



In Defence of Modernity: 4 (British Idealist Studies 1: Oakeshott)

Efraim Podoksik

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Although Oakeshott's philosophy has received considerable attention, the vision which underlies it has been almost completely ignored. This vision, which is rooted in the intellectual debates of his epoch, cements his ideas into a coherent whole and provides a compelling defence of modernity.

The main feature of Oakeshott's vision of modernity is seen here as radical plurality resulting from 'fragmentation' of experience and society. On the level of experience, modernity denies the existence of the hierarchical medieval scheme and argues that there exist independent ways of understanding our world, such as science and history, which cannot be reduced to each other. On the level of society, modernity finds expression in liberal doctrine, according to which society is an aggregate of individuals each pursuing his or her own choices. For Oakeshott, to be modern means not only to recognise this condition of radical plurality but also to learn to appreciate and enjoy it.

Oakeshott did not think that it was possible to find a comprehensive philosophical justification for modernity, therefore the only way to preserve modern civilisation seemed to be an appeal to sentiment. As a consequence he was a passionate defender of liberal education as the best way to underwrite the 'conversation of mankind.'

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