

Political Philosophy  
versus Poetic Individuality:  
A Response to David  
McIlwain's *Michael  
Oakeshott and Leo  
Strauss: The Politics  
of Renaissance and  
Enlightenment*

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Leo Strauss and Michael Oakeshott are widely recognized as two of the leading conservative political theorists of the twentieth century. One of the many virtues of David McIlwain's fine book is that he appreciates that the conservative label is only partly applicable in each case.<sup>1</sup> Both Strauss and Oakeshott were "radical" thinkers, in the literal sense of aiming to uncover the deepest roots of our contemporary intellectual and cultural predicament, even as they were conservative, that is, moderate or anti-utopian, in their practical political stances. And for both, the life of theory, rather than political activism, was primary.

There were other important areas of agreement between the two men, as McIlwain brings out. Both appreciated the practical moderation engendered by England's traditional political institutions—even while acknowledging a tension between that moderation and the radicalism that a commitment to philosophizing requires. Both admired Winston Churchill as an exemplar of the political greatness that England's free institutions might sometimes generate. Both championed an older idea of liberal education, aimed at pursuing the truth (through the study of classic books) for its own sake, rather than chiefly for any utilitarian, let alone partisan, aims. Each thinker appreciated the need to defend liberal political institutions against the threats posed by twentieth-century totalitarianism (of the left and the right), and opposed the "universal homogeneous state" espoused by Strauss's erstwhile friend, the Hegelian-Marxist Alexandre Kojève. And both—in common with the philosophically profound, but politically dangerous, Martin Heidegger—saw the threat to human freedom constituted in our time by the empire of technology, as well as by the attendant rise of the "last" or "mass man" warned against by Heidegger's antecedent Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nonetheless, there were major differences between Strauss's and Oakeshott's scholarly enterprises that McIlwain points out but sometimes, in his endeavor to provide a balanced approach, understates. The most important difference that I shall highlight concerns the extent to which they conceived and practiced the project of interpreting the writings of a great thinker as entailing the recovery, to the extent possible, of the author's *own understanding* of what he was saying, as opposed to reinterpreting a classic text in such a way as to conform to the scholar's own views. Strauss, I contend, consistently adopted the former approach, as a propaedeutic to developing his own reflections, while Oakeshott repeatedly favored the latter. For this reason, I believe that Strauss offers a better guide to the understanding of philosophic texts—and therefore of their implications for human life today—than Oakeshott does.

## OAKESHOTT ON HOBBS

I shall demonstrate this point first by focusing on key aspects of Oakeshott's interpretation of the writings of Thomas Hobbes, the thinker with whom he was most closely identified. It should be noted, at the outset, that the initial published encounter between Oakeshott and Strauss was an extremely generous, and largely favorable, review that Oakeshott wrote of the first book by Strauss to have been published in English, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oakeshott 1937; Strauss 1936). But the focus of that review was chiefly on Strauss's contention that Hobbes's political philosophy was based on his observation and study of human nature (including the study of history, most importantly Thucydides' *History*, which he had translated), rather than (as the then-regnant scholarly consensus held) on the materialistic physics he set forth in other writings. While questioning the evidentiary basis of Strauss's interpretation, Oakeshott appeared open to it. Only briefly in the review did Oakeshott allude to what would become a major element of his own subsequent Hobbes studies, the claim that Hobbes was more indebted to the "Stoic-Christian tradition," and hence less fully a revolutionary thinker, than Strauss maintained (Oakeshott 1937, p. 144). As McIlwain points out, in his next treatment of Hobbes's thought, which became the chapter on "The Crisis of Modern Natural Right" in his 1953 book *Natural Right and History*, Strauss appears to respond to Oakeshott's position (without naming him), when citing the view of "present-day scholars" who question Hobbes's originality, some even "com[ing] close to suggesting that he was one of the last Schoolmen" (Strauss 1953, p. 167). In that chapter Strauss aims to elaborate the authentically novel, transformative character of Hobbes's teaching.

It is somewhat curious, in view of what McIlwain terms Oakeshott's "later emphasis on the continuities of Hobbes's thought" with that of his predecessors, to note that only two years prior to his review of Strauss's book, Oakeshott, in a 1935 survey of recent Hobbes studies, had warned against the "danger" of the "at least, semi-medieval portrait" that they offered of Hobbes's thought, since there could be "no doubt that Hobbes's writings do represent a profound revolution in European thought, . . . [and] that he was one of the most original of philosophers" (p. 110, n. 14, citing Oakeshott 2007). In other words, in the period when he published his Strauss review, McIlwain's own fundamental position was not far from Strauss's own. By contrast, in his 1960 essay on "The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes," as McIlwain points out, Oakeshott adopted a reading that "was almost diametrically opposed to Strauss's" emphasis on Hobbes's condemnation of pride, embodying "the war-avoidant attitude of the bourgeoisie," and providing the decisive ground for Locke's more prudent presentation of the grounds of modern liberal society (p. 89).

In contrast to Strauss, Oakeshott went so far as to "trac[e] Hobbes's conception of pride to Augustine," who "had distinguished between the just pride in emulation of God" and "the vainglorious pride born of contention with God." (This despite the fact, I note, that in Chapter 15 of *Leviathan* Hobbes specifically identifies pride as a violation of the ninth "law of nature" aimed at promoting peace, since it tends to weaken people's disposition to obey established authority, while in no way limiting his condemnation to its "vainglorious" form.) McIlwain suggests that the change in McIlwain's emphasis "may have been partly a reaction to Strauss's privileging" of Hobbes's break with earlier thought (p. 89 and 110 n. 14; Oakeshott 1975, p. 123).<sup>2</sup> But more fundamentally, as McIlwain observes, Oakeshott "wished to recall liberal modernity to a foundation of magnanimous pride and Renaissance individuality," believing that the "rediscovery" of that foundation would provide conditions whereby society's "lions," that is, "those citizens who were capable of a rich inner life of high sensibility and adventurous self-expression" (such as he himself evidently aspired to achieve) would "come to predominate" and "set the pattern" of many "public practices" (p. 108).

In further pursuit of his enterprise of turning Hobbes's timid, egalitarian, acquisitive human being into one guided by a spirit of aristocratic liberalism, Oakeshott redescribes the fundamental passion that Hobbes makes the foundation of obedience to civil authority, the fear of violent death, as a fear of "dishonourable" or "shameful" death (Oakeshott 1991, pp. 306, 343), a qualification that Hobbes nowhere adds.<sup>3</sup> In that connection, whereas Hobbes states that in motivating men to obey the "covenant" obliging them to obey a sovereign, the fear of punishment is the passion to be reckoned on, since the alternative, "pride"

in keeping one's word, is "a generosity too rare to be presumed on," given most men's inclination to pursue "wealth, command, or sensual pleasure" (Hobbes 1994, pp. 87-88), Oakeshott, as McIlwain points out, "seized on some relatively secondary points" in *Leviathan* that he maintained "gestured toward a crucial but deliberately understated role for the noble character" in the original "establishment of the contract" by which men are obliged to civil obedience, notably Hobbes's reference to the source of the "relish of Justice" lying in "a certain Nobleness or Gallantness of courage, (*rarely found*), by which a man scorns to be beholden for the contentment of his life, to fraud, or breach of promise" (p. 106; Hobbes 1994, ch. 15 [my emphasis]; Oakeshott 1991, p. 350).

But aside from Hobbes's explicit denial that such nobility is commonly found, the issue of whether noble individuals might have initiated the social contract is quite beside the point. As McIlwain acknowledges (p. 105), "Hobbes had not lingered over the details of how a covenant of mutually authorized wills might actually be achieved in the state of nature," precisely because (I observe) he *denies* historicity to that condition as a universal situation (Hobbes 1994, ch. 13, p. 77), and therefore has no need to explain how a social contract could have been agreed to in it. Just as the state of nature is simply a hypothesis designed to illustrate *why* government is needed (by imagining a bare-bones situation without any artificial restraints on our conduct) and what its true purpose must be (to protect us from the consequences of anarchy), the notion of a contract is meant as an intellectually explanatory hypothesis, not a historical account.

Yet in order to avoid the consequences that Hobbes demonstrated to follow from his account of the state of nature, Oakeshott found himself compelled to espouse an interpretation that as McIlwain acknowledges will "appear overly ingenious, if not disingenuous," except to those who assume that Hobbes (for unexplained reasons) stated it "esoterically" (p. 106). In his wish to restore "liberal modernity" to what he wished to see as its true foundation in "magnanimous pride and Renaissance individuality," in an epoch (our own) "in which liberal society had declined into narrow-hearted acquisitiveness" (p. 108), Oakeshott not only took unjustifiable liberties with Hobbes's text, but came to dismiss with vehemence those who maintained a contrary view. So contemptuous was Oakeshott of the economic acquisitiveness that beset modern liberal society that, as McIlwain observes, he dismissed the Canadian political theorist C. B. Macpherson's book *The Theory of Possessive Individualism*, which Strauss cited for its agreement with his Hobbesian interpretation of Locke, "in one of his most uncivil footnotes," calling Macpherson's "reduction of the unfolding of Renaissance individuality 'into a history of so-called market-society capitalism'" as "a notorious botch," even remarking (in words that must have been directed at Strauss, as McIlwain observes, no less than at Macpherson) that anyone who believed such claims "is capable of believing anything" (p. 108; Oakeshott 1975, p. 242, n. 1).<sup>4</sup> (Aside<sup>5</sup> from other difficulties, we wonder how Oakeshott managed to shoehorn Hobbes, who published his writings in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, into the Renaissance.)

Still another oddity in Oakeshott's interpretation of Hobbes's argument, noted by McIlwain, is his insistence, in response to Strauss's emphasis on the philosopher's "dry atheism" (which helped keep his reputation from being redeemed until well after Spinoza's was), that Hobbes "died in mortal fear of hellfire"—an assertion for which he offers no textual support, and which is contradicted by what Strauss observed was the "optimistic and worldly tenor of Hobbes's writings" (pp. 102-3; Strauss 1959, p. 171; Oakeshott 1991, p. 291). As McIlwain astutely observes, whereas Hobbes had explicitly dismissed fears regarding an afterlife as "old wives' tales," Oakeshott needed "to discover some kind of religious sensibility in Hobbes to ensure that the non-substantiveness of his civil association [that is, its lack of directedness towards some positive, unifying goal] could still be guided by the virtuous idiom of conduct characteristic of those noble individuals capable of the kind of rich and generous inner life" that Oakeshott would subsequently term "self-entertainment" (p. 103).

Simply put, Oakeshott was again guilty of rewriting Hobbes to make him say and believe what Oakeshott wished he had held, rather than what he actually wrote. As McIlwain observes, "Oakeshott's 'Hobbes' may have been more indicative of [his] 'retaliation' against the kind of 'rationalism' which the actual seventeenth-century Hobbes was advancing," given Oakeshott's determination, for polemical reasons of his own, to place Hobbes's moral teaching in the "medieval tradition" of Stoicism and Christianity rath-

er than view it as a critique of Aristotle's "theory of the passions" (pp. 94-5). Indeed, in contrast to Strauss's repeated emphasis on the need to understand a serious author's thought as he understood it himself, rather than quickly assuming that we readers grasp it better than he did, Oakeshott, as McIlwain points out (p. 100), in his Introduction to *Leviathan*, suggested that Hobbes's failure to appreciate his indebtedness to a "tradition" would have required him to see "the link between scholasticism and modern philosophy which is only now becoming clear to us."

Instead of taking seriously Hobbes's claim to be the true founder of political science, McIlwain explains, Oakeshott "maneuver[ed] to depict" that science in a "quainter, more imprecise, and (almost) medieval sense," lying somewhere "between medieval and modern science" (p. 98).<sup>6</sup> But as Strauss remarked in the essay in which he cites Hobbes's barely concealed atheism, "[o]ne cannot ignore Hobbes"—that is, the real Hobbes rather than a softened, imaginary, traditional one—since he "ushered in" "the modern type" of social doctrine, focused on power (culminating in Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power), "with impunity," lest we lose sight of the grounds of our own commonly held beliefs (Strauss 1959, p. 172). In contrast, Oakeshott's unsubstantiated attribution of religious dread to Hobbes, just to ground his own wished-for vision of noble Christian souls informally guiding a liberal society, can only blind us to our situation.

In the end, while McIlwain acknowledges the likelihood "that Strauss's reading of Hobbes shows Oakeshott's reading to be (at certain points) untenable," but that Oakeshott may not even have intended "to provide a merely textually faithful commentary" on Hobbes's writing, he understates the difficulty by downplaying the significance of this difference, holding that the more "profound divergence of Strauss and Oakeshott" concerned "the implications of modern morality for political life and the relation of this political problem" to what Strauss (1953, p. 323) referred to as "the status of 'individuality' in modern thought" (p. 109). For Strauss, unlike Oakeshott, the process of dissecting the grounds of our present crisis began with a meticulous effort at reconstructing its true intellectual sources, as well as the classical alternative to them.

More needs to be said here about two interrelated aspects of Oakeshott's position: (1) the nature of his "non-substantive" vision of political society whose tone is nonetheless set by aristocratic lions, including its unacknowledged Kantian foundation, and (2) his vision of the noble, "self-enacting" individual who is to flourish in, and supply guidance to, that society.

### OAKESHOTT'S QUEST FOR "SELF-ENACTMENT"

With reference to the first of these points, McIlwain explains that "Oakeshott recognized that human society is perennially drawn toward 'the unity of politics and religion'" and hence would always stand in need of "skepticism" to "recall political activity from the religious 'frontier,'" since "only when the City of Man is viewed in these skeptical, non-substantive terms" does "the autonomy required for moral conduct becom[e] possible," just as (in Oakeshott's understanding) the religious believer "is not only necessarily left to subscribe to his obligations as best he may but can do so only in self-chosen actions, in contrast to a divine Will to which he must submit" (p. 178; Oakeshott 1975, p. 158). In support of his notion of political skepticism, in the sense of anti-utopianism, Oakeshott cites Augustine, while acknowledging that he was hardly a skeptic when it came to religion. But in reality, Oakeshott's conception of a non-substantive politics (p. 178), in which government abstains not only from prescribing adherence to particular religious doctrines, but also from directing citizens to specific morally preferred modes of conduct, in the name, not of civic peace (as with Hobbes), but of morality itself, reflects the underlying, if indirect, influence of Immanuel Kant (see p. 180 on Oakeshott's belief that the compulsion of law seems "the very negation of morality [understood as self-chosen actions]"; also p. 190 for reference to Oakeshott's endeavor to steer a course between Kantian and Hegelian conceptions of morality, as described by Terry Nardin). Oakeshott found an interpretation of Hobbes that "identifies moral conduct with prudentially rational conduct" based on fear to be "unacceptabl[e]" (p. 105)—despite this being the way that Hobbes in fact defines morality in the opening

paragraph of his treatment of the subject: “those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity” rather than conflict (Hobbes 1994, p. 57).

In contrast to the alleged “botch” of “contracting” what he calls “the early years of modern European history” “into a history of so-called ‘bourgeois market-society capitalism,’” Oakeshott insisted on tracing the roots of the modern principle of “personal autonomy” at least as far back as the twelfth or thirteenth centuries (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 236, 239-40). He identified the “classic expression” of the supposedly new tendency to view every aspect of life (both practical and theoretical), including even religion, as “an assemblage” of freely chosen “opportunities for self-enactment” as Montaigne’s *Essais* (p. 240). But this entire notion of life as a process of self-enactment is not one that I am aware can be found anywhere in Montaigne’s writing. (I doubt that the term has any provenance prior to the twentieth century.) Montaigne indeed initially claims that his monumental book is merely a self-portrait meant for his friends and relatives, but the most superficial survey of the work’s contents demonstrates the irony of that claim. (See Schaefer 1990, ch. 1, pp. 3-5, 19-22, with the studies by Ballaguy and Marcu cited at n. 43). Nor does Oakeshott display any awareness of the connection between Montaigne’s repeated profession of love for liberty and the liberalism of Locke, having claimed that such elements of Lockean liberalism as “democracy, parliamentary government, progress, discussion,” and the “ethics of productivity” would have seemed “worse than slavery” to the Périgordian (p. 88; Oakeshott 2007, p. 59; for Montaigne’s advocacy of republicanism, scientific progress, free discussion, and economic freedom, see Montaigne 1958, I.3.12; I.22; I.23.85; III.3; III.7.700; III.13.817-18; Schaefer 1990, chs. 3-6, 12-13.). So preoccupied is Oakeshott’s Montaigne with self-enactment that he has no concern with political life, or even with philosophizing, at all. (See Coats 2000, p. 17, on the difference between Montaigne’s praise of conversation and argument as a means of advancing towards the attainment of truth and Oakeshott’s “stylized” view of it as “purged of any purposes” other than delight in the activity itself; Oakeshott 1991, p. 489.) In sum, Oakeshott presents readers with a dilettantish Montaigne who is no less fabricated than his Hobbes. (He even attributes to Montaigne the same terror of death that he wrongly associated with Hobbes [pp. 101-2; Oakeshott 1991, p. 291], when the essayist repeatedly seeks to dissuade readers from such a preoccupation so as to reduce their susceptibility to Christian superstition [Montaigne 1958, I.14.33-7; I.20.; II.6; III.12.802-8; Schaefer 1990, ch. 10]).

In view of Oakeshott’s elevation of dilettantism over the concern either with achieving practical political goals or with the pursuit of truth, it is not surprising that his denunciation of the subsumption of “high culture” under an educational system aimed at serving the interests of “the productive masses” lent itself to suspicions of outright snobbery, as McIlwain reports (p. 52). As previously noted, Strauss was at one with Oakeshott in seeking to preserve the ideal of classical, great-books-based education amid the thoughtlessness often found in modern democratic society. But Oakeshott, unlike Strauss, exhibited a curious fixation on the alleged corruption of the medieval ideal of a university through the mere introduction of practical studies. McIlwain reports that Oakeshott was “only too aware that the fear of having to conscript technologically ignorant and incompetent soldiers was a major impetus for the implementation of mass education by the European states of the early modern period” and decried the “enthusiasm for peacetime mobilization” (pp. 51-2): but why should the establishment of widespread, practically-oriented training have constituted by itself a threat to the survival of liberal education? (Would Oakeshott have preferred that British soldiers remain incompetent? Or that ordinary people be deprived of the sort of technical education they needed in order to advance in life and make a useful contribution to society?) In a review McIlwain quotes from the 1940s, Oakeshott observed that “in war, all that is most superficial in our tradition is encouraged merely because it is useful, even necessary for victory” (p. 52); but what was the alternative? (Contrast Strauss’s acknowledgment, in the concluding paragraph of his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, that even the classical political philosophers “were forced to make one crucial exception” to their general opposition to “inventions” that might engender “political or social change”: “[t]hey had to admit the necessity of inventions pertaining to the art of war,” in this respect providing grounds for Machiavelli’s critique of their practical conservatism (Strauss 1958, pp. 298-9). While far from a Machiavellian, Strauss was readier than Oakeshott to acknowledge the necessity of accommodating the realities of practical political life).

For Strauss, unlike Oakeshott, liberal education was far from an exercise in public “self-enactment.” To the contrary, while distinguishing, as Oakeshott did, between liberal education and that which is based on “machines,” Strauss held that liberal education “shuns the limelight” precisely because it “seeks light,” that is, understanding (Strauss 1968, p. 25). And far from regarding the self-enacting gentleman as the exemplar of liberal education, Strauss remarked that “the ultimate justification for the distinction between gentlemen and nongentlemen is the distinction between philosophers and nonphilosophers,” and that one of the redeeming benefits of the “increasing abundance” brought about by modern technology is that it made it “increasingly possible to see and to admit the element of hypocrisy which had entered into the traditional notion of aristocracy,” which served practically as a mask for oligarchy, with the promise (in the earlier, liberal wave of modern political philosophy) of “abolish[ing] many injustices” (Strauss 1968, p. 21). While Strauss shared Oakeshott’s concern for the effects of the reorientation of science towards technology on liberal education in the modern era, his fear was not that the “rearranging” of the educational system to accommodate the demands of modern democracy would endanger “the morality of individuality” (p. 51; Oakeshott 1989, p. 152), but that the severance of science from philosophy—with the former now elevated over the latter—entailed the replacement of “the fruitful and ennobling tension between religious education and liberal education” with “the tension between the ethos of democracy and the ethos of technocracy,” culminating in the denial that there can be rational knowledge of what are called “values” (entailing the non-democratic rule of supposedly neutral “experts”). Consequently, in Strauss’s view, “[s]cientific education [was] in danger of losing its value for the broadening and deepening of the human being” (Strauss 1968, pp. 22-3). (Contrary to McIlwain, p. 54, Strauss, unlike Oakeshott, expressed no “desire to free the universities from the practical tasks they [had] been shackled with”: it didn’t bother Strauss in the least that while housing one of America’s leading undergraduate colleges as well as the Committee on Social Thought and other often-distinguished graduate liberal-arts departments, the University of Chicago, where he taught for two decades, also incorporated schools of law, medicine, social work, and business administration—none of which, with the possible exception of the first, had any connection to its liberal arts programs.)

Oakeshott’s disparagement of learning that was directed towards practical utility extended much further, as McIlwain recounts, in *On Human Conduct* (1975). In his endeavor to elevate a purely aesthetic, “poetic” mode of conduct over practical considerations of any sort, Oakeshott disparaged the ancient poets because they aimed at “communicating practical and ancestral wisdom.” (Contrast Strauss’s high regard for the comic poet Aristophanes, on account of his politico-philosophic wisdom: Strauss 1966; and his lengthy study of the Epicurean poet Lucretius, who “restor[ed] the union of philosophy and poetry” [Strauss 1968, p. 134]). Again in contrast, Oakeshott admired the “contemplative delight” with which he maintained “the invading Romans” regarded Greek temples and statues, precisely because they lacked any religious “significance” for the conquerors (Oakeshott 1991, p. 532; compare Nietzsche’s scathing judgment of such a view of “culture” [Nietzsche 1980, sec. 4, distinguishing genuine culture that gives meaning to a people’s life from mere “knowledge about culture”; also sec. 7 on the consequences of a “historicizing” view of Christianity]). Oakeshott represented the very disposition to regard poetry as offering “a guide to conduct” or a repository of wisdom as misguided: even while acknowledging how the desires and judgments of French and English youth had been shaped, respectively, by Racine and Shakespeare, he denied the presence of any serious thought behind that shaping (Oakeshott 1991, pp. 532-6).

Remarkably, McIlwain observes, the relation of Oakeshott’s conception of poetry to his “conservatism” is exemplified by his account of *fishing* “as an activity which may be engaged in, not for the profit of the catch, but for its own sake.” Even though even fishing requires “some measure of practical completion . . . Oakeshott believed that a poetic sensibility and conservative disposition prevent play from declining into mere ‘recreation’ and ‘relaxation’ from work.” But McIlwain properly alludes to the limitation of this outlook, noting that earlier in life Oakeshott had appreciated the truth of the philosopher R. G. Collingwood’s observation that “style without substance is dilettantism” (p. 140). It remains unclear to me, however, how McIlwain thinks that the mature Oakeshott succeeded in overcoming the “polemical emptiness of aestheticism” in a way that distinguished his position from the “formalistic dilettantism” of Kojève (who held that

at the end of history, while human beings “would continue to enjoy art despite the disappearance of philosophy [thanks to the universal realization of objective truth] and the human significance of activity,” they “would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs,” that is, out of mere instinct or habit, without meaning (p. 141).

### OAKESHOTT, STRAUSS, AND THE “UNIVERSAL, HOMOGENEOUS STATE”

By comparison with Oakeshott, Strauss, as McIlwain demonstrates in Chapter 6 of his book, took the threat of the universal homogeneous state more seriously, while recognizing (contrary to Oakeshott) its Hobbesian roots. McIlwain perceptively notes the link between Strauss’s “first American book,” *On Tyranny*, a study of Xenophon’s *Hiero*, and his later *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, inasmuch as the *Hiero* in Strauss’s account “presents ancient political philosophy at its ‘point of closest contact’ with the modern alternative” founded by the Florentine. *On Tyranny* occasioned a lengthy review (invited by Strauss) by Kojève, subsequently included along with a response by Strauss when the book was republished. As McIlwain observes, Kojève’s challenge to the Xenophontic or classical understanding of tyranny reflected his Hegelian assumption that perfect wisdom was available only at the end of history. And Strauss in turn “understood Kojève’s Hegel to be something of a Hegelianized Hobbes” in that “the triumph of the modern understanding of reason” as Kojève represented it “would be the metaphysical equivalent of the advent of [Nietzsche’s] last men,” individuals who had fully imbibed Hobbes’s position that the only objective human good was self-preservation and hence freedom from conflict, the full achievement of which would require what Kojève himself called “the suppression of opposition” (pp. 118-120).

In opposing Kojève’s world-view, as McIlwain notes (p. 128), Strauss believed that “the continuation of politics” and hence of political freedom was inherently linked to the preservation of philosophy. By contrast, as McIlwain subsequently observes, Oakeshott’s own reversion to “the mode of poetry” (linked to a supposed “Judaic-Christian-Augustinian tradition”) seemed to ignore “the nihilistic implications of . . . the story of the technological Hobbesian being freed of its practical tasks” in Kojève’s vision of humanity’s completion (pp. 138-9). How different is Oakeshott’s depiction of fishing as an exemplary conservative “ritual” if performed solely for “its own sake” from Kojève’s elevation of the “snob” who “transcends his animal nature” at the end of history only by exemplifying a pure “form,” “opposed . . . to content of any sort” (pp. 140, 142)?

### OAKESHOTT’S “AUGUSTINIANISM”

There remains to be considered what McIlwain portrays as Oakeshott’s “Augustinianism,” which he represents as the key to understanding Oakeshott’s account of “the crucial contribution which Hobbes offered to the moral life” (p. 177). In reality, (see note 2), Oakeshott’s attribution to human beings of an innate “moral depravity” that parallels Augustine’s notion of original sin, for which civil association is the necessary remedy, flies in the face of Hobbes’s denial of any such inherent human sinfulness. He represents government rather as a remedy for the miserable condition in which “nature” has left us (1994, ch. 13, p. 76-77). Moreover, while Oakeshott opposed the Enlightenment project of “displacing” religion, he shared what he believed to have been Hobbes’s more limited aims of “remov[ing] religious ‘enthusiasm’ from politics”—an alliance of “political skepticism . . . with personal faith” that he claims had been shared by “all *informed* Christians . . . since the time of Augustine or Paul,” if not from Jesus himself (p. 179, emphasis added). (The word I have italicized indicates the question-begging character of the claim.) Yet Oakeshott’s advocacy of the separation of religion from public life was motivated neither by Christian piety nor by wishing “to secure a public role for scientific knowledge,” but rather, McIlwain explains, “to secure freedom and completion for the self” along with providing “public space for a variety of self-enactments” (p. 181). Where in Augustine’s own writings is any such goal stated?

Far from being animated by Augustinian faith, Oakeshott's "self," McIlwain observes, "for[ego]es] any supernatural hopes or expectations." McIlwain "use[d] his flexible understanding of the historical identity of Christianity to adapt a *pagan* worldview . . . almost a City of God *contra* Augustine, in which grace is 'reconciliation to nothingness'" (first emphasis mine) (p. 182). While McIlwain maintains that Oakeshott's "celebration" of such assorted "ironic, existential, religious, and poetic heroes" (as he conceived them) as Don Quixote, Montaigne, and Nietzsche makes his seemingly "eccentric" readings more "coherent," by demonstrating that his sensibilities "placed him not in Athens, but Jerusalem" (p. 182), his collection of such models tends rather to blur the fundamental tension between Athens and Jerusalem (a central concern of Strauss's, as McIlwain acknowledges at p. 200) rather than offer greater clarity about either alternative.

For Strauss, neither the choice for philosophy (Athens) nor for faith (Jerusalem) was a matter of personal "sensitivity," let alone "self-enactment," while (I observe) an earthly "City of God" was no more faithful to the Biblical tradition than was Oakeshott's reduction of Judaism to "will and imagination," let alone his view of religion as "the willful completion of a self" (pp. 183-4; cf. p. 192, citing Corey Abel's "justified" doubt that Oakeshott's vision of an entirely earthly City of God, unsupported by revelation, left him "in any meaningful sense Christian"). Most important, what McIlwain describes as Oakeshott's concern to ward off the "threat" to "the creative principle" posed by "the Socratic tradition of philosophizing" and his preference for the "solid manliness" of the "cave dwellers" (from Socrates' allegory in Plato's *Republic*) over the quest to transcend the cave of inherited opinion (pp. 185-6) sets him clearly at odds with Strauss's endeavor to revive Socratism.

Not only was Oakeshott, as these remarks indicate, far more a mythmaker than a philosopher; his wish to encourage those who lack the capacity to participate actively in the process of myth-formation "to embrace their position inside the vision of those of greater will and imagination rather than face the 'dreadful insomnia' or 'nightmare' of wakefulness" (p. 184) is radically antidemocratic (despite his ostensible wish to "diffuse aristocracy downwards" on the basis of his idiosyncratic reading of Hobbes, so as to reverse "the servile cast of modern thought" [p. 188]). And it ran directly contrary to what had traditionally been understood as the purpose of liberal education, i.e., the education that equips its recipient to live as a genuinely free human being and citizen, even if not a philosopher (Cf. Strauss 1968, ch. 1). When it comes to Oakeshott's intention to ensure the passive acceptance by most people of the myths created by thinkers like himself, we must ask, *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

While neither Hobbes nor any other serious thinker ever denied the need for political authority to regulate human conduct (cf. Locke's description of law as a "hedge" that defends rather than destroys our effectual freedom: Locke 2019, II.57, pp. 305-6), it is difficult to comprehend Oakeshott's belief (as described by Paul Franco) that "it is Reason, not Authority, that is destructive of individuality" (p. 189). Whatever the value we place on individuality (however that term is understood), the proposition can be accepted only if we identify reason with the narrowly instrumental rationality of Hobbes, an identification that Strauss (following Nietzsche) challenged: there is no way to prove that a life devoted to self-preservation is more rational than one aimed at honor, piety, or wisdom. Despite Oakeshott's endeavor to transcend modern rationalism by subsuming it under poetry, it appears that he, no less than Carl Schmitt (as Strauss demonstrated) in his own reading of Hobbes, remained its prisoner. The result was not only the underestimation of the capacity of philosophic inquiry (as attested by Plato, Aristotle, and their successors) to supply the ground of a meaningful life, but also an exaggeration of the opposition between philosophy and (thoughtful) poetry. As the variety of characters, opinions, and outlooks portrayed in Plato's dialogues exhibits, reason, understood as the unending *quest* for truth, rather than (as with Hobbes or Hegel) the claim to certain knowledge about the whole, in no sense suppresses human diversity, or what Oakeshott preferred to call individuality.

## PHILOSOPHY VS. "MYTH-MAKING"

David McIlwain has labored impressively to articulate the rival visions of Strauss and Oakeshott, and their relation to such major twentieth-century thinkers as Kojève and Heidegger, in a thoughtful and balanced way. But in his Conclusion, where he attributes "the genius of both men" to their having provided "a central and defensible place in their thought for traditional inheritances [hence their 'conservatism'] without ever abandoning their commitment to enlightenment and renaissance" (p. 199), I believe he substantially overstates Oakeshott's achievement, by comparison to that of Strauss. Contrary to McIlwain (p. 200), Oakeshott can hardly be said to have achieved a "renewal of Christian religion as a civilizational grounding," given the liberties he takes with Augustine (just as he did with Hobbes), and the manifestly worldly character of his version of Christianity. Even less credible is the criticism McIlwain attributes to Oakeshott of Strauss for "overlooking" "the myth of original sin" in his treatment of Hobbes (p. 201), since (as I have noted) Hobbes espouses no such doctrine. While McIlwain rightly applauds Strauss and Oakeshott for their resistance to "perfectionist and millenarian fantasies," preferring in their *practical* politics a "good-natured and liberal muddling through," it should be noted that even in this respect, Oakeshott was less than fully consistent, since at the conclusion of his essay on "Political Education," he represents his view as an extension of John Stuart Mill's "theory of human progress," suggesting a greater confidence than Strauss expressed in the progressivist "philosophy of history" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 69).

McIlwain plausibly portrays the "opposing visions" of Strauss and Oakeshott as reflecting the millenia-old rivalry (as alluded to in Book X of Plato's *Republic*) between the claims to supremacy of philosophy and poetry (pp. 204-6). What this account omits to consider, however, is how far a genuine renaissance of civilization can be grounded on a process of *mere* myth-making, designed to satisfy a particular thinker's taste for the enhancement of "individuality," as opposed to a *philosophically informed* poetry, as practiced not only by Plato, Aristophanes, Lucretius, and Shakespeare but also (for instance) by Strauss's preferred novelist Jane Austen (p. 202), or by a series of thoughtful American novelists (see Zuckert 1990; also Alvis and West 2000). Contrary to Oakeshott, it is not the function of poetry at its highest to enclose us in a cave, but to extend both our thoughts and our sympathies to the broader world we inhabit while elevating our aspirations. Nor would such an enclosure be conducive to the preservation of the political liberty and constitutional government such as Strauss and Oakeshott both valued.

## NOTES

- 1 All page references that are not accompanied by a source title, as in the above citation to p. 110, are drawn from McIlwain 2019.
- 2 Already in his 1946 "Introduction to *Leviathan*," Oakeshott downplayed Hobbes's originality, asserting that his political philosophy instead "reflected the changes in the European political consciousness which had been pioneered" by "theologians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 278).
- 3 In this respect it seems to me that Oakeshott's attempt to introduce a concern with honor or recognition as a primary motive underlying the establishment of civil order constitutes a "Hegelian" reading of Hobbes, more than (as McIlwain contends, p. 118) a "Hobbesian Hegel."
- 4 A sympathetic interpreter of Oakeshott's thought, Wendell John Coats, similarly finds implausible Oakeshott's claim that Hobbes "understood human beings as creatures more properly concerned with honour than with either survival or prosperity" (Coats, 2000, p. 60, citing Oakeshott 1975, p. 125).
- 5 Strauss's realism also entailed rejecting the utopian (or dystopian) proposal of followers of Kojève for a "world state" as a solution to the problem of war in the atomic age (130; cf. 201).
- 6 In his Introduction to *Leviathan*, Oakeshott even represents Hobbes as "an ally of Plato, Augustine, Aquinas" (Oakeshott 1991, p. 276).

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