. He will "type on a surface resembling a television screen in response to recorded instructions regulated by a computer"; and "at the touch of a button, 'teachers' may call up profiles of his progress and advise accordingly". He will be able "to choose his own educational goals" and pursue them at his own pace (ivi, p. 81).

Of course, to Oakeshott, these are plans not only for the dissolution of schooling, but also for the abolition of man.

The concern and foresight of the English philosopher, who was mistrustful of any form of prophecy, reached their culmination with his pained and decidedly pessimistic description of the world and the condition of the youth. Oakeshott provided this description, which is worth quoting in full, back in 1974, well before the advent of the Internet and of social media[16]:

> The world in which many children now grow up is crowded, not necessarily with occupants and not at all with memorable experiences, but with happenings; it is a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities which invoke neither reflection nor choice but instant participation. A child quickly becomes aware that he cannot too soon plunge into this flow or immerse himself in it too quickly; to pause is to be swept with the chilling fear of never having lived at all. There is little chance that his perceptions, his emotions, his admirations and his ready indignations might become learned responses or be even innocent fancies of his own; they come to him prefabricated, generalized and uniform. He lurches from one modish conformity to the next, or from one fashionable guru to his successor, seeking to lose himself in a solidarity composed of exact replicas of himself. From an early age children now believe themselves to be well-informed about the world, but they know it only at second hand in the pictures and voices that surround them. It holds no puzzles or mysteries for them; it invites neither careful attention nor understanding. As like as not they know the moon as something to be shot at or occupied before ever they had the chance to marvel at it. This world has but one language, soon learned: the language of appetite. The idiom may be that of exploitation of the resources of the earth, or may be that of seeking something for nothing; but this is a distinction without a difference. It is a language composed of meaningless clichés. It allows only the expression of "point of view" and the ceaseless repetition of slogans which are embraced as prophetic utterances. Their ears are filled with the babel of invitations to instant and unspecified reactions and their utterances reproduce only what they have heard said. Such discourse as there is resemble the barking of a dog at the echo of its own yelp. School in these circumstances is notably unimportant (Oakeshott, *A Place of Learning*, in Id., 2001, p. 33).

16. This passage is part of the essay entitled *A Place of Learning*, in which Oakeshott also reflects on what possibilities "liberal education" still has of surviving the difficulties that stand against it (see Oakeshott, *A Place of Learning*, in Id., 2001).

Yet, at the beginning of the 1960s, Oakeshott had spoken of the character of new university students in very different tones:

> Students since the world began have been an unruly lot-noisy, irreverent, eccentric and irresponsible. For innumerable generations they have hitch-hiked about the world learning what they could and where they could. They are serious and light-hearted at the same time; having nothing but a few books, sometimes rebellious, often uncomfortable, but on the way to acquiring what in the end, on their distant death-beds, they will recognize as one of the things most worth having: a mind and some thoughts of your own (Oakeshott, *On Arriving at a University*, in Id., 2004, p. 334).

Between the first two texts and the last there is a crucial decade; and while it is true that even today we can dramatically identify with the gloomy portrait of the world in which young people were living in the Seventies according to Oakeshott, it is also true that educational institutions are at least partially beginning to look at things with a disenchanted and humbler gaze again, despite the many points of non-return we have passed. So, in heeding Oakeshott's warning, we must hope that schools, from primary education to university, will continue to face the challenges that the present time is posing to them. As a living reality, educational communities should bear in mind that the complexity of the world cannot be reduced to formulas or doctrines, and that a conversational approach may represent a renewed way of looking at such complexity. Unsurprisingly, at the end of *A Place of Learning*, wondering how a university should respond to the attacks of those seeking to undermine its dialogic nature, Oakeshott more optimistically suggests: «Not, I think, by seeking excuses for what sometimes seem unavoidable surrenders, not in any grand gesture or defiance, but in a quiet refusal to compromise which comes only in self-understanding. We must remember who we are. Inhabitants of a place of liberal learning» (Oakeshott, *A Place of Learning*, in Id., 2001, p. 34).

In conclusion, philosophizing, in the Oakeshottian sense, entails a non-dogmatic scepticism which may not always end with *epoche*, but reveals the reductive formulations, doctrinaire tendencies and false requirements of all modern ideologies. The same applies to educational institutions and teaching-learning methods and theories.

The philosopher raises doubts and highlights inconsistencies where there seemed to be none. Faced with plans for – and forecasts of – human improvement, his philosophical approach opens up any such undertaking to doubt.

Change is ineluctable, as things necessarily evolve: the human world is a contingent flow of goings-on where philosophy leads to scepticism about any alleged ultimate understanding of it, including by the philosopher

himself, who may be tempted to assume he possesses an unconditional or definitive knowledge about reality.

However, in education, more than in other fields of human activity, we have the opportunity to explore and experience the adventure of self-understanding and self-definition as human beings, without merely having to solve practical problems. The privileged avenue for this practice is conversation, «which expresses the central character of human existence – the civility of the agreement to disagree» (Fuller, 2001, p. XXIX).

Here is the meeting place for teachers and learners and for the different traditions and developments of literature, philosophy, art and science, as concrete expressions of human civilization. In Oakeshott's words, education is inseparable from learning to participate in what we call a "culture":

> A culture is not a doctrine or a set of consistent teaching or conclusions about a human life. It is not something we can set before ourselves as the subject of learning, any more than we can set self-understanding before ourselves as something to be learned; it is that which is learned in everything we may learn. A culture, particularly one such as ours, is a continuity of feelings, perceptions, ideas, engagements, attitudes and so forth, pulling in different directions, often critical of one another and contingently related to one another so as compose not a doctrine, but what I shall call a conversational encounter. […] A culture comprises unfinished intellectual and emotional journeyings, expeditions now abandoned but known to us in the tattered maps left behind by the explorers; it is composed of light-hearted adventures, of relationships invented and explored in exploit or in drama, of myths and stories and poems expressing fragments of human self-understanding, of god worshipped, of responses to the mutability of the world and of encounters with death. And it reaches us, as it reached generations before ours, neither as long-ago terminated specimens of human adventure, nor as an accumulation of human achievements we are called upon to accept, but a manifold of invitations to look, to listen and to reflect (Oakeshott, *A Place of Learning*, in Id., 2001, pp. 16-7).

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