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

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# MICHAEL OAKESHOTT: LECTURES IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT STUDY GUIDE, 2012 Steven Alan Samson

## 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  
ruling  
political vocabulary

political culture  
emergence of political society  
political theory

three conditions for politics  
amenability to human choice

# 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 Dorians? What were some of traits of the people who emerged from the resulting mixture? How did the Achaeans and Dorians 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 *boûle*? 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	<i>genos</i>	tribal household
unions of tribes	Dorians	difference between Athens and Sparta
loquacious vs. laconic	<i>oikia</i>	attributes of the <i>polis</i>
citadel	Acropolis	<i>agora</i>
<i>demos</i>	<i>politai</i> (citizen)	resident foreigners ( <i>metics</i> or <i>metoikoi</i> )

citizen relationship  
*basileus* as pivot  
aristocracy  
tyranny

the task of a founder  
*boûle*  
timocracy  
*politike*

aspects of Greek political experience  
three features of the *polis*  
democracy

## 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*

Croesus  
Oedipus

Xerxes  
Thucydides

*Nemesis*

## 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 maximus*, 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 *eucaastrophe* 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

context of earlier mythology	taboo	<i>Themis</i>
<i>Dike</i>	<i>sceptra</i>	<i>Nemesis</i>
<i>thesmos</i> = custom, use	<i>themistes</i> = common law	<i>thesmothete</i>
Solon, Draco, Lycurgus	<i>nomos</i>	<i>nous</i>
<i>logos</i>	Herodotus	<i>nomos</i> : disadvantages, difficulties
connection of fact and value	<i>Dike</i> = justice	Eunomia and <i>Eirene</i>
<i>phusis</i> and <i>dike</i> of a man	criterion in judging	threefold activity of a judge
purpose of punishment	process of reconciliation	types of constitutions
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 *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: *Peitharcho* (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 *Heliæa*?
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	<i>despotes</i> = master	internal arrangements of an <i>oikia</i>
<i>pater patriae</i>	<i>basileus</i> was not a potentate	<i>hegemonia</i> = leader, superior power
<i>arche</i> = cause	mediator [cf. <i>pontifex maximus</i> ]	<i>orchamos</i>
<i>archon</i> = ruler	<i>basileus</i> : [mimetic] model for ruling	<i>peitharcho</i> = based on persuasion
<i>politike</i> and <i>arche</i> belong to the	<i>agora</i>	haziness over sources of authority
<i>kurios</i> = supremacy	men of wisdom	power of artifice
<i>eleutheria</i> = freedom	Dionysus: <i>eleutheros</i>	<i>bios politikos</i>
circumstances of freedom	free man in the <i>agora</i>	<i>isotes</i> of the citizen
coming of age	<i>Heliæa</i>	Aristotle: <i>polis</i> and the good life
<i>isonomia</i>	<i>isogoria</i>	

## CHAPTER SIX: ARISTOTLE (1)

### Review

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

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ARISTOTLE (2)

### Review

nature	accident	what makes <i>polis</i> -life possible
teleological behavior	human <i>eudaimonia</i>	<i>role of desire</i>
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	idea	triangularity: essence of a triangle
characteristics of things	characteristics of ideas	copies of ideas (models, archetypes)
three sorts of things in the world	misrepresentation	nature of genuine knowledge
<i>doxa</i>	<i>periagoge</i>	philosophical enterprise
Plato's definition of <i>polis</i> -life	allegory of the cave	who can understand and do justice

## CHAPTER NINE: PLATO (2)

### Review

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

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

### Review

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

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

### Review

