

Oakeshott and the Complex Ecology of the Moral Life

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Abstract: The first of three parts of this article explores Oakeshott's indictment of rationalism in the moral life and endeavors to explain why he is so negative towards this version of morality. The second investigates the role that he ascribes to habit in moral conduct and argues that his writings can be understood to accommodate the place of reasoning in the moral life. The third part demonstrates the role of formulated principles and ideals in his conception of morality.

Keywords: Morality; ecology; rationalism; habit; reason; principles; justification; literature.

This essay explores the complex texture of the moral life in the work of Michael Oakeshott and to this end it draws on literary texts, interpreted broadly to include biography. The difference between philosophy and literature as conduits of human understanding is communicated in Goethe's distinction between theory and life itself, mentioned by Robert Grant in his monograph on Oakeshott. '*Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldener Baum* (Grey, dear friend, is theory all/ And green the golden tree of life)' (Grant, 1990, p. 118).¹ Of necessity there is greyness in some philosophical work but literature does offer something of the 'green' of life's 'golden tree'. Margaret Watkins (2008) draws attention to the power of imaginative literature to capture what she calls both the 'particularity and complexity' p. 311) of ethical contexts in teaching moral philosophy. Noel O'Sullivan (2005, p. 13) perceptively notes the potential contribution of imaginative literature in understanding Oakeshott's account of human practices. Literature communicates some of the pulse of human lives. For example, writing on one the classic autobiographies of Western literature, Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, David Denby commends the work as possessing 'the juice of life' in it (p. 192).

So what then is the character of the rationalist morality the Oakeshott condemns?

1. RATIONALISM IN THE MORAL LIFE

The 'morality of the Rationalist' (1991, p. 41) consists in the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals or principles and the deliberate application of moral rules. This form of morality is a classic *taxis* based on self-consciousness and planning. What it proposes is that individuals firstly determine 'in the abstract' (p. 473) their moral ideals and then formulate them in words. Then they learn by applying a set of rules to regulate their conduct in accordance with these ideals before finally learning to defend their chosen ideals from the criticism of others. The dangers which Oakeshott sees in this view of the moral life are, firstly, that it sets such a high value on reflection that full participation in moral life is restricted to the kind of person who is 'something of a philosopher and something of a self-analyst' (p. 475). The second and more damning indictment of this form of moral life is that applying such rules to conduct is not an art easily learned and the intellectual effort involved in determining how and where to apply them can paralyze action. Oakeshott also maintains

that an individual who does not enjoy a broad intellectual grasp of the relative importance of different moral ideals can become obsessional in the pursuit of one particular ideal. And, as he observes in a memorable and poetic aphorism, the pursuit of such an obsession ‘has made many a man hard and merciless’ (p. 476). Although this rationalist morality in a pure form is unlikely to be found in reality, yet in our culture it is the dominant strain in thinking about the moral life.

Why is Oakeshott so hostile to the morality of rationalism? It is interesting here to note how religion and the moral life were communicated in the school that he attended. As a community it ‘was remarkably equipped with heroes, with a past and a relationship to that past’ (Grant, 1990, p. 119):

Religion did not appear as a set of beliefs but as a kind of *pietas*; morals was knowing how to behave; Florentine and Pre-Raphaelite art was on the walls. These things were very little ‘intellectualised’, and afterwards, when some of them were left behind, I never felt that they were things I had to be released from (*ibid*).

This absence of intellectualization captures much of the spirit of the appropriate version of the moral life advocated by Oakeshott. The fundamental flaw in the understanding of morality in which reflection and the self-conscious pursuit of ideals are dominant is its intellectualized nature whereby formulated ideals are conceived as being generative of moral conduct. In reality moral ideals, principles and rules depend on there being concrete episodes of conduct to reflect upon and many such ideals are the result of reflection upon actual conduct. A further disadvantage of the form of moral life where reflection dominates is that thought and speculation are given priority at the expense of action, and moral conduct is seen as a constant attempt to resolve moral dilemmas. And this can lead to a higher value being placed on intellectual coherence than on a coherent pattern of conduct. This form of moral life, suggests Oakeshott, may be compared to a religion where the construction of a theology has become more important than the practice of a way of life (p. 479). Or, as he puts it in another apposite and illuminating analogy, the preaching of moral ideals such as that of social justice is considered a greater achievement than possessing ‘a habit of ordinary decent behaviour’ (p. 482). And in respect of moral education the danger of a predominantly reflective form of morality is that instruction in principles and rules will come to assume greater importance than the cultivation

of appropriate patterns of conduct through the provision of good example.

When it comes to moral conduct Oakeshott believes, as does Shakespeare’s (1997) *Coriolanus*, that ‘action is eloquence’ (Act III, Sc. ii, line 76). He envisages formulated principles as tending to be otiose, trivial, sanctimonious and often invoked to disguise hypocrisy. They represent what the narrator’s mother in Proust’s great novel, *Remembrance of Things Past* is thinking of in her witty comment about her antipathy to preached virtue—‘What virtues lord thou makest us abhor’ (Proust, 2012, p. 43). The moral exhortations of the pigs in *Animal Farm* exemplify a dramatic version of preached morality. This is also the form of moral and political discourse that a character in a Milan Kundera (1985, pp. 111-112) story describes as ‘[p]olitical rhetoric and sophistries’ that do not exist to be ‘believed’ but rather only to serve to promote the self-interest of the political authorities. It is only ‘[f]oolish people ... who take them in earnest’ and even these people ‘sooner or later discover inconsistencies’ in the ‘rhetoric and sophistries’ (*ibid*). From the time of the condemnation by Jesus of the Pharisees, disingenuous moralizing is also to be found in religious rhetoric. There is a passage in *The Catcher in the Rye* that captures this tendency very well. The students in the narrator’s school enjoy a visit from the successful past pupil called Ossenburger who has made a fortune in the undertaking business. In the chapel he delivers an oration in which he says that:

he was never ashamed, when he was in some kind of trouble or something, to get right down on his knees and pray to God. He told us we should always pray to God—talk to him and all—wherever we were. He told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy and all. He said he talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car. That killed me. I can just see the big phoney bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiffs (Salinger, 1972, pp. 20-21).

But moral principles do not have to be so self-serving and hypocritical. In an account of his experience as a parent of three young children growing up in Italy entitled *An Italian Education*, the British novelist Tim Parks (2000) writes about the shock and cultural dissonance that the moral double standards that he detected in many Italians provoked in his English sensibility. The double standards of provincial Veneto between professed beliefs and actual conduct are reflected in what he refers to as an ‘extraordinary

conflict of cultures' (p. 71). There is 'peasant, Catholic, superstitious Italy, physically present in the roadside shrines and Madonnas' (*ibid*), but where many people who claim to be non-believers dress up in their best clothes to appear at Mass on Sunday. Children will be baptized and receive catechetical instruction at the behest of parents who never go to Church themselves. There is also there the secular, liberal Italy of fashion, the latest technology and a surface acceptance of the rhetoric of equality—between races, sexes, the able-bodied and those who suffer from disabilities. Yet a young mother might cry when she is told that she has given birth to *una bella bambina* (a beautiful baby girl), a mere girl, rather than to the much more desirable *maschio* (boy) (Parks, 2000, pp. 71-72). When it comes to gender preferences and to the upbringing of children, modern pieties carry less weight than inherited attitudes. Girls and boys will be brought up in terms of traditional gender roles (Parks, 2000, p. 73). Parks suddenly becomes aware that his Anglo-Saxon presumption that there should be internal consistency between one's beliefs and further consistency between one's beliefs and behavior is not shared among the inhabitants of the Veneto. It then dawns on him that values seem to be held 'more for their aesthetic properties than anything else' (*ibid*). Modern liberal orthodoxies are pleasant to embrace as indeed are the beliefs of traditional Catholicism. Parks learns what Oakeshott perceived in 1948, that formulated principles are not necessarily designed to connect with the conduct of real life.

2. AFFIRMING THE HABITUAL

On account of the intellectualized and unrealistic character of much morality embodied in pious propositions, Oakeshott therefore advocates a form of moral life in that habit is the dominant but not exclusive element. In other words he envisages the moral life as a spontaneous rather than a planned practice. This form of moral life is based on habits of 'affection and behaviour' (1991, pp. 467-468) in which individuals unselfconsciously act in accordance with a tradition of moral behavior. It is the form that moral conduct takes in 'all the emergencies of life when time and opportunity for reflection are lacking' (p. 468) and in which actual conduct is given priority over the mere profession of moral convictions. And there are two good grounds for this salutary emphasis in Oakeshott's writing on the subject. This is because, firstly, how we actually behave, as opposed to what we merely profess, represents our real moral convictions and consequently what is most morally worthwhile about us. As noted earlier,

in the moral life 'action is eloquence' (Coriolanus, Act III, Sc. ii, line 76). Secondly, where precedence is given to action over reflection, moral ideals, rules, and principles are assigned their duly subordinate epistemological status because formulated moral rules depend on there being conduct to reflect upon in the first place.

Nevertheless, in spite of Oakeshott's claim that what he calls habits of 'affection and behaviour' (Oakeshott, 1991, pp. 467-468) go beyond mere 'imitation' to take the form of 'selective conformity' to traditional moral conduct (p. 469), his use of the term 'habit', on account of its association with mere acquiescence and blind conformity, must give us pause (see Williams, 2007, pp. 169-87). And indeed it is on the very grounds that the high value which he places on habit in moral life would lead to mere conformity in moral conduct that Peter Winch (1980, pp. 54-65) criticizes Oakeshott's commitment to a form of moral life based on habit.² Now there is a lack of precision in Oakeshott's writing regarding the meaning of the term habit and even such a careful writer as Winch could be more sensitive to the different senses of the term. Accordingly it is necessary to look more closely at the way in which the term is used in order to establish what Oakeshott understands by a form of moral life based on habit.

The concept of habit: an elucidation

As a preliminary distinction, a habit must not be identified with such reflex responses as blinking, flinching, wincing or recoiling. Rather we use the term habit in the first instance to refer to a low-level automatic response to some familiar stimulus, that is, to the performance of elementary operations, each of which is the exact replica of its predecessor. Examples would be a child reciting the multiplication tables or a soldier saluting or standing to attention. In this sense, where habit comes nearest to mere reflex, we even speak of doing things from sheer force of habit. A second use of the term habit is to be found in its application to the performance of relatively sophisticated operations where these are carried out on a predictable and regular basis. Here habit has the sense of something done habitually or as a matter of routine. Examples of a habit in this sense would be the routine preparation of laboratory equipment or a routine check on tyre pressure, oil and water levels in a car. The distinction between the first and second senses in the use of the term is between habit as automatic response and habit as the habitual exercise of a capacity. In a third sense of the use of the term, a habit may be a performance which expresses a disposition

or tendency to behave in a particular manner, such as, for example, where we surrender our seat on a bus to an elderly or infirm person. Perhaps here we could say that habit refers to something which is done as a rule.

Now conduct that expresses a disposition to act in a particular manner will always require some reflection as to its necessity and appropriateness. In the last example we may ask ourselves whether the potential recipient of our consideration will feel happy at being treated as less than youthful and able-bodied, or we may wish to excuse ourselves from making an offer on this occasion because we are feeling particularly tired or unwell. Conduct performed as a matter of routine, on the other hand, requires reflection only in non-routine circumstances. In the context of the first example, such a situation may occur where we have to look for some pieces of equipment which have been mislaid by a careless colleague or, in respect of the second example, we may have to cope with a situation where the car is leaking oil. Much of the routine work carried out by a doctor or a dentist could be done by a paramedic with minimal training—but it is the ability to detect when something is not susceptible to routine treatment which distinguishes the skill of a doctor or dentist from that of the lesser qualified paramedic.

Both the habitual performance of routines and performances that express dispositions differ from the production of automatic responses. Each automatic response, the act of standing to attention, for example, is an exact replica of its predecessor and can be produced at will outside the context in which it normally has its place. The capacity to produce an automatic response is inculcated by means of drill and we can speak of someone producing such a response without thinking in that it can be produced without taking thought regarding whether or how to perform the act in question. Routine and dispositional performances, however, cannot be acquired by drill alone. These are normally learned through trial and error or through supervised initiation supplemented by demonstration and explanation. Performances of this kind cannot be produced without taking thought, although they can take place without conscious reference to rules regarding means and ends. Both kinds of performance are also rooted in contexts from which they cannot normally be detached. The preparation of laboratory equipment can only occur in a laboratory context and the activity of servicing cars can only be practiced on actual cars. Performances which express a disposition are similarly rooted in actual situations, although they may have a component of social skill which can be practiced in a simulated setting. For example, a teacher may organize a role play situation in the classroom

to show his/her pupils how to offer a seat graciously, politely and without ostentation.

When he talks of a 'habit of affection and behaviour' Oakeshott is thinking of dispositional performances of the third kind. In his writing there is an unfortunate parsimony of illustration on the matter but the pre-eminent moral habit, the 'habit of ordinary decent behaviour', is clearly a habit in the sense of a settled disposition to act in the light of certain attitudes, convictions, values and commitments. Moreover, in the description of how we acquire this 'habit of affection and behaviour' he says, as we have just seen, that although habit begins in imitation, it becomes in time 'selective conformity' to the moral values that a society offers. Consequently habit goes beyond mere mimetic and automatic response. More explicit again is his attribution to the property 'elasticity' to 'a moral life which is firmly based upon a habit of conduct' (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 470). Perhaps we can best understand Oakeshott's habits of moral conduct as analogous to the kind of habit involved in being able to speak a language. In speaking a language we do not simply produce utterances; rather we respond to contexts or matrices of human meaning in terms of our particular intentions and purposes.³

And the analogy between moral habits and speech habits demonstrates the essential point which Oakeshott wishes to make. Just as in speaking our mother tongue we observe rules of grammar and syntax without consciously advertent to these, in the version of moral life advocated by Oakeshott rules of conduct are observed implicitly and unselfconsciously, 'tacitement, naturellement et sans art' (tacitly, naturally and without art) (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 25). And the essential distinction which Oakeshott wishes to make is between conduct that involves conscious reference to rules and that in which rules are observed implicitly and 'as nearly as possible without reflection' (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 468). An example of the kind of moral character from literature is that of Captain Brown in *Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell. Gaskell refers to the Captain's 'infinite kindness of heart, and the various modes in which, unconsciously to himself, he manifested it' (Gaskell, 1963, p. 15). To say that Captain Brown manifests his good nature 'unselfconsciously to himself' means that he acts consistently or habitually in a kindly manner, without conscious deliberation about ideals and rules. Accordingly for the Captain, articulated knowledge is superfluous. Yet his habit of kindly behavior is not a habit in the sense that he responds to situations in an automatic, reflex manner. Doubtless Oakeshott's use of the term 'habit', with its suggestions of automatic, unreflective, reflex

response is somewhat misleading. In using the term, however, his aim is simply to mark a distinction between conduct which is normal, customary and/or traditional and that which is premeditated and self-conscious.⁴ Just as people can speak their mother tongue without being overtly and concurrently aware of the rules of grammar and syntax that they are following, so can people behave morally without self-conscious reference to the principles and ideals in terms of which they are acting (although this is not to deny that, if called upon to do so, they must be able to give some justification for why they act as they do).

It would, however, be less confusing and more accurate to speak of moral conduct as a practice rather than as a habit of 'affection and behaviour'. Practice is indeed the term which Oakeshott himself uses in *On Human Conduct*, together with the illuminating metaphor of moral conduct as a language (1975, pp. 58-89). The version of the moral life that he defends could be better described as ecological rather than habitual. The term appears (as oecological) in Oakeshott (1991, p. 64) and prompts Hanna Pitkin to write that 'more profoundly than anyone since Burke [Oakeshott has] developed for us a vision of human society that might properly be called "ecological": an awareness of the complexity and delicacy of the interrelationships among institutions, customs, and ways of life' (Pitkin, 1976, p. 301).

The notion of moral conduct as an embodied practice of an ecological nature is shown in the actions of Captain Brown and can be found in many other literary characters. The doctor in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 1963) represents a classic instance of a person who responds with ethical sensitivity without moralizing. The lady in waiting has sought the doctor's advice on Lady Macbeth who is walking and talking in her sleep about the murder of the King and his servants (Act V, Sc. i). In response to her guilty ravings, the doctor sympathetically comments: 'What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged', while the lady exclaims 'I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body' (line 56-9). The doctor goes on to explain that '(i)nfected minds/To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets,/More needs she the divine than the physician. /God, God forgive us all' (lines 76-79). For the doctor, compassion for the stricken is far more compelling than passing judgment in moral formulae.

Another famous fictional character who represents a similar moral outlook is Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret. The detective, whose moral universe is perceptively explored by Peter Ely (2010), like the doctor above, seeks to understand rather than to judge. Ely refers to Maigret's

refusal to judge the criminals whom he is charged with apprehending (p. 466), some of whom he views as misguided human beings gone astray rather as morally reprehensible. His virtues are 'humility, the ability to enter into the lives of other people, a determination to understand and not to judge, and above all, compassion' (p. 470). Compassion for Maigret is not a theoretical principle but rather an ideal that he embodies. In the Maigret novels, as in several stories of Maupassant's, prostitutes are depicted positively and are far more likely to exemplify patterns of 'ordinary decent behaviour' than are upstanding citizens.

3. MORAL DISCOURSE AND MORAL PRINCIPLES

Yet, as noted earlier, Oakeshott himself is aware of the conspicuous limits of an habitual form of moral life merely based on habit. In the first place, he does attribute to moral ideals a 'power as critics of human habits' (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 480) that enable people to reflect on their conduct. Secondly, such an education cannot give individuals the ability to defend and to explain their conduct and they may remain unaware that there are genuine alternatives before them in action. Moral virtues are to this extent cloistered and patterns of behavior may collapse under threat or they may degenerate into a form of superstitious allegiance to the past. Both responses are to be expected from individuals brought up in an uncritical and closed environment who are then exposed to the world outside their communities. Moreover if what is conventionally done were to be accepted as the sole criterion of moral value, the result would be that, to invoke again words of Shakespeare's (1997) *Coriolanus*, the 'dust on antique time would lie unswept,/And mountainous error be too highly heaped/For truth to o'erpeer' (Act II, Scene iii, lines 108-111).

Yet it must be acknowledged that there is some basis for the criticism by R. S Peters that for Oakeshott principles are 'somehow spurious in relation to justification' (Peters, 1974, p. 451 and Benn and Peters, 1959, pp. 317-318). It is certainly true that he believes that justificatory principles can be spurious. The character of such principles is very well communicated in Maupassant's famous story *Boule de Suif* that formed the basis for the plot of John Ford's movie *Stagecoach*. This *novella* captures the distinction between individuals who invoke spurious, self-serving principles and the inherent decency and kindness of the prostitute heroine, *Boule de Suif* (which can be translated as ball of lard). She takes a coach with a group of upstanding citizens to escape

from German occupied Rouen but, because *Boule de Suif* is a prostitute, she is ignored by the other passengers who condemn her based on their narrow rationalistic principles. Yet she shares her food with them when those around her are extremely hungry. They are all held captive by the Germans in the village of Tôtes unless *Boule de Suif* consents to have sex with the German commanding officer. Her patriotic convictions are deeply offended by the suggestion and this sense of outrage is shared by her companions. But as the captivity drags on the others become impatient and use every spurious, dishonest moral argument based on very different principles to persuade her to change her mind. She very reluctantly allows herself to be cajoled into sleeping with the German. This results in the passengers being permitted to continue their journey but they treat *Boule de Suif* with contempt and refuse to share their food with her. The story is a classic expression of a clash between a spurious ‘principled’ morality and the morality of ordinary decency.

The criticism of Oakeshott’s attitude to principles is, however, quite untrue of the later work where he very explicitly upholds the necessity of being able to justify our moral choices. Indeed it is interesting to note that he himself offers a useful analysis of the different forms in which justification may be used to rebut the imputation of injustice in respect of our actions (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 69). He explains that we may justify an action (1) by relating it to the moral principle which we are accused of violating (2) by pointing to the relationship between the action in question and the duties attaching to an office or role (3) by invoking a principle of a higher moral priority. An example (the examples are mine) of justification of the first form would be where a person argues that his taking another’s car keys is not a case of theft or an injustice to the other party as this person commonly drives when drunk and thereby puts at risk his own life and that of others. A doctor offers a justification of the second kind where, to the accusation of professional negligence, she claims that she was precluded on the grounds of professional ethics from disclosing to her patient’s parents, without the daughter’s consent, the fact of her pregnancy. The individual in the first example offers justification of the third kind where he admits to telling a lie about his knowledge of the whereabouts of the other person’s car keys by arguing that his falsehood is justified in terms of the higher moral principle of respect for life. Thus he justifies his action by invoking a principle which can be said to be more compelling because it is of a higher order of moral priority than the one purportedly neglected.

Unless people can articulate the basis of their moral judgments, it is impossible for them to endorse or condemn conduct. Where standards of ‘affection and behaviour’ have not been observed, then it is necessary to be able to explain why. One of the most stinging reproofs in the work of Jane Austen is where Mr Knightley takes Emma to task for her sarcastic rudeness to the hapless Miss Bates, an elderly impoverished spinster. In a game, participants have to provide various responses and Miss Bates informs the others that she is bound to utter three dull things when she opens her mouth. Emma cruelly retorts that this may be difficult because Miss Bates will be ‘limited as to number- only three at once’ (Austen, 1982, p. 364). Emma attempts to justify her actions by referring to the combination of the good and the ridiculous in Miss Bates’s character. Mr Knightley acknowledges that both of these qualities are present in the woman but that this does not justify Emma’s cruelty. He proceeds to show why her words have so dramatically violated acceptable standards of ‘affection and behaviour’. In the first place Miss Bates is poor and far from being the ‘equal in situation’ (Austen, 1982, p. 368) of Emma, who is the first lady of the neighborhood. She has come down in the world from the comforts of her earlier years and is likely to sink even further.

Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!—You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her—and before her niece, too—and before others....(*ibid*)

Some of the people making up the party, he adds, will be likely to be ‘entirely guided by *your* treatment of her’ (*ibid*). Mr. Knightley goes on to explain that his rebuke will not prove pleasant to Emma—no more than it gives him pleasure to administer it. In his moral condemnation Mr. Knightley relates Emma’s action to the moral principle that she has violated and further points to the relationship between the action in question and the duties attaching to Emma’s position as a role model in their society.

CONCLUSION: RECONCILING CONDUCT AND PRINCIPLES

In the introduction to this essay attention was drawn to the potential of literature, including autobiography, to commu-

nicate something of the complex texture of the moral life. In conclusion I propose to dwell on a recent autobiography that does precisely this and which also captures the complex tension between moral conduct and the articulation of ethical stances. The autobiography of Sister Emmanuelle (2008) has important lessons to teach us about the springs of moral and religious commitment. Her life and thought embody a reconciliation between conduct and principles that Oakeshott would find congenial.

Born in Brussels in 1908, Sr. Emmanuelle spent her life working tirelessly on behalf of the dispossessed of this earth and died just before her one hundredth birthday. There is an irony that the year of the birth of Sr. Emmanuelle was also that of Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most notable atheists of the twentieth century. But these two outstanding women have much in common besides sharing the same year of birth. Both were committed to the welfare of the poor and both were impelled by the passionate pursuit of truth. Sr. Emmanuelle's work led her to give voice to the voiceless in many countries—in the Sudan, the Philippines, Senegal and especially to the families who dwelt beside the garbage dumps of Cairo.

Her account of her religious vocation is quite compelling. She had to overcome the opposition of the family and the skepticism of the order of Our Lady of Sion, the order that she joined. The skepticism came from their perception that she was stubborn and self-willed and likely to struggle with the vow of obedience as indeed she did. She also acknowledges with a great honesty that she was sexually driven and practiced masturbation and would find the sexual aspect of life difficult to forgo. Yet the impulse of her vocation to serve God and the less fortunate led her to make the sacrifices necessary to embrace the religious way of life.

Less well known perhaps was her extraordinarily generous openness to the beliefs of others. In her life she had no fear of self-righteous Catholics who might have perceived her as a reprehensible relativist. What the life and spirit of this exemplar of compassion and religious commitment show is that individuals who are most deeply connected to their own religious tradition can display openness to others because they are confident and non-defensive in their own convictions. In 1944 in Istanbul her teacher of philosophy, Mr. Auerbach, and Mr. Feyzi who taught her philology in preparation for her degree at the Sorbonne, were Jewish and Muslim respectively. These two teachers were as committed to the truth claims of their religions as she was to those of Christianity. It suddenly dawned on Sr. Emmanuelle that she may not be in possession of all truth. Because she believed in

the truth proclaimed by the Catholic Church did not mean that she had exclusive access to the truth. With her friend, Mme. Mano, daughter of the Chief Rabbi, she embarked on an eager, passionate and shared study of the Torah so that both could learn for themselves what it revealed about God, the world and humankind. The Rabbi himself arrived to visit his daughter at the convent. Sr. Emmanuelle found herself on the same spiritual 'wavelength' (p. 92) and he went with her and some of the other sisters to pray in the chapel of the convent.⁵ He promised to give a list of the psalms from which he derived most spiritual sustenance. Sadly he died suddenly before he could share the list with his Christian friends. Yet Sr. Emmanuelle did go on to offer her Jewish students extra lessons on the bible and taught them to recite the Shema. As one of the girls told her in later life, this was her most precious gift to them.

The Church authorities then invited Mr. Feyzi to work with Sr. Emmanuelle on a translation into Turkish of the Catholic catechism. This exciting work was punctuated by engaging and illuminating conversations about their respective beliefs. Mr. Feyzi's genuine bafflement at the doctrine of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist led to their agreeing to differ about certain matters of faith that have to be lived to be believed. Instead of leading to bitterness and alienation between the two friends, the discussion ended with smiles and a return to the work in hand. From her Muslim teacher, Sr. Emmanuelle learned not only the Turkish language 'but also and above all to respect the other in his or her identity'. She found that atheists, Jews and Muslims all 'nourished her Christian faith' (p. 263). They extended her understanding of God and enlarged 'her vision of God, goodness and beauty' (*ibid*) and enabled her to see value in human beings irrespective of their allegiances. Yet she did not consider that all religions were equally true. 'Truth is an absolute and cannot be contradictory. Either Jesus is the son of God or he is not' (*ibid*)—there cannot be two views of this defining belief.

Her other influential teacher was a French Franciscan, philosopher and theologian, Father Gauthier, and he helped her to understand contemporary agnosticism and atheism. Atheism was not a sin of impiety but rather in most cases the response of an individual following an upright conscience and unable to believe in an invisible God in a world where tragedy is common. She came to believe that people accept or reject God on account of their education and upbringing, their reading and life events. These criteria of judgment are difficult and even impossible to change. Each individual reaches a decision according to her or his lights and both believers and non-believers can be subject to doubts (, p. 272).

He taught her the same lesson as Mr. Feyzi—consider the human being first before focusing on the person’s religious, political and cultural affiliation. It is vital to avoid becoming so immersed in one’s own identity that one is incapable of joining the other person in his or hers. She did not perceive the struggle on behalf of the poor as the sole preserve of religious believers. She often found herself on the ‘same wavelength’ (p. 260) as non-believers who shared her concern for human suffering. She saw such individuals, though not in communion with a church, as disciples of the gospel. In her work in helping to create homes for street children, she emphasized the importance of teaching the young people to love one another and for all to respect religious difference. In these homes, there was to be not the slightest trace of proselytizing intent. As she reminds readers, the essence of religion (*re-ligio*) is to bind together human beings to God and to each other. Even young Catholics had to confirm their wish to attend Sunday Mass to ensure that they were going willingly and of their own free will. She shared the French passion to respect and preserve the sacredness of individual beliefs.

The link between the work of Oakeshott and the achievement of Sr. Emmanuelle should be clear. A lesson that he has well taught is that the virtues that people espouse may well be commendable but if they are not given expression in human conduct then they are worthless. Sr. Emmanuelle exhibited consistency between her conduct and the values that she so eloquently articulated and her work thus embodied the complex ecology of the moral life. A virtuous life can be unsupported by moral theories but Sr. Emmanuelle was capable giving reasons for the principles that drove her. It would be misguided to claim that Oakeshott was the first person to understand the primacy of conduct in the moral life but every generation benefits from having it re-stated.

NOTES

- 1 I have slightly changed Grant’s translation.
- 2 A detailed response to Winch’s critique of Oakeshott can be found in Callahan (2012).
- 3 For an account of how children learn their mother tongue see Donaldson (1987), in particular pp. 32-39. The analogy between moral education and the learning of the mother tongue is also favored by Gilbert Ryle (see Williams, 1986).
- 4 In Oakeshott (1991, p. 6) the terms traditional, customary, and habitual are used as synonyms.

- 5 All translations from Sister Emmanuelle’s book are my own.

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