

Living in the Past: Oakeshott and Strauss on Historical Knowing

LUKE O'SULLIVAN

National University of Singapore

One way to get a sense of what a book is about is to begin at the end. McIlwain concludes *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss* with the following words:

To fully assess the opposing visions of Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss we would have to ascend to the spiritual stage on which the towering figures of the philosophic and the poetic traditions find their meaning and completion. We would then be able to determine whether it is the philosophers or the poets who have been, and will again be, the unacknowledged legislators of the unfathomable ground of Western civilization. The enlightenment of this ground may reveal the path to renaissance (p.).¹

Since this is the upshot of the whole work, it deserves some close scrutiny.

The first thing to note is the assertion that writers like Oakeshott or Strauss exist on some kind of higher level (a 'spiritual stage' that we supposedly need to 'ascend' to). It is important to understand the kind of claim being made here. At a minimum, it is neither historical nor philosophical. For the historian, Oakeshott and Strauss are no different to any other authors. Their texts need to be explained as contributions to debates that were going on at a certain time and place. For the philosopher, likewise, no author enjoys any kind of elevated status. The interest of a text lies purely in the soundness and validity of its arguments, though determining these may itself require some recognition of the context. But neither historians nor philosophers aim to assign any author a place in a spiritual hierarchy of any sort.

The metaphors of height contained in the vocabulary of 'ascent' and 'towering figures' are, in technical terms, *argumenta ad verecundiam*. Such arguments from authority, however, by definition assume what it is that they are trying to prove. Here, McIlwain is simply assuming the existence of a normative hierarchy of some kind that allows us to rank different thinkers. His point is not simply that the meaning of the works of philosophers and poets in general may be established at different 'levels'. In history and philosophy we would normally understand by this only the extent of the context or the degree of reflexivity involved. For historians, meanings may be a feature of the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, the whole text, or the relation of the text to other texts. Likewise, for philosophers, there can be first-order or second-order levels of argument, and so on.

But meaning, at least in the sense of intelligibility, does not depend on locating the proposition or text at any kind of 'spiritual stage'. The question of the very existence of such stages does not even come up.

What is meant here by 'meaning', though, is not simply intelligibility. What McIlwain has in mind by 'meaning' is significance or value of some kind. Hence his reference to the 'unfathomable ground of Western civilization'. This phrase is far from self-explanatory, but in McIlwain it is a repetition of an idea taken from Leo Strauss. More specifically, it is an idea that Strauss believed that he had found in the Stoic natural law tradition, in Heidegger, and in the writings of Hermann Cohen on Judaism. Strauss, summarizing his understanding of Stoicism, wrote that: 'The unchangeable and universally valid natural law—a part of which determines natural right, i.e. that with which justice . . . is concerned—is the ground of all positive law.' (Strauss 1983, p. 141). Reviewing *Religion of Reason*, he paraphrased Cohen with apparent approval as saying that 'holiness . . . is the ground of God's being' and that in Judaism, 'the true God becomes the ground of morality or more specifically of the virtues' (Strauss 1983, pp. 238, 246).

For Heidegger, on the other hand, Strauss wrote that 'the true ground of all grounds' is 'the fundamental abyss' (Strauss 1983, p. 30). As Strauss saw, this implied that 'Heidegger understands his great predecessors better than they understood themselves'; and Strauss, according to Thomas Pangle (one of the editors of the series in which McIlwain's book appears), regarded Heidegger as 'the thinker of our age' (Pangle, 'Introduction' to Strauss 1983, p. 25). In other words, Strauss accepted Heidegger's understanding of the history of philosophy as sound, at least in outline, together with Heidegger's diagnosis that modernity was in a state of crisis. But where Heidegger eventually turned to a neo-pagan vocabulary in which the answer to the crisis was to prepare for the return of the gods, Strauss believed that the best response to the crisis was a revival of the tradition of ancient Western political philosophy, especially the ideas of Plato.

As McIlwain correctly observes, the title of Strauss's *Natural Right and History* was a deliberate allusion to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, filtered through Heidegger's later concern with the history of metaphysics itself as the history of nihilism (p. 70). In *Being and Time*, the alleged problem of the concealment of the meaning of Being in the history of Western metaphysics was not yet identified with the growing nihilism of Western civilization which manifested as 'violence and despair' (Heidegger 1991, p. 245). But by the time Heidegger delivered his lectures on Nietzsche in the late 1930s, he had explicitly connected the two themes (Heidegger 1991, p. 205).² The history of Western metaphysics simply was the history of nihilism. Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, which recommended that we embark on a 'quest for wisdom' after the manner of Plato and Aristotle, can thus be read as echoing Heidegger in declaring that 'The contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism — nay, it is identical with nihilism' (Strauss 1953, pp. 5, 36).

In this story, the loss of natural right, which was that part of metaphysics which dealt specifically with the problem of justice, had allowed two trends to emerge in modern thought that were responsible for the current crisis. The first was positivistic scientific materialism which took a narrow view of the nature of reason and identified all knowledge with scientific knowledge leading to an ever-increasing emphasis on the technological exploitation of the world. The second was historicist relativism, which made all values simply a reflection of their own time and place, and hence undermined contemporary values. But if social and political order were once more based on principles of natural right, these two trends could potentially be overcome. The key to this was accepting the concept of philosophy Strauss found in Plato, according to which 'Philosophizing means to ascend from the cave to the light of the sun, that is, to the truth (Strauss 1953, p. 12). This conviction that there are timeless universal moral truths that are key to the right ordering of political life determined Strauss's whole approach to the history of philosophy. Thinkers were ultimately to be judged according to whether or to what extent they had grasped or failed to grasp them.

It is this Straussian narrative that informs McIlwain's conclusion that philosophers can serve as legislators of the ground of civilization. It is clear from the vocabulary McIlwain uses that he thinks Strauss was, in essence, correct. In McIlwain's lexicon, Strauss 'recovers' things; he 'realizes' things; he has 'unquestionable insights'; he 'recognizes' things; he 'perceives' things; things are 'revealed' to him (pp. 121, 154–9). Because the Straussian narrative is a version of the Heideggerian one, Heidegger is likewise described as

‘uncovering’ the possibility of a return to classical thought that Strauss would then exploit, as if this possibility were somehow independently there (p. 69).

This is the kind of language one uses of religious visionaries who have received a revelation, not philosophers or historians who interpret evidence and make arguments. For the historian or the philosopher, however, there can be no ‘unquestionable insights’, and nothing allows of simply being ‘uncovered’. To write as if there are such insights is to have adopted, wittingly or not, a dogmatic stance that is appropriate, if anywhere, in theology and mysticism. It is no surprise, then, that McIlwain describes Strauss’s attitude to philosophy as the attempt to create a secular theodicy (p. 43). This is exactly right. But the terms in which McIlwain’s conclusion is phrased suggests that he himself endorses this Straussian conception of philosophy.

The main body of the work bears this impression out. As we shall see, McIlwain’s Straussian standpoint creates major difficulties, but they are often of a subtle kind, and not always immediately obvious. There is no question that McIlwain knows his subjects well. At least some of the interpretation he is offering is sound, so it is worth dwelling at some length on what he unquestionably gets right. He is certainly correct to reject Perry Anderson’s view of Oakeshott and Strauss as members of the ‘intransigent right’ in the same class as Carl Schmitt (p. 17 ff). His labelling of his subjects might provoke some comment: he wants to position both Oakeshott and Strauss as ‘conservatives’, when some would be more inclined to regard Oakeshott as a kind of liberal, for example (Franco 1990).

McIlwain, however, is aware of this controversy over how best to classify them, and makes clear that the conservatism he has in mind is of an unorthodox kind (p. 15). Moreover, he notes, again correctly, that in significant respects they shared a common intellectual milieu. In particular, both were deeply engaged with German post-Kantian philosophy. Oakeshott was an admirer of Hegel; Strauss, as we noted, was impressed more with Heidegger. But both Oakeshott and Strauss studied Nietzsche carefully and realized the need for a response of some kind to his radical perspectivalism which informed much twentieth-century postmodernist thought.

McIlwain is also right in saying that both Oakeshott and Strauss were powerfully impressed by the contrast between the English and German political traditions, and felt the impact of this difference personally. Strauss fled Hitler’s Germany for England before taking up the position at Chicago which would make his reputation in the Anglophone world. Oakeshott spent time in Germany as a student after the first World War, and signed up for service in occupied Europe during the second. As part of the Allied forces that liberated France, Belgium, and Holland, he saw at first hand the destruction that the war had caused.

Their respective political philosophies can be read as attempts to explain the conditions of political freedom in a way that would rule out totalitarian appeals. For this reason, both engaged with the writings of Hobbes, where they came most directly into contact. Oakeshott was notably admiring of Strauss’s *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, writing not one but two pieces on it when it was published in 1937. McIlwain can cite Boyd in support of his own claim that it seems likely that they were reacting to one another’s work over an extended period (Oakeshott 1936–7, pp. 364–79; 1937, pp. 239–41; compare Boyd 2008, pp. 690–716). Strauss thought of Oakeshott’s ‘Introduction’ to *Leviathan* as one of his main rivals in interpretation, and Oakeshott in turn was probably responding to Strauss in his post-war essays on morality and obligation in Hobbes.

There is no issue in principle, either, with McIlwain’s decision to include a chapter on the relationship between Oakeshott and the Russian emigré Alexandre Kojève, as well as one on the relationship between Kojève and Strauss, even though Oakeshott, unlike Strauss, never interacted with Kojève directly.³ Kojève’s seminars on Hegel at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études have gone down as a major chapter in the history of twentieth-century French thought (Kojève 1980). They were influential partly for their interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from a Marxist standpoint, but also because of the subsequent careers of those who attended, including Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan (Yar n.d). Their shared interest in Hegel makes a plausible basis for a comparison between them.

Indeed, Oakeshott has already been profitably compared elsewhere with other major figures in twentieth-century French intellectual history, including both Jean-Paul Sartre (who assimilated Kojève's emphasis on the struggle for recognition when writing *Being and Nothingness*) and Michel Foucault (Farr 1998; Plotica 2015). McIlwain's argument that because Strauss's handling of the theme of avoidance of violent death in Hobbes was mediated by his reaction to Kojève's reading of Hegel, and Oakeshott engaged with Strauss over the same issue, Oakeshott can be seen as indirectly also responding to Kojève, makes sense.

Even some of McIlwain's more striking claims regarding Oakeshott and Strauss can be defended. He makes the argument that they were not reactionaries, but 'closer to classical republicans' (p. 9). A declared admiration for Cicero's *Republic* makes this a reasonable claim about Strauss, but Oakeshott's criticisms of the modern versions of republicanism put forward by, for example, Thomas Paine and Immanuel Kant, initially make it harder to understand how he too can be placed in the 'republican' camp. For Oakeshott, modern republicanism made the mistake of thinking that a certain constitutional form would in itself be a guarantee of good government, but this was a fallacy.⁴ There was no direct relationship between the arrangement of offices in a constitution and the kinds of activities which government undertook. Constitutions in and of themselves could not determine whether the members of a state remained free under the law to decide for themselves how best to live, or whether their aims were determined for them. Oakeshott likewise repudiated Rousseau's version of republicanism, regarding the notion of the General Will (and indeed 'will' in general) as philosophically unsound.⁵

Yet McIlwain finds support in David Boucher's work for his view that Oakeshott can still be said to have had republican sympathies of a kind (Boucher 2005). Boucher disentangled Oakeshott from contemporary republican political theory as practiced by Philip Pettit and others, in which the emphasis is on non-domination. Instead, Boucher associated Oakeshott's republicanism with the idea of the rule of law, which Oakeshott placed at the center of his own theory of civil association in *On Human Conduct*. Oakeshott more than once confessed an admiration for Roman politics, and Boucher points out that *libertas* or freedom was for him one of the key words in the Roman political vocabulary (Boucher 2005, p. 88). This conception of freedom was entirely compatible with the rule of law. Unlike the liberal tradition which tended to see law as a restraint, Oakeshott (like Hobbes) saw freedom as enabled by and only possible under conditions of legality. This position was entirely consistent with a politically conservative orientation that emphasized the importance of the informal, traditional, dimension of a shared membership of a community of rules.

Furthermore, McIlwain's focus on the importance of Christianity to Oakeshott, in order to draw a parallel with Strauss's interest in Jewish thought, has more plausibility than would have once seemed the case. In the scholarship that emerged in the years following Oakeshott's death in 1990, the occasional perceptive scholar like Glenn Worthington recognized the importance religion had for him, but on the whole, the argument made by Terry Nardin that Oakeshott was a philosopher first and foremost seemed to fit the published evidence (Worthington 2000; Nardin 2001). In his early writings in the 1920s Oakeshott showed a strong interest in the problem of the relationship between Christianity and history, and in his late work *On Human Conduct* he discussed the place of religion in moral life more generally, but in between he had little to say on the subject (Oakeshott 1993b, 1975, pp. 81–6).

Though McIlwain says that 'the suggestion of a religious orientation in Oakeshott's thinking is likely to be treated with skepticism', subsequent research has made clear that the topic of Christianity was actually of permanent interest for Oakeshott, even though he chose not to publish on it (p. 6; Oakeshott 2014). Towards the end of Oakeshott's life, he wrote to a former student that he would have liked to expand the few pages on religion in *On Human Conduct* into a book in its own right, but had left it too late.⁶ So McIlwain is not unreasonable in wanting to emphasize this theme.

The difficulties begin when we start to consider the overall framework of interpretation of which these various elements form a part. The overarching thesis is that 'Oakeshott's desire for a renaissance of poetic individuality would lead him to seek a human understanding of the Judaic tradition of creativity and imagination, while Strauss's aim of recovering the universality of philosophical enlightenment would mean

facing the unintelligibility of the ground of the Greek tradition of rationalism' (p. 1). But McIlwain has again taken this view directly from Strauss. Strauss wrote that 'the broadest and deepest [experiences of Western man] are indicated by the names of two cities: Jerusalem and Athens'. In this narrative, 'Western man became what he is, and is what he is, through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought' (Strauss 1967, p. 45). So one thing to realise about McIlwain's mention of 'philosophical enlightenment' is that it refers to the Straussian idea of an ancient Greek Enlightenment, and not to 'the Enlightenment' of the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, Strauss's notion that what went on in the 'classical' period of Greek history constituted an 'Enlightenment' transparently depended for its existence on a prior interpretation of the intellectual history of eighteenth-century Europe as itself an 'age of reason'. Strauss's view of ancient Greece was thus already refracted through a romanticized understanding of Europe's own past in which Greece was a place of gleaming white marble statues literally standing as metaphors for the pure reason that modernity had finally revived. Well into the twentieth century, any evidence to the contrary had to be literally scrubbed out (Jenkins 2001). But even before the nineteenth century closed, this image of the ancient Greek world had already been subjected to fierce criticism by Nietzsche, who set out to 'dismantle the artful edifice of *Apolline culture* stone by stone' (Nietzsche 1999, p. 22).

The Birth of Tragedy emphasized that the cult of Dionysos, in which the terror and horror of life were given their due, had as much to do with ancient Greek life as the serene worship of Apollo.⁷ But the idea of the Greek Enlightenment nevertheless survived into the early twentieth century. Edmund Husserl was a noted exponent of it, and gave it a major role in his account of the 'Crisis of European Man' (Husserl 1965, p. 155).⁸ From a modern perspective, however, the twin claims that the idea of a Greek Enlightenment is typically used to support, the claim of Western uniqueness, and the claim of the existence of a single continuous entity called 'Western civilisation', have both come to seem highly dubious to historians and philosophers alike.

To contemporary scholarship, the various ancient cultures appear much more similar to one another than Husserl claimed. All combined rational and (what look to us like) proto-scientific elements with a religious mythology. This is not to deny that they differed in content and emphasis from one another, but rather to say that, structurally, their rationalistic thinking about empirical and mathematical subjects took place mostly in the context of the ethical imperatives imposed by a normative cosmological hierarchy. Traditional China no longer (or once more) appears to us as not different in kind from ancient Greece in this respect (van Norden 2017, p. 19).⁹ If we still want to talk about a 'Greek Enlightenment' at all, then we must concede that there was likewise a Chinese Enlightenment, an Indian one, and so forth. The phenomenon of human beings in the ancient world emancipating themselves from the immediate demands of survival and developing intellectual and cultural lives was a generalised one.

The specific differences of the West, Rémi Brague has argued, were due to the discontinuity between its past and its present being more linguistically marked than elsewhere: 'the lettered Chinese were experts in Chinese letters; in Europe, on the contrary, one studied the classics of two *other* civilizations, and of an otherness that was sometimes painfully felt' (Brague 2002, p. 123).¹⁰ But it remains true that the modern West has little or no direct relationship to ancient Greece; it is doubly other to itself, having divorced itself from both its ancient and its medieval roots.

McIlwain, though, ignores all the modern scholarship that has thrown the old Eurocentric genealogy of the Greek Enlightenment into question (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 5).¹¹ He simply accepts Strauss's declaration that 'Athens at its peak' was defined by 'reason', whereas 'Jerusalem', or the culture of the Old Testament, was defined by 'revelation' (Strauss 1967, p. 55). Paraphrasing Hermann Cohen, again in a way that suggested approval, Strauss wrote that 'What we owe to Plato is the insight that the truth in the first place is the truth of science.' The Hebrew prophets on the other hand, 'precisely because they lack the idea of science and hence the idea of nature . . . can believe that men's conduct towards one another can undergo a change much more radical than any change ever dreamed of by Plato' (Ibid.). Again, in the light of modern scholarship, all of this is disputable, to say the least.

The notion that Plato had any concept of ‘science’ in a modern sense is contentious enough by itself, but even if we accept it for the sake of argument, the opposition of Platonic science to Hebraic revelation raises further issues. For one thing, Plato was much more given to thinking in terms of revelation than Strauss cared to admit. Strauss discounted any element of revelation in Plato on the grounds that ‘The Platonic teaching on creation does not claim to be more than a likely tale’; but he discounts the mystical nature of the vision of the good received by the philosopher-ruler, which stood higher than all the truths of mathematics (Strauss 1967, p. 54).¹² Similarly, Strauss underplayed the rationalist element of prophetic Hebraic culture. Mathematical astronomical calculations, for example, were a feature of Jewish life (Geller 2017, pp. 393–400). These were not intended as scientific investigations in the modern sense; they were used in the context of religious belief. However, once again, this is if anything not a source of difference from Greek thought, but a similarity. Astronomy and astrology shaded into one another in both cultures.

Strauss did acknowledge that there were ‘Greek counterparts to the beginning of the Bible’, such as Hesiod and Parmenides. In other words, he did not try to pretend that Greek culture was wholly rationalistic (Strauss 1967, p. 53). He was far too learned for that, and was certainly capable of some astute observations. His remark that for Plato ‘the cosmic gods are accessible to man as man—to his observations and calculations—whereas the Greek gods are accessible only to the Greeks through Greek tradition’ goes a long way to clearing up the apparently paradoxical attitude to the gods in the *Republic* that lead Plato sometimes to write of divinity in a reverential manner and at other times to argue that the gods are to be, quite literally, kept off the stage altogether (Strauss 1967, p. 54). But in the last resort, the relationship that Strauss saw between Athens and Jerusalem was one of ‘fundamental opposition’ (Strauss 1967, p. 55). Unfortunately for Strauss and his contemporary followers, this claim simply does not stand up.

Modern work on the intellectual history of ancient and medieval thought has made clear how untenable (and outdated) the Straussian story really is. Far from there being a ‘tension’ in Greek thought with Biblical tradition, Christianity was able to swallow large chunks of Platonism more or less whole. Augustine’s journey from Platonism to Christianity was in many respects a very small step indeed. What eventually proved indigestible in Greek thought for Christianity was not strictly its rationalist element, in the sense of the Platonic fascination with geometry, or the Aristotelian emphasis on logic. Mathematics and mysticism already co-existed quite happily in the Pythagorean roots of Platonism itself. Rather, it was cosmology that gradually became a problem.

This, though, was true only in the very long run indeed. To begin with, and for many centuries thereafter, Christianity adopted the Platonic-Aristotelian world-picture, with its attendant theories of the heavens, without finding it in fundamental tension with the account of creation in Genesis. It took more than a millennium before the problems raised by the effort at mathematical description of observed astronomical motion began to cause this synthesis to splinter. Even then, the problems first emerged as the ironic consequence of the effort to vindicate the geocentric cosmos, not to overturn it. They did not become acute until the age of Galileo.

Moreover, in the ancient world, Christianity had presented itself, one could say, in explicitly ‘rationalist’ terms to the Greeks and Romans. It too claimed to be a ‘philosophy’, albeit the true one; and by this time, centuries after what Strauss considered as the high point of Greek philosophical rationalism in the era of Plato and Aristotle, pagan philosophy in the early centuries of the Christian era was itself heavily infused by mystical and astrological themes that left it very open to the idea of a figure who was half-man, half-god, and promised eternal life. Each of the main schools had their canonical sages with supernatural powers; Jesus was not so different.

Emphasizing the untenability of Strauss’s account of the history of ancient thought is important in this context because McIlwain uses it as the background for his reading of both Oakeshott and Strauss. Oakeshott is made to stand for Jerusalem, and Strauss for Athens. In effect, they are treated as emblems or types who exemplify the different tendencies Strauss identified. It is this approach, in which Strauss becomes an actor in his own mythos, that is behind all the serious defects of the book. Seeing Oakeshott as seeking a renaissance based on the Judaic tradition relies on making far too much out of passing remarks.

It is true that Oakeshott referred to a 'Hebrew belief' in history in one of his early papers on the history of Christianity, but when McIlwain says that he 'observed [this] as early as 1928' it implies that this was a constantly held opinion (Oakeshott 1993b, p. 69; McIlwain, p. 9).

On the contrary, when Oakeshott referred to 'history' here, he was in fact talking about what he would later call the 'practical past' in distinction from historical understanding. So, rather than it being the case that 'Oakeshott developed this observation in *Experience and its Modes*', as McIlwain claims, Oakeshott was rejecting his own earlier formulation. In 'noting that the concern with the past, long characteristic of Christians, had been transformed in modern times from a practical or traditional concern into a "specifically historical interest"', what Oakeshott was actually saying was that that view of history found in Christian belief was not history *at all* in the modal sense of the term that he was now concerned with.

This point is worth dwelling on, because as McIlwain rightly says, Oakeshott and Strauss held 'divergent interpretations of the history of political thought' that reflected very different conceptions of the nature of historical knowledge itself (p. 10). As a mature thinker Strauss noted that the Bible contained material that could be described as 'historical'. In particular, he observed that 'the Bible contains . . . many sections that, on the basis of the distinction between mythical (or legendary) and historical, would have to be described as historical' (Strauss 1967, p. 48). Now, Strauss defined history here as simply 'accounts of events' and separated history from myth in terms of 'the Greek distinction between mythos and logos' that he argued was 'alien to the Bible' (Strauss 1967, p. 46). However, the idea that the Bible contains 'accounts of events' in the same sense as historiography was, as Strauss himself recognized, already being called into question in the early modern era by thinkers like Spinoza.

As Strauss put it, 'From the point of view of the Bible, the "myths" are as true as the "histories"' (Strauss 1967, pp. 46–7). But for Oakeshott the problem was not, as Strauss claimed, that from the historical point of view 'the biblical account is in important respects not authentic but derivative'. Historians, Oakeshott argued, were not in the position of deciding simply whether to believe or disbelieve their sources. The question of the truth of particular sections of the Biblical text, or of the Bible as a whole, was orthogonal to understanding it in historical terms. For Oakeshott, then, an important distinction that Strauss never drew was that between the practical implications of the recognition of the historicity of the Bible, where belief was indeed an issue, and the understanding of the Bible in historiographical terms.

Now in practical understanding, for Oakeshott, the use of types in relation to the past is common. But on his account of the logic of historical thought, everything must be grasped in terms of its specificity. For Oakeshott, presenting thinkers as representatives of traditions, in the manner that McIlwain wants to use him to stand for Jerusalem and Strauss to stand for Athens, is a characteristic of practical understanding. That is not to say the use of types or classifications is inherently illegitimate. But in a historiographical context, it is inevitably a reductive form of understanding.

McIlwain is thus keen to exploit whatever references he can find to Hebraic thought or Jewish tradition in Oakeshott in order to present him as standing for 'Jerusalem' in the Straussian dyad, but the truth is that such references are very rare. The other notable instance is in the Introduction to *Leviathan*, where Oakeshott distinguished three main traditions of political philosophy in Western thought. These were said to be Reason and Nature, Will and Artifice, and the Rational Will. The greatest representative works within each of these traditions were supposedly Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, respectively. 'Israel and Islam' were mentioned as sources of inspiration for the Hobbesian tradition of Will and Artifice, though Oakeshott argued in fact that this second tradition 'springs from the soil of Greece' and only later incorporated other elements (Oakeshott 2000 [1975], p. 8).

On this particular point, McIlwain argues, probably correctly, that Oakeshott's position was influenced by Oxford philosopher Michael Foster's *The Political Philosophies of Plato and Hegel*. Foster argued that there was a 'metaphysics of will implicit in the Judaic doctrines of the Creation and the Law', and that Roman and Judaic ideas about law resembled one another insofar as both conceived of law as posited (and therefore as willed) rather than as a reflection of a natural order, as in Greek thought (Foster 1965 [1935], pp. 120 n. 2, 138). But although it is true that Oakeshott allowed this typology of three traditions, includ-

ing a Jewish-influenced tradition of Will and Artifice, to stand when he republished the Introduction to *Leviathan* in 1975, he never made use of it elsewhere at any time after the late 1940s.

Even in the immediate post-war era, Oakeshott, despite his clear admiration for Hobbes, clearly regarded the Hegelian tradition of the Rational Will as more satisfactory than the partly Hebraic tradition of Will and Artifice. In the tradition of the Rational Will, Oakeshott wrote, 'the truths of the first two traditions are fulfilled and their errors find a happy release'. But McIlwain wants to argue that in his subsequent work, Oakeshott 'would seek to rectify the "Rational Will" tradition through this corrected understanding of the Judaic contribution to political thought' in his subsequent writings (p. 138). This is a double distortion, since Oakeshott never again mentioned the Rational Will, and also showed no serious later interest in the Jewish intellectual tradition, either in his notebooks or in his published work.

McIlwain can reply by making the point that Strauss raised in relation to Spinoza in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, that 'the truth, or the seriousness, of a proposition is not increased by the frequency with which the proposition is repeated' (Strauss 1988, p. 185).¹³ But while this is certainly true in principle, to assume that an author seriously holds a proposition simply because they do not repeat it frequently is an evident fallacy. In this case, there is every reason to think that the overall tripartite classificatory scheme that Oakeshott put forward in his Introduction to *Leviathan* was superseded.

In Oakeshott's later lectures on the history of Western political thought, he replaced this typology with the idea of successive Greek, Roman, medieval, and modern political experiences that were all distinct from one another. Specific thinkers did not personify traditions persisting through time from one era to the next, but had to be understood in terms of the context in which they wrote. Moreover, *On Human Conduct*, by far the most comprehensive statement of Oakeshott's mature political philosophy, only mentions the Jews as victims of religious persecution (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 222, 279). Discussions of Israel, Hebraic philosophical tradition, or Judaic thought are notable by their absence; nor are there any hints that we should look for them between the lines.

Ironically, as McIlwain is well aware, in his Introduction to *Leviathan*, Oakeshott was partly 'employing some of Strauss's hermeneutical principles against Strauss's own interpretation' (p. 105). Oakeshott argued that in *Leviathan* 'there appear (not side by side, but almost inextricably mixed) a theory of moral obligation at once original and consistent with the other philosophical novelties to be found in them, and another account of moral obligation the vocabulary and general principles of which are conventional' (Oakeshott 2000 [1975], pp. 121–2). Hobbes, in other words, had 'run together two strikingly different (and at some points contradictory) accounts of moral obligation' in a way that seemed deliberate to Oakeshott.

Hobbes did so, according to Oakeshott, because he knew that the conclusion to which his reasoning lead him, that obligation was entirely the creation of the will of the sovereign, was at odds with what most people actually believed, namely that the obligations of the civil law were expressions of a normative cosmological order. Since Hobbes wanted people to be persuaded by his argument above all else, he deliberately engaged in what Oakeshott called 'artful equivocation'. It is worth noting that Oakeshott, at least when he wrote the Introduction, seems to have endorsed Strauss's view that this practice had in fact been widespread in the history of political thought. 'Numerous' thinkers had done likewise, including Plato, Machiavelli, and Bentham (Oakeshott 1993b, p. 126). But Oakeshott acknowledged that in the absence of any other evidence, his argument was not conclusive: 'in the nature of the case it cannot be demonstrated to be true.' It was at best a plausible hypothesis.

Since McIlwain's aim is to portray Oakeshott and Strauss as representing the opposing principles of Athens and Jerusalem, he has no need to try to reconcile Oakeshott's and Strauss's account of Hobbes and recognizes that Oakeshott turned Strauss's own interpretative principles back against him. Here, in fact, he is following Jonathan A. Boyd's analysis of the different interpretations of Hobbes offered by Strauss and Oakeshott. Boyd has argued that one of Oakeshott's key aims in writing 'The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes' was to rebut the argument that 'Hobbes was a moralist of the common good, the chief proponent of which he perceived to be Strauss' (Boyd 2008, p. 716). Boyd argues, however, that Oakeshott's

interpretation was not merely alternative to Strauss's, but that it was demonstrably superior, even though it was also indebted to it.

Oakeshott's account of Hobbes's theory of obligation noted a distinction in Hobbes between endeavouring, which involved bodily action, and intending, which was purely attitudinal (Boyd 2008, p. 698). Our obligations could justly apply only to our endeavours, as there is no way for anyone else to reliably know of our intentions. Strauss failed to observe this distinction in Hobbes, and so his view that for Hobbes intentions themselves could be obligatory lead him to an account in which obligations could exist apart from sovereign authority. This, however, is precisely what we have seen Oakeshott arguing that Hobbes did not really believe. Boyd argues that if Oakeshott is correct, Hobbes only offered this as a view for public consumption on pragmatic grounds.

Since, moreover, our most important intention or aim in life is to avoid the fear of violent death, Strauss was led to the conclusion that obligation was entirely a matter of self-interest based on fear. This was the attitude that he thought had defined the bourgeois liberal culture of the modern West of which he believed *Leviathan* was the harbinger. While Oakeshott agreed that the thought of a violent death was a powerful motivation, he also believed that for Hobbes there were at least some people for whom their sense of their own integrity was more important than their own life. Such people did not regard themselves as obliged by fear of violent death to create the sovereign but by their own desire for a society in which they could continue to live with integrity. This is why Hobbes's passing mentions of 'pride' in his explanation of how the social contract was possible assumed great significance for Oakeshott. As Boyd points out, pride could motivate a magnanimous contempt for injustices such as rule-breaking in the Hobbesian commonwealth which would help to sustain as well as create it (Boyd 2008, p. 711).

The limitation of Oakeshott's interpretation, as we have already noted, was that it tended to reduce his account of modernity to a clash between character types. In his essay on 'The Masses in Representative Democracy', he treated 'individuality' as a recurrent historical phenomenon that was liable to emerge in any era. Following the nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt, who was a colleague of Nietzsche's at Basle, Oakeshott claimed that 'Italy was the first home of the modern individual who sprang from the break-up of medieval communal life.' As the experience of individuality began to become a topic of philosophical reflection, it was Hobbes who was 'the first moralist of the modern world to take candid account of the current experience of individuality.' But although Oakeshott stated that 'Human individuality is an historical emergence, as "artificial" and as "natural" as the landscape', the story he told was one in which generic types and explanations predominated. Individuality emerges typically 'as a consequence of the collapse of a closely integrated manner of living' (Oakeshott 1961, p. 152).

In the modern European case, it was the end of the medieval world and the beginning of the Renaissance that precipitated the development of an individualistic ethos and culture. For a period (Oakeshott singles out the seventeenth and eighteenth century), this morality and way of life carried the day. The morality of individuality created a form of government appropriate to itself (the kind of state that Hobbes thought would suit the magnanimous type of character). But the very success of individuality precipitated a resentful reaction by those who could not or did not want to embrace it. What the creation of modern democratic government in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed, which tended towards populism and plebiscitary rule, was a 'final release' for the mass man 'from the burden of individuality: he was told emphatically what to choose.'

Seen in context, Oakeshott's essay belongs to the broader post-war effort to find an explanation for totalitarianism. His account of the individual *manqué* in rebellion against individualism resembles the notion of an 'authoritarian personality' put forward by Theodore Adorno, for example. When Oakeshott wrote of the representative of popular government who 'has drawn up his own mandate and then, by a familiar trick of ventriloquism, has put it into the mouth of his electors' so that 'as an instructed delegate he is not an individual, and as a "leader" he relieves his followers of the need to make choices', it seems plausible that he was alluding to Hitler and Mussolini. But for our purposes what is crucial is that, as with his interpretation of Hobbes, Oakeshott was elsewhere critical of this whole approach to interpreting the past, at

least insofar as it was supposed to be a genuinely historical one. He himself admitted that he was breaching the boundaries of historical reason in his account of the character of the modern European state when he resorted to character types as part of his explanation (Oakeshott 1975, p. 323).¹⁴

Read against Oakeshott's late writings, an essay like 'The Masses in Representative Democracy' was pitched at a different, lower, level of abstraction than the chapter 'On Civil Association.' If, as Michael Freeden has argued, political thinking can take place at a variety of levels, with political theory in the strict sense being a concern with the conditions of political concepts themselves, as distinct from justificatory arguments phrased in general terms, or quasi-propagandistic efforts at legitimation, then while 'On Civil Association' is a genuine piece of political theory, 'The Masses in Representative Democracy' deserves to be classed as itself ideological rather than historical (Freeden 2014, p. 15).¹⁵

This distinction matters, because Oakeshott's theory of historical understanding decisively separates him from Strauss. McIlwain appreciates this point, and tries to address it. In particular, he discusses Kenneth B. McIntyre's comparison of Oakeshott and Strauss on the topic of historical explanation (McIntyre 2010). McIntyre contrasts Oakeshott's 'defense of the autonomy of historical explanation and . . . elaboration of the character of historical contextualism' with Strauss's attitude to history, which he argues in Oakeshott's terms is 'primarily a practical one' that 'yields a concern with a legendary or mythical past constructed primarily to address contemporary political problems'.

It is this position that McIlwain needs to try to rebut. His main argument is that Strauss did not in fact think that philosophers had access to 'the very essence' of concepts like justice and freedom. Rather, Strauss's concern was with 'eternal human problems' (p. 75). According to McIlwain, 'while some readers of Oakeshott . . . have criticized Strauss as concerned with the practical impact of his inquiries' into the past, 'the true grounds of this comparison' of their attitudes to the historical past is 'revealed' to be their shared critique of rationalism (p. 72).

The first issue is that of Strauss's attitude to eternal problems. McIlwain's response begs the questions of whether there are such problems, and if there are, whether they can be thought of historically. It is not clear that 'freedom' or 'justice' have been anything like 'eternal' problems for human beings. At best this seems an exaggeration: they have been a concern for a few thousand years of the human past. Even if one were to admit there is a class of eternal problems and that freedom and justice belong to it, however, it seems plausible that the meanings of 'freedom' and 'justice' have changed profoundly. But this is what Strauss cannot admit.

Moreover, McIlwain's attempt to argue that Strauss in effect made a distinction between form and content in relation to the question of 'eternal human problems' does not accord well with at least some of the things that Strauss himself said. McIlwain could point to Strauss's claim that 'Philosophy is essentially not possession of the truth, but quest for the truth', for example (Strauss 1957, p. 344). But this does not fit with some of Strauss's other statements. In discussing Collingwood's philosophy of history, for example, Strauss wrote that a truly historical re-enactment of Plato's thought 'means to understand Plato's description of the simply good social order as a description of the true model of society with reference to which all societies of all ages and countries must be judged' (Strauss 1952, p. 575). This does not sound as if Strauss thought Plato had simply identified an eternal problem. Plato's answers, rather, were presented as a standing reference point for judgment.

Strauss also declared in the same essay that for a historian 'to take a thought seriously means to regard it as possible that the thought in question is true', which also does not seem to support McIlwain's interpretation. As McIntyre points out, Strauss asserted more than once that we should consider whether the writings of great authors are 'simply true', even if we don't know what those truths are, and their teachings cannot be considered true in their totality (p. 81 and n. 44). But as McIntyre also emphasizes, it is not at all clear what it would mean for an ethical or metaphysical view to be 'simply true' (Strauss 1965 [1953], pp. 19–20).¹⁶ If the term 'simply true' means something like 'unconditionally true', or 'true out of relation to all other propositions', it is, to say the least, contentious, and possibly even incoherent. But Strauss did not elaborate.

Another point against McIlwain's reading of Strauss is Strauss's injunction that we should take seriously the idea that there were 'things known to the thinkers of the past' that modernity has forgotten. This was clearly a claim by Strauss that there could have been substantive knowledge about political truths that ancient thinkers enjoyed which has now been lost, and not only about the form of 'eternal problems' (Strauss 1952, p. 579). There might be explanations for this discrepancy, of course. Some of Strauss's interpreters have argued, for example, that he too was an esoteric writer along the lines we have discussed (Frazer 2006, pp. 33–61). McIlwain hints at this view, but does not develop it in detail (p. 77).

For Oakeshott, however, taking a thought seriously in a historical context did not mean primarily engaging with or recovering its truth. Rather, it entailed understanding the thought in question as, like all historical identities, contingent in nature. The historical question was how a given thought, or philosophy, had arisen. The truth, whether construed as soundness or validity, of a thought might be of interest insofar as it contributed to further change (or failed to), but it was not the aim of historical inquiry to pronounce on the truth of a thought as such.

To assess McIlwain's claim that Oakeshott and Strauss were both critics of rationalist interpretations of the past, we can turn to Strauss's critique of the historicism that he believed Collingwood's philosophy of history represented. For Strauss, the kind of view that Collingwood's philosophy of history represented was one for which history 'attempts to understand the various cultures or peoples exactly as they understand or understood themselves'. Culture, however, was really the unintended result of a concern with 'the Truth', (Strauss 1967, p. 46, capitalized in the original). The problem with Collingwood's position, Strauss argued, was that it introduced a covert form of progressive relativism.

The historicist goal of re-enacting past thought treated it as necessarily specific to a given context, but historicism failed to acknowledge its own historicity. 'The alleged insight into the equality of all ages which is said to make possible passionate interest in the thought of the different ages, necessarily conceives of itself as a progress beyond all earlier thought' (Strauss 1952, p. 574). Now Strauss could have been right to the extent that, as a matter of fact, modern writers have sometimes been guilty of implicit self-congratulation because they enjoyed a perspective on the past that other cultures lacked. But this does not entail that it is obvious, as Strauss claimed, that a progressive relativism is necessarily intrinsic to the historical perspective.

The historical standpoint seems equally compatible with the purely sceptical outlook with which Oakeshott associated it. Incidentally, Oakeshott argued explicitly at the end of his final discussion of the philosophy of history in *On History* that the absence in earlier eras of Western history of an authentically historical perspective was itself a contingent matter (Oakeshott 1983, p. 118). There was nothing that had stopped Aristotle, for example, creating a philosophy of historical understanding in principle. Oakeshott's point was not that there were already examples of historiography in ancient Athens. Even if there had not been, Aristotle might have asked himself in principle what form a theoretical perspective on contingent events could take. If other tendencies in Aristotle's thought had in fact precluded such a line of questioning, and modernity was recognized to have created such a philosophy when ancient thought had not, these matters were themselves differences for historians to investigate, but nowhere in Oakeshott's work was there any suggestion that modernity's achievement in doing so constituted any kind of claim to superiority, as Strauss believed.

The element of truth in McIlwain's argument is that Oakeshott did agree with Strauss's negative critique regarding the problem of intentions in historical interpretation. Strauss asserted that the key question for historicist interpretation was that of understanding the intentions of an author, and that this was problematic (Strauss 1952, p. 581).¹⁷ One of the difficult features of Collingwood's philosophy of history, as has often been noted, was the notion that the historian seeks to re-enact past thought, because this raised the problem of how one could know that this goal had been successfully carried out. It seemed to require access to mental phenomena that, even if they were treated as existent, were no longer accessible.

Ironically, however, Strauss's own view seems to have been that those he considered great authors were great precisely because they had a total control of meaning. McIntyre draws attention to Strauss's claim

that ‘in a book in the strict sense there is nothing that is not intended by the author’ (Strauss 1967, p. 53; McIlwain, pp. 81–82). As McIntyre points out, though, Strauss ‘offers no real explanation of what he means by intention’ (p. 78). Moreover, as McIntyre also notes, this claim depends on a view of language that is entirely unsustainable. No author is exclusively in control of meaning, which is a feature of language independent of the consciousness of the individual writer. It is impossible to avoid saying more and other than what one means on any and all occasions; even if the intended meaning is successfully conveyed, other meanings may go along with it, regardless of what the author intends.

Oakeshott, like Strauss, was explicitly critical of the attempt to tie historical meaning to intention (Oakeshott 1952, pp. 276–77). The historical events that historians inferred from evidence might include some reference to intention as part of the process of research, but an historical event as he conceived it was nobody’s experience. Indeed, an authentically historical understanding of a set of past events was something that no-one who actually participated in them could have by definition. Even if someone who had participated in events later wrote a history of them, they would effectively have to treat themselves in the third person, and regard their own memories as just one more piece of evidence, to be studied not for their credibility as testimony (as might be the case in legal proceedings) but with respect to the question of how such a representation of events had arisen. Oakeshott wanted to insist on the distinction between what he called the practical past of lived experience (which he was happy to accept as a feature of a Heideggerian phenomenology of the lifeworld in which we necessarily occupy a futurally-oriented present) and the theoretical, historical, standpoint (Oakeshott 1983, pp. 20–27).

Oakeshott’s philosophy of history, however, did not enjoin historians to treat certain thinkers as special, or to presuppose that they wrote in a certain way. We have seen that he was prepared to entertain something like Strauss’s argument in favour of the view that a certain thinker had an esoteric doctrine, but he did not elevate this into a principle. As McIntyre puts it, ‘historians are quite aware of the possibility that past writings are written in code, but whether or not it is so is an historical question easily handled by normal means of contextual analysis’ (McIntyre 2010, p. 82). More generally, Oakeshott was arguing for a difference between two things that Strauss effectively treated as synonymous, namely, historicity, which he took to refer to the inherent temporality of experience, and historicality, which he defined in effect as the theoretical investigation of past historicity. These, Oakeshott insisted, were not the same thing, even if historicity was itself subject to historicity, so that, for example, there is a history of historiography.

Strauss’s solution to the problem of progressive historicist rationalism was to replace it with another story of the same kind, whereas Oakeshott’s distinctions allowed him to liberate historical interpretation from the kinds of psychological and progressive arguments that Strauss found problematic without needing to resort to the ‘reverse whiggism of [Strauss’s] tale of the declension of political philosophy from a prelapsarian state of Platonic bliss to its current wallowing in the slough of Heideggerian despond’ (McIntyre 2010, p. 86). Oakeshott’s distinctions were the basis of what McIntyre finds ‘a consistent, coherent, and for the most part compelling account of the logic of historical explanation.’ On the other hand, McIntyre argues that ‘Strauss’s work offers very little to those who are interested in the logic of historical explanation, other than a series of unsupported assertions concerning intentionality and an obscure and poorly constructed argument about the connection between philosophy, politics, and esoteric writing’ (p. 100).

Even if McIlwain’s attempt to defend Strauss fails, it is to his credit that he has not simply ignored scholars like Boyd and McIlwain who have compared Strauss unfavourably with Oakeshott. On the whole, however, he ignores most of Strauss’s contemporary critics. There is no discussion at all of the most devastating recent critique, mounted by Adrian Blau. Blau argues (like McIntyre) that Strauss naively assumes the possibility of what Blau calls ‘perfect speech’, typically ‘analyses similarities, but not differences’, and is guilty of ‘overstating the certainty of inferences, and only citing evidence which fits a claim’ (Blau 2012, p. 145). While Blau acknowledges that Strauss was ‘superb at spotting odd disparities’ in texts, Strauss was too quick to assume they were deliberate.

Strauss, Blau notes, ‘thinks dichotomously: a writer either intends every detail or is deeply inept.’ But this dichotomy is a false one. Even great philosophers can be ambiguous and make mistakes. Strauss also

made contentious interpretative assumptions, for example that ‘hidden arguments are often central—the middle example, or an idea in the center of a chapter’ (Blau 2012, p. 147). This, however, was entirely arbitrary, and in effect licensed Strauss to find esoteric meanings wherever he was so inclined. Again, while Strauss was right to think that interrogating an author’s silences on a topic could be a useful line of inquiry, he was wrong to assert, as he did with Spinoza, that such silences can be assumed to have been deliberate in the absence of other evidence (Blau 2012, p. 149).

The most serious problems with Strauss’s work, according to Blau, relate to his numerological approach. Strauss saw significance in the fact that the three chapters in Machiavelli’s *Discourses* which start with quotations from Livy are each exactly twenty chapters apart, but Blau points out that the simplest explanation of this is simple randomness (Ibid.). As with Strauss’s approach esoteric meaning more generally, the point is not that numerological explanations are always wrong. It is unlikely that it is purely the result of chance that Machiavelli’s *Discourses* has the same number of chapters as Livy’s *Histories*, Blau concedes. But it is far too easy to concoct baseless readings. As a methodological *reductio ad absurdum*, Blau offers his own prophetic numerological interpretation of Hobbes according to Straussian principles in order to ‘prove’ that *Leviathan* and *Behemoth* include a foretelling of Beethoven’s future career (Blau 2012, p. 153).

There is, of course, nothing as ridiculous as this in Strauss himself, or in McIlwain. Blau’s point is rather that a combination of interpretative naivety and philosophical dogmatism, where dogmatism means that certain ideas go unquestioned, tends to result in exaggerations, distortions, and misrepresentations in an effort to vindicate a pre-determined point of view. Unfortunately, these tendencies are clearly visible in McIlwain’s handling of Oakeshott. For example, early in *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott compared his own conception of understanding with Plato’s, using a re-telling of the myth of the cave in the *Republic*. The myth of the cave was also significant for Strauss, who as McIlwain points out, interpreted modern culture as a ‘second cave’ (p. 92).

Here again the difference between Oakeshott and Strauss was instructive. Whereas for Strauss both caves, Platonic and modern, were places from which at least those who could ought to be seeking to escape, for Oakeshott Plato had been mistaken to dismiss cave-knowledge as ‘nescience’. Where Plato saw a form of understanding ‘so minimal that he is disposed to write it off’, Oakeshott found ‘a conditional understanding of the world, valuable so far as it goes, and indispensable in the engagements of practical life’ (Oakeshott 1975, p. 27). Platonic theoretical knowledge was not a substitute for the knowledge of the cave-dwellers in the way that Plato imagined, even though it enjoyed a greater level of self-consciousness.

What Oakeshott never does anywhere in this account, however, is to say how much he ‘admired the solid manliness of the cave dwellers’, a view that McIlwain attributes to him without any textual support whatsoever (p. 185). This is presumably McIlwain’s rendering of Oakeshott’s description of the cave-dwellers as ‘sagacious and knowledgeable persons’, but Oakeshott’s account is not gendered, and does not relate to the ethos of the cave dwellers. It exclusively addresses the adequacy of practical knowledge for its own purposes. ‘Manliness’ is, however, the subject of a book by another Straussian, Harvey Mansfield, in which the quality of *thumos* or spiritedness described by Plato is represented as a mostly male endowment that defies scientific understanding (Mansfield 2006). Whatever the merits of Mansfield’s work (and there are doubtless real issues to do with the idea of a gender-neutral society that he sets out to criticize), it belongs to the context of American neo-Straussianism, for which a concern with the alleged creeping corruption of American character has been a dominant theme. McIlwain foists it, wholly groundlessly, onto Oakeshott, who in reality had nothing to say on the subject.

An interpretative nadir is reached when McIlwain supports his claim that ‘Oakeshott would attempt to establish a distance between his mode of poetry and . . . modern science’ with a footnote—to Strauss (p. 80, n. 78). In the same passage, McIlwain asserts, giving no textual references whatever, that in Oakeshott’s later writings, ‘poetry begins to assume the priority which philosophy had at least nominally held’, and that ‘Oakeshott distinguished science based on the use of Greek reason in the analysis of natural causes and Judaic creativity through the freedom of human will and intelligence’. These are major claims, but they are made without any evidence.

The closest that we come is a reference to ‘The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind’ in which Oakeshott argued that the subjects of poetic discourse were individual, whereas science was concerned with universals. This much is correct, but the attribution to Oakeshott of a contrast between Greek rationality and Judaic creativity is entirely McIlwain’s own invention. It is presumably based on Oakeshott’s discussion of the traditions of Reason and Nature, Will and Artifice, and the Rational Will that we reviewed above, but that discussion occurred in an entirely different context, and as we saw, was not repeated. It certainly played no role in what Oakeshott had to say about aesthetic experience.

McIlwain’s approach to interpretation, then, is often authentically Straussian in a way that does him no credit. His work is repeatedly beset by the same kinds of distortions and misrepresentations that critics such as Blau have highlighted in Strauss himself, and which explain why Strauss has not, outside a small inward-facing circle of admirers, been taken seriously by the great majority of historians and philosophers as a contemporary interlocutor for over half a century. To be fair, contemporary philosophers tend to ignore both Oakeshott and Strauss, at least so far as the Anglo-American analytic community goes. Both are conspicuous by their absence from leading philosophy journals.¹⁸ As for the history of philosophy, the *Routledge History of Western Philosophy* devotes only a single mention to either thinker across all three volumes for the twentieth century (Parkinson and Shanker 1993–9). Their admirers have some grounds for thinking that this does them a disservice with respect to their historical importance. Both thinkers played a more considerable role in the intellectual life of their times than this lack of coverage would suggest.

If one were to make an argument for the continuing relevance of either, however, it is easier to make the case for Oakeshott. The modern contextualist approach to intellectual history associated with historians such as Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock began at least in part from an explicit rejection of Strauss’s approach to historical interpretation. Oakeshott’s analysis of the logic of the new contextualism, on the other hand, is still considered relevant by practitioners of intellectual history, and indeed superior to Skinner and Pocock’s own efforts to provide a philosophical account of their approach (Thompson 2019, p. ix).¹⁹ Oakeshott’s theory of civil association and the rule of law also find contemporary defenders amongst scholars whose primary interests are not in his work (Dzyenhaus 2015, p. 236).²⁰ Strauss, on the other hand, is championed only by his devotees.

We began at the end; let us finish at the beginning. On the first page, the volume declares itself to be part of a series on ‘Recovering Political Philosophy’. The premise of the series, that a study of classic texts can ‘help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason’, simply takes for granted that reason can have a ground in the first place, classical or otherwise. The editorial preface also simply asserts that the meaning of postmodernism was a ‘challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives’. This is, at best, an oversimplification. The real motivation for postmodernism was a recognition that Nietzsche had been correct in arguing that all traditional Western foundational conceptions of reason descended from Plato were insupportable. Oakeshott was actually at one with postmodernism in realizing the need for a more pluralistic account of rationality, as witnessed by his re-telling of the story of Plato’s cave. That is another reason why at least some of Oakeshott’s thought remains relevant. But this was something Strauss rejected, because he was in thrall to a nineteenth-century German story about the lost unity of the now intellectually and morally fragmented West.

This story has long been exposed for the Romantic myth that it is, and it now only appeals to believers. McIlwain’s vocabulary of spiritual stages and towering figures marks his book as fundamentally a work not of intellectual history but hagiography. It is erudite but naïve: where it should be sceptical, it is fundamentally uncritical. It leaves unquestioned various dogmatic positions that do not bear scrutiny, and misreads and fabricates in order to support them. This approach was characteristic of Strauss himself, whose contemporary appeal is now restricted mostly to an audience that seeks a vindication of beliefs, often religious in nature, already held on other grounds.

Indeed, McIlwain’s main reference points, it is fair to say, are themselves Straussians who venerate Strauss as a figure with the answers to the problems of modernity. The other series editor for this Palgrave volume, it is worth noting, is Timothy Burns, who, like Pangle, is closely associated with the study

of Strauss. McIlwain cites them both extensively, along with other notable American Straussians such as Steven B. Smith, who thinks that the aim of scholarship should be to ‘preserve modernity from its self-destructive inner tendencies’ (Smith 2016, p. xii). But Strauss’s contemporary followers, in their eagerness to share ‘the Truth’ with us, to correct our failings, and to exhort us (to ‘manliness’, for example), have repeatedly mistaken the lectern for a pulpit.

Those who imagine that they too would enjoy a view from towering heights will doubtless appreciate following McIlwain through his eminently readable pages; the book will surely be enthusiastically received and heaped with praise by the converted. Unbelievers, on the other hand, who have no need for a theodicy and do not want philosophers like Strauss (or Oakeshott, though he had no predilections in that direction) to legislate for them, will experience the kind of sympathetic embarrassment occasioned by witnessing a brave but doomed attempt to revive one of the twentieth century’s definitively outmoded fashions.²¹

NOTES

- 1 Unless specified, all citations refer to McIlwain 2019.
- 2 ‘The essence of nihilism *is* historically as metaphysics’.
- 3 Strauss and Kojève knew one another well in Paris in the early 1930s; see Strauss 2000.
- 4 ‘Kant approved of a republican constitution because he believed that a government of this kind would automatically pursue peace; and Tom Paine approved of a democratic constitution because he believed that a democratic government would confine its activities within the limits he approved . . . But both Kant and Paine were in error, not merely in respect of their empirical expectations but in respect of the logical relations between the constitutions and the pursuits of governments’ (Oakeshott 1993, pp. 9–10).
- 5 ‘what is called “the will” is nothing but intelligence in doing’, and ‘*respublica* cannot be acknowledged to have authority . . . on account of being identified with . . . a so-called “general” will’ (Oakeshott 1975, pp. 39, 152).
- 6 Michael Oakeshott to Patrick Riley, 28 February 1985, Oakeshott archive, LSE 15/2/6.
- 7 Nietzsche (1999, p. 21) argued that ‘Dionysiac music . . . elicited terror and horror’ but that at the same time it enabled a ‘complete unchaining of all symbolic powers’ and held out the promise of ‘the destruction of the veil of maya, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself.’
- 8 ‘an extraordinary teleology . . . innate only in our Europe . . . is most intimately connected with the eruption (or the invasion) of philosophy and of its ramifications, the sciences, in the ancient Greek spirit.’
- 9 van Norden points out that ‘when European philosophers first learned about Chinese thought in the seventeenth century, they immediately recognized it as philosophy’.
- 10 Emphasis in original. Brague broadly agrees with Strauss’s argument that European culture is the product of a ‘fecund and even constituent conflict’ between pagan and Judaeo-Christian culture (p. 26) but does not make the claim that ancient culture contains lost insights in need of recovery and argues that it is ultimately Christianity that supplies the form though not the content of contemporary European culture.
- 11 See for example: ‘an entity called “the European intellectual tradition” stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history’.
- 12 Plato, *Republic*, 517d, where noetic knowledge is said to be the study of the divine.
- 13 The passage is quoted in both McIlwain 2019, p. 106 and Boyd 2008, p. 712.
- 14 ‘the temptation remains to seek a more general explanation of this ambivalence [in the character of a modern European state] than a historical understanding can provide’.
- 15 Freeden argues for a ‘crucial triple distinction between the practice of political and ethical philosophizing, constructing political theories, and engaging with the social world’.
- 16 ‘Once all metaphysical and ethical views can be assumed to be, strictly speaking, untenable, that is, untenable as regards their claim to be simply true, their historical fate necessarily appears to be deserved.’
- 17 ‘The guiding question of the historian who wants to use Herodotus, for example, must become, for some considerable time, the question as to what question was uppermost in Herodotus’ mind, i.e., the question of what was

- the conscious intention of Herodotus, or the question regarding the perspective in which Herodotus looked at things’.
- 18 A search of the top thirty-five philosophy journals according to the Leiter report (<https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2018/11/best-general-journals-of-philosophy-2018.html>) shows only the *Review of Metaphysics* has featured articles on Strauss since 2000. Oakeshott does not appear to have figured in any of them at all.
- 19 ‘the most comprehensive, critical analysis of the logic of this new historical attitude was Michael Oakeshott’s’.
- 20 Dzyenhaus calls Oakeshott’s essay on ‘The Rule of Law’ in *On History* possibly ‘the most important contribution on its topic since . . . the Second World War’.
- 21 I am grateful to Linh Mac for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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