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

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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
- ruling
- 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 Dорians? What were some of traits of the people who emerged from the resulting mixture? How did the Achaeans and Dорians 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  Dorians  difference between Athens and Sparta
loquacious vs. laconic  oikia  attributes of the polis
citadel  Acropolis  agora
demos  politai (citizen)  resident foreigners (metics or metoikoi)
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

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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/thenavaloriginofgreekarchitectureandsculpture. 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 lawgiver. 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 physis 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**

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<th>taboo</th>
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**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 hegemonia? 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 *orchamos* 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 *politike* and *arche* were activities that belonged to the *agora*. What is significant about what the book calls *peitharaxia*? 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 *Heliea*?

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*.

**CHAPTER SIX: ARISTOTLE (1)**

**Review**

government  
*pater patriae*  
*arche* = cause  
*archon* = ruler  
*poltike* and *arche* belong to the *agora*  
*kurios* = supremacy  
*eleutheria* = freedom  
circumstances of freedom  
coming of age  
*isonomia*  

despotes = master  
*basileus* was not a potente  
mediator [cf. *pontifex maximus*]  
*basileus*: [mimetic] model for ruling  
*men of wisdom*  
*Dionysus: eleutheros*  
*free man in the agora*  
*Heliea*  
*isonomia*  

teleological movement  
obstructions and accidents  
artifice  

teleological behavior  
*human eudaimonia*  
role of desire  

**CHAPTER SEVEN: ARISTOTLE (2)**

**Review**

nature  
teleological behavior  
role of reason  
rational choice  
accident  
*human eudaimonia*  
habit of living according to a rule  
unique human aptitude for artifice  
what makes *polis*-life possible  
role of desire  

human conduct: two distinctions  
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 periagoge allegory of the cave

CHAPTER NINE: PLATO (2)

Review

artifacts and actions where justice resides what the structure of the polis represents first precept of justice democracy
idea copy of the ideal model what justice is not for Plato the summit of justice Thucydides’s happy versatility

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

Review

populus Romanus self-consciousness household gods and tribal law
Etruscans Romulus civitas Romana
treaty (foedus) households clients
patrician plebeian dignitas
libertas curia (pl. curiae) rex
imperium auspiciun pax deorum (divine peace)
patres senate patres
comitia curiata (Curiate Assembly) curiae (pl. curiae) arcana
comitia centuriata (Centuriate Assembly) Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud)
Lucius Junius Brutus rex sacrorum consuls [a double office]
dictator lex sacra [plebeians granted the double office of tribune with the veto]
tribunes [sacrosanct, inviolable] auxilium concilium plebis
college of pontiffs [headed by pontifex maximus] decemviri

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

Review
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

four main characteristics of the positive law of a civil order
*prudentia politica* and toleration

why civil law should not be treated as an instrument of salvation
*jus gentium*