

Review of Efraim Podoksik's *In Defence of Modernity*
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Efraim Podoksik's new book, *In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott* is an impressive contribution to the burgeoning scholarly literature on Oakeshott. As the fourth volume in Imprint Academic's series on Oakeshott and British Idealism, this book follows three others in which Oakeshott is portrayed, respectively, as a critic of the Enlightenment, as a philosopher of history and as one of Hobbes's most influential interpreters. Like the authors who have preceded him in Imprint's Oakeshott series, Podoksik makes extensive use of archival material now available at the London School of Economics. But although he considers a number of unpublished early essays in this book, Podoksik is careful to base his argument primarily on Oakeshott's published works, which he believes are "superior . . . in the quality of their style and argument."

The author sets out his main argument in a sparkingly clear prologue and first chapter. Podoksik's thesis, simply stated, is that Oakeshott ought to be understood as a defender of modernity. Modernity, according to Podoksik, is the situation Oakeshott believed he had inherited, a situation consisting of "inescapable fragmentation" and "irreducible plurality" of the spheres of life. This situation, already diagnosed and lamented by nineteenth-century continental philosophers such as Nietzsche and Georg Simmel, is precisely the one R.G. Collingwood addresses in *Speculum Mentis*. But while Collingwood joins Nietzsche and Simmel in bemoaning this situation as a disease that must be remedied, Oakeshott takes a markedly different tack. He sees modern fragmentation as something to be celebrated, not mourned, precisely because it offers opportunities for those who are inclined toward self-determination and what Oakeshott elsewhere calls the "morality of the individual."

One of the most compelling aspects of Podoksik's first chapter consists in his effort to position Oakeshott between those who might be called "pre-modernists" (such as Voegelin, Strauss and MacIntyre) and post-modernists like Lyotard and Rorty. Although Oakeshott certainly has much in common with thinkers such as Strauss and Voegelin, he does not long for what Podoksik designates as a pre-modernist "hierarchical system of values" or for "some form of primordial certainty." On the other hand, however, Oakeshott would certainly not have

supported the post-modernist project of deconstructing all systems of value, and Podoksik is right to point out that post-modernists who have simply appropriated Oakeshott would do well to re-read his work in its entirety before they ally with him unreservedly. Oakeshott, then, stands between the pre- and post-modernists, sharing characteristics with both groups but identifying fully with neither. He is notoriously difficult to categorize—a fact that also gives evidence for the extraordinary originality of his thought.

Oakeshott is certainly best understood not as a “conservative critic of modernity,” but instead as a conservative *defender* of modernity. If this description is to have meaning, however, we must follow Podoksik’s argument about the nature of Oakeshott’s conservatism (which defies all ordinary categorization) as well as the precise view of modernity that Oakeshott wishes to defend.

Podoksik makes his case by investigating Oakeshott’s thought from two different standpoints—understanding and doing—following a distinction highlighted in Terry Nardin’s recent book, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*. The realm of “understanding” or “the character of our reflective imagining of the world” is the subject of chapter two, while chapter three is concerned with “doing” or acting—with the “pragmatic perception of our social life.” Both these chapters are lengthy excursions into Oakeshott’s thought with substantive subheadings.

Podoksik begins chapter two by examining the idea he considers to be the core of Oakeshott’s thought and indeed the core of modernity that Oakeshott defends. This idea makes its original appearance in Oakeshott’s first major work of philosophy, *Experience and its Modes* but, as Podoksik argues, remains evident throughout the entirety of Oakeshott’s career. In short, Oakeshott believes that the world of human experience is divided up into a plurality of “abstract independent worldviews,” each of which exists for its own sake. In *Experience and its Modes* Oakeshott uses history, science and practice as examples of these abstract worldviews, all of which represent distinctive and self-contained ways of understanding the world. But Podoksik examines history, science and *poetry* in this chapter, since he regards practice (as Oakeshott does later in his career) not primarily as a way of *understanding* but as a way of acting in order to satisfy desires. Of course, as Oakeshott is fond of telling his readers in *Experience and its Modes*, there is no human experience that does not presuppose at least some measure of understanding. Nevertheless, since Podoksik has made a distinction between chapter two’s concern with “understanding” and chapter three’s concern with “doing,” practice is postponed for consideration along with those pursuits (like politics) that are part of the “active” life.

In this second chapter Podoksik again does his readers the service of situating Oakeshott in his intellectual context. In the realm of science he presents Oakeshott’s views against the background of “scientific positivism,” and with

regard to history, Oakeshott is portrayed engaging in philosophical conversation with thinkers such as Croce and Collingwood. Likewise, in his consideration of Oakeshott's views on poetry, Podoksik observes Oakeshott's interest in such thinkers as Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, as well as his contemporaries or near-contemporaries: Collingwood (again), E.M. Forster, and Lionel Trilling, to name only a few of those mentioned. But the most illuminating part of this section is Podoksik's introduction of Edward Bullough into the discussion of Oakeshott's views on aesthetics. Only a few commentators—among them Robert Grant and Glenn Worthington—have dared take up the thorny question of Oakeshott's views on the relation of aesthetics and morality. Podoksik, however, broaches the topic armed with a work that goes far toward clarifying this problem: Bullough's 1957 *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays*. Oakeshott certainly knew this book well and probably re-read it (as Podoksik speculates) prior to writing his 1959 essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." In this work Bullough argues for an expansive understanding of the aesthetic realm, in which aesthetic experience does not encompass merely the appreciation of art and poetry but represents a vital component of human conduct. Bullough essentially restates Pater's dictum that "life is the end of life," in which moral conduct may sometimes approximate an artistic performance. Some such conception of the aesthetic component of morality is clearly present throughout Oakeshott's work, especially in his notion of "self-enactment" as expressed in his 1975 work, *On Human Conduct*.

In chapter three, Podoksik turns to the "philosophy of society" to investigate the development of Oakeshott's social thought from the 1930s onward. Here he argues that unlike the relative clarity of Oakeshott's philosophy of experience (understanding), Oakeshott's philosophy of society (doing) is more complex, largely because he wrote so *much* about morality and politics. Podoksik first considers Oakeshott's ideas concerning practice and morality, observing the evolution of these ideas over the course of his career.

He then turns to the contentious question of whether Oakeshott may be best characterized as conservative or liberal. In many quarters Oakeshott is considered a defender of what might be generally classed as "conservative politics." And yet as anyone who has read his essay entitled "On Being Conservative" knows, Oakeshott is an unusual conservative. His defense of the conservative disposition arises neither out of respect for the natural law tradition nor from a tendency to reverence the past: it is simply the disposition to enjoy what is present, which Oakeshott thinks is threatened by modern thought. Podoksik here argues that Oakeshott is best understood as synthesizing elements from two traditions of European *liberalism*, which he designates 'Whig' and 'Romantic.' Again, Podoksik provides (as he does throughout this book) a broad-ranging intellectual context for Oakeshott's ideas. Here he notices Oakeshott's great affinity to such European thinkers as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Benjamin

Constant, who cherished the Romantic idea of “diversity, originality and spontaneity, stressing the idea of human self-development achieved through the free and harmonious exercise of individual capacities.”

The final section of Podoksik’s third chapter deals with Oakeshott’s mature “civil philosophy” as set out in *On Human Conduct*. At the conclusion of this chapter Podoksik makes the crucial link between understanding and doing: neither the activity of understanding (the idea of modality) nor of doing (agents concerned to disclose and enact themselves in civil association) can be subsumed within a holistic framework. Like the modes, which are irrelevant to each other (though they may be understood to have a conversational relationship), the independent selves in modern society may speak to one another and yet never be united in a comprehensive, purposive association. In the realms of both understanding and doing Oakeshott notices and celebrates an irreducible plurality.

By the end of his third chapter, Podoksik’s argument has been fully set out. For Oakeshott, plurality is the central characteristic of modernity and it is something to be embraced. It requires, indeed, a particular kind of moral actor who is willing to undergo the rigors of self-examination and to make difficult choices for himself. But this conception of modernity, according to Podoksik, “cannot be *philosophically* justified” (my italics). Its preservation requires “a sentiment, not an argument,” which can only be cultivated in a certain kind of education.

Thus Podoksik’s final chapter examines Oakeshott’s splendid writings on the character of liberal education, and makes two major points. First, Podoksik observes that these writings were influential among those who shaped British education in the twentieth-century. And second, he notes Oakeshott’s concern with education as a way of cultivating the faculty of “self-development.” By self-development, Podoksik means to highlight Oakeshott’s interest in the moral and intellectual development of independent agents—agents who welcome the opportunity to make choices and to realize fully their “spiritual and aesthetic abilities.” The education required for such development requires that a person reject, at least for an interval, the ceaseless quest for material gain and comfort. It asks that one cultivate an independence of mind, a love of knowledge for its own sake, and a degree of philosophical detachment that would allow a view of the possibilities available to human beings. As Oakeshott reminds his readers, man is “what he learns to become.” Thus the moral agents who engage in civil association must be led to understand and enjoy the situations in which they find themselves. This is the function of a university education, and it is of vital importance to Oakeshott.

The book as a whole is a major contribution to the scholarly literature on Oakeshott. Podoksik’s ability to portray Oakeshott’s work as part of a “conversation” with others—from Hobbes to Goethe to Collingwood—sheds light

on Oakeshott's place as a philosopher in the twentieth century. Not unlike John Coats's *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries*, Podoksik assumes (correctly) that Oakeshott's "text" may be best understood in the "context" of other western thinkers whom he knew well. Moreover, Podoksik's central thesis—that Oakeshott wanted to defend the plurality and fragmentation of modern life—is surely right.

And yet a mild qualification may be in order. For while Oakeshott undoubtedly celebrates what others would prefer to describe as our modern "predicament," he often does so with a certain reserve. He argues at once for enjoying "what is present and available," even as he also criticizes the loss of a poetic, spontaneous morality (in his 1948 essay, "The Tower of Babel") and laments the rationalist tendencies of modern politics and education. Oakeshott, indeed, is a polemicist as well as a philosopher, and several of his most famous essays are incisive critiques of various modern pathologies: of rationalism, of morality that is wholly reflective (and not habitual), and of *homo laborans* who now dominates *homo ludens*. In *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, for instance, Oakeshott is quite merciless in describing the shortcomings of the politics of "faith," a kind of Pelagianism oriented forever toward the future, whose practitioners long for a solution to their problems and can never be satisfied with the world as it is. It is the same critique implicitly leveled against modernity in his 1979 "Tower of Babel" story.

At times Oakeshott observes that despite the great opportunities for individual self-determination and freedom, many people reject such opportunities for the safety and security offered by overweening governments. To put it bluntly, there is a certain modern character who is either too lazy or too frightened to seize the opportunities freedom offers. Such people look instead for ready-made codes of conduct in "cribs" and ideologies and would gladly relinquish the burden of self-determination. But Oakeshott is intensely critical of those who would escape this burden by harnessing themselves to an overarching project or by conceiving moral activity as the pursuit of predetermined ideals. Such individuals, through their actions, *reject* modernity, in a sense, as they reject their individuality and the moral creativity that is part and parcel of an inherited "language" of conduct.

Podoksik does, of course, recognize this critical, pessimistic strain in Oakeshott's thought and finds it most clearly expressed in his essays on education and in his essay, "Rationalism in Politics." He also notes in his epilogue that Oakeshott's thought is not merely a summary of the positive attributes of modern life, but rather a "very coherent *critique* of the essential postulates of the often confused and ambiguous self-understanding which underlies our civilization." But perhaps a slightly greater emphasis on "Oakeshott as critic" would be a valuable addition to this work, since the critical and pessimistic strains of his thought are important counterweights to Oakeshott's tendency toward appreciating what may be valued in the present. A superficial reader of Podoksik's book might assume

that Oakeshott's general optimism goes further than it actually does. Then again, however, this is not a book that asks to be read superficially.

One other point is worth noting in conclusion. *In Defence of Modernity* continues the recent trend in Oakeshott scholarship toward considering the entirety of his thought, not just those works that fall under the heading of "political philosophy." One of the foremost problems in studying Oakeshott's corpus, Podoksik rightly observes, has been "an artificial and confused separation of his social, or 'political', philosophy from the rest of his thought." Anyone who reads Oakeshott's entire output soon discovers that he is much more than a philosopher of politics, though he is certainly this.

In the 1920s Oakeshott was preoccupied with questions about the nature of religious experience, and recent commentators have noticed that there is a markedly religious thread woven through even those works that appear to be concerned exclusively with politics. Also, scholars are now paying close attention to Oakeshott's theory of aesthetics, especially as expressed in his famous 1959 essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." As I have already noted, Podoksik's section on aesthetics in chapter two is a significant contribution to this literature.

It has begun to seem likely that these topics—religion and aesthetics—may be crucial for achieving a more accurate understanding of Oakeshott's thought. The main reason for this recent surge of interest is that prior to Oakeshott's death in 1990 many of the early essays on religion and morality remained unpublished, and thus unavailable to scholars. It is true that he wrote numerous reviews of theological books during the 1920s and 1930s, but these reviews in themselves provide only hints at his early views. The posthumous publication in 1993 of *Religion and the Moral Life* introduced a number of these essays to the general public, and these works have sparked a great interest in the "early Oakeshott." Now with the opening of the archives there are even more sources for scholars to use in researching Oakeshott's work from these years.

As a young man Oakeshott was explicit about his quest to understand human beings, and he never lost sight of the fact that genuine political philosophy "deals first of all not with institutions but with men." Thus Oakeshott begins his career not with politics but with ethics, exploring questions of what it means to be a human being and how humans might find their greatest happiness. His aim in examining religion and poetry is thus to come to terms with what he sees as the most vital parts of human experience, to discover at what points these activities may temporarily remove us from the more mundane human experience of pursuing desire after desire—the much-discussed "practical" mode of experience.

As Oakeshott observes in another early essay, a man's "greatest works differ from his lesser works in degree and not in kind: they may be more perfect, but they express the same idea." There is a strong case to be made that the

entirety of Oakeshott's work is thus an attempt to express an idea about human beings, and then to explain the kind of political arrangements that are most conducive to fostering human happiness. In short, he sees human beings as free creatures with diverse interests and aspirations, who are most likely to achieve lasting satisfaction by pursuing those things that can be enjoyed as ends in themselves, such as love, friendship, and contemplation. When we mistake this condition, we are likely to imagine that the satisfactions of practical life will make us happy, but these temporary satisfactions lead only to desiring more of the same. To put the problem in the Idealist terms of Oakeshott's youth, the "ought" and "is" can never be reconciled. Thus for Oakeshott, the challenge of contemporary life is to understand correctly the character of modern human beings as well as the undeniable plurality that is part of our experience. As Podoksik rightly asserts, the task is then to "attempt to reconcile ourselves with modernity by learning to appreciate and enjoy this plurality." This is what Oakeshott achieved in his own life, and it is what he recommends for the rest of us as well.