

Interpretation

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Liberal Education, Moderation, and Conservatism in Strauss and Oakeshott

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David McIlwain's new study of Oakeshott and Strauss is a welcome contribution to the critical literature on twentieth-century conservative political philosophy. McIlwain's book brings Oakeshott to the attention of readers who may have heard of Oakeshott as a relativist and a historicist, or as a defender of modernity, but not as a conservative.

McIlwain's work offers an extended and wide-ranging comparison of Strauss and Oakeshott, and his command of the history of political thought is impressive, even if one wishes, at times, that the book were more narrowly focused. In the scope of a monograph, he examines the conventional characterization of both thinkers as conservative, their interest in liberal education, history, and Hobbes, the relationship of each man's thought to Alexandre Kojève, Strauss and Socratism after Nietzsche and Heidegger, and Oakeshott and Augustinianism after Hobbes and Hegel. I will focus here on just a few of these topics: conservatism, moderation, liberal education, and religion.

McIlwain argues, correctly, that the so-called conservatism of each man was neither simple nor unqualified. It was not something that could be equated with the economic or social conservatism prevalent in the United States or England in the mid- to late twentieth century. Strauss and Oakeshott

were not primarily motivated by politics or economics at all—neither was a defender of a regime—but both were philosophers through and through. Yet they were interested in politics and economics. And both Strauss and Oakeshott displayed political moderation alongside uncompromising commitments to philosophical rigor—even, in the case of Oakeshott, exhibiting a “radical” stance toward nonpolitical modes of life. As Oakeshott explained provocatively, it is not inconsistent to be conservative in politics but “radical in respect of almost every other activity.”¹

How can moderation and radicalism coexist in a single thinker? For Oakeshott, part of the answer may be found in his “modal” characterization of human activity. He wrote in his early book *Experience and Its Modes* and in his later essay “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” that human beings are capable of viewing the world in a variety of ways. Foremost among these are the “modes” of history, science, and practice. In each mode certain considerations are salient and others irrelevant. Moderation may therefore be a virtue in the practical-political life, as Oakeshott thought it was, but not in historical study or science or philosophy. Oakeshott qua philosopher sought to apprehend and understand experience “without reservation or arrest.”² But in politics he was much more Burkean, praising existing traditions of conduct for their stabilizing effects. The ideology and “rationalism” that characterized much of modern political activity were dangerous and destructive.

Strauss similarly, McIlwain argues, began, at age thirty, “to find coherence in a life of philosophical radicalism and political moderation” (23). In his love of moderation, Strauss particularly praised the English temperament and character. The English, he wrote, “never indulged in those radical breaks with traditions which played such a role on the continent” (28). Whatever might have been wrong with the “peculiarly modern ideal” in England, Strauss thought, the English were tempered by their immersion in the classical tradition. In a memorable formulation, Strauss observed that Englishmen “always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counterpoison” (28) to modernity, which was, of course, precisely this classical tradition.

The primary difference between Strauss and Oakeshott on this score lay in Oakeshott’s acceptance of the continuity of historical traditions and practical

¹ Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” in *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 435.

² Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 80.

ways of living, which did not appear to him to arise out of theorizing. Practical and political life was the stuff that philosophers examined; philosophers did not themselves construct or guide it. In this sense, philosophy was always an activity that was secondary in time, if not in priority. If Oakeshott thought that one could simultaneously be a radical (in the philosophical exploration of questions wherever they might lead) and a moderate (in politics), Strauss, who lacked the modal framework, could not affirm such practical, moderate conservatism. Rather, “he understood the modern world to be already the creation of theory” (33), according to McIlwain—not the owl of Minerva at dusk but the afterglow of theory at dawn.

Both thinkers, however, were deeply troubled by the advance of progressive and collectivist political projects that encouraged powerful states and uniformity among citizens. On this score they were both conservative in a way that is recognizable even today. Oakeshott is more straightforwardly the “individualist,” given his religious and poetic conception of what it means to be human and his acceptance of modern pluralism. But Strauss, too, saw the risks posed by mass democracy and urged a quasi-aristocratic cultivation of liberally educated men. As he wrote in “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” we should not imagine that liberal education will ever become universal. “It will always remain the obligation and the privilege of a minority,” observed Strauss.³ But he hoped that this minority might also remember its political duty to the society that had enabled its education.

McIlwain’s discussion of Strauss and Oakeshott on liberal education is particularly insightful because it emphasizes their commonalities and differences. To summarize their agreement, both Strauss and Oakeshott thought that universities must be defended on decidedly nonutilitarian grounds as places where liberal education was valued as an end in itself. Both objected to the overweening demands of the technologically advanced society that had sprung up around them; both saw that such a society was likely to marginalize liberal education because it did not understand it or see its value. Liberal education requires leisure, and it is “at odds with an ethos of total mobilization of society for practical gain” (43). In other words, it is amateur, in the very best sense of that term.

Liberal education is also unlikely to be understood by those who have not experienced it, whether they be men of the world or university administrators

³ Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, ed. Allan Bloom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 24.

trained in professional subjects such as law, business, and contemporary social science. Still, neither Strauss nor Oakeshott ignored the practical world around them and the need to defend universities as places that facilitated liberal education. Indeed, as McIlwain notes, much of their writing about liberal education offered practical criticism and even at times polemical diagnoses of the current disease. They knew well that the “continuing realm of necessity” (48) required both the wisdom that can be cultivated only in leisure and the moderation and *phronesis* that must be exercised in practical affairs. Again, it is the distinction between radicalism and moderation: an unceasing commitment to the philosophical life may coexist with prudent actions in daily life and politics.

The differences between Strauss and Oakeshott are also important. As McIlwain rightly points out, Strauss and Oakeshott understood the origins of liberal education differently. For Oakeshott, it began with the Christian scholars of the twelfth-century Renaissance, while for Strauss it began with Socrates and Greek antiquity. Since he was educated as a historian, history was more complicated for Oakeshott than it was for Strauss, even though Strauss paid greater attention to medieval Jewish philosophy than Oakeshott. Neither of them, by the way, undertook anything like the trenchant study of world religions that Eric Voegelin undertook, in part, no doubt, because neither shared Voegelin’s deep interest in divine revelation. Instead, both gravitated toward particular favored philosophers, and particular favored time periods, for reasons associated with their own philosophical preoccupations.

One qualification is in order, however, about Oakeshott and Plato. Though he wrote far less about the ancients than did Strauss, a perusal of Oakeshott’s recently published notebooks reveals a deep and abiding engagement with Plato; and another manuscript is a record of the detailed notes he took on the *Republic*—almost a line by line exegesis of the dialogue. The truth, perhaps, is that Strauss and Oakeshott exhibit a difference of emphasis and interpretation. Oakeshott was, in fact, deeply influenced by Plato, not least in his notion of conversation as a metaphor for life. Conversation as modeled in the Platonic dialogues was a deeply civilizing project that Oakeshott thought would never conclude, as long as there are people alive to engage in it. Oakeshott differed markedly from Strauss in his interpretation of the cave metaphor, among other things. In fact, Oakeshott’s *On Human Conduct* expresses greater sympathy for the cave dwellers than for the philosopher-king, as McIlwain notes in several places.

Finally, McIlwain's comments on Oakeshott and religion. Neither Strauss nor Oakeshott is typically considered "religious" in any conventional way. Neither was an apologist for a religious tradition, though both were schooled in a Judeo-Christian view of the world. For Strauss, the emphasis was obviously on the Jewish experience, for Oakeshott, the Christian. McIlwain's way of generalizing this background is as follows: the "German Jewish Strauss" and the "English Christian Oakeshott" (3) drew upon both national and religious inheritances in approaching the problem of historical identity, among other topics.

Yet the idea that the mature Oakeshott was a Christian himself is implausible. I do not think this is what McIlwain means to imply, for his entire chapter on Oakeshott and Augustinianism (or "transposed Augustinianism," as Timothy Fuller has properly put it) shows that Oakeshott's view of religion is unorthodox and deeply imbued with aesthetic overtones.

Oakeshott's transposed Augustinianism recasts Augustine's dualism between the "city of God" and the "city of man" as two kinds of *moral* character. One is Rationalist, invested in worldly achievement, and focused on political change. The other is ironic and skeptical, interested in "self-enactment," as Oakeshott termed it in *On Human Conduct*, and inclined toward poetry, friendship, and conversation. Oakeshott loved dualisms, and he repeated many times a version of this one. In his early work it was the "religious" and "worldly" man. In the posthumously published *Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, it was faith versus skepticism. In *On Human Conduct*, it was self-disclosure and self-enactment as ways of engaging in moral conduct, "civil" and "enterprise" associations as different understandings of society.

But *nota bene*—his ideal types were always imbued with moral judgment. The person who is "religious," skeptical, and poetic is much preferred to the Rationalist progressive malcontent. Yet the religious and poetic person need not be recognizably Christian, nor need he believe anything at all that is doctrinally orthodox to Christians everywhere—for example, that faith in Jesus is required for salvation, or that there are certain moral precepts that ought be obeyed.

This is all to say that while Oakeshott certainly has a religious and poetic view, and a compelling one at that, he recasts the idea of religion into his own, idiosyncratic frame. His "religion" draws on Christianity, theology, and particularly the writings of Augustine, but it is not doctrinally Christian. Yet

Strauss's opposition between religion and philosophy is alien to Oakeshott. As McIlwain observes, for Strauss the vitality of Western civilization lay "in the fertile restlessness created by the tension between its two incommensurable sources, Greek rationalism and the biblical tradition" (153). Oakeshott had no such view.

In sum, this is a good book that fills a gap in the scholarship about Oakeshott and Strauss. I believe it would be better if it were more narrowly focused. But I look forward, very much, to this author's future contributions to the study of political philosophy.