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DONALD  
MACKINNON'S  
THEOLOGY

*To Perceive Tragedy  
Without the Loss of Hope*

ANDREW BOWYER

# **DONALD MACKINNON'S THEOLOGY**

T&T Clark Studies in English Theology

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**Andrew Bowyer**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### *MacKinnon's works*

- BT *Borderlands of Theology, and Other Essays by Donald M. MacKinnon.*  
edited by George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker Eugene: Wipf and  
Stock, 2011. 1968.
- ET *Explorations in Theology.* London: SCM, 1979.
- TT *Themes in Theology: The Three-Fold Cord; Essays in Philosophy, Politics and  
Theology.* Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987.
- PM *The Problem of Metaphysics, Gifford Lectures,* Cambridge: Cambridge  
University Press, 1974.
- SET *A Study in Ethical Theory.* London: A. & C. Black, 1957.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO DONALD MACKINNON

Stanley Hauerwas once made the offhand comment that ‘MacKinnon saved British theology.’<sup>1</sup> Here was an endorsement of Donald MacKinnon’s attempt to reframe theology in light of a rejection of ‘constantinianism’ and the ‘Christendom project’, his suspicion of popular theological modernizers and liberals of the early to mid-twentieth century and his willingness to see Barth as providing a timely word on theology’s true ground and method. Rowan Williams, Nicholas Lash, Brian Hebblethwaite, Fergus Kerr and David Fergusson all cite MacKinnon as an indispensable influence on their thinking, as does his long-time friend, the literary critic George Steiner. Additionally, a number of prominent female moral philosophers who emerged from war-time Oxford, including Mary Midgley, Mary Warnock, Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch, came under his influence to various degrees.

Donald MacKinnon (1913–94) can be counted among the most influential Anglican theologians in the British context in the second half of the twentieth century. His writings reveal a restive and unsystematic thinker, yet there is a good case to be made that a series of reoccurring questions – ‘obsessions’ might better suit MacKinnon’s temperament – appear throughout. These relate to the demands of moral realism, the tensions between the philosophical positions of realism and idealism and the perennially disruptive presence of Christ, whose redemptive significance cannot be fully appreciated apart from a tragic ascription.

Under the heading, ‘Is there an intuition of being? MacKinnon and Lash on analogy in Aquinas’, DeHart notes,

In many ways this story, like much that is most interesting in recent theology in England, begins with Donald MacKinnon. The towering, eccentric Scotsman (no Presbyterian but rather member of the Episcopal Church of Scotland [*sic*], and a catholic in ecclesial and theological outlook) held the Norris-Hulse chair in Cambridge for almost twenty years (1960–78). As he threaded his life’s path of agonizingly self-aware dissent over the course of the blood-soaked twentieth century, he launched one attempt after another toward a contemporary retrieval of the implicit ontology of Nicaea and Chalcedon, always faithful to a creatively Kantian ethics of the limits of cognition, and deeply colored by his bruisingly intimate feel for the irredeemability of historical suffering. This (for its time) highly atypical theological stance challenged and intrigued any

1. He made this comment to the author at Durham University in 2012.

number of independent thinkers, especially at Cambridge, as did his tireless recommendations of Barth and Balthasar in a period of Anglican theology when the first was far from popular and the second hardly known.<sup>2</sup>

While MacKinnon has appeared as a conversation partner in a number of academic monographs in the decade after his death, the most important shift in interest coincided with the onset of the twenty-first century, particularly with the emergence of PhD research projects that have focused on MacKinnon in his own right. The most significant contribution has been that of André Muller, whose doctoral thesis has provided a detailed intellectual biography of MacKinnon up until 1959, with a second volume now being prepared.<sup>3</sup> Timothy Connor has also provided an incisive analysis of the interactions between ecclesiological and Christological themes of MacKinnon's various writings, placing them in the wider context of contemporary Anglican ecclesiastical polity, in his 2011 book *The Kenotic Trajectory of the Church in Donald MacKinnon's Theology: From Galilee to Jerusalem to Galilee*.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these, concerted attempts to edit and reissue MacKinnon's now out-of-print publications have occurred, which are indicative of a new generation that perceives the enduring value of his contribution. In this vein, McDowell has produced a 'Donald MacKinnon Reader',<sup>5</sup> a new edition of *Borderlands* has been reissued<sup>6</sup> and a collection of MacKinnon's contributions to the 'signposts' series has been published (*God the Living and True* and *The Church of God*), together with *The Stripping of the Altars*.<sup>7</sup>

What follows is a work that is sympathetic to MacKinnon, perhaps too much so. A focus on his signal achievements is warranted, however, because they have often been obscured by his own difficult style, by the fact that it was impossible to establish any discrete and enduring school of thought in his name, and by the fact that he was so immersed in the particular theological and political controversies of

2. Paul DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Enquiry* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 38.

3. André Muller, 'Donald M. MacKinnon: The True Service of the Particular, 1913-1959' Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Otago, 2010.

4. Timothy G. Connor, *The Kenotic Trajectory of the Church in Donald Mackinnon's Theology: From Galilee to Jerusalem to Galilee* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

5. D. M. MacKinnon, *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John C. McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

6. D. M. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology, and Other Essays by Donald M. MacKinnon*, ed. George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

7. Scott A. Kirkland, Ashley J. Moyse and John C. McDowell, ed., *The Church in Dispossession: The Ecclesiological Writings of Donald M. MacKinnon* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).

his day that it is tempting to see his work as speaking exclusively to a past epoch.<sup>8</sup> An attentive reading of MacKinnon's oeuvre results in two further convictions. First, that there has been insufficient attention as to the way his commitment to moral realism appears over the disparate writings, providing a point of connection between his theological and philosophical interests. Second, that more must be said about MacKinnon's methodology beyond such labels as 'deliberately unsystematic'. I address this latter concern with the proposal that MacKinnon's method has a distinctly 'therapeutic' character. The issue of MacKinnon's moral realism and call for metaphysical renewal are interlocking themes across this whole study. It is a realism that seeks to contemplate suffering borne of evil unflinchingly, together with the presence of Christ, who (for MacKinnon) is always the crucified messiah of history *and* the mystical body of the Catholic Church at every time.<sup>9</sup> MacKinnon's moral intensity and concern for a post-positivist metaphysics comes to bear on his appreciation of Kant and Wittgenstein, and plays a decisive role in his engagements with literature, Marxism and the person of Jesus.

What becomes evident in exploring these dimensions of MacKinnon's thought is a deep engagement with philosophy. Classics was a core focus of the school curriculum at Winchester and an interest in Plato and Aristotle never left him, no doubt encouraged by his study of the 'Greats' at Oxford and his early close proximity to figures such as A. E. Taylor. Yet it was Kant who had the greatest impact and Janz has argued that MacKinnon's nuanced reading of the Enlightenment master has received something of a vindication in the wake of the fading influence of Strawson's commentary; a reading that led many British theologians to view Kant as *the* enemy. In this context MacKinnon was a minority voice for holding Kant as an indispensable ally for theology. This is certainly a point on which he and Hauerwas would disagree and which, as I will examine in Chapter 5, becomes the greatest source of Milbank's complaint against him. For MacKinnon, the purgation Kant effected in the realms of metaphysics and theology forms a 'point of no return', and the way Kant set up a perennial tension between idealism and realism, freedom and necessity, as unavoidable dimensions of human reason stayed with him as he moved beyond Kant to engage with other interlockers. This point, I think, was crucial for MacKinnon's reluctance to join others in a full embrace of the Wittgensteinian trajectory, although, as my final chapter shows, MacKinnon's reluctance emerged from a perceptive reading of Wittgenstein rather than any indictable avoidance or neglect.

8. Janz speaks about MacKinnon as one 'whose illuminating and highly relevant contributions to [the philosophical problem of anti-realism and realism] have been all but lost in contemporary treatments and whose insight opens the debate to theological problems in enormously productive ways'. Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason, and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 52.

9. For an early affirmation of this sentiment read D. M. MacKinnon, *The Church of God*, Signposts (London: Dacre, 1940).

The first chapter proposes a new lens through which MacKinnon's project may be viewed. It will characterize his work as a form of 'therapeutic' philosophy that combines a call for intense interiority *and* moral realism in a way that sees these notions as mutually involved and reinforcing. As the chapter progresses the extent to which Kant lies behind much of MacKinnon's therapeutic language of 'purgation' and 'illumination' will become clear. So too the fact that moral realism becomes, both the end of a certain therapeutic discipline and a commitment that shapes MacKinnon's engagement with philosophy and theology at every level. It characterizes a 'form of life'. MacKinnon never sets out a *systematic* defence of moral realism nor for his insistence that the tension between idealism and realism is at once (a) something crucial for theologians to confront explicitly, (b) a tension that necessarily exists and remains perennially unsolved, and (c) results in the continued need for a language of metaphysics. Yet, these ideas occur again and again throughout his corpus. They emerge as philosophical inevitabilities from within the task of continued description and re-description of human experience in all its historical particularity.

An examination of the key influences on MacKinnon follows in Chapter 2, and it is here we can detect one of the sources of MacKinnon's restiveness as he seeks to adopt insights from a confident moral apologetic theology of the previous generation, while at the same time respecting the ways in which the analytical turn had highlighted the impossibility of such projects. The remainder of the study is taken up by exploring the various domains in which MacKinnon's therapeutic moral realism comes to the fore. These include his engagements with kenotic Christology (Chapter 3), his convictions as to the indispensability of good literature for moral philosophy and realist theology (Chapter 4), and his response to Wittgenstein as he sought to articulate a post-Kantian position (Chapter 5).

The picture of MacKinnon that emerges in the pages to follow suggests a figure who invites an initiation into a purgative form of therapy that fashions the theologian, and the wider church, as animators of a renewed Catholic humanism with an uncompromising commitment to moral realism. For MacKinnon, Kant was an ally for this project, while for the likes of Milbank, he is what the Catholic humanist must be saved *from*. Some of MacKinnon's critics certainly hit their mark, as the final chapter will show, but there is also room for riposte. In what follows, I seek to shine a light on an original thinker, whose mark on British theology continues to be felt and whose attentiveness to the problem of metaphysics and call for moral seriousness, which were for him, two sides of a coin, remains pressing.

## Chapter 1

### MACKINNON'S 'THERAPEUTIC' METHOD

#### *Introduction*

In an introduction to a book entitled *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, Szabados speaks about 'a family of writers' 'reading in the borderlands' whose

line of thinking was fideistic in the sense that they believed in order to understand, that they endorsed the attitude '*Credo ut intelligam*'. This is an attitude to the activity of philosophizing that sees acceptance of rooted practices and ways of life as a given. Such an acceptance is not some peculiar and wilful act of belief, but an expression of reverence and a sense of wonder. This attitude takes what is given seriously. In contrast to traditional philosophy, which employs the method of sceptical doubt as a road to knowledge, fideist thinkers take an attitude of trust as fundamental to action, understanding and appreciation. They aim to do justice to what there is by overcoming forms of thought that distort and by providing perspicuous descriptions.<sup>1</sup>

While claiming that it would be wrong to attribute to this 'family' a 'common essence', Szabados thinks that they do share a 'central concern to leave room for faith by exposing the abuses and pretensions of reason involved in bad philosophy and the scientism of the age.'<sup>2</sup> The invocation of 'fideism' here obscures more than illumines, yet all that follows will indicate that MacKinnon was a sympathetic fringe dweller of the 'family' about which Szabados speaks; a fringe dweller because he continued to see immense purgative potential in the 'sceptical doubt of traditional philosophy'.

Attempts to bring the philosophical and theological output of MacKinnon under the discipline of a single organizing principle is a fraught enterprise, not least because MacKinnon himself admitted that there was nothing particularly organized about the way he thought and wrote. He never claimed to have reconciled the different strands of his thought.<sup>3</sup> The continually shifting,

1. Béla Szabados, 'Introduction', in *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, ed. K. Nielsen and D. Z. Phillips (London: SCM Press, 2005), 14.

2. *Ibid.*

3. 'I don't pretend that my philosophy and theology hang together. I wish they did. They impinge on each other; but there are many very dark places.' MacKinnon, in L. Macintyre 'Thinking Legend Still in Search of Answers', *Glasgow Herald*, 7 November 1989.

open-ended and interrogative nature of his work indicates as much. Regarding theology, MacKinnon discounts the possibility of synthesis as a factor that arises necessarily from within the discipline itself:

If 'synthesis' is not to be the lot of Christians in the twentieth century that will be because it is less a theological act than an act of God, a putting together of fragmentary lives and efforts in the resurrection of the dead.<sup>4</sup>

In regard to his philosophical commitments, MacKinnon was too aware of the early-twentieth-century positivist turn in philosophy to align himself with particular forms of idealism fading in its wake, or any analogous approach that lent itself to ambitious exercises in system building.<sup>5</sup> It is not only the idealist tradition, however, that MacKinnon sought to move beyond. He also articulated dissatisfaction with positivist reductionism, concerned that when one submits to its premises and methods, inevitably there will be violations against the manifold complexity of the human subject and 'an expulsion of the poets'; a refusal of some modes of imaginative discourse that are essential in any effort to apprehend history and moral subject.<sup>6</sup> This is despite his lifelong admiration for positivism (and the whole empiricist pedigree) because of its commitment to 'realism' and what he perceives as its purgative intellectual rigour. Perhaps it is the case that – loosely analogous to figures of the early German romantic movement in their own time and context – MacKinnon feared that the atomistic drive of empiricism and its positivist offshoots of the interwar period ended up placing costly limits on the very realism empiricists nonetheless held as an absolute commitment. It is the rigour of the empiricist's drive to capture objective knowledge of the world as it stands independent of specific subjective constructs that is at once the greatest contribution of the empiricist school *and* the source of its most crippling blind spots.

It is no surprise that MacKinnon looked upon the progression of J. S. Mill's thinking with sympathy in as far as the latter affirmed the necessity and usefulness of empirical realism, but alongside a growing conviction that Benthamite epistemological rigour could undermine the realist's receptivity to reality in ways that demanded redress, supplementation and the expansion of terms.<sup>7</sup> The most telling test case in any manifestation of this dispute, and certainly between the likes of Bentham and Mill, is whether poetic forms of speech can constitute knowledge of some sort, or whether they must be rejected or exposed to reductive

4. D. M. MacKinnon, 'Some Reflections on the Summer School', *Christendom* 14 (1945): 111.

5. D. M. MacKinnon, 'Revelation and Social Justice', in *Burdens*, ed. John McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 144–5.

6. D. M. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, Gifford Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 46–52.

7. *Ibid.*, 46–7.

analysis in order to uncover underlying 'facts'.<sup>8</sup> In MacKinnon's case, and unlike Mill, the resources drawn upon for this critical engagement with empiricism lies less with any specific forms of romanticism and more with Kant, Christian existentialism, Collingwood's historicism and phenomenological approaches to moral action mediated through literature. Closer to MacKinnon's era was Isaiah Berlin: MacKinnon's tutor at Oxford and one whose relationship with positivist philosophy has resonance with features of Mill's biography as described above.<sup>9</sup> Berlin was deeply committed to the positivist turn in British philosophy in the early twentieth century, yet without renouncing a commitment to 'empirical seriousness' spent much of his latter life examining the history of romanticism and defending the notion of freedom within political liberalism.<sup>10</sup>

MacKinnon resisted projects of idealist metaphysics *and* positivist realism in as far as they were judged to distort or limit apprehension of the subject's particular place in history and compromise moral self-apprehension. As intimated above, he saw much more promise in the second although he did posit a qualified re-engagement with Kant as a possible avenue by which to repair some of its deficiencies.<sup>11</sup> Kant is *the* great philosophical figure of modernity for MacKinnon, separating yet holding together the realms of 'nature' and the autonomous rational subject's freedom, while seeking to posit renewed possibilities for speaking about morality, aesthetics and religion.<sup>12</sup>

One important aspect of MacKinnon's project was that of bringing what he saw to be the clarifying rigour of the early-twentieth-century positivists into conversation with Kant. To this conversation he added an abiding commitment to a realist orthodox Christian theology. Given the disparity of these interests and the way that they oppose each other, it is not surprising that his efforts were deliberately and self-consciously unsystematic. MacKinnon preferred to express himself in essays, lectures and short books – mediums that are better at raising questions and probing possibilities than delivering anything by way of definitive solution or 'knock-down' argument.<sup>13</sup> While allowing for creativity and subtlety the openness of texture can be frustratingly obtuse.

8. This is a question that MacKinnon often references in relation to Plato. On the philosophical status of the poetic form, see for instance: D. M. MacKinnon, *On the Notion of a Philosophy of History: Lecture Delivered on 5 May 1953 at King's College, London*, Hobhouse Memorial Trust Lecture, 23 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

9. Muller, 'True Service', 251–2.

10. D. M. MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (London: A&C Black, 1957), 207–9.

11. *BT*, 55–81.

12. Pamela Sue Anderson and Jordan Bell, *Kant and Theology*, Philosophy and theology (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 11–25.

13. Steiner notes that MacKinnon 'shares this preference with modern logicians ... , but also, I would like to imagine, with the pre-Socratics'. George Steiner, 'Tribute to Donald MacKinnon', *Theology* 98, no. 781 (1995): 5.

What kind of a picture is emerging about the peculiarities, risks and priorities of MacKinnon's programme? Indispensable is a conviction regarding the importance of philosophy for the theologian and the centrality of morality to the whole methodology. In the first instance, MacKinnon holds that theology can only remain true to its vocation if it engages with philosophy, not in an apologetic mode but rather as one discipline undergoing testing and refinement at the hands of another. In his inaugural lecture as the Norris Hulse Professor at the University of Cambridge, MacKinnon noted that 'apologetic concern, as Karl Barth (the one living theologian of unquestionable genius) has rightly insisted, is the death of serious theologizing, and I would add, equally of serious work in the philosophy of religion.'<sup>14</sup> Yet, in contrast to Barth's programme, MacKinnon more explicitly emphasizes the way theologians might avoid illusion and resist temptation in as far as they expose their ideas to the sceptical gaze of the modern philosopher. In his context, it is clear that the advent of analytical philosophy in Britain, with its positivist and empiricist dimensions and its tendency to underwrite forms of utilitarianism, provides a worthy provocation or purgation of Christian temptations towards anthropomorphism, as well as voluntarism and abstraction in moral theology. The same could be said for the various trends in Marxist theory with which MacKinnon engaged.

One will search MacKinnon's writing in vain for an equally strong sense that philosophers need to open themselves up to the purgative insights of theology.<sup>15</sup> Beyond an ever-deepening apprehension of revealed knowledge, which can only ever be a scandal to the philosopher, theology's task is to give witness to the irreducibility of personhood's moral dimension and to defend the unique spiritual dignity of men and women in the face of all temptations to reductionism. Further, it can note the way in which moral experience continually raises questions that expose limits and reinforce the poverty of anthropomorphism.

### *MacKinnon's 'therapeutic' methodology*

Claiming that MacKinnon was an 'unsystematic' thinker could be taken as a rebuke. It might suggest a scattered mind that could never quite pull the threads together:

14. *BT*, 28. The early influence of Neo-Orthodoxy on MacKinnon is evident in one of his more accessible works: D. M. MacKinnon, *God the Living and the True*, Signposts (London: Dacre Press, 1940).

15. MacKinnon's work does not reflect the characteristic pattern which Insole identifies as typical of (what was to become) the Radical Orthodox movement in which 'there is the usual description of "secular" approaches, reliant upon a mythos or "original violence"; then there is the invocation of the peaceful, analogical Christian mythos that understands the secular better than the secular understands itself; finally there is an invocation of a certain theological position to answer definitively a wider social/philosophical problem'. Christopher J. Insole, *The Realist Hope: A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 170.

never attaining an acceptable level of coherence, resolution or a convincing response to detractors. MacKinnon knew that he could be obscure, fragmented and tortured in his writing. Yet, a patient examination of MacKinnon's *oeuvre* suggests that he was developing something of a therapeutic method. Approaching his project through this lens helps us to appreciate that the struggle for clear expression flows from the conceptual tensions he was trying to hold and is integral to the perceptiveness achieved.<sup>16</sup> The opening lines of John Wren-Lewis's review of SET, in which exasperation is evident, captures the difficulty in accounting for MacKinnon's method:

This is a curious book, which at least one reader has gone through carefully twice without being able to grasp quite what the author is trying to say or indeed to achieve. The one thing that can be said with certainty is that it is a study in the different ways that ethical language can be used, written somewhat in the style of a 'novel of atmosphere', bringing out various subtle differences of *nuance* and highlighting the tensions that occur in different situations. Professor MacKinnon studies a number of writers on ethics more or less at random: H. A. Pritchard, Mill and the Utilitarians, Kant, Isaiah Berlin, Bishop Butler, Hegel and St. Paul each serve to illustrate one aspect of his subject, one mood, as it were, in which ethical language may be used. If he makes no reference whatever to the ethical teaching of Jesus, Buddha or Plato, or even of Aristotle or Confucius, it is hard to know whether he can be criticised for omitting them or not: it is scarcely possible to criticise a playwright's use of character when you are not clear just what plot he has in mind.<sup>17</sup>

Wren-Lewis was right to detect a theatrical impulse and the influence of a literary sensibility in MacKinnon's style. In Chapter 4, I will show that MacKinnon was acutely aware of the way plays and novels of realist intensity can invite approaches that are helpfully different to those demanded by modernist philosophers who attempt to prevent flights of fancy by fixating on mimicking the natural sciences or mathematics in key aspects of method. Where Wren-Lewis misses the mark is his claim that MacKinnon chooses his subjects 'more or less at random' and this is a representative case in which the therapeutic ascription is helpful for a defence of MacKinnon. Wren-Lewis *suspects* something more is at play in SET but he can only explain it in terms of the inaccessibility of an artistic temperament. MacKinnon begins the book with a focus on the controversy that dominated modernist moral philosophy; the debate between utilitarians and deontologists, and then proceeds to invoke a number of figures whose work provides a series of

16. Murray was the first to associate MacKinnon's project with the 'therapeutic' label. Paul D. Murray, 'Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective: A Study in the Theological Relevance of Postfoundationalist Approaches to Human Rationality with Particular Reference to the Work of Richard Rorty, Nicholas Rescher and Donald MacKinnon' (University of Cambridge, 2003), 15, 169–73.

17. J. Wren-Lewis, 'A Study in Ethical Theory', *Modern Churchman* 3, no. 2 (1960): 145.

distinctive purgative and reparative resources orientated towards two interrelated goals. The first involves enabling the reader to look beyond the terms of the debate as they had been set (in this vein at least, there is a similarity with Wittgenstein's project), and the second: to convince the reader that part of their 'healing' comes with the acceptance of a form of rigorous, historically grounded realism. If this were MacKinnon's intention then an unhelpful criticism would point to a lack of breadth, comprehensiveness and systematic resolution, while an astute critic would point to the ways in which he has misdiagnosed the problem, sought therapeutic remedies from the wrong sources or missed potential resources altogether.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the writings of St. Paul, MacKinnon made an observation that could well apply to himself:

If Paul writes sometimes as a man in pain, the very depth of his perplexity gives a certain purity to his words; for he writes not as if he would provide a solution, but rather as if he would lay the texture of a problem bare.<sup>19</sup>

There is an acknowledgement of unresolved perplexity, a drive towards 'purer' expression, and an emphasis on an open-ended need for diagnosis and 'treatment'. To call MacKinnon 'unsystematic' is to evoke a famously restless and eccentric personality, but also to point to deeply held convictions about the nature of rationality itself and his acute sensitivity to the problem of scepticism. Yet this is not to say that MacKinnon was blind to the benefits of attempts to systematize, whether they emerged from the pen of Barth and Balthasar, or from Russell or Moore. Nor is it to say common threads or carefully developed arguments cannot be found in MacKinnon's various writings. Indeed, the conviction that propels this study is that MacKinnon's project *does* have a central theme, into which all the tributaries of his various thoughts flow; that of moral realism and the perennial dialectic of idealism and realism which warrants the retention of a recall to metaphysics. By his own admission the place MacKinnon found himself was the 'borderlands', where one is caught in an open-ended conversation between philosophy and theology and such liminal spaces proved to be a crucible. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the trend in Britain was towards a revelatory positivism that sought sanctuary from the fires of hostile philosophical trends or alternatively, the abandonment of realist claims for theology in order to make a bid for greater philosophical credibility. MacKinnon refused both options.

To say that MacKinnon is undertaking a type of philosophical therapy means, I contend, looking at his work through an analogous lens to that which Stanley Cavell looks upon the later works of Wittgenstein. Cavell argues that it is unhelpful to characterize Wittgenstein simply as an unsystematic thinker full of radical provocations and half-formed propositions for a non-foundationalist linguistic

18. See, for instance, Cornelius Ernst, 'Ethics and the Play of Intelligence', *New Blackfriars* 39, no. 460–1 (1958): 325.

19. *BT*, 156.

philosophy, properly appraisable from an 'objective distance'. Of course, one *can* remain at a distance, but what Wittgenstein sought was to invite us to observe and participate in something that can only be described with an analogy to spiritual disciplines of contemplation and purgation. On exploring the relationship between analytical philosophy and existentialism, a relationship that could also be said to have characterized MacKinnon's borderland wanderings too, Cavell argues that

in both [Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard], the cure is for us to return to our everyday existence. It will be obvious that this emphasis on diagnosis and cure continues the early image of the philosopher as the physician of the soul, and it also aligns these writers with the characteristic effort of modern thought to un-mask its audience, its world, an effort as true of Marx and Nietzsche and Freud as it is of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. And the effort to un-mask requires a few masks or tricks of its own. Traditional forms of criticism, of logical refutation pre-eminently, are unavailing. Our new problems do not arise through inconsistency or falsehood; they are worse than false, and they are all too consistent. What one must do is to alter the terms and the ground upon which the whole argument rests.<sup>20</sup>

The analogy I wish to draw between *our* apprehension of MacKinnon's method and Cavell's 'therapeutic' reading of Wittgenstein's is not without grounding; a point developed in Chapter 5, where MacKinnon's reading of Wittgenstein comes into sharper focus. Indeed, to the extent that they both take up a version of post-Wittgensteinian therapy, Cavell and MacKinnon occupy the same borderland. They approach the boundary from opposite directions; one as a philosopher who is intrigued by the linguistic excesses of theology in a way that potentially marginalizes him among peers; the other, a restive Christian intellectual engaged deeply with philosophy in a way that was isolating. Yet both converge in their efforts to articulate 'realist' moral perspectives after having learnt key lessons from Kant, Wittgenstein and the organized brutality of the twentieth century.

The point here is to draw MacKinnon out of isolation posthumously, placing him among kindred spirits who share some of his intuitions and practices on questions of method. MacKinnon may have been an independent and original thinker, but he was not alone in his attraction to a therapeutic style, just as Cavell is not alone in speaking of Wittgenstein's project in such terms.<sup>21</sup> Roger Shiner has argued that with the exception of Cavell no interpreter of Wittgenstein since Wisdom has

20. Stanley Cavell, 'Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy', *Daedalus*, no. 3 (1964): 959.

21. Thompson observes that for Wittgenstein 'religion in relation to the problems of life, is manifestly concerned not with the manipulation of the world but with the transformation of the self, with the state of a person's soul. And Wittgenstein himself was clearly interested in the possibility of such a transformation and with the power of religion to bring it about.' Caleb Thompson, 'Wittgenstein, Augustine and the Fantasy of Ascent', *Philosophical Investigations* 25, no. 2 (2002): 1.

understood the 'ambivalence of the image of philosophy as therapy'; a tantalizing claim given that MacKinnon read and commented appreciatively upon Wisdom's philosophy on a number of occasions.<sup>22</sup> Caleb Thompson, Cora Diamond, James Conant, Thomas Ricketts, Kevin Hector join Peterman and Cavell in advocating 'therapeutic' interpretations of the Wittgenstein's later works. Each in their own way attests to Wittgenstein's restless, vividly self-conscious explorations of various problems in philosophy that are not, in fact, simply 'problems' but 'illusions' and 'temptations', calling for a 'confessional' response by which

the interlocutors must acknowledge what they actually believe and not just enter in the conversation in a merely academic way. [Peterman calls] this the requirement of confession to emphasize that such acknowledgments made in a therapeutic context often will require recognition that the acknowledged beliefs are mistaken and must be overcome.<sup>23</sup>

Such a style of philosophy plunges interlockers into processes of self-examination and renunciation where sifting illusions and self-deceptions become the focus for a life that integrates intellectual and moral striving. In MacKinnon's terms, such efforts are weighted towards 'reception' of what *is* rather than 'construction', which is to say that philosophical (and theological) method is to be driven by a realist imperative. Works such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, MacKinnon's SET and PM, and Cavell's *Little Did I Know* could all be said to display this methodological disposition in the broadest sense. In each case 'therapy' necessitates a move from various illusions, unhelpful abstractions and dangerous flights to innocent and de-historicized vantage points, to greater immersion in the concrete, the historical, the 'ordinary' with which the subject must grapple. Various, it may ground the human being before a God who becomes incarnate in history (Augustine) or before a realization of our 'situatedness' within particular communities of language users (Wittgenstein), or before another soul who I may acknowledge or fail to do so (Cavell), or some combination of all of these (MacKinnon). Realizing the limitations of human apprehension becomes a core epistemic discipline and humility a core moral virtue for the reader joining the confessing author in therapeutic purgation.

Other types of therapy are available – ones informed by the assumptions of radical scepticism, emotivism and anti-realism, for instance. The methodical disposition identified in Wittgenstein, Cavell and MacKinnon, however, aligns itself to the insights of empiricism, moderate scepticism or agnosticism and versions of

22. *Ibid.*, 53. See also D. M. MacKinnon, 'John Wisdom's Other Minds & Philosophy and Psycho-analysis', *Aberdeen University Review* 35 (Spring 1954): 271–3.

23. James F. Peterman, *Philosophy as Therapy: An Interpretation and Defense of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophical Project* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 5–9.

moral realism.<sup>24</sup> Such a claim demands unpacking, but at this point we can at least note that it is not a novel line of argument. Thompson, for instance, makes the following observation in relation to what he sees as the analogous concerns of Augustine and Wittgenstein:

Wittgenstein like Augustine feels his problem as real disturbances, as 'deep disquietudes' [*tiefe Beunruhigungen*] (§111). But more than that, each is deeply concerned with his separation from and connection with reality. Each is deeply interested in language as a medium in which one is brought to or led away from what is real. Consequently, each is exhibiting for us a linguistic activity which can perhaps secure for one presence in the reality and limitations of human existence. For each that activity involves an attention to the details of human life and language, details in which meaning is in the end found to reside.<sup>25</sup>

Cavell and MacKinnon join Augustine and Wittgenstein in this therapeutic drive towards a form of confessional realism, an ascription that becomes particularly resonant in their respective writings on the nature of moral knowledge. As already noted, MacKinnon was a moral thinker with an almost obsessive zeal to critique theologians in the thrall of abstracting forms of idealism, but he did not find the versions of realism proffered by key figures of his British empiricist and positivist milieu as providing anything more than an important corrective.<sup>26</sup> It may be fair to say that some exposure to Wittgenstein, together with the influence of Wisdom, helped MacKinnon towards an embrace of this particular type of dissatisfaction. Discussing Wittgenstein in SET, MacKinnon states that 'if the conception of a reconstruction of human knowledge upon a sure and certain foundation is an illusion, yet like other illusions it may tell us much of the men who attempted it; it can even be regarded sometimes as a specially revealing chapter in their autobiography.'<sup>27</sup> While MacKinnon does not adopt Wittgenstein's substantive proposals to Cavell's extent, particularly on the possibility of employing the language

24. It is a rejection of the 'existentialist and Anglo-Saxon heirs of Kant (such as Sartre in France and R.M. Hare in England) [who] make the human will the creator of value, which was previously seen as inscribed in the heavens'. J. E. Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 12.

25. C. Thompson, 'Wittgenstein's Confessions', *Philosophical Investigations* 23, no. 1 (2000): 23–4.

26. As noted above, MacKinnon rejected positivist realism and emotivist non-realism and here there is a parallel with Cavell. D. M. MacKinnon, 'Ayer's Attack on Metaphysics', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 30, no. 1 (1991): 27–34; D. M. MacKinnon, 'Kant's Agnosticism', in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: a Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John C. McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011). See also his review of Ryle's influential monograph: D. M. MacKinnon, 'The Concept of Mind (Book Review)', *Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. April (1951): 248–53.

27. SET, 157.