

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT, WENDY BROWN, AND THE PARADOXES OF ANTI-MORALISM

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Resumen

El filósofo británico Michael Oakeshott es muy conocido por su crítica del idealismo moral racionalista. Él ha sido acusado en ocasiones de conservadurismo porque alguno de los moralismos racionales que critica son socialistas o izquierdistas. Sin embargo, la pensadora Wendy Brown que se autodefine como progresista también critica el moralismo en la política a veces con las mismas razones. Interlocutores recientes en debates sobre moralismo racionalista han intentado aconsejar cómo evitar el moralismo racionalista, pero es uno de los vicios que uno identifica en otros, mucho antes que en uno mismo. Volver a alguno de los aspectos de la filosofía de Oakeshott nos ayuda a aclarar los problemas y proporcionar algunas orientaciones para proseguir el debate.

Palabras clave: Oakeshott, moralismo racionalista, idealismo moralizante, ideales morales, filosofía moral, racionalismo.

Abstract

British philosopher Michael Oakeshott is well-known for a critique of rationalistic moral idealism. He has sometimes been charged with conservatism, since some of the moralisms he criticizes are leftist or socialist. Yet self-described progressive thinker Wendy Brown also criticizes moralism in politics, on some of the same grounds. Contributors to recent debates about moralism have attempted to give advice on how to avoid it, but it is one of those vices one is much more likely to see in others than identify in oneself. A return to some aspects of Oakeshott's philosophy helps clear up what the problems are and provide some advice to the ongoing debate.

Keywords: Oakeshott, moralism, moralistic, moral ideals, moral philosophy, rationalism.

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In one of his essays, Michael Oakeshott makes some remarkable claims. In “The Tower of Babel” (1948) he writes that “every moral ideal is potentially an obsession; the pursuit of moral ideals is an idolatry...”¹ “Too often the excessive pursuit of one ideal leads to the exclusion of others, perhaps all others; in our eagerness to realize justice we come to forget charity, and a passion for righteousness has made many a man hard and merciless” (476). “In short, this is a form of the moral life which is dangerous in an individual and disastrous in a society” (476). By way of conclusion, we may quote: “The Pursuit of moral ideals has proved itself (as might be expected) an untrustworthy form of morality...” (486).

I say that these claims are remarkable because most people genuinely want to be moral, I think, in whatever way they define morality. So what could be so wrong with having moral ideals and pursuing them? I want to explore two answers here. One is to explore some recent anti-moralist writers and see how far their suggestions get us. The other is to go into Oakeshott’s essay and some of his other work a bit more deeply, in order to flesh out what he is trying to say. My suggestion will be that a reading of Oakeshott might have helped the more recent anti-moralists with their problematic. It might help all of us adapt to modern life.

Let me start with the point that “moralistic”, “moralizing”, and “moralism” belong to the small class of words that bring a negative connotation, by adding “-istic”, “-izing”, or “-ism”, to something that otherwise usually has a positive connotation. To be “scientific” is usually considered a good thing, but “scientism” and to be “scientistic” are not. “Legal” is good, but usually “legalism” joins “legalistic” as bad. “Sex” is good, but “sexism” and “sexist” are bad. In the right context “sermons” are good, but “sermonizing” is always bad.² Similarly, no one says that there is anything wrong with moral behavior; it is moralistic behavior and moralizing that is wrong. But most of the time we have to rely on that “we-know-it-when-we-see-it” feeling to identify it, and do not have widely articulated standards for distinguishing morality from moralism. So we will see if our study of recent anti-moralism and of Oakeshott can help us understand this vocabulary and what it is trying to do.

¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 476 [hereafter cited in the text in parentheses].

² But “artistic” is good; “artsy” is the bad one in this area. “Artism” is not used, to the best of my knowledge.

1. Contemporary anti-moralism

It is a remarkable phenomenon that much of contemporary anti-moralism sounds very much like Oakeshott, but does not refer to his writings. One can speculate that one of the causes of this phenomenon is that many of the authors in the contemporary theoretical debate are self-described as coming from the “left”, and Oakeshott is often described as representing something called “conservatism”. An example is Wendy Brown, who worries about moralism in politics replacing political action. There is a “contemporary tendency to personify oppression in the figure of individuals”, she writes, and “theoretical as well as political impotence and rage... is often expressed as a reproachful political moralism”.³ One problem with this is that “one finds moralizers standing against much but for very little” (28). Her judgment is that moralism “marks both analytical impotence and political aimlessness” (29).

Moralism, in Brown’s analysis, generally turns against politics *tout court*. It is the moralistic side of revolutionary movements from liberalism and Maoism to multiculturalism that turn those movements into “brittle, defensive, and finally conservative institutions” (31). The reluctance to challenge the “seamy underside of righteousness or goodness in politics” of those movements allows them to go bad (30). Critical thought is suppressed in the name of moralistic ideals. Among other things, she regrets the tendency to personalize evil, rather than to find it in structures of power and culture. Moralism is also tacitly anti-democratic: it does not want to argue but to end conversation (37-8). It begins to look like a siege mentality, lamenting and blaming rather than identifying contingencies that could be changed (39). It is anti-intellectual because it does not want to know what can be said against it (41). Much of this analysis could be mistaken as coming straight from the pages of Oakeshott.

Several of the authors in two collections of essays titled *The Politics of Moralizing and What’s Wrong with Moralism?* provide useful analyses of the elements of moralism.⁴ The introduction to the first of these volumes defines moralism as “a style of speaking, writing, and thinking that is too confident about its judgements and thus too punitive in its orientation to

³ Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 21 [hereafter cited in the text in parentheses].

⁴ Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro, eds., *The Politics of Moralizing* (New York: Routledge, 2002); C. A. J. Coady, ed., *What’s Wrong with Moralism?* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006); first published as a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 22, 2, 2006.

others” (4), and the preface to the second defines it most generally as “the vice of overdoing morality” (1). These are useful definitions, but leave wide open the question of how to tell when you are overdoing it. Presumably, if you are the one who is doing it, you do not think you are overdoing it.

In her contribution to *The Politics of Moralizing*, Jane Bennett explores her own negative reaction to Jedediah Purdy’s moralizing book, *For Common Things*.⁵ To her credit, she recognizes that her reaction to Purdy’s book as moralizing almost inevitably involves her in moralizing (11ff). She identifies three characteristics of moralizing: “self-certainty”, a quest for purity, and punitiveness (12-15). She also develops a catalogue of anti-moralizing disciplines that we can use to curb our own moralism without abandoning morality altogether. “Seasoning one’s claims with self-irony and modesty, cultivating a tolerance for moral ambiguity, periodically practicing normative reticence, building up a resistance to the pleasure of purity, minding your own business, doing what you can to forget to wreak vengeance, defending negative freedom..., and playing around are the best you can do [to resist your own moralism]. But that’s quite a lot” (22). Our question is, is it a lot? It does sound like both common sense politeness and the kind of philosophical grooming that Michel Foucault recommended in his later writings. But can these techniques really be expected to work when one thinks another person is wrong about something? Again, the point is that one may not be able to see one’s own flaws.

In his contribution to *What’s Wrong with Moralism?*, Robert Fullinwider discusses Charles Dickens’s character Seth Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit* as the epitome of moralism. Fullinwider also provides a catalog of synonyms, words with family resemblances, and related concepts: moralists are “swollen up with self-importance”, “pompous”, “busybodies and meddlers”, and “sanctimonious, holier-than-thou prigs”.⁶ Of course, we can always charge anyone who criticizes us with these sins, so we are still left with the question, how can we decide when our critics really deserve these epithets? Moralists are “judgmental”, uncharitable in those judgments, and probably on “shaky epistemic grounds” (9-10). But of course almost everyone makes judgments all the time, so how do we decide who is making unwarranted judgments? Is it actually possible to suppress all or most of our judgments, and really be non-judgmental?

⁵ Jane Bennett, “The Moraline Drift” in Bennett and Shapiro, eds., *The Politics of Moralizing*, 11-26.

⁶ Robert Fullinwider, “On Moralism”, in Coady, ed., *What’s Wrong with Moralism?*, 6 [hereafter cited in the text in parentheses].

Fullinwider supplies some helpful perspectives when he observes that one of the criteria which we might use to evaluate judgments is “standing”, that is, the position of the judging observer in analogy to legal standing. We can ask if someone is entitled to judge because they do not indeed display the same fault that they claim to find in others (12-13). Society has also delegated the authority to make some judgments, such as legal judgments, to people who have the education and position to judge, such as judges. But that does not help us too much with moral issues, which often go far beyond what the law and such training can identify. Fullinwider does not want us to back up into relativism, where no one is entitled to judge anyone about anything (14). So how can a class of moral judgments that do not fall into moralism be saved? Fullinwider concludes with the interesting suggestion that we need a morality of moral judgments; that is, we must use our moral sense and moral judgment to judge whether or not moral judgments are justified in particular cases (17). This may well be the case, but it seems that we will still have the question, only now at a meta-ethical level: how will we know our moral judgments about moralism are not moralistic?

Julia Driver defines moralism “as the illicit introduction of moral considerations”.⁷ (It would seem that “introduction” may include the sense of “intensification” where moral considerations have been properly introduced but are overstressed.) She sees three problems with it. The first one is that it is excessively demanding, either “by holding the supererogatory to be obligatory” (37), or “by insisting on strict adherence to absolute moral rules”, leaving no room for nuance (38). The second one is that it is almost always about manipulating or pressuring others: we do not call someone who holds only him- or herself to high standards a moralizer. It is a kind of conversion-seeking, or missionizing, or sermonizing (38). And a third problem is the “taking of non-moral factors to be moral ones” (38). An example here might be to punish someone for being late when it was no fault of their own.

One of the dangers of overweighting a given moral factor, according to Driver, is that it will almost inevitably drive out other moral factors that should be taken into consideration (42). “Perfectionism” about one thing leads to neglect of others (39ff.). Justice can bury forgiveness or generosity. These remarks sound like they could have come right out of Oakeshott. Of course, underweighting a moral factor can be a vice, too. So moralizing about one factor can lead to amoralism about another (43).

⁷ Julia Driver, “Moralism”, in Coady, ed., *What’s Wrong with Moralism?*, 37 [hereafter cited in the text in parentheses].

Duncan Ivison comes up with another set of three: “three kinds of moralism relevant to politics”.⁸ The first of these is “undue abstraction”, demanding conformity with too high and abstract ideals (71). As he observes, this can be depoliticizing, making us miss “the unintended consequences of actions taken with the best of intentions” and masking real motivations such as “fear, greed, and prejudice” (71). The second one is unjustified coercion, imposing “moral judgments on people through the exercise of state power... which are inadequately justified” (71). As he notes, this “infringes people’s basic freedom and dignity and... generates frustration and resentment” (71). The last one is “impotent moralism”, reacting against the world that will not yield to one’s moral values (71). Ivison claims to find all of these in the debates about multiculturalism.

One way multiculturalists engage in moralism, according to Ivison, is by assuming that all who disagree with them are immoral (72). Then, writers like James Tully who call for vigorous public discussion of these matters are demanding a standard that is too high (80). For Millian reasons, Ivison argues, controversial debates should not be prohibited by multiculturalists: there may be something we can learn from them (82). But Ivison concludes that moralism is “an inherent risk in [all] politics”, so the mere fact that it crops up in multiculturalism does not mean that multiculturalism is any different on this point than liberal constitutionalism. As he puts it, “constitutional moralism is as undesirable as democratic moralism” [i.e. the moralism of some multiculturalists, self-defined as democratic] (82).

We can be asking ourselves whether the suggestions of the foregoing anti-moralists help us in our attempts to understand and avoid moralism. Again, it may be easy to see moralism in others, but harder to see it in ourselves. We usually think there is some happy medium, some middle way between moralism and amoralism. But that middle will look different from different perspectives, and we are all likely to see ourselves as closer to the happy medium than we may actually be. Now let us explore Oakeshott’s treatment of the issue, and ask how it can help us.

2. Oakeshott’s contrast between types of morality

Oakeshott’s strategy in “The Tower of Babel” was to contrast two types of morality. One was moral life as a habit, acquired like a language from

⁸ Duncan Ivison, “The Moralism of Multiculturalism”, in Coady, ed., *What’s Wrong with Moralism?*, 71 [hereafter cited in the text in parentheses].

interacting with others (466-7). It could be variously described as part of one's character, or as a pre-conscious impulse (466-7). It was not fixed, but ever-changing (471). It could be considered "natural", and also a product of authority. This is the one that Oakeshott obviously preferred.

The other type of moral life he described as reflective application of a principle, overtly expressed and debated. In a minimal version, this could be observance of moral rules. But the more ambitious version was what Oakeshott saw as dangerous. It was the pursuit of moral ideals, also described as the pursuit of perfection (466). He pointed out that in this way of thinking, it was more important to have the right moral ideals than to act on them. These ideals are not easily subject to change, but are rather set in stone. They can be found in philosophers' moral theories, and in Christianity. It is this moral life that Oakeshott described as an idolatry, and as untrustworthy.

Just as elsewhere Oakeshott recognized that few people are pure skeptics and few live purely by faith,⁹ here he recognized that we will always have some of the moral life of habit and some of the life of reflection (477). Everything turns on how much of each. Where the morality of habit dominates, there will always be change, partly because habits never congeal but are rather always evolving: "no traditional way of behavior, no traditional skill, ever remains fixed; its history is one of continuous change" (471). But it is not deliberate, controlled, directed change. One learns it like one learns a language, and it changes like languages do (468). "There is a freedom and inventiveness at the heart of every traditional way of life" (472). Note that Oakeshott's characterization of custom and tradition might surprise those who think of them as fixed and unchanging, but sociologists of tradition confirm his notion that customs are ever in flux.¹⁰

On the contrary, where the morality of reflection dominates there will be pressures to prevent change, Oakeshott writes. Once you have the right principle, it should not be abandoned. "A morality of ideals has little power of self-modification" and "has a great capacity to resist change" (476). Such a morality also resists variety and eccentricity: everyone should conform to the highest ideals (482). And such a morality creates a great deal of self-confidence on those who profess it: if it has been thought through, it must be right (475). Strong measures against those who are wrong are easily

⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Edward Shils, *Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

justified. There is little room for the variety and eccentricity that emerge naturally in moralities of habit and custom.

Oakeshott explores two examples of the morality of ideals that we have inherited. The first was the Greco-Roman world of the first four centuries of the modern era, after the “old habits of morality had lost their vitality” (483). His models here are Epictetus and Dio Chrysostom, who theorized a neo-stoic and neo-cynic moralism for the elites of their time. The second was early Christianity after the original Christian habits of morality had given way to formulated moral ideals (484). “The urge to speculate, to abstract and to define” replaced Greco-Roman and Christian habits, to the detriment of morality (484). Oakeshott is often referred to as “conservative”, and he may well be in some respects, but I call your attention to the implications of calling post-early-Church Christianity an “untrustworthy form of morality” (486). It is not particularly conservative to suggest that the dominant strand of modern morality is untrustworthy, with the obvious implication that it should be reformed.

Oakeshott was not completely original in his critique of the morality of ideals. As Debra Candreva puts it, “his rejection of the pursuit of pure ideals... contains audible echoes of Hegel’s rejection of pure objectivity”.¹¹ He was also “not alone in identifying the importance of customs and traditions... He has been compared frequently if not accurately with Burke in this regard” (110).

So here we have it: the more we have a self-conscious, philosophical, reflective, theoretical morality, the more we are in trouble. Oakeshott does not use the words “moralism” or “moralistic”, but it seems clear to me that his “morality of ideals” is at least related in a family way to the phenomenon, and some other authors have used those words to describe his view.¹² So now we get to a problem. Can we and should we try to return to the morality of custom and tradition, learned like a language rather than like a philosophy? Oakeshott concludes that we cannot even recognize how wrong we have gone: he refers to “the corrupt consciousness, the self-deception which reconciles us to our misfortune” (487). But he refrains from providing us with detailed guidance about how to change the balance, how to move away from the moralistic morality of ideals and return to a

¹¹ Debra Candreva, *The Enemies of Perfection: Oakeshott, Plato, and the Critique of Rationalism* (Lexington Books, 2005), 1.

¹² In the “Introduction” to Michael Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (Yale University Press, 1993), 23, Timothy Fuller uses the words “moralism, rationalism and scientism” to describe the targets of Oakeshott’s critique.

less moralistic and more fortunate morality. This has become a recurring criticism of Oakeshott. Long ago, Neal Wood observed that “his view of tradition is the most critical and yet the weakest ingredient of his political thought”.¹³ How can tradition be a standard if it is always in flux? Why should we rely on it? How can we even tell if something really is part of a tradition? (661).

Let us now turn to some of Oakeshott’s other writings and some of the scholarship for clues about how he might have seen a way to recover the more habitual kind of morality.

3. Oakeshott’s moral vision recovered

Elizabeth Campbell Corey has reconstructed what might be labeled Oakeshott’s positive moral vision from a number of his texts. In summary, it is “an essentially religious and aesthetic vision of the character of human beings, in which life is understood as something that ought to be enjoyed and cherished in the present moment”.¹⁴ To the extent that this is Christian, it is Christianity as a tradition, not as an ideology (8). Aesthetic experience, also labeled as “poetry” by Oakeshott in a famous essay, “stands as a model for the kind of moral conduct Oakeshott finds most satisfactory” (12). Corey reconstructs this as “the cultivation of a personal sensibility... that strives to live fully in the present” and “is learned through observation and action” (128). It is “natural, creative, and habitual” (128). “Like a language, this kind of morality is learned by being observed as by being used” (136).

Up to this point, Corey admits, she is just paraphrasing Oakeshott. But he does not “provide much detail about precisely why he views the morality of habit and affection as better and more natural”, nor tell us much about his alternative (139). In other writings, she finds the answer: “The category ‘play’ encompasses all those things Oakeshott valued most highly: teaching and learning, poetry, love, and friendship. This preference for the ‘playful’, aesthetic, and creative may be identified as the distinguishing factor in Oakeshott’s view of the moral life” (146). Morals have to be learned in practice, and only in practice—not by following rules— can we sometimes

¹³ Neal Wood, “A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott”, *The Journal of Politics* 21, 1959, 660.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Campbell Corey, *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics* (University of Missouri Press, 2006), 3.

achieve a fleeting moral perfection akin to poetry: only in “certain natural, appropriate, spontaneous actions” (149).

This is a plausible reconstruction, and it draws on some of Oakeshott’s suggestions. But it is not a very detailed reconstruction, so we do not really learn how to live this sort of morality. And Corey has to admit that “this particular argument... is largely my own”, not guaranteed to have won Oakeshott’s approval (153).¹⁵ We need more in order to imagine what a non-moralistic Oakeshottian morality might look like.

Jeremy Rayner pointed out that Oakeshott’s “appeal to tradition started the cry of ‘conservatism’ and invited comparisons with Burke”.¹⁶ In response to such critics he “abandoned tradition as inadequate to what I want to express” and redescribed what he had been calling “tradition” as “practice” in *On Human Conduct*.¹⁷ In that work, Oakeshott followed up on the analogy with learning a language by claiming that “the two most important practices in terms of which agents are durably related to one another in conduct are a common tongue and a language of moral converse”.¹⁸ There are some passages in his discussion of this point that may help us.

Morality, in Oakeshott’s account, should be “the *ars artium* of conduct; the practice of all practices” (60). It is “not a prudential art connected with the success of the enterprises of agents”; and here Oakeshott offers the intuitive point that although honesty might be the most profitable policy, it “does not stand condemned if no such advantages were to accrue” (60). Rather, “it is concerned with the act, not the event” (61). Oakeshott wants us to get away from thinking that morality is about the common good, human excellence, or the good life (61). It is not substantive purpose to be achieved, but rather a way of living. Therefore, a “morality may be identified as a practice without any extrinsic purpose” (62); it is enough to be good.

¹⁵ Even harder to draw lessons for moralism from is Aryeh Botwinick’s attempt to reconstruct Oakeshott as a “mystical Wittgensteinian” who offers “a theological reading of some of the most persistent and defiant conundrums of philosophical reasoning” in *Michael Oakeshott’s Skepticism* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 19, 27. In his account, for Oakeshott, “religion... gives us the key to unlocking the rest of the universe”, but it seems to reveal only “ignorance and impenetrability” (28).

¹⁶ Jeremy Rayner, “The Legend of Oakeshott’s Conservatism”, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 18, 1985, 320.

¹⁷ Michael Oakeshott, “On Misunderstanding Human Conduct”, *Political Theory* 4, 1976, 364.

¹⁸ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 59.

In Oakeshott's account, a moral practice "is like art in having to be learned, in being learned better by some than by others, in allowing endless opportunity for individual style" (62). He continues: "a moral practice is not a device for controlling or suppressing biological urges, so-called 'natural' instincts or passions... It is concerned with the conduct of agents who have beliefs, sentiments, understandings, etc. and not 'instincts'" (62). All of this may mean that it is moralizing to assume that humans are such animals in need of control. As he explains, children "come to consciousness in a world illuminated by a moral practice" (62). They "compose a vernacular language of colloquial intercourse" which is "an instrument of self-disclosure used by agents... and it is a language of self-enactment" (63). And here is why it is not possible to simply learn the rules: it is an opportunity to "explore relationships far more varied and interesting than those it has a name for or those which a commonplace acceptance of so-called 'moral values' would allow"; "it emerges as a ritual of utterance and response, a continuously extemporized dance whose participants are alive to one another's movements" (63). This is all part of Oakeshott's effort to distance his idea of morality from the morality of rules.

How could this understanding help us avoid moralism? Moralizers are often accused, as we have seen, of being overly strict; of being incapable of bending the rules for particular cases. Oakeshott's preferred morality is flexible, even playful. Moral practices "intimate", they do not set rules (67). Maybe one can avoid moralism by avoiding articulating rules and relying on intimations. That way they avoid losing "some of their characteristic expansiveness" (67). There is more "play" (67). Oakeshott also likes the "spontaneity of morally educated conduct" (70). Expressions of moral disapproval are already otiose if the person condemned does not see that he or she deserves them.

Let me add that there is a great deal more in other writings of Oakeshott about this alternative style of moral life. Much of what he says about enterprise associations, the politics of faith, and collectivism seems to align more or less closely with rule-bound morality and moralism, where civil associations, the politics of skepticism, and individualism would incline one to avoid moralism.

Oakeshott makes special reference to women: "they are apt to get along without any profound respect for rules" (65). This is an interesting one, because it suggests that women may be less inclined to be moralistic than men. I do not know if this is, in fact, empirically true. Anyone have any ideas?

Andrew Sullivan observed that Oakeshott was “fickle, aloof, humane, where [many modern conservatives] are consistent, engaged, and rationalist. Oakeshott couldn’t care less about politics as such, who wins and loses... He cared about understanding the relations between human beings, and he saw the vagaries of human beings as occasions for celebration, rather than correction. His paradigm was dramatic, not programmatic. His life was poetic, not prosaic. His conservative politics were not a means to repress man’s exuberance, but a way to allow it to flourish when politics ends.”¹⁹ This seems consistent with what we have seen: moralism is the effort to politicize everything, including poetry.

At this point I think we have collected some clues to Oakeshott’s method of avoiding moralism. Don’t take formal ethics or politics too seriously. Be playful, not too goal-oriented, less judgmental, etc. Realize that morality is a work in progress and that not only you but other people may be improvising something new. You might be less inclined to moralize against them. If you accept Oakeshott’s analysis, you almost have to give other people more slack. This is a much more profound and complex analysis of what morals can mean than the self-grooming and the three rules that were suggested by our contemporaries, as we have seen above. The added value is the articulation of a theory of the right sort of morality that might make that morality almost immune from moralism. This much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of morality works against the impulse to become indignant when other people violate the set rules of the moralizers. So maybe Oakeshott’s strictures against living by moral rules will help us avoid moralizing.

But maybe not. Maybe it is almost impossible to avoid moralizing. Let us move on to ask ourselves, did Oakeshott himself moralize? Some people have charged that he did.

4. Oakeshott’s own moralism

Oakeshott’s own moralism may presumably be found in his political commitments. Richard Rorty bracketed Oakeshott with John Dewey and discussed them under the rubric of “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism”.²⁰ They “want to preserve the institutions [and practices of the surviving

¹⁹ Andrew Sullivan, “Taken unseriously”, *The New Republic* May 6, 1991, 42.

²⁰ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197-202 [orig. 1983].

democracies] while abandoning their traditional Kantian backup” (197). But Oakeshott does not want to preserve everything. David Spitz is surely right when he observes that “Oakeshott’s conservatism —if such it may still be called— is at odds with, and not a complement to, conceptions of conservatism that seek in God or natural law or natural right absolute standards of morality”.²¹

Neil McInnes asserted that whatever the merits of Oakeshott’s contrast between the individualists and the servile masses, there is little doubt that “Oakeshott told it in a heavily moralistic language”.²² I am going to refute several charges below that Oakeshott was moralistic, but I cannot help thinking that there is, indeed, some moralistic language in Oakeshott.

McInnes went on to observe that Oakeshott’s story of the “working out of traditions, feeling the way by touch toward a balance of political forces” might well work as a description of English history, but “no such account could be given of the history of, say, Spain”, which had been a “great enterprise” since the expulsion of the Moors (87-8). And he also pointed out that one of Oakeshott’s ostensible nemeses, the welfare state, could also be described as “an evolution from the poor relief of Elizabethan times, and from religious charity via private benevolence to social insurance... a classic example of the unplanned, dispersed, incremental growth of an institution” that Oakeshott favored (88). This raises another question: can Oakeshott favor “tradition” without moralizing?

One of the occasional critiques of Oakeshott that may be understood as having a moralizing undertone is the charge that he held “aristocratic prejudices”.²³ This is a curious one, because Oakeshott was not of aristocratic birth, nor did he praise aristocratic values, culture, etc. It may be suspected that this charge is peculiarly American: English bearing and language may appear courtly and even aristocratic to foreigners, although it might not appear so to the English. And “aristocratic” almost always has a moralizing, negative sense in America (as does the word “prejudices”). The author who made the foregoing charge explained that “it is the preference for trading in critiques that emphasize habits of mind, of character revealed through practice (*habitus*), that makes Oakeshott’s intellectual tools so aristocratic in nature”, with a reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (831). One wonders why the study of *habitus* is to be understood as

²¹ David Spitz, “A Rationalist *malgré lui*”, *Political Theory* 4, 1976, 339.

²² Neil McInnes, “A Skeptical Conservative”, *The National Interest* 61, 2000, 87.

²³ Ted Miller, “Oakeshott’s Hobbes and the Fear of Political Rationalism”, *Political Theory* 29, 2001, 821.

aristocratic: for one thing, Bourdieu was not an aristocrat, and very aware of that.²⁴ For another thing, neither Bourdieu nor Oakeshott would deny that all classes have *habitus*, so the study of them does not necessarily imply an aristocratic sensibility. If there is a way in which Oakeshott can be understood as an aristocrat, it is as a member of the academic elite in England, studying and teaching at Cambridge and then teaching at LSE. In that case, the appropriate Bourdieu references would be to his *The State Nobility [La Noblesse d'état]* (1989/96) and *Homo Academicus* (1984/88). That Oakeshott shared many of the prejudices of the academic elite, including moralizing tendencies, probably cannot be denied: and the same goes for all of the academics that read him.

Critics of Oakeshott often use moralistic language in their descriptions of his work. One such word is featured in Perry Anderson's "The Intransigent Right".²⁵ One wonders if Anderson thinks of himself as a member of the "Intransigent Left"? Or of the "Transigent Left"? Or is it by definition that only the right can be intransigent, and the left is just "firm" and "committed"? But the fact that your critics are moralizers does not mean that you are immune from moralizing in turn, and maybe Oakeshott does so, too.

Our review of recent critics of moralism and Oakeshott leads to several tentative conclusions. One is that we should not expect simple rules for avoiding moralizing to succeed. It is indeed possible that Oakeshott's subtle reconstruction of a form of morality that is less rule-conscious may help someone who has absorbed an understanding of that form of morality to avoid moralism. But moralism also may be a sort of professional danger that always has the potential to appear at some point in the moral life.

²⁴ His study may have been "scientific", but it was not "distanced", as Miller describes it (831): it was very much the resentful response of a self-conscious son of the lower classes against the French *haute bourgeoisie*.

²⁵ Perry Anderson, "The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century", *London Review of Books*, 24 September 1992, 7-11.