

David McIlwain's Reply

DAVID MCILWAIN

Firstly, I am humbled and grateful for this sustained attention to my work. I wish to thank each of the contributors, the editor of this edition Christopher Adair-Totef who has a rare gift for encouraging and organizing intellectual output, and Leslie Marsh and *Cosmos + Taxis* for so generously extending this honor in furthering the discussion of two remarkable thinkers, Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss.

A sympathetic reviewer of the manuscript of *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss* worried that I might have been “chasing too many hares”. This is a justified observation, but I was also conscious to avoid the fixed and tedious dichotomies that jostle their way to the forefront of a comparison of two thinkers. The framework indicated by the title *The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment* was intended to be loose enough to be inclusive of a great deal. Nevertheless, it is already, I hope, suggestive of the true nature of the stag hunt.

Luke O’Sullivan suggests that one way through all this is to look to the last lines where I engaged in a poetic flourish about the contest between philosophical light and poetic color. I reflected that it may require a great mind to pin down and assess the true rank of great minds, and I had not attempted any Lilliputian antics. But in echoing Shelley on poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” and quoting Goethe on the “battle of belief of unbelief” I implied that my framework had not been “Straussian,” but had been designed to encompass some broad and age-old themes. In terms of political theory, I was dealing with two individuals whose overwhelming concern was their freedom to pursue radical, private endeavors. Individuality is thus an underlying theme. For Leo Strauss, his radical individuality was expressed in a pursuit of philosophy, centered on the question *quid sit deus*. Some urge that Michael Oakeshott should also be understood as a philosopher, but I have described him as a poetic-religious figure—a man who explored and lived the this-worldly implications of *cur deus homo*. Both were aware that privacy and individuality require political defenses. Leo Strauss’s decision to revive classical political science and teach its virtues to a generation of young scholars would generate great opprobrium and invite misunderstanding of his true nature. In a not dissimilar manner, the more intellectually solitary Michael Oakeshott’s untimeliness amid the progressives and socialists of the English academy led to him being mischaracterized as an isolated flare up of fading reaction. It is precisely this complacency of the progressives about the success and

legitimacy of the modern Enlightenment project that is prologue to understanding the meaning and importance of Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss.

Timothy Fuller has supplied this prologue in tracing the modern moral imagination to the predominant tendencies of the Enlightenment project. It is this foundation of the modern Enlightenment which Oakeshott would seek to profoundly modify and enrich and Strauss to go radically behind and surpass. Fuller pinpoints the aspirations of the modern project as, in effect, Hobbes' politics set in motion, although more familiarly located in Kantian morality and Kant's essay on world government. Fuller names these as "perpetual peace and ever-expanding prosperity." Hobbes defined happiness in terms of progress and Kant construed happiness in moral terms. As Fuller emphasizes, a progressive moral project implies that, "It is no longer the life outside the cave that is primary, but rather the task to reorganize the life within the cave." This cave-bound vision precludes asking those questions that demand a bird's eye view of the situation. For instance, as Fuller suggests, it resists such a simple and sober reflection as, "Is it possible that we can advance materially and decline spiritually?"

Yet this simple and sober attitude is characteristic of the skepticism that the cave once maintained against the intellectuals. Fuller locates Oakeshott in the skeptical tradition, emphasizing the significance of a distinction Oakeshott made, in a work he did not publish during his lifetime, between "the politics of faith" and the "politics of scepticism" (Oakeshott 1996). The cave has the resources for its own critique of those who present themselves as serving its interests through their pragmatic reorientation of the meaning of enlightenment. Fuller names the tension within modernity between this wary skepticism and the utopian "politics of faith" as "the internal dialectic of the modern moral imagination." Terry Nardin (2001, p. 191) makes a related point in *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* where he remarks on the similarities between Oakeshott's "language of conduct" and Michael Walzer's social criticism. Like Walzer, Oakeshott values the immanent critique. As Fuller realizes, Oakeshott's skepticism is "the residual legacy of the Classic/Christian heritage of western civilization". Oakeshott criticizes from within Western civilization as a whole rather than just from European modernity or English culture (more specific perspectives that he adopts on occasion). Thus, "The modern moral imagination exemplifies a profound dialectical tension between the philosophy of the future and the Classic/Christian inheritance." This is where Strauss and Oakeshott stand in clear contrast. For Oakeshott, these "Classic/Christian" resources remain available as the tradition from which he recognizes his relationship to the moral conduct that he observes, participates in, critiques, and seeks at times to redescribe. In other words, there is a possibility of renaissance out of the recent domination of the politics of faith. For Strauss, this modern technological project has transformed the cave irreversibly and the resources of commonsense opinion are no longer immediately available. It is necessary to return to the opinions that underlay an earlier effort at enlightenment, one that maintained a theoretical orientation and thus left the cave untouched (beyond the stairway it provided for, and indicated to, the philosophical natures).

Fuller notes the reappearance of Oakeshott's dialectical understanding of modernity in his celebration of "voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind." As Fuller emphasizes, "The voice of poetry is an alternative to, but not a substitute or replacement for, the scientific/technological voice." Oakeshott positions it as the successor to the classical notion of "contemplation" but Fuller indicates the clarification of this aesthetic mode which reveals how completely Oakeshott's understanding of contemplation breaks with the classical understanding, for the "merely present" images of contemplation "provoke neither speculation nor inquiry about the occasion or conditions of their appearing but only delight in their having appeared" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 510).

This is not aestheticism, at least in Oakeshott's own terms, for he does not suggest that this voice should dominate, only that it should complement and balance what has become the increasingly dominant, or amplified, voice of practice and technology. Nonetheless, David Lewis Schaefer has reason to wonder whether this is not the kind of dilettantish "snobbery" that Alexandre Kojève posited as one of the aimless possibilities at the end of history. Fuller sees the voice of poetry as offering "temporary and momentary releases from our time-boundedness." For Fuller, Oakeshott's Stoic outlook "hints at a more comprehensive

moral imagination”. But is the hint too subtle and the voice too quiet? Does not “delight” want all seriousness? These questions confront us in the persecution of those whose skepticism seems to obstruct the realization of human perfection. Describing what Eric Voegelin critiques as the Gnostic strain of the Western mind, Fuller notes how its logic veers towards an acceptance that “The liquidation of that individual or group, or at least the reform of their thinking, will be necessary in order that progress toward the ideal may continue.” Oakeshott understood this with equal clarity, implying that the compulsory collectivist state that is the outcome of utopian politics carries a presumption of “the authority to exterminate associates [citizens] whose continued existence is judged to be irredeemably prejudicial to the pursuit of its purpose” (Oakeshott 1975, n. 317). Leo Strauss’s dialogue with Alexandre Kojève only reinforced to him the centrality of this Stalinist logic in the homogenizing project of the Enlightenment. Kojève propagandized for a future in which “The ‘healthy’ automata are satisfied (sports, art, eroticism, etc.), and the ‘sick’ ones get locked up” (Kojève 2013, p. 255). Strauss perceived that modern tyranny is driven by the thymotic part of the psyche and thus is more dangerous and totalizing than the “erotic” tyrannies of the ancient world. He warned that the political science of his own day could not consistently recognize tyranny. A political science worthy of the name should begin with the normative understanding and commonsense from which medical science identifies and treats cancer.

Stephen Turner suggests that the fundamental ground for comparing Strauss and Oakeshott is in the legacy of Neo-Kantianism. Both men came into their own amid the rejection or dissolution of this philosophical movement, and each was shaped to some degree by his response. Turner sees Strauss in particular to be demanding a return to objectivity out of Socratic dialectics, reacting against the culmination of Neo-Kantianism in relativism of different systems, its inability to resolve these differences, its reliance on the Enlightenment project of progress towards a universal culture to overtake this and cover this over, and the connection that this disappointment may have had to the breakdown of German political order and the disastrous consequences of this for the German Jews. Turner’s Oakeshott navigates away from the philosophical shipwreck of Neo-Kantianism in terms of his central concept of experience, which theorizing may only momentarily and arbitrarily arrest. This experience he divides into modes. Presuppositions survive as, at most, “platforms of conditional understanding” which do not challenge or even disturb the relativism and historicism of thought. Oakeshott wants to tell us that the civil association provides for the most unrestricted and elevated kind of human experience but he does this by describing antinomies within a specific practical tradition, “between the ideal expressions of practical orientations.” Among these are the politics of skepticism and the politics of faith. In contrast, the “antinomy” Turner finds in Strauss (philosophy or faith) is of the nature of a “stark and ungroundable existential choice between fundamentally incompatible alternatives.”

Turner refers to Strauss’s antinomy, Athens and Jerusalem. But it is an ongoing question whether this can be understood in terms of a dreadful gulf “between the theology of the denial of God and the philosophy of the denial of philosophy.” Stanley Rosen presented Strauss as staring at this kind of nihilistic terrain and it may be that, minus the mischief, Daniel Tanguay has given a similar assessment of Strauss’s project (Rosen 2003; Tanguay 2007). But it is worth remembering that Strauss had an opportunity to be a professor of religion in Jerusalem and provided a clear statement of his atheism. If America was the Sparta fate had provided, it was still a place for a Greek. In my view, the irrational impasses in Strauss are merely apparent. Note that Tanguay does not follow Strauss because “we no longer possess the certainty that the Socratic laugh can wipe away the tears of repentance, or that Greek serenity can make one forget the henceforth tragic dimension of human existence.” For Tanguay, but emphatically *not* for Strauss, “Revealed religion, Christianity in particular, has transformed the human soul in an essential manner” (Tanguay 2007, p. 213).

Even the writer behind *The Antichrist* endorsed this massive concession to the moral-religious world but Strauss, who had become aware (in 1929 or 1930) of how Farabi and his fellow philosophers of the medieval Arabic enlightenment understood and accounted for revelation in political terms, traced a rational path to Platonic political philosophy. Strauss scholars are right to insist on the importance of what Strauss called his “change of orientation” (Yaffe and Ruderman 2014). This was not a political change of

heart, but it led into a new political horizon. Strauss recognized defensive (*negative*) possibilities in a strong state like Mussolini's as the Weimar republic capitulated. However, it is worth reflecting that, at the same time in Roosevelt's America, Progressives and New Dealers championed the reforming (*active*) power of Mussolini's state (Gottfried 1999, p. 66). As a related point in terms of the present day, multiculturalism is indeed corrosive to social trust as Turner's personal example suggests and Strauss, like Marcuse perhaps, was most comfortable talking philosophy with his Old World friends. But Strauss came to America and fostered respect for the New World's constitutionalism while Marcuse came to turn American youth against this heritage—to leave them guilty for the crimes of the Old World and ready for a kind of Freudian Marxism. As for whether Strauss may be connected to the destruction of Iraq, one could more fruitfully speculate on what responsibility the Harvard Law School bears for the destruction of Libya, and what separates “regime change” from “responsibility to protect”. Both are variants of the old Wilsonian lie of wars to end war, wars for human rights and democracy. To return to the empirical Strauss, it is fair to say that his political views would remain untimely as he moved from Hobbes to Socrates. He was not welcomed with open arms in Britain as the socialist J-P Mayer was. He was at most welcomed with one open arm, and only for a time. There is a memory that comes down to us of Oakeshott noticing Strauss's “inky fingers” at Cambridge, suggesting a handshake, and suggestive of Strauss's scholarly *Sitzfleisch*.

In the book I reflected on Strauss's favorable impression of Britain but this does not explain the change in his politics. The reason for the change is reflected in the centrality of Hobbes in the book. Put simply, Strauss was a reluctant Hobbesian before he realized that a path to Socratic political philosophy remained open. Strauss as Hobbesian was open to (pre-Anti-Comintern Pact) Mussolini's example, though Strauss as Jew could never have been open to Hitler's Germany as indeed it could never have been open to him. But Strauss leaves Hobbes behind, most clearly in his critique of Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* where he suggests that Schmitt himself would be better to join him on the path to the pre-liberal world of Socratic dialectics. Schmitt was not fully awakened by this critique and continued as a Hobbesian of a kind. As a consistent Hobbesian he had warned Weimar against National Socialism and communism before 1933, and precisely as a consistent Hobbesian he was bound to support the Nazis after 1933 for “such obedience is no Crime: for no man is obliged (when the protection of the law faileth,) not to protect himself, by the best means he can” (Hobbes 1985, Ch. 27, p. 345).

What can be said of Hobbes in another sense is relevant to what Kant meant for both Strauss and Oakeshott. For Hobbes retreats into the consciousness to found his new science on the basis that we know what we make. This is again a large concession to the moral-religious view that Oakeshott celebrates as the tradition of “Will and Artifice”. It opposes the tradition that Oakeshott terms “Reason and Nature”. But surely it is not resolved as “Rational Will”. Oakeshott might have named the Hobbesian tradition “Will and Chaos” and established that it is the cosmos that is denied, this absence covered over progressively, by the artifice of science and technology. At any rate, it is fair to say that Oakeshott welcomed the abandonment of *metaphysica generalis*—a reasoning that “excludes from philosophy the consideration of the universe as a whole . . . [a] method of circumscribing the concerns of philosophy” (Oakeshott 2000, p. 18). It is not difficult to see where Kant's transcendental analytic and reliance on utopian progress fits in, nor why the shock of the Great War lent spiritual force to Heidegger's “existential analytic”. Strauss's return to the “relative truth of the contradictory opinions” in this fertile moment does not signify a desire for the “pure truth” of natural law. He rejected the oblivion of the question of being *and* the invitation to look straight into the fierce glare of this question (See Velkley 2011).

Turner suggests a contemporary ground for the differences between Oakeshott and Strauss, while in a similarly formidable and erudite piece Wendell John Coats, Jr. traces the fundamental differences over creativity and individuality to contrasting interpretations of Greek, Hebraic, and Roman thought. I will focus on the Roman question where Coats identifies one of the clearest points of contention between Strauss and Oakeshott. Strauss observes at the end of *Natural Right and History* that the quarrel of ancients and moderns turns on “the status of ‘individuality.’” (Strauss 1953, p. 323). Strauss's comments are made in the context of Burke and may remind us of comments in his “German Nihilism” lecture about “the English”

who, though bearers of the modern ideas, “always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counterpoison” (Strauss 1999, p. 372). Strauss fleshes out this earlier statement in noting that “Burke himself was still too deeply involved with the spirit of ‘sound antiquity’ to allow the concern with individuality to overpower the concern with virtue.” This does indeed suggest, as Coats argues, that the differences between Strauss and Oakeshott are stark and deeply embedded. For Oakeshott affirmed the exact reverse of Strauss’s observation and sentiment in his pivotal declaration, in the context of Hobbes, that, “It is reason, not Authority, that is destructive of individuality” (Oakeshott 2000, p. 67). This confirms the centrality of the disagreement over Hobbes whom Oakeshott celebrates as securing individuality and a civil association in which “Individuals may be collected together, may be added, may be substituted for one another, or made to represent one another, but can never modify one another or compose a whole in which their individuality is lost” (Oakeshott 2002, p. 65). Coats points out that Oakeshott detected the origins of civil association in the Roman republic and contrasted this tradition with the Greek *polis* which he considered an instance of the opposing pole of enterprise association. Strauss would have agreed that the rationality of the *polis* was in its concern for virtue, but he located the emergence of modern constitutionalism, and thus political individuality, not in Rome, but “in the period in which political philosophers consciously opposed to the ancient (and medieval) doctrines a doctrine which they themselves considered fundamentally novel, that is, in the latter half of the sixteenth and seventeenth century” (Strauss 1959, p. 272). Coats notes Strauss’s review of Charles Howard McIlwain’s *Constitutionalism Ancient and Modern*, but the question is rejoined in the comparison of Burke and Cicero at the close of *Natural Right and History*: “Above all Cicero made it perfectly clear that the characteristics of the best polity can be determined without regard to any example, and especially to the example of the Roman polity” (Strauss 1953, p. 321). In the notes to an important passage in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* Cicero is subtly compared with Hobbes when Strauss indicates that Cicero speaks for the ancients in implying the natural distinction of philosophical natures (Strauss 1988, p. 34, n. 16). Strauss places Cicero with the classical philosophers according to whom the best constitution is the work of conscious reason and in harmony with nature in that it seeks to fulfill the higher aspirations of human nature. Hobbes, who confesses that he “consider[s] the greatest part of Mankind not as they should be, but as they are,” (Strauss 1988, p. 34, n. 15) is for Strauss “fundamentally novel” and involved in a project that is “consciously opposed” to the ancients. (For Oakeshott, Hobbes reflects “slowly mediated changes in European thought”—his significance is “not that he began a new tradition”) (Oakeshott 2000, p. 62).

Coats speculates that what he sees as Strauss’s relative silence on the novelties of Roman thought and institutional practice may have been motivated the desire to avoid “detract[ing] from the rhetorical force of [his] account of Christian and later bourgeois influences in his indictment of the Machiavellian project.” By contrast, Oakeshott was keen to describe the Roman republic as civil association. As Coats puts it, “Oakeshott draws upon the Roman and Ciceronian view of the republic as a loose civil association of individuals pursuing their own goals for family and state glory while observing the general requirement to keep faith with “old ways” (*mos maiorum*).”

In the book, I endorsed David Boucher’s categorization of Oakeshott in terms of Roman republicanism. I also suggested that Strauss might be considered a classical republican when considering his political science, but in the tradition of the Greek *polis*. Does the Roman republic better exemplify virtue and the spirit of antiquity or the raised status of individuality? Socrates is the individual whose way of life was directed by the understanding that virtue is knowledge. One is forced to wonder whether Cato the Younger and his commitment to the *mos maiorum* better answers to the name of virtue or “the institution of the individual”. Strauss reminds us that Rousseau revived “the severe accent of Catonic virtue” against the politicians of his day who were concerned with private affairs, with wealth and trade, who were “bourgeois rather than citizens” (Strauss 1953, p. 253). In this sense, and in turning to David Lewis Schaefer’s focus on the question of Hobbes, I reemphasize Oakeshott’s irritation with C. B. Macpherson’s bourgeois Hobbes and a “possessive individualism” which detracted from the rhetorical or mythical force of his presentation of the Roman continuity of the civil association.

David Lewis Schaefer effectively demonstrates that I understated some of the stark differences between Oakeshott and Strauss in the pursuit of balance. I think this is probably fair. In the central chapter on Hobbes, I aimed to develop each interpretation along its own lines and in terms of what I understood to be its own logical coherence. But Schaefer reminds me that correspondence to Hobbes intention (“the author’s *own understanding* of what he was saying”) cannot be treated as a secondary matter. Schaefer does not fail to notice points at which I implied that Oakeshott’s portrayal of Hobbes came close to being disingenuous. For instance, claiming that Hobbes feared fire and brimstone is not even required by Oakeshott’s own irreligious religiosity and indeed if Strauss is correct about Hobbes’s atheism, then so much else follows. It is not a trivial point. It explains the otherwise strange significance that Alexandre Kojève is given in the book. Kojève aimed to complete Hobbesian atheism and the state that it presupposes. But this means that it is inconsistent to locate anything like a myth of original sin or the myth of the Fall of Man in Hobbes as I still allowed in my conclusion. While I may have given too much latitude to this mythical Hobbes, bringing light to the character of Oakeshott’s interpretation does provide for the profound contrast with Strauss that I only gently implied. Carl Schmitt, that other Hobbesian pole in my study, came away from reading Strauss’s critique of his Hobbes with his faith that Hobbes was “by far the greatest and perhaps the sole truly systematic political thinker” shaken to the point that he wavered over whether Hobbes was a *political* thinker at all (Meier 1995, p. 36). Schmitt’s response to reading Oakeshott on Hobbes in later life was quite different. As he wrote to Ellen Kennedy who had provided *Hobbes on Civil Association*:

Everything in the book is highly interesting for me, but the greatest thing is the broadcast-talk “Leviathan—a myth” from 1947. These five pages (pp. 150-154) are, sentence by sentence, word [sic] for an encounter for me which I would not have expected from *England* anymore (Quoted in Schmitt 2013, p. 76, n. 5).

Michael Oakeshott’s *mythoi* are almost the opposite of Schmitt’s and not as anti-democratic as they may appear in my reconstruction. Oakeshott is more concerned with the sovereign individual than the political sovereign, and he refers Christian civilization back to its skepticism of great political projects while celebrating Hobbes for recalling the individual to “his littleness, his imperfection, his mortality, while at the same time recognizing his importance to himself” (Oakeshott 2000, p. 163). In those precious pages which captivated Schmitt, and which, despite their origin as a radio broadcast (“a conversation piece, a flight of fancy”) are extremely important for understanding Oakeshott, civilization is described as “a collective dream” (significant in a writer who is anti-collectivist and committed to individuality in all its forms); “the substance of this dream is a myth, *an imaginative interpretation* of human existence”. Setting himself against the disenchantment of modernity and the Enlightenment, but in the most civilized and clement manner (again, in complete contrast with Schmitt), Oakeshott deems the role of “philosophical literature” such as *Leviathan* “is not to break the dream, but perpetually to recall it, to recreate it in each generation, and even to make more articulate the dream-powers of a people.” Having positioned *Leviathan* as “philosophical literature” and then “literature” merely, Oakeshott refers to “the gift of the greatest literature—of poetry”. However, he avoids simply conflating poetry and philosophy, allowing that a work of philosophy will provide “an increase in knowledge; it will prompt and it will instruct.” Nonetheless, this distinction is just as soon made equivocal: “In it we shall be reminded of the common dream that binds the generations together, and the myth will be made more intelligible to us” (Oakeshott 2000, pp. 159-60, emphasis added).

Schaefer soberly interjects that Hobbes emphasizes the meanness of nature, not the fallenness of human beings: “He represents government rather as a remedy for the miserable condition in which ‘nature’ has left us.” In the famous Chapter 13 of *Leviathan* to which Schaefer refers, Hobbes illustrates the Natural Condition, and how “Nature . . . disassociate[s]”, and that “The desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no Sin” (Hobbes 1985, Ch. 13, pp. 186-87). The continuities with Augustine and the myths of a Christian civilization are very difficult to sustain in these terms (although Oakeshott points to Augustine’s understanding of the Abel episode) (Oakeshott 2000, p. 88, n. 10). Schaefer presses the point that there is

little in Augustine to support the kind of poetic Kantian moral world of the Oakeshottian civil association. As I implied by placing “pagan” and “Christian” in the same sentence (quoted with emphasis by Schaefer), Oakeshott’s “collection of such [supposedly poetic Kantian] models tends rather to blur the fundamental tension between Athens and Jerusalem . . . rather than offer greater clarity about either alternative.” Here it may be relevant to recall Oakeshott’s early interest in the identity of historical Christianity. Many of these ideas are retained in the theory of historical identities given in his late work *On History* in which, as Terry Nardin interprets, “A historical identity, properly understood, is nothing other than its own circumstantial coherence understood as a contiguity of discernable differences” (Nardin 2001, p. 159).

The problem with such a yielding sense of identity is that it makes it difficult to distinguish or regard the importance of intentions. It is helpful in bringing together Don Quixote, Montaigne, and Nietzsche, but less effective in detecting those whom Oakeshott deems “enemies of our civilization, exponents of a counterfeit myth” (Oakeshott 2000, p. 162). The corollary to this is an insight Oakeshott offered in observing contemporary liberalism, where he found an identity that is perfect for his own historical theories (which is why I used his definition at the beginning of my chapter on liberalism) and an ideological movement that displays “ignorance of who its true friends are” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 385). This is the affliction Leo Strauss diagnosed in Carl Schmitt who believed he fought a common enemy alongside Hobbes.

Oakeshott’s historical theories are the preoccupation of my two most trenchant critics. Kenneth McIntyre considers my interpretation of Oakeshott “eccentric” for straying outside the boundaries of “Michael Oakeshott the academic philosopher”. However, his real concern is with Michael Oakeshott, the historian of political thought, while Leo Strauss he condemns for being “uninteresting” and “not an historian at all.”

In terms of the poetic-religious character of Oakeshott’s thought, my interpretation of Oakeshott is indeed not unique, as McIntyre allows. It is influenced by Andrew Sullivan’s *Intimations Pursued: The Voice of Practice in the Conversation of Michael Oakeshott*. Sullivan has a style and personality thoroughly in tune with Oakeshott’s and is well-placed to pursue a thinker who declared, “Not to detect a man’s style is to have missed three-quarters of the meaning of his actions and utterances” (Oakeshott 1989, p. 56). Sullivan appreciates how Oakeshott guides the conversation in the idiom of the civilization, “to describe persuasively a character with whom a reader of a particular tradition can identify with; to evoke a personality with whom we can not only feel sympathy, but solidarity.” This is how he perceives the immanent perspective Oakeshott adopts, being alive to the manner in which Oakeshott’s vision of freedom and individuality “is designed by its rhetorical skill and narrative appeal alone to turn the conversation in a certain direction” (Sullivan 2007, p. 167). More specifically, and serving to explain the often remarked upon unargued character of *On Human Conduct*, Sullivan shows that the modes are not Procrustean beds. What Oakeshott was “unable to argue from his own practical premises” about the superiority of a civil association “he attempted through rhetoric, characterization and metaphor”. Sullivan concludes that philosophy and religion are unreconciled in Oakeshott’s understanding of human existence, but there remains “the pleasant distraction of the aesthetic, without which the opposition would be unbearable” (Sullivan 2007, pp. 208-209). Poetic-religious individuality and its vital role in the conversation of mankind, both as style and substance, cannot be Oakeshottian for McIntyre because “[the] modes are irrelevant to one another”. This places a great deal of weight on the Procrustean reading of *Experience and Its Modes*, a work from which the “voice of poetry” or the aesthetic mode developed as a kind of correction. This demands a consistency that Oakeshott himself could not keep. In fact probably no one has ever written a complete work of history within the terms of the purified mode of the past Oakeshott outlines in that work. The impossibility is suggested in McIntyre’s example of E. P. Thompson who “was a Marxist and an historian, but, if he was a good historian, it was in spite of his Marxism, not because of it.” This comes near to imputing Oakeshott’s conception of the historian’s intention to Thompson, whereas we can be quite sure Thompson entered the humanities as all Marxists do, not to interpret the world but to change it. This does not tell us if Thompson was a good or bad historian, and if Marxism is correct then it is necessary for the historian. Marxism has a clear practical aim, but

a practical aim to resist all practical aims also has political and moral implications. What about Michael Oakeshott's intentions on first turning to the activity of being an historian?

Oakeshott's earliest interest in history was stimulated by a practical concern with the continuity of the Christian religion in the modern world. This identity may even be the test and concern of the historical theories Oakeshott worked on from the 1920s to the 1980s. But it is not necessary to locate these continuities in his writings on history, for in a diffused form they pervade all he has to say about practical experience, which at its highest is imbued with a non-practical poetic-religious character. When these intimations are pursued, they reveal a coherent picture of the Oakeshottian project, culminating in what Andrew Sullivan did not leave to a "Straussian" to call a "theologico-political treatise" (Sullivan 2007, p. 197). The theologico-political significance of *On Human Conduct* reflects a commitment to the moral side of life, despite the unbelieving character of Oakeshott's poetic religiosity and his professional activities as a theorist. McIntyre points out that Oakeshott's modal distinctions explicitly disallow for a "poetic philosopher" or a "philosophical poet" which is quite correct. But McIntyre muddies these crystal-clear waters in noting that "McIlwain, echoing Strauss' general tone concerning religion, claims that 'no one can be both a philosopher and a theologian,' which would have surprised Augustine and Aquinas." McIntyre recreates what he thinks must have been my own thinking, concluding that, ergo "Augustine and all Augustinians (including Oakeshott) are not philosophers."

This is a powerful illustration of why it is better to seek the author's own intentions rather than trying to recreate his thoughts and know him better than he knows himself. Augustine did not for a moment forget the struggle between belief and unbelief and of his well-known case against the philosophers in book 19 of *The City of God* I need quote only the opening lines:

As I see that I have still to discuss the fit destinies of the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, I must first explain, so far as the limits of this work allow me, the reasonings by which men have attempted to make for themselves a happiness in this unhappy life, in order that it may be evident, not only from divine authority, but also from such reasons as can be adduced to unbelievers, how the empty dreams of the philosophers differ from the hope which God gives to us, and from the substantial fulfilment of it which He will give us as our blessedness (St. Augustine 2015, Book 19, Chapter 1).

In the book I claimed that Oakeshott's own "City of God" offers only a temporal or immanent transcendence in aesthetic terms. Happiness is not found in the philosophical life as it is for Strauss. Strauss keeps the absolute separation of the philosophical life and religion in affirming that the philosophers live in the isles of the blessed. In other words, Strauss could have happily sided with Augustine's adversary Porphyry in accepting that, in every relevant sense, the philosopher must be his own savior. It was in studying the modern theologico-political treatises of Spinoza and Hobbes that Strauss discovered what he recognized as the Platonic understanding of the problem. This recovered understanding of the tradition had implications in terms of the history of thought which are unwelcome to historicists, but not necessarily to Michael Oakeshott. As Terry Nardin points out, in Oakeshott's terms, "Collingwood's argument for the primacy of history (historicism) is as reductionist as arguments for the primacy of science (scientism) or practice (pragmatism)" (Nardin 2016). McIntyre bases his claim that I have provided a "hagiography" of Leo Strauss on my hint that "Strauss became so adept at political philosophy that his profoundest observations often appear as mere platitudes." But Oakeshott may have understood this in terms of his own acceptance of the possibility that Hobbes, like other writers such as Plato and Machiavelli, [has] two doctrines, one for the initiated (those whose heads were strong enough to withstand the giddiness provoked by his scepticism) and the other for the ordinary man who must be spoken to in an idiom and a vocabulary he is accustomed to, and to whom novelties (both in respect of duties and in respect of their grounds) must be made to appear commonplaces... (Oakeshott 1975, p. 126).

Oakeshott goes on to affirm that this practice of esotericism and exotericism “goes back to the beginnings of political speculation and was by no means dead in the seventeenth century.” Strauss discerned the differences between its practice in the hands of the Enlightenment philosophers and those at “the beginnings of political speculation”, arguing that seventeenth century writers like Hobbes (Strauss notes that he is “thinking of Hobbes in particular”), concealed their views only far enough to protect themselves as well as possible from persecution; had they been more subtle than that, they would have defeated their purpose, which was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of people who were not potential philosophers (Strauss 1988, p. 34, n).

The philosophers who wrote in the tradition of the Platonic understanding of the theologico-political problem did not construct the exoteric appearance of their works with this progressive aim in mind, understanding the distinction between their philosophical initiates and the superstitious multitude to be “a basic fact of human nature” (Ibid). The difference reflects the bold attempt of a modern philosophical movement “to become the master and owner of nature, to conquer chance” (Strauss 1959, p. 55). Strauss does not argue that philosophy has no impact on history and politics. Rather he points out that history and politics do not transform the problems for philosophy. McIntyre is aware of the philosophical intention in imputing it to Oakeshott. But he cannot accept that a highly intelligent man of leisure who writes and considers a work of philosophy would not allow it to go out with errors that might shame even an intelligent high school student (*i.e.*, one of lesser leisure, education, experience, and intelligence than he) without a reason, and that this reason is that he has two doctrines, as Oakeshott was prepared to accept of Hobbes and other great thinkers.

Talk of “great thinkers” and, in more poetic terms of “towering figures”, has convinced Luke O’Sullivan that I am involved in the fallacy of *argumentum ad verecundiam*. I would suggest no more so than those who say that Western philosophy is “footnotes to Plato” or that modern philosophy is a For-and-Against Kant. We begin with a commonsense assessment of the great thinkers in our tradition. One is also aware of fashions and prevailing ideologies, but it is less sensible to begin with these. To begin with these latter might lead to *argumenta ad populum*, which seems a danger in O’Sullivan’s assertion that Strauss has “[not] been taken seriously by the great majority of historians and philosophers as a contemporary interlocutor for over half a century.” What have the intellectuals been taking seriously during this time? I was lectured by a liberal teacher to regard John Rawls as the great thinker who comes around every century or so and whom the twentieth century had been waiting for. Had I any regard for fashions and prevailing ideologies I would have championed the Rawlsian administrative state or the multicultural and anti-European perspectives of which O’Sullivan appraises me. It may be the case that Michael Oakeshott is better attired to move in these fashionable circles, and that Leo Strauss and his students have often been at odds with the predilections of the contemporary intellectual class.

An example of this “political incorrectness” is Harvey Mansfield’s book *Manliness*. O’Sullivan believes I have echoed Mansfield in claiming that Oakeshott admired the “solid manliness” of the cave-dwellers in Plato. But Oakeshott sides with men whose conceptions of justice—and even their horsemanship—have been called into question by one whom they soon decide would be better run out of town as a “mountebank” and “imposter”. In other words, Oakeshott sides with experience over knowledge in *On Human Conduct*, just as Stephen Turner finds him doing in the 1931 notes he has cited (“What is dangerous, deadening, monstrous, is knowledge *in place* of experience”). In doing so, Oakeshott identifies with the “men of Athens” (*andres athēnaioi*) and “gentlemen of the jury” (*andres dikastai*) who convicted Socrates.

This alignment with the perspective of the cave confirms Oakeshott to be a man of myth, poetry, and the religious life, regardless of the number of pages he devoted to the explicit question of “religion”. This is not a “Straussian” framework but a distinction which is age-old. But while Oakeshott’s Christian civilization is despised by the intellectuals, his apparent antifoundationalism is *de rigueur*. When only the latter is advertised Oakeshott may travel freely in these fashionable circles and O’Sullivan deems Oakeshott well-positioned to meet this postmodern world:

Nietzsche [was] correct in arguing that all traditional Western foundational conceptions of reason descended from Plato were insupportable. Oakeshott was actually at one with postmodernism in realizing the need for a more pluralistic account of rationality, as witnessed by his re-telling of the story of Plato's cave. That is why at least some of Oakeshott's thought remains relevant.

Oakeshott was of course claimed by Richard Rorty as a fellow Postmodern Bourgeois Liberal. But Robert Frost compared poetry without meter ("free verse") to tennis without the net and a consistent critic might say the same about antifoundationalist philosophy. Strauss understood Plato through a tradition of the medieval Arabic enlightenment in which the question of foundations (being) is not neglected, nor does it receive a dogmatic answer.

O'Sullivan is aware that the Strauss I have presented is concerned with nothing but these "eternal" problems. These problems developed into explicit discourses that are coeval with urban or political man. The real bone of contention then is historicism, and thus many of Kenneth McIntyre's arguments are echoed over esotericism and historical interpretation (understandably, as I addressed them in the book). But O'Sullivan gets closer to the heart of the issue in scrutinizing this question of permanent problems, raising the questions of whether there are such problems, and if there are, whether they can be thought of historically. It is not clear that 'freedom' or 'justice' have been anything like 'eternal' problems for human beings. At best this seems an exaggeration: they have been a concern for a few thousand years of the human past. Even if one were to admit there is a class of eternal problems and that freedom and justice belong to it, however, it seems plausible that the meanings of 'freedom' and 'justice' have changed profoundly. But this is what Strauss cannot admit.

Strauss's understanding of a philosophical tradition concerned with permanent problems relies on us not taking the conventional appearance of philosophical works as evidence that the problems themselves have "changed profoundly". O'Sullivan notes that Oakeshott accepted that his own appeal to an esoteric doctrine in Hobbes "was at best a plausible hypothesis": "[I]n the nature of the case it cannot be demonstrated to be true." Straussians claim little more for Strauss's hermeneutics. Paul A. Cantor for instance, offers the reminder that "interpretation cannot hope to proceed according to universal and unequivocal rules, which will always yield unambiguous and unassailable results." This is especially the case for an art of writing that provides for distinct audiences and which demands qualities such as "prudence, tact, and judgement". In this case, "One can offer principles of interpretation, but not rules, unless one means *rules* in the sense of *rules of thumb*" (Cantor 1991, p. 270). Some may deplore this and demand a rationalistic crib but, measure for measure, they will have to defend other interpretative methods with such certainty, for instance, that which led to Oakeshott's Montaigne-like Hobbes. Strauss's reading of Plato's *Republic* in terms of the permanent problems of justice and wisdom may be set against the typical historicist claim, "The Republic of Plato is an account, not of the unchanging ideal of political life, but of the Greek ideal as Plato received it and reinterpreted it" (R. G. Collingwood quoted in" Strauss 1952, p. 575). Did Plato intend the *Republic* to illuminate a Greek ideal of justice or the human desire for wisdom? As Ben Johnson wrote of a contemporary who had received and reinterpreted the English ideal of verse drama, "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

On an autobiographical note, it seems to me that every "injustice" that I remember in my childhood was only a variation on something that might have occurred around any campfire in the African savannah. The move from this kin-based private social world to the group-oriented public political life of a city and a state does indeed bring about a new set of human possibilities, including the philosophical life. This fact is probably the source of the impasse between those who consider justice and wisdom to be permanent problems for philosophy and those who believe that profound changes in our political life throughout history have relegated earlier discourse to matters of merely antiquarian or perhaps anthropological interest. I understood the better sections of my book to touch on this kind of problematic. Strauss turns to the historical and linguistic insights of the later Heidegger and records partial but remarkable agreements with them (Velkley 2011; McIlwain 2018). In querying the notion of an Athenian enlightenment O'Sullivan points

out, “The phenomenon of human beings in the ancient world emancipating themselves from the immediate demands of survival and developing intellectual and cultural lives was a generalised one.” While philosophy is at first glance unique amid these axial age breakthroughs, this multicultural, or at least transcultural, observation is furthered in noting the peculiar features of the languages of intellectual worlds. Strauss was always curious to hear about how other linguistic cultures dealt with concepts like “nature”. While the Greeks raised the question of being clearly, and in a pioneering way,¹ Strauss noticed that the question is also generalizable or transcultural. He seemed to be calling for philosophers out of other cultures, out of the pre-technological or pre-modern roots of these traditions. Those of the Western tradition must assist to the extent that they are capable of understanding the emergence of philosophy as their own tradition of questioning—of foundational questioning. The question of being, Strauss intimated, awaits an insight that may have to emerge from a non-Western tradition of thinking. For the question is not a mere epiphenomenon of the Greek verb *einai*. The uses and prominence of this verb may have encouraged an explicit ontological discourse among the Greeks, just as the epistemological concerns of modern philosophy may have been prompted by, or rather arisen in response to, the biblical tradition and the contingency of its concept of existence (Kahn 2009, pp. 37, 141; see also Burns 2014, pp. 131-156). Strauss hinted that philosophy may have to return to these roots in what are Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic languages of thought in the era of global technology and modern rationalism. Examining the Bible in terms of the question of being could be a first step (Strauss 1989, p. 43).

But to return from global historical tasks to the present matter, it seems to me that argument in the humanities always proceeds on the basis of what is a plausibly coherent explanation of the facts. O’Sullivan finds Adrian Blau’s critique of Strauss to be “devastating”. But it will be found so only by those who have already ruled out the philosophical art of writing. For these readers, Strauss’s method of interpreting philosophical texts “was entirely arbitrary, and in effect licensed Strauss to find esoteric meanings wherever he was so inclined.”

Were this the case, Strauss’s interpretations would be implausible and incoherent, and surely, at times, absurd. But they are not. Rather than scrutinizing Strauss’s alleged methods, one must go to the texts and demonstrate a superior reading.

The appeal to absurdity is made on the problem of numbers. Numerology sounds like a superstition. But nobody wants to dismiss the obvious: Machiavelli’s *Discourses* does have the same number of chapters as Livy’s *Histories*. For other apparent numerical patterns or significances in Machiavelli Blau finds that “the simplest explanation of this is simple randomness.” Indeed, “Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can” (Strauss 1988, p. 36). Having allowed at least one number significance in Machiavelli—the number of chapters in the *Discourses*—it may be worth considering the number 26, which is the number of chapters in the *Prince*. For one has now begun to study Machiavelli rather than simply read through his pages.

But after studying Scott B. Nelson’s wonderfully generous and informative piece, I am more likely to dive into Hayek’s collected works than Machiavelli’s. It is flattering to have one’s work described in beautiful musical terms, and this aspect of Nelson’s contribution serves to remind me (though it should not be necessary) that a concern with the economic basis of political freedom does not imply a lowered cultural gaze. Nelson is correct to situate Hayek as another “middle voice”. The two poles of my study, Alexandre Kojève and Carl Schmitt, both made totalizing claims about political life on behalf of sovereigns. Oakeshott and Strauss are “middle voices” precisely because they make claims against totalizing political orders on behalf of the lives of individuals. Although I gave perhaps undue weight to Oakeshott’s ungenerous criticism of Hayek in the book, I did imply that Hayek belongs as a “middle voice”. In fact, he is the only other thinker that I positioned in these terms. Collectivists who believe in nothing but yielding power and social control to administrative bureaucracies demonize Hayek, but having seen 2020 and especially 2021, we are all Hayekians now, or should be, for certainly we are on the road to serfdom, and some have already spotted the cabins up ahead. “Eco pods,” the driver corrects. One keen-eyed youngster has made out some kind of slogan above the gates—“You will own nothing, and you will be happy.”

However, on the question of spontaneous order, one would think we have found Hayek's opposite in Leo Strauss who argues the wisdom of an order that is consciously designed by human reason. But Strauss believed that virtue might freely develop in these orders shaped consciously by consideration of human nature. It is important to keep in mind that in practical terms Strauss supported the limited constitutional order. It is furthermore a mistake to assume that, in Strauss's terms, a practical commitment is a lower or lesser one, for it is precisely the limited constitutional order that allows for the philosophical life—the serious meaning of a preference for this regime is that the philosopher's own regime can be founded within it. It does not assert sovereignty over the sovereign individual. This rational regime of the philosopher is the virtuous city in speech.

Nelson notes that in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* “Hayek traces some of the problems bedeviling modern democracy to the legislative branch, which, in his view, had relegated the actual task of legislating to administrators and bureaucrats”. This is also a central concern of contemporary Straussian political science.² The transformation of the limited constitutional order into the administrative state with its mission to socially engineer complete and total equality of outcomes and to turn every institution, including the universities, into vehicles of this ideology (which Strauss would have called “permissive egalitarianism”) is a shared concern. Strauss foresaw a global society with a state apparatus dedicated to “forbid[ing] every teaching, every suggestion, that there are politically relevant natural differences among men that cannot be abolished or neutralized by progressing scientific technology” (Strauss 2013, pp. 211-212). Historical man makes himself. Or, to put it another way, as Alexandre Kojève told Strauss, “If there is something like ‘human nature,’ then you are surely right in everything” (Strauss 2013, p. 261).

In this context, it is interesting to note that even some of Hayek's least fashionable ideas have been receiving posthumous confirmations. His support of what is now recognized as multi-level selection (group selection) was extremely prescient, especially at a time when the “selfish gene” reigned supreme. Scientists as eminent as Edward O. Wilson are now on the side of this understanding (Nowak et al. 2010). But both Hayek and Michael Oakeshott made their names warning against the continuation of wartime mobilization and social control in peacetime, and group selection may suggest that it has been the pressures of warfare that have driven humans to cooperate and form into large dissociated *political* groups beyond the limited *social* bands of their genetic kin. In short, war may be the cause of our political life, of our “unsocial sociability,” reflecting that, in David Sloan Wilson's correction of Kant: “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups” (Wilson and Wilson, 2007). Altruistic groups need not mean tightly collectivist units and this rule is consistent with the civil association and successful market relations. This is close to what Oakeshott sets out to establish in his endorsement of Henry C. Simons's insights on demobilization. Releasing the energies of competition and free initiative in peacetime and resisting a permanent war-footing is what best primes a society to withstand the challenges of potential wars and crises (Oakeshott 1991, p. 404). In *The Fatal Conceit* Hayek similarly warns of the error of applying kin-group social logic to large group political situations. Meanwhile Strauss speaks of the political problem of the desire to study the cosmos (with a small group of philosophical friends) amid a political society dedicated to its own laws and conceptions of justice. Oakeshott sees us drawn towards the false comfort and *ersatz* familial warmth of the enterprise association, while our calling is to be true to our own selves in civil association. We are not genetically-programmed to behave in concert as bees and ants are, and are capable of rationality and language as these are not. It is consistent with these human tendencies that Friedrich von Hayek praised a tradition of freedom that had proved itself over many centuries while offering his own rationally conceived plans for an improved legislative order. As Nelson notices, Oakeshott makes his closest approach to Hayek in “The Political Economy of Freedom” where he speaks as “a libertarian in the English tradition” and recognizes that in using the English word “freedom” one invokes a man's right to private property and his “[enjoyment of] a proprietary right over his personal capacities and his labour”. This presupposes the freedom to move among potential employers. Far from a statement of “neoliberalism,” Oakeshott's description of English liberty is so lacking in ideology that it is as good a summary of the demands of Wat Tyler in the 1380s as it is of the convictions of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Oakeshott

deemed *The Road to Serfdom* too ideological and suggested that “a self-conscious ideology” may be more appropriate in “resistance to the tyranny” of a society “deeply infected with Rationalism” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 26). But that is where we are now, with major Western leaders eerily coordinating behind a single slogan, “Build Back Better” and attentive to proposals for a “Great Reset”. In 2021 the most powerful Tory prime minister since Thatcher endorsed the terms of this global enterprise association: “we are building back better together and building back greener and building back fairer and building back more equal and... in a more gender neutral and perhaps a more feminine way.” Oakeshott criticized Hayek for providing “A plan to resist all planning”. But that is not at all like the wartime lie of “a war to end all wars”. In spite of Oakeshott’s intention, “A plan to resist all planning” is closer to the spirit of our lost constitutionalism.

NOTES

- 1 Perhaps reflecting Kahn’s view (2009, p. 17) that, in terms of conceptualizing being, “ancient Greek is one of the most adequate of all languages, and that the possession of such a language was in fact a necessary condition for the success of the Greeks in creating Western logic and philosophy—and [he] suspect[s] also for their success in creating theoretical science and rigorous mathematics, but this second thought might be harder to defend.”
- 2 See for instance, Marini 2019. Although not a product of Straussian political science, we should not ignore, Francis 2016.

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