TRADITION AND RECOLLECTION

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There is much to be admired about Mark T. Mitchell's new book, *The Limits of Liberalism*. It is a tome in which the great weight of many a great man's original and divergent thoughts has been exposed to clarity, comparison, and mutual elucidation. It is an invaluable map to the hoar-bitter and contentious halls of that much abused realm called Tradition. It is a engaging investigation into that realm of the unspoken and inarticulate which is too often derided in ignorance.

Much to be admired, and, of course, some to be critiqued. But we do not come to praise Caesar, nor to bury him, nor even to soliloquize. Rather, we shall, I hope deliberate and discuss some matters which spring to light at Professor Mitchell's prompting. It is a fine thing, I believe, to begin by praising what is fine in Mitchell's work, and then to do the respect of contending what is contentious.

The book proceeds in seven parts, if we include the introduction and epilogue. The five meaty middle parts of the book comprise the main sustenance. The two bookends supply the commentary, definitions, and reflections which both motivate the monograph and give it logical structure. If I many paraphrase, Mitchell's main contention is that liberalism and the modern mindset which reflects it, are definable by their unhealthy war on or lack of healthy relationship with tradition. In order to clarify the point, Mitchell helpfully introduces an outline of the philosophic skepticisms of Francis Bacon and René Déscartes, who serves as paradigms and progenitors of the new attitude.

Within a chapter, Mitchell quite handily describes the differences between Bacon's experimental or empirical skepticism and Déscartes' rationalist or transcendentalist skepticism (those terms being my own shorthand). Of equal or greater import to the summaries is the author's main point. That both men's explicit theoretical positions dovetail with practices which they prescribe in order to unburden oneself of superstition, error, and the idols of the mind. Said practices themselves entail a necessary attitude of doubt or hostility to received opinions and to the intellectual frameworks in which we are naturally, and largely a-critically enculturated.

It matters not, then, that Bacon proposes to overcome error and to enhance the powers of perception and reasoning through experimental method. Nor does it matter that Déscartes proposes a method of transcending the errors of the senses and opinions through a form of rationalistic transcendental meditation. Rather, it is the radicalism of the critical disposition towards all but certain and indubitable knowledge which is

of import. Said attitude, in both skeptics' works, is explicitly aimed at the Aristotelian and Scholastic traditions of medieval Europe. It implies also the proposition that one may, as an individual, rise above the causes, context, and conditions of one's own ratiocination, and from that enlightened and disembarrassed position, subject all things to methodical, critical clarification and control.

Mitchell is quite sage to observe that such skepticism involves one in a rejection of memory, community, and forms of knowing that escape explicit formulation, focal awareness, or control—in short, a rejection of tradition. This, I think, is a precise philosophic observation to be recalled and valued most highly, at a time when it becoming almost cliched to lament the lack of respect for intellectual or cultural authority. The invocation of these three rejections encapsulate what is unique about the new form of individualism. Said individualism impels one not simply toward expressing one's uniquiness or seeking honors and recognition within society. Rather, it leads one towards a lonely separation from the messy, sensual, and provisional stuff of merely human life in search of certitude and independence.

Indeed, memory may be a phenomenon of greater inquisition. Certainly, it plays a crucial, if somewhat murky part, in the philosophies of Michael Oakeschott, Alasdair Macintyre, and Michael Polanyi, all of whose thoughts on tradition Mitchell very ably harvests and prepares for the reader. Here, memory appears underlying the practices of Oakeschott, there mixed-into the habits and virtues of Macintyre, there again in the structures of tacit knowing delineated by Polanyi. What, though, is this elusive bird called memory? Why is our relationship to it of such seeming import to our manner of relating to the world and our fellow creatures?

As Mitchell makes clear, the radically skeptical mind of a Déscartes or a Bacon seeks to unshackle itself from memory or "prejudice" (literally, "previous judgement"). It seeks to secure itself in the logic of an indubitable method, the steps, findings, and conclusions of which might, in principle, be made explicit and replayed backwards or forwards at any time without consequential deviations in the results (or at least within a reasonable margin of error). But, it is clear from a reading of the arguments of chapters 2 to 4 that this is strictly impossible, due to our embededness in practices, our ethos, our history, the tacit dimension of our knowing and being, etc.

The question concerning memory is not new. As Polanyi observed, it had been posed by Plato's Socrates in both the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus*, and many of Plato's dialogues are consciously constructed as dramatic recollections. We may also observe that questioning or inquiry itself is the very definition of *skepsis*. And yet, while a Nietzsche may occasionally dub Socrates a nihilist or a Popper dub Plato a totalitarian, yet never has either, to my knowledge, been prosecuted for being a Cartesian. This suggests that there may be something different about Socratic skepsis that may hinge on its relationship to memory.

I will suggest that the difference lies in the classical distinction made between *mneme* and *anamnesis* or memory and recollection, on the one hand, and the relationship with doubt, commitment, and practice, on the other. To be perhaps too hasty in paraphrasing a matter which has received deeper exploration in other pages, we may compare the Socratic practice of recollection to Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing and discovery, the later of which Mitchell outlines quite well. In effect, memory, practice, and experience represent the subsidiary elements which are re-collected together for inquiry and which are brought to bear as clues pointing to some entity, insight, or action beyond themselves. In other words, they make-up elements of the from in the from-to structure of consciousness.

Skepsis (Socrates) or critical analysis (Polanyi) thus simply designates the practice of pulling apart and examining how we act and what we think we know. However, such examination necessarily proceeds from wherever we're at, existentially speaking. The process allows for a certain amount of rectification and changing of ourselves (or turning around, in Platonic language), but it does not lend itself to raising oneself to a god-like, Archimedian point about the earth. There seems to be an intrinsic need for critical appreciation of the foundations of our knowing and being.

This point seems to be what at least MacIntyre, Polanyi, and Mitchell are getting at. To paraphrase again: we simply cannot do without a living and open-ended repertoire of experience, practices, ways of being, language, and education, etc. This is what it means to have received, to possess, or to embody a tradition. To critique oneself is to critique one's tradition. Conversely, critiquing one's tradition is critiquing oneself. While this process is integral to learning and discovery, if we do not step back down onto some ground at some point, it necessarily leads to hollowing oneself out if taken too far. A garden too weeded quickly becomes a desert. It leaves us with no nourishment, and with neither vine nor tree to climb. Thus, I strongly praise Mitchell's thought-provoking essays on the thinkers heretofore listed, the skillful conversation that he builds between them. Now though, the critique.

I fear that Mitchell mars his work somewhat by embroiling himself, not in the politics of his home country, but in the cliché language and the pre-analytical and frankly ideological topoi of contemporary American factionalism. The fact that these topoi don't rise to the level of the grandiose chicanery of a Marx or a Locke, but are as seemingly homespun and "common-sensical" as the cliché languages eviserated by the likes of Karl Kraus and H.L. Mencken in their days, does not change their essentially obscuring and deforming character. On a strictly practical level, topoi such as "social justice warrior" add no analytical clarity to politics, nor improve the flavour or shelf-life of an otherwise excellent book.

On a scientific level, the topoi add a certain Sturm und Drang, but only short-circuit curiosity and inquiry into the phenomena of present-day American political

reality, by throwing-up a wall of easy and familiar opinions cemented with stiff emotions. On a philosophic level, one is only left, especially as a stranger and foreigner, with the perplexity as to whether, for instance, it is "society," "justice," or "warriorship," which one is expected to hold in polite contempt. Naively, all three are usually considered good and laudable things.

Perhaps more to the point, I wonder to what extent Mitchell wanders into the fallacy of misplaced concreteness in his political analysis. The working definition of liberalism which Mitchell proposes seems to include 1) a disdain for tradition, 2) an obsession with freedom as a supreme and guiding principle, and 3) an metastatic vision of a cosmopolitan state with liberalism as its established orthodoxy.

It is this ideological and anti-critical framework which is assumed to animate "SJWs," left-wing American political activism, federal policy under various administrations, and the like. One reads sentences like "Liberalism seeks X," and finds oneself superstitiously scanning the room for the cunning Geist which so moves people against their self-knowledge and stated motivations. The Geist of liberalism is also proposed to inadvertently provoke its anti-thesis as represented in far right, alt-right, or frankly fascist counter-movements, resulting in the unexpected synthesis of the Trump administration. But frankly, here lies the fallacy. Mitchell's working definition is merely an hypothesis and one that I frankly think would fail tests of verification or validation. Again, naively, I perceive that, in practice, the U.S.A. is currently being rocked by profound conflicts over justice, honour, security, and belonging, rather than anything as esoteric and intellectual as the freedom of autonomous individualism vs. communitarianism. If only life were so simple.

Be that as it may, I am left with three substantive questions regarding the chief investigation of Professor Mitchell's book. First, what place does *aporia* or doubt (or *skepsis* or critical analysis) find in the "Western" tradition, however understood? Doubt about received traditions and customs seems to be an indispensable aspect of Greek philosophy and of Jewish and Christian praxis and faith, all of which are commonly understood to be chief foundations of said tradition. Second, if doubt is an essential element of Western tradition, what form should it take? Finally, what place does the study of history, in a spirit of critical appreciation, play in the matter of education and understanding of oneself and the world?