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Oakeshott and Voegelin on the University

Eric Voegelin wrote very little that directly concerned the university. He was in general less occupied with the institutional arrangements of modern education than with elaborating and restoring a theory of consciousness that he thought had been lost in modernity. Still, as a university professor both in Germany and the United States he gave serious thought to the state of university education. He explicitly addressed the topic in a short essay originally presented at the University of Munich during the winter semester of 1965-66 and later published in *The Intercollegiate Review*. This essay, "The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era," is a summary of many issues that are presented more expansively in *Hitler and the Germans*. The substance of Voegelin's argument is that the German university had not only failed to prevent the Nazi disaster but had even facilitated an environment in which Hitler could rise to power almost entirely unimpeded.

Michael Oakeshott, unlike Voegelin, wrote frequently about the state of university education over his many decades as a university teacher both at Cambridge and at The London School of Economics. He produced a number of essays on the subject that were subsequently collected and published as *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Since the publication of that book a voluminous literature has grown up on the subject of Oakeshott's ideas about education. Most of this literature, however, appears not in journals of political science but rather in those of education and philosophy of education. As a result, the full political implications of Oakeshott's view of education have not yet been given the treatment they deserve.

A comparison of these two thinkers is instructive because it brings into focus not only the differences in their views of what education ought to provide, but also their contrasting (though sometimes complementary) views of our modern political situation. The remainder of this essay will therefore rearticulate Voegelin's critique of German universities in the mid-twentieth century. Next it will present a brief summary of Oakeshott's view of university education. Finally, I consider how these two authors "speak" to each other, evaluating what their views of the character of university education have in common as well as how they differ.

Voegelin and the German University

In his "German University" essay Voegelin unequivocally connected the tragedy of mid-twentieth century Germany with a failure of university education, but offered little by way of suggestions for how things might have been improved. As he candidly admitted in the final paragraphs of the essay, he saw his role primarily as that of critic or diagnostician. His diagnosis consisted of several connected parts.

Voegelin began by recalling Nietzsche's three types of history: monumental, antiquarian and critical. Monumental history is relevant only for those who wish to be great; antiquarian or descriptive history is appropriate for those who wish to abide in custom and tradition. Critical or "evaluative and judgmental" history is the only type that

may be of assistance for those faced with a political and social crisis of massive proportions. It is precisely this critical history that German universities failed to teach, and which, Voegelin thought, resulted in the rise of Nazism. The universities had rejected a pedagogy of history that would have allowed for moral evaluation of current events. By way of illustration, Voegelin considered three representative examples of Germany's "spiritual disorientation": Martin Heidegger, the Lutheran minister Martin Niemöller, and Percy Ernst Schramm, a famous German historian.

Although these contemporary examples are instructive for understanding the crisis in which Germany found itself in the twentieth century, Voegelin searched elsewhere for the genesis of the problem. He identified it in the educational philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the eminent German thinker credited with originating the concept of *Bildung*, often translated into English as "self-cultivation." *Bildung* was a conception of education whose aim was the liberation of human beings from their practical needs and wants into a quasi-timeless realm of study and contemplation. Education was emphatically not undertaken for the sake of achieving material ends but for the joy of thought itself. The only practical consequence of this education was the creation of a particular kind of character. A person whose character had been formed in such a way might largely be freed from the petty concerns that monopolized the lives of the "philistines." Voegelin and others noted a marked elitism in this conception of self-cultivation, as well as a particularly anti-political bent. If political activity was the ultimate practical, mundane activity, then it was precisely what ought most to be avoided by those who aimed at self-perfection through detachment and study. *Bildung*, according to Voegelin, thus led inevitably toward preoccupation with oneself or narcissism.

Voegelin gave numerous examples of the anti-political tendencies in Humboldt's language. He quoted Humboldt: "The freest educational development (*Bildung*) of man, one which is concerned with the relations of citizenship as little as possible, must everywhere take precedence."¹ "As long as the subject obeys the laws, and keeps himself and his dependents well-provided for in an occupation that is not harmful to others, the state is not concerned about the exact manner of his existence."² With respect to the narcissistic tendencies of *Bildung*, Voegelin observed that Humboldt's expressions—"inner being," "individuality," "originality," "uniqueness of human strength and development"—all tend toward excessive individualism and even, in Voegelin's terms, indicate "a closure against the ground of being."³ If the life of the spirit consists in "the openness of man to the divine ground of his existence," then Humboldt and his successors paved the way for the denial of any transcendent ordering principles outside an individual consciousness. "Development" and "eternal striving" have replaced the tension of a life lived in questioning unrest.

The heart of Voegelin's critique is his understanding of what education ought to provide. Platonic *periagoge*, that art which "moves man to turn away from the spiritual desolation of his existence in the world, and leads him back in the direction of the ground" is categorically different, Voegelin thought, from the Humboldtian phenomenon

¹ Eric Voegelin, "The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era," *The Intercollegiate Review* (Spring/Summer 1985): 17.

² *Ibid.*, 18

³ *Ibid.*

of a quest for self-perfection. Voegelin called Humboldt's language that of "estrangement," observing pessimistically that "rational, reality-related discussion is not possible" with such a person. Humboldt created a "second reality," according to Voegelin, and the heart of the problem is therefore pneumopathological. This is the conception of education the contemporary German university has inherited. In destroying the *xynon*, or the "commonality in the spirit," it has left German citizens unable to reflect critically on their experiences. The German university has failed to "transmit the stock of knowledge needed for the rational discussion and transaction of public business."⁴ Many elites have become wary of political involvement and contemptuous of political activity itself. Such is a summary of Voegelin's argument in the "German University" essay.

However, this essay begs many questions. It is a polemic clearly aimed at provoking its audience by the pointed critique of Humboldt as the father of German education. But it is worth asking whether Voegelin's criticisms of Humboldt are altogether fair. Does *Bildung*—the idea of self-cultivation and full development of one's individual powers—inevitably lead to narcissism? Does this kind of education exclude the possibility of openness toward the divine ground? What was Humboldt himself trying to guard against, or against what tendencies was he reacting? Even Voegelin recognized at the end of his essay that the modern German university, or the program that has apparently followed from Humboldt's principles, is not one that Humboldt himself would have approved. Voegelin observed only that he could not consider what Humboldt *really* wanted, because Humboldt spoke an "idiom of estrangement," and his writings "do not have a grip on reality."⁵ But this is too dismissive an answer; for in many respects Humboldt's writing is remarkably straightforward and luminous. As such, it deserves a more equitable treatment. Moreover, although Humboldt often invokes with approval such concepts as originality, self-sufficiency and individualism, he is also quite emphatic that significant and continuous social interaction is absolutely necessary for human fulfillment. In *The Limits of State Action* Humboldt writes that his ideas and arguments were an "attempt to find as many new social bonds as possible. The isolated man is no more able to develop than the one who is fettered."⁶ Voegelin seems to have ignored entirely this aspect of his thought.

Yet despite this "social" side of Humboldt's work, which unfortunately has been largely neglected, there *are* unmistakable anti-political tendencies inherent in the idea of *Bildung*.⁷ If politics appeared to German intellectuals as the ultimate practical activity, and if the person who engaged in self-cultivation explicitly tried to avoid engagement with this workaday world, then such a person would also have to avoid political activity. "In his effort to escape the corrupting realm of petty resentment and of clashing interests, the cultivated man displayed a more or less openly avowed yearning for social order . . . and authority."⁸ A certain type of "tradition-conscious subordination," to use Voegelin's words, yielded what he called in 1965 "national conservatism." This was a tendency to

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David Sorkin, "Wilhelm von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (*Bildung*), 1791-1810," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44:1 (Jan. – Mar. 1983): 59.

⁷ Ibid., footnote 15.

⁸ Fritz K. Ringer, Review of *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: "Bildung" from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* by W.H. Bruford, in *Central European History* 11:1 (March 1978): 109.

prefer authority, stability and tradition to change of any kind; and it ultimately produced a citizenry quite willing to facilitate Hitler's rise to power.⁹

Finally, there is also the question of whether or not those who espoused the ideal of *Bildung* ever took account of the social conditions that facilitated it. One scholar has put it this way: "While the world of culture is universal and classless in principle, it is also inevitably tied to a particular social order in fact. . . . [T]he emphasis on self-cultivation during the decades around 1800 was typically coupled with a polemical indifference to the accidents of birth as sources of social differentiation and of official preferment."¹⁰ To put it more bluntly, *Bildung* was simply not available to all who might have wished to pursue it. Retirement from the world to cultivate one's self-understanding and potentialities was possible only for those who could also be self-supporting. It therefore perpetuated differences between the poor and wealthy, the working classes and the privileged. This antithesis between "cultivated" and "philistine" was further reinforced by the state schools which had routinized the idea of *Bildung*.

Voegelin did not dwell on this divide between cultivated and philistine, but rather on the first of the potentially dangerous political consequences of *Bildung*: a tendency to retire from political life altogether or to retreat into the "non-political politics" of tradition-conscious subordination (the national conservatives) or anti-traditional opposition (modern radicals). In contrast to the conservatives, Voegelin observed, the radicals "protest[ed] against the regime without themselves being able to develop viable political alternatives."¹¹ Both responses were in a certain sense political, but neither effected the kind of fundamental change that Voegelin desired. He did, however, think both resulted from the narcissism and extreme individualism inaugurated by Humboldt.

Oakeshott on the University

In the preceding section I have enumerated a few of the most significant objections to Humboldt's philosophy of education. These are helpful in understanding Voegelin's critique of the modern German university as an outgrowth of the idea of *Bildung*. But these criticisms are also relevant to Oakeshott, who was in many respects a direct intellectual descendant of Humboldt. The objections raised against Humboldt are precisely those that continue to be leveled against Oakeshott by contemporary scholars and critics. These include his apparent lack of concern with the social conditions that facilitate university education for some but not others; his contempt for practical considerations that issue (some say) in a too-stark dichotomy between vocational and liberal education; and his sometimes disparaging view of politics that seems to emerge from an "elitist" view of human self-cultivation. These objections to Oakeshott's views are worth careful consideration, and I shall return to them below.¹² First, however, his philosophy of education must be considered on its own terms. Although it is worthy of much more than a few cursory paragraphs, I shall nevertheless highlight some of Oakeshott's most important and distinctive contributions rather briefly.

⁹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁰ Ibid., 110-11

¹¹ Voegelin, "German University," 22.

¹² Critics have focused particularly on his discussion of the influx of unprepared students in his essay entitled "The Universities," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 152.

At the heart of Oakeshott's views on education was his unapologetic notion that liberal education ought to be understood as a release from practical activity. University education was "the gift of an interval." The interval he referred to was, of course, one between the immaturity of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood. At a university, Oakeshott thought, students ought not jump directly into specialized studies (pre-law, pre-medicine, etc.) but should engage in the "playful" pursuit of learning for its own sake. Students should learn the "languages" of different subjects: of history, of philosophy, of art, of music, and so on. They ought to cultivate not just a passing acquaintance with the products of these fields but a kind of connoisseurship and judgment that could only come with serious immersion in one or more of them. This kind of education would yield not just the ability to recognize *that* a piece was composed by Bach or a work written by Plato (though recognition was obviously a necessary foundation for what was to come). Education was rather the capacity to see *why* and *how* Bach's music or Plato's dialogues were distinctive—to discuss them, to make judgments about others' interpretations of them, and to differentiate excellence from mediocrity in a particular field as a whole. The aim of such study was resolutely *not* to impress others, or to get a job as a critic of music or literature, or to pass some sort of test. This kind of understanding and appreciation was quite simply valuable for its own sake and for no other reason.¹³ Oakeshott thought that education ought to be, in the most profound sense, *enjoyable*.

His views emerged from an understanding of modernity that was at once critical and pessimistic, on the one hand, and positive, on the other. Throughout his long career Oakeshott criticized the Rationalist tendencies of the modern West and the inability of people to enjoy life in the present. More than any other age, Oakeshott thought, the twentieth century had placed all other human activities in the service of work, improvement and production. He went so far as to identify modernity as "a dark age devoted to barbaric affluence." In a strikingly pessimistic passage from *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, Oakeshott writes the following lines against the presumption that some sort of "revolution" might remedy the ills of the modern university:

When what a man can get from the use and control of the natural world and his fellow men is the sole criterion of what he thinks he needs, there is no hope that the major part of mankind will find anything but good in this exploitation until it has been carried far enough to reveal its bitterness to the full. This . . . is not an argument for doing nothing, but it is a ground for not allowing ourselves to be comforted by the prospect, or even the possibility, of a revolution. The voyager in these waters is ill advised to weigh himself down with such heavy baggage; what he needs are things that will float with him when he is shipwrecked.¹⁴

Note that Oakeshott did not say we should do *nothing* about the state of the modern university, which may indeed be headed for shipwreck. He did, however, think it

¹³ An illustration of this, from "The Idea of a University": "One may go to some sorts of art schools and be taught ten ways of drawing a cat or a dozen tricks to remember in painting an eye, but the scholar as teacher will teach, not how to draw or paint, but how to *see*." In *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 110.

¹⁴ Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*.

impossible that revolutionary efforts at reform would achieve much, indeed anything, of significance. Instead, echoing his arguments about politics in the essays “Rationalism in Politics” and “On Being Conservative,” he asserted that all we can do is engage confidently, almost faithfully, in a tradition of activity that has been handed down over generations. The place of a university, he wrote, is not to contribute “to some other kind of activity in the society *but [to be] itself and not another thing*. Its first business is with the pursuit of learning—there is no substitute which, in a university, will make up for the absence of this.”¹⁵ He saw vocational and professional training not as a value-added “bonus” but rather as a total corruption of the character of university education. For this idea Oakeshott has been roundly criticized, since he is sometimes perceived (like Humboldt) as an elitist, out of touch with the exigencies of the modern world.

Yet Oakeshott’s incisive, almost bitter criticism of the university goes hand in hand with his positive vision of what a university education can still provide for those students who desire it. Here is his poetic, even romantic, description of what this kind of education offers the young man or woman upon arrival at school—what it feels like “to be an undergraduate on that first October morning.”

[A] world of ungracious fact . . . melted into infinite possibility; we who belonged to no “leisured class” had been freed for a moment from the curse of Adam, the burdensome distinction between work and play . . . The distracting urgency of an immediate destination was absent, duty no longer oppressed, boredom and disappointment were words without meaning; death was unthinkable. . . . And what of the harvest? Nobody could go down from such a university unmarked . . . [One] will know, perhaps, that it is not good enough to have a “point of view,” that what we need is *thoughts* . . . he will have acquired something that puts him beyond the reach of the intellectual hooligan, and whatever has been the subject of his study he may be expected to be able to look for some meaning in the things that have greatly moved mankind . . . In short, this period at a university may not have equipped him very effectively to earn a living, but he will have learned something to help him lead a more significant life.

This is Oakeshott’s positive vision for education, and we should note that it is not, after all, entirely divorced from the practical. Although he emphatically denied that university education should be preparation for a career, it may yet be a certain kind of preparation for a fulfilling adult life. This is something akin to Humboldt’s self-cultivation. The process clearly entails a kind of “realization of the self” and the development of one’s capacities and talents. But against the criticism that self-realization will inevitably turn into narcissism, Oakeshott continually emphasized that a student must *submit* to traditions of thought. Indeed, perhaps the most valuable part of a university education is the time we spend in apprenticeship to those who have preceded us.¹⁶ One of Oakeshott’s favorite metaphors was that of language, and anyone who has attempted to learn a language (much less speak it fluently) knows that it is an arduous task which demands a willingness to be refuted, even embarrassed. If anything, the university

¹⁵ Ibid., 117; italics mine.

¹⁶ See “Study of Politics in a University” in *Rationalism in Politics*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 187.

education Oakeshott described may yield a certain kind of intellectual humility, not narcissism.

Oakeshott's view of education, then, included both an unwillingness to sign on to the "crisis of the university" agenda as well as the recognition that the modern university was not well. He could at times be bitter about the corruptions he saw visited upon the university during his lifetime, but he seemed to have had no doubts about its continuing value. The greatest gift of a liberal education was a sense of one's place in the universe, of one's capabilities, perhaps even of one's insignificance in the greater scheme of things. Indeed, a clear sense that there *is* a greater scheme of things can be best (perhaps only) seen through the submission required by liberal education. Oakeshott thought that there was "no other way for a human being to make the most of himself than by learning to recognize himself in the mirror of this inheritance."¹⁷ This emphasis on inheritance, however, does not necessarily yield political conservatism, or any particular political position at all. Indeed, an education of this kind is quite likely to make conventional political life far more difficult. Insofar as a liberally educated person will be able to see more clearly the range of choices available in political and moral life, commonly-held political ideologies are likely to become awkward and uncomfortable—a set of clothes that no longer fits.

Voegelin and Oakeshott

What then are the fruits of a comparison of Voegelin and Oakeshott on the subject of university education? At first blush, comparison seems to yield nothing but differences. Oakeshott was an intellectual descendant of Humboldt, and as such he used much of the language of *Bildung*. He spoke about individual self-realization and "the cultivation of a sensibility" or, in another formulation, "self-enactment." He often used precisely the vocabulary Voegelin so harshly criticized in Humboldt; and Oakeshott, like Humboldt, was a great defender of individualism and freedom.

Oakeshott was also apparently unconcerned with what Voegelin identified as the central problem for the German university: its complete abandonment of the "life of the spirit." Setting aside the problem of whether the critique of Humboldt is accurate, Voegelin clearly wanted to set two types of education side by side: Platonic *periagoge*, which asked man to recognize his existence between immanence and transcendence, then to be drawn toward the divine but also to remain politically active; and narcissistic self-absorption, which required only that one "develop oneself" to the best of one's abilities. The one pointed toward openness and engagement with others; the other to vanity and self-absorption. Oakeshott, on the other hand, seemed almost to celebrate just this aspect of the university—namely (and only rarely, he lamented) that it might almost entirely seal itself off from the outside world. He called the university "a place apart" and described a university education as "the gift of an interval" from precisely those practical and political considerations that Voegelin thought its graduates should be prepared to face.

In what respects then are Oakeshott and Voegelin the same, or how at least might they both recognize a common problem? They do agree on one important fact: something is terribly wrong with the modern university. I have already described Voegelin's critique in some detail, but Oakeshott saw a problem of equal magnitude though he did not speak in terms of "crisis." Yet his critique is even more pessimistic

¹⁷ Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 41.

than Voegelin's. For, while Voegelin thought there might yet be a possibility of the university positively affecting political society (if only the Humboldtian corruption could be excised), Oakeshott sees no such possibility. His "shipwreck" quote reproduced above is clear evidence of this. Oakeshott thought rather in terms of preserving the integrity of liberal learning in those places and through those teachers who could themselves engage in it. It was for such people that he wrote his essays about education. Oakeshott was thus not particularly concerned with the relationship of the university to the political community but rather with describing the essence of a certain kind of activity. His choice of the metaphor of the "interval" or "interim" is instructive: it has both a beginning and an end, and as he observes, "the eternal undergraduate is a lost soul."¹⁸ Still, for the duration of that interval university education should be cordoned off both in time and space—between childhood and adulthood, on one hand, and away from the corruptions of desire and aversion that animate politics, on the other.

But here again is a point of disagreement between Oakeshott and Voegelin. Voegelin recognized something quite important that Oakeshott sometimes stubbornly refused to see: the university *does* in fact have a relationship to politics. This is both good and bad. In the most positive sense it means, as Voegelin hoped, that its graduates would emerge equipped to engage the issues that define their lives. They would be able to participate in collective life and, with some luck, perhaps prevent the rise of the next Hitler. In its most negative sense, it means that political considerations tend to corrupt the university. The demands of work and productivity, of the world of getting and spending, demand the creation and funding of business, engineering and law schools which may do a splendid job of preparing young people for prosperous careers. But their curricula are a far cry from liberal education in any sense that approximates Oakeshott's ideal. The other political corruption is, of course, the danger of ideological politics—conservative *or* liberal—infiltrating a liberal arts curriculum. If traditions are thought to be no longer worth defending, or even worth studying, students will be left with the worst of the *hic et nunc*. Likewise, if traditions are defined from a limited ideological perspective, and simply presented as dogma that must be accepted, many students will likely find them repellent or, at worst, boring.

In his "German University" essay Voegelin is at once too hopeful and too vague about what a political community that shares a "life of the spirit" might mean in practice. But Oakeshott's blanket denial of any relationship between university and politics does not adequately take account of all the types of liberal education that may exist within a university. Oakeshott is certainly correct that certain types of study—for example, medieval history, ancient art history, English or French literature—are best approached as ends in themselves with little thought for their practical application. But other courses, and particularly those that have to do with politics, function as hybrids. A student studying the just-war tradition may do so only for the illumination it brings about past events; but it is also likely that such study will influence his assessment of current reasoning about war. Courses in American Constitutional law may be approached simply as a catalogue of past decisions; but to engage the legal reasoning of the cases is unavoidably to think through the issues for oneself. And since many of these issues remain unsettled, students will likely encounter them not just in the classroom, but long after they have left the university and moved on to full-fledged adult life.

¹⁸ Perhaps college professors are even more lost.

Did Oakeshott fail to see this? I doubt it. Although he saw a clear divide between the university and politics, his own output did in fact bridge this gap. Many of the essays he produced were explicitly political, even polemical. In fact, with the exceptions of *Experience and its Modes* and parts of *On Human Conduct*, his writing was rarely as detached as the education he defended. He wrote for the most part in the practical mode when he considered politics—not so much to influence politics directly, but rather so that others (both philosophers and practitioners of politics) might see that there were alternative ways of envisioning political activity. What people did with his essays, if they were patient enough to try to understand them, was not Oakeshott's concern. His political essays might even be seen as Oakeshott's return to the cave of practice, though unlike Voegelin he had no hopes at all of changing the course of anything practical. Oakeshott knew that practice would go on with or without the philosopher; indeed, with or without the university as he understood it. But, like poetry, conversation and all the other civilized arts, university education as an “interval” was something he wanted to defend and preserve. This conception was in danger of extinction when Oakeshott wrote, and it is even more so now.