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ANTHONY FARR ON OAKESHOTT AND SARTRE

Anthony Farr (1998): Sartre's Radicalism and Oakeshott's Conservatism. The Duplicity of Freedom. London, Macmillan Press Ltd.; New York, St. Martin's Press. 266 pages.

Anthony Farr has taken quite a challenge when starting to compare two as interesting but also as notoriously difficult writers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Michael Oakeshott. It has certainly not been easy to find a way through the vast amount of original texts and commentary literature into an interpretation which would bring out the ideas the writer wishes to highlight and leave aside the more irrelevant discussions. It hasn't been easy to find the thematic and conceptual constructions where the ideas of the two writers encounter and where focussing on points of interest for political theory becomes both possible and fruitful.

This may be one of the reasons why, when reading the book, we find that it is somewhat difficult to see for which kind of audience this book is written. The text varies from a strong generalization to interpretations which call for a specific knowledge of the texts of the thinker in question. Farr offers us an overview of the history of philosophy which aims at construing clearly detectable traditions behind the conceptual divisions he employs as conceptual devices. However, his text tends to require such familiarity with reading philo-

sophical texts that the discussions he construes seem often both too long and superficial.

This, in its turn, may be the reason why it seems that the questions Farr uses to frame his discussion arise from here and there, without any specific order, continuity or even relation to the rest of the text. This almost gives an impression that the text has remained partly unthematized. It also seems that it is not yet finished in the sense that the writer could have said a lot more on the main issue had he reduced the extensive discussion on some of the major figures of Western thought – such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Kierkegaard. We could perhaps even say that these thinkers in this text can be seen as figures whose notions seem to have been included for the sole purpose of construing a set of dichotomies though which Farr then advances – dichotomies which make it difficult to approach thinkers such as Oakeshott and Sartre.

The central ideas Farr brings forth in relation to these general questions could perhaps have been presented in a form of a thesis and used in a more hypothetical manner than is the case. Now this discussion has the undertone of an "obligatory" academic discussion which does not, in fact, much further his argument but, on the contrary, sounds like a language he was "forced to employ" (p. 252).

Therefore we feel that the text would have profited had Farr concentrated on his main theme, the construing of a relation between Sartre and Oakeshott. This relation, and the discussion it can generate, is a very interesting and promising setting for the questions Farr wishes to discuss. However, in the present form of the text the specific questions and profiling which might legitimate the reading of these two thinkers within the same framing remain all too vague.

In his book Farr aims at using Sartre's and Oakeshott's texts as examples through which he could construe a discussion of the notions of freedom, radicalism and conservatism and come to a better understanding of the disputes of the Left and the Right. In Farr's own words we could say that he opens a discussion where he wishes to "seek an academic understanding of the term" (of freedom) and of its use by the "political Left and Right" (p. 1).

In order to offer a view into the discussion of the book, let us forward an example. If the above formulates Farr's starting point, in his concluding remarks he formulates his thoughts by saying that

"for the Left, freedom and order are real, man creates disorder and discomfort which is his bondage whereas the Right views both order and freedom to be artifice, made by man in the face of natural, real and pervasive chaos." (p. 249, see also p. 245) Farr searches the division between what he names Left and Right from the divisions he construes on the basis of notions such as "real", "natural", "order" and "chaos" which we, as already pointed out, do not see as a fruitful way of approaching either Sartre's or Oakeshott's thoughts.

For an attentive reader it soon becomes obvious that Farr operates throughout his text with a strong set of dichotomies, such as the Kantian realm of action vs. reason (p. 23), causality vs. freedom (p. 24-25), Hegelian mind vs. being (p. 31-32), etc. This seems to limit his possibilities of engaging into the kind of play with notions that one would expect a writer to intend to construe in a context of thinkers so clearly without any common measure as Sartre and Oakeshott are. Farr's discussion, which could be an interesting venture into two largely neglected political theorists, seems to be limited from the very beginning by the definitions and dichotomies which exclude the very possibility of a conceptual play and which turn the discussion into an either/ or situation, or, at the most, into a confrontation on a ground where the conceptual premises which could be questioned in this setting, remain intact.

This is perhaps the most striking feature of Farr's text. It is a text which operates with expressions, notions and ideas presented as political and yet it turns out to be a text where the political is lost in the process of defining notions through these divisory conceptual devices. This can be seen both in the part of the text devoted to Sartre and in the one discussing Oakeshott. In the following Suvi Soininen will discuss Farr's views on Oakeshott and Leena Subra his views on Sartre.

Farr's Oakeshott and the Mimetic Thesis

Farr's manner of approaching Oakeshott seems to me somewhat indecisive. For one thing, he chronologically charts Oakeshott's major production from the *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), through

the postwar essays to the major work *On Human Conduct* (1975). By this 'close reading' he seeks to *understand* the development and shifts of Oakeshott's thinking in relation to the concept of freedom. This effort gains strength of a few contextual remarks that, so to say, add the meat around the bones of Farr's interpretation.

From the viewpoint of politics the obvious gain in this approach is noting the texts that usually do not get the attention deserved. Farr's stressing of the *The Claims of Politics* (1939) as a "brilliant insight into Oakeshott's attitude to politics" is a representative example (p. 178). This particular text seems to support Farr's earlier reflections on Oakeshott's (Bradleyan or British) idealism, because here the meaning of political system ('politics') is derived from the 'social whole'. Also, it is fair to remind of the expressions like 'mental vulgarity' that Oakeshott attaches to political action at the time.

However, Farr's analysis of the text paradoxically also reveals the main weakness of his total view on Oakeshott, i.e. the lack of consistent choice of viewpoint. For example, although he mentions the piece was a contribution to the *Scrutiny* symposium, he does not take the contextualization further. Here the operation would have been especially important, since Oakeshott's view on politics having far more significance at the crisis than 'normally', is certainly in junction with the public discussions of the specific year. Even a simple report of other contributions would have been helpful.

Instead, Farr immediately starts to follow a different route and reads the Hobbes article *Collective Dream of Civilization* (1947) as a further 'evidence' of what he calls a 'mimetic thesis' of Oakeshott's thinking. This thesis is actually what Farr seeks to defend in his *earlier* production, i.e. 'Hegelianism' understood as the primacy of a larger 'order' and 'inheritance' of which the structure of an individual mind is a (sort of) reflection. Again, the train of thought could have been potentially interesting *if* the claimed main theme were something other than the *political thought* of Oakeshott and Sartre. In the present form, even from a somewhat 'purely' philosophical point of view, Farr's persistent neglect of Aristotle and Hobbes in Oakeshott's thought seems odd, especially as the latter was the actual subject of the essay in question. And especially the discussion on scepticism and artificiality of human associations would have required more detailed accounts on Oakeshott's various writings on Hobbes. Yet,

Farr is content with the passing mentions of "the eloquent earthiness characteristic of their work" which shows itself in Oakeshott's work. Then, the fact remains that a reader familiar with Oakeshott's political philosophy and its previous reception does not gain notable benefit from reading this book.

Contrariwise, it is almost too easy to observe how following the changes of Oakeshott's work is, to use Farr's favourite terminology, only 'appearance' compared to the 'reality' of *judging* and *freezing* them in the book. As the fatal factor to Farr's view on politics seems to be that politics is a derivative and subordinate to philosophy it is quite easy to understand why Oakeshott's late production is not of much interest for him. In my mind [SS], the most revealing sentence is: "the question of freedom becomes philosophical in the fullest sense of the term" when one examines "the source of our power of understanding" or if "we have real command over the condition of psyche?" (p. 248) From this starting-point it is quite impossible to gain a deep understanding to Oakeshott's thought which – especially in *On Human Conduct* (1975) and *On History* (1983) – emphasizes the importance of historical understanding on political philosophy. One representative misconception is Farr's argument that in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott turns away from the *mimetic* thesis of the self to the *pathetic* one. By this he means that "Oakeshott's self is the 'real' ground of individual character, it is a soul, a demiurge which uses practices to give itself expression." (p. 240) This kind of understanding would bring Oakeshott closer to the traditional Left view of freedom as "the liberation of an 'inner nature of man" which appears to be a sort of enemy to Farr (p. 248).

So, Farr ends up in 'defending' Oakeshott's 1940s and 50s essays as "one of the clearest doctrines of the Right view that there is no order beyond the structures which we inherit." (p. 249) Additionally he defines "the general theme of Oakeshott's output" as having a "dual purpose; specifying a narrow remit for government and circumscribing the authority of the intellectual." (p. 183) The latter 'conclusion' may of course be reasonably argued, but unfortunately in light of the whole book it seems more a repetition of conventional Oakeshott reception than a result of a research process. At least Farr's speaking of "the axiom of Oakeshott's thought" implies in this direction (p. 183). In relation to a thinker for whom philosophy showed

itself as an adventure and *en voyage* the statement simply is not appropriate.

To my view, then, Farr's book does injustice to Oakeshott's thinking – still an original one in the Anglophone political theory and rich in nuances – in two serious respects. First, the changes appearing in *On Human Conduct* certainly do not centre on the agent that could be named a "demiurge" entertaining some kind of inner freedom. The agent Oakeshott describes in *On Human Conduct* is an actor in *contingent situations* that require 'responses', i.e. different kind of choices between various possibilities. The agent and situation (or 'practices') simply cannot be separated from each other in a way that the agent's 'essence' or 'will' would precede the situation. Thus, I find it difficult to connect Farr's interpretation of an agent's reflective consciousness and freedom as a part of "our nature" (p. 229) with the very words by Oakeshott himself: "In short, conduct postulates what I shall call a 'free agent'. And I use the word 'free' because I am concerned here with the formal detachment from certain conditions which is intrinsic to agency, and not with the quality of being substantively 'self-directed' which an agent may or may not achieve.." (*OHC* 1996, 36.) And further, "freedom inherent in agency" means for Oakeshott a capability to understand and thus act in a situation – not in Farr's 'natural way' – but "as a 'historic' self-enacted reflective consciousness." (ibid., 37.) Farr neglects the interesting implications of Oakeshott's view on agency and action to political theory and their profound comparison with Sartre's comprehension on freedom and responsibility, i.e. the way of proceeding which the title of the book implies. Second, reinforcing the legend of Oakeshott's conservatism and naming his essays 'a doctrine' could be called rather high-handed. For those acquainted with Oakeshott's own texts and his 'definition' for a conservative *disposition* as "the inclination to enjoy what is present and available is the opposite of ignorance" this only sounds strange, but in those for whom Farr's book is the first encounter with Oakeshott this may hinder further interest in the subject (*On being Conservative*, 1956). Since Oakeshott has occasionally been treated even as a 'pre-Thatcherian' ideologist, it would be much more useful and important to stress his strong critique of rationalist style of

politics that equally has infected the politics of 'the Right' and 'the Left', in case one still wishes to use this dichotomizing grouping.

In short, if one wishes to point out one central deficiency in Farr's reading of Oakeshott, the lack of analysing the writings of 1960s and early 1970s serves as a good candidate. Although these texts are not numerous, they promote the understanding how Oakeshott's 'esteem' of political activity can be interpreted to have 'grown' or obtaining more space in his thinking. In particular, when keeping Farr's emphasis of reading in mind, I find Oakeshott's 'educational' essays highly illuminating, as they deal with the questions of agency from a viewpoint of *how* we *become* agents capable of responsibility. The texts make it clear that for Oakeshott freedom is no question of 'inner' or 'outer structures' but a 'feature' in a *contingent, historical* situation. Naturally, he himself values, e.g. many of the political practices in England, but more like a Rortyan 'conscious ethnocentrist' than merely wishing to maintain the status quo. I hope that in this light Oakeshott's reputation as a doctrinaire conservative could finally be buried and fresh interpretations would acquire more space.

Farr, Sartre, Political Freedom and Authenticity

Farr's central concern in his book is freedom which he defines in terms of the political: "[t]he freedom dealt with in this work is political freedom" (p. 1). For him freedom "is a concept which crosses the boundary of academic and everyday politics and gives ordinary discourse a resonance of importance" and also, "[f]reedom is the state of being free" (p. 1) Moreover, for Farr freedom is "both descriptive and normative" (p. 2) and, in his words, "[f]reedom, then, denotes our place in the order of things" (p. 2).

Starting from what he considers a political view of freedom, Farr then wants to present us an implicit "criticism of the ordinary, 'liberal', notion of freedom" (p. 3) as liberalism, in Farr's view, does not "pass beyond articulating the currently fashionable notion of the proper expressive sphere of the agent" (p. 3) and it has failed to

"acknowledge the 'artificiality' of human order and of our intellect" (p. 3).

After commenting on thinkers such as Descartes and Kant, Farr sets the basic dichotomy concerning the notion of freedom which guides his views. In his view we can split the field into two, the Hegelians and the Kierkegaardians, or describe it in the dividing terms of "freedom as our immediate possession, as something we must find beyond the appearance of the world" vs. [freedom] "as our mediated possession, as something only enjoyed insofar as we master this world of appearances." (p. 48). After establishing the dividing fence he chooses his side by writing: "[t]he phenomenal idea of freedom, that is, the image of freedom as the skill of our attaining what we set ourselves to achieve is, then, a very radical critique of the tradition we have inherited..." (p. 48).

In his text Farr wishes to use Jean-Paul Sartre for promoting this radical critique. In my view [LS] this as such is a quite legitimate goal, but the way Farr proposes to do it brings forth a set of serious problems with regard Sartre interpretation. First of all, Farr's views on freedom are construed in a conceptual frame which adapts with difficulties, if at all, to reading Sartre. Sartre's notion of freedom cannot, in my view, be understood or used in the kind of conceptual environment that follows from Farr's repeated use of dichotomies. Moreover, it cannot be placed on this kind of conceptual map without depriving it the very thing Farr evokes in his title: its radicality. For Sartre freedom is not "the state of being free", but very much on the contrary the act(ion) of being free. "A state" is a term altogether alien to Sartre's thought which is headed toward a description of action and movement. This is present already in *L'être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness), and more explicitly in his later work *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Critique of Dialectical Reason) which Farr analyses more as a description of social emancipation than a description of action and political freedom (p. 116-121). Also, it seems evident that the use of the much criticized and misleading translation of *L'être et le néant* has also in Farr's case created additional difficulty in reaching Sartre's complex ideas.

In Sartre the question of freedom is not a question of having or not having access to freedom, of possessing or not possessing a (positive) value called freedom, but of being a free agent, an actor for

whom there is no escape from her freedom. This could be formulated in Sartrean terminology by saying that the agent is condemned to freedom. In other words for Sartre the notion of freedom is one of the notions he uses when construing the political aspect into his discussion.

Moreover, freedom, in the Sartrean sense, does not lean on the idea of the human being as (a) fully capacitated (member of community), or of not having "our capacities taken away" (p. 1). On the contrary, it means acting in freedom even in a situation where "our capacities" have been taken away. The Sartrean agent is always a free, political actor as she is the player of the (political) condition of being thrown in the world (see Subra 1997). It is in this perspective that I would understand Farr's own statement which says that for Sartre "freedom is not an aspect of the world but the frame in which the world is set" (p. 87). If freedom is the frame in which the world is set, and the agent acts in freedom, the use of a conceptual apparatus which dichotomizes its conceptual devices seems very inadequate indeed for discussing the questions that raise from this setting.

With Farr's use of dichotomies the play with notions, everpresent in Sartre, the play which indicates the presence of the political, is a perspective regrettably lost. It is lost also in the interpretation of Sartre's other notions. His complex and often misunderstood notion of authenticity becomes in Farr's interpretation – as in many others – a synonym for "proper life" (p. 73) as he seeks a "rescue from the inauthenticity" (p. 75). Besides the dichotomization, this also results from reading Sartre in a symmetrical conceptual setting where notions are discussed in a harmonious relation of two opposing terms, such as "authenticity – inauthenticity" or "bad faith – good faith". This is a setting which in my view hides the possibility of reading Sartre's texts through more complex and politically oriented perspectives offered by the interpreting of his notions in an asymmetric setting such as authentic – conversion – bad faith. Here each notion offers a different perspective to action, they do not describe different or opposed "ways" of being, nor a change in action in such temporal terms as "before" and "after". Here bad faith is not a counterpart for good faith but a way of playing this inescapable political condition of freedom. Furthermore, authenticity and bad faith form an asymmetrical relation where conversion to authenticity does not eradi-

cate bad faith leaving only authenticity on the scene but forms a setting for politically understood action (see Sartre's *Cahiers pour une morale* p. 42 and Subra 1997 esp. p. 218-220).

In Farr's interpretation his use of conceptual devices leads to a rationalized reading of Sartre which undermines the complexity, controversiality and ambiguity of Sartre's thought. It sees Sartre as the promoter of ideas such as "the ultimate equality of mankind" and "the radical commonality of mankind" (p. 61, 62) where it, in my view, should consider Sartre as a wild card in a game which is never over. Reading Sartre's notion of freedom requires the provocative combination of that which Farr calls "Romanticism" and of that which he calls "Scientific", namely the adventurer and the stranger. The reader who ventures into Sartre's texts must be prepared to face this impossible combination of being and of not-being at the same time, of playing in the field where different traditions and interpretations do not form conventional systems.

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In all, we could say that the words radicalism, conservatism and freedom used in the title of the book imply the political. However, the question one would like to ask in relation to Farr's book is not one opening a view on the presence of the political in the text, but on its absence. Both Oakeshott and Sartre are discussed in a manner which does not bring forth their originality and value for political theory. On the contrary, it seems that an important opportunity of presenting a fresh view on a challenging subject has been lost.

References

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