

Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

Experience and its Modes

Review Number: 744
Publish Date: Wednesday, 1 April, 2009
Author: Michael Oakeshott
ISBN: 9780521311793
Date of Publication: 1986
Price: £35.00
Pages: 368pp.
Publisher: Cambridge University Press
Publisher URL:
Place of Publication: Cambridge
Reviewer: Alexander Macfie

How far should the practising historian accept the conclusion of the idealist analysis of history carried out by Michael Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes* (1), probably the most brilliant book on the philosophy of history written in the first half of the 20th century (even possibly including Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, published in 1946 (2))? As a student of philosophy, perhaps, quite far, for Oakeshott's analysis is both coherent and convincing. But as a practising historian? Hardly at all (it seems to me), for it is doubtful if any practising historian could actually implement many of the conclusions drawn by Oakeshott in his analysis. Not that Oakeshott himself would have expected the practising historian to make such a choice, for as he remarks in *Experience and its Modes*, it was not his intention in that work to instruct the historian on how history had been written in the past, or how it should be written in the future, but merely to provide the reader with a view of history 'from the outside' (pp. 86-7), to determine its character, that is to say, from the standpoint of experience (p. 88).

Oakeshott, it may be noted, lectured on history and politics at Cambridge in the 1920s and 1930s, before becoming, following service in the armed forces in the Second World War and a brief spell at Oxford, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics (1951-68). During his life time (1901-90), he was known mainly as a political thinker, but he is now known almost as much as a philosopher of history.(3)

What Oakeshott argues, broadly speaking, in *Experience and its Modes*, is that the world of experience, normally understood as a totality, can also be understood, independently, by way of (at least) three modes of understanding, the practical, the scientific and the historical (in 1959, in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, Oakeshott added a fourth mode, the poetic, that is to say experience viewed under the category of the aesthetic, the contemplation of images). The

practical mode of understanding is present experience viewed under the category of use or benefit (friendly or hostile, advantageous or disadvantageous). The scientific mode is experience viewed under the category of quantity (objective, and as far as possible independent of self). The historical mode is experience viewed under the category of the past (a certain way of reading the present). Experience here means thought, a world of ideas. Each abstract world of ideas, thus created is, as such and as a world, wholly and absolutely independent of any other. And each, in so far as it is coherent, is true for itself (p. 75).

In order to understand the character of history, the philosopher, in Oakeshott's view, must first discover the system of postulates that underlies it – the *differentia* of the historical mode. In Oakeshott's opinion the five most important of these are: the idea of past, of fact, of truth, of reality and of explanation. The past, as a postulate of history, is not the remembered past. Nor is it the practical (useful) past, the fancied (imagined) past, or the whole past. It is the past conceived 'for its own sake' as a dead past, inferred from the evidence of a past that has survived into the present. The 'historical past', in other words, is a constructed past, made up of 'what the evidence obliges us to believe'. It can neither be found nor discovered, nor retrieved, nor recollected, but only inferred. To attempt to construct a history that somehow corresponds to 'what was', 'what really happened', would be to pursue a phantom (pp. 102-12).

Historical fact, Oakeshott declares, in *Experience and Its Modes*, is a conclusion, a result, an inference and a judgement. As such it belongs, like everything else, to the world of present experience. Like the 'historical past', it is 'what the evidence obliges us to believe' (pp. 111-2). Truth is coherence in a world of present ideas. As such it is never a matter of the correspondence of a present world of ideas with a past course of events, or the correspondence of present facts with 'what was'. The truth of each fact depends upon the truth of the world of facts to which it belongs, and the truth of the world of facts lies in the coherence of the facts that compose it. Each separate fact remains a hypothesis until the whole world of facts is established (p. 113). Historical reality is present experience of the world, comprehended under the category of the past. For convenience sake this 'real' world is divided up into 'historical individuals', namely events, things, situations and persons, all governed by the ideas of change, continuity and discontinuity. Explanation is similarly derived from experience. In experience there is always explanation. Historical explanation is an attempt to give a rational account of the world in terms of two of the principal categories of historical experience, change and identity. Such categories as these are not the product of some kind of inductive study of the course of events but the presuppositions of such a study. For without such presuppositions there would be no historical world, no course of events from which to gather the principles of historical knowledge (p. 125).

It is the business of the philosopher, Oakeshott declares, in *Experience and Its Modes*, to understand, as far as possible, the nature of experience. 'Experience' stands for the concrete whole, which analysis divides into 'experiencing' and 'what is experienced'. Similarly, experience is sometimes divided into thought, consciousness, sensation, perception, volition, intuition and feeling. But such divisions, though occasionally useful, are in error, for experience as such admits of no final or absolute division. As for the world of value, that too is a mode of experience, an abstract world of ideas, an incomplete assertion of reality; while the act of valuation is thinking, the attempt to make coherent a world of ideas (p. 274) – though for Oakeshott, it must be said, most of the time valuation is concerned rather with the practical mode of understanding.

For Oakeshott then a historically understood past is a past that has not been discovered or found but inferred, the product of an inherently deficient mode of experience. Far from being 'a doubtful story of successive events', an account of an 'objective' world of past events, waiting to be discovered, unearthed or recaptured, or an account of 'what actually happened' (Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen [war]*), it is a constructed past, wholly deduced or inferred by the historian (pp. 93-101). As

such history (the historically understood past) contains no lessons, justifies no meaning and sends no messages. Such interpretations of experiences belong purely to the practical mode of understanding, which should not be confused with the historical (pp. 102–11, 157–8).

Oakeshott did not abandon the philosophy of history, following the publication of *Experience and Its Modes*. In 1958 he published an essay entitled 'The Activity of Being a Historian', later published in *Rationalism in Politics* (4), and in 1983 he published three essays on history in *On History and other Essays*. (5) Broadly speaking, in these essays Oakeshott continued to think of history as an autonomous mode of understanding the world, but he no longer identified philosophical experience as 'experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification' (1933, p. 2), and history as a defective mode of that experience, as he had done in *Experience and Its Modes*. And where, in *Experience and Its Modes* he had tended to underestimate the importance of language in understanding, in *On History* he paid it much more attention, placing each mode of understanding separately in an autonomous universe of discourse (1983, p. 22).

It is commonly believed that *Experience and its Modes* was largely ignored when it first came out in 1933. Oakeshott himself later recalled that 'Nobody took any notice, and it was soon forgotten'. (6) It is said that the first print run, of a thousand copies, took 30 years to sell. But in fact it was quite widely reviewed, by amongst others Susan Stebbing, in *Mind* (1934), S. P. L., in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1934), T. E. Jessup, in *Philosophy* (1934), John Oman, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* (1934), and R. G. Collingwood, in the *Cambridge Review* (1934). Susan Stebbing, in what one student of Oakeshott later referred to as a somewhat 'sniffy' review (7), found many of Oakeshott's conclusions both confused and innocuous. S. P. L. found Oakeshott's chapter on history 'particularly good' but doubted if the philosophy of absolute idealism, on which it was based, stood up: 'It has already, in the opinion of many philosophers, been quite sufficiently refuted.' T. E. Jessup found Oakeshott's exposition of his idealist philosophy, with which he sympathized, unhelpful. In particular, he found that Oakeshott failed to safeguard his identification of reality and experience *argumentatively* against the charge of solipsism; and similarly that he failed adequately to reargue the case for a coherence theory of truth. Oakeshott's tendency, Jessup concluded, was to suppose that the coherence theory of truth was established by an exposure of the difficulties of the correspondence theory. He, Jessup, would have welcomed an attempt to define exactly what sort of coherence was meant. And he would have welcomed a less rhetorical approach to the subject. John Oman pointed out that the distinction between subject and object, evident in everyday conversation, was not so easily identified as the abstraction of experience that Oakeshott supposed it to be. How far, he wondered, did Oakeshott's analysis leave unquestioned the leading principle of the Idealist position, that all reality is one Universal Reason, of which human reason is at once part and pattern. All experience may be idea and idea may be judgement, but is not judgement a different act the moment we consciously stand over against the world? Only R. G. Collingwood, the noted Oxford historian and philosopher, responded to Oakeshott's work with unqualified enthusiasm.

In his review of *Experience and Its Modes*, published in the *Cambridge Review*, Collingwood explained that he intended to expound Oakeshott's thesis, not to criticize it, as it was so original, so important, and so profound that criticism must be silent until its meaning had been long pondered. Nor (unlike a number of the other reviewers), did he consider the thesis an essay in system building, copied from Hegel and Bradley. It had been arrived at, he suspected, mainly from an intense effort to understand the nature of historical knowledge. The chapter on history, the 'real nucleus of the book', was undoubtedly 'the most penetrating analysis of historical thought' that had ever been written. It was certain to remain a classic in 'that hitherto almost unexplored branch of philosophical research'.

Collingwood, clearly fascinated by Oakeshott's work, returned to the subject later in his own *The Idea of History*. There, after summarizing the arguments of *Experience and Its Modes*, he drew

attention to a number of problems, which in his opinion Oakeshott had failed to solve. Why, he asked, given that Oakeshott believed that history is an 'arrest' of experience, in effect a backwater of experience, should history exist at all? Why should philosophy, as concrete experience, tolerate such a thing? Only by mapping the river of experience itself could Oakeshott answer that question, and this he had failed to do. Were he to do so, he might conclude that history, far from being an accidental feature of experience, was a necessary one. Experience, in other words, understands itself, that is, has features and grasps them. One of those features might be history.

A second problem associated, according to Collingwood, with Oakeshott's view of history would be that the historian/philosopher should stop thinking that the present is past, once he has understood the philosophical error he is making. But he does not do so, which means presumably that the supposed error is not an error at all. The only way out of the dilemma is for the historian to suppose that the past is not a dead past but a living past, one which, because it was once thought, and not merely a natural event, can be reenacted in the present and in that reenactment known as past. History thus interpreted would not be a mode of experience, based on a philosophical error, but an integral part of (present) experience itself. What led Oakeshott to rule out this alternative solution to the problem must, Collingwood concludes, be his failure to grasp the consequences of his assumption that experience contains in itself an element of mediation, thought or assertion of reality. In an experience, which is mediation or thought, that which is experienced is real, and is experienced as real. So far as historical experience is thought, therefore, what it experiences or thinks as past really is past, in the same way that what is perceived as over there can be both perceived/thought of as over there and be perceived/thought of as over here. The fact that it is over here does not prevent it from being over there anymore than the fact that a historical experience is of the present prevents it from being of the past.

It is generally agreed by students of Oakeshott that the relatively subdued reception of *Experience and Its Modes* in the 1930s was due in part at least to the declining influence of the idealist philosophy on which it was for the most part based, as earlier propounded in the 19th century by such philosophers as F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet and T. H. Green.⁽⁸⁾ Oakeshott himself notes this decline in *Experience and Its Modes*, when he remarks that many of his readers would probably condemn a philosophy based on Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* out of hand, such was the ill repute into which it had fallen (p. 6). An alternative explanation for the work's subdued reception may lie in the originality and profundity of the views expressed there, to which Collingwood drew attention at the time. One way or the other, in the post-Second World War years interest in *Experience and its Modes* was renewed, and in 1966 the work was republished, this time in both England and America. There followed a series of books and articles on Oakeshott's philosophy of history, in all of which *Experience and Its Modes* figured prominently. These included works by William H. Dray, David Boucher, Robert Grant, Harwell Wells, Steven Anthony Gerencser, Preston King, Terry Nardin, Luke O'Sullivan, and Paul Franco.⁽⁹⁾ Dray, in particular, questions whether Oakeshott's view of history, as a distinctive mode of enquiry, clearly distinguishable from the scientific and the practical, stands up. King similarly wonders whether the various modes of understanding, historical, poetic, scientific and practical, are as distinct as Oakeshott supposes. After all, is not the past implicit in all intellectual endeavor? Boucher concentrates on grounding Oakeshott's philosophy of history in the context of the 19th-century concerns of British Idealism, as does Franco in his chapter on idealism. Finally, O'Sullivan, in a sort of intellectual biography of Oakeshott, based on a recently assembled archive of his work, places Oakeshott's ideas on history in the full context of his previous thought.

The basic ideas of 19th-century British and European idealism, in which Oakeshott's thought is said to be firmly rooted, may, according to Gerencser, be briefly summarized as follows: That there is only one true substance, the absolute or reality as a whole. Nothing that is real can be excluded. All

that is real combines to form a single complex whole. That truth consists of coherence. A proposition is only true if it is in harmony (consistent) with the whole of reality, since the criterion of truth is reality. That the identity of an object is discovered only in its relationship to the whole, the concrete universal. An identity both qualifies and is qualified by the whole. That reality is essentially mental or spiritual in nature. Only the sentient, in other words, can be considered real. And finally that mind and its objects are indivisible, harmoniously related within the absolute. All these ideas, according to Gerenscer, have a place in Oakeshott's work, though some, he admits, receive more emphasis than others do.(10)

According to O'Sullivan and Franco, the sort of history Oakeshott was attacking, in *Experience and its Modes*, was mainly the scientific and the pseudo-scientific, popular at the time.(11) Such may well have been the case. But in the chapter on history, in *Experience and its Modes*, it is clear that Oakeshott's primary concern was to challenge the more conventional (popular and academic) view of history, as the study of an 'objective' world of past events, what actually happened, Ranke's '*wie es eigentlich gewesen [war]*', waiting there in the past to be discovered, unearthed and recaptured. According to this view, it is the business of the historian, not to think but to recall, not to construct but to receive, not to create but to exhume (pp. 92-3). It is the business of the historian, in other words, to reconstruct, from the remains of the past (particles of data, empirical facts), an account of past events that somehow corresponds with those events. But - so Oakeshott's argument goes - there is no such 'objective' world out there, waiting to be discovered. What is known in history is not 'what was', 'what really happened', of which we can know nothing. It is 'what the evidence obliges us to believe'. There are no two worlds - the world of past happenings and the world of present knowledge of those events - there is only one world, and it is a world of present experience (pp. 107-8). A course of events independent of experience, untouched by thought and judgement, is an impossibility. And even supposing 'what really happened' had some sort of independent existence, how could the historian know that the present world he had constructed corresponded to it? He could not (p. 108).

How far then, it might reasonably be asked, should the historian accept the implications of Oakeshott's idealist analysis of history, as put forward in *Experience and Its Modes*? As a philosopher, perhaps, as I have already suggested, quite far, as Oakeshott's analysis is both coherent and convincing. Who after all (except possibly the dyed in the wool realist) could possibly argue with Oakeshott's basic assumptions, that experience (consciousness) is the foundation of all understanding; that truth consists not of correspondence but of coherence; that an identity both qualifies and is qualified by the whole; that reality, or at least the only reality we can ever know, is essentially mental; and that mind and its objects are, in human experience at least, harmoniously (or inharmoniously) related within the whole? And who could possibly argue with the idea that to understand history, as a philosopher understands history, one must first understand the postulates that support it; that the historical past - 'what the evidence obliges us to believe' - is a product of the historian's present; and that history, as it is written, is not something discovered but constructed, not found but inferred? Nor, it may be noted, will the historian find much support for the realistic view of things - as existing, independently of the mind of the observer, 'objective', and possibly measurable: the argument from conformity, the supposed 'convergence' of theory, the argument from inference and so on - if he consults a standard encyclopedia of philosophy. There he will find that the latest authorities on the subject end up discussing, not the ontology of things, but the language in which they are discussed. The historian then, thinking as a philosopher, might well accept Oakeshott's idealist argument more or less in full. But the historian, as a historian? That surely is a different matter.

The historian as a historian is, I think, bound to reject Oakeshott's analysis on three, possibly four, grounds. Firstly, that for the actual historian, as distinct from Oakeshott's model historian, all

history is practical (in the Oakeshott sense of the term), as he cannot effectively detach himself from his own ego (self, subjectivity, instinctive drives, intentionality, will to power), no matter how hard he might try to do so. As Oakeshott himself admits, in *Experience and Its Modes*, practice is seen by most people as a disposition that reigns supreme in the entire realm of experience (p. 248). Even the most detached philosopher would find it difficult – some would argue impossible – not to submit. ‘Objectivity’, for the historian, that is to say, is an aspiration, not an accomplishment. Secondly, that Oakeshott’s view of history, as an autonomous mode of understanding, which constructs a ‘historical past’, somehow independent of the actual past, inferred logically and dispassionately from ‘what the evidence obliges us to believe’, is for all practical purposes too restrictive a view. Even a Benedictine monk would find it difficult to submit to so strict a discipline. And it makes no allowance for the imaginative element in historical construction and no allowance for the poetic element that Oakeshott analyses so well in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*.⁽¹²⁾ Indeed, rigorously applied such an approach might even produce, not a philosophically sound history, but an unnatural monstrosity. And thirdly, that the conventional historian, unlike Oakeshott’s philosophical historian, inhabits, most of the time at least, the ‘real’ world, inhabited by ‘real’ people, who remember and record a ‘real’ past, in which events occur ‘objectively’, in a comprehensive and intelligible manner. For the historian to depart from this ‘real’ world of human experience, humanly described, in the living (or for that matter the dead) language of the community he inhabits, would be for the historian to abandon all association with the world of actual experience Oakeshott supposedly describes. For the historian, in other words, history is simply not a philosophical subject. (A fourth reason might be that Oakeshott himself considered that it was the business of the historian, not to consider the validity of history philosophically, as a world of experience, but merely to establish truth or coherence in the world of history itself: ‘A view of the world of history from the outside may be an exercise which affords interest for the otherwise idle, but it can result in no extension of our knowledge of the character of history’) (p. 87).

The supposition that all history is practical history has, it has to be admitted, substantial implications for Oakeshott’s analysis of history. For at a stroke it would abolish history as an autonomous mode of understanding, which constructs a ‘historical past’, made up of ‘what the evidence obliges us to believe’. All that would remain from the wreckage would be the practical mode of understanding (where in any case Oakeshott places most history) and the scientific (and of course later the poetic). Henceforth the Oakeshott model, of an ‘objective’ sort of history, somehow detached from the practical, would survive only as an ideal to be aimed at by the philosophically ambitious, but not, alas, one that the conventional historian would ever be expected to realize.

The everyday language of a community, it may be noted, which in most cases incorporates concepts of past, fact, truth, reality, explanation and such like, is not some kind of philosophical construction, designed to make the world of understanding rational and coherent. It is the product of an evolutionary process that has been tested in the ‘real’ world for possibly thousands of years. As such it is not something to be wantonly laid aside, either by the historian or the philosopher.

A number of historians have remarked on the somewhat odd character of the philosophically sound model of history identified by Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes*. But none perhaps has done so as penetratingly as Gertrude Himmelfarb, the American historian, in ‘Does history talk sense?’. There she describes the regime Oakeshott imposes on the historian as ‘austere and difficult’, in one sense ‘exceedingly modest’, and in another ‘exceedingly ambitious’.⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, according to Himmelfarb, so austere is Oakeshott’s regime that it makes the writing of history almost impossible. It is not so much a prescription for the writing of history as a prescription for its non-writing. In setting up as an ideal the kind of history that ‘has never been written’ Oakeshott may be guilty of the fallacy of rationalism that he himself has diagnosed so brilliantly elsewhere (in *Rationalism in Politics*). Oakeshott, as a philosopher of history, in short, makes Nietzsche – with whom Himmelfarb

compares Oakeshott - look positively benign.

What this short account of Oakeshott's *Experience and Its Modes* reveals, I suppose, with regard to history at least, is the unbridgeable gulf that apparently exists between two of the principal ways of understanding the world: the philosophical, habitually followed by Oakeshott and other such philosophers of history, who subject the world of thought to investigation and analysis, and the popular and conventional, as followed by most academic historians and others who, as 'naïve' realists, accept the world more or less as it is, or at least as it seems to be, as reflected in ordinary language and consciousness. Inevitably perhaps, the philosophical, as instanced by Oakeshott, tends to destroy the popular and conventional, despite the occasional efforts made by philosophers, such as Oakeshott, to accommodate both. In such a world, it seems to me, the popular and conventional can only survive - as they evidently do - by ignoring the philosophical. By, that is to say, the historian not taking account of the analysis of historical understanding contained in such books as *Experience and Its Modes*, and continuing to believe that his/her task is the 'resurrection of what once had been alive' (p. 107). Such at least is the outcome, of this, my short 'reappraisal' of Oakeshott's impressive work.

Notes

1. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See David Boucher, 'The creation of the past: British idealism and Michael Oakeshott's philosophy of history', *History and Theory*, 23, 2 (1984), 193-214; Luke O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History* (Exeter, 2003); and Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction* (London, 2004). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Michael Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being a Historian' in *Rationalism in Politics* (London, 1962), pp. 137-67. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1983). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*, p. 82. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *ibid*, p. 83. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Nevil Johnson, 'Michael Joseph Oakeshott', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1993), 407; O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*, p. 82; Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 6-7, 24-5. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. William H. Dray, 'Michael Oakeshott's theory of history', in *Politics and Experience*, ed. Preston King and B. C. Parekh (Cambridge, 1968); Boucher, 'The creation of the past' (1984); Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (London, 1990); Harwell Wells, 'The philosophical Michael Oakeshott', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55, 1 (1994), 129-45; Steven Anthony Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (New York, 2000); Preston King, 'Michael Oakeshott and historical particularism', in *Thinking Past a Problem: Essays on the History of Ideas* (London, 2000), pp. 84-119; Terry Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001); O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*; and Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, chapter 1. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*, p. 12; Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 46-7, 52-3. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (London, 1959). [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Does history talk sense?' in *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), p. 214. [Back to \(13\)](#)

Links:

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/experience-and-its-modes/>