

A Conversation Unrealized, or Unrealizable? Davis on Oakeshott and the Future of Philosophy of Education

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Michael Oakeshott presents a vision of the conversation of mankind that acknowledges the diverse contributions and unique voices of all participants,¹ as Trent Davis illustrates in his thought-provoking piece on Oakeshott's "conversation." As I understand him, Davis draws upon Oakeshott, specifically emphasizing his notion of an "ideal" conversation, primarily because of the value that this ideal places on the coexistence of diverse voices. Davis therefore sees Oakeshott's idea of the conversation of mankind as having relevance for a more specific kind of conversation: the conversation that *should* be taking place among philosophers. Davis envisions a conversation among mainstream philosophers and philosophers of education that accounts for the diverse interests of its participants, whether theoretical or practical in nature, without making them "compet[e] for supremacy."

While I agree with Davis's advocacy of a certain ideal as a desired outcome that we may look toward achieving, I contend that if we only look at the ideal, we lose sight of the enormous gap between the ideal and the real. For Oakeshott, the *real* conversation of mankind is of central concern, for his ideal is not formulated to the exclusion of the real, but as a conscious critique of it. By shifting the discussion away from a consideration of the ideal conversation in order to focus on the gap between "ideal" and "real" conversations, I seek to bring to light what is at stake for Oakeshott in characterizing the ideal conversation.² Second, I contend that only when we consider the enormous *difference* between ideal and real conversations can we begin to understand the difficulty in overcoming this difference; then we can begin to consider the conditions under which such overcoming might become possible. Before considering how this shift comes to bear on Davis's idea of a conversation among philosophers, I consider it in the context of Oakeshott's notion of the "conversation of mankind."

Unlike the ideal conversation, the real conversation of mankind is a product of human history. In this conversation, as Oakeshott points out, many voices tend toward barbarism, such that the conversation on the whole can hardly be sustained.³ In recent history, he contends, the conversation has come to be monopolized by a few dominant voices, namely that of "science" with its "eristic tones," and that of "practical activity," or "politics."⁴ From Oakeshott's characterization, it becomes clear that the form of conversation in which every participant can contribute to the direction of the conversation with a unique voice is in grave danger of losing all hope for a future. The real conversation continues only in spite of itself, largely excluding non-conforming voices. The ideal conversation, however, as Davis points out, knows no hierarchy among participants; it allows space for otherness and newness.

In light of these constraints within the real conversation, how might human society work toward a desired, ideal form of conversation? For Oakeshott, the

conversation in the mid-twentieth century was so bleak that he openly admitted that “to rescue the conversation from the bog into which it has fallen and to restore to it some of its lost freedom of movement” would require a philosophy far greater than he could offer.⁵ However, in many of his writings he makes clear that education plays a significant role in altering the course of the conversation by opening it up to the new contributions of the next generation. On Oakeshott’s model, education initiates newcomers into the conversation by helping them understand how to participate, recognize different voices, and make themselves understood.⁶

Oakeshott sees the conversation of mankind as intergenerational, yet he makes clear that the older generation cannot simply pass on the conversation to the younger generation as a static inheritance; rather, the older generation must teach the younger generation how to participate in it. In his article “Learning and Teaching,” Oakeshott explains that teachers are the “agent(s) of civilization” because they initiate newcomers into the conversation of mankind, foster the development of their voices, and thereby bring them in *as* new voices within an ongoing conversation.⁷ It is the business of a teacher to pass on the “inheritance” of human beings to the newcomers of the next generation — an inheritance that they can “succeed only in a process of learning.”⁸

For Oakeshott, the role of the educator cannot be ignored if we want to discuss the future of conversation. The teacher prevents the dominant voices that have monopolized the conversation in the present generation from determining what pieces of the conversation are inherited by the youth. Oakeshott reminds us that the teacher’s task is not to just mechanically pass on the popular viewpoint, or the dominant voices or interpretations, of the present time. Rather, teachers must make available to the learner what is beyond “his present world,” and that includes what “may not be in current use, much that has come to be neglected and something even that for the time being is forgotten.”⁹ In analyzing the teacher’s task, Oakeshott emphasizes that the conversation that each new generation inherits is contingent, “miscellaneous and incoherent,” and “does not deliver us a clear and unambiguous message; it speaks often in riddles,” such that it requires interpretation.¹⁰ The question remains: How do teachers ensure that a broad understanding is passed on, and that all the voices of humankind, loud or soft, or even silenced and forgotten, are being heard by the next generation?

Oakeshott does not answer this question within this discussion of the teacher’s task. However, it is clear that it would not be consistent with his vision of liberal education to allow the dominant voices of politics or science, with their utilitarian or vocational ends, to determine the course of education, though this may be their intent. Despite their differences, both Oakeshott and John Dewey see that a vision of education that values new contributions from the next generation presupposes a certain type of pluralist society; yet, this leads us to ask what type of society would allow for this openness in education and conversation.

Davis’s consideration of the need for a conversation that sees all participants as “learners” who are seeking ways “to look, to listen, and to reflect” in order to expand philosophy of education in new directions is worth consenting to. However, Davis’s

conclusions seem to imply that, to achieve this outcome, it is sufficient for philosophers merely to consent to participating in this conversation in this way. Just as Oakeshott's ideal of the "conversation of mankind" presupposes a certain kind of education, and a certain kind of society that allows for such open interaction, so too Davis's vision of the "conversation of philosophers" presupposes that they have all learned to participate in the way that he advocates, and that the university as a sociopolitical institution would condone and foster such participation. Certainly, Bill Readings's identification of a real trend toward the decline of the liberal university must make us at least pause to question whether the university is at present such an institution.¹¹ Even if Davis believes that conditions are ripe to take up the type of conversation among philosophers that he imagines, it is shortsighted to avoid the question of the education of the next generation, and thereby to fail to address how such a conversation could be sustained.

In looking to future conversations of philosophy of education, we must remember that philosophy and education share a central concern for passing on a tradition to the next generation. It is *philosophers of education* (such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Dewey, Richard Peters, and Oakeshott, to name a few) that ask, how do we pass on the tradition of human thought and activity to the next generation of learners in such a way that they also learn to criticize and revise it? This is clearly a question that cannot be answered solely from a purely theoretical or purely practical standpoint. It is a question that we cannot afford to lose sight of, not simply for the sake of our own present conversation, but for the sake of the conversation that is yet to be had by the next generation.

1. Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962).

2. Although Oakeshott does not use the terms "real" and "ideal" conversation, I am using them here to distinguish between the conversation that he describes as actually going on and the normative vision of the conversation that he hopes for.

3. Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," 200.

4. *Ibid.*, 202.

5. *Ibid.*, 202f.

6. *Ibid.*, 199f. See also Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in *The Concept of Education*, ed. Richard S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967); and Michael Oakeshott, "Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 5, no. 1 (1971): 43–76.

7. Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," 157.

8. *Ibid.*, 158.

9. *Ibid.*, 161.

10. *Ibid.*, 162.

11. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).