Idealism Revisited: Michael Oakeshott's "Conversation" and *the Question of Being-Together*

Trent Davis
York University

A little more than a decade ago, Bill Readings, in the provocatively titled *The University in Ruins*, insisted that, in the wake of increasing globalization, the most urgent ethical issue facing educators was what he called "*the question of being-together*."[1] Readings framed "being-together" as a "question," since he believed that its moral and political dimensions could be effectively addressed only by an ongoing sensitivity to significant cultural and political shifts. In the context of higher education, Readings claimed that one of the most disturbing changes was the ongoing erosion of the broader rationales that had traditionally linked the functions of the university with the interests of the liberal democratic nation-state. The conventional idea of the university was in danger of falling into "ruins," argued Readings, to the extent that its role as a state institution was under threat from an increasingly interconnected and cross-bordered world.

Taking Readings's concerns about the future of higher education at face value, I think it is important that philosophers of education of late have been wrestling with how they ought to think about their relationship to their colleagues who work in departments of philosophy. An essay by René Vincente Arcilla entitled "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" which appeared in *Educational Theory* in the winter of 2002, inspired a symposium issue later that very summer, with all of the contributors earnestly addressing Arcilla's provocative question.[2] It also is revealing, I would suggest, although obviously only anecdotally so, that the alternative session at the 2008 Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting that seemed to generate the most spirited conference discussion was the one entitled "Philosophy of Education and Mainstream Philosophy."

In the introduction to his *Educational Theory* piece, Arcilla indicated that he was committed to "problematizing the established silence between philosophy and education."[3] He explicitly signaled his theoretical commitments, however, when he went on to claim that a fuller understanding of the question of why philosophers and educators were not on speaking terms "broaches the hope that we might be able to revive the Deweyan conversation if we revise Dewey's idea of it."[4] More specifically, Arcilla questioned whether John Dewey's work could adequately provide what he called "conventions," the purpose of which was to inform, in more practical terms, a viable framework of scholarly communication.[5] From this Deweyan perspective, Arcilla offered a definition of the philosophy of education as involving three related components:

> (1) a conversational discourse that draws together philosophers and educators, so that they may (2) articulate an overarching, coherent, constructive theoretical attitude toward their contemporary society — a philosophy that would motivate, guide, and be refined and expanded by practical experiments to modify other extant attitudes accordingly, by education, for the purpose of (3) devotedly keeping their society flourishing.[6]

However, as Harvey Siegel pointed out in his response essay in the themed issue of *Educational Theory*, the second and third points here, which connect philosophical practice to societal concerns, are not shared by all philosophers, educational or otherwise. Siegel's own view on this matter, which he stated directly and simply, is that "philosophy cannot be tied to the attempt to solve practical problems, whether social or any other."[7]

In this essay, I want to address Arcilla's subject of the current state of communication in the university among philosophers and educators. It is the first part of Arcilla's proposed definition of the philosophy of education — that it is "a conversational discourse that draws together philosophers and educators" — that will be my concern. Taking my cue from Siegel's criticism, I want to explore how philosophers, regardless of how "pure" or "applied" they are in orientation, might be "drawn together." To achieve this aim, I will develop an alternative approach to this problem by shifting the theoretical framework from Dewey's pragmatism to Michael Oakeshott's idealism.

The type of philosophical idealism I have in mind here is neither radical nor novel, and follows the classical form in its two most basic operating premises, which, as Gerald Gutek points out, can be discerned by closely examining the root words "idea" and "ideal."[8] First, idealism assumes that the metaphysical nature of reality is primarily ideational or spiritual. Second, idealism regards the striving to realize some of life's "ideals," or highest aspirations, as the best approach to the living of a human life. Taken together, these two premises imply that, from the perspective of idealism, the most important philosophical goal is the cultivation of wisdom, which Brenda Almond clearly defines as "the quest for order, plan, purpose and method in the face of the arbitrary contingency of the world and of events."[9]

My primary purpose in shifting the theoretical ground of the discussion to idealism will be to discuss how Oakeshott utilized the notion of "conversation." In one of his most famous passages, he described his understanding of it this way:

> As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. Of course there is argument and inquiry and information, but wherever these are profitable they are to be recognized as passages in this conversation, and perhaps they are not the most captivating of the passages. It is the ability to participate in this conversation…which distinguishes the human being from the animal.… Practical enterprise is recognized not as an isolated activity but as a partner in a conversation, and the final measure of intellectual achievement is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet.[10]

I am particularly drawn to the notions of "partner," "participate," and "contribution" here. I am also intrigued that Oakeshott felt that moments of argument were "not the most captivating of the passages." He believed not only that he had found a way around moments of splintering polarity, but also that he had found a way to render those moments uninteresting. There is no denying, however, that many issues still have to be worked out, such as power in the form of access to the "conversation": Who defines the parameters? Is everyone able to participate? Are all discourses

given equal weight? But as a viable starting point, I am firmly convinced of the fertility of Oakeshott's concept of "conversation" as a way to structure communication between philosophers and educators.

My key argument, then, is that, as an alternative to Arcilla's Deweyan inspired "conversation," which is informed by pragmatic "conventions" that emphasize societal issues, Oakeshott's version, with its idealist goal of enhancing "wisdom," can contribute to "the question of being-together," since it provides a sound framework within which philosophers and educators can come together. To emphasize the spirit of cooperativeness that I hope animates my discussion, I would like to indicate my desire not to directly compete with Arcilla's approach, but to hopefully strengthen our collective understanding of the different ways that productive "conversation," from either point of view, can be enhanced.

As a show of good faith in this regard, I would like to share a line from the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty that best captures my orientation here. In the introduction to the second volume of his *Philosophical Papers*, Rorty described the essays contained therein as examples of "weak thought," since, rather than being radical critiques of existing ideas and practices, they exemplified instead a type of philosophical analysis that "assembles reminders and suggests some interesting possibilities."[11] I would like to signal right up front my agreement with Rorty that philosophical work that is "weak" in the sense that it keeps valuable options alive by reanimating them in interesting ways, rather than aggressively eliminating them, is indeed worthy of greater attention. I should also point out that it was Rorty, in his seminal work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, who claimed that Oakeshott's "conversation" was important to him, since "it catches the tone in which, I think, philosophy should be discussed."[12] I would like to suggest that these points should have particular resonance in an essay such as this, on the potential of "conversation."

In what follows, I proceed in two sections. In the next section, I offer an interpretation of Oakeshott's "conversation" — his most famous notion — in which I try to highlight its most salient features. In the final section, I offer several concluding reflections. Hopefully, my essay will clarify what I believe are the most important things that both philosophers and philosophers of education can learn from my reading of Oakeshott, things that might help contribute to a better understanding of their relationship to each other.

Michael Oakeshott and the Potential of "Conversation"

In this section, I want to proceed carefully in three steps. First, I want to begin by outlining the theoretical assumptions that, while first appearing in Oakeshott's early work, resound from a distance, but loudly, in his later writings. Second, I will describe the controlling principles that he insisted could give his view of "conversation" a broad purpose and direction. Third, I want to examine the specific types of activity that Oakeshott felt ought to be going on in "conversation."

Revealing that Plato and G.W.F. Hegel were his greatest teachers,[13] Oakeshott claimed in his first major work that "what is achieved and is satisfactory in experience is a coherent world of ideas, and this is satisfactory solely on account of

its coherence, that is, its unity and completeness" (*EM*, 58). It is important to note, however, that Oakeshott was acutely aware of the criticism that idealism exaggerates the role of the mind and its products, since he went on to qualify what he meant here by admitting that:

> This world is not a world of mere ideas, because the world of experience is not such a world. In experience, that is, there is always a reference beyond what is merely true to what is real, because what is merely true — a coherent world of mere ideas — is, in the end, neither complete nor absolute, but an abstraction. (*EM*, 58)

Thus, for Oakeshott, while the truth as a "coherent world of ideas" is an abstraction, it is still related to the "real" or the "beyond." In other words, our knowledge of reality is derived from our experience, and, for Oakeshott, this is necessarily a *thinking* experience. We all live within the "given," which Oakeshott described as "a complex, significant whole" (*EM*, 29), where the truth meets the universal and absolute background of the real. The rational, equated with coherence, is preferred everywhere over its opposite: the irrational, or incoherence. The individual thus experiences reality as a thinking subject, partaking of some version of the truth in the form of a coherent (rational) world of ideas.

Oakeshott's first move in dealing with epistemological diversity was to break up differing epistemological claims into "modes of experience," which are not parts of reality, but "the whole from a limited standpoint" (*EM*, 70). Here is how Oakeshott described the relationship between them:

> No one of these modes of experience is, in any sense whatever, based upon or dependent upon any other; no one is derived from any other, and none directly related to any other. This does not, of course, mean that these modes of experience are merely separate and have no place in no universe, for that is impossible. They are abstractions from the single whole of experience, and consequently meet in the whole to which they belong. They arise from arrests in experience, and they derive their significance from their connexion with the totality of experience. (*EM*, 76)

Science as a mode of experience, to follow Oakeshott's reasoning, is not necessarily tied to, say, history as a mode, but they are related in that they are both connected to the "totality of experience" — the place where all modes of experience meet. The truth of a mode is "relative," wrote Oakeshott, "to the degree of completeness which belongs to its world of ideas, its organization of reality" (*EM*, 77). Notice how careful Oakeshott was not to place different modes in competition for the right to claim the best organization of reality, while still connecting them in the broader framework of experience.

But Oakeshott does not stop there. The connotation of Oakeshott's laconic existential line about how the philosopher is "the victim of thought" (*EM*, 2) receives a fuller treatment much later, in an essay entitled "A Place of Learning":

> A human life is not a process in which a living organism grows to maturity, succeeds in accommodating itself to its surroundings or perishes. It is, in the first place, an adventure in which an individual consciousness confronts the world.… This engagement is an adventure in a precise sense. It has no pre-ordained course to follow: with every thought and action a human being lets go a mooring and puts out to sea on a self-chosen but largely unforeseen course. It has no pre-ordained destination.… It is a predicament, not a journey.[14]

If the individual is faced with an "adventure," or a "predicament" even, with no model to follow, then the framing of our collective adventures becomes essential. In *Experience and Its Modes*, there are moments of foreshadowing which predict the metaphor of "conversation" that would come much later. When Oakeshott wrote that what is desirable is "a point of view from which the relative validity of any world of experience can be determined" (*EM*, 2), and that thinking is "something we may engage in without putting ourselves in competition" (*EM*, 7), there is already the suggestion of some sort of meeting place where ideas are discussed and weighed, a place where competition is anathema, and claims to knowledge are judged in relative terms.

Oakeshott's "conversation" receives its fullest treatment in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Part of what makes this text so compelling is that Oakeshott developed his version of "conversation" by demonstrating how poetry fits within it:

> The only apology for poetry worth considering is one which seeks to discern the place and quality of the voice of poetry in the conversation…a conversation where each voice speaks in its own idiom, where from time to time one voice may speak louder than others, but where none has natural superiority, let alone primacy. The proper context in which to consider poetic utterance, and indeed every other mode of utterance, is not a "society" engaged in practical enterprise, nor one devoted to scientific inquiry; it is this society of conversationists. (*VP*, 534)

In building to this conclusion, Oakeshott made a number of salient points. He defined "conversation" as a "manifold," where "diverse idioms of utterance" have a "meeting-place" (*VP*, 489). These utterances "take wing and play round one another," gently prodding the participants to "fresh exertions," where they may "differ without disagreeing" (*VP*, 489). The "flow of speculation" is what powers this "unrehearsed intellectual adventure," where "certainties" are accepted as "combustible" (*VP*, 490). "Excellence" in conversation is marked by a "tension between seriousness and playfulness" (*VP*, 493).

In describing this ideal "conversation" and how poetry fits within it, Oakeshott seems to be positing a positive and, perhaps, overly ambitious design. Why should participants see their relationship in the way that Oakeshott has described? Are they even capable of following these gentle and highly cooperative norms? What exactly should the participants keep in mind if "conversation" is their goal?

Defining theorizing as an "unconditional engagement of understanding," the purpose of which is to inhabit a "less mysterious world,"[15] Oakeshott added:

> Its principle is: Never ask the end. Of the paths it may follow, some (we may suppose) will soon exhaust their promise. It is an engagement of arrivals and departures. Temporary platforms of conditional understanding are always being reached, and the theorist may turn aside to explore them. But each is an arrival, an enlightenment, and a point of departure.[16]

Continuity is more important to Oakeshott than finality. "Keep at it," he might insist, warning those who become too self-satisfied that the truth is a relative and fleeting condition that quickly dissolves the moment we accept the range of human interests and experiences that live in the universal world of all ideas.

More specifically, and as a way to draw this section of the essay to a close, it is revealing that Oakeshott only recommended four specific qualities to all those who wish to engage in the act of theorizing. First, it is essential to recognize "conversation" as a place of study that requires discipline and energy.[17] Second, the best theorists identify themselves primarily as learners,[18] and, third, they see themselves as learners who see the myriad pathways of "conversation" as "invitations" to "look, to listen, and to reflect."[19] Finally, the theorist is someone who is calm in times of tension and disagreement, a person "not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all."[20]

What We Can Learn from Oakeshott

Now that the three steps of the last section have been taken, I think it worthwhile to reflect on Oakeshott's "conversation" as a whole. He took great care to attend to all of its facets: there is a tough metaphysical foundation, an elaborate set of guiding principles, and specifically recommended ways of relating to other participants. It is a connected series of ideas that occupied one person for almost sixty years in print. I have tried here to present these views as an instance of "weak thought," in order to highlight the potential of "conversation" as a way to frame communication among philosophers and, in particular, among philosophers of education. I want to conclude by offering a few summative points that will hopefully clarify what I take to be the most important things to be learned from my reading of Oakeshott.

First, the "mode of experience" or "voice" of philosophy that has a place in Oakeshott's "conversation" is bigger than any particular philosopher's, or school of philosophy's, description of it. What this means is that what all philosophers have in common, educational or otherwise, is, well, philosophy. This deceptively simple insight should always be kept in mind, since being aware of our collective interest might play a not insignificant part in encouraging goodwill and cooperativeness.

Second, if we can assume that philosophers have a vibrant intellectual tradition called philosophy in common, this could also mean that they have the pursuit of "wisdom" in common. All philosophers, in other words, regardless of their own deeply felt allegiances, and despite their aversions to all those "other" schools or traditions of philosophy that seem to them clearly wrong-headed, can be seen as striving to enhance their understandings of themselves and the world. Oakeshott described this quality of understanding as "coherence," and different philosophers will name it differently; but that does not matter, I would suggest, since, in Oakeshott's view, it is how we conduct ourselves when we are participating in the "adventure" or "predicament" of learning that matters.

Third, despite these commonalities, we can see the wonderful plenitude of philosophy — its various philosophers, schools, approaches, traditions, and questions — not as competing for supremacy, but as what Oakeshott called diverse "invitations." The most immediate implication of this is that we do not need to worry whether philosophers of education are being "philosophical enough" (whatever that might mean), and educators do not need to criticize "pure" philosophy for being esoteric and irrelevant. Since we are all trying to enhance our understanding, we

should be focused on supporting each other within the "conversation," and not on interfering with each other by behaving in ways that are divisive, and ultimately defeating.

Fourth, we can see the division of "philosopher" versus "philosopher of education" as likely being boring to everyone else in the "conversation," broadly construed. We could find ways to learn better from each other, and we could consciously work on expanding our "conversational" range of acquaintance, by becoming more familiar not only with those who speak in the "voices" of the different humanistic disciplines, like history and literature, but also with those who are interested in areas like ecology, physics, geography, and statistics. Of course, philosophical differences matter, since ideas do indeed have consequences, but a sense of humor, or at least not taking ourselves *that* seriously, might be worth the effort.

Finally, and perhaps a little sentimentally, I would like to believe that Oakeshott's "conversation" does have genuine implications for the lived conversations that people can and do have. I would like to entertain the fantasy, for example, that if John Dewey had ever met Michael Oakeshott, in either of their backyards in Chicago or London, that they would have treated one another with politeness, and even kindness, as they talked things over. This is not to deny their differences, which were, admittedly, substantial: Oakeshott was an idealist and a conservative who was skeptical of progressive politics and thought that government should have a limited role in cultural life, while Dewey was a social democrat who believed just as deeply that political reform was vital, and that democracy needed to be extended into cultural life. But is it asking too much for us to imagine that these two philosophers could have engaged one another in meaningful ways, if given the chance?

Readings may have been right — the university may very well be in danger of becoming "ruined" in this century, as its function is increasingly up for grabs. But perhaps reminding ourselves on a regular basis of the quality of "conversation" that the university can offer when *we* are at our best might be a good way to delay that slide, or even, in the best possible world, to prevent it from happening at all.

---

1. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 20 (emphasis in original).

2. René Vincente Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1–11.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 3.

6. Ibid., 8.

7. Harvey Siegel, "Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002), 278.

8. Gerald L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Voices in Education* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2004), 15.

9. Brenda Almond, "What is Wisdom," in *Key Questions for Educators*, eds. William Hare and John P. Portelli (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Edphil Books, 2005), 5.

10. Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty, 1991), 490–91. This work will be cited as *VP* in the text for all subsequent references.

11. Richard Rorty, "Introduction: Pragmatism and Post-Nietzschean Philosophy," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6.

12. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 389.

13. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 6. This work will be cited as *EM* in the text for all subsequent references.

14. Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Thomas Fuller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 8–9.

15. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1.

16. Ibid., 3.

17. Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," 10.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 17.

20. Ibid., 30.