Michael Oakeshott: Lectures in the History of Political Thought
Study Guide, 2012

Steven A. Samson
Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs

Part of the Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, Political Science Commons, and the
Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/414

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Helms School of Government at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Study Questions

1. What is the circumstantial context of political thought? [As the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset defined himself: “I am I and my circumstance”]. Oakeshott rejects a rational-purposive-progressive (or what he elsewhere calls telocratic) conception of history (“the operation of general laws”) in favor of an empirical nomocratic conception that relates events, actions, and beliefs to other things of the same kind. He concludes that a “historical study of political beliefs cannot, then, supply anything like a final explanation or justification of them.”

2. Oakeshott rejects treating the history of political thought as a continuous and progressive story. He seeks, instead, to connect particular examples with actual political experiences that belong to distinct political cultures (e.g., Greek, Roman, medieval Christian, and the states of modern Europe). NOTE: Culture refers to religious cult, which are self-contained systems of belief.

3. Why do we think? Political thought specifically is thinking about political activity.

4. Is politics an acquired or natural activity? [Aristotle defines man as a “political animal” or creature of the city-state, but he also recognized that it is artificial. The implication is that man becomes fully human only through participation as a citizen]. What does Oakeshott believe to be the three necessary conditions for political experience? How does he distinguish politics from ruling?

5. What makes politics a European invention? What has been the commonest occasion for the emergence of a political society?

6. What is the basic assumption of political deliberation? Where should we look first for political thought? How does a political vocabulary originate? State, citizen, and empire were originally neologisms (new words); others, like freedom (which appears to have originally had to do with the satisfaction of a blood-feud) and tyranny (usurper), were ordinary words that were given a political meaning. For example, Francis Lieber introduced city-state and nation-state from the German into English in the mid-19C. The word citizen (medieval Anglo-French)—like bourgeois (French), burgher (German) and burgess (English)—is derived from the word for city. The study of political thought is “the study of political deliberation, discourse, and argument.” A history of thought is a history of men thinking, not of abstract, disembodied “ideas.”

7. Political theory is explanatory thinking.

8. The study of political thought has to do with both practical ideas and explanatory thinking.

9. What are the four political cultures that are studied in this volume?

Review

| politics | political culture | three conditions for politics |
| rulering | emergence of political society | amenability to human choice |
| political vocabulary | political theory |
CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE ANCIENT GREEKS

Study Questions

1. Identify the four political experiences that shaped Greek thought.

2. What does Oakeshott mean by myth or legend?

3. How extensive was the Greek-speaking world? How did the land shape Greek expectations?

4. How were the Achaeans organized? What were some of the characteristics of the tribal “household”? Who were the Dorian? What were some of traits of the people who emerged from the resulting mixture? How did the Achaeans and Dorian differ and how was this difference reflected in Athens and Sparta?

5. How did the polis reflect both unity and diversity? How many of these poleis were scattered around the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins (at least 230 were completely independent and many of which were a mixture of Greeks and others)? Even at its greatest territorial extend, Athens was smaller than Rhode Island. What did Plato mean by associating justice with the polis, calling it “the art of resolving differences”?

6. What are oikia? How was the “household-community transformed into the “private” family community? What was significant about this distinction between public and private? What are some of the connotations of the word polis? What kind of public space was the agora? What was the demos? What is the politai or citizen? Who is not a politai? Resident aliens were called metoikoi or metics. How did Aristotle characterize the relationship between citizens? Oakeshott calls it “conventional equality.” Where, by contrast, were relationships hierarchical?

7. What is the nature of the task of a founder? What was the role of persuasion?

8. Identify three political experiences of the ancient Greeks. How did the “experience of creation” and “the experience of governing and being governed” shape Greek life? What was the role of the basileus in the earliest kind of polis? What was the boule? What was the ecclesia [the name used later for the church]? Identify three features of the polis that the Greeks considered to identify them from others. What replaced the office of basileus? What other varieties of government (or constitution) followed?

9. What was a fourth aspect of the Greek political experience? Did the Greeks imagine change to mean progress?

10. What external forces led to the transformation of this civilization of independent city-states into a civilization of dependent and insignificant municipalities? What may be an internal cause?

Review

myth          Marseilles (Massilia)          tearing a living
Achaeans      genos                         tribal household
unions of tribes Dorian                difference between Athens and Sparta
loquacious vs. laconic oikia                attributes of the polis
citadel       Acropolis                        agora

demos         politai (citizen)               resident foreigners (metics or metoikoi)
CHAPTER THREE: THE GREEK IMAGE OF THE WORLD

Study Questions

1. “The unique character of [Greek] political thought derived from the peculiar way in which they thought about the world in which they lived.” This is the world in which, to use the Apostle Paul’s words, they lived, and moved, and had their being.” Paul addressed the philosophers at the Areopagus in order to show that it is in God we live, and move, and have our being.

2. What does the Greek concept of cosmos mean? What did Werner Jaeger write about the relationship of cosmos and politics? What were the two part of this living organism? What made politics the realm of freedom? The philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev took up a similar theme in Slavery and Freedom.

3. What was the Greek conception of phusis? [We find this concept in natural law and natural rights]. How does it differ from ousia? Phusis is the specific character according to which a thing behaves. Aristotle sought to categorize things by their character or constitution. The cosmos is a mixture of laws and contingency that permitted politike: political activity.

4. Who was wholly free of the laws of natural necessity? What family or household lived on Mount Olympus? What is the Greek concept of fate? A present-day illustration of the Greek concept of fate: http://news.yahoo.com/report-iran-adds-reward-rushdies-death-110326038.html. How did their beliefs allow the Greeks to try their luck and lived dangerously? Who were the heroes? The supreme hero? Why were the gods not part of the cosmos? What was the essence of politike?

5. What was the law of the cosmos? What made human beings unlike both gods and beasts? In their ambiguous situation, what made them like beasts? Like gods? What was the emblem of human freedom? Identify the two forms in which the power of artifice appears. The Latin term homo faber refers to man the fabricator. Why is politike the supremely and uniquely human activity? What are its attributes or components? Politics is choosing and acting where there is an alternative. What two things must be chosen?

6. How can we control contingencies? What was the Delphic Oracle’s most famous pronouncement? What aberrations should humans avoid? What is sophrosune? How do Croesus and Xerxes illustrate hubris and Nemesis? What is the essence of Greek tragedy and how is it illustrated by Oedipus? What is wisdom?

7. What is the proper business of human beings in the world?

Review

cosmos as a living organism
houranos
phusis (physis)
gods
fate as a thread
essence of politike
nature vs. art
Delphic oracle

Werner Jaeger on justice, law, and fate
sublunary world
ousia: being or substance
Zeus:
heroes
world of natural necessity
forms of the power of artifice
sophrosune

realm of contingency
mixture of law and contingency
Mount Olympus
Prometheus
man’s capacity for choice and action
how Greeks understood political activity
hubris
CHAPTER FOUR: POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE ANCIENT GREEKS (1)

Study Questions

1. What was the relationship between the sophisticated Athenians of the 5C BC and their earlier mythology?

2. How does the concept of taboo differ from law and justice? René Girard, for example, believes that taboos, such as the incest taboo, “involve distancing siblings in order to control mimetic rivalry” (Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis*, p. 65). Under law, a process of human decision is interposed between the act or crime and suffering the penalty. Who are *Themis* and *Dike*? What do these names invoke in practice? What was the function of a sceptron (*skeptron*)? Our word scepter, which is a staff, derives from it; but it was also something like a discus (*diskos*), lightning bolt, or anchor (dolphin) that could be thrown at another vessel to split the hull. Such implements evolved into ensigns and heraldic signs. See http://pdfuri.com/thenaivaloriginofgreekarchitectureandsculpture. Oakeshott notes kinship of the staff or mace to a magic wand. Mythologically, kings have historically been regarded as conduits or mediators (like the Roman *pontifex maximinus*, who was perhaps the “great bridge-maker” or mediator between the gods and man) between the voice of God (*vox Dei* in Latin) and the people. *Themis* is a divine law, emanating from Zeus, that represents divine wisdom. But due to the human role in its transmission, error can creep into the human law that derives from divine wisdom. The rejection of divine wisdom in order to live in a “make-believe world,” results in misfortune and the catastrophe of *Nemesis*. J.R.R. Tolkien coined the term *eucatastrophe* to refer to a sudden and favorable turn of events at the end.

3. Oakeshott continues his English common law analogy by saying that *themis* is “something which had been discovered, understood, and declared” rather than made. He sees it as a tribal word that is not quite at home in the *polis*. This led to *thesmos*, which began as custom but evolved formally into law. What is *themistes*? The process of developing a common law Oakeshott regarded as a process of “doing justice” to the various tribes that entered the “union of a *polis*.” Here again we encounter the role of the founder, who is an *oikistes* (host), who plays the role of lawmaker. Thus *thesmos* is tribal *themis* that has been subjected to a judicial process (cf. the concluding play of the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus is the *Eumenides*, which depicts the *Erinyes* (Furies) into the Gracious Ones). The *thesmothetai*, like Solon, Draco, and Lycurgus, judged the law itself and were expected to exhibit wisdom and disinterestedness.

4. How does *nomos* differ from *thesmos*? How are *nous* and *logos* connected with *nomos*? What made Lycurgus and Solon qualified to play their role as *thesmothetai*? The historian Herodotus believed that each people has its own *physis*. Thus constitution-making should not be regarded as a form of technology transfer. The great orator Demosthenes, an opponent of Philip of Macedon, believed that every *nomos* is an invention.

5. What are some of the disadvantages and difficulties of *nomos*? This issue of the conformity of law with nature raises the question of the connection between *is* and *ought* statements as well as between value and fact.

6. Justice was not in the first place an abstract noun but a kind of verb or action. If the *phusis* of a man is to be rational, what is the *dike* of a man? What then is the task of a judge and his criterion for judging? What, specifically, is the threefold activity of a judge? What is the purpose of
punishment? In light of giving people their “due,” how does the establishment of a polis an act of doing justice? Among other things, it means the establishment of a jurisdiction. Oakeshott calls it a process of reconciliation. This is also the significance of the establishment of cities-in-speech in Plato’s Republic, which is a dialogue concerning justice, with the various “cities” serving as models. Oakeshott concludes the chapter by noting two aspects of the political experience of the ancient Greeks. What are they? What were the forms or constitutions of the Greeks? What was the place of tyranny? What happened to the poleis in Roman times?

Review

context of earlier mythology
taboo
Dike
thesmos = custom, use
sceptron
Solon, Draco, Lycurgus
themistes = common law
nomos
logos
Dike = justice
connection of fact and value
Herodotus
phusis and dike of a man
criterion in judging
purpose of punishment
process of reconciliation
conversion of Greek cities into Roman municipalities

CHAPTER FIVE: POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE ANCIENT GREEKS (2)

Study Questions

1. This chapter is devoted to Greek thoughts about government as distinguished from politics.

2. Two characteristic Greek words for government are never used to describe the government of a polis. In what ways did the Greeks use despotes and hegean? Patriarchy is a late Latin/Greek word derived from the pater patriae, father of his people. The earlier despotes was regarded as a master over slaves and nothing like a basileus. He as a potentate (potential = physical power) rather than a ruler exercising what in Latin was called auctoritas: the authority that is derived from a founder or author.

3. Arche originally meant to make a beginning, cause, or govern. The basileus of the primitive Greek polis was a priest-king as well as judge and warrior. He was a master of ceremonies who made the first sacrifice, was the first to speak, and set the agenda. How does Oakeshott distinguish the archamos from the archon? [NOTE: I cannot find any political use of this name. Orchamaos was a Persian king that figured in Greek mythology because of his daughter Leuchothoe. Orchomenos, on the other hand, was a Mycenaean center]. Drawing on René Girard, it is clear that the basileus was the model for the Greek conception of ruling. [Turning to Roman history, Roman was initially under priest-kings. With the abolition of the monarchy, the Romans divided the imperium (power of command) between two consuls, who could veto (“I forbid”) each other. The priesthood was also separated and the office rex sacrorum (king of the sacrifices) testifies to its royal origin]. Both polite and arches were activities that belonged to the agora. What is significant about what the book calls peitharxia? NOTE: Peitharcheo (paith-ar-KAY-o) is a better translation into English. It means “to be persuaded by the ruler). What does kurios mean? Oakeshott says that Greeks regarded ruling as the exercise of authority, but they were hazy over the sources of authority. Moreover, if they had a theory of democracy, it was not a majority tyranny but more of a belief that every citizen should be allowed to speak and be eligible to hold office.
4. What did *eleutheria* mean for the Greeks? In what way did *Dionysus* represent freedom? Why is the power of artifice an emblem of human freedom? What are the specific circumstances of freedom? What are the two worlds of men? What makes the *agora* the site of a liberation? What is the second liberation of the *Heliaea*?

5. What did the status of citizen mean in terms of human relationships? Persuasion, rather than command, is the proper way of dealing with equals. What does *isonomia* mean and what was there about it that could sometimes make it more compatible with an oligarchy than a democracy? James Madison appears to have understood the importance of *isonomia* when he wrote of the safeguards built into the House of Representatives in *The Federalist*, no. 57: “they can make no law which will not have its full operation on themselves and their friends, as well as on the great mass of the society.” As for what will protect against corruption by favoritism, Madison answered: “the genius of the whole system; the nature of just and constitutional laws; and above all, the vigilant and manly spirit which actuates the people of America—a spirit which nourishes freedom [*eleutheria*], and in return is nourished by it.” What is *isogoria*?

6. The first part is a summary of the preceding chapters. Oakeshott concludes with a reflection on the *polis* as more than a mere convenience but as a living community that could command loyalty and devotion. Here he leads into Aristotle by noting that Aristotle regarded the object of the *polis* as an association, not for mere protection, but for the good life. Here we might see an anticipation of the later Christian concept of *koinonia*.

**Review**

- government
- *despotes* = master
- internal arrangements of an *oikia*
- *pater patriae*
- *basileus* as not a potentate
- *hegemonia* = leader, superior power
- *arche* = cause
- mediator [cf. *pontifex maximus*]
- *orchamos*
- *archon* = ruler
- *basileus*: [mimetic] model for ruling
- *politeike* and *arche* belong to the *agora*
- *peitharcheo* = based on persuasion
- *kurios* = supremacy
- men of wisdom
- haziness over sources of authority
- *eleutheria* = freedom
- *Dionysus: eleutheron*
- *bios politikos*
- circumstances of freedom
- *free man in the agora*
- *Heliaea*
- *isotes* of the citizen
- coming of age
- *isogoria*
- Aristotle: *polis* and the good life

**CHAPTER SIX: ARISTOTLE (1)**

**Review**

- teleological movement
- obstructions and accidents
- artifice
- human rationality
- three permanent characteristics of the world
- science
- democratic potential of the *polis*
- classification of constitutions
- ideal types
- three possible political sciences

**CHAPTER SEVEN: ARISTOTLE (2)**

**Review**

- nature
- accident
- what makes *polis*-life possible
- teleological behavior
- human *eudaimonia*
- *role of desire*
- role of reason
- habit of living according to a rule
- human conduct: two distinctions
- rational choice
- unique human aptitude for artifice
- principle of all good human conduct
mixed constitution (polity) Aristotelian map

CHAPTER EIGHT: PLATO (1)

Review

Sophists characteristics of things three sorts of things in the world doxa Plato’s definition of polis-life idea characteristics of ideas misrepresentation doxa periangoge allegory of the cave triangularity: essence of a triangle copies of ideas (models, archetypes) nature of genuine knowledge philosophical enterprise who can understand and do justice

CHAPTER NINE: PLATO (2)

Review

artifacts and actions where justice resides what the structure of the polis represents first precept of justice democracy copy of the ideal model what justice is not for Plato what the structure of the polis represents the summit of justice Thucydides’s happy versatility who needs not to be a philosopher what made justice the polis’s midwife hierarchy of their importance marks of an unjust polis

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE POLITICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE ANCIENT ROMANS (1)

Review

populus Romanus Etruscans treaty (foedus) patrician libertas imperium patres comitia curiata (Curiate Assembly) comitia centuriata (Centuriate Assembly) Lucius Junius Brutus dictator tribunes [sacrosanct, inviolable] college of pontiffs [headed by pontifex maximus] self-consciousness household gods and tribal law household gods and tribal law clients dignitas rex pax deorum (divine peace) arcana Servian reforms Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud) consuls [a double office] consul [a double office] concilium plebis decemviri

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE POLITICAL EXPERIENCE OF THE ANCIENT ROMANS (2)

Review
potestas  auctoritas  Scipio (Africanus)
censor  Battle of Cannae  Julius Caesar
Mark Antony  temple of Janus  princeps senatus
Octavian’s titles: Caesar, Augustus, [and Savior of the World]  Tiberius
Pater patriae  principate  Pax Romana
Emperor  Septimius Severus

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: MEDIEVAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY (1): AUGUSTINE

Review

order of life in early Christian communities  Gnostic belief
two fundamental propositions of De civitate Dei  ordo universi
God’s twofold attitude toward this created universe  nature of human sin
the twofold problem sin creates  what is at the root of original sin
twofold consequence of the self-preference of sinful man  the two loves that create two cities
civitas terrena vs. civitas coelestis  sub specie aeternitatis (under the aspect of eternity)
post-lapsarian (after the Fall)  Augustine’s Roman manner of thinking

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: MEDIEVAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY (1): AQUINAS

Review

recovery of Aristotle’s writings on Ethics and Politics  radical difference from Christian view
Aristotelianism of the Christian view of the Christian universe  the goal of Aquinas’ undertaking
understanding of human nature: Augustine’s view  Augustine’s propter peccatum
why activity of rulers is penal  Aristotle’s view of human nature
what is missing from Aristotle’s view  Aquinas vs. Aristotle on slavery
seven cardinal virtues  seven deadly sins [wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony]
Aquinas vs. Aristotle on the relation of grace to nature  duplex ordo in rebus: nature and grace
Aquinas’s rejection of propter peccatum  Aquinas’ view of the civil order
how Aquinas differed from Aristotle on the civil order  possibility of resistance to tyranny
regimen politicum vs. regimen regale  church as a corpus mysticum
sacerdotium (civil government) vs. regnum (civil government)  civil potestas (secular legitimate power)
ecclesiastical auctoritas (the authority of an author)  distinguish good man from good citizen
relation between natural law and eternal law  primary (core) vs. secondary precepts
what is meant by positive law  three kinds of positive law
divine law  civil law
canon law  prudential politica and toleration
four main characteristics of the positive law of a civil order  jus gentium
why civil law should not be treated as an instrument of salvation