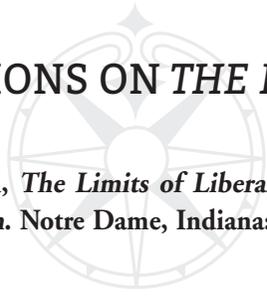


REFLECTIONS ON *THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM*



Mark T. Mitchell, *The Limits of Liberalism: Tradition, Individualism, and the Crisis of Freedom*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. 340 pp. \$55.00.

Keywords: Mark T. Mitchell, Michael Polanyi, Alexis de Tocqueville, liberalism, tradition, epistemology, autonomous self, democracy, Will R. Jordan, Matthew Sandwisch, Colin Cordner, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Oakeshott, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Edmund Burke

ABSTRACT

Three reviewers summarize and analyze Mark Mitchell's latest book on liberalism and tradition. Mitchell then responds.



LAND OF THE LOST

Will R. Jordan

Nobody knows. What good's an opinion if you don't know? My grandfather knew the number of whiskers in the Almighty's beard. I don't even know what happened yesterday, let alone tomorrow. He knew what it was that makes a rock or a table. I don't even understand the formula that says nobody knows. We've got nothing to go on—got no way to think about things.

John Steinbeck, *Travels With Charlie* (1962)

Steinbeck's Yankee farmer describes our plight in a way that perfectly complements Mark T. Mitchell's thesis about the epistemological crisis that threatens modern liberal societies. According to Mitchell, contemporary liberalism is based on a fundamentally false conception of the human person. The liberal ideal of the autonomous self—"unconstrained, unattached, and absolutely free" (23)—fails to account for, and indeed actively rejects, the indispensable role that tradition plays in human life.

Although Mitchell's impressive book focuses primarily on the epistemological costs and philosophical incoherence embedded in the liberal rejection of tradition, it is clearly animated by a concern for the social and political effects that emerge once liberalism becomes triumphant. Foremost among these social and political effects is the tendency of liberalism to devolve into its opposite: a coercive and intolerant illiberalism which recognizes no limits to the exercise of power. Mitchell sees this tendency at work in a number of contemporary political controversies, from the threats to freedom of speech emanating from the halls of academia, to the nationalistic and reactionary political movements emerging in the most advanced liberal democracies. To check these trends, Mitchell offers his readers a sketch of a possible alternative to modern liberalism. Mitchell argues that his "humane localism," rooted in tradition and based on a richer conception of the human person, provides a more stable and sustainable liberty than does the prevailing liberal model.

In advancing his claims, Mitchell anchors each step of his argument in an analysis of a particular thinker. The book therefore ranges widely and helpfully across the history of philosophy—a methodology which seems especially appropriate for an argument about the importance of tradition. After an initial survey of the early modern founders of liberalism and cosmopolitanism, Mitchell narrows his focus to two key seventeenth-century figures, Francis Bacon and René Descartes. In Bacon's defense of experimental science, Mitchell identifies a strong rejection of received authorities and opinions, most notably the prevailing Aristotelian tradition. He also finds in Bacon's *New Atlantis* an early warning about the loss of political liberty that might emerge from the scientists' project of total dominance over nature (35). Descartes' philosophy offers, if possible, an even clearer rejection of tradition as a source of authority, as he (in) famously calls for doubting everything that is not clear and distinct to the individual's own mind. Mitchell fairly recognizes the political implications of this method, as it is both radically individualistic and egalitarian. Mitchell ends this section by enlisting the aid of Alexis de Tocqueville, who not only identified both Bacon and Descartes as important contributors to the modern democratic project and its rejection of tradition, but also foresaw how democratic individualism could lead, seemingly paradoxically, to novel forms of centralization and despotism. While Mitchell is very sympathetic to Tocqueville's account, he sees his project as somewhat different. Mitchell wants to focus first on the epistemological incoherence of liberalism, rather than on its political effects. Mitchell clearly thinks the latter problems are simply derivative of the former. We'll return below to the question of whether Mitchell should be so confident in framing matters this way.

At the center of the book are three chapters dedicated to twentieth-century thinkers who, despite their differences, recognize that modern liberalism's assault on tradition undermines our ability to really know and understand the world in which we live. Mitchell gives his readers a careful and helpful analysis of the philosophy of

Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Polanyi. These three share a concern that the modern ideal of an objective, neutral, purely rational mind, free from all vestiges of traditional practices and beliefs, is nothing but a misleading illusion. In all three accounts, real knowing looks more like apprenticeship in a set of traditional practices than it looks like the solitary mastery of a technique, as Bacon or Descartes would have it. We are necessarily embedded in a tradition just as we are embedded in language, and cannot comprehend or articulate any truth free of that framework, no matter our rationalist pretensions. Mitchell is attentive to the fine points of difference in these three thinkers, and readers especially interested in epistemology or in a clear introduction to one or more of the three philosophers would do well to study these chapters in some detail. One point worth noting here is that Mitchell clearly prefers MacIntyre and Polanyi to Oakeshott, as the former pair root knowledge in traditional practices and beliefs without falling prey to relativism. Both think particular traditions can be better or worse at describing a reality that exists independently of humanity, even though we have no non-traditional way of accessing that reality (193-197). In sum, Mitchell attempts here to describe a middle way between the ambitious, but ultimately false, certainty of enlightenment rationalism and the nihilistic banality of postmodern relativism. This middle way is grounded in the recovery of tradition as a source of knowledge.

In the final sections of the book, Mitchell turns again to the political and social consequences of liberalism's crisis—especially the tendency for liberalism to fall into illiberalism by eschewing limits and demanding ideological homogeneity (213) as well as the related social pathologies (including declining birthrates, rising public and private debt, and environmental degradation) that follow from liberalism's inherently self-centered and short-sighted conception of the human person (214-17). Instead of returning to what he calls "first wave liberalism"—the liberalism of the American founding, in which liberalism's worst excesses are counterbalanced by pre-modern elements in the surrounding culture, and which he finds to be ultimately unstable—Mitchell calls for a more ambitious project "to imagine a nonliberal conception of liberty, one that does not depend on the myth of the liberal self" (218). The "tradition-constituted liberty" that emerges here is drawn primarily from the thought of Edmund Burke, but represents part of a tradition that Mitchell traces back to Augustine and forward to the twentieth-century in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Mitchell's proposed alternative to liberalism, which he describes as "humane localism," recognizes the inherent limits on politics imposed by our natural human limits, instills a new sense of duty and obligation that comes with our rootedness in particular communities, and resuscitates the ideas of providence, vocation, and stewardship (266-67). Mitchell provides the most concise description of this vision when he writes, "humane localism is rooted in respect, not in homogeneity, in love of one's traditions, not hatred of other traditions,

in a recognition that liberty is sustainable only with limits, and in the realization that human flourishing is best realized in the company of friends and neighbors sharing a common place in the world” (268).

As attractive as this vision is—and I think there is much to recommend it—we should not lose sight of the fact that the book’s primary purposes are to identify the epistemological errors inherent in the liberal conception of the human person and to attribute the source of our contemporary political crises to these errors. The description of “humane localism” is merely sketched out at the end of the book as a possible alternative to liberalism—an alternative that embraces rather than undermines tradition. Acknowledging this limitation, the book certainly succeeds in its primary purposes. I have encountered no recent account more plausible than Mitchell’s when it comes to identifying the underlying incoherence of the dominant liberal worldview.

However, as I am required here to offer some thoughts which might lead to further discussion, I will advance three lines of argument that I hope will be worth addressing. First, taking Tocqueville as my guide, I question whether the modern abandonment of tradition is simply the result of bad philosophy, or whether it is a natural consequence of democratic equality itself. If the latter, it seems the problem is much too deeply rooted to be addressed in any incremental, or Burkean, way. Second, I question whether our traditions (including elements which Mitchell clearly would like to resuscitate into his “humane localism”) are not in some way implicated in bringing us to the current crisis. In other words, how can we clearly identify and separate the good in our traditions from the harmful? Finally, although I am somewhat sympathetic to the critique of enlightenment rationalism and abstract theory offered by Oakeshott, MacIntyre, and Polanyi, I wonder whether the clarity it seeks to provide hasn’t sometimes proven to be indispensable in informing and correcting our sometimes murky and conflicting traditions.

To the first point, Mitchell rightly credits Tocqueville with recognizing how liberal democratic people exhibit a tendency to reject authority and tradition. America, for Tocqueville, was “the one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed” (Tocqueville 1992, 403). Yet while Tocqueville does acknowledge the influence of Bacon and Descartes in formalizing the method used to batter down traditional beliefs, he also emphasizes that democratic people come to this method untaught. The democratic social state “naturally disposes their minds to adopt [the maxims of Descartes],” because they no longer feel the importance of aristocratic family bonds or class bonds, and “not perceiving in anyone among themselves incontestable signs of greatness and superiority, are constantly led back toward their own reason as the most visible and closest source of truth” (Tocqueville 1992, 403-404). In other words, people in a democratic social state are fundamentally unwilling to submit themselves to an authority or master (in the manner of an apprentice), which Mitchell

argues is necessary for the transmission of tradition (73,124). There is indeed an epistemological problem according to Tocqueville, but it is one inseparable from, and driven by, democracy's equality of conditions.

At times, Mitchell seems to acknowledge this problem, as when he notes that "such notions as submission, trust, and the decided nonegalitarianism entailed in the relationship between a master and a student are concepts that find little favor in a world that celebrates the liberal self along with epistemic independence" (125). However, if the source of the problem is democratic equality itself, it will not be solved by simply improving our philosophy or our understanding of the human person. Tocqueville is remarkably modest about how much change is possible in democratic ages, and recognizes that "we ought not to strain to make ourselves like our fathers, but strive to attain the kind of greatness and happiness that is proper to us" (Tocqueville 1992, 675). In this context, I wonder whether Mitchell's "humane localism" is attached to democracy, in which case it might have little effect, or not so attached, in which case it attempts a decidedly non-Burkean transformation of our now-traditional social state.

My second concern has to do with the difficulty inherent in the complexity of our traditions. Mitchell gives good reasons for preferring a new, "tradition-constituted liberty" to "first wave liberalism," as the acid of liberalism eventually eats away at all pre-liberal checks. What if it is the case, however, that even parts of the tradition that Mitchell would include in his "humane localism" have a tendency to contribute to liberalism? For example, Tocqueville sees the protestant reformation as a step prior to even Bacon and Descartes in the overthrowing of traditional beliefs (Tocqueville 1992, 404). Mitchell himself begins his chapter on the denigration of tradition by noting the influence of Martin Luther (25). If we're tempted to think that pre-Reformation Christianity might avoid these problems, Oakeshott suggests that even the early Church contributed to a non-traditional form of moral perfectionism. The abridgement of "Christian habits and customs into a creed that could be translated across cultural and linguistic boundaries produced a morality corresponding to this change. Rather than emphasizing habits and customs rooted in a tradition, moral ideas were abstracted from the original traditional behavior" (179). Polanyi then elaborates how this more simple Christian idea of moral perfection was appropriated by the skeptical rationalists to disastrous effect (170-71). One suspects that Christianity even contributed to the growth of cosmopolitanism over localism, which Mitchell decries, even though his account of its development skips from the Stoics to Immanuel Kant (12).

None of this is to deny Mitchell's contention that Christianity can be a powerful and beneficial force for counteracting the worst excesses of liberalism, but it simply raises the question of whether we are ever capable of bringing with us only the purest and most helpful parts of our tradition, without including the problematic and even contradictory bits. Mitchell addresses this question, at least with respect to Christianity,

in Chapter 5, but he here focuses on revitalizing three main theological insights which he finds most useful (251). Even if we grant that modernity has deformed Christianity in ways not salutary and therefore we must revive a more pure and true form, we are left to wonder whether any of our traditions can be disentangled fully from the whole, including those elements which ultimately spawned liberalism and cosmopolitanism.

Finally, I want to raise a point that springs from Mitchell's admirable defense of a traditionalism that takes seriously the reality of the world. Mitchell largely supports the "tradition of classical realism [which] holds that all things are imbued with a nature that they share with other similar things. Humans, too, have a nature, and to flourish is to live in conformity with the limits and ends indicated by that nature" (256). If this is true, it suggests that some traditions come closer than others to perceiving and reflecting this reality. Mitchell does a fine job of explaining, in the thought of MacIntyre and Polanyi, how such distinctions are made. That said, it seems evident that enlightenment rationalism—despite all of the problems Mitchell's book identifies—can sometimes come closer (even if not completely or wholly satisfactorily) to illuminating the reality of nature than does reliance upon faulty tradition. To take two examples of the same liberal enlightenment philosophy, we can look at the doctrine of natural rights as applied in 1776 by the American founders and in the 1850s and 1860s by Abraham Lincoln. Especially in the latter case, it is difficult to imagine how the mere traditionalist wouldn't side with Stephen A. Douglas and his defense of popular sovereignty. Even though Lincoln's doctrine of natural rights was an abstract rule, what Oakshott would dismiss as a crib or an abridgement, it was a powerful tool for illuminating the moral reality of the situation. (Of course, Lincoln wasn't dismissive of tradition, as he took great pains to show he was more loyal to the spirit of the Founding than were his opponents. See, for example his February, 1860 "Cooper Union Address." Lincoln's First Inaugural Address also famously invokes the "mystic chords of memory" in a way totally incompatible with the idea of the liberal, autonomous self.) If, then, there are better and worse traditions, as well as rationalist doctrines that conform more and less closely to reality, I'm not convinced we've solved our epistemological problems by simply preferring the former to the latter.

In the end, Mitchell's book is a welcome reminder that our contemporary political dysfunction goes very deep, perhaps as far as a fundamental incoherence in the way modern people think about their place in the world. If indeed we find ourselves in the situation of Steinbeck's Yankee farmer—lost with no map and no clear sense of direction—we do well to retrace our steps to see where we went wrong. Mitchell's work here, on the epistemic necessity of tradition, is an excellent place to start.

Reference

de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1992. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.