On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct: Understanding, Conduct and Agency

WILLIAM CHURCH

I. INTRODUCTION

On Human Conduct (1975) was Michael Oakeshott's most mature and rigorous work in political theory. Critics thought otherwise, and OHC received mixed reviews after its publication. It exemplified a venerable tradition of political theory that had fallen out of fashion in the latter half of the 20th Century. It stands in contrast to significant contemporaneous works such as John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and Robert Nozick *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) which were normative works and sought to revive traditions of political treatise and social contract. The closest analogue to this style was Bernard Bosanquet's *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (1899) which perhaps led Paul Franco (2014, p. 101) to describe OHC as Oakeshott's attempt to provide a '*restatement of the idealist theory of the state*.' Conversely, others have emphasised Oakeshott's break with commitments in his earlier Anglo-Hegelianism. Aspects of the work compare favourably with what Hannah Arendt identified as the ontological task of the political theorist to contemplate the features of the human condition.[1] Hannah Pitkin, one of Oakeshott's most uncharitable detractors, penned a review titled, "Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory" (1976, pp. 301-320). Benjamin Barber, writing in 1976, p. 447, perhaps best encapsulated the dismissive caricature of Oakeshott during his lifetime among academe:

> Oakeshott will be written off as an idealogue, a conservative, or simply an Englishman, only by those completely deaf to political theory as a conversation. That is not to say that his writings have not had a central ideological thrust: ever since 1933, when he published *Experience and its Modes*, he has been struggling to conserve politics from the central orthodoxies of the 20th Century liberalism and liberal Marxism. Against economists, moralists and reductionists of one kind or another…

In contrast, many subsequent scholars have lauded its value as a dense work of profound originality.

OHC diverged from Oakeshott's other works in that it was almost entirely an exercise in political and philosophical abstraction. The book consisted of three inter-linked essays, the titles of which perfectly described their respective contents: (I) "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct," (II) "On the Civil Condition," (II) "On the Character of a Modern European State." Much extant scholarship has focussed on the last two essays, both in terms of Oakeshott's intellectual history and what he proffered—the equivocal nature of the modern European state and the relationship of civil association to liberal political theory. The first essay, however, has been comparatively neglected and yet it is crucial to the purpose of OHC in significantly modifying Oakeshott's earlier thought on philosophy and the nature of theorising. Within this essay Oakeshott discussed human conduct, importantly distinguishing between

conditions of self-disclosure and self-enactment. Although an organised thinker, those familiar with Oakeshott's post-war publications often admire his essayist prose, rich with allegory and neat metaphors. *On Human Conduct* combined Oakeshott's literary elegance with systematic rigour proceeding from first principles to finally extrapolating upon his understanding of human nature to sharply dissect the ambivalent character of modern politics.

I first discuss Oakeshott's exploration of the nature and limits of theorising by grounding it in conditional platforms of understanding and rejection of the idea that theory can uncover ultimate truths or guide conduct. Secondly, I analyse Oakeshott's account of human conduct and agency as contingent on action involving reflective, intelligent agents engaging in a world of contingencies. Drawing (somewhat) on Aristotelian and Hegelian traditions, Oakeshott conceptualises agency not as unconstrained will but as reflective consciousness—a learned, historic condition. Conduct is not theoretical but performative, involving deliberation and persuasion. Moral conduct, analogised to language, is a practice of self-enactment and self-disclosure: agents act both in accordance with shared moral norms and from personal motives. This duality allows for individuality, subject to the adverbial conditions of conduct. Similarly, Oakeshott rejects biological determinism and instrumental morality, arguing that moral rules guide action without determining it. This view is important to his theory of civil association, which grounds freedom in rule-based practices, echoing Hegel while defending moral agency as expressive, uncertain, and historically situated. Thirdly, I discuss how Oakeshott links religion to self-enactment rather than to specific actions, viewing faith as consolation for human futility. Influenced by Augustine, he treats religious belief as a response to existential despair. Important here is his implied critique of modern liberalism's emphasis on self-disclosure, arguing that true individuality lies in authentic, inward moral self-enactment beyond utilitarian calculation. Finally, whilst scholars have extensively covered Wittgenstein's influence, I contend that compelling grounds support an Augustinian reading of Oakeshott's purpose. Oakeshott's distinction between self-enactment and self-disclosure parallels Augustine's distinction between the *verbum interius* and the external word: for Augustine, the *verbum interius* is the inward, mental articulation that orders thought and intention, a conceptual "word" prior to any spoken sign and ultimately rooted in the soul's participation in divine illumination. Whereas the external word is the outward sign or voice that expresses that internal understanding through speech and action, and which can never by itself confer intellectual insight. In Oakeshott, self-enactment expresses the agent's moral sentiment, revealing the orientation of the will that animates conduct, whereas self-disclosure manifests the adverbial conditions under which actions are performed, showing their moral quality indirectly. Moreover, Oakeshott approaches an Augustinian account of agency insofar as he affirms that human beings exercise will, choice, and deliberation, yet the virtue of their actions ultimately depends upon the orientation of desire; although Oakeshott allows greater latitude in identifying the sources of moral selfenactment, Augustine locates the remedy for disordered desire decisively in divine grace, which heals and rightly orders the will to produce genuinely virtuous action.

II. HUMAN UNDERSTANDING: POSTULATES AND THE NATURE OF THEORISING

The gist of *On Human Conduct* is nicely summed up by Oakeshott's opening statement in the preface (1995/1991):

> Philosophical reflection is recognised here as the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands in which the understanding sought, is a disclosure of the conditions enjoyed and not a substitute for it.

Oakeshott starts from first principles, contemplating the nature of human understanding. This, he argues, is an unsought condition and inextricable from our human condition which constitutes a predicament. To be human is to "inexorably inhabit a world of intelligibles" (OHC 1). Through the pursuit of misty intima-

tions we come to inhabit a world of recognisables, in which "there can be no absolute distinction between fact and theorem" (OHC 2-3). This is necessarily an activity of identifying ideal characters, which is prone to fallibility, but involves a unity of particularity and genericity. As Oakeshott expressed this, "in every "going-on" identified there remains an imperfectly resolved tension between particularity and genericity" (OHC 5). Importantly, Oakeshott impresses a distinction between "going-on" which is theoretical and concerned with the generation of *theorem*, and that concerned with unproblematic verdicts. To apprehend an apple falling from a tree does not necessitate a theory of Newtonian gravity, this is an example of "going-on" in the sense of observable processes. To express this in Oakeshottian terms: "going-on" concerned with identifying ideal characters (*qua* theoretical explanations) are distinguishable from the identities with which they are concerned (OHC 14-15). Suffused here is a categorical distinction between two kinds of identities. Firstly, "going-ons" which are not themselves the exhibition of intelligence, and do not require being learnt to grasp their happening and can be understood as having causal processes. Secondly, "goings-on" which are themselves exhibitions of intelligence. These are not concerned with processes but rather practices and presuppose an ordered context. Each necessitates a different order of inquiry with its own distinct idioms of inquiry. All human activities are exhibitions of intelligence and concern practice, including theoretical understanding. The theorist is engaged in the reflective activity of explaining at a higher level a phenomena beyond its identification (OHC 13). In Oakeshott's words the theorist, "is no longer concerned with a thunderstorm but with the new problematic theorems of electromagnetism" (OHC 10). In elucidating postulates, this theorist is engaged with a more difficult task than identification—how polarised electric charges interact to create the observed phenomena of flashes of lightning. Thus, theorising involves two composites: (I) identification, and (II) explanations in terms of postulates. The activity of theorising he contends always involves problematic *theorems*, since identification is fallible, and given its inquiry takes place within conditional platforms of understanding.

The theorist is "perpetually *en voyage*" (OHC 11), and the *theorems* produced by his theorising are always open to investigation. The paradox of theory "is its propensity to generate, not an understanding, but a not-yet-understood" (OHC 11-12). Oakeshott discounts the possibility of minimum or universal epistemological standards; however, it follows that each "conditional platform" is comprised of its own standards, which he likens to idioms. This marked a terminological shift from *Experience and its Modes* (EM 1933), in so far as homogenous modes (which make up the concrete whole of experience) were replaced with conditional platforms. However, Oakeshott preserved irreducible plurality in that each platform has its own idiom, not unlike the distinct internal logic that characterises autonomous modes of understanding. According to Oakeshott, conditional platforms presuppose that "each is an autonomous adventure in theorising, insula, inextinguishable, resistant to reduction, having his own conditional truth, and capable of its own conditional perfection" (EM 12). In effect the substance of Oakeshott's position is simply modified but largely unchanged, the soundness of discourse dependent upon the internal standards of the conditional platform and their distinct idioms of inquiry. This coheres with Oakeshott's earlier position that, "each abstract world of ideas, in so far as it is coherent, is, then, true so far as it goes, true if its postulates are accepted, true if its reservations are admitted" (EM 77).

In EM Oakeshott was primarily concerned with differentiating the worlds of science, historical experience, and practice from each other. Oakeshott went to considerable lengths to differentiate these modes in terms of their distinctive features and disciplinary boundaries. In particular, he expended much effort defending the autonomy of historical inquiry from the intrusion of science—reflecting Dilthey's distinction between the natural and human sciences. Similarly, many of Oakeshott's contemporaries shared this humanist concern to defend its autonomy from science, as most evident in Isaiah Berlin's lectures on the philosophical history of Vico (Berlin 1982, pp. 80-110). Importantly for Oakeshott, the attempt to reason from one mode to another was an example of categorical error (*ignoratio elenchi*). Oakeshott's concern was undoubtedly to dismiss as nonsensical the supramodal reasoning of such endeavours as Karl Mannheim's "sociology of knowledge," and to protect history from positivistic reductions of its enterprise. In later writings, this hard injunction was tempered to the extent that

Oakeshott countenanced intermodal conversation as distinct from argument (*Rationalism in Politics* RP 477). Comparisons between his defence of the autonomy of history and R. G. Collingwood have been well-explored, though it also shared a striking semblance to the German hermeneutical tradition, in which human acts are not subject to the methods of natural science and their proper interpretation is *via* imaginative dialogue.[2] Whilst this was substantively preserved in OHC, Oakeshott was primarily concerned with the nature and limits of theorising. All understanding begins in an already understood, and all theorising involves understanding with more clarity than what is already understood. Consistent with his earlier Idealism, Oakeshott, similarly disposed of "brute" facts. However, OHC marked a shift in three significant ways: (I) Firstly, "going-on" replaced experience. Furthermore, instead of separating the practical from other kinds of activities, all activity involves practice, and this extends to theoretical engagement. (II) Secondly, conditional platforms replace modes as the domain within which inquiry takes place. (III) Oakeshott substantially revised the critical and unconditional task he had ascribed to philosophy in his earlier work. In EM philosophy enjoyed a supervening role above other forms of modal experience as understanding "without arrest or presupposition" (EM 2). This earlier position somewhat reflected Hegel's notion that philosophy is "the highest, freest and wisest phase of the union of subjective and objective mind" (Herbermann 1907, pp. 192-93). Oakeshott himself noted his debt to F. H. Bradley and Hegel (EM 6), though such an understanding of philosophy, arguably, finds an analogue in Spinoza's *Ethica* (1677). Arguably, Oakeshott was closest to Collingwood's *Speculum Mentis*, without the insistence upon a hierarchy between modes. Oakeshott also departed from Collingwood in arguing that the presuppositionless nature of philosophy denied its understanding as a mode. In contrast, *On Human Conduct* affirms that while philosophy involves the critical task of pursuing definitive understanding, as an explanatory form of inquiry it is concerned with postulates and conditions, therefore philosophy remains a conditional form of understanding. The philosopher cannot escape the imperfect condition of the cave-dweller and discover "ultimate postulates" (OHC 29). The conditional nature of philosophy necessitates that it is incapable of finality, its conclusions are incomplete, and always subject to subsequent critical investigation.

Oakeshott's repartee to Plato in his reworking of the allegory of the cave in the first essay underscores Oakeshott's shift to a more conditional understanding of philosophy. The cave-dweller for Oakeshott was correct to hold in scorn the philosopher who egotistically posits that his understanding is not only unconditional but superior to the conditional understanding of the cave-dwellers (OHC 25-30). He affirms the Socratic understanding of philosophy as a critical activity, but shared Hegel's sense of circumspection that the philosopher is often wise in retrospect. Important to Oakeshott was the sense that philosophy (and theorising) is chiefly concerned with explanation, and not with practical recommendation, thereby distinguishing its proper purpose from the activity of the theoretician and *philosophe*. As Oakeshott remarked, the theorist having escaped the cave, "recognizes the conditions (the performance at the parapet), not as instruments of understanding but themselves invitations to inquiry" (OHC 28). This was also consistent with his earlier insistence on a separation of theory and practice. However, in OHC his concern is rather to separate the domains of theory from conduct, since he reasons that all activities involve specific practices. Importantly, all theoretical understanding needs to relate to the conditional understanding it attempts to theorise. Furthermore, the postulates which result from theorising are not deduced principles which have relevance to conduct. This cautious attitude towards the role of the philosopher was arguably one that developed prior to OHC. Oakeshott is best known for his critique of rationalism; however, this critique has limited connection here. The critique of rationalism concerned an approach to politics that was Baconian, and significantly, cannot be interpreted as prophylactic for the philosopher's relevance to human conduct.[3] In his essay "The Claims of politics" (1939, p. 148) published in *Scrutiny,* we can see the first inkling of Oakeshott's departure from the almost omniscient quality he assigned to philosophy in EM. In Oakeshott's words, the philosopher does not emerge from "a retreat, bringing with them some superior wisdom, and enter the world of political activity, but to stay where they are, remain true to their genius, which is to mitigate a little their society's ignorance of itself."

To imagine that philosophy can perfect conduct is to forsake what makes it distinctly philosophical. Oakeshott's criticism of the *philosophe* cannot be likened to the vulgar anti-intellectualism of reactionary figures, such as Maurras or Gentile. The activity of the theorist is valuable as it clarifies or provides new insight into an already understood. Moreover, philosophical reflection is, "a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it" (OHC xxi). Curiously, Oakeshott remarks that theorising so far as it concerns identifying abstracted identities remains "poised between heaven and earth" (OHC 25). Potentially, this is an allusion to Marx and Engel's (1988, p. 47) criticism of the immanentism of the German Idealists—"In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven" (Marx and Engels 1988, p. 47). The idea being that (material) social realities are made more real when raised to the level of theory- and, importantly, the ideological superstructures that cloud our comprehension of social realities can be unmasked. For Marx, there was no unbridgeable gulf between theory and "*praxis*." Theory enjoys a superordinate power to both make sense of and direct practice. In the *Theses of Feuerbach* (1845), Marx criticised the approach of philosophers to merely interpret the world, against the aspiration to change it. Such an aspiration could scarcely be more opposed to the proper task of political theory outlined in Oakeshott's *oeuvre*. Despite its originality, OHC, reaffirms many of Oakeshott's earlier commitments about the limits of political philosophy. In Oakeshott's 1951 Inaugural Lecture at the London School of Economics 'Political Education,' he enunciated the modest task of political philosophy, as follows:

> Political philosophy cannot be expected to increase our ability to be successful in political activity. It will not help us to distinguish between good and bad political projects; it has no power to guide or to direct us in the enterprise of pursuing the intimations in our tradition. But the patient analysis of the general ideas which have come to be connected with political activity—ideas such as nature, artifice, reason, will, law, authority, obligation, etc.—in so far as it removes some of the crookedness from our thinking and leads to a more economical use of concepts, is an activity neither to be overrated nor despised. But it must be understood as an explanatory, and not a practical activity, we may hope to be less cheated by ambiguous statement and irrelevant argument (RP 64).

Oakeshott, at times, referred to philosophising and theorising interchangeably. However, like Arendt he was more comfortable with "political theorist" than philosopher. An unassailable dilemma arose from his characterisation of politics as a practical exercise in EM, yet elsewhere: the more metaphysical their theorising, the more removed the theorist becomes from their subject matter (politics). Consequently, the theorist must have limited relevance to the practical activities of politics itself, his activity concerns a different platform of conditional understanding. For Oakeshott, the proper concern of the political theorist is a two-pronged task of explaining the ideal character and postulates of both (I) human conduct, and (II) political association.

Throughout the first essay, Oakeshott expends some pages dismantling the fashionable theories of the twentieth-century, Freudian analysis, and more pointedly other developments in the fields of psychology and sociology. The latter he described as darkling pain, "where ignorant armies clash by night." Much of Oakeshott's criticism of sociology and psychology is unsurprising in the context of their ascendency in British universities during the 20th-Century. The London School of Economics, founded by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, was devoted to the "scientific study of society." Oakeshott found the prefix of "social" to demarcate a discipline of discrete inquiry most problematic. Sociology was both an ill-defined and confused subject category, squeezed between other "social sciences." However, it was not just a case of incoherence, but that human activity was not a proper domain for scientific study and conjecture. Invariably, what is designated as social involves a collapsing of categories and neglecting the place of historical practices, custom, and culture. Moreover, there is no entity "society" or "social" removed from intelligent human conduct and agency. Émile Durkheim's (1933, p. 79) "collective conscience" was perhaps a great example of this categorical confusion, attributing supra-intelligent qualities and agency

to an abstract entity ("a determinate system which has its own life"). For Oakeshott, any inquiry into human action must presuppose reflective intelligence, otherwise it involves the wrong order of inquiry and categorical irrelevance. In addition to certain sociological conjectures, he considered as "categorically absurd" the reduction of humans to genetic or organic processes, or psychic needs and ego. These were all different examples of the muddled work of theoreticians, reducing reflective intelligence to mere laws and processes or collective social systems. These were not proper examples of theorising and their theorems self-refutably denied reflective intelligence itself. In Oakeshott's words, "Theorems about the so-called behaviour of social systems, or about the behaviour of their alleged components, can be represented as theorems about the actions and utterances of human beings only in a masquerade of categories" (OHC 25). Negating these theories was also important to his discussion of human conduct and agency. Since both are connected with the exhibition of intelligence, it is imperative to distinguish them from nonintelligent processes—genetics, organic conditions, theories of collective conscious, or biological processes. Oakeshott throughout his writings emphasised his concern with the human condition. He would have disavowed the efforts of various "social scientists" to reconcile speculative notions of innate human nature with Hobbesian philosophy.4 Similarly, it is not a stretch to imagine how Oakeshott might have responded to subsequent claims in the fields of neuroscience, genetic studies, and psychology that human volition is illusory, or that ethics can be reduced to notions of social reward, adaptive altruism, or neural circuits and anatomical structures of the brain. Oakeshott may likely have conceded that science could be instructive in explaining the how thinking and the mind operate, but this was not a substitute for humanistic disciplines of inquiry.5 The value of these disciplines (particularly history) is that their inquiry is categorically relevant to making sense of the institutions and practices of human associations.

III. HUMAN CONDUCT AND AGENCY

Oakeshott's distinction between two categories of "going-on" is important to how he conceptualises human conduct. Human conduct is concerned with the exhibition of intelligence, though it is different to theoretical activity. It concerns the transactional world *inter homines*, and more precisely, individuals responding to their contingent situations by doing this rather than that in relation to imagined or wished for outcomes (OHC 32). In theorising human conduct Oakeshott again applies a Greek vocabulary to conduct as *pragmata*. Whilst it shared some fidelity with Aristotle's semantics, Oakeshott deployed it in an idiosyncratic manner. The world of *pragmata* corresponded to a pre-theoretical form of conditional understanding that in earlier writings he consigned to the practical world (*sub specie voluntatis*). In OHC it was given more exact terms, as concerning the recognition of identities in contingent situations which, "predicate action, imagined future conditions of things, agency, deliberations, choices, decisions, intelligible utterances, performances, satisfactions, procedures, practises, motives." (Ibid.). Oakeshott made several clarifications about conduct, some of which seem so basic as to be a given, but were important to the related postulate of agency. These were briefly: Firstly, conduct concerns doing, and to this extent presupposes intelligent agents capable of choosing to do this or that action in the pursuit of satisfying wants. Secondly, it concerns understandings in terms of beliefs as distinguished from organic conditions or simply feelings. Thirdly, so far as it involves an engagement to understand, it is not concerned with the generation of *theorems*. It is categorically concerned with performances, and therefore concerns the self-disclosure and self-enactment of agents. Oakeshott understood his task of explaining conduct and agency at a theoretical level to be cabined. The theorist is not himself "*a doer*" and his theoretical understanding is removed from the activity he explains in terms of its postulates (OHC 35).

Oakeshott at times refers to freedom interchangeably with agency, but it is significant that he prefers to use *lexeme* "agency". The contingent activity of conduct presupposes reflective consciousness, "an agent who inhabits a conduct of pragmata, who is composed of entirely understandings, and who is what he understands (or misunderstands) himself to be" (OHC 36). Such reflection presupposes choice, or at least an ability to choose given limited contingent circumstances, and deliberation. This reflects that "doing"

often takes place within the context of contingencies, where outcomes are uncertain. It was implicit also that circumstances in which an agent responds may present alternatives, which compels the agent to deliberate. This was suggestive of Aristotle's influence in that deliberation involves more than simply choice given contingencies and precedes action. Moreover, deliberation is itself contingent, and situations in which the agent is uncertain about how to respond warrants deliberation, and every response proceeds from deliberation, given that it is contingent, implies uncertainty and alternative ways of responding or not responding. Like Aristotle, deliberation for Oakeshott was concerned with the means with which to act, rather than the ends or outcome of the action (Aristotle 2.10, 1226b16-17). Oakeshott describes conduct concerned with an agent as disclosing himself in action to be emotive utterance. In this sense, the conduct of agents comprises both reflection and utterance. Thus, it follows that an agent's conduct involves two characteristic idioms: (i) deliberation, the idiom of reflection; and (ii) persuasion, the idiom of utterance (OHC 40). Conduct where it relates to agents responding to situations by choosing certain actions is concerned with self-disclosure. Oakeshott described this as hazardous insofar as it concerns contingent responses from other agents as an enterprise of uncertainties.

Agency as Oakeshott theorises it in the first essay is related to the exhibition of intelligence. It is significant that Oakeshott avoids discussion of free-will and volition, orienting himself closer to Hegel than Kant. While in Kant's moral philosophy "autonomy" was related to the rational will and is the basis for moral action and judgment independent of external authority; with Hegel, moral agency is a product of reflective intelligence. Freedom inheres in the fact that it is concerned with reflective consciousness and is learnt. To this end, freedom is a characteristically human condition. An agent is not free because he has an unconstrained will, but because he has reflective intelligence and "because doing is an intelligent engagement" (OHC 37). This, Oakeshott emphasises, is not a natural or biological condition, but a learned and historic condition—"the starting-point of doing is the agent as a self-enacted reflective consciousness" (Ibid.). Oakeshott's lecture "A Place of Learning" (1974) contained a remarkably similar account of human freedom as historical contingent "self-understanding."[6] Many have interpreted this as a rejection of Benthamite-Hobbesian ideas of liberty (the absence of external constraint) considered paradigmatic of the classical-liberal tradition. A r*eductio* of Oakeshott's concept of agency would hold that a prisoner of Alcatraz is a free agent, insofar as he has reflective intelligence and is able to choose and deliberate action in response to other agents (prisoners). Yet it is apparent that a convict is decidedly limited and unfree given any ordinary understanding of what it means to be "free." This arguably misconstrues the intended context in which Oakeshott was concerned with conduct and agency. Efraim Podoksik suggests Oakeshott arguably straddled freedom as intelligent agency (human freedom) with a notion of civil freedom—the latter standing closer to the "negative freedom" of some modern liberals (Podoksik 2003, pp. 57-75).

Oakeshott's reference to utterances and idioms is suggestive of the influence of later Wittgenstein, as other scholars have recognised. Oakeshott emphasises idioms rather than truth as the standard of correctness applicable to theoretical endeavours. In contrast to Wittgenstein, Oakeshott rejects the idea that philosophers can resolve confusion in philosophy as linguistic puzzles as philosophy is itself limited by its idioms of inquiry. Intuitively we see in Oakeshott a likeness to J. G. Herder's insistence of the inescapability of language as the "organ of thought" (Spencer 1996, p. 249).[7] Similarly in terms of agency, Oakeshott argues that conditions which qualify conduct do not undermine our agency. Wittgenstein's influence was most apparent in his discussion of adverbial conditions as non-instrumental rules that qualify practice and in his concept of moral conduct in terms of self-disclosure. In an essay which predates the first publication of *The Philosophical Investigations* in 1953, Oakeshott suggested that traditional conduct occurs within a context of moral tradition that is analogous to language. Whilst this renders it dynamic it does not undermine certain examples of moral self-disclosure being analogous to the constructions of bad grammar (RP 471). Perhaps Oakeshott's most original idea in OHC is his explanation of moral conduct as a language comprised of self-enactment and self-disclosure. For Oakeshott, conventions and the rule-ordered character of linguistic practices do not undermine individuality in moral agency and conduct. The fact that individual agents subscribe to frameworks of practice does not

undermine the sentiment of our actions—just as subscription to the conventions of grammar and syntax does limit the self- expression of a novelist or poet. The similarity of this to Wittgenstein's concept of a public language cannot be overstated, though it is a connection which has already been well-explored to date.

IV. MORAL CONDUCT: SELF-ENACTMENT AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

Firstly, it is necessary to unpack how Oakeshott characterises morality as non-extrinsic and akin to language. Oakeshott compares morality to mastery of a language in that, "moral conduct is not solving problems; it is agents continuously and colloquially related to one another in the idiom of moral converse" (OHC 64). In Oakeshottian style, he both qualifies what is meant by moral conduct as conversation and excludes various alternative accounts and theories of morality. As "the *ars artium* of conduct; the practice of all practices" (OHC 60), it was like art in that it permits opportunity for individual style, and yet mastery can be distinguished (OHC 62). In this respect, Oakeshott affirms the Kantian prudence-morality distinction, given it is not connected with the success of the enterprises of agents. Nevertheless, this is where the similarity to Kant's ethics begins and ends. In a more Aristotelian fashion, he holds that moral conduct presupposes (as with agency) choice and deliberation. However, Oakeshott was most explicit that his theory of moral conduct is not concerned with human excellence, the good life, or teleological substantive purposes (Ibid.). Morals are concerned with actions and not events (OHC 61) and concern a way of living and not some substantive purpose to be achieved. To this end, they are examples of practice without any extrinsic purpose:

> In short, a morality may be identified as a practise without any extrinsic purpose; it is concerned with good and bad conduct, and not with performances in respect to their outcomes. A moral relationship is not an association for the achievement of common purpose (e.g. the greatest happiness of the associated); it is relationship solely in respect of conditions to be subscribed to in seeing the satisfaction of any want (OHC 62).

In an analogy with learning to master their mother tongue, he explains that children "come to consciousness in a world illuminated by a moral practice" (Ibid.). Thus, moral practice is composed of "a vernacular language of colloquial intercourse" (ibid.) as well as formalities of grammar and syntax. In being analogous to a language, "it emerges as a ritual of utterance and response, a continuously extemporized dance whose participants are alive to one another's movements" (OHC 63). This aspect of extemporaneity forbids the reduction of moral practice to rules in terms of codes. Furthermore, the vernacular and colloquial aspect of a moral language is fluid and often elusive—one cannot grasp it with reference to the formalities of moral practice, any more than one can understand the peculiarities of cockney slang with reference to the Cambridge English Dictionary. Each moral language has its grammarians who speak it "monotonously" but with care for exactness (OHC 66). Conversely, the ill-educated who speak vulgarly, and "each generation will speak its own moral slang" (OHC 65). Thus, Oakeshott is able to account for variation without devolving into moral relativism.

Several important considerations can be disentangled from Oakeshott's account of moral conduct and warrant brief exposition:

Firstly, consistent with his arguments elsewhere, morals cannot be conflated with biological urges or behaviours. They defy the reductionism of the former since they are concerned with the beliefs, sentiments, and understandings of agents and not instincts (OHC 62). It would also follow from elsewhere in OHC, that biological determinism errs categorically and denies agency—as Oakeshott reiterated, "morality is the practice of agency without further specification" (Ibid.). Oakeshott would have regarded as nonsense various attempts in modern psychology to explain morality in terms of adaptive behaviours or traits that are predetermined—tracing to genes or evolved modular structures of the brain. Importantly, the suggestion

that morals can be innate or programmed defies their understanding as practices, which necessitates their acquisition *via* learning. Moreover, even where such claims are merely concerned with descriptive ethics, Oakeshott would insist this is the wrong order of inquiry.

Secondly, morality consists of moral rules but not rules in the sense of codes or prescriptions of specific performance. This follows from the fact that moral conduct is concerned with practice, and therefore relates to procedures. Categorically, practices concern prescriptions that are procedural conditions and are relevant to the choices and actions of agents (OHC 58). Moral rules are abstractions and examples of abridgements, which are revealed in idioms of *ex post facto* persuasive discourse, concerned with the rightness or wrongness of certain performances (OHC 68). To characterise them as concerned with a persuasive mode of discourse, is not unlike Oakeshott's articulation of political discourse elsewhere. In the case of political conduct, the case for pursuing a particular action over another is not concerned with proving a desired direction—it is a persuasive and rhetorical exercise of demonstrating that it is a preferable course to alternatives. It concerns contingencies which cannot be demonstratively true or false. Congruently, to claim that a moral performance was just or unjust is to demonstrate that it was the best thing to do in the circumstances. Also, it cannot be a consequential activity concerned with the achievement of some outcome, because consideration is how the performance stands in relation to a composition of moral rules (OHC 69). Since, moral rules are not concerned with specific performance, Oakeshott argues that they are indeterminate and inclined to conflict. Further, not all moral rules have equal importance, and cannot be applied to all like-cases in a rigid or identical manner. The justification for good moral actions is often a "casuistical enterprise" of distinctions, obliquities, and exceptions (OHC 70)—not unlike the approach in case-based legal reasoning, which arguably found an equivalence in Cicero's *De Officiis* and later common lawyer jurists. For Oakeshott, the proposition that moral rules do not prescribe specific performance is important to his claim that agency is not undermined by subscription to conditions concerned with self-disclosure.

Thirdly, moral conduct is inextricable from agency. To be an intelligent agent is to act in recognition of the authority conditions of moral practice. Oakeshott expresses this in interdependent circular terms: "There is no agency which is not the exercise not the acknowledgement of moral practise, and no moral conduct which is not an exercise of agency" (OHC 63).

Finally, moral conduct like all practices, is subject to prudential and adverbial qualification. Since it is a practice, it concerns: (I) relationships of *personae*; (II) individual agents making intelligent choices in terms of wishes for circumstances, in relation to other individuals, related by subscription to moral standards. As practice it is learnt (not innate) and thus moral education is necessitated to acquire fluency.

Crucial to Oakeshott's account of moral agency is a distinction between self-enactment and self-disclosure. The two are inseparable but distinct aspects that comprise our moral language. Oakeshott elucidates this well in the following statement:

> Like any other language, it is an instrument of self-disclosure used by agents and disclosing their situations and in choosing their responses; and it is a language of self-enactment which permits those who can use it to understand themselves and one another, to disclose to one another their complex individualities, and to explore relationships far more varied and interesting than those it has a name for all those which a commonplace acceptance of so-called moral values would allow (Ibid.).

Acts of self-disclosure are necessarily "fugitive transactions between mortal agents," in the sense that our sentiments are masked (Ibid.). Self-disclosure is always in use akin to how non-instrumental norms are subscribed to any activity. The conditions of self-disclosure are always external to the agent, but are not concerned with the sentiment or motives of moral performances. In this sense, conditions of self-disclosure are closest to the formal conditions of grammar and syntax. This aspect of moral conduct is inextinguishable and stands prior to authentic self-enactment. Self-enactment reveals something of the

true nature of the agent since it involves motive unmediated by calculations of contingency and the possible responses of other agents. In simple terms, self-enactment concerns conduct understood in terms of the sentiments or motives in which they are performed (OHC 84). To extrapolate from Oakeshott, if self-disclosure is performative then self-enactment is substantive, the latter representing emblems of self-command (OHC 75). Consequently, self-enactment leaves more space for authenticity, however, it is also conditioned by moral practice. To the extent that self-enactment concerns motive it is always opaque to others and personal. Yet, our judgments about the virtuosity or laudableness of a moral action often relate to motives that concern self-enactment. Despite the duality of these two aspects of moral conduct, they are not capable of complete separation. Oakeshott was at pains to emphasise that self-enactment was not free of the compunctions that condition self-disclosure. Moreover, the sentiments or motives of self-enactment could not be repugnant or inconsistent with the conditions of self-disclosure. In Oakeshott's words, "since a vocabulary of moral self-disclosure and a vocabulary of self-enactment are a single language, the conditions they specify cannot be discrepant in any important respect; nevertheless, they concern different things" (OHC 77). Oakeshott made plain that virtuous examples of self-enactment never releases an agent from adequate subscription to conditions of self-disclosure.

The distinction between these aspects of moral conduct was important to Oakeshott's later purposes in OHC. If certain adverbial conditions of practice do not determine the substantive choices of agents, then moral autonomy is not compromised. Later in OHC, Oakeshott considers the ideal character of two dualities of political association that comprise the understanding of the modern European state: civil association and enterprise association. The former allows for a wider sphere of self-chosen action than its counterpart, and to this end the most amenable to the conditions of a *res publica*. Unsurprisingly, Oakeshott also identifies laws in the civil association as non-instrumental rules prescribing adverbial conditions—with the eccentric example that criminal laws do not proscribe lightning fires but prohibit the lighting of fires arsonically. To this end, he was close to Hegel's defence of civil law in the *Philosophy of Right* (1820), that obligations to laws cannot be considered constraints on freedom. Oakeshott belabours the point that moral agency is never without criteria, thus situating himself close to Hegel's notion of mediated autonomy (*contra* Kant):

> What is called moral autonomy does not require moral choice to be gratuitous criterion this exercise of so called will (an isolated *meum*) in which allowing the agent simultaneously recognises or even creates a value for which he is wholly responsible and places himself under its command, thus miraculously releasing himself from organic impulse, rational contingency, the authority rules of conduct (OHC 75).

In OHC (and elsewhere) Oakeshott traces civil association to Hobbes's *Leviathan* and his denial of the *summum bonum*. Subsequent theorists, such as John Gray, have explicated this in terms of the tradition of *modus vivendi* liberalism—in contrast to the liberalism of rational consensus (Gray 2000, p. 26). Conversely, other theorists sympathetic to Oakeshott have doubted the possibility of non-instrumental laws, as laws are rarely simply procedural in the terms Oakeshott described. Arguably, even laws which accord most closely with Oakeshott's non-instrumental rules have some extrinsic purpose. Oakeshott's civil association was also relevant to a wider debate in political theory—whether the involuntary compulsion of law can be reconciled with individual freedom.[8]

Finally, conduct involves uncertainty, in the sense that even if agents are sure of their wants, they can never be sure of satisfying those wants. In the world *inter homines* the pursuit of wants is largely contingent on the performances of other agents. While the formal conditions of self-disclosure are external to the agent and more transparent, success or failure of conduct is always a contingent exercise. Arguably, self-enactment provides a sense of clarity for agents, in that the sentiments which motivate actions are personal to the agent. Oakeshott left open a multiplicity of possibilities in terms of self-enactment, though religious enactment was certainly intended:

> Human conduct, then, is agents to disclosing and enacting themselves in responding to their understood contingent situations by choosing to do or say this rather than that in relation to imagined and wished for outcomes, in the exercise of chosen sentiments, and in terms of multiplicity of arts and practices presided over by a practise of moral conduct and perhaps a religious faith (OHC 85).

IV. SELF-ENACTMENT & RELIGIOUS FAITH

Oakeshott did not publish extensively on religion and theology in his lifetime. However, the publication of *Religion, Politics and the Moral life* (2011) and *Michael Oakeshott: Notebooks 1922-1986* (2014), has ignited interest in his religious thought. Significantly, one of his earliest essays "Religion in the World" (1929) reflected the importance of St. Augustine to his religious thought, in which Oakeshott distinguished worldly affairs from that of religious life. His discussion of religion in "On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct," was brief but dense and wide-ranging. His characterisation of religion as the "evocation of sentiment" arguably departed from its earlier treatment in EM. In the latter, religion was practical with its mystique providing "concrete mood" (EM 292-296) as a near perfect form of experience. Contrastingly, OHC portrays religion as most intimately connected with self-enactment. As Oakeshott clarified, "A man may enact himself religiously, but there are no religious actions. Every religion, each with its own image of deity and of itself, has its own idiom of faith which reflects the civilisation of the believer" (OHC 85). Worthington argued that Oakeshott departed here from earlier treatments of religion, so far as Augustinian providence was jettisoned in the direction of a more Hobbesian understanding of self-enactment. Whilst Oakeshott implied a duality between the worldly and the temporal, both cities were "within the sphere of human experience" (Worthington 2000, p. 382). In Oakeshott's early essays on religion, the city of man was depicted as having lost sight of mortality and reflected St. Augustine's notion that the world is corrupt, as our mortal condition is afflicted by pride and *libido dominandi* (desire to dominate).

Additionally, Oakeshott addresses the consolation provided by religion, given the agony of the human condition. In a discussion of wrongdoing *inter homines* and theodicy one finds fleeting references to both Boethius and St. Augustine. In a Kierkegaardian tone, Oakeshott allows that above all, religious faith is consolation for the futility and nothingness of life:

> But while religious faith may be recognised as a solace of wrong-doing, its fortune and as a release from this utility of wrongdoing, its central concern is with a less contingent dissonance in the human condition; namely, the holiness, the futility of that condition, its character of being no more than, "un voyage au bout de la nuit.' What is sought in religious belief is not merely consolation for woe or deliverance from the burden of sin, but a reconciliation to nothingness (OHC 83-85).

For Kierkegaard, the human predicament is a sense of nothingness and emptiness, experienced by both the righteous and the unrighteous. Faith in our Creator allows the individual to confront existential dread, fear, and anguish, sustaining the self in a paradoxical relation to the divine (Kierkegaard 1941, p. 26). In a similar vein Bosanquet remarked, "Religion is what makes life worth living" (1920, p. vii). Moreover, for Oakeshott the individual finds some release through self-enactment from the hazardous adventures in self-disclosure. Worthington further explained this connection in terms of its significance to Oakeshott's civil philosophy. For Oakeshott, many of the historical proponents of moral individuality had failed to grasp that self-disclosure does not capture individuality in its fullest sense as authentic self-enactment:

> The tendency of liberal theory to focus in the moral character of self-disclosure and to overlook the moral significance of self-enactment has provoked charges that its conception of the individual is spiritually bankrupt by such (individualist) critics as Kierkegard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Frederich Nietzsche. Like Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and for that matter, Augustine, Oakeshott argues that the moral achievements of an individual must refer to something beyond (or behind) the merely external appearances of innocence and guilt (Worthington 2000, p. 394).

This interpretation not only reconciled religious self-enactment with Oakeshott's wider civil philosophy, but also the existentialist current in his thought. Consistent throughout Oakeshott's lectures and essays was a criticism of key figures in the liberal tradition as lacking a comprehensive understanding of moral individuality—namely Locke, and the later utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill. Bentham's felicific calculus exemplified the tendency to overlook self-enactment and to merely consider motives in terms of the pursuit of satisfying wants (*qua* utility). Oakeshott made explicit that such an approach involved not only a retrograde conception of moral individuality, but a denial of agency in its proper sense.

However, even in his Hobbesian turn, Oakeshott preserves subtle allusions of Augustine. He situates religious sentiment within the interior life rather than in acts themselves considered religious. He intimates that moral and religious significance stems from the inward ordering of the self, in place of the correct performance of outwardly recognised acts. This echoes Augustine's injunction *noli foras ire; in te ipsum redi*—do not go outside; return into yourself. Augustine's account of *ordo amoris* presents sin as a misdirection of love prior to its manifestation in conduct, a corruption of the will that only subsequently appears in outward action. Oakeshott frames morality as self-disclosure and self-enactment, with the self expressing itself within social conventions while realising its own moral and spiritual orientation. Religion, in his account, is the intentional cultivation of the self toward ultimate concerns. The significance of any act does not derive from its outward appearance but from the inward realisation of the self in performing it.[9] Oakeshott's self-enactment reflects Augustine's *verbum interius*: moral and religious significance emanating from the inward ordination of desire and deliberation. Self-disclosure manifests but does not consummate the ethical or spiritual quality of action, thereby emphasising the role of interior orientation in human agency.

V. AUGUSTINE AND OAKESHOTT: THE COMMUNAL, VERNACULAR CHARACTER OF MORAL CONVERSATION

While scholars have explored continuities between Oakeshott and Wittgenstein on rule-following and practice (Plotica 2013, pp. 45-68), the potential influence of Augustine on Oakeshott's moral thought warrants closer attention. In *Confessions* and *De Magistro*, Augustine presents understanding as arising through participation, correction, and habituation within a community, rather than from prior possession of abstract meanings. Wittgenstein famously interprets Augustine's description of language-learning in the opening sections of *Philosophical Investigations* as exemplifying an ostensive and referential theory of meaning (Wittgenstein 2001, pp. 6-8), but this reading isolates a brief autobiographical passage from its broader pedagogical and theological context, where Augustine emphasises the limits of ostension and the indispensability of communal practice. In *De Magistro*, he argues that words do not transmit knowledge but prompt inward recognition, while in *Confessions*, learning unfolds through the formative authority of parents, teachers, and liturgical life. Conceptually, Augustine anticipates Oakeshott's claim that moral knowledge is a practical competence rather than a codified set of principles. Augustine's analysis of the will reinforces this parallel: moral quality depends upon the proper ordering of love, not merely outward conformity. Augustine's insistence that genuine understanding cannot be transmitted technically supports Oakeshott's contention that moral education resists codification and remains embedded in living, vernacular practice. Knowledge is never purely private or innate but emerges through relationships, instruction, and shared activity, evincing the communal and lived character of Oakeshottian moral conversation. This

Augustinian influence is evident in three respects: in the inward realisation of moral orientation within the will; in the distinction between outward conformity and inward moral self-enactment; and in the understanding of moral life as cultivated within a historically transmitted practice, whose authority arises through communal habituation and through lived engagement.

Firstly, for Oakeshott moral self-disclosure constitutes a practical competence, the *ars artium* of conduct (OHC 60), acquired through mastery rather than through theoretical instruction. One does not master morality by assimilating a codified system of rules; instead, one attains fluency in it much as one acquires a language, through use, correction, and immersion in a living practice. Like any language, moral life possesses a vernacular and improvisatory character that resists reduction to formal grammar. Moral competence requires grasping a practice's idiom, not simply acquisition of its formal rules (OHC 63-64). Moreover, morality concerns both a cultivated capacity and the quality of the agent's self-enactment, as enacted in the orientation from which conduct proceeds. This understanding finds a striking pedagogical antecedent in *De Magistro*, where Augustine rejects the claim that teachers transmit knowledge through words (Augustine 1995, p. 141).[10] Words function as signs that occasion recognition; they do not deposit understanding in the hearer. The pupil must appropriate truth inwardly (Ibid., pp. 137-38). Augustine extends this insight in *Confessions*, portraying his moral crisis not as a defect of intellect but as a division of the will[11]: he recognised the good before he loved it sufficiently to perform it (Augustine 1991, p. 182). By situating moral understanding in the ordering of love, Augustine anticipates Oakeshott's contention that morality inheres in self-enactment rather than in explicit doctrine. For both, communal instruction and habituation remain indispensable, but moral realisation ultimately depends upon the agent's inward appropriation and active orientation of the will.

Secondly, Oakeshott distinguishes between outward conformity to rules and the inward enactment that gives conduct its moral quality, the criterion by which one's actions may be judged as virtuous or unvirtuous. A person may comply with the conditions of self-disclosure and still act unvirtuously if that compliance emanates merely from calculation or concealed self-interest. Oakeshott therefore refuses to identify morality solely with prescriptivism. He treats moral conduct as the expression of a disposition and sentiment, a way of going on within a practice that manifests the agent's inner orientation. Moral life, on this account, requires more than procedural correctness; it demands authentic self-enactment. Congruently, in *Confessions*, Augustine scrutinises not only his deeds but the loves that animate them. For Augustine, sin arises from a disorder of desire rather than a mere breach of external command (Wetzel 1992, pp. 82-95). He grounds inwardness more determinately than Oakeshott, evaluating moral conduct according to the proper ordering of the soul toward God as the highest good (*ordo amoris*) (Ibid.). Oakeshott, by contrast, allows broader latitude regarding the sources from which self-enactment derives its virtuosity. Both reject morality reduced to external compliance, but Augustine anchors virtuous orientation in a theologically ordered account of love, whereas Oakeshott situates it within historically contingent practices. For Oakeshott, virtuous conduct is not simply mastery of idioms or conformity with conditions of self-disclosure; the requirement of agency prevents him from appealing to any eternal or teleological source of virtuosity (OHC 79),[12] and agency demands that the only absolute is that self-enactment must remain compatible with the conditions of self-disclosure.

Thirdly, for Oakeshott, moral life realised within historically inherited practices finds strong analogues in Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine situates moral formation within communal and institutional life, showing that humans acquire virtue through participation in historically extended forms of social and religious practice.[13] In *City of God*, he emphasises that families, laws, and churches shape habits and desires, habituating people to ordered love and moral discernment.[14] Authority in these institutions is formative rather than coercive, guiding individuals toward proper ends without supplanting reflective understanding. Moral knowledge and virtue emerge not from abstract precepts but from sustained engagement with living practices that transmit patterns of thought, behaviour, and judgment over time (Ibid.). Augustine presents the ordering of desire toward God as the highest good, yet he stresses that temporal communities provide the context in which individuals learn to orient their loves rightly

(Williams 1989, p. 143). Tradition, in this sense, is not mere custom; it functions as the repository through which moral intelligibility and virtuous action are transmitted and sustained. Augustine's account coheres with Oakeshott's view that moral life is vernacular, historically transmitted, and embodied in conduct: it has no single architect, cannot be reconstructed from first principles, and depends upon immersion within a living communal tradition. In this way, Oakeshott's emphasis on authentically enacted will within a context of tradition and communal practice is partially Augustinian.

Thus, Oakeshott's moral philosophy emphasises the inward enactment of the self within historically transmitted practices and the communal cultivation of moral competence. He conceives morality as self-disclosure and self-enactment, with the moral quality of action determined by the agent's inward orientation. Augustine situates virtue within the ordering of love and habituated engagement in communal life. Both stress that moral understanding and conduct emerge through sustained practice, with Oakeshott allowing a plurality of sources for self-enactment, while Augustine grounded it in the proper ordering of love toward God.

VI. CONCLUSION

Oakeshott's OHC presents human understanding not as a quest for foundations but as a reflective clarification of the world we already inhabit. Theorising begins within practice and never escapes its conditional character; it identifies and explains without prescribing. By distinguishing intelligent conduct from natural process, he secures agency against reductionism while denying philosophy any sovereign authority over life. Theory remains an adventure without finality, valuable for lucidity but constrained by its own idiom. This account prepares the ground for moral conduct, where intelligent agency discloses and enacts itself within practices that no theory can command, yet which the theorist strives to understand. Oakeshott's reflections on religion deepen his account of moral individuality by situating faith in self-enactment rather than discrete acts. Religion names an orientation of the self toward ultimate concerns, expressed through sentiment and interior resolve, consoling not by resolving contingency but by reconciling the agent to it. This inward emphasis recalls Augustine's ordered love, where moral and religious significance derives from the will's orientation toward its ultimate good rather than mere outward conformity. In a secular age that often reduces morality to biology or utility, Oakeshott demonstrates that ethical life cannot be fully captured by instinct or calculation; instead, it unfolds through historical contingency and lived tradition, requiring the cultivation of inward orientation, reflective judgment, and authentic self-enactment within enduring communal practices.

REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Aristotle. 2012. *Eudemian Ethics*. Trs. Brad Inwood and Raphael Woolf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Augustine. 1991. *Confessions*. Tr. Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____. 1995. *On the Teacher* (*De Magistro).* Tr. Peter King. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

_____. 2003. *The City of God*. Ed. and tr. Henry Bettenson, rev. ed. London: Penguin.

Barber, Benjamin R. 1976. Conserving Politics: Michael Oakeshott and Political Theory. *Government and Opposition* 11(4):447.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1982. The Sciences and the Humanities. *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, pp. 80-110, ed. Henry Hardy. New York: Penguin.

Bosanquet, Bernard. 1920. *What Religion Is*. London: Macmillan & Co.

Durkheim, Emile. 1933. *The Division of Labor in Society.* New York: The Free Press.

Fell, A. P. 1991. R. G. Collingwood and the Hermeneutical Tradition. *International Studies in Philosophy* 23(2):1-12.

Gray, John. 2000. *Two Faces of Liberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Herbermann, Charles George. 1907. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, pp. 192-93. New York: The Encyclopedia Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1941. *Fear and Trembling.* Tr. Walter Lowrie. New York: Princeton University Press. https://www.sorenkierkegaard.nl/artikelen/Engels/101.%20Fear%20and%20Trembling%20book%20Kierkegaard.pdf

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1988. *The German Ideology*, part one, ed. C. J. Arthur. New York: International Publishers.

Oakeshott, Michel. 1933. *Experience and its Modes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. 1939-40. The Claims of Politics. *Scrutiny* 8:148.

_____. 1991/1962. The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind. In: *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

_____. 1975/1991. *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

_____. 1991. A Place of Learning. In: *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller. New Haven/Yale University Press/Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Pinker, Steven. 2018. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress.* New York: Viking.

Pitkin, Hannah. 1976. Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory. *Political Theory* 4(3):301-320.

Plotica, Luke Philip. 2013. This Is Simply What I Do: Wittgenstein and Oakeshott on the Practices of Individual Agency. *The Review of Politics* 75(1):45-68.

Podoksik, Efraim. 2003.Oakeshott's Theory of Freedom as Recognized Contingency. *European Journal of Political Theory* 2(1):57-75.

Sandlin, Mac S. 2021. Love and Do What You Want: Augustine's Pneumatological Love Ethics. *Religions* 12(8):585. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080585.

Spencer, Vicki. 1996. Towards and Ontology of Individualism: Herder's Theory of Identity, Culture and Community. *History of European Ideas*, 22:249.

Wetzel, James. 1992. *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Rowan. 1989. Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*. *Literature and Theology* 3(2):143.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2001. *Philosophical Investigations.* Trs. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Worthington, Glenn. 2000. Michael Oakeshott and the City of God. *Political Theory* 28(4):382.

NOTES

1 However, there are some insurmountable differences. Congruently, Arendt was careful to emphasise that she was a "political theorist" and foremost concerned with the human condition as distinct from human nature. See: Arendt 1958.

2 This is hardly surprising, Collingwood himself wrote of the historical imagination, as comprising interpretation and interpolation. The connection between Collingwood and the hermeneutical tradition has been explored elsewhere. See Fell 1991, pp. 1-12.

3 This essay is so well-known its recitation here is almost redundant. Oakeshott traced this attitude to Bacon's Novum *Organum* (1620) and *New Atlantis* (1629). In a nutshell, this approach insisted that politics could be perfected through a "sovereignty of technique" to the exclusion of connoisseurship and traditional practice. This erred in neglecting the role of experience and practical *know-how* and imagined that politics was a science that could be reduced to a set of learned principles alike a political handbook.

4 See Pinker 2018.

5 This is somewhat implied in the statement: "The distinction, then between goings on identified themselves exhibitions of intelligence and goings on to which may be made intelligible but are not themselves intelligent, is not a distinction between mental or physical or between minds and bodies regarded as entities it is a distinction within the engagements of understanding, a distinction between sciences (that is ideal characters) and the identities with which they are concerned" (OHC 14-15).

6 This was initially delivered as an address to the Colorado College as the Abbott Memorial Lecture, commemorating the centenary of the college, and later published in a compendium of works. See Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 19-34.

7 Some caution must be had here to impute similarities without much support or attribution in Oakeshott's published writings. However, as at least one scholar has explained Herder's thought, "...language is the form in which human thoughts are moulded and shaped, and it is thereby credited as constituting the very contents of our consciousness" (Spencer 1996, p. 249).

8 In short, Oakeshott held acquiescence to authority to be obligatory, and from that it made sense to speak in terms of civil obligation rather than civil obedience. "Political engagement then, is an exploration of respublica in terms of the desirability of the conditions it prescribes, and this entails a relationship to respublica which is at once acquiescent and critical. The acquiescence is assent to its authority. Without this there can be no politics" (Oakeshott 1975/1991, pp. 155-156).

9 As Oakeshott qualifies, "The unresolved and inconclusive character of human conduct is qualified (and not merely concealed) when actions are recognised as self-enactments; that is, when they are recognised as self-enactment" (OHC 84).

10 Augustine implored us to instead "*hear the Teacher within you*" (Augustine 1995, p. 141).

11 "Human sinfulness, Augustine believed, resulted from misdirected or disordered love, making a sharp distinction between that which we ought to use and that which we ought to enjoy" (Sandlin 2021, p. 585).

12 Oakeshott restates and belabours this point throughout. However, he makes explicit that a practice, "does not prescribe choices to be made or satisfactions to be sought; instead, it intimates considerations to be subscribed to in making choices, in performing actions, and pursuing purposes. Consequently, it postulates 'free' agents, and it is powerless to deprive them of their freedom."

13 This can be distilled from Book XIX, Chapter 28, in his exposition of the two cities and the shaping influence of love on moral existence. Humans are shaped by the order of love, and moral identity is assimilated through community life rather than innate or abstract rule learning (Augustine 2003, pp. 593-94, Book XIV.28).

14 Augustine stresses that moral discernment depends on ordering love toward God, with virtue shaped through habitual engagement in community life (Ibid., XIX.13-14, 870-873).