

The Importance of Michael Oakeshott for Polanyian Studies: With Reflections on Oakeshott's *The Voice of Liberal Learning*

Walter B. Mead

ABSTRACT Key Words: Polanyi, Oakeshott, liberal education, epistemology, boundaries, curriculum, values.

Despite fundamental differences in the epistemologies presented by Oakeshott and Polanyi, there are some important areas of common concern which suggest further exploration. Focus here is on Oakeshott's epistemological and disciplinary boundaries in his The Voice of Liberal Learning.

Those of us who are interested in building upon and applying Michael Polanyi's profound epistemological insights naturally find ourselves seeking dialogue with those who are, if not directly influenced by Polanyi, at least engaged in thinking that is essentially consonant with his. It is easy to be dismissive of those who appear to have no regard for such fundamental Polanyian tenets as the elusively tacit grounding of knowing, the important role played by the intimation of indeterminate manifestations in the discovery process, the personal, or fiduciary, act central to all knowledge claims, the sense that we inhabit a heuristic universe whose boundaries are ever open to the guidance of transcending truths and values, and, not least, the humble recognition that we cannot, in this world, aspire to comprehension characterized by complete clarity, let alone certainty – that all human knowing is subject to error.

Michael Oakeshott is such a case in point. He unabashedly embraces an essentially Enlightenment type of rationalism, aspires to a kind of Hegelian perspective that would allow for a totally comprehensive, clear, and certain understanding of the entire “world of experience,” offers an understanding of values as essentially relative — the circumstantial “prejudices” of tradition, denies any meaning to the concept of “transcendence,” and advances an essentially Hobbesian/Humean perspective that human motivation is explainable in terms no loftier than the pursuit of “desire,” “delight,” and “satisfaction.”

This stark contrast between Polanyi and Oakeshott, contemporary thinkers who, during two of their most productive decades, lived within an hour's drive of each other, probably goes a long way in explaining why neither appeared to be particularly interested in the other's thoughts. There is no indication in any of Polanyi's writings that he was even conversant with Oakeshott's thinking. However, at the time that Polanyi was writing his seminal work, *Personal Knowledge* (1958),¹ it appears that very few others had shown interest in Oakeshott's major philosophical work, *Experience and Its Modes*.² Since its publication in 1933, its first printing of one thousand copies had not yet sold out. And although Oakeshott provided a review of *Personal Knowledge* immediately upon its release and a few years later briefly incorporated some of Polanyi's characteristic terminology in one of the essays included in the book we are about to consider, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*,³ he displayed no more – either deep or extended – appreciation of Polanyi's sense of these terms than he, by his own admission, had for *Personal Knowledge*, which he found to be “disordered, digressive, repetitive, and obscure.”⁴

Still, there is one important area in which the, otherwise divergent, epistemologies of these two thinkers coincide. Both perceive the process of knowing as essentially contextual – an act in which the knower, in his attempt to achieve a more determinate and coherent awareness, is continually engaged in making judgments, drawing conclusions, based upon an indeterminate range of experiences. Oakeshott, in one of the essays included in *Liberal Learning*,⁵ occasionally even seems to agree with Polanyi that many of these contributive experiences are of a “subsidiary” and “tacit” nature. Although these are Polanyi’s terms, not employed by Oakeshott, the latter uses other words and phrases – e.g., “not explicit,” “indeterminate” – to suggest similar meanings. And the judging/comprehending process itself, Oakeshott – like Polanyi – reminds us, is not always “defined by rules”; it occasionally relies upon “connoisseurship” – a “knowing how . . . without knowing the rules”; some things are “known only in practice”; and he even suggests that learning is “inspired by intimations of what there is to learn.”⁶

But we must not read too much into Oakeshott’s employment of these “Polanyian” terms. The larger body of his essays and books indicate that his fundamental stance, ever since the publication of *Experience*, remains rooted in an understanding of knowing that never really moves beyond a commitment to the definitional precision, explicit clarity, complete coherence, and absolute certainty aspired to – and often claimed – by Enlightenment rationalism. The thought that, in his reference to “intimations,” (above) Oakeshott may have attained the imaginative and intuitive “reach” implied in Polanyi’s use of the term disperses when we hear him say, “We never look *away from* a given world to another world, but always *at* a given world to discover the unity it implies.”⁷ For Oakeshott, whatever “indeterminate” and “unspecified” elements he ascribes to the judgments entailed in knowing, the degree to which we can properly call something “true” or “real” must be measured by his essentially critical criteria. It is relevant to note here that, even though he, on rare occasions, uses the term “unspecified” to describe some of the contextual elements of our knowing, he *never*, to my knowledge, characterizes these elements as “unspecifiable.” To acknowledge any knowing as unspecifiable, because ultimately tacit in nature, for Oakeshott, is to make an unwarranted concession to irrationality and ignorance. By way of contrast, Polanyi articulates his *post*-critical declaration that it is this very tacit and often unspecifiable grounding, and our recognition of this grounding, that gives our knowing, even our most explicit knowing, whatever rational validity and substantiality it can claim.

However, it is not without significance that both philosophers are in agreement and consistent in their insistence on the essentially contextual nature of knowing. Polanyi and Oakeshott concur that comprehension involves some kind of an act of bringing together an indeterminate range of particulars into coherent and integrated wholes. Further, both make reference to some kind of boundaries that give definition to these wholes. Having observed this, we must recognize that these thinkers sharply diverge when they reveal the characteristics of their respective integrated wholes and the nature of the boundaries that demarcate these wholes.

For Polanyi, an integrated whole is any focal perception, concept, idea, system of ideas, or even – moving from epistemology to ontology, as he does in his philosophical writings – complex mechanical or living entity that is an “organic” result of subsidiary, and largely tacitly organized, particulars. When Polanyi comes to speak of boundaries, it is almost entirely in regard to his ontological theory of hierarchical levels and emergence. Although his ontology of hierarchy and emergence appears to have been inspired by his initial employment of these concepts in his epistemology (according to which the focal object of our perception and knowing emerge from a tacit process of integrating particulars into wholes that are greater, or more meaningful, than the sheer sum of their constituent particulars), he only briefly applies the concept of “boundary” to his understanding of the structure and process of knowing.⁸

This is not to suggest that the idea of boundaries is not *implied* in his epistemology. In his consideration of visual perception, he speaks of a “from-to” dialectic between the periphery of the visual field and its focal center, and he detects an analogous “from-to” dialectic between subsidiary and focal awareness in all knowing. Where there is a periphery, there is an implied boundary, whether tacit or explicit. Similarly, recognition of an integrated whole, emergent from the “from-to” dialectic of cognitive integration, implies a boundary.

Still, Polanyi gives slight attention to the concept of boundaries in his extended discussion of the structure and process of knowing. In contrast, for Oakeshott, the subject of the nature and function of epistemological boundaries is of major concern and receives extended treatment in his writings. Even though the integrated wholes of which Oakeshott speaks refer mostly to *whole systems* of ideas (indeed, completely isolated “particular ideas . . . without relations must be devoid of significance and consequently fall outside *experience*”⁹) and are – as we have already noted – the product of a significantly different process of integration, his insightful and imaginative investigation of epistemological boundaries, and many of the questions he raises in the course of this investigation, suggest some interesting lines of inquiry that might be fruitfully pursued by those interested in building upon the ultimately more persuasive epistemological paradigm initiated by Polanyi.

Oakeshott establishes the fundamental principles of his concept of epistemological boundaries in his *Experience*. This important philosophical work, because of its enormous scope and abstraction, is daunting but richly rewarding reading. To adequately understand the philosophical rationale for his much later examination of the principles of liberal education, elaborated in the six essays comprising his very readable *Liberal Learning*, it is important to have struggled first with *Experience*. The value of the later work is that it gives “flesh” to his highly abstract theory of knowing and, at the same time, identifies what the author considers to be major failures in twentieth-century higher education while also presenting constructive proposals for remedying those failures. His proposals do not suggest simply a return to what one might call the “classical” idea of liberal education but, in many respects, a radical re-examination of how liberal education ought to be conceived. Some of his proposals have drawn sharp criticism from those committed to the classical model. But whether or not one ends up agreeing with these proposals, they, like his underlying theory, offer important, commonly neglected questions that need to be addressed.

Oakeshott’s understanding of the issues to be dealt with in coming to an appreciation of the learning/ knowing process did not start in abstract theory. It is rooted in his lifetime of experiences in education as both student and teacher. In this sense, the very tangible observations we encounter in *Liberal Learning* are logically anterior to the grand abstractions of his much earlier *Experience*. Liberal learning, he suggests, is learning to participate in “the great intellectual adventures in which human beings have come to display their various understandings of the world and of themselves.”¹⁰ He then proposes that at the heart of liberal education at the university level is *conversation*. Indeed, he suggests that higher education importantly ought to provide an *interval* in a person’s life that allows him or her to be temporarily removed from the narrow pressures of society that call for immediate and “gainful” results, a space wherein one – through conversation – can be encouraged to ask questions, to examine prior assumptions, and to think thoughts never previously dreamed of. It is the conversation among students, among professors, but most importantly between students and professors (Oakeshott dismisses Rousseau’s plan for leaving the student to draw largely on his/her own “innate” resources) that gives substance to liberal education.

However, a conversation can be substantively productive only if its boundaries are properly – neither too narrowly, nor too broadly – drawn. This naturally leads Oakeshott to consider curricular and disciplinary boundaries. Experience has amply demonstrated the dangers of an overly narrow focus. Teaching what has been described as “more and more about less and less” leads not only to irrelevance and superficiality but also to serious distortions in what is learned. While recognizing the importance of offering some vocational training in the university curriculum, Oakeshott warns that allowing vocationalism, or even non-vocationally-oriented specialization, to dominate a curriculum or a given field of study is destructive of liberal education.

He warns, also, that the same dangers result from an overly broad drawing of these boundaries, as happens when university studies are defined in such vague and global terms as, for example, “History of Civilization” or “Thinking Logically” – so that curricula, emptied of the riches that can be conveyed only in concrete specifics, only provide the student with, we might say, “less and less about more and more.” A well-defined field of learning appears to be one whose boundaries are drawn narrowly enough to permit coherence in the teaching/learning conversation and broadly enough to be comprehensive of all that might be relevant and, therefore, permit the greatest possible enrichment of that conversation.

Interestingly, Oakeshott’s disciplinary boundaries coincide with those that he had drawn, in *Experience*, to define what he there called “modes of experience.” A mode of experience, for him, is a “world of ideas” or a “universe of discourse” focused upon the pursuit of a particular goal. In both *Experience* and *Liberal Learning*, speaking specifically respectively about modes and fields of teaching/learning, he identifies four of these: “science,” “history,” “poetry” (in which he includes all the visual, audio, and dramatic arts), and “practice” (in which he includes politics, economics, sociology, and psychology), and he indicates that this listing is not exhaustive because there is actually an “indeterminate” number of modes or fields of inquiry.

The goal of science, he says, is to present an understanding of the world in terms that are objective, precise and quantifiable. The task of history is merely to report, with no attempt to make judgments or to advocate, the events of the past. What he calls “poetry,” and I shall refer to as “the arts,” has no purpose other than to “bring delight.” And practice is an attempt to order the world so that our actions in it will maximize the satisfaction of our desires.

Because the objective perceived as most important for attainment by each field of learning structures all the tools that are deemed appropriate for attaining this objective, the concepts, idioms, universe of discourse, and conversation appropriate to each field are also, in each case, unique. This helps us to understand why, throughout the many decades that Oakeshott concerned himself with this subject, he uses the terms “mode,” “idiom,” “universe of discourse,” “field of inquiry,” “conversation,” and – most common in his later writings on the subject, “voice” interchangeably.

This also may help us to understand one of the more criticized, but I think defensible, aspects of his philosophy of knowing and, consequently, his philosophy of liberal learning. Because each of these modes is so different in virtually all respects – goal, conceptual idiom, governing paradigm, area of relevant conversation, etc. – each mode is autonomous: there can be no relevance of one mode or field of inquiry for another, no meaningful conversation between them, no way that one can learn substantively from another. This is true by definition, since each mode was created to pursue its own goal by conceptual and other means that have proved uniquely successful to that pursuit. Indeed, to assume otherwise, to allow for a blurring of interdisciplinary boundaries by incorporating “insights” from other modal endeavors, can lead only to confusion, or worse –

error, and, still worse – the destruction of modal, or disciplinary, integrity and of liberal education itself. For example, in the twentieth century we have seen the inappropriate influence of the historical paradigm on politics lead to the corruption represented by “historicism,” and the similarly inappropriate impact of the scientific idiom on social studies result in the “scientism” of behavioralism.

Where Polanyi speaks of open boundaries, Oakeshott speaks only of closed boundaries. This is not to suggest that new information is not constantly being appropriated by each mode, but it is generated internally; information generated within other modes is alien to its purposes and understanding. Still the content in each mode is constantly changing. Oakeshott’s holistic (and Hegelian) understanding of a mode or a field of inquiry leads him to conclude that a change in any part entails a change in the whole, and a change in the whole gives new meaning to all of its parts. Consequently boundaries, properly understood, are constantly changing, but not overlapping.

Those who have criticized Oakeshott on this aspect of his epistemology and education for giving too narrow scope to intellectual conversation should be reminded that, especially when we consider “poetry” and “practice” as academic disciplines, the range of inquiries he includes within each of these is enormous – far more encompassing than most presently-defined academic disciplines. As regards science, he is suggesting that the most rewarding conversations here – as biochemists, astrophysicists, nuclear biologists, and most other scientists have discovered – far transcend most of the recent and even current definitions of the scientific disciplines: physics, chemistry, biology. Further, Oakeshott even, somewhat surprisingly, recommends that institutions of liberal learning encourage a more encompassing conversation that extends even beyond the fairly broad intra-disciplinary conversations we have just noted and that invites the participation of every member of the academic community. It appears that, even if the separate disciplines can have no substantive influence on each other, a liberally educated person is one who still is well aware of the conversations going on within the other disciplines. Having some conversance with other fields may not improve his performance in his own field, but it does give him a broader, and to that extent deeper, understanding of the world in which he lives.

The boundary that Oakeshott defines for history is, to my thinking, more problematic than those he provides for the other fields of learning – and even so for him. He wants politics, for example, to be informed by history (all of his “political writings” are immersed in historical observations) while still maintaining that it cannot be substantively relevant to politics since its idiom is totally alien to politics. Psychology (included, like politics, in “practice”), unlike history, can speak to politics because it shares a common idiom. My most generous interpretation of Oakeshott on this matter is that, while history cannot substantively contribute to politics, the “concrete detail” of history is there to caution the political thinker and actor of the complexity of the world, to give him a humble awareness that many forces other than political forces are at work both in shaping the problems he must address and in limiting how much influence he can have in determining his society’s, or his own, destiny.

However, this is just one of several instances where one might wish that Oakeshott had been within earshot of Polanyi when the latter was warning of the problems we create for ourselves when driven by the quest for unbridled clarity and precision. He sometimes creates new categories to maintain the integrity of his boundaries. For example, he doesn’t want to blur the boundary between philosophy and politics, but still sees the need for political philosophy – so he calls it a “pseudo-philosophy.” Sometimes one gets the impression that the same ambitious intentions that give Oakeshott’s epistemological project its imaginative richness also, because of their convergence with his unbridled faith in the reliability of Enlightenment rationality, leads him

to creating appendages to his overall structure not unlike the complex epicycles intended to maintain the structural integrity of the ancient Ptolemaic universe.

By operating within the context of a hierarchical ordering of his epistemological and ontological universe, Polanyi is able to allow for open boundaries in his system that permit the kind of communication (“marginal control”) across boundaries that can account for the emergence of higher systems. Oakeshott, by contrast, firmly denies any hierarchical characteristics in his system – epistemological or curricular. It seems as if an acknowledgement of higher and lower levels of knowing or being, perhaps leading to an acknowledgement of transcendence (a concept he just as firmly dismisses as that of hierarchy), might threaten to put areas of knowing out of human reach. He perceives the relations among his various curricular fields, like the relations among his modes of experience, as essentially horizontal. He does – some would say, inconsistently – find it necessary to describe some fields, or universes of discourse, as more important than others. For example, he regards “practice” as the “most important” of the fields of inquiry – since it attempts to provide for human survival and well-being, without which the other pursuits were impossible. Sometimes he even describes one endeavor as of higher quality than another.

But, for him, “hierarchy” connotes more than relative quality and importance. It also connotes relevance of one level or entity to another. And his manner of drawing and defining boundaries does not allow, as we have seen, for such relevance, or for one field to be able to improve the chance for successful pursuit of its substantive goal by drawing substantively – that is, conceptually, idiomatically, paradigmatically, etc. – from another. It is the symbols, or idioms, of each field that define for that field what is real. “H₂O” and “water” denote the same thing, but each connotes a different kind of reality, one appropriate to the world of science and the other to the world of practice. Even in a hierarchically structured universe, Polanyi recognizes, we cannot achieve through some system of common idioms, a rationally explicit means of explaining boundary-crossing, whether we are addressing the phenomenon of emergence or of tacit integration. Influence across boundaries must always, he tells us, entail an element of mystery, of the unspecifiable, concepts, as we’ve noted, alien to Oakeshott’s thinking.

I have not yet mentioned Oakeshott’s treatment of philosophy as either a part of the “world of ideas” or as part of the liberal curriculum. Here, too, he has stirred considerable controversy among advocates of liberal education. In *Experience*, he makes it clear that philosophy is not to be viewed as one of the modes of experience. It represents totally comprehensive and wholly coherent understanding (what Oakeshott calls “concrete” knowledge), knowledge that has no conditionality (specific goal to attain), or boundaries. It is, in other words, Absolute knowledge. It is what Oakeshott calls the “whole of experience” or the “world of experience.” By contrast, experience is modal to the extent that it is conditional (that is, organized around the attainment of a particular goal), therefore “abstracted” from the “concrete” (that is, totally comprehensive and completely coherent) “whole of experience,” and therefore it is fragmentary and distorted in its comprehension. Modal experience represents an “arrest in experience.” Although, viewed from the far more encompassing perspective of the whole of experience, or philosophy, modal experience has all these shortcomings and flaws, from its own perspective it understands itself as a complete and self-sufficient world unto itself.

Because of this, the various modes of experience, or fields of teaching and learning, are constantly tempted to view themselves as true and complete in their understanding, and therefore to assert hegemony over the other disciplines, as well as over philosophy itself. Philosophy, of course, because of its radically different idiom and universe of discourse, as we might expect, can have no substantive relevance for the modes than they

can have for it. By Oakeshott's interpretation of Plato's Cave Allegory, the philosopher, returned to the cave, deserved whatever abuse he received, for he had no business meddling in politics. He, with his totally disparate wisdom, however perfect, could only disrupt the proper workings of politics. For philosophers have no better understanding of politics than politicians have of philosophy. This disparity between the "modal" disciplines (science, history, poetry, practice, etc.) and the discipline of philosophy is even greater than that existing among the former. Philosophers must not be allowed to rule! Or even to advise rulers! Because philosophers cannot be assumed to be wise in "practical" matters (remembering that philosophy, even as the "whole of experience" is not the sum-total of its abstracted/distorted parts – that would only add up to one gigantic abstraction or distortion!), we might be well advised to take seriously this admonition. (Unless we might imagine a philosopher who is as well versed in politics; but even then his philosophical wisdom, on Oakeshott's terms, could have no bearing on his politics.)

Although philosophers cannot address themselves with substantive relevance to practitioners of other fields of learning, what philosophy can and should do within the university, as well as within society at large, Oakeshott advises, is to keep the various disciplines aware of their limits and of their proper relations among each other (and with itself), to warn them of the dangers that are involved in imposing their own idioms and paradigmatic assumptions upon those of another discipline, and to speak out forcefully when it perceives such interdisciplinary transgressions. In other words, philosophy, in its role toward the other disciplines, should be a referee, a protector of the, properly conceived, principles of liberal education.

"Principles" here are to be understood not as values but merely as the structural arrangements that insure the proper, or most efficacious, relations among the disciplines. Philosophy itself, according to Oakeshott, has no comprehension of, or use for, the concept of value. Here I find the most glaring weakness among Oakeshott's proposals. Values, he insists, belong only to the modal world of "practice." (He doesn't always distinguish clearly, but he seems to be referring here to *moral* values. He also occasionally speaks of *aesthetic* values, which belong to the world, or discipline, of the arts.) Oakeshott understands moral values and meaning from a Hobbesian perspective. They are mere servants of the task appropriate to the world of practice. The purpose of ethics (a sub-field within practice) is to optimize society's meeting of individual appetites and desires by assigning to human beings some quality of innate worth and, from this, deriving rules to keep people from harming each other or otherwise interfering in their pursuit of their desires. The values of a society are relative to the circumstances of each particular society, and usually the established traditions of a society will suffice for its moral compass.

Within an academic curriculum, ethics does not even have the over-viewing referee status assigned to philosophy. Universities are not justified in describing as one of their comprehensive tasks that of "building character." This, Oakeshott says, must be left primarily to a much longer period of more worldly experience. The "interval" of liberal education has no special place even for beginning or encouraging this process. It seems ironic that the various disciplinary studies he has defined need the protection from worldly influences that such an interval provides, but not ethical values – apart from those that are understood to facilitate the fulfillment of one's appetites and desires. And these latter values are created only within the "practical" sub-fields of politics, sociology, economics, where the objectives of each of these task-masters defines their substance.

I have analyzed to greater length this major failing of Oakeshott's philosophy elsewhere.¹¹ Here I'll only note that, despite his numerous insights in regard to the boundaries that define the various fields of liberal learning and the relations among them, his advice on the subject of value, if followed, would likely undermine

the very institution of liberal learning that he seeks to promote. There are many other issues addressed by Oakeshott in *Liberal Learning* that deserve our engagement. I recommend that fellow students of Polanyi give thoughtful attention to this collection of essays, but only after first perusing his *Experience*.

Endnotes

¹ *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

² Cambridge University Press. Reissued in 1994. Hereafter referred to as *Experience*.

³ A collection of six essays that Oakeshott authored between 1949 and 1974, originally published in 1989 by Yale University Press, and subsequently reissued in 2001, by the Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, IN. Hereafter referred to as *Liberal Learning*. The specific essay I refer to is Oakeshott's "Learning and Teaching" (1965). Although none of the other essays in this collection (three authored before his review of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* and two after) suggest any influence from Polanyi, this essay contains about a dozen terms and several statements that sound very Polanyian. Yet, even in this essay, none of these apparent, and unacknowledged, borrowings represent much more sustained appreciation of Polanyi's concepts than his other writings, and they certainly never fundamentally challenge any of Oakeshott's dominant, and very "un-Polanyian," perspectives noted above.

⁴ "The Human Coefficient," *Encounter*, vol. 11 (London, September 1958), 77-80.

⁵ "Learning and Teaching," (1965), pp. 35-61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, except for the last phrase, which is from another of his essays in *Liberal Learning*, "A Place of Learning," first presented as a lecture in 1974.

⁷ *Experience*, 31.

⁸ E.g., Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 44-45. Hereafter referred to as *Tacit*.

⁹ *Experience*, 28.

¹⁰ *Liberal Learning*, 22.

¹¹ See my more extended critique of Michael Oakeshott's philosophy in "Michael Oakeshott as Philosopher: Beyond Politics, A Quest for Omniscience," in *The Political Science Reviewer: An Annual Assessment of Scholarship*, vol. 32 (2003), 221-68