

On Misunderstanding Michael Oakeshott

KENNETH B. MCINTYRE

Sam Houston State University

INTRODUCTION

David McIlwain has written an extremely intriguing book comparing the oeuvres of the German Jewish American political theorist Leo Strauss and the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott. Regarding the former, McIlwain's book reads as a conventional hagiographical account of Strauss' work,¹ but his reading of Oakeshott is more fascinating as it seems to be an essay in Straussian esotericism which concludes that Oakeshott is best understood as some sort of romantic religious mystic instead of as an English philosopher in the tradition of the British Idealists. My interest lies almost solely in McIlwain's treatment of Oakeshott, and so most of this essay will address what I take to be his eccentric and ultimately unconvincing picture of Oakeshott's work. However, since I did write something about Strauss' conception of historical explanation at some time in the past and since McIlwain has been kind enough to mention that essay in his book, I will spend at least some part of this essay addressing his critique of my critique of Strauss.

The essay that is the subject of McIlwain's critique offers an account of both Strauss' and Oakeshott's conceptions of historical explanation (McIntyre 2010). I chose Strauss as the foil of Oakeshott because Strauss' work on historical explanation offers a particularly egregious example of the defense of a non-historical/practical treatment of the past. Unlike many so-called historians of political thought, Strauss does offer some sort of account of what he takes to be the task of the historian of political thought, but that account is confused, unclear, gnomic, sententious, oracular, and obscurantist. Were I to write the essay again, I would not include a section on Strauss, as he is an uninteresting thinker when dealing with questions of historical explanation. Indeed, Strauss' remarks on historical explanation are so sketchy as to not really even amount to a critical philosophy of history, and his work in the field of intellectual 'history' suggests that he is not so much a bad historian as not an historian at all.² McIlwain's account of Strauss' work and his critique of my critique of Strauss have done nothing to change my mind about Strauss' importance (or lack thereof), and, therefore, the greater part of my response to McIlwain's critique of my work will consist of a restatement of my earlier critique of Strauss.

On the other hand, McIlwain's account of Oakeshott's work is quite unusual, though not completely unique. For McIlwain, Oakeshott is primarily a poetic thinker whose work is secretly or esoterically in the service of the superiority of the poetic imagination, an imagination which finds its completion and consummation in religious experience.³

I am thoroughly unconvinced by this claim, and, in sections two and three, will explain why. My concern will be with Michael Oakeshott the academic philosopher, not Oakeshott the poet, the religious mystic, the bon vivant, the soldier in WWII, the father, the husband, et al. Indeed, I would suggest that anyone who claims that Oakeshott is primarily a poetic or religious thinker has to ignore the overwhelming majority of the works that he decided to publish during his lifetime.⁴ For Oakeshott, poetry is a modally distinct form of experience, and religion is an aspect of practical life, which is another mode of experience. These modes are irrelevant to one another, and, thus, in Oakeshott's terms, it is nonsense to speak of a 'poetic philosopher,' a 'religious historian,' or a 'religious poet'. Santayana may have been both a poet and a philosopher, but, according to Oakeshott's understanding of the two activities, he most certainly was neither a poetic philosopher nor a philosophical poet; Eliot was certainly both a religious man and a poet, but the quality of his poetry has nothing to do with his religiosity; and E. P. Thompson was a Marxist and an historian, but, if he was a good historian, it was in spite of his Marxism, not because of it.

So, what was Oakeshott doing? He was offering theoretical accounts of the various ways that human beings have come to understand themselves and their circumstances. For example, he offers a theoretical account of historical experience (i.e., a logic of historical explanation) which is not a work of historical explanation; a theoretical account of science which is not a scientific hypothesis; a theoretical account of aesthetics which is neither a poem nor a work of art; and a theoretical account of religion which is part of a theoretical account of practical experience or human conduct which is neither a dogma/doctrine nor a practical recommendation of how to succeed in the world. In every one of his published works, he is doing what he takes to be the work of a philosopher; one might criticize it as bad philosophy, i.e. it is incoherent, inconsistent, self-contradictory, illogical, etc., but mistaking it for a poetic or religious statement doesn't even do it the justice of taking it seriously at its own word.

I. STRAUSS

As mentioned above, I am primarily concerned here not to dispute McIlwain's version of Strauss, but to reiterate my own critique of Strauss' various arguments about historical explanation. In the article, I offered three distinct criticisms of Strauss' approach to the history of political thought (McIntyre 2010, p. 69). First, he offers a critique of historicism which confuses and often conflates three different conceptions of historicism: one, the idea that all ideas are to be understood only as the conditional expression of the temporal situation of a particular age; two, that past ideas have been subsumed and moved past in the process of some sort of progressive history; and, three, the notion that an historical past is an autonomous object of experience and explanation.⁵ Second, he suggests that historical explanation should be concerned with understanding the intention of the author, but he never explains what he means by 'intention' or how an historian is supposed to discover that intention. Finally, in his most radical claim, he argues that past 'philosophers' necessarily wrote in an esoteric or hidden way, and that proper interpretation of these philosophers must pursue this esoteric meaning. However, his defense of this method is neither theoretically coherent, nor, in the form in which he explains it, particularly relevant to historical explanation.

The first claim, that Strauss confuses various different sorts of historicism, is less important to my critique of his historiographical methodology than the other two, so I will only remark that it is in his treatment of historicism that his claims about the practical use of the study of past political philosophers is most clearly stated. Strauss writes that, because modernity and the historicism that goes with it has blinded modern human beings to the essence of reality, "the need for natural right is as evident today as it has been for centuries and even millennia;" that "the rejection of natural right is bound to lead to disastrous results;" that "the contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism—nay, it is identical with nihilism;" and that "the inescapable practical consequences of nihilism is fanatical obscurantism" (Strauss 1953, pp. 2, 3, 5). So, the study of the 'history' of political philosophy is a necessary propaedeutic to the study of political philosophy itself. What is needed is a quasi-archeological recovery of the 'teachings' of past political philosophers, and it is the task of the Straussian philosophical historian to recover that past. The study of the

past, however, has, first and foremost, a practical justification in that it ought to lead to better, or, at least, less nihilistic politics in the present.

So, the vital question is, how does one recover the true or authentic teachings of past philosophers? Strauss certainly does not inspire confidence in his answer to this question when he admits that “the epistemology of history is likely to be of vital concern only to certain technicians, and not to men as men” (Strauss 1952, p. 559). In fact, his arguments about the character of historical explanation are rather meager and sketchy at best. They consist primarily of two elements: a claim about the centrality of authorial intention to interpretation and an argument about the connection between political life, philosophy, and the necessity of secret or encoded writing. Strauss writes that “before one can use or criticize a statement, one must understand the statement, i.e., one must understand it as its author consciously meant it,” and that “the originator of the doctrine understood it in one way only, provided he was not confused” (Strauss 1952, p. 581 and 1959, p. 67).⁶ Strauss is not alone in insisting upon the centrality of authorial intention in the interpretation of past texts. However, he is somewhat unique in that, despite his insistence that intention is the criterion for any correct interpretation, he offers no real explanation of what he means by intention. Indeed, Strauss repeats his invocation of intention throughout his essays on history and political philosophy, but appears to believe that the mere repetition of a few set phrases can adequately replace the explanation of such phrases. An investigation into a person’s intention necessarily involves questions like ‘why did ‘x’ do this?’ or ‘why did ‘y’ write that?’, and answering such questions involves more than the mere repetition, translation, or interpretation of a text, statement, or action. Questions of intention necessarily involve placing statements into contexts in which they can be found to be some sort of answer to a question or placing actions into contexts in which they can be understood as attempted solutions to problems. Strauss’s only apparent attempt to elucidate the concept ‘intention’ is by insisting that “the task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves” (Strauss 1959, p. 67). This elaboration does not clarify things, however. What is the import of the term ‘exactly’? It cannot mean the re-enacting of a particular thinker’s entire life experiences, which would be quite impossible. It is certainly not related to Skinner’s elaborate account of historical intentionality based upon his interpretation of illocutionary intentions and perlocutionary results. It seems that it might involve some sort of quasi-Collingwoodian re-enactment of the thoughts of previous thinkers, but this sort of re-enactment supposes that there is some course of events existing somewhere which could be re-enacted.⁷

Further, the conventionality of language means that the intentions of the author do not completely exhaust the possible meanings of the text. The notion that the writer is in complete control of meaning itself is far-fetched, yet it is central to Strauss’s most famous doctrine. Strauss writes that “in a book in the strict sense there is nothing that is not intended by the author” (Strauss 1967, p. 18). This understanding of authorial perfection might seem to be more at home in a fundamentalist religious tract than an essay on historical explanation, but it is deployed by Strauss to support his controversial claim that philosophers necessarily hide the real meaning of their work behind a screen of obfuscation. If the author is in complete control of meaning, any seeming contradiction, incoherence in argument, or factual error must be the result of secret, coded, or, as Strauss calls it, esoteric writing.⁸

Strauss offers three different arguments in support of his thesis that philosophers hide their ‘true teachings.’ The first is non-controversial, while the second two rely on assertions rather than arguments, and depend upon an unconvincing claim about the distinction between knowledge and opinion. First, Strauss argues that some writers in the past wrote in code, and that some philosophers did so as well. Historians are quite aware of the possibility that past writings are written in code, but whether or not that is the case is an historical question easily handled by normal means of contextual analysis. Second, Strauss claims that there are writers who are so vastly superior to other human beings in terms of their capacity to control meaning that their writing should be taken as if it were logically perfect. The conclusion Strauss draws from this notion is that any contradiction in the work of a ‘genuine’ philosopher should be taken as a clue to a secret teaching. He avers that “if a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional” (Strauss 1952b, p. 30). For this

sort of argument to work, either a prior claim to some notion of what makes a writer ‘a master of the art of writing’ must be argued, and Strauss makes no attempt to inform the reader of any criteria of judgment, or we must accept the authoritative judgment of others as to the question of ‘master writer.’ Indeed it appears that the sole criterion of whether a thinker is a ‘master writer’ is Strauss’s imprimatur.

Strauss’s third argument about esoteric writing is drawn directly from his understanding of the character of philosophy. He posits a radical difference between knowledge and opinion as central to the idea of philosophy, which he then translates into a claim about the inherent and logically necessary opposition between philosophy and the political community. He writes that philosophy is “the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole,” and “there is a necessary conflict between philosophy and politics if the element of society necessarily is opinion, i.e. assent to opinion [because] philosophy...is...the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes” (Strauss 1959, pp. 11, 229, 221).⁹ Because society depends for its survival upon the acceptance of ‘opinions’, ‘genuine’ philosophers must hide the truth from society behind an exoteric teaching, and must reveal their real teaching only to “trustworthy and intelligent readers” (Strauss 1952b, p. 25). After all, as Strauss reassures us in an earnest rhetorical tautology, “thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers” (Ibid.). According to Strauss, this esoteric writing constitutes the truly political kind of political philosophy because it consists of defending philosophy in a political way. However, the radical distinction between knowledge and opinion cannot be upheld.¹⁰ To be informed, even at the most elementary level, requires a knowledge of the subject of information which would allow one to be informed (i.e., the knowledge of the particular language in which communication takes place, the knowledge of the particular convention or practice being discussed, etc.). For example, a person who knows a great deal about games will learn a new game easily; a person who is completely ignorant cannot even have an opinion about a game. Indeed, philosophy has often been described as a way of coming to know better what we know already, but unsatisfactorily.¹¹ However, esotericism plays more of a functional role in Strauss’ philosophy than a methodological one. The distinction between exoteric readers and esoteric readers plays a similar role in the Straussian world to the distinction made by Marx and Marxist thinkers between those afflicted with false consciousness and those blessed with authentic consciousness. Esotericism, like ‘false consciousness’, functions to shield the doctrine from external criticism, so those who disagree with Marx, et al., are running dogs of capitalism, sexists, and racists respectively, while those who disagree with Strauss’ or Straussian interpretations of various thinkers are inattentive readers.

McIlwain’s rejects my criticisms and offers various justifications for his decision. His first criticism of my essay is easily answered insofar as he accuses me of misjudging something that was not even the subject of my essay. He writes that “Kenneth B. McIntyre’s account of Oakeshott and Strauss on historical explanation is illustrative of the confusion which can result from a failure to observe the common commitment of both men to understanding modern European thought through broad designations” (p. 74). My essay dealt almost solely with Strauss’ and Oakeshott’s accounts of historical explanation, and, thus, I said little to nothing about each thinkers potted version of the history of political philosophy. Oakeshott’s treatment of what he calls the two poles of modern political thought and experience and his three traditions of political philosophy were not the subject of my essay. Neither was Strauss’ ‘history’ of political thought, which moves from the pristine translucence of Platonic philosophy (skipping over all of that Christian mumbo-jumbo, of course)¹² through the decadent three waves of modernity to our present nihilistic and relativist slough of despond. So, my essay “fail[s] to observe the common commitment of both men to understanding modern European thought through broad designations” in the same way that it fails to address Oakeshott’s book on horse racing, Strauss’ war service, the ‘Adam Smith’ problem, or the place of fate in Conrad’s novels.

His second, and more serious, complaint is that I suggest that Strauss’ work on historical explanation suffers from two related weaknesses that T. D. Weldon calls ‘the illusion of real essences’ and the ‘illusion of the geometric model’ (1953, pp. 20-30). McIlwain defends Strauss from the second ‘illusion’ by offering a quote in which Strauss recognizes the temptation to mathematize philosophy. However, Strauss’ recogni-

tion that the temptation is there does not excuse his succumbing to it. And, contrary to McIlwain's suggestion, I am not accusing Strauss of being some sort of behaviorist, but, instead, I am criticizing Strauss' inadequate understanding of language, and the two 'illusions' which I attribute to Strauss' are both connected to that misunderstanding. To appropriate Weldon, Strauss seems to believe that "linguistic conveniences ... beget metaphysical entities" (1953, p. 28). So, while it is perfectly reasonable to claim, on the one hand, that the statement 'a triangle is a three-sided plane figure', or, on the other, that the statement 'a cat is a small domesticated carnivorous mammal with soft fur, a short snout, and retractable claw' is, in Strauss' favorite phrase, simply true, it is not at all clear how Plato's *Republic* or Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* could be simply true. The move from the geometrical statement or the essentialist definition (but, of course, cats and mats are not really metaphysical entities) to the generic claims that Strauss makes about philosophy and philosophizing is why it is accurate to claim that Strauss' work suffers both from the illusion of essences and the illusion of the geometrical model. So, I find neither of McIlwain's criticisms of my work particularly convincing, and, thus, though McIlwain finds my interpretation of Strauss inadequate, he gives me no reason to revise it.¹³

II. OAKESHOTT ON PHILOSOPHY

McIlwain's treatment of Oakeshott's work is eccentric in many ways, but one of the primary difficulties in making one's way through it is that the language used to describe Oakeshott's thought is completely foreign to Oakeshott's thought. He treats Oakeshott's work as exemplifying the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem, the theologico-political problem, and the quarrel between poetry and philosophy.¹⁴ Oakeshott mentions none of this in his work, and, as I will attempt to demonstrate, Oakeshott rejects in a fundamental way the notion that these sets of oppositions are in actuality oppositions at all. To appropriate one of Oakeshott's responses to a critic, McIlwain's work "displays [his] disposition *never* to attend to what [Oakeshott] has written but to mistranslate it into terms of [his] own" (Oakeshott 2008, p. 268). Further, McIlwain rarely quotes Oakeshott's most coherent and considered publications, preferring to base his argument on very early articles, essays unpublished during Oakeshott's lifetime, and excerpts from his journals. For example, in a chapter in which McIlwain claims to be offering an exposition of Oakeshott's conception of historical understanding and explanation, he supports his argument with a grand total of two references to "The Activity of Being an Historian," and three references to the chapter on historical experience in *Experience and its Modes*. Only two of these references are full quotations of Oakeshott's writing. There is not a single reference to *On History* at all, despite it being Oakeshott's most extensive and mature consideration of the subject. In fact, there are more quotations from my essay on Strauss and Oakeshott in the chapter in question than there are from Oakeshott's own three published essays on historical explanation (pp. 64-85).¹⁵ Reading McIlwain on Oakeshott is like showing up to see *Hamlet* and finding out that it's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that's being performed. For these reasons, I will offer a brief overview of Oakeshott's conception of philosophy, and follow with a review of his understanding of aesthetic and religious experience. Along the way, I will address McIlwain's claim that Oakeshott is best understood as poetic and/or religious thinker, instead of what he (Oakeshott) professes to be, which is a philosopher.¹⁶

Perhaps, it should not be a surprise that McIlwain mischaracterizes Oakeshott's overall project, since he never addresses in any substantive way what Oakeshott thought about the nature of the philosophical enterprise. Oakeshott's thoughts on the character of philosophical activity are scattered throughout his essays, but his most extensive and concentrated reflections on philosophy are found in three works: *Experience and Its Modes*, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," and the first essay of *On Human Conduct*. His treatment of the activity of philosophizing in these three different pieces manifests a remarkable degree of continuity in terms of the kinds of questions and concerns which animate his inquiry and in terms of the proper disposition of the philosopher. Oakeshott understands philosophical activity as informed by an unconditional commitment to the interrogation of the conditions of understanding, and

thus maintains that the disposition of the philosopher is fundamentally skeptical toward the world as it normally appears. Philosophy is understood as a kind of mood which draws us away from the various practices in which we normally engage in order to question the logic of those practices. For the most part, it is a second order activity.¹⁷ Thus, there is a distinction between the activity of philosophizing, which is expressive of a disposition toward appearances, and the particular conclusions of philosophers, which, as such, represent a further invitation to reflect on their specific conditions and on conditionality itself. In terms of his own philosophical conclusions, Oakeshott's work manifests a consistent commitment to conceiving various practices or modes of understanding, like history, science, and art, as quasi-sufficient, autonomous, and independent worlds logically unrelated to each other, and in viewing philosophy as a non-normative explanatory activity in relation to the modes. Contrary to McIlwain, all of the modes are autonomous, and none have primacy over the others. Philosophy retains its independence, in part, by examining the conditions of the modes themselves, and, thus, is not subject to any of them. This vision of philosophy as a disposition to investigate the conditions of intelligibility remains relatively unchanged throughout his long life.

In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott claims that "philosophical experience is...experience without reservation or arrest, without presupposition or postulate, without limit or category; it is experience which is critical throughout and unencumbered with the extraneous purposes which introduce partiality and abstraction into experience" (Oakeshott 1933, p. 347). Philosophy thus understood is not practical, historical, or scientific, but the adjudicator of the character and adequacy of practicality, historical explanation, and scientific explanation. Unlike other forms of activity and understanding, philosophical activity begins with a determination of its own self-reflective and autonomous norms of judgment. Philosophy is, first, an exploration of its own character which issues in a vision of itself which is at one and the same time a provisional conclusion and an invitation to further reflection. Oakeshott claims that *Experience and Its Modes* is an exploration of the idea of philosophy as experience without arrest, presupposition, or modification.

Thus, the tasks that Oakeshott understands to be central to the activity of philosophizing are, first, an exploration and self-definition of a criterion or set of criteria which then inform judgments about the adequacy of our understanding of the world, and, second, a critical investigation of what Oakeshott calls arrests or modes of experience which do not meet the criterion of adequacy. He writes that "I consider it...the main business of philosophy...to determine its own character...[I]t must [also] fall within the task of philosophy to consider the character of every world of experience which offers itself" (1933, p. 83). It is worth noting that Oakeshott focuses on the first of these tasks only in *Experience and Its Modes* and rarely revisits the task of philosophical self-definition again, concentrating his theoretical work instead almost solely on the latter task of investigating the modes of experience.

For Oakeshott, unlike other Idealists, each mode of experience is completely independent of the other modes because of the distinctive presuppositions associated with the mode.¹⁸ He claims that "between these worlds...there can be neither dispute nor agreement; they are wholly irrelevant to one another" (1933, p. 327). The various modes exist as a result of a set of specific presuppositions or postulates which constitute the conditions of the mode itself. The modes do not share the same presuppositions, so it is impossible to move in argument from one mode to another without resulting in what Oakeshott calls "the most subtle and insidious of all forms of error—irrelevance" (1933, p. 76). The *ignoratio elenchi*, or category mistake, is central to Oakeshott's critique of modern attempts to reduce history, art, or practice to science; for any attempt on the part of one mode to regulate or judge other modes is both inappropriate and philosophically unjustifiable. Oakeshott observes that "what, from the standpoint of one world, is fact, from the standpoint of another is nothing at all" (1933, p. 327).¹⁹ For example, historians, when investigating the past, presuppose a past that is inherently different from the present and thus irrelevant to the concerns of, say, a politician or a moralist whose past is constituted primarily by questions of its usefulness and, as such, dissolved into the present. The politician doesn't use historical 'facts' to support an argument, but conceives of the past as a storehouse of ready-made symbols and arguments whose relevance is solely based upon their utility. Or, to offer another example, artists understand metaphor as intrinsically meaningful, whereas, in the world of practice or science, metaphors are useless unless they can be treated more or less as a form of lit-

eral symbolic language. The scientist is not merely appropriating a fixed and finished artifact created by a poet, but instead transforming it into something understandable as an answer to questions about precision, stability, or measurability. Oakeshott's insistence on the complete autonomy of these various modes of understanding is one of the characteristic features of his philosophical work and remains a consistent feature of his theoretical investigations throughout his life.

Oakeshott's next iteration of the character of philosophy appears in "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in which he also introduces aesthetic experience as a distinctive mode in itself. Poetry shares the characteristics of the other modes in being autonomous, impervious to the intrusions of forms of experience foreign to it (e.g. the practical, the historical, or the scientific), and irrelevant to the other forms, as well. For Oakeshott, "poetry is a sort of truancy, a dream within the dream of life" (1991, p. 541). However, this is true not only of poetry, but also of historical inquiry, scientific explanation, and philosophy itself. None these are necessary for the continuation of human life, and all can be considered escapes from the 'deadliness of doing'. Here, the primary activity of philosophy involves the exploration both of the conditions constituting the modes of experience and imagining and of their relation to each other. Oakeshott writes that "philosophy [is] the impulse to study the quality and style of each voice [or mode], and to reflect upon the relationship of one voice to another" (1991, p. 491).

During this middle period, Oakeshott also writes essays which support a traditionalist epistemology, and these essays expand upon his elaboration of the distinctive characteristics of each mode of human experience. For Oakeshott, rationality is not a single abstract characteristic of one of the modes or of philosophy itself, but, instead, it is a characteristic immanent within all sorts of practices and within each modally distinct form of understanding. The most important conclusion to be taken from "Rationalism in Politics" and "Rational Conduct" is that rationality is a characteristic which is immanent within practices and varies accordingly, and not an independent or universal quality of a separable human faculty called reason or mind. Therefore, questions about the rationality of ideas or actions are necessarily questions of contextual knowledge and connoisseurship, or of 'knowing how' instead of 'knowing that'.²⁰ Oakeshott (1991, p. 12) distinguishes between technical knowledge, which is "susceptible of precise formulation," and practical knowledge, which "exists only in use, is not reflective and...cannot be formulated in rules." This practical, or tacit, knowledge consists in knowing how to engage in particular practices like cooking, playing baseball, conducting a scientific experiment, or writing a poem. The character of rationality related to each of these practices is specific to the practice itself, and does not involve a prior cognitive operation, such as writing a recipe for Peking duck, constructing a method or a plan for hitting a baseball, composing a hypothesis about the relation between force and energy, or creating the model of an ideal poem before then engaging in each respective activity. Instead, Oakeshott (1991, pp. 117-118) claims that "it is the activity itself which defines the questions as well as the manner in which they are answered ... [A]ctivity ... is something that comes first, and is something into which each [person] gradually finds his way: at no time is he wholly ignorant of it; there is no identifiable beginning." As in *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott claims that human beings always and everywhere inhabit a world of meanings, and rationality consists of acting and thinking in such a way that we move from a given world of meaning to a more satisfactory one. Actions always take place within specific worlds and it is the character of these worlds or practices that give meaning to the actions. As Oakeshott (1991, p. 121) observes, "all specific activity springs up within an already existing idiom of activity...[W]e begin with what we *know*...and if we knew nothing we could never begin." Thus, knowledge consists in getting to know something better that we already know, but imprecisely or inadequately in some way. This dialectical conception of knowledge is continuous with Oakeshott's early work.

In Oakeshott's final lengthy consideration of the character of philosophy, he maintains that philosophy is a second order activity consisting, first, in the consideration of the general character of human understanding and, second, in the investigation of the presuppositions or postulates of various specific ways of understanding the world. He writes (1975, p. vii) that:

philosophical reflection is recognized here as the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands and in which the understanding sought (itself unavoidably conditional) is a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it...[Philosophy] may enlighten but it does not instruct.

For Oakeshott, philosophical understanding is of a different conditional quality than common understanding because philosophical understanding is concerned with the conditions which constitute common understanding and is, thus, inherently non-normative. However, unlike in *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott emphasizes the necessary conditionality of even philosophical understanding, and there is no mention in *On Human Conduct* of a criterion of unconditional or presuppositionless experience. Instead, Oakeshott emphasizes the distinction between the activity of philosophizing, which is an unconditional engagement, and the conclusions of such an activity, which are themselves susceptible to further investigation and elucidation. He writes (1975, p. 11) that:

the engagement of understanding is not unconditional on account of the absence of conditions, or in virtue of a supposed terminus in an unconditional theorem; what constitutes its unconditionality is the continuous recognition of the conditionality of conditions...[and, thus,] the irony of all theorizing is its propensity to generate, not an understanding, but a not-yet-understood.

The philosopher is not engaged in the attempt to reach an understanding of the world which is in itself unconditional or presuppositionless, but is instead unconditionally committed to understanding the general conditionality of all understanding or experience. The philosopher, or theorist, maintains an attitude of sceptical dissatisfaction with understanding because it always rests on conditions which can be further explored. The results of such an engagement in philosophical reflection (i.e., theories or philosophies) are inherently provisional, or, as Oakeshott puts it, they “are interim triumphs of temerity over scruple” (Ibid.). And, of course, they lose their concrete character when they are detached from the activity which produced them and transformed into sets of doctrines or dogmas. However, nothing that Oakeshott writes suggests that he considers philosophy as a secondary activity to poetry or religion, and his explanation of the imminent character of rationality in human practices is not a denial of rationality, but an elaboration of its variety.

III. OAKESHOTT ON POETRY AND RELIGION

McIlwain’s Oakeshott is a man for whom poetic and religious experience is the pinnacle of human aspirations, but, as has been shown above, Oakeshott always considered himself to be a philosopher, and always maintained that the different forms or modes of human experience (e.g. history, science, art, and practical life) are independent from and irrelevant to each other. Philosophy is a second order activity, but it is most certainly not of secondary importance. It is the highest achievement of the human intellect. In this section, I will explore what Oakeshott actually says about poetry and religion in order, once again, to dispel the notion that Oakeshott places a higher absolute value on either poetry or religion.

As noted above, Oakeshott suggests that the aesthetic mode is one of several ways of conceiving the world, and that none of these modes are completely satisfactory nor is any one mode intrinsically superior to the others. Thus, it is perfectly reasonable for a human being to approach the world, at least on some occasions, and consider it in terms of its capacity to delight, entertain, or surprise us. Oakeshott’s ways of conceiving the world are independent and irrelevant to each other and thus do not form any sort of hierarchical scale. These modes of experience, which include the poetic/aesthetic, the historical, the scientific, and the practical are co-equals, none having more philosophical validity than the others do. The world of practice is the one that we humans most commonly inhabit, and it is a world conceived under the postulate of its mutability. It is a world of good and evil, right and wrong, and success and failure. The world of history is conceived under the postulate of the unchanging pastness of the past, and it is a world of historical

fact, truth, and falsehood. And the world of science is conceived in terms of the postulate of measurement, and it is also a world of fact, truth, and falsehood, but insulated from historical fact because of the differing postulates of the two.

Oakeshott distinguishes the world of poetry/art/aesthetic experience from each of the other modes and, in so doing, offers his own defense of the autonomy, but not the primacy, of the aesthetic world. His philosophical aesthetics proposes that art or poetry forms its own realm of human experience having nothing to do with practical or moral concerns, historical questions, or scientific claims. The postulate of aesthetic experience is delightfulness, and the world of poetry or art is the world considered in terms of its capacity or possibility for delighting us. This delight is an intrinsic value and points to no other value outside of itself. As Oakeshott (1991, p. 513) notes, in art, “there is no problem to be solved, no hypothesis to be explored, no restlessness to be overcome, no desire to be satisfied, or approval to be won ... At every turn what impels the activity and gives it whatever coherence it may possess, is the delight offered.” Thus, Oakeshott’s work serves the purposes of the literary/aesthetic critic as a negative aesthetics which, like a negative theology that tells us what God is not, provides a modal distinction which rules out the irrelevant concerns of the moralist, the politician, the hedge preacher, the historian, or the scientist.²¹

In addition to ruling out certain kinds of questions and considerations as irrelevant to aesthetic experience, Oakeshott also offers an explanation of the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience which does not limit such experience to the creative artist. For Oakeshott, anything in our experience can become a subject of contemplation in terms of the delight that it is capable of producing. Anything can be conceived as art, including things that would normally be considered moral enormities. For example, incest (Sophocles’ Theban plays), pedophilia (*Lolita*), hysteria (*Madame Bovary*), rape (*A Clockwork Orange*), and mental illness (*The Idiot*) have all provided artists with images which, though morally troublesome in various ways when considered in practical terms, continue to delight. Artists contemplate the aesthetic possibilities of seemingly mundane things like peasant boots (Van Gough), houses (Cezanne), goats (Rauschenberg), urinals (Duchamp), pipes (Magritte), colors (Rothko), shapes (Kandinsky), and lines (Mondrian), and composers consider the aesthetic qualities of sounds of all sorts like taxi horns (Gershwin), toy pianos (Cage), birdsong (Messiaen), and donkeys (Mendelssohn).

The contemplation of anything from the morally reprehensible to the unremarkable and mundane in terms of its capacity to delight is possible because artistic expression is not propositional, and, therefore, the world of aesthetic experience cannot logically claim its own superiority to other modes of experience. As Oakeshott (1991, p. 519) notes, “a poetic image can never ‘lie’ because it does not affirm anything.” Unlike the worlds of history, science, and, to a certain degree, practical morality, there are no ‘facts’ in the world of aesthetic experience. Messiaen may strike a ‘false note’, but it’s not because his composition doesn’t accurately reflect the sound of the black-eared wheatear, and Homer may nod, but it’s not because he fudges on the body count in one of the battles in *The Iliad*. Thus, it is irrelevant whether ‘The sun-comprehending glass ... shows Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless,’ is an accurate description of the play between sunlight and windows, just as it makes no sense to ask Delmore Schwartz if he really has a ‘heavy bear who goes with me, A manifold honey to smear his face.’ The criteria of inclusion in art lies not in its correspondence to a factual world or in its capacity to ameliorate the human condition, but in its internal coherence as a work of art.²² Thus, a poem of two lines might be too long and a novel of a thousand pages might be too short.

Oakeshott’s elaboration of aesthetic experience offers a lens through which to view the world aesthetically, but also through which to examine certain objects which present themselves as works of art. These objects often stand out as aesthetic objects because they are ‘framed’ as works of art.²³ However, Oakeshott’s philosophical aesthetics does not offer a critical method, and, in fact, he rejects the notion that his work will be of much practical use to the artist or art critic. His primary concern is distinguishing between various ways of understanding or contemplating the world, and the aesthetic is just one of these ways. To reiterate, Oakeshott himself never makes the claim that the world of delight is superior to any oth-

er world of experience, and Oakeshott's philosophy of art cannot reasonably be understood to be making such a claim.

The other side of McIlwain's poetic Oakeshott is his religious Oakeshott. It seems to me that calling Oakeshott a religious thinker is like calling Shostakovich a composer of film scores or calling Thomas Pynchon a detective novelist. In the two philosophical monographs that Oakeshott decided to have published during his lifetime, he spends around ten pages total in *Experience and Its Modes* out of 330 some odd pages, and he spends 5 ½ pages in *On Human Conduct* out of 350 on the subject of religion. Religion is not mentioned in any of his essays on historical or scientific explanation or poetic expression. When Oakeshott does discuss it in his two books, it is as an aspect, albeit a somewhat significant one, in the world of practical life or human conduct. Insofar as the world of practical life is philosophically or theoretically unsatisfactory (and, for Oakeshott, this is most definitely the case), the world of religious experience is also philosophically unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, I will offer a brief account of Oakeshott's exiguous comments on religion in order to clarify the (relatively minor) place of religion in Oakeshott's thought.

First, Oakeshott maintains in each of his considerations of religion that religious experience is practical experience, i.e. an aspect of human conduct. His understanding of the character of practical experience or human conduct reflects his understanding of the character of philosophy and modality. He conceives conduct as specific performances emerging from and embedded in practices, or traditions, which condition and are conditioned by those performances. These practices are either instrumental or prudential considerations concerned with successful performance, or non-instrumental practices, like morality and language, which condition all performances. Conduct or practical life itself is an effort to alter one's present situation in terms of a preferred situation. However, this new situation inevitably presents problems which call for action, and the necessarily interminable, mutable, and incomplete character of the practical world of experience is evidence of its theoretical inadequacy. Thus, according to Oakeshott, from the standpoint of philosophy, religion offers an ultimately unsatisfactory understanding of the world, while from the standpoints of the worlds of art, history, or science, religion is merely irrelevant. Oakeshott's account of religion does change from *Experience and Its Modes* to *On Human Conduct*, but the change does not affect the theoretical inadequacy of religion as an understanding of the whole of human experience. In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott (1933, p. 292) characterizes religion as the "consummation of practice," while, in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott (1975, p. 81) suggests that "religious faith is...a reconciliation to the unavoidable dissonances of a human condition, ... a mode of acceptance, a 'graceful' response." In neither of these characterizations, however, is religion understood as an escape from the practical world, nor is it conceived as resolving the theoretical difficulties inherent in the practical world. As he writes (1933, p. 310) in *Experience and Its Modes*, "not until we have shaken off the abstractions of practical experience, of morality and religion, good and evil, faith and freedom, body and mind, the practical self and its ambitions and desires, shall we find ourselves once more turned in the direction which leads to what can satisfy the character of experience." Further, in writing about religion, Oakeshott is not advocating the adoption of a religious sensibility, but offering a theory of religious faith. As he notes (1975, p. 81) in *On Human Conduct*, "although a faith is an understanding, a theoretical understanding of faith is not itself a faith." Thus, it is an obvious mischaracterization to suggest that Oakeshott is best understood as a religious thinker.

CONCLUSION

To conclude and to return to McIlwain's argument, his refusal to consider Oakeshott's understanding of philosophy and the modal character of experience, and his lack of regard for Oakeshott's epistemological writings explain, at least in part, his contentions that Oakeshott is an irrationalist.²⁴ Further, this neglect of Oakeshott's own work leads McIlwain to claim that Oakeshott sides with poetry in its dispute with philosophy, and that he is a proponent of Jerusalem in its perpetual war with Athens (pp. 80, 182). Both of these claims are patently false, if, of course, one takes Oakeshott's writings seriously. For Oakeshott, there is no inherent conflict between religion and philosophy, between poetry and philosophy, between science and

philosophy, or between history and philosophy. These are all separate and distinct ways of understanding the world and of making ourselves at home in it. Each is satisfactory in its own way, but irrelevant to any other way of conceiving the world. The exception is philosophy, which is supposed to offer second-order explanations of the unique and distinctive characters of each modal form of experience. Neither religion, which is an aspect of practical life, nor poetry/art can legitimately claim to comprehend the whole of human experience, as both are abstractions. Thus, Oakeshott, as the person who makes these claims, cannot reasonably be understood as primarily a poetic or religious writer. It is baffling how anyone who has read his oeuvre could mistake his work so tremendously. Perhaps, to appropriate Oakeshott's response (2008, p. 274) to an unfriendly critic, McIlwain's primary "concern...is not at all with [Oakeshott's] argument, but with the predilections it revealed."

NOTES

- 1 For example, McIlwain writes (p. 153) that "Strauss became so adept at political philosophy that his profoundest observations often appear as mere platitudes."
- 2 I do not think that most Straussians would necessarily disagree with this assessment, since they tend to think of their master as a philosopher first and foremost.
- 3 There are other writers who have focused on Oakeshott's treatment of poetry and/or religion, but these writers have not gone so far as to claim that Oakeshott himself placed poetry and religion at the apex of human experience, and several of these writers noted, first and foremost, how sketchy and intermittent Oakeshott's various comments about poetry, and, more especially, religion happen to be. See, for example, Tragenza 2010, pp. 2-16; Abel 2010, pp. 17-31; Corey 2012, pp. 134-150, 2006; and Worthington 2003.
- 4 Oakeshott (1991, p. 60) once wrote that "the sin of the academic is that he takes so long in coming to the point." In the case of Oakeshott the poet and religious thinker, Oakeshott never got to the point at all.
- 5 McIlwain's account of historicism (p. 70) is similarly confused. He writes that historicism claims that "the presuppositions of ancient thought have been rationally superseded or reflect only 'truths' of their time." These two claims are quite different and have distinctive implications concerning how to explain past thinkers. Further, despite devoting a substantial portion of his book to a thinker (i.e. Oakeshott) who focuses specifically on historical explanation as logically distinct from other sorts of explanation, he neglects this sort of treatment completely.
- 6 In contrast, G. E. M. Anscombe (1969, p. 36) notes that "a man's intention in acting is not so private and interior a thing that he has absolute authority in saying *what* it is."
- 7 It is unlikely that Strauss meant to appropriate anything from Collingwood. He wrote an ill-informed and unconvincing attack on Collingwood and Collingwood's posthumously published collection of essays *The Idea of History* in 1952a, pp. 559-586.
- 8 As Pocock (1975, p. 393) writes, "we enter a world in which nobody ever makes a mistake or says anything which he does not intend to say; in which nobody ever omits to say something which he does not intend to omit... [and] if there are no anomalies..., then everything that Strauss can impute to [an author] as an intention is an intention."
- 9 Strauss (1959, p. 227) also insists that "esotericism necessarily follows from the original meaning of philosophy."
- 10 The radical separation of knowledge and opinion and its manifestation in esoteric writing constitutes one of Strauss's most well-known formulations. He also claims that there is a radical distinction to be made between 'Athens' and 'Jerusalem', or reason and faith. For a compelling critique of Strauss's account of this distinction which convincingly argues that Strauss is mistaken about the character of both 'Athens' and 'Jerusalem,' see Grosby 2008, pp. 239-260.
- 11 Collingwood (1995, p. 11) writes that "in a philosophical inquiry what we are trying to do is not to discover something of which until now we have been totally ignorant, but to know something better which in some sense we knew already."

- 12 McIlwain (p. 200), 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. This claim might provide the secret key to McIlwain's claim that Oakeshott is really a poet and preacher. His reasoning might be characterized thusly: Oakeshott is some sort of Augustinian; Augustine was a Christian theologian; theologians cannot be philosophers; thus, Augustine and all Augustinians (including Oakeshott) are not philosophers.
- 13 McIlwain (p. 75) observes that "Paul Gottfried [is] one of the few who have found McIntyre's Strauss plausible." As far as I am aware, Paul Gottfried, the editor of *The Journal of the Philosophy of History*, and the two external reviewers for the journal are the only human beings to have read the essay before McIlwain found it. Since Gottfried approved and the *Journal* published the piece, I think that my plausibility rating was at 100%, until McIlwain came along, of course.
- 14 All of these are Straussian tropes, of course (pp. 182, 6, 80).
- 15 For an explanation of why relying on juvenilia and work unpublished in Oakeshott's lifetime presents a false picture of Oakeshott the philosopher, see McIntyre 2005, pp. 119-132.
- 16 At various places in his book, McIlwain (pp. 33, 42, 65, 72, 80) claims that Oakeshott's thought is "align[ed] with poetry and religion," that "Oakeshott represents a poetic viewpoint," that Oakeshott has an "overall poetic viewpoint," that Oakeshott posits "the priority of creativity rather than reason," that Oakeshott "reveal[s] his partisanship for poetry in its permanent quarrel with philosophy," etc.
- 17 In his essay on poetry, Oakeshott (1991, p. 489) calls philosophy a parasitic activity, but this is merely another way of describing it as a second order activity. This understanding of philosophy is not foreign to Hegel or Bradley, and it was the general conclusion of many of philosophers who were contemporaries of Oakeshott (e.g. Ryle, Austin, Wittgenstein, Hampshire, Strawson, Searle, et al.).
- 18 For a contrasting view, see Collingwood 1924. For a comparison of the Collingwood and Oakeshott on this issue, see also Boucher 1989, pp. 69-89.
- 19 Ryle (1984, pp. 15-18), argues that a category mistake is at the heart of the wrongheaded conception of the mind/body problem which he calls the doctrine of the 'Ghost in the Machine'. It is possible that Ryle was aware of the emphasis that Oakeshott placed upon the issue of category error in *Experience and Its Modes* and was influenced by it, although there is no public evidence extant. It is certainly the case that Ryle's work had a significant influence on Oakeshott's later work on rationalism.
- 20 Ryle (1984, pp. 31, 41) argues that "knowing how to apply maxims cannot be reduced to, or derived from, the acceptance of those or any other maxims...We learn *how* by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by any lessons in...theory." Oakeshott writes (2007, p. 318) a very positive review of Ryle's book, noting that "this is a piece of philosophical writing in the highest class ... [which] has something of the vitality and the power of standing on its own feet which belong to the philosophical classic."
- 21 This claim does not deny that a person might consider a work of art under different categories than the aesthetic. For example, one might consider Fernand Léger's *Contraste de Formes* in a purely practical way, noting that it sold for \$70 million last year. Or one might consider it in scientific terms, asking questions about the chemical composition of the paint used, the type of wood used for the frame, etc. And one might consider it historically, observing that it was completed in 1913 at the height of Cubism, and was influenced by the Italian Futurists. None of these, however, contributes to an aesthetic understanding of the painting, which is concerned with the brushwork, color, and contrast, the novel use of chiaroscuro, the return to two-dimensionality, etc. The art historian is the closest to the art critic, and a knowledge of the artistic character of Cubism and Futurism would add something to the aesthetic understanding of the painting, but merely connecting the terms Cubism, Futurism, and Léger would not so contribute.
- 22 Oakeshott (1991, p. 527) suggests that an artist's aesthetic purposes are "like the Spanish painter Orbaneja, of whom Cervantes tells us: when a bystander asked what he was painting, he answered, 'Whatever it turns out to be'."
- 23 For example, a urinal in a junkyard usually evokes little more than a cursory glance at a discarded piece of refuse, but a urinal in an art museum titled "Fountain" and marked by the unusual signature 'R. Mutt' screams to be considered as a work of art of some sort.

- 24 McIlwain writes (pp. 42, 72) that “Oakeshott represents a poetic viewpoint which implicitly denies that ‘virtue is knowledge’”; and that “Oakeshott denied that reason...could find a coherent place in historical experience.” The claim that Oakeshott is an irrational romantic is central to the writings of the early critics of Oakeshott’s work. See, among others, Falck 1963, pp. 60-71; and Raphael, 1964, pp. 202-15.

REFERENCES

- Abel, Corey. 2012. Oakeshott’s Wise Defense: Christianity as a Civilization. In: *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, pp. 17-31. Ed. Corey Abel. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1969. *Intention*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Boucher, David. 1989. Overlap and Autonomy: The Different Worlds of Collingwood and Oakeshott. *Storia, Antropologia, e Scienze del Linguaggio* 4: 69-89.
- Collingwood, R. G. 1924. *Speculum Mentis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- _____. 1995. *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Bristol: Thoemes Press.
- Corey, Elizabeth. 2006. *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics and Politics*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- _____. 2012. The Religious Sensibility of Michael Oakeshott. *A Companion to Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 134-150. Eds. Paul Franco and Leslie Marsh. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Falck, Colin. 1963. Romanticism in Politics. *New Left Review* 18: 60-71.
- Grosby, Steven. 2008. Jerusalem and Athens: In Defense of Jerusalem. *Hebraic Political Studies* 3: 239-260.
- McIlwain, David. 2019. *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss: The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McIntyre, Kenneth B. 2005. Publication as Polemic: A Review Essay on the Publication of Michael Oakeshott, *What is History? and Other Essays*, Ed. Luke O’Sullivan. *British Idealism Studies* 11: 119-132.
- _____. 2010. ‘What’s Gone and What’s Past Help...’: Oakeshott and Strauss on Historical Explanation. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4: 65-101.
- Oakeshott, Michael. 1933. *Experience and Its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1975. *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1991. Political Education. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Timothy Fuller, ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press.
- _____. 1991. The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind. In: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*.
- _____. 2007. *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence: Essays and Reviews 1926-51*. Ed. Luke O’Sullivan. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- _____. 2008. On Misunderstanding Human Conduct. *The Vocabulary of a Modern European State*. Ed. Luke O’Sullivan. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Pocock, J. G. A. 1975. Prophet and Inquisitor: Or, A Church Built on Bayonets Cannot Stand: A Comment on Mansfield’s “Strauss’s Machiavelli”. *Political Theory* 3: 393.
- Raphael, D. D. 1964. Review of *Rationalism in Politics*. *Political Studies* 12: 202-15.
- Ryle, Gilbert. 1984. *The Concept of Mind* (rep.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1952a. On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History. *The Review of Metaphysics* 5: 559.
- _____. 1952b. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1953. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1959. *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- _____. 1967. *Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections*. New York: City College Papers, no. 6.
- Tragenza, Ian. 2010. Skepticism and Tradition: The Religious Imagination of Michael Oakeshott. In: *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*. Ed. Corey Abel. Exeter: Imprint Academic, pp. 2-16.
- Weldon, T. D. 1953. *The Vocabulary of Politics*. London: Penguin Books.
- Worthington, Glen. 2003. *Religious and Poetic Experience in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott* Exeter: Imprint Academic.