

**Leslie Marsh, *Political Studies Review* 2(3), 2004, pp. 337-338.**

*In Defence of Modernity: vision and philosophy in Michael Oakeshott* by Efraim Podoksik. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003. 260, £25.00, ISBN 0 907845 66

Efraim Podoksik's central task is to identify Oakeshott as a defender of modernity. He thus seeks to shift our perspective on the familiar views of Oakeshott as conservative anti-modernist or as proto-postmodernist. He does not claim that these views are simply false, but that they are misleading unless we appreciate the inherent fluidity of these interpretive categories (Michael Freeden's 'ideological morphology').

For Oakeshott, the mark of the modern consciousness is the emergence of a plurality of distinct spheres of knowledge - poetry, science and history (inter alia). This plurality, insists Podoksik, should not lead us to derive postmodern relativistic conclusions - each of these domains are constitutive of their own criteria of objectivity and standards appropriate to their own subject matter. This sounds pretty much like postmodern relativism - the precise contrast with postmodernism is not as clear as his modernity thesis requires. A marked feature of his discussion is the substantial amount of time he devotes to the place of science in Oakeshott's thought. Typically, commentators talk up Oakeshott's anti-naturalist credentials almost as a matter of professional pride. Podoksik rightly views this emphasis as one-dimensional: Oakeshott's admonitions against scientism should be counterbalanced by his intention to maintain the integrity of science, rescuing science from misplaced scepticism and the relativism that is corrosive of one of modernity's great achievements. Podoksik has made an excellent effort to examine the scientific influences upon Oakeshott's sparse writings on the topic. His conclusion is surprising - that Oakeshott has more in common with the scientific positivism of Mach and Poincaré than with the antinaturalists and relativists he is so often allied with.

Podoksik's approach to Oakeshott is that of an intellectual historian: it is no part of his brief to offer a critical engagement with Oakeshott's philosophy. But the book is a superb text for both the novice and the seasoned Oakeshott reader. The former will find a

refreshingly clear exposition of Oakeshott's work considered as a whole. The latter will find a bold statement challenging some entrenched interpretations.

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