In recent years, the English philosopher and political thinker Michael Oakeshott has become the subject of a growing body of critical work and discussion. Numerous monographs on various aspects of his thought have been published.\(^1\) It is a sign of the vitality of Oakeshott’s thought that no agreement has been achieved about how best to characterize it. Thus, scholars often emphasize one particular aspect of Oakeshott’s thought to the neglect of others. He is regarded as a skeptic, as a conservative, as a critic or as a defender of modernity, as a political philosopher.

Oakeshott's oeuvre is peculiar in that his publications consist mostly of essays and merely two book-length monographs which also do not follow the usual pattern of heavy footnoting.

Among recent introductions to Oakeshott’s work the latest addition comes from Edmund Neill who offers a succinct, balanced and therefore valuable account of the major elements of Oakeshott’s thinking.\(^2\) His book appears in a series about conservative and libertarian thinkers which, according to series editor John Meadowcroft, „aims to show that there is a rigorous scholarly tradition of social and political thought that may be broadly described as ‘conservative’, ‘libertarian’ or some combination of the two“. This is indeed a very valuable aim and highly to be commended, as book series explicitly devoted to conservative thought as a serious intellectual enterprise are few and far between.

Neill always offers a sober understanding of Oakeshott's sometimes rather difficult teaching. He thus enables the reader to see what is Oakeshott's contribution to 20th century political and philosophical thought. For Oake-

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\(^2\) There are only few misprints. One occurs in a quotation from Oakeshott's *Experience and its modes*, p. 26, which Neills misquotes as "degree of kind" instead of "degree or kind" (p. 21).
shott does not readily fit into the dominant strands of thought of his time, due to the fact that he was heavily influenced by some kind of idealism. The book begins with a sketch of Oakeshott’s life, presents him as a defender of pluralism and modernity, looks at the reception of Oakeshott’s thought and finally develops some thoughts about his continuing relevance. The proportions of his book seem to be just about right. In the second chapter, dealing with Oakeshott’s thought proper, he also sides with those readers of Oakeshott who see him rather as a defender of modernity than its critic (p. 15, 77). This may in fact oversimplify matters, because Neill seems to believe that critics of modernity harbor fond thoughts about the middle ages to which they would like to return. However, it seems questionable whether this is in fact the case; indeed, some of Oakeshott’s texts show a fairly radical skepticism about the mass society that is a major feature of modernity. Neill acknowledges this fact, but claims that the period in which Oakeshott criticizes the Enlightenment is a “fairly short one” (p. 33; cf. p. 111). Without engaging in a lengthy argument about this issue it may be enough to just note that the case is not yet closed on this particular matter. For Neill does not sufficiently stress the fact that Oakeshott was not so much critical of rationalism as such but of "modern" rationalism. The same could also be said about Oakeshott’s relationship to conservatism.

In Neill’s sympathetic account Oakeshott comes across as a thinker who offers a pluralist view of human society. Oakeshott defends that state which can respect this plurality (p. 62). The business of the government of such a state is not to unite human beings around some pre-determined goal, but to secure the right of citizens to follow their own notions of activity (p. 48). For a government to achieve this, it needs to be sovereign to overcome "the communal pressures of family and guild, of church and local community", as Oakeshott says (p. 49). This sovereign power, it should be stressed, has to be exerted according to the "rule of law", another concept that was dear to Oakeshott and is certainly of utmost importance in our world.

The third chapter dealing with Oakeshott’s reception introduces a few comparisons to thinkers and theorists like T. D. Weldon or Peter Winch who Neill believes share more common elements with Oakeshott than is generally believed. A third comparison refers to the group of intellectuals known as "cold war liberals" (S. 90). Here, Neill refers to thinkers like Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin or Karl Popper. He sketches some of their ideas and then highlights three important similarities with respect to Oakeshott. Firstly, Oakeshott also rejected a positivist understanding of philosophy that saw no place for political philosophy. Secondly, Oakeshott was as aware as these cold war liberals of the "plural nature of modern life and chose to accept this plurality as a given" (p. 94 - 95). Thirdly, Oakeshott also wanted to uphold

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4 It remains to be seen what Corey Abel’s approach to this issue will be in the forthcoming book *The meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s conservatism* / Corey Abel. - Exeter : Imprint Academic, 2010.
the individualism characteristic of modernity. In these matters, then, Oakeshott shares common ground with the cold war liberals. Neill goes on to argue, though, that some differences in outlook are also significant: modernity is construed in a different way by Oakeshott, for in contrast to the cold war liberals who accepted a Weberian account of modernity, Oakeshott regards tradition as a possible source of our commitment to individualism and pluralism (p. 96). Oakeshott, furthermore, stressed the need for a kind of "civil association" for citizens to enjoy their individuality (p. 96), so that laws are not regarded as reducing liberty but as enabling it. This notion links Oakeshott’s thought more to the legal philosophy of Hayek or H. L. A. Hart (p. 96).

Neill wants to come up with a solution to the problem whether Oakeshott should be regarded as a conservative, liberal or libertarian; Neill's procedure in all this is to first look at possible similarities and then going on to highlight the differences with respect to other thinkers. Although in general a sound method, it sometimes leads to shorthand characterizations that are less convincing, e.g. when Neill remarks that Oakeshott cannot be "identifie a 'conservative' like Nietzsche or Leo Strauss" (p. 111). That Nietzsche was a conservative, if even one in inverted commas, will come as a surprise to most readers. In any case, it is hardly surprising that Neill regards Oakeshott as a moderate conservative (p. 113).

There are of course some aspects of Oakeshott's thought that Neill does not treat or only mentions in passing, such as Oakeshott's aesthetics (suffice it to say here that Neill is perhaps least convinced of this aspect of his thought - Oakeshott's art for art's sake approach - which he regards as an almost total absurdity). But Oakeshott's aesthetics are further proof for Neill of Oakeshott's commitment to modernity (p. 51).

But this does not seriously detract from the fact that Neill's book can be recommended as a first introduction to the overall themes of Oakeshott's thought. These should then be explored further by sampling Oakeshott's writings as well as some of the more comprehensive analyses of Oakeshott's thought such as those by Paul Franco or Terry Nardin. And Neill's book should also stimulate interest in the biography of Michael Oakeshott which is currently prepared by Robert Grant and will include various corrections to some of the erroneous material in Grant's earlier book (even though some of those errors go back to Oakeshott himself, as Grant found out later). As there are some more volumes of unpublished writings by Michael Oakeshott, it is to be expected that there will be other attempts to offer comprehensive interpretations of Oakeshott’s ideas. Meanwhile, books like Neill’s help to keep Oakeshott part of the “conversation of mankind.”

Till Kinzel

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