Chapter Five

Mister Hobbes’s Oakeshott

"It may be said, then, that Hobbes is not an absolutist precisely because he is an authoritarian. His skepticism about the power of reasoning, which applied no less to the ‘artificial reason’ of the Sovereign than to the reason of the natural man, together with the rest of his individualism, separate him from the rationalist dictators of his or any age."¹ In this interestingly paradoxical passage, Oakeshott connects his emphasis upon Hobbes’s skepticism with his interpretation of Hobbes’s political thought. For Oakeshott, Hobbes was not an absolutist, because his skepticism served to undermine the certainty on which absolute claims—whether philosophical or political—could rest. In labeling Hobbes an “authoritarian,” Oakeshott meant no pejorative; instead, he reveals authority as a central concept of his interpretation of Hobbes’s political philosophy and, I will argue, of his own.

In Chapter Three, I examined Oakeshott’s discussion of “The Authority of the State.” Authority remains an important concept in his discussion of Hobbes, and I will begin to show in this chapter that Oakeshott’s interpretation of the place of authority for Hobbes prefigures his own developing thoughts on authority. If there was a sympathy between Oakeshott’s skepticism and his interpretation of Hobbes’s philosophy, that sympathy doubles back in the way he understood Hobbes to offer authority in response to skepticism. Oakeshott reveals this connection not only in the themes of his discussion of Hobbes’s ideas compared with his own, but in the very vocabulary that he uses in analyzing Hobbes. Most importantly, Oakeshott’s pref-
ference for terms such as “recognition” and “acknowledgment” over “consen-
t” and for civitas over commonwealth in his interpretation equip Hobbes
with the very terms by which Oakeshott comes to express his own politi-
cal thought. What is more, by tracing adjustments to Oakeshott’s interpre-
tation of Hobbes in a new version of his “Introduction to Leviathan,” I
highlight Oakeshott casting Hobbes as a theorist of civil association, per-
haps the central concept of Oakeshott’s own On Human Conduct.

The connection of skepticism and authority plays a central role in
Oakeshott’s interpretation of Hobbes. Having rejected a human capacity
for certainty, the questions for Hobbes become whether there is any means
whereby humans can know which claims—if any—oblige them, and
whether there are any grounds on which the state can exercise power other
than its ability and desire to do so. Beginning with the question of author-
ity Oakeshott tightly weaves together the themes of law, duty, obligation,
and morality in Hobbes’s political philosophy. The tapestry that results is
one that distinguishes Oakeshott’s interpretation from others, and signifi-
cantly reveals a pattern that will be re-inscribed in his own political theory.
Focusing upon Oakeshott’s interpretation of Hobbes also reveals a stage in
interpretation that Paul Ricoeur holds as the most significant. “To under-
stand is not to project oneself onto the text,” Ricoeur claims, “but to
expose oneself to it; it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of
the proposed worlds the text unfolds.” Oakeshott’s interpretation of
Hobbes contains both the moments of projection and exposure; it is an
encounter that is reflected in his interpretation and in his own developing
ideas so that we end up not only with Mister Oakeshott’s Hobbes, but also
Mister Hobbes’s Oakeshott.

II

In the last chapter I explored the heavy emphasis that Oakeshott placed
upon Hobbes’s skepticism and nominalism. Oakeshott took Hobbes’s phi-
losophy to hold that reasoning is merely a hypothetical venture that can tell
us nothing about a world external to language. In accord with this,
Hobbes’s conception of truth is not the character of statements that accu-
rately reflect the world, but the coherent and consistent use of words,
which are merely conventional signs used to secure fleeting images.
Oakeshott had hinted at the implications of this understanding of his phi-
losophy for Hobbes’s political theory in his early essay “Thomas Hobbes.”
There he argued that “Hobbes’s theory of law and government has, indeed,
no ethical foundation, in the ordinary sense; but it is conceived throughout