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Conservative theory as sympathetic dissent: the example of Michael Oakeshott

Eno Trimçev

Department of Political Science, Greifswald University, Greifswald, Germany

ABSTRACT

The article examines the coherence of conservative political theory by seeking out its principle and its form. It argues that conservative theory differs from liberal theory by the principle of differentiating between the activities of theorizing and doing. Two thought-figurations, called here 'sympathetic' and 'unsympathetic' dissent are outlined with respect to the perspective conservative theory holds vis-à-vis the liberal order. The article argues that only sympathetic dissent is coherent with the principle of conservative theory. The argument is illustrated by way of the thought of Michael Oakeshott. The form of sympathetic dissent is constituted by a double-movement of thought: a dissenting move, away from the historical context which deconstructs and critiques the existing political order, and a sympathetic, constructive move, which recovers the coherence of that very order.

Introduction

Taking its cue from the oft-cited denial that conservatism is an ideology,¹ the secondary literature on conservatism has often sought an overarching theme or a bundle of contingent features common across conservatisms.² Scepticism about change, adhesion to traditional values, valuation of the particular at the expense of the universal, of hierarchy at the expense of equality, and distrust of rationalism have all been trudged up at one moment or another. In recent years, however, there has been a renewed interest in the non-contingent attributes of conservatism resulting in a greater grasp of its analytical coherence.³ Yet, for the purposes of this article, the benchmark remains a definition that Michael Freeden offered 20 years ago. Freeden characterizes conservative political thinking by three core features: first, conservatives hold to a notion of 'organic change' as opposed to 'artificial, humanly devised, change'.⁴ Second, conservative arguments refer to some 'extra-human' instance, that is an instance 'independent of human will'.⁵ Third, conservatism has a 'mirror-image characteristic',⁶ because it is articulated as a reaction to progressive ideologies, whose languages it consequently must share to some degree. The formal nature of the characterization lends itself to seriously engaging with the question whether there can be something like a coherent conservative political theory. This has become a pressing question for an ideology that is often

judged as ‘intellectually dormant’⁷ and that has recently, in Europe and elsewhere, been exposed to growing pressures from right-wing populism.⁸

This article takes up Freeden’s characterization from a new angle. My subject here is not the various conservatisms to be encountered in the political scene or the ruminations of conservative intellectuals, but conservative political theory. By this term, I refer to those works of mainly twentieth-century political philosophy that are commonly held to have had a deep impact on the field from a conservative perspective. I conclude two things. Firstly, the ‘extra-human’ argumentative reference gives conservative theory a daring, immoderate upshot not commonly associated with conservatism. Secondly, however, because conservative theory retains the core features of Freeden’s characterization, the common ascription of conservatism remains appropriate to it.

That this is not self-evident becomes clear from the *principle* of conservative theory which differentiates between theorizing and doing. The principle justifies a demarcation between conservative politics and conservative theory that calls into question the conservatism of the latter. The article maintains that this principle generates two ideal-typical *forms* of conservative theory: Sympathetic and Unsympathetic Dissent.⁹ It argues that only sympathetic dissent remains coherent with the principle of differentiation between theorizing and doing. I reconstruct sympathetic dissent as a double-movement of thought; a dissenting move outwards, *away* from the arrangements of the historically-existing political order and a sympathetic move inwards, *towards* the complete coherence of that very order. The sympathetic move is necessarily theoretical; its coherence is afforded by the things that constitute it: theorems of political action and political order (as opposed to, say, advocacy for a best regime from the past) whose sole principle is coherence. It thus moves *outside*, not along, historical time. But the dissenting move is also theoretical: while it may use historical materials from the past, and thus move *along* time, the move serves to critically engage contemporary theorems of the existing order. In our concrete situation, therefore, it challenges liberal theory, not the historical achievements of the liberal order *tout court*. Unsympathetic dissent then simply performs either one or both moves badly: it may unsympathetically argue in favour of some other historical regime (say, the Greek polis); or it may dissent along historical time as some kind of *Verfallsgeschichte* (narrative of decline). It thus puts theory at the service of history, subjecting theorizing to doing.¹⁰ Or, conversely, the differentiation between theorizing and doing brings it to some modified version of the old, metaphysical two-world theories, posting the truth of things in an other-worldly realm accessible to thought alone. It then views history from the perspective of theory, thus subjecting doing to theorizing, as if doing contains an inherent deficiency to be healed by theory.¹¹

In other words, it seems from the perspective of practice that unsympathetic dissent is conservative; sympathetic dissent is simply theory. There appear to be only two secondary reasons to call sympathetic dissent conservative: first, because it dissents from the principle of change of the existing political order and, second, because it is commonly recognized as conservative, which turns out to be a misnomer. It is this view that I challenge with the help of Freeden’s characterization.

The analytical distinction of the two moves that constitute conservative theory helps to grasp its potential strength in the field of political theory by the standard of coherence while simultaneously rejecting any view of conservatism as ‘purely practically focused.’¹² The commonplace claim that conservatism is historically oriented reveals its

meaning in this form: although sympathetic dissent *differentiates from*, it *never slips outside of* its historical situation. I illumine this approach by examining the work of Michael Oakeshott. Unlike unsympathetic dissent, Oakeshott's sympathetically dissenting thinking allows him to critique his contemporary liberal order without escaping into another (Platonic) *supra*-order of metaphysics, an (Heideggerian) *under*-order of ontology, or *other*-order of ancient or medieval (theo)-politics.

The article proceeds in three steps. In the next section, I spell out the dissent from the liberal theory that I claim is formative of all conservative political theory, by way of its source in the principle of differentiating between theorizing and doing. Then, I outline the distinction between sympathetic and unsympathetic dissent already mentioned above. The two forms are sketched out from two perspectives: in light of their relationship to the (historical) liberal order in which we live and what I call the (philosophical) 'fundamental situation', i.e. the question of human order as such, abstracted from historical contingencies. The following section elaborates in more detail the sympathetic nature of dissent in the thought of Michael Oakeshott. In my concluding remarks, I indicate the theoretical coherence of this form by reference to Freedén's definition of conservatism.

The conservative dissent from liberal theory

Underlying my argument on conservative theory is a historically informed understanding of the concepts of liberal order, liberal theory, and their relation to conservative theory. I begin, therefore, by making these conceptions explicit.

The notion 'liberal order' indicates an ambivalence of contemporary liberalism. The first term, 'liberal', refers to the variety of modern efforts – philosophical, political or otherwise – that have understood themselves to contribute to liberal causes. It, therefore, refers to a broad plurality of discourses, political movements, symbolic articulations and ideological encrustations whose lines of transmission often lead to historical dead ends, crisscross or merge into each other.¹³ The term 'order', on the other hand, evokes a possible coherence of these myriad articulations, that makes liberalism irreducible to any one of its articulations. The two terms gesture to the centrifugal and centripetal forces in contemporary liberalism. While the centrifugal, pluralizing forces emerge from the self-understandings of historical actors and the distinctions of practical life, the centripetal forces emerge out of the effort to comprehend them. Among the most representative attempts at understanding our order stands the tradition of 'liberal theory'. The term includes those reflective efforts – from Locke through Mill all the way to the political, egalitarian, libertarian, pragmatic and other articulations that characterize it today – that have illumined the conditions, nature and ends of liberalism, i.e. its orderly nature.

Against this background, 'conservative theory' is best understood as an alternative effort to reflect about the contemporary world. Conservative theory primarily dissents from liberal theory rather than, say, socialism (as the historical opponent of conservatism), because its principle pushes it to dissent from contemporary ideas about the order.¹⁴ Appropriate to the principle of conservative theory referred to in the Introduction, these thinkers are theorists or philosophers and not public intellectuals. That is, Leo Strauss and Michael Oakeshott are in; Irving Kristol and Edmund Burke

are out.¹⁵ For the latter thinking is at the service of the practical question ‘What is to be done?’. For the former thinking is carried out for its own sake; it is the answer to the question ‘What is to be done?’.

Conservative theory is an alternative to liberal theory because it dissents from its framework. This dissent, I argue in this section, is mobilized by the principle of conservative theory. Each thinker carries out the differentiation between theorizing and doing in his or her own way.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in what follows I will attempt to provide a general description that accounts for the broad movements in conservative thought. For most conservative theorists, theorizing and doing are alike insofar as they both are activities. For Hannah Arendt, for example, they are the ways in which human beings escape the grip of necessity.¹⁷ As such, even if often only implicitly, theorizing shares with doing an equivalent structure which makes them mutually intelligible, i.e. it allows the doer to grasp a theory or theorize and a theorist to grasp a doing or do intelligently. And, finally, there is no necessary hierarchy between the two: doing may come first but it does not have to be most important and, on the other hand, theorizing is critical, but it does not command doing.¹⁸

The difference is in their *objects* – one deals with universals, the other with particulars¹⁹ – and in their *results*: one results in theorems and the other in actions, decisions, or prescriptions.²⁰ Here I deal with the latter due to its relative unfamiliarity. Theorizing understands a thing in terms of what it presupposes, e.g. motion in terms of the principles of mechanics, or political order in terms of the postulate of generality. These, however, do not in any way help doing. Bicyclists, for example, do not apply the principles of classical mechanics in order to ride.²¹ Or, to go with the second example, when Rousseau identifies generality as a postulate of political order, he does not identify a characteristic that may be applied to a particular regime. Consequently, Robespierre paid the price when he thought he could apply it. A clear understanding of the postulate of generality is not required in order to act successfully; in fact, the very opposite may help, for by keeping to the distinction ‘each voice learns to be playful, learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognize itself as a voice among voices.’²²

The distinction between theory and practice articulates itself in a resolute dissent from liberal theory. This dissent unfolds on two levels. On the surface, conservative theory dissents from the organizing concepts of liberal theory. In depth, it dissents from the general movement of liberal theory. On the first level, conservative theorists hold that the organizing concepts of liberal theory, such as the ‘state of nature’ or the ‘harm principle’, are incapable of doing justice to the nature of politics relative to rival concepts from classical or modern theories. This has flattened out liberal politics into what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a ‘civil war carried out by other means’.²³ Conservative theory thus appears conservative on the surface in that it holds the theorems of liberal theory to be inadequate. On the second level, conservative theorists criticize the general movement of liberal thinking – a movement that starts from abstract principles and moves towards the concrete institutional arrangements of the liberal polity. According to conservatives, this misunderstands the nature of theorizing, which has both a theoretical and a historical drawback. On the one hand, conservatives hold that liberal theory, by failing to distinguish properly between theorizing and doing, commits the former to a call it cannot answer: either attempt a demonstrable foundation of the historical order or, when that justificatory enterprise inevitably fails, abstain from

justification altogether.²⁴ From a conservative viewpoint, theorizing neither demonstrates foundations nor is it a category of doing. But the move from abstractions (the solitary or the risk-averse individual in the state of nature or behind the veil of ignorance) to concreteness (the organization of our socio-political life) also elides any understanding of the concrete. As Strauss put it, the acceptance of abstraction as the starting point means ‘that the concrete at which one eventually arrived was not at all the truly concrete, but still an abstraction’.²⁵ In either case, theory collapses in history.²⁶ This short-changes theory; if the problem of order is merely historical, then theory is obsolete. But, on the other hand, it short-changes history too, in two ways. First, it kicks the support from underneath the historical order by undermining the belief that liberal democracy represents the best regime since no such truth claims seem possible. Second, it deprives history of its autonomy and dignity, by placing theory in the possession of ‘history’s commanding heights’. This second level of dissent is ‘deep’ in that it unfolds from the principle of conservative theory: the distinction between theorizing and doing. It is at this level that the real battle between conservative and liberal theory takes place, and it is here that the prize of victory will be had. And, at this level, the self-understanding of conservative theory seems to shed its qualifier; here, it understands itself to be *not at all conservative*, but theory *simpliciter*. In other words, in its most coherent form, conservatism no longer recognizes its designation by others as such.

If liberal theory moves from the abstract to the concrete situation, conservative theory moves in the opposite direction. It is with this proviso that it attempts to view the human situation free from historical contingencies and regularly raises the question of the fundamental situation; the best regime of Plato or the moderate regime of Montesquieu are famous examples from the history of political ideas. Liberal theorists tend to place it at the beginning of their theorizing effort; intellectuals, who take a public stand in defence of the collective good, may have an implicit notion of a free and equal society as the culmination of their thought, to be realized by way of collective action. Conservative theorists have no particular place in the thought-form as far as I can tell. Decisive is the theoretical nature of the answer; the fundamental situation establishes the critical distance between the thought-form and the historical situation. By raising this question, the postulates of order, as identified by liberal theorists, are questioned, critiqued, rejected or re-thought by conservative theorists and; the more sharply it is raised, the clearer the form of the dissenting movement.

Hence, the problem of the fundamental situation puts the spotlight on the relationship between the thinker and the historical situation in which she finds herself. As such, it poses a challenge to the coherence of the theoretical enterprise because it raises two possibilities: whether the thinker, dedicated to the distinction between theorizing and doing, transcends the historical situation or, in the opposite case, whether she remains within the strictures of history, i.e. she thinks practically rather than theoretically. The former amounts to a resurrection of some form of the old metaphysical two-world theory which conservatives reject while the second contradicts the principle of conservative theory. Both would, therefore, be incoherent. As the last step in this section, I distinguish two different answers to this problem, which I name sympathetic and unsympathetic dissent. The dissenting move from liberal theory carries unsympathetic dissenters beyond the liberal order in which they think and live. They end up situating their thought wholly beyond the historical order. Sympathetic dissenters, on the

contrary, do not simply move away from, but, at the same time, re-negotiate the relationship between theory and practice within the liberal order. As we will see through the example of Michal Oakeshott, the double nature of sympathetic dissent means that it remains coherent with the principle of conservative theory without falling simply into historicism.

In their rejection of liberal theory, unsympathetic dissenters often bring to light earlier, pre-liberal philosophical or religious traditions.²⁷ For example, thinkers like Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and, more idiosyncratically, Hannah Arendt have either explicitly called for a return to classical political philosophy or sought in their personal encounters with it to bring to bear non-liberal intellectual resources. Explicitly or not, and with varying degrees of qualification, they have tried to inject the liberal order with spiritual resources from outside of itself; resources that are deemed to be lacking and unable to be generated from within.²⁸ Jacques Maritain and Alasdair MacIntyre have done the same regarding the Thomist tradition. Mircea Eliade has even provided a critique of contemporary liberal movements by way of interpreting archaic sources. This, however, is inconsistent with the differentiation between theorizing and doing; to attempt to change the order as it is towards what it should become (e.g. by increasing virtue or faith), is the very definition of doing. It, therefore, contradicts the principle of conservative theory. The deconstructive move outwards is never followed by a constructive move inwards. Thus, the thinker ends up outside – whether *back* (in history), *above* (metaphysics) or *below* (ontology) – looking in; and the *outsider*-perspective betrays the *orderly* nature of political order. From the perspective of the liberal order, unsympathetic dissenters appear to be unqualified conservatives.

On the other hand, sympathetic dissenters have long been recognized as more amenable to liberalism.²⁹ Its representative thinker in this article is Michael Oakeshott, but others, such as Alexis de Tocqueville or contemporaries like Stanley Rosen also belong to this camp.³⁰ Insofar as they *dissent*, they all problematize the direction of change of the liberal order and recover pre-liberal resources. But, importantly, sympathetic dissenters do not ignore the devastating question as to why pre-liberal traditions were left behind. Their recovery aims to bring to light the originary experiences and impulses of the liberal order which have been covered over in its historical development.³¹ The recovery of the origins enables critical distance without slipping into an explicitly non-liberal vocabulary. Instead of turning away from the liberal horizon, they are able to sympathetically illumine the ‘spirit’ of its laws and enlarge its existing moral resonances. As conservatives, they move backwards in history. But as liberals, they move within the order with a view to illumine what practice – through forgetfulness, opaque repetition, or misunderstanding – has consigned to the dark. The *sympathetic* nature of their dissent is not only coherent with the principle of conservative thought, but also helpful to understand the historical order they live in.

What, then, is conservative about this strand of conservative theory?³² Firstly, sympathetic dissent appears to other contemporary schools of thought to be conservative due to the broad directionality of its movement away from, or beyond, things as they *are*. In this, it parallels old-fashioned understandings of philosophizing which seem obsolete to contemporary schools. And, secondly, sympathetic dissent appears to be conservative from the perspective of doing, since it does not provide prescriptions for action. Conservative thought does not primarily critique *this* or *that* institutional set-up or

practical idea about what should be done; it critiques the principle of the existing order – understood as the broad direction of its movement.³³ On this account, actual politics moves in the wrong direction because it misunderstands its own liberalism. And this because it is unable to test itself, because it does not attempt to move beyond what is in order to create the space to critically reflect on its own directionality. Hence, for conservative thought, liberal theory – whose task it is to open up that space – remains within the order *as it is*³⁴ even when it appeals to its highest existing future aspirations (emancipation, social justice, etc.). From the perspective of conservative theory, liberal theory is guilty of conserving the status quo, while conservative theory *appears* to be conservative but is, in fact, liberal through and through. Differently put: from a merely theoretical perspective there is nothing conservative about conservative theory, because it is in its character to think immoderately, i.e. to boldly push beyond what is.

The sympathetic dissent of Michael Oakeshott

This section now turns to Michael Oakeshott in order to flesh out more concretely the ‘sympathetic’ nature of sympathetic dissent. It reconstructs the Oakeshottian alternative to liberal theory within the ideational horizon of the liberal order in four steps.³⁵ First, I examine Oakeshott’s early philosophical work where he explains his notion of ‘experience.’ In that light, in a second step, I situate his non-hierarchical account of the principle of conservative theory – the distinction between theorizing and doing. In a third step, I revisit his presentation of the fundamental situation – his famed ‘civil association’ – in light of this principle in order to illustrate the double-movement of Oakeshott’s thought. This account displays a political thought that is at once historically situated and thoroughly philosophical and, consequently, coherent with its own principle. Finally, I connect Oakeshott’s thought to other conservative thinkers to give credence to the claim that Oakeshott’s is not merely a peculiar version of the conservative theory.

Oakeshott achieves the greatest degree of transparency on the differentiation between theorizing and doing in his first and least well-known book *Experience and its Modes*. Here he thinks through the equivalential structure of both as superseding the already given. In what follows, I show how this equivalential structure undermines the initial gulf between philosopher and everyman that seems to open by way of the distinction of theorizing from doing; a recognition that is absent in many, but not all conservatives.³⁶

The decisive term that runs through this work is ‘experience’. Oakeshott claims, first, that something is said to happen only when it is experienced; when it is *a part* of the experience. This is the postulate for a thing – an object, a sensation, a feeling, an image, an act or a thought – to be said to exist. But, second, a part cannot exist isolated *apart* from the other things in experience; in this sense, Oakeshott argues, the experience reaches out *beyond what is* experienced, by inference or reflection, memory or judgement, to other parts in experience. A constituent of experience happens when it is recognized; and it is recognized insofar as it is connected to other constituents in experience. Nothing can be sensed in a way that is wholly isolated, inexpressible and unrelated to previous experiences; no self is a pure subject free of ‘opinion, prejudice, habit, knowledge’³⁷; no act exists free of thinking; and, no thinking exists in any

meaningful sense free of that which it is about.³⁸ Experience is, then, thought movement beyond each part of experience. And it is the 'concrete whole' within which each of its constituents – objects, sensations, subjectivity, acts, or reflections – exist 'in the most complete interdependence'.³⁹

It follows, third, that experience is thought or judgment: '[t]here are, of course, different forms of thought, and judgment is not everywhere realized in its full character; but nowhere is there to be found a form of experience which is not a form of thought'.⁴⁰ That is, there are no sensations, feelings *and* thoughts; sensations and feelings *are* thoughts. They may be separated or 'modified' for this or that purpose, but they are not 'different in principle' and cannot be 'separated from one another, finally and absolutely'.⁴¹

Oakeshott illustrates the thinking quality of what is experienced by taking perhaps the most famous counter-example: a pure sensation, like a sudden 'loud and prolonged sound' which the hearing subject can neither anticipate nor has any previous familiarity with, in order to recognize it as *this* rather than *that*. The assertion – based on some distinction between sense and mind – would then be that this is a 'direct, immediate experience ... relieved from the interference of reflection' that evidently 'obtrudes itself on consciousness'. It seems, therefore, 'finally and absolutely' sensation rather than thought; the experience of the sensation 'is separated entirely from the influence of judgment'.⁴² For this to be so, Oakeshott counters, 'the given in sensation must be isolated, simply, exclusive, and wholly unrelated; transient, inexpressible, unsharable and impossible of repetition'.⁴³ Its content must be utterly indeterminate, and its presence purely in the moment of its occurrence (a 'bare "this is" and "here"'⁴⁴). But, Oakeshott continues, insofar as it is recognized – because, if nothing else, it is referred to as having existed – its content is saved from pure indeterminacy. It is, therefore, no longer in 'isolation, singularity and unrelatedness.' The recognizing of the sound – its *experiencing* – involves it immediately 'in judgment, in inference, in reflection, in thought'.⁴⁵ More generally, for Oakeshott experience is a 'homogeneous whole within which distinctions and modifications may appear, but which knows no absolute division'.⁴⁶

If a thing occurs as thought defined as pointing beyond its 'bare "this" and "here"' to cohere with experience, it follows that thoughts *move* and their movement has a *structure*; a broad directionality beyond what they have already 'achieved'.⁴⁷ For Oakeshott, what is given in experience is not merely this or that of its constituents, but the concrete whole in which human beings always already exist; 'a world [...] that [...] is a whole as opposed to a mere series, and a system as opposed to a mere collection'.⁴⁸ This given world, however, is experienced as deficient, because, like all constituents in it, for it to be, it must point beyond itself to what it should become. Hence, what is given in experience can never be simply, or conservatively, accepted or assented to: 'the given in experience is given always in order to be transformed'.⁴⁹ Incoherence is the malady of existence, whose measure is 'absolute coherence'.⁵⁰ Hence, human beings are spurred on to move between what is already achieved, which is 'unstable and defective,' and what is to be achieved 'complete and can maintain itself'.⁵¹ There is yet no metaphysical two-world theory here: 'what is achieved is contained seminally or implicitly in what is given'⁵²; 'it differs from the given world only by being more of a world'.⁵³ Hence, the 'supersession' of what is given is never completely open-ended in the sense of a solipsistic or a wholly licentious movement; it is ordered by its *object* as never a 'look away from a given world to another world, but always *at* a given world to discover the unity it implies'⁵⁴ and by its *principle* of 'absolute coherence.' This

trajectory, *in* but not *of* the world, is decisive to experiential movements for it denies their radical subjectivity or arbitrariness.

To sum up, for Oakeshott nothing exists before or beyond, above or below thought; all thought moves beyond that which *is* to that which *should* be; i.e. the arc of movement is progressive. Clearly, *I* am not moving in thought beyond the given world. Rather, the world, as the order of things experienced, is continuously moving beyond itself towards its own ‘coordination and completion.’⁵⁵ Each of the constituents of my movement – sensations, memories, feelings, ideas – is confirmed by the world which *must move* in order to cohere. The dialectical supersession of the mundane is relentless; it admits of no arrest despite the different levels of achievement, modes and degrees of satisfaction it implies.⁵⁶ To cease the movement is to cease to be.

Here we come to Oakeshott’s differentiation between theorizing and doing: if everything occurs as thought, thought can be modal or theoretical. The modes are many and historically constituted.⁵⁷ Each has its own criteria of validity; it orders the constituents of experience in its own way. What interests us here, for the sake of the principle of conservative theory, is the differentiation between theorizing and doing. Doing is the given mode; the one in which we operate from the beginning and within which ‘[u]nless we make some conscious effort to step outside’⁵⁸ we will pass our lives.⁵⁹ According to Oakeshott, doing is the pursuit of particular things, and its standard is the reconciliation of ‘what is’ to ‘what ought to be’.⁶⁰ Theorizing, in Oakeshott’s account, is however not a mode but a ‘mood’⁶¹; it is not constituted by specific assumptions, because it is the questioning of assumptions, including, of course, the ones it must itself rely on. Viewed from the perspective of other modes, theorizing is resultless for it is inapplicable. Moreover, differently from other modes of experience, one cannot live the *bios theoretikos* because one has to get on and produce results (grow food, write books, raise children, etc.). But, viewed from the perspective of the whole of experience, it is ‘unqualified experience’⁶² because it is always concrete, since nothing in it can pose as a given. In this, its movement reflects the general structure of experience. In theorizing, thus, the nature of experience comes most lucidly into evidence.

Like all modes of experience, doing or practice is a self-consistent perspective on the whole of experience. In this perspective, ‘it belongs to the character of thought to be for the sake of action’.⁶³ Practical life is ‘the production and the prevention of change’ understood ‘not merely [as] a programme for action, but the action itself.’ The practical world is ‘the totality of such actions, together with all that they imply.’ In it ‘the alteration of existence is undertaken’⁶⁴ and this alteration, of course, is neither blind nor inexpressible but ‘so as to agree with an idea’⁶⁵ and therefore mediated, qualified, and interpretable. Practice is thus active even when it appears still, because it presumes a discrepancy or separateness between “‘what is” and “what is to be””, where what is to be is ‘another given world’⁶⁶ understood as more coherent than ‘what is.’ Again, the two for Oakeshott are not separate worlds; the latter is what is valuable, and it is presupposed by implication in what already is. Efforts to collapse the two – such as in revolutionary Marxisms or traditionalist conservatisms – are bad practices and, therefore, bound to fail. Absolute coherence cannot be achieved in practice because it would then cease to be. From this perspective, and from this perspective alone, practice is also unsatisfactory:

Practice is the reconciliation, in detail and in practical fact, of ‘what is here and now’ and ‘what ought to be’; it is this and all that it presupposes and involves. It is not the reconciliation in principle of the discrepancy between what is valuable and what is practical fact, but the reconciliation of each instance of this discrepancy as it arises. And such an integration can never be finally achieved [...] We have at each moment in practical experience a partially integrated world of experience ...⁶⁷

The movement to absolute coherence becomes transparent in theorizing. Theorizing occurs when things, with or without premonition, are understood no longer in terms of their contingent characteristics but in terms of their postulates. Out of pre-existing events in the world of practice, such as thunderstorms, palace coups or bodily motions, new identities, such as theorems of electromagnetism, regimes or classical mechanics, come into being. Theorizing does not transcend practice in the sense of being elsewhere; it is ‘the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands’.⁶⁸ But it supersedes it wholly and decisively in the sense that its constituents are wholly different: it has another *principle* of organizing knowledge (identification), another *procedure* (logic) and different *objects* (identities that are achieved in the process of theorizing rather than given in practical life). The two are, therefore, ‘wholly irrelevant to one another’.⁶⁹

If in practice things are recognized to be by the criterion of separateness, in theorizing they are recognized by the criterion of identification.⁷⁰ It follows that practice is deeply implicated in the given where things, by their mere perception, are recognized as real insofar as they are separate from another. In theorizing, Oakeshott tells us, the contingent characteristics of things are detached from the things themselves, reformulated as ideal characters and re-assembled in ideal identities.⁷¹ From this point of view, theorizing begins by breaking down the separateness of things in an effort to make them (re)-cohere. This process is open-ended. Things, respectively, identities, cohere again, as their ideal characters are reassembled in new, ideal identities. Theorizing occurs only insofar as this unconditional examination continues; the moment we stop – because we are persuaded to have reached the end, desire to write a book or go shopping – it is no more. In sum, for Oakeshott, doing does justice to the appearing nature of the thing; theorizing moves beyond its appearance to deepen its identity.⁷²

When viewed from the perspective of the world of ideas, the aim of the experiential movement is truth. According to Oakeshott, truth is the appropriateness of fit within the world of the mode in which it occurs; therefore, truth is mode-dependent.⁷³ Experience is true insofar as it is coherent. Devoid of truth, human life is evacuated of its humanity, he tells the reader.⁷⁴ The stress on the unattainability, unknowability or harm of truth that is popular in the contemporary academe comes from the categorical mistake of considering truth *in abstracto* (to claim its unknowability is to assert that which we know nothing about and, hence, incoherent nonsense). On the contrary, precisely because ‘truth ... is inseparable from experience’⁷⁵ human beings already live *in* and *towards* truth. Two things follow: first, the quest to cohere one’s experience is an ineliminable feature of the human way of being in the world, and the variety of claims that valorize (postmodern) contingency, (liberal) pluralism or (conservative) resignation to the incoherence of the world are theoretically problematic. On the contrary, for Oakeshott,

what is repugnant is not that a man's life should be a perfectly consistent whole, but that it should be an incoherent collection of isolated desires, hopes, fears and achievements [...] it is contradictory of practical experience itself to select incoherence as a satisfactory state of a man's world of practical experience.⁷⁶

Second, if coherence is the standard of experience, the idea of the whole truth or complete coherence cannot be jettisoned from the human vocabulary simply.⁷⁷ Absolute coherence is the indispensable standard of all understanding – of *all* movement in the world – and the ideas with which we attempt to establish it (e.g. Justice, the Good, Truth) cannot be eliminated from human life.

Much has been made of Oakeshott's privileging of theorizing vis-à-vis modal experience. Terry Nardin, for example, notes that

philosophical thinking creates an ever-widening chasm between philosophical and non-philosophical ideas. In undertaking to think philosophically, one is slowly but inexorably separated from those who choose not to question the assumptions on which their own thinking and activity rests.⁷⁸

Theorizing, Nardin rightly observes, is a parting of ways from what is already there, including other theorizing efforts 'because even philosophers must make assumptions if they are to question other assumptions, the authentic philosopher is separated from any school of philosophy that rests on shared assumptions'.⁷⁹ The ties that bind us to one another seem to snap when Oakeshott concludes '[p]hilosophy consists, not in persuading others, but in making our own minds clear'.⁸⁰ indicating its solipsistic, if not entirely solitary nature.⁸¹ The result is something that we simultaneously recognize as professionals – philosophy as critique – and reject as egalitarians – philosophy as a privilege. At first sight, the old spectre of the superiority of *vita contemplativa* returns. If theorizing is the mood that best mirrors the whole experiential arc towards its own coherence, are not all modes mere derailments of the philosophical ideal?

The suspicion that Oakeshott admits through the window the two-world theory that he has already thrown out of the door⁸² clearly misses the punch of his argument, however. First, the movement of theorizing is not in any sense spatial (the theorist does not get 'closer' to the truth) but ideal (he re-identifies experience in ideal terms). A conceptual distance opens up between our everyday use of the term 'justice' and its use by a Plato.⁸³ But the two do different sorts of work; using Plato's conception to critique, say, the injustices of current fiscal policy, is nonsense. Second, as has been commonly pointed out, theorizing is in no way better than doing because (a) it comes after doing; (b) it is merely a 'mood' rather than a 'mode', and; (b) both do not need each other.⁸⁴ Third, and more importantly, from the perspective of the structure of experience the philosopher's engagement reflects that of everyman. Both acts out of dissatisfaction with the order as a given; both engage that order by superseding its givens; both are driven to 'coherence' and; both do so in pursuit of their 'implications' or 'intimations'.⁸⁵ And both move within the single order in which human beings find themselves and whose coherence they relentlessly seek. They may cope with the order differently, but they both are persons coping with the same order in movements that are structurally equivalent and therefore potentially open to understanding by the other.

Having shown the principle of conservative theory operating in Oakeshott's work, I now turn to his political philosophy⁸⁶ in *On Human Conduct*. The work is composed of

two competing ideal characters: the civil and the enterprise association. The two are assemblages of other ideal characters; for instance, the civil association is composed of *lex* (ideal character of law), *civis* (membership), *civitas* (association) and *respublica* (civil practices).⁸⁷ Human conduct, itself an ideal character, is an exhibition of intelligence which, for Oakeshott, means that it is not governed by causal laws or automatic processes, but by practices, of which there are two types: prudential or moral.⁸⁸ Prudential practices have a purpose; moral ones do not. Accordingly, prudential practices find expression in enterprise associations – i.e. armies, hospitals, businesses – while moral ones do so in civil associations – i.e. friendships, debating clubs, speakers of a common language. There are institutions, such as the state or the university, which cut across these. The enterprise association derives its legitimacy from its effectiveness in enabling the realization of the common purpose; the civil association from the recognition of the authority of the practices; and both are structured accordingly. Thus, the enterprise association requires an executive; a civil association requires an adjudicative, but both require an administration. The ‘authority’ – and its counterpart ‘obligation’ – of civil association is earned daily, in the ‘continuous acknowledgment’ of its members and is not predicated on mechanisms of consent or prescription.⁸⁹ Politics is the activity of caring for these interdependent and interlocking rules or, in Bhikhu Parekh’s apt formulation, ‘the correction of incoherence, not the pursuit of perfection.’⁹⁰

Oakeshott’s civil association, we may say, exists doubly. Theoretically, it has a clear existence as a composite of ideal characters. Historically, it has an ambiguous existence as *societas* in the imagination, character and development of the modern European state. The former is set out in the second, and the latter in the third, essay of *On Human Conduct*. As a theoretical construct, it is ‘consistent with seeing ourselves as free agents capable of a high degree of individuality.’⁹¹ As a historical construct, it emerged to accommodate the appearance of human individuality in the late Middle Ages. It thereby illustrates the double-movement of what I have called sympathetic dissent very well: its definition as an ideal character denotes the *outward* push of thinking from the way things are to their postulates. By moving outward, the space of critique and dissent against the ‘teleocratic’⁹² tendencies of the contemporary order opens up. ‘What ought to be’ is recovered as something other than what it is in the process of becoming. And, its ideality makes it impossible to wish for, as a political regime to be achieved in the world.⁹³ But, at the same time, its historical existence denotes the *inward* push of thinking to re-cohere the existing order. It situates ‘what ought to be’ in the context of ‘what is’. The nomocracy of the civil association, understood as a state ‘whose laws are understood as conditions of conduct, not devices instrumental to the satisfaction of preferred wants’⁹⁴ is nothing other than the ever-precarious achievement of the liberal order. Although the civil association has no historical existence as such, it is present everywhere in our history: in the constituted character of the medieval realm,⁹⁵ the tendency of early modern Europeans to identify relationships with one another in terms of law,⁹⁶ in the myriad attempts by rulers to gain authority rather than power,⁹⁷ in old institutions such as the *Parlement de Paris*,⁹⁸ and in rights such as the right to petition. Everyone recognizes in it both the ever-present elements that sustain our order such as rule of law, constitutionalism, separation of powers and the faith in the individual whether in politics, the Marylebone Cricket Club, or in the very practice of language (whose grammatical rules tell us nothing about what to say). Everyone that is, can

recognize in 'what ought to be' what is already there, in 'what is', cleared of misdirection and confusion for, 'what is achieved is contained seminally or implicitly in what is given.'

The civil association serves, of course, to think about our politics. But, as Plotica has pointed out, although the civil association has a moral character, it may also be thought of as a means to an end in one respect; as the home that is appropriate for the individual as an intelligent agent.⁹⁹ Perhaps its final significance, then, is in its relationship to the theorist and theorizing. As Sheldon Wolin has remarked, it is in the civil association that 'the theoretical mind can be at home regardless of the conditions obtaining in the actual world.'¹⁰⁰ At home may be an overstatement; it is nevertheless the only possible accommodation, within the realm of practice, for the heretic, the quixotic¹⁰¹ and, of course, the thinker. Pushing the point beyond Oakeshott's immediate intentions, the civil association (in his second major work) may be thought of as Oakeshott's housing policy for his restless philosopher (of his first work); Plato's solution in *The Republic* ('city in speech'¹⁰²) minus the philosopher-kings¹⁰³ to the problem of Socrates in *The Apology*.

Oakeshott's dissent from liberal theory reveals also his implicit dissent from what I have called here unsympathetic conservatism. The error of unsympathetic conservatives is the attempt to inject the order with resources that are not present in it. This is not so because the liberal order is particularly resource-rich or good; these characteristics are merely contingent. It is rather because theorizing precludes the possibility of re-ordering 'what is' through 'what is not'; or, of the complete transcendence of the historical order. All that is needed, therefore, is already present within the order; and this is everything.

Oakeshott's understanding of the structure of human experience is one example – although, to my mind, a particularly representative one – of other thinkers of a conservative bent such as Etienne Gilson, Eric Voegelin, Mircea Eliade, Stanley Rosen and Hannah Arendt who, in their own ways, converge on this point.¹⁰⁴ All have studied human experiences of order occurring in and across time which, they agree, display a morphological equivalence despite their substantive differences. Gilson and Rosen have studied such articulations in the field of philosophy while Voegelin has extended the inquiry to symbolizations of socio-political order throughout human history. Gilson's finding that 'strikingly similar movements can be observed'¹⁰⁵ in the history of philosophy arising from the structure of the reasoning process is replicated by the structure of symbolization Voegelin finds in history and his call for 'unoriginal thinking.'¹⁰⁶ The end result, says Gilson, is that once the first principles of their inquiry are laid out, philosophers 'no longer think as they wish – they think as they can.'¹⁰⁷ Human beings thus are not free to make the order in which they live according to their wishes. In Oakeshott's words '[r]eality is not whatever I happen to think; it is what I am obliged to think.'¹⁰⁸

Oakeshott, however, extends Gilson's finding that the philosopher is 'the metaphysician [who] looks behind and beyond experience for an ultimate ground of all real and possible experience'¹⁰⁹ to everyman. If Gilson finds that philosophy is metaphysical in the sense that it aims to 'transcending all particular knowledge',¹¹⁰ Oakeshott responds that this is the wider context of human life in general. The sharp differentiation between

theorizing and doing, which is a red thread of conservative thought, is, on final reflection, subtly reconciled by their common structure as experience.

Concluding remarks

Is there something like a coherent conservative political theory? The example of Michael Oakeshott, I believe, has shown that when theorizing displays a simultaneously dissenting and sympathetic nature, this question can be answered in the affirmative. The dissent that Oakeshott articulates with regard to the liberal order reinforces the insight that conservatism is not merely a backward-looking or affirmative way of political thinking, but a potentially critical re-description of the world.

But the standard, of course, ought not to be critique but coherence. The alternative that sympathetic dissent provides comes most clearly to the fore when we link it back to Freeden's second feature of conservative thinking, namely the reference to an 'extra-human' instance 'independent of human will'. Different from other strands of conservatism that finally measure 'organic' against 'artificial' change with a yardstick foreign to the political sphere – Nature, God, the laws of biology, the Invisible Hand of the Market, History or *philosophia perennis* – sympathetic dissent gains its yardstick *out of* the political sphere. This yardstick is 'independent of human will' in the qualified sense that it links back human practice to its own, historical postulates; but 'extra-human' it is not. Interestingly, Oakeshott builds this restriction already into his notion of will, which is not an arbitrary projection of whatever we may wish, but 'an exhibition of intelligence', 'intelligence in doing'.¹¹¹ It is worth noting that there is nothing like a transcendent foundation here. To agree to a conservative argument like the Oakeshottian 'civil association' is, in the last instance, not a question of belief, but a question of understanding. That is, it retains its source in the *human* quest to put things in order.

While this finding calls for a peculiar revision of Freeden's second characteristic of conservatism, it strengthens the other two core aspects. On the one hand, the claim that a notion of change is not foreign, but at the core of conservative thinking, is reaffirmed. For a conservative theorist like Oakeshott, both theorizing and doing are ways in which human beings affect changes to their world; in fact, changing – themselves and their world – *is* what human beings *are*. In comparison to other strands of conservatism, conservative theory, therefore, holds a particularly strong notion of change.

On the other hand, the 'mirror image characteristic' of conservatism, in the case of sympathetic dissent, loses the overtone of ideological indistinctness, opportunism, or vagueness. The combined examination of Oakeshott's early and late work has shown that by being a 'liberal conservative', he is not 'less' of a conservative because he admits some more liberal pieces to his ideational patchwork. Rather, his mirroring of liberalism is what makes his conservative project stand up to its own standards, since theorizing, by definition, cannot transcend the historical situation. Appropriately to the metaphor, the 'mirror image characteristic' helps us draw out the form of conservative thought.

But, beyond these impulses that confirm or modify the features of Freeden's characterization, what turns his definition into a benchmark is the following: it is because conservative *theory* stages these core features at the theoretical level, that we can recognize the form of sympathetic dissent as *conservative*. That is, if the principle of conservative theory seems to abolish the possibility of any political qualifier for a theory

that seems completely removed from practice, its restaging of the core features allows us to reattach to it the 'conservative' qualifier. If conservative theory retains the standard of coherence, it is not (merely) its dissent, but (particularly) its sympathetic nature that makes it conservative.

I conclude with a broader remark. Historically, because of the pressures of modernity, there might have been a conservative reluctance to theoretical articulations. But, theoretically, judging from the logic of conservatism, there is not.

Notes

1. Michael Oakeshott, 'On Being Conservative', *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN.: Liberty Fund), pp. 407–437.
2. For an example, see Jerry Z. Muller, 'Introduction: What is Conservative Social and Political Thought?' *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 3–31. For an exception, see Samuel Huntington, 'Conservatism as an Ideology', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 51 (2): 454–473.
3. Jan-Werner Müller, 'Comprehending Conservatism: A New Framework for Analysis,' *Journal of Political Ideologies* (October 2006), 11 (3), pp. 359–365; Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, 'Comprehending Conservatism: Frameworks and Analysis,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19 (2): pp. 227–239; Martin Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true Conservative?' *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought* (2014), pp. 1–18; Martin Beckstein, 'The Concept of a Living Tradition', *European Journal of Social Theory* (forthcoming); and the articles in *The Monist*, 'Conservatism' (2016), 99 (4).
4. Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 333.
5. Freeden, *ibid.*, p. 334.
6. Freeden, *ibid.*, p. 336.
7. Freeden, *ibid.*, p. 337.
8. For example, Martin Beckstein, 'Alternative für Deutschland: Gescheiterter Konservatismus', 29 July 2016, <http://www.theorieblog.de/index.php/author/martin-beckstein/>.
9. By *principle* is meant the dynamic that generates the theoretical movement; by *form* I designate the structure and directionality of the thinking movement that allows us, for heuristic purposes, to visualize it. The form is not a classificatory category under which thinkers may be placed, but an ideal-type. The categorization of individual thinkers in the main body of the article is tentatively introduced for illustrative purposes only.
10. This is not to say that this version of unsympathetic dissent is not theoretical, but merely that its thesis is ultimately historical.
11. In a qualified manner, Hannah Arendt's work may illustrate this point. See my *Thinking Founding Moments with Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017), chapter 4.
12. Kieron O'Hara, 'Conservatism, Epistemology, and Value', *The Monist* (2016) 99 (4): p. 423.
13. That this may be too broad has been noticed, for example, by Judith N. Shklar in 'The Liberalism of Fear', *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 3. That the breadth may be unproblematic has been pointed out by Duncan Bell in 'What is Liberalism?' *Political Theory*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2014): pp. 682–715.
14. As remarked by an anonymous reviewer.
15. Inherent to the principle of conservative theory is the distinction political theorist/intellectual where the former theorizes and the latter acts politically, i.e. speaks publicly about what should be done for the sake of justice. The case of Burke may be more controversial than Kristol's; here I follow Strauss' judgment that Burke 'did not write a single theoretical

- work on the principles of politics.’ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 295.
16. The differentiation between theorizing and doing in Arendt and Oakeshott is dealt with in more detail here. But it is also present in Strauss’ differentiation of the philosophical from the political life and the privileging of the former; in MacIntyre’s Aristotelian understanding of human practices in *After Virtue* and the objects and ends of thought in, for example, the fifth, seventh and eighth essays in *The Tasks of Philosophy Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); in Voegelin’s exploration of human (political) doings in his 5-volume *Order and History* as a hermeneutic of symbolic representation and his exploration of theorizing in his philosophy of consciousness, that ultimately severs all links with doing. Cf. David Corey, ‘Eric Voegelin and Aristotle on *Nous*: What is Noetic Political Science?’ *The Review of Politics*, vol. 74, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 57–79.
 17. Hannah Arendt, ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’, *Social Research*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Autumn 1971), p. 421.
 18. That there is no necessary hierarchy between theorizing and doing does not mean that conservative theorists hold the same position. Some do not hierarchize between the two (Oakeshott), others value theorizing over doing (Strauss) and others still do the opposite (Arendt).
 19. Hannah Arendt, ‘Thinking’, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc. 1977), p. 200.
 20. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 3.
 21. Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 101.
 22. Michael Oakeshott, ‘The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind’, *Rationalism, op. cit.*, p. 493.
 23. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 254. Conservatives share this dissent with others, such as the tradition of the democratic left, e.g. Chantal Mouffe, ‘Introduction’ *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000). Hannah Arendt, who partakes of both traditions fitting uneasily in each, is indicative of this common ground.
 24. For the move of liberal theory from philosophy to history, consider the arc of post-war liberal theorizing that begins with Rawls’ confident justification of the principles of contemporary liberal order in *A Theory of Justice*, flattens out into the parsimonious rationalizations of liberalism by Alan Gewirth and Robert Nozick, declines into Ronald Dworkin’s elegant retreat into principles internal to the tradition, splutters to a halt with John Gray’s recognition that the tradition itself has reached its end, and abandons efforts at justification altogether in favour of historical contingency in Richard Rorty. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974); Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); John Gray, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
 25. Leo Strauss, ‘What is Political Philosophy?’, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 28.
 26. History turns out a singularly unstable place to be for liberal theory. John Gray concludes ‘Liberalism as a doctrine implicitly presupposed what contemporary cultural pluralism destroys or diminishes, a single cultural tradition as undergirding the institutions of civil society’ (Gray, *Liberalisms, op. cit.*, Ref. 24, p. 214).
 27. To repeat: this classification is solely for illustrative purposes; the two forms are not categories under which thinkers can be firmly placed. See fn., 9.
 28. The metaphor of darkness to describe the contemporary conditions of the order is common. MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23, p. 263; Arendt, ‘Preface’, *Men in Dark Times* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973).

29. Sanford Lakoff, 'Tocqueville, Burke, and the Origins of Liberal Conservatism', *The Review of Politics*, vol. 60 no. 3 (Summer, 1998): pp. 435–464. For Oakeshott, see the discussion in Andrew Gamble, 'Oakeshott's Ideological Politics: Conservative or Liberal?' *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* ed. Efraim Podoksik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): pp. 153–176. For his affinity to left-wing thought, see Luke O'Sullivan, 'Michael Oakeshott and the Left', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 75, no. 3 (July 2014): pp. 471–492. For a thoughtful rejection of the conservative reading of Oakeshott's theoretical reflections, see Luke Philip Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought* (State University of New York Press, 2015).
30. Stanley Rosen may be considered conservative only in the sense that he argues for a modified kind of Platonism. But he claims that we cannot even seek a way out of contemporary problems by recovering past thought. To look for a solution to the problem of modern nihilism in a past episode would be 'to surrender to the very forces which have produced modern nihilism.' Rosen, *Nihilism*, xvii, 137. Rosen's purpose in *Ancients and Moderns* is to defend, through his modified Platonism, a particular version of Enlightenment modernity (a 'modified or moderate enlightenment') against conservative thinkers who defend antiquity against modernity.
31. Tocqueville's continuous movement between the aristocratic and democratic as his own innermost temperamental poles is well known. He remains faithful to this tension by dissenting from the dynamic of the liberal order without for a moment abandoning that order or fancying its supersession. Oakeshott too brings to light resources that are not strictly speaking within liberalism. The theory of civil association connects liberalism's historical beginnings with what went on before it in medieval life. On the philosophical plane, the analysis of experience opens up access to modes of thinking that stand outside of the liberal theoretical tradition. But even at his most 'conservative' in *Rationalism in Politics*, '[h]e was not interested in restoring lost or endangered political traditions.' Steven B. Smith, 'Practical Life and the Critique of Rationalism', *The Cambridge Companion*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 29, p. 136.
32. Unsympathetic dissent ends up at a conservative position insofar as it considers the liberal order as unsalvageable within its own terms and moves to recover past modes of theorizing and doing in order to re-order the present.
33. For example, the principle of love of equality that tends to overwhelm the principle of love of liberty in liberal democracies over time. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), p. 873.
34. Allan Bloom's judgment on Rawls is representative and could be replicated all along the line of liberal theorists. Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, says Bloom, '[amounts] to a restatement of American constitutional arrangements, reinterpreted to include the imperatives of the welfare state'. Allan Bloom, 'Justice: John Rawls Vs. The Tradition of Political Philosophy', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 69, no. 2 (Jun. 1975), p. 657.
35. The claim that Oakeshott is a liberal is not controversial. See W. H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London: Longman, 1966); Paul Franco, 'Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist', *Political Theory*, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 1990), p. 411; Wendell John Coats, Jr. 'Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist', *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Review canadienne de science politique*, XVIII:4 (December/décembre 1985). For a similar perspective to mine, based on Oakeshott's notion of experience, see Nardin, *Oakeshott*, *op. cit.* and Stuart Isaacs, *The Politics and Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (London: Routledge, 2006).
36. This gulf is reconciled in thinkers like Eric Voegelin precisely because of this equivalency. The opposition remains, however, in Leo Strauss' view of the philosopher as the possessor of esoteric knowledge unavailable to the statesman, or Hannah Arendt's view of philosophy as inherently 'solitary' activity that is 'dangerous' to the politics that inherently 'requires the presence of others' except 'in the rare moments when the chips are down'. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952);

- compare Arendt, 'Thinking' *op. cit.*, Ref. 19, with 'Action' *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp. 175–247 and 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', *op. cit.*, Ref. 17, pp. 417–446.
37. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 14.
 38. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 27.
 39. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 9.
 40. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 26.
 41. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 11.
 42. All quotations from Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 12.
 43. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 23.
 44. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
 45. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 14.
 46. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 27.
 47. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 42.
 48. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 30.
 49. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 29. And this 'given' is not sense-data or some immediate things but 'the complex situation in which we find ourselves in the first moments of consciousness'. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 20.
 50. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 35.
 51. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 29.
 52. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 31.
 53. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 29.
 54. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 31.
 55. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 259.
 56. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 81.
 57. Aside from practice, Oakeshott considers also science and history in *Experience and its Mode* and later poetry in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*. But the modes are not limited to these.
 58. Oakeshott, *op.cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 248.
 59. Oakeshott resembles other conservative thinkers by beginning with doing but distinguishes himself from most by not privileging it. Cf. Nardin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 21, p. 10.
 60. Oakeshott, *op.cit.*, Ref. 37., p. 288.
 61. I hold to Oakeshott's terminology in *Experience and its Modes*. In *On Human Conduct* theorizing is grasped more systematically through a critically detailed examination of its postulates.
 62. Oakeshott, *op.cit.*, Ref. 37., p. 83.
 63. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 248.
 64. All quotations from Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 256.
 65. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, pp. 288–289.
 66. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 289.
 67. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 303.
 68. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20, p. 1.
 69. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 327. After this book, Oakeshott refers to theorizing as conversation and, later still, as understanding (and, incidentally, to doing as tradition and, later still, as practice). Here I mix the more common former and later references to indicate continuities. For a more complete discussion, see James Alexander, 'Oakeshott as Philosopher', *The Cambridge Companion*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 29, pp. 9–41.
 70. I identify only this principle for the sake of economy; others are doing's standpoint of human desires and needs with all the concepts, understanding, and presuppositions that this implies. See Bhikhu Parekh, 'Oakeshott's Theory of Civil Association', *Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 1 (Oct., 1995): pp. 161–162.
 71. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20, pp. 3–8.
 72. Cf. Nardin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 21, p. 52.

73. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 77.
74. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, 11. The (true) articulation, of course, cannot be true *as such* because the practical articulation of the truth of the whole (e.g. in a book) turns it immediately into a given which, by definition, is in dissonance with the movement of experience beyond what is merely given or achieved.
75. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, 27.
76. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 302.
77. The later Oakeshott in *On Human Conduct* abandons this drive to totality but, it seems to me, the earlier Oakeshott is more consistent, if decidedly less fashionable. But cf. Nardin, *Oakeshott*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 21, p. 35, 48.
78. Nardin, *ibid.*, p. 48.
79. Nardin, *ibid.*
80. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 3.
81. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, 3.
82. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, pp. 261, 180–4.
83. Nardin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 21, p. 50.
84. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 75; Nardin, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–3; Alexander, *op. cit.*, Ref. 69, p. 17. But for a qualified hierarchy, see *Experience*, p. 3. This, however, disappears in his later work.
85. For Oakeshott's definition of politics as the 'pursuit of intimations', see 'Political Education' in *Rationalism and Politics*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 56–8. For his definition of philosophy as 'pursuing the implications of what is given', see *Experience and its Modes*, *ibid.*, p. 37.
86. 'Political philosophy' is a charged term for Oakeshott. In *On Human Conduct* he saw it as a legitimate but 'conditional'—in the sense that the theorizing movement must be 'arrested'—form of theorizing. See Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20, pp. 10–11, but cf. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, pp. 340–344.
87. S. Wolin, 'The Politics of Self-Disclosure', *Political Theory*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Aug. 1976), p. 324.
88. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20, pp. 55–58.
89. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, chapter 2, pp. 108–184.
90. Parekh, *op. cit.*, Ref. 70, p. 179.
91. Pidge Digeser and Richard Flathman, 'Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct*', *The Cambridge Companion*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 29, p. 201.
92. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20, p. 205.
93. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 109. Its ideality allows Oakeshott to distinguish civil association from a laissez-faire state of classical and economists and free-market liberals. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, pp. 293–294.
94. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
95. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 206.
96. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 201.
97. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 207.
98. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 215.
99. Luke Philip Plotica, *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 75.
100. Wolin, *op. cit.*, Ref. 87, p. 324.
101. On the role of Cervantes' forlorn knight in Oakeshott's imagination, see Michael Oakeshott, *Notebooks, 1922–86*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2014), p. 172, O'Sullivan, 'Introduction', p. xxiii.
102. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 369c.
103. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20, pp. 27–31.
104. See, respectively, Eric Voegelin, 'What is History?' and 'The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth', in *What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, eds. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works 28* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 173–232 and Eric Voegelin, 'Equivalences of Experience

and Symbolization in History', in Ellis Sandoz, ed. *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 115–133; Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937); Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). Cf. Thomas Heilke, 'Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization: Historic Constant or Changing Structures? Gilson, Rosen, and Voegelin on Equivalences and Constancy amidst Change', Paper presented at the *Eric Voegelin Society*, 108th APSA Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA: Aug. 20–2 September 2012. In Hannah Arendt, the common structure of thinking and acting remains implicit, but present in the designation of both as 'genuine experiences'. Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', *op. cit.*, Ref. 17, p. 423.

105. Gilson, *The Unity*, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

106. 'Unoriginal thinking' refers to Voegelin's finding that there are continuities in human experiences of reality over time; that theory is the self-interpretation of these experiences; and that the propositions and symbolisms used to interpret one philosopher's experience of order have an equivalent structure to those of others. 'The test of truth', Voegelin concludes, 'will be the lack of originality in the propositions.' Eric Voegelin, 'Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History', *Published Essays: 1966–1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* 12 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 122.

107. Gilson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 104, p. 302.

108. Oakeshott, *Experience*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 59.

109. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 307.

110. Oakeshott, *ibid.*, p. 309.

111. Oakeshott, *Conduct*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

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