

theory, which will be more familiar to the intended audience. But readers familiar with Habermas who seek a better understanding of Rawls should find the book helpful for the same reason.

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Wendell John Coats Jr.: *Michael Oakeshott as a Philosopher of the "Creative," and Other Essays*. (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2019. Pp. viii, 129.)

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John Coats's new book is his second devoted to the thought of Michael Oakeshott and is the fourteenth volume in Imprint Academic's Oakeshott Studies series. As the title suggests, it is a collection of essays rather than a unified work, an approach that has both advantages and drawbacks, as I shall sketch in turn below. The main claim of the book, articulated most robustly in the title chapter and reiterated in several others, is that "the unifying perspective in Oakeshott's entire *corpus* is arguably the poetic or creative structure of experiential reality" (8). To both substantiate and elucidate this claim about the character of Oakeshott's thought, Coats primarily looks to Oakeshott's first book, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), a challenging philosophical work firmly within the tradition of British idealism. Drawing extensively upon its terminology, Coats depicts Oakeshott as presenting a conceptual picture in which reality, for us, in our experience, is an indivisible compound of form and substance, of essence and existence. Upon this foundation is built the claim that experiential reality is ineluctably creative, dynamic, and contingent because (against the Platonic tradition, which Coats cites for contrast) the content of actual experience is not simply the transient, imperfect manifestation of eternal, static, and necessary forms. Experience is always, rather, the unfolding of an intelligible story of goings-on that have, as Oakeshott put it in *On Human Conduct* (1975), explanations or reasons "but not causes" in either organic or mechanistic senses (40, 256). Rather than simply manifesting antecedent laws, designs, or intentions, experience manifests spontaneity, unpredictability, and fecundity, the boundaries of which cannot be specified in advance. (Here Coats's account is also palpably indebted to M. B. Foster's work on the role of "the creative" in philosophical and political reflection both before and since early Christianity.)

Taking this as Oakeshott's central insight, recurring with various inflections throughout a more than sixty-year career, Coats sets his Oakeshott in a number of encounters with other thinkers, from widely recognized figures such as Alfred North Whitehead and Leo Strauss to perhaps lesser known thinkers such as Oakeshott's British contemporary A. C. Graham. Roughly half of the eight essays that make up the bulk of the collection are oriented directly toward the creative or poetic character of experience, while the others relate to the subject less directly or deeply. Distinct strengths of Coats's general approach are that it articulates a synthetic view of Oakeshott's thought that (1) makes a profound claim about its form as well as content and (2) provides a fruitful lens through which to view a body of work that is often perplexing in its diversity and changes of philosophical vocabulary and idiom and that is yet often pigeonholed (as conservative, idealist, etc.).

What emerges from the imbricated essays that make up the book is a not entirely unprecedented but nonetheless refreshing reading of an important twentieth-century thinker. Although Coats imposes a selective conceptual lens, which, as promised, yields the same basic insight wherever one looks in Oakeshott's extensive body of work (from the programmatically idealist *Experience and Its Modes* to the more eclectic *On Human Conduct*), the very nature of his interpretation leaves open more than what his own treatment directly addresses. It is fitting that a book of essays claiming that our experience of the world is ineluctably creative and contingent would not offer a final word on anything else. Indeed, if Coats's project succeeds, if his reading of Oakeshott proves felicitous, it would do perhaps more to unsettle the common characterizations of Oakeshott, especially as straightforwardly conservative or idealist, than works that have avowedly presented him as a liberal or as a skeptic or individualist of Hobbesian provenance. This result may be more than Coats intends, but if he is correct that Oakeshott's fundamental insight is that experiential reality is a contingent moving target, then nothing within human experience is simply given or immutable, least of all the supposed truths of conservatism or idealism, however they may be defined.

While this collection of essays offers the reader much to consider, that it is such a collection also mitigates what it achieves. Coats's fundamental claims echo through nearly all of the essays, often in the same words, supported by the same quotations and generalizing historical narratives, but they are not often developed further than in the opening, titular essay of the volume. Rather, what Coats offers is a genuinely thoughtful variety of abbreviated paths to the same somewhat underdeveloped conclusion. This is by no means uncommon in secondary literature on Oakeshott or any other major thinker, and Coats nonetheless unpacks his interpretation of Oakeshott more deliberately and explicitly than many such works have done. Indeed, Oakeshott's perspective and vocabulary are often just unusual enough that rendering them in terms that open his thought for closer, critical inspection,

or present the familiar from an unfamiliar angle, is a worthwhile project unto itself. This is likely less than what Coats hopes to achieve, but it is a valuable result all the same.

Coats ultimately declines the chance to deeply explore (exegetically and/or analytically) the aspects of Oakeshott's work that support his characterization of it. This is largely due to the conception of the book as a collection of self-contained occasional papers and book chapters that happen to share a common theme (though some share it more clearly or robustly than others), rather than as a sustained development of that theme across interwoven, building chapters. If Coats is correct that Oakeshott's decades of work is animated by a central but often neglected or mischaracterized theme, one could reasonably expect that a detailed, deliberate excavation thereof would generously repay the effort.

There is also another sense in which the book misses an opportunity. Coats begins, perhaps understandably, from the unambiguous but implicit notion that Oakeshott is *correct* about the poetic character of experiential reality, and Coats explores some of what follows from this. He does not elucidate or explore the *justification* of this view, and he does not say as much as one might hope about its implications for philosophy or (especially) political thought (beyond some fairly well-worn lines about the supposed folly of what Oakeshott called "rationalism"). Accordingly, and despite Coats's suggestion in the introduction that the book ought to appeal to a general audience, it seems in fact to be best suited not merely to readers familiar with Oakeshott's work but to those already quite well-disposed towards Oakeshott's conclusions. Within this group, Coats no doubt recharacterizes and reinvigorates familiar themes, but it is less apparent what this collection of essays might offer readers less familiar with or favorable to Oakeshott.

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David McIlwain: *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss: The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment*. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Pp xii, 222.)

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This book is an intellectual history of the thought of two seminal twentieth-century political philosophers, Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss. Its