The Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School

Occasional Papers Series in the Humanities

Occasional Paper Number Three

Michael Oakeshott's Theory of History

Ian St. John

Stjohn_i@habsboys.org.uk

March 2016

Haberdashers' Aske's Occasional Paper Number Three

March 2016

Michael Oakeshott's Theory of History

Ian St John

Abstract

Although primarily a political theorist, Michael Oakeshott studied and taught history at the University of Cambridge, and reflected deeply upon the nature of history as an intellectual enquiry throughout his long career. His 1933 book, *Experience and Its Modes*, devoted significant attention to history as a form of experience and his robust handling of the various claims made regarding the methodology of history was that part of the work that has been most lastingly admired – indeed, R.G. Collingwood considered it to represent 'the high-water mark of English thought upon history…'[1] Ironically, Oakeshott's analysis of history in *Experience and Its Modes* was undertaken primarily with a view to exposing the self-contradictory nature of the subject and the need to avoid being distracted by it away from the superior claims of philosophy. Yet Oakeshott, himself, failed to follow his own injunction, writing, in the later 1930s, an historical account of the outbreak of the Britain's war with Spain in 1739, and then, more significantly, returning once more to the question of the methodology and meaning of history as a discipline in such publications as 'The Activity of Being an Historian' (1955) and *On History* (1983).[2] This paper addresses two issues: first, what was Oakeshott's understanding of the nature of history as a mode of enquiry as expounded in his early and later studies; and second, to what degree are we justified in distinguishing between an 'early' and 'late' Oakeshott with respect to his views on the study of history?

[1] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), p. 159.
[2] Paul Franco refers to the 'prominent role reflection on historical knowledge plays throughout [Oakeshott's] career…' P. Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (1990), p. 31.

History and the Modes of Experience

Oakeshott's purpose in his *Experience and Its Modes* was to critique the claims of History, Science, and Practice to provide separate and distinct guides to the nature of ultimate reality. Each of these disciplines represents a world of experience, and their practioners claim for these worlds that they provide the truest conception of total experience as such. This Oakeshott denied and in *Experience and Its Modes* he takes each distinct Mode of Experience in turn and seeks to show that it is abstract, incomplete, contradictory, and provides an arrest of Experience, distorting our Experience from its true goal of Philosophical Experience. Thus, Historical experience, he argues, is an abstraction from what was real, and distracts those who pursue it from what is the true goal of thought – namely, the total experience of a coherent concrete reality. History is not Experience as such, but a Mode of Experience, and like all other Modes of Experience is a self-contradictory 'arrest' of experience in its quest to form a wholly satisfactory and coherent world of ideas.

Experience

For Oakeshott, the only thing that exists is present experience. This present experience is a single concrete whole. It is the world we inhabit as soon as we become conscious and which we never cease to inhabit so long as we are conscious. Although it can be analysed in terms of 'experiencing' and 'what is experienced', in reality these two aspects can't be separated. To experience at all means to experience something *in* experience. An object of experience can only exist in experience.[1] Oakeshott is concerned with experience as a concrete whole – i.e. experienced and experiencing together, with no distinction. There is simply, experience – a doctrine known as Monism.

This experience is a world of ideas. All experience is thought. 'There is, in my view,' he writes, 'no experiencing which is not thinking, nothing experienced which is not thought, and consequently no experience which is not a world of ideas.'[2] Our conscious experience consists of ideas and judgements. If we consider our consciousness we find that it consists solely of ideas and judgements about things. I open my eyes: I don't see random meaningless stuff – I see chairs, trees, colours, shapes, people – everything I am aware of I categorise and subsume under an idea – I form a judgement about it, I judge it to be this and not that. Even if I have sensation, in the moment of experiencing it I attach significance to it by giving it meaning: if I put my hand in a flame I recognise the experience of pain; something assails my ear – I comprehend it as a loud sound.

> To be conscious of something is, in some degree, to recognise it; and recognition involves us at once in judgement, in inference, in reflection, in thought … Nothing, in short, can maintain

[1] M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (1933), p. 9.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. pp. 26-7.

> its claim to be in experience which presents itself in utter isolation, alone, without world, generation or relevance. Experience is always and everywhere significant.[1]

There is no external reality outside of experience. The concept is nonsensical: nothing can exist beyond experience, because to exist outside of experience is not to exist for us at all. There is a concrete objective world of reality – but it exists *inside* experience, not outside of it. The commonplace distinction between 'the world' and our 'experience of the world' is untenable. 'The world and our interpretation of the world,' comments Timothy Fuller, 'are the single world of our experience.'[2]

The world of experience is a world of coherent ideas. It is always this. From the moment humans are first conscious they experience a coherent world of ideas. It is impossible to envisage what an incoherent world of experience would be like and we never do experience it. As soon as we become conscious what is given to us is a single world of experience and this is the world we always inhabit. This is what it means to be in the world – a coherent single world of ideas. Empiricists are wrong to suggest that we build up our world in stages from sense-data. We don't start with random isolated fragments of sense-data and from this slowly construct a systematic world of experience. We *begin* with such a systematic world and sense data in the form of ideas and judgements, are accommodated by us into that systematic world. The world comes first and individual ideas come second, and these ideas only are meaningful and significant as ideas in terms of the world to which they become part.

> What is at first given in experience is single and significant, a One and not a Many. The given in thought is the complex situation in which we find ourselves in the first moments of consciousness.[3]

So we begin with a coherent world of ideas. But this world is not, from the beginning, *completely coherent*. Experience is not a static, once and for all thing. It is a process and complete coherence is an achievement of consciousness. We are given a world, but we also make one. The goal of experience is to make its world of ideas more coherent, more satisfying. This is the particular task of Philosophical Experience. Philosophy seeks to make our total world of ideas more of a world. To make it more coherent and more satisfying as experience. What is given in experience is an inter-connected world of ideas that is meaningful, where each element is recognised and understood as part of the system of experience as a whole. But this world that is given to us is not merely acquiesced in, it is not considered by us as fixed and inviolable. Our attitude towards experience is always critical and always positive. From the given, we turn to what can be achieved; from the unstable and defective, we turn to what is complete and can maintain itself. 'What is achieved is, then, first, a world which differs from the given world only by being more of a world; the given and the achieved are both worlds, but not equally worlds…'[4]

---

[1] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[2] T. Fuller, 'Michael Oakeshott, 1901-1990', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 71. No. 1 (Winter 2009), p. 102.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 20.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 29.

As an analogy, think of how sometimes you stop and look around your bed room and it strikes you: this is a mess. It is a coherent world as a bedroom – you recognise the things that are there and you know why they are there and their relationship to other things in the room – you recognise the clothes heaped in the corner, the books on the floor, the old empty cup on the desk, the crumpled duvet. And then you set to work to tidy and sort – clothes are hung up, books put back on shelves, the duvet straightened and so on. By doing this you make the world of your room more coherent, more satisfying – you make it more of a room. That is what experience does to the ideas which it contains.

Every world of ideas is a systematic whole. It is a system and every meaningful idea gains its meaning by virtue of its relationship to other ideas in the system.

> In suggesting that the achieved in experience is a world I mean, then, that it is a whole as opposed to a mere series, and a system as opposed to a mere collection. In a system each constituent rests upon the whole, not merely upon its nearest neighbour … And again, these constituents have no individuality or character of their own in isolation from the whole which they constitute; their character is their place in the system. To modify the system as a whole is to cause every constituent to take on a new character; to modify any of the constituents is to alter the system as a whole.[1]

The systematic nature of experience is its coherence, and the more systematic it is the more coherent it is. The coherence of experience is what makes it satisfying as experience, and the more coherent is experience the more satisfying it is.

The coherence of experience is the criteria of its truth. The correspondence theory of truth is wrong because there is no outside reality against which a proposition can be tested to determine its truth or falsehood. There is nothing independent of experience for experience to 'correspond' with. As there is only present experience the truth of a proposition is determined with respect to the coherence of the world of ideas within which it must find its place. To be a fact means to occupy a necessary place within a world of experience. This world is itself the arbiter of fact, for to be a fact means to have a necessary place within it. The acceptance or rejection of an idea is always a question of the result to the world of ideas in which it is intended to be comprehended.

> Only a perfectly coherent world of ideas is a world of fact … Fact is what we are obliged to think, not because it corresponds with some outside world of experience, but because it is required for the coherence of the world of experience. And in experience satisfaction is achieved when the level of fact is reached.[2]

Knowledge, facts, truth, consist, then, of those ideas and judgements which we are obliged to believe in the context of a coherent world of ideas. A proposition is not a 'fact' in and of itself.

---

[1] *Ibid*., p. 30. Oakeshott seems to have been chiefly influenced in this conception of experience as a systematic whole by H.H. Joachim's *The Nature of Truth* (1906), which deployed the idea of a 'significant whole.'
[2] *Ibid*., p. 42.

No individual isolated statement can be a fact. Facts are never merely observed. An idea becomes a fact by virtue of finding a necessary place within a world of ideas. Facts are always made – we construct them when we locate them within a world of ideas. We make facts. 'A "fact"', summarises Nardin, 'is a verdict, the product of judgement, something we are compelled to think by the pattern of our ideas...'[1] It is, in essence, a theory about experience. So, for example, if I were to come across a proposition about London I would seek to locate it within an existing set of propositions about London which form a system of propositions about it. So the facts might be: London is in Great Britain; it is the biggest city in Britain; it is located on the River Thames; it hosted the 2012 Olympics etc. If the next 'fact' I receive was the proposition 'London is the capital of France', then this proposition would clash with my existing system of facts about London and therefore it would make my world less coherent to accept it. Hence the 'fact' is rejected as a fact and does not find a necessary place in my system of facts about London. This judgement is made without my needing to go to France, and find its capital, and check if it's called London. Every fact is a theory, and it becomes an established fact by proving coherent within a world of experience.

Knowledge, the world of necessary facts, IS reality. Reality is a characteristic of experience. There is no reality beyond experience. The only place reality exists is in experience. There is no other place for it to be. And since experience is a world of ideas, reality is a world of ideas too. But it is not just any ideas. Reality is not just the ideas I happen to have in my head at any given moment – unicorns, day-dreams etc. It is not a world of 'mere' ideas, it is a world of *necessary* ideas – reality is what I am *obliged* to think. It is the totality of established facts. Because I am obliged to think these things, because they are unavoidable and necessary in my world, these ideas are *things*. My world is a world of objects – objects which are not independent of our experiencing them, but which are constituted by mind or thought.[2] It is a world of necessary ideas that I am obliged to hold. Concrete reality consists of these ideas that I am obliged to hold.

To summarise:

> Experience is a world of ideas. And the condition of the world of ideas satisfactory in experience is a condition of coherence, of unity and completeness. Further, the world of experience is the real world; there is no reality outside experience. Reality is the world of experience in so far as it is satisfactory, in so far as it is coherent.[3]

Modes of Experience

[1] T. Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (2001), p. 25.
[2] P. Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction* (2004), p. 40.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 69.

Thus, for Oakeshott, experience is a coherent world of ideas, and the object of experience is to make that world more satisfying by making it more coherent. A completely coherent world of ideas is what idealists have tended to call the Absolute, and what Oakeshott talks of as total concrete reality. Absolute coherence is, for Oakeshott as for Hegel, the ideal, when all discrepancies are resolved, and it is the particular object of philosophy to pursue this. 'The absolute, in this sense, is the imagined end of an endless dialectic of discrepancy and reconciliation.'[1] However, although consciousness seeks to attain this absolute state of coherence, in practice it becomes distracted from progressing towards it by pursuing other, incomplete, and partial worlds of ideas instead. These artificial, distracting, partial, yet often more accessible worlds of ideas, are *modes of experience*. Modes are categories for organising experience. Each appears to promise a useful means by which we might grasp the world as a whole, but all, in fact, represent 'arrests' of experience, for they hinder experience from forming a wholly coherent world of ideas, creating, instead, experience containing incoherent, limited, and abstract worlds of ideas that cannot ultimately satisfy us as experience and which must, therefore, be discarded and superseded. As Jessop remarks:

> This effort after coherence, however, has a tendency to run into blind alleys, to seek limited unifications, and – which is worse – to rest content with one or other of these as final. The limitation is one not of extension but of initial categories: each unification is an interpretation of the whole, but in terms of an arbitrarily restricted set of notions.[2]

By using the word 'mode', says Franco, 'Oakeshott means to indicate that such a world of ideas is not a separate *kind* of experience but the whole of experience arrested – modified – at a certain point.'[3] These modes, in other words, are like tributaries running off from the main stream of experience: each seems tempting to follow and appears to offer greater coherence than the main stream – but they ultimately merely distract us and lead us astray and eventually run into the sand. We must avoid all such tributaries of experience, however seductive, and continue along the main stream of experience – and it is the role of philosophy to ensure that we do this.

There are, potentially, countless modes of experience, yet they all have one characteristic in common: namely, that *they are the products of abstraction*. They take the total reality of experience and try to separate out certain aspects of this experience and make a coherent world of ideas. This abstracted world is a sub-world: it is total experience viewed from a certain perspective. A mode is not a separate type of experience. Experience is always a single whole world of ideas and cannot be dismantled into pieces. *A mode is the whole world of experience seen from a limited viewpoint.* It is, to quote Nardin, 'a self-contained world of experience that makes an implicit claim to completeness and coherence.'[4] 'It is not,' remarks Collingwood, '*a* world, a separate sphere of experience in which things of a special kind are known in a special way, but *the* world, as seen from a fixed point in experience…'[5] As such, this abstract mode

[1] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott,* p. 23. Nardin points out that Oakeshott later discarded the idea that philosophy is a means to a coherent conception of reality, seeing it, instead, as one of several 'voices' or 'modes' of understanding with no privileged superior status.
[2] T.E. Jessop, 'Review of *Experience and its Modes*', *Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 35 (July 1934), p. 357.
[3] Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, p. 43.
[4] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 39.
[5] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 153.

is a self-contained world of ideas and, in so far as it is coherent, it is true for itself. But it is only true within its own world because each mode of experience is constructed by means of premises or assumptions which it takes for granted but which are not the same premises as are made by other modes. 'Each mode,' writes Nardin, 'rests on a foundation that it does not question and constructs a coherent world on this foundation.'[1] No one mode of experience can comment on or engage with or judge another mode of experience. The significance of an idea, symbol, fact, or argument is confined to the mode within which it is asserted. Each is irrelevant to the other, and just as Scientific Experience has nothing to contribute to Historical Experience, neither does Historical Experience have anything to say about Practical Experience.

More importantly, whenever a mode of experience tries to venture outside of its abstract world and assert an absolute universal truth about experience as a whole, about the ultimate nature of concrete reality, it will be in error. While, by means of a mode, we are able to attain to coherent experience at a particular level, and can sustain the belief that the world so understood is the 'real world', this is not the case, for each mode is merely an abstract intellectual construct, and there are an infinite number of such modes, each of which is a historical creation and none of which is fundamental reality.[2]

> An abstract world of ideas is an arrest of experience. It is not a part of reality, it is not an organisation of a separate tract of experience; it is the organisation of experience from a partial and defective point of view. And no collection or combination of such abstractions will ever constitute a concrete whole. The whole is … not dependent upon abstractions, because it is logically prior to them.[3]

Because each mode of experience is a distorting abstraction from experience as a whole it cannot have the coherence of concrete experience as a whole. It is, therefore, ultimately self-contradictory. It tries to constitute itself as a coherent world of experience, but it is really the opposite: it is a distorting abstraction from precisely that world of coherent experience. Hence it fails as a coherent world of experience and only by abandoning its modality can it return to this coherence. And the path to this coherence is Philosophy.

Philosophy is the pursuit of coherent concrete experience without hindrance or distraction. Unlike the modes, philosophy doesn't need any artificial assumptions or presuppositions to constitute itself as an abstract world of knowledge. Philosophy's concern is with experience as it is, its purpose being only to make that world more coherent and satisfying – to make it more of a world. To quote Oakeshott:

> Philosophy … means experience without reservation or presupposition, experience which is self-conscious and self-critical throughout, in which the determination to remain unsatisfied with anything short of a completely coherent world of ideas is absolute and unqualified. And

[1] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 41.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 33.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 78-9.

> consequently, whenever experience remains true to its concrete purpose and refuses to be diverted, to suffer modification or abstraction, philosophy occurs.[1]

Philosophy, writes Franco, makes explicit the unity that is already implicit in a given world of ideas.[2] It never looks '*away from* a given world to another world, but always *at* a given world to discover the unity it implies.'[3] This, as Nardin suggests, is an essentially Kantian project, seeking for a single and necessary structure of concepts that define the nature of human experience as a whole.[4]

There is 'no theoretical limit' to the number of modal worlds of experience that can exist.[5] However, in *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott critiques the three he considers most significant and disruptive. These are the modes of: Historical Experience; Scientific Experience; and Practical Experience. Each of these is a world of ideas, and each generates knowledge and facts that are relevant to its own world and as such encourage people to immerse themselves in this mode of experience, taking it for concrete reality. But this is misguided: each of these modes is an artificial and incoherent arrest of experience and yields not concrete reality but an abstract contradictory world which must be discarded if absolute reality is to be attained. Here we consider just one of these: namely History as a Mode of Experience.

Historical Experience

History is a Mode of Experience, and Oakehott's investigation of historical experience is the most striking part of *Experience and Its Modes*. While the book's first chapter, dealing with experience as such, is largely derived from Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, Oakeshott's critique of history's claims to be a form of concrete knowledge of reality is more original and influential. Writing in 1966, L.R. Perry observed that 'Oakeshott offered us an account of historical knowledge so subtle and penetrating, and so alive to the many problems with which philosophy of history is fraught, that his chapter on the subject forms one of the basic and most frequently discussed statements in the literature of philosophy of history.'[6]

History is a Mode of Experience. This means, as we have seen, that it is a world of ideas constructed out of the seamless whole of total experience through a process of abstraction. Oakeshott's purpose is to investigate history as a mode of experience: what is the character of history as a world of ideas; what assumptions does it rest upon; and how valid is history as a type of knowledge? In sum, it is Oakeshott's intention to 'consider the character of history in order to determine whether it be experience itself in its concrete totality or an arrest of

[1] *Ibid*., p. 82.
[2] Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, p. 42.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 31.
[4] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 34.
[5] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 75.
[6] L.R. Perry, 'Review of *Experience and Its Modes*', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Feb., 1968), p. 96.

experience, an abstract mode of experience', and whether it can 'provide what is ultimately satisfactory in experience.'[1]

According to Oakeshott, history is a world of ideas. Let us start with the fact that it is a *world*. This means that the elements that constitute history exist in a systematic and inter-dependent relationship to each other. History is a world of experience like all other forms of experience. Experience is always a world. If it were not a world it would be an incoherent meaningless confusion of noise, with events and ideas randomly jumbled up together. But experience is not like this, and neither is historical experience. If history were merely a tissue of mere conjunctions between random observations it would not be a form of thought or experience – it would be outside experience and could not constitute a sphere of knowledge or even experience. In reality, history is indeed a world of co-existent and mutually independent facts and, as such, is a form of experience.

> Historical experience is a mode because it is not a mere series but a 'world,' for the process of criticism by which it is constructed determines the temporal order by a non-temporal one: nothing is admitted as historical fact until, through being evidenced, it is integrated with what is really a logical scheme.[2]

When we consider a period of history we hold together a series of facts about it. For example, when we contemplate Victorian Britain we construct, in our historical understanding, a world of inter-related facts – facts about the economy, the system of government, its foreign policy, its art, its customs and so on. There is a world of Victorian history that exists made up of simultaneous facts. We don't view the nineteenth century as one random event after another. History 'is not a series, but a world.'[3]

Second, history is a *world of ideas.* Here, again, history shows itself to be a mode of experience. Experience is a world of present ideas and this is true of history also. History is a world of present ideas. History exists in the present experience of the historian. History does not exist in a past world of events independent of present experience. As we have already seen, nothing can exist independently of our experience. An event independent of our experience would be unknowable and meaningless. The past is by definition not here now, and as such is outside our experience and does not exist. When the historian talks about the past, what he is really referring to are the ideas that exist inside his present experience. The historian does not discover a past world of facts – he constructs a present world of ideas.

> The historian's business is not to discover, to recapture, or even to interpret; it is to create and construct. Interpretation and discovery imply something independent of experience. There is no history independent of experience; the course of events, as such, is not history because it is

[1] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 86-87.
[2] Jessop, 'Review of *Experience and Its Modes'*, p. 357.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 91-92.

> nothing at all. History is experience, the historian's world of experience; it is a world of ideas, the historian's world of ideas.[1]

By this Oakeshott did not mean, comments Franco, that the world of history exists *only* in the mind of an individual historian. The world of historical ideas is constituted by the ideas of all historians reflecting upon an aspect of the past as a whole. It is quite possible for an individual historian to be wrong.[2] The 'house of history', as Collingwood had earlier remarked, 'is a house inhabited by all historians, and it consists not of ideas about history but of history itself.'[3]

Historians tend to think of there being two histories – the history they think and write and the history that 'actually happened' in the past, and the role of history is to seek to bring the former as close as possible to the latter – to tell it how it 'really was'. This is totally false. History is not the correspondence of a present idea with a past event, for there are no past events. There is no course of events independent of experience. The events of history exist in the present, not the past, they exist in the experience of the historian. 'History is the historian's experience. It is "made" by nobody save the historian; to write history is the only way of making it.'[4] So history is a world of ideas in present experience. It begins with a world of ideas, and this world it seeks to transform, to make it more satisfactory. The 'explicit end in history is to make a given world more of a world, to make it coherent.'[5] 'What the historian is doing,' writes Collingwood, 'when he fancies he is merely cognizing past events as they happened, is in reality organizing his present consciousness…'[6]

The historian starts, then, with a system of ideas and it is by means of this system of ideas that he judges any data or information that he encounters. Coherence is the test of truth in history as it is in any world of experience. There are no 'facts' in history independent of the world of ideas of the historian. The historian does not discover facts – he makes them. Why is this? A historian discovers a piece of evidence from which he infers a possible event in the past. Is this event a fact? Not initially. The only person who can elevate this event into a fact is a historian. It only becomes a fact when the historian is able to accommodate it within his existing system of knowledge regarding the state of affairs he is investigating. 'The world of the historian', wrote Oakeshott in 1927, 'is a world of half-true, half-understood facts and happenings out of which he must make up some kind of rational whole.'[7] If the event can be coherently accommodated within his existing framework of understanding then it is accorded the status of a fact. If it cannot, then it is not a fact – though it might initiate further reflection and investigation since the emergence of this piece of evidence might indicate that the existing framework of understanding is wrong. 'The information on which a historian relies in

---

[1] *Ibid*., p. 93.
[2] Franco, *Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 34.
[3] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 155.
[4] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 99.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 97.
[6] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 153.
[7] M. Oakeshott, 'The Philosophy of History' (1928), in L. O'Sullivan (ed.), *What is History and Other Essays* (2004), p. 128.

constructing an account of the past', remarks Nardin, 'is not history until it has been critically reinterpreted.'[1] History, 'like every other form of thought, ends and does not begin with facts.'[2] 'Ultimately,' reflects Franco, 'everything the historian includes in his narrative must fit together to form a coherent, non-contradictory whole. All the pieces criticize one another.'[3] If, for example, we find a piece of evidence – a diary entry perhaps – that suggests that the Duke of Wellington was seen in Wigan on the day of the Battle of Waterloo, then this new piece of evidence does *not* cohere with my present world of historical ideas and will be rejected. It may be, of course, that further evidence accumulates placing Wellington in Wigan on the day of the battle and eventually our world of ideas concerning the Battle of Waterloo will have to change to become coherent again in the context of the available evidence. But in most cases evidence which clashes with our existing world of ideas makes that world less not more coherent and will not be accorded the status of a historical fact.

History, then, is a world of ideas and is capable of generating conclusions appropriate to itself. Because it is a world of ideas it is also, therefore, a form of experience, and because it is experience it is a form of reality – because experience is reality – and as a form of reality it is the whole of reality, because reality is one and indivisible. It is the whole of reality from a limited viewpoint. It can claim to be the whole of reality because everything that exists can be understood to have happened – the present is a mere momentary instant that becomes real only when it becomes past.[4] But what characterises history as a world of ideas in the first place? On what basis is history formed as a mode of experience? History, like all modes of experience, is defined by the assumptions or postulates that underpin it. These postulates are not inferences *from* history – they are the assumptions that make history possible as a way of organising experience as a whole.[5] According to Oakeshott, these specific postulates of historical thinking are: the idea of the past; of fact; of the individual; and of explanation.

1. **The Past.** This is, in Franco's phrase, the 'master-postulate'.[6] History is the study of 'the past for the sake of the past. What the historian is interested in is a dead past; a past unlike the present.'[7] The past of historical experience is radically separated from the present. It is a particular past, a past of particular events happening in a unique time and space. As postulated by the historian this past is a fixed world of events stretching out behind the present which the historian sets out to discover.

> In short, the past *for* history is 'what really happened'; and until the historian has reached back and elucidated that, he considers himself to have performed his task

[1] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 145.
[2] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 97.
[3] Franco, *Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 33.
[4] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 37.
[5] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* p. 101.
[6] Franco, *Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 37.
[7] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 106.

> incompletely… [It is] the discovery and elucidation of a fixed and finished past, for its own sake and in all its dissimilarity from the present.[1]

This past the historian seeks to assemble, recover, and construct from present objects which are considered to be survivals from the past. The raw material of historical inquiry consists of things that exist in the present from which the historian seeks to infer evidence relating to a past that no longer exists. The historical past, writes Nardin, has not survived, but is inferred by the historian through a critical investigation of authenticated survivals which are used as circumstantial evidence of past events.[2] By emphasising the fixed and independent nature of the past as viewed by the historian, Oakeshott is concerned to discount the idea that history has any relationship to the present. While it is true that people in the present such as politicians and religious leaders often evoke the past for practical reasons – to vindicate a policy or draw a parallel – this, says Oakeshott, is not a historical attitude. It does not approach the past for its own sake.

> In practical experience, the past is designed to justify, to make valid practical beliefs about the present and the future, about the world in general. It constitutes, of course, an argument the form of which disguises its real content and cogency; the language is that of history, while its thought is that of practice.[3]

An example might be how Christianity relates the life of Christ to vindicate belief in Christ's divinity, or how a politician might refer to the Appeasement of Hitler to justify a firm line in Iraq or Ukraine. Such people are approaching history as a means to some practical end – not as an end in itself. That is not the distinctively historical approach to the past – it is like being given a copy of *War and Peace* and using it as a door-stop.

2. Facts. A fact is a necessary element in a world of ideas. A historical fact is a judgement, an inference, a conclusion, that occupies a necessary place in the system of ideas that constitutes the world of the historian. This historical fact is not what 'really happened.' We can never know for sure what really happened in the past. It is what the evidence that survives from the past into the present 'obliges us to believe.'[4] But being obliged to believe that a certain fact was the case is not the same as knowing it to be so. In an earlier unpublished essay Oakeshott argued that such absolute factual knowledge in history was a theoretical impossibility. For to know a historical fact 'in its full significance, exactly as it happened' the historian would have to know in equal detail all the facts that together constituted the context within which it occurred and within which it comes to be accepted by the historian as a fact at all. Each fact is at the

[1] *Ibid*., p. 107.
[2] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 153.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 105.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 112.

centre of an infinite network of facts and to fully know its meaning would be to fully know all these interconnected facts – and this is clearly impossible. Hence, he concludes, 'there is no single fact of history the nature and meaning of which is or can be finally settled.'[1] In practice, therefore, we are obliged to believe what is coherent with our existing understanding of the past. Truth is always 'coherence in a world of ideas', and the truth of our historical understanding of the past is formed out of the system of interconnections and relationships between all the existing facts that constitute it. A 'fact' is a piece of evidence that has a necessary place within the historical understanding of a given period of the past. A fact is achieved in experience – not given.

> 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 which compose it … Each separate 'fact' remains an hypothesis until the whole world of facts is established in which it is involved.[2]

There is no world of facts independent of experience – there is nothing independent of experience, and certainly not a past, which is not only independent of experience, but by definition is no longer existing. Hence when I encounter a piece of evidence I do not say: does this conform to some independent objective body of 'facts'. What I ask is:

> Does my whole world of experience gain or lose coherence when I take facts in this way? Truth in history, I repeat, is a matter of the coherence of a world of facts, and there is no world of facts apart from the world of present experience taken as a single whole.[3]

This point is well-made by Nardin:

> The truth of a proposition is not determined by a criterion that lies outside experience – an absolute, permanent, universal, or unquestionable standard against which any proposition can be tested. It is determined by how that proposition fits with others within a given system of ideas. It is this condition of coherence – coherence relative to a given system – that allows us to speak without contradiction of different kinds of truth: scientific, moral, artistic, and so forth. It follows that there can be no test of historical truth outside the historian's reconstruction of the past … The meaning and therefore the very identity of historical facts is determined by their place in the story the historian constructs according to the evidence … Historical truth is … coherence within a system of historical ideas.[4]

[1] Oakeshott, 'The Philosophy of History', pp. 120-21.
[2] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 113.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 114.
[4] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 147-48.

3. **Reality and the Individual**. History is the whole of reality subsumed under the category of the past. Reality in history consists of events, things, institutions, and persons. These we shall call the 'historical individual'. History postulates the existence of such individual entities. It assumes they exist when it begins the business of constructing historical worlds of understanding – which is what history does from the first instant. History uses concepts like 'Napoleon', 'religion', 'war', 'science', 'empire', without critically examining the concepts as such and inquiring systematically into their clarity and coherence. It basically accepts them according to conventional understanding of their meaning. This means that historical individuals are 'designated' not defined – they are accepted and pointed to and used in historical narratives, but they are not defined. Underlying the concept of the individual in history is the notion of continuity and discontinuity. To qualify as an individual a thing, institution event, must emerge out of a background through a process of discontinuity – the foundation of the Roman Empire, the Battle of the Somme, the crowning of a King or whatever. This thing then undergoes change, but change not so significant for it to cease to be the thing initially designated – the Roman Empire changes, but remains the Roman Empire. Eventually the change may be so great as to represent a discontinuity and the individual is shattered and ceases to exist in historical accounts – the dissolution of the Roman Empire, the end of the Battle of the Somme. The historical individual is something with a meaning and which can maintain itself relatively intact and self-complete.

> Its capacity for establishing its individuality lies in the discontinuity, the relative break which seems to precede it; and its capacity for maintaining its individuality lies in the continuity, or relative absence of break, which it can show… The world of historical experience is, then, a past world of historical individuals, a world governed by the ideas of change, of continuity and discontinuity.[1]

4. **Explanation**. History attempts to give a rational account of the world, and this means, above all, seeking to account rationally for historical change. For, it is only by explaining the changing character of its world that historical experience can hope to introduce coherence into it. 'Historical explanation is, then, an explanation of the world in terms of change…'[2] This explanation of change in history is, argues Oakeshott, distinctive to history as a mode of experience. It is a postulate of history because it is assumed by historians when engaging in historical explanation: distinctly *historical* explanation is not explanation as conceived in the sciences or by Marxists or by those seeking a philosophy of history in which there is some logic to events.

   Explanation is commonly structured in terms of the idea of *cause*. But the concept of cause is derived from outside history and applied to it, and it is in fact incompatible with the postulates of historical experience. The concept of cause, derived

[1] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 122, 124.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 125.

from science, is of the 'if this, then that' form. There are, however, two major reasons why this manner of thinking about causality cannot be applied to history. First, we can never isolate cause and effect in history. We cannot abstract a single historical event from the world of history and make it free of all its relations, and then speak of it as *the* cause of one event or all events that follow it. In history every historical event is necessary and there is 'no more reason to attribute a whole course of events to one antecedent event rather than another.'[1] A causal explanation requires us to explain one event in terms of another, isolated, event. Yet this is just what is impossible given the postulates of historical experience.

> It cannot be achieved by selecting some single event and attributing to that any subsequent event or the whole course of subsequent events. No single event in history is isolable in this manner, and if it were there could be no more reason to isolate *this* event rather than *that*.[2]

To talk of geographical or economic causes of events is to abstract from history altogether, which is concerned with the contingent relationships between particular events as inferred by the historian. Second, causal relationships in history are understood in terms of general covering laws based upon repeated observations of the same phenomena. But the idea of an average outcome of repeatable events has no place in history – for the historian 'is dealing all the while with individual, unique facts…' To seek to derive general causal laws from history 'would be to change the past from an individual occurrence into an instance of a rule.'[3] 'The strict conception of cause and effect appears, then, to be without relevance in historical explanation.'[4]

If cause and effect is rejected as a form of historical explanation, what are we to use? Oakeshott's answer is: *the presentation of change in the greatest possible detail.*

> Change in history carries with it its own explanation; the course of events is one, so far integrated, so far filled in and complete, that no external cause or reason is looked for or required in order to account for any particular event … This principle I will call the unity or continuity of history; and it is, I think, the only principle of explanation consonant with the postulates of historical experience.[5]

In history every event is related to every other and change is incremental, however dramatic certain events might appear from the outside.

> And the only explanation of change relevant or possible in history is simply a complete account of change. History accounts *for* change by means of a full account *of* change.

[1] *Ibid*., p. 131.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 132.
[3] Oakeshott, 'The Philosophy of History', p. 129.
[4] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 132.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 141.

> The relation *between* events is always other events, and it is established in history by a full revelation *of* the events. … History, then … is the narration of a course of events which, in so far as it is without serious interruption, explains itself … And the method of the historian is never to explain by means of generalisation, but always by means of greater and more complete detail.[1]

When the historian is explaining change, what he is really doing is making it intelligible, and the greater the detail regarding the series of events, the more intelligible it becomes. But the relation between events is always contingent: it is not necessary, it is simply what the evidence shows the circumstances to have been. To quote Nardin:

> A contingent relationship is both immediate and circumstantial. It is immediate in being a relationship of proximity or contiguity. Contingently related events, Oakeshott suggests, are connected with another by filling in even smaller details. When a historical account is finished, one event 'touches' another in such a way that there is neither need nor room for further mediating events or relations. And it is circumstantial in the sense that events in historical explanation are related simply because, according to the evidence, they *happen* to be contiguous: the relationship is a matter of evidence and not of causal necessity or probability.[2]

Oakeshott himself attempted an exercise in explanation through the detailed narration of events in a 1930s essay on England's declaration of war on Spain in 1739, which he presented as the conjunction of three series of events: British political history; European history; and colonial policy – though he admitted that his principles really implied that three separate strands of events be not delineated, but that a truly historical explanation would 'present these three strands as a single whole and present them without confusion…'[3]

The Critique of History as a Mode of Experience

We have established that history is a systematic world of ideas, constituted by facts relating to real individuals such as people, institutions and events, where the relationship between events is explained by the most detailed possible enumeration of the events. As such, history is, within its own terms, true and certain reality, and in organising its experience historically, experience finds a world of experience satisfying in itself. History, remarked Oakeshott in 1927, is 'one among a number of attitudes which the mind is capable of adopting towards the objective world…'[4] It 'needs no apology and no justification. The voice with which it speaks is a human voice, and indeed it seems wholly inseparable from human nature.'[5] All this is sound so far as

[1] *Ibid*., p. 143.
[2] Nardin, *Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 164.
[3] Cited in L. O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History* (2003), pp. 104-05.
[4] Oakeshott, 'The Philosophy of History', p. 128.
[5] *Ibid*., pp. 124-25.

it goes. But is the world of history concrete reality? Is it, taken as a whole and by itself, satisfying to experience in its totality? Is history coherent reality as such, or is it abstract, defective, and unable to satisfy the ultimate demands of experience? Is history the experience of ultimate reality – or is it a mode of experience, an arrest of experience? For Collingwood, Oakeshott's delineation of the presuppositions that defined history as a distinct mode of understanding was his most valuable achievement. The reasoning on history in *Experience and Its Modes*, he wrote, 'entirely vindicates the autonomy of historical thought. The historian is master in his own house; he owes nothing to the scientist or to anyone else.'[1] W.H. Greenleaf agreed that this 'alone makes *Experience and Its Modes* a book of very considerable significance', while Luke O'Sullivan has recently written that 'Oakeshott's contribution was to establish philosophically that history really was an autonomous, distinctive and irreplaceable form of thinking about the past.'[2] However, his purpose in laying bare what he took to be the essential assumptions underlying the practice of history was to show that it was *fundamentally incoherent and unsatisfactory as a form of experience.* As an abstraction from concrete experience its view of reality is partial and contradictory, and experience, seeking satisfying knowledge of the whole, must discard and supersede history as a flawed distortion of experience.

The Contradictions of History

The Past as Present

The essential contradiction of historical experience is that its form contradicts its content. The subject of history is past events. History is the study of the past for its own sake. But history, as a form of experience, exists always and only in the present. The past of history does not exist and never did exist. The world of history is a world of ideas in current experience. Although historical experience purports to relate to an inferred past, although it claims to tell us what really happened, historical experience, like all experience, is a world of present ideas. History takes present experience and re-categorises it as evidence about a real existing past. But this is something it can never realise.

> All [the historian] has is his present world of ideas, and the historical past is a constituent of that world or nothing at all. For, in historical inference we do not move from our present world to a past world; the movement in experience is always a movement within a present world of ideas. The historical past is nothing other … than what the evidence obliges us to believe – a present world of ideas.[3]

[1] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 155.
[2] W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (1966), p. 25; L. O'Sullivan, 'Worlds of Experience: History', in E. Podoksik (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* (2012), p. 42.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 109.

It is this that the historian fails to see. By thinking of the past as a fixed reality independent of the present, the historian forgets that history is actually present experience.[1] As Oakeshott was to write some years later in a review of E.H. Carr's *What is History?*:

> What was Mr. Carr trying to understand and interpret when he was composing his history of Soviet Russia? Surely it was writings and documents which were present, in front of him. What was he doing with these present facts? Surely he was reading them in order to find out what they could tell him about past happenings.[2]

Likewise, the 'facts of history are present facts.' 'The historical past does not lie behind present evidence, it is the world which present evidence creates in the present.'[3] This is the essential contradiction of history. The past it claims to study is really a present, and its present is always couched in terms of a non-existent past. History 'is the continuous assertion of a past which is not past and of a present which is not present.'[4] The historian, to use Collingwood's analogy, is arranging in imaginary pigeon holes ideas about past events which actually exist in the present. The historian is not mistaken about his 'facts': what he is mistaken about is where he places them – for while he thinks he is placing them in a past removed from him, they are in reality located in his own mind. The mistake the historian makes is a *philosophical* one of 'arranging in the past what is actually all present experience.'[5] For this reason alone history is an incoherent form of experience resulting from abstracting from reality and needs to be avoided.

Designation is not Definition

The historical individuals that constitute reality in history are not real at all. 'What in history is taken to be real falls short of the character of reality.'[6] This is because the individual in history is constituted by abstraction, by arbitrarily focusing on one aspect of experience compared to the whole of experience, and because the individual is created by abstraction it is unstable. In reality, all events are interconnected with all others in a world of ideas. Separating one group of experiences as constituting an individual thing apart from other experiences is inherently arbitrary and tends always to break down as events relating to the individual are found to have a myriad of connections to events in the environment. The historian peoples his writing with terms like 'Russian Revolution', 'Reformation', 'Catholic Church', 'Napoleon', and these individuals are taken for granted in discussion, whereas each can be dissolved by critical analysis and disintegrated as event by merging it into its context: for example, was the Russian Revolution an event or a series of events; did it begin in February or October; was it

[1] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 154.
[2] M. Oakeshott, 'What is History?' (1961), in O'Sullivan (ed.), *What is History?*, p. 329.
[3] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 108.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 111.
[5] Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 155.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 148.

an intellectual revolution or an institutional one; was it made by a classes or individuals; was it an event of St Petersburg or Russia as a whole, and so on.[1]

> The historical individual is relatively stable, but it is also abstract and to some extent arbitrary … Historical experience, like all abstract experience, is always on the verge of passing beyond itself … The historical individual … is conceived in terms rather of separateness than of self-completeness and passes almost unnoticed into its environment. Where does one historical event begin, and where end?[2]

Thus the individual postulated by history – whether person, institution, event – is less than a definitive individual: it is an incomplete abstraction that cannot sustain itself as an individual since it is essentially arbitrary. The individual event, person, or organisation in history cannot exist independently of the context within which it has meaning, of the events that precede and surround and follow it, but this means that it is flimsy and insubstantial and cannot ultimately exist independently from these surrounding events. This is a characteristic of all modes of experience: if we define an individual as whatever is self-complete and independent of its environment, then 'nothing can count as an individual except the whole of all there is – the union of a thing and its environment.'[3] The experienced world of things is a world of meanings defined relatively by their relationship to other things – which, as Nardin observes, Derrida was later to analyse in his concept of *differance*.[4]

Concluding Comments

Historical experience is a way of organising total experience from the point of view of the past. It constitutes a world of ideas and is satisfying, to a degree, as experience, and generates truths that are truths within its own world. However, none of this alters the fact that history, as a means of organising experience as a whole, is fundamentally unsatisfactory. It is contradictory and incoherent, and studying history distorts and disrupts experience, arresting its pursuit of ultimate concrete reality. History is an abstract mode of experience, founded upon suppositions that are necessary for it to exist at all but which cannot survive critical scrutiny.

> Historical experience, I conclude, is a modification of experience; it is an arrest of experience. History is a world of abstractions. It is a backwater, and, from the standpoint of experience, a mistake. It leads nowhere; and in experience, if we have been unable to avoid it, we can regain the path of what will afford satisfaction only by superseding and destroying it … My standpoint is that of the totality of experience, and from this standpoint historical experience is a failure and consequently an absolute failure.[5]

---

[1] Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 153.
[2] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 123.
[3] Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 28-29.
[4] *Ibid*. p. 29.
[5] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, pp. 148-49.

Oakeshott's Later Historical Theory

In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott developed his analysis of history as part of his wider project to critique it as a mode of experience. Subsequently, however, he returned to reflecting upon history more in the spirit of understanding it as a mode of enquiry as such, the old concern to debunk it as an intellectual endeavour having been abandoned. This reflected a more fundamental revaluation of his philosophical position, in which the ideal of a totality of concrete experience devoid of presuppositions was replaced with an acceptance of a variety of 'discourses' which meet in conversation.[1] This still left the question as to what defined universe of historical discourse and in his 1955 essay, 'The Activity of Being an Historian' and the set of essays collected in *On History* in 1983, Oakeshott sought to delineate his view of what were, and were not, the defining features of historical thinking.[2] In essence his arguments of *Experience and Its Modes* remained unchanged: history remains an activity whereby historians construct a past that never existed out of evidence existing only in the present. The chief differences are threefold:

1. The idealist theory that all that exists is a current experience of ideas is not present; neither is the argument that the only truly satisfactory and coherent form of experience is absolute total experience as pursued through philosophy.
2. Oakeshott is not concerned to expose the contradictions of history as a mode of experience. History is accepted to be a worthwhile yet difficult endeavour and not a form of understanding to be discarded as flawed and misguided.[3]
3. In his book *On History*, Oakeshott conceives the historical understanding of the past in much more dynamic, change-orientated, way than he does in the more static conceptualisation of historical experience in *Experience and Its Modes*.

History as an Abstract Mode of Enquiry

In both his early and later work, Oakeshott regards history as an abstract mode of understanding.[4] As such its existence depends upon a series of conditions (or, in the language of *Experience and its Modes*, presuppositions) which define it as a way of thinking about present experience. What then, according to Oakeshott, are the conditions of historical thinking? They are the ideas of the past; historical events and the significant contingent relations between them; and change viewed as a passage of contiguous events.

---

[1] M. Oakeshott, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' (1959), in M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (1962). See also M. Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (2000), p. 246.
[2] For a helpful review of the context of these two works, see Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 133-40.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 133.
[4] M. Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (1983), p. 97.

The Past

Historical enquiry is the study of the past for the sake of the past alone. The past does not exist and never did exist. In *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott represented this point as an obvious corollary of his doctrine that *nothing* exists independently of experience for, since the past is clearly independent of current experience, it evidently cannot be said to exist. Now Oakeshott makes the same argument in a different way.[1] The past is something historians construct from present experience. The 'past' is never in the present as such – it is inferred from evidence that has survived into the present – letters, diaries, coins, buildings, music and such like. Everything that happens occurs in the present. Thus the past was never, when it happened, a past. An historical event 'is something that never happened and an "historical" action something never performed; that an "historical" character is one that never lived. The idiom of happening is always that of practice…'[2] What is called 'the past' was always someone's present and therefore one can say that the past never existed. It only exists now, in the present. In making this point Oakeshott was, *inter alia*, rejecting Collingwood's contention that the historian understands past situations by re-enacting in his own mind the thoughts of past actors. This cannot be what the historian does since the historian's past never existed: the past actor was behaving in a practical present, whereas the historian is constructing an historical past. He is perceiving past events in a way that they were never perceived at the time.[3]

So the past is something constructed by the historian in the present. It is a way of looking at present objects and using them to infer the character of a separate, distant, past.

> The historian is understood, in the first place, to be distinguished on account of the direction of his attention; he is concerned with the past. He is interested in the world around him considered as evidence for a world that is no longer present; and we recognise his activity as one of inquiring into 'the past' and making statements about it.[4]

History, as Boucher emphasises, is 'not given. It is an achievement or conclusion arrived at by means of subscription to the practice of history'.[5]

This is not the only way of viewing present experience in terms of the past. The chief rival to history as a way of viewing the past through the present is that of the *practical past*. This is the past understood in terms of the needs and values of the present – when the past is referred to in order to justify a contract or trace the origin of an institution or custom or to draw analogies with contemporary events or a sphere within which one may form judgements or condemn actions. The past is then a place appreciated, not for itself, but for its uses in the

---

[1] C.f. O'Sullivan, *Oakeshott on History*, p. 223; D. Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May 1984), p. 205.
[2] M. Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', in *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 164.
[3] Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past', p. 206. See also R. Grant, *Thinkers of Our Time: Oakeshott* (1990), pp. 102-03.
[4] Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 139.
[5] Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past', p. 207.

present. This, says Oakeshott, is the most basic instinctual manner in which humans have regarded the past:

> The practical manner of understanding the past is as old as the human race. To understand everything (including what we believe to have happened in the past) in relation to ourselves is the simplest and least sophisticated manner of understanding the world.[1]

To view the past in the light of present needs, concerns, and ideas is quite understandable – for by so doing an individual is seeking to 'explain his present world, or to justify it, or to make it a more habitable and a less mysterious place.'[2] To view the past practically is not wrong – indeed it is 'an indispensable ingredient of an articulated civilized life.'[3] But it is not a distinctively historical way of viewing evidence concerning the past since it is not really concerned with the past at all but with the needs and priorities of the present. The practical person seeks to assimilate the past to the present and reads the past backwards, in the light of current events. He doesn't wish to understand the past as past, as the historian does, but to understand the present in the light of a past which is inevitably then interpreted in the light of present situations. To quote Oakeshott:

> In short, [the practical man] treats the past as he treats the present, and the statements he is disposed to make about past actions and persons are of the same kind as those he is disposed to make about a contemporary situation in which he is involved.[4]

Hence he makes moral judgements about the past, and talks of turning points, or accidents, or successes and failures, and origins, and of serious consequences – all ways that we talk about the world around us, but not appropriate ways to talk about a past which is separate from us and which is to be understood on its own terms and not in the light of our personal 'take' upon events.[5]

Thus the historian is someone who regards the present as containing objects which are survivals from the past, and these objects are regarded solely in terms of what we may infer about that past from them.

---

[1] Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 150.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 153.
[3] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 44.
[4] 'Activity of Being an Historian', p. 154.
[5] Rex Martin takes issue with this emphasis upon the absence of practical considerations in the true historical understanding. He points out that any historian must have practical objects in mind when writing history – to teach students or persuade colleagues or produce books. If history is to be intelligible it can't be confined to a private language, and therefore must be written with some practical reference to the present. C.f. R. Martin, 'How the Past Stands with Us', *History and Theory*, vol. 44. No. 1 (February 2005), p. 145. The effect of denying the status of historical writing to any work of history with a practical motivation would also, as Steven Smith notes, remove the likes of Thucydides, Gibbon, and Macaulay from the historical cannon on the grounds that they thought 'history has something useful to tell us about the conduct of life.' S.B. Smith, 'The Character of Historical Understanding', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 47. No. 1 (January 1985), p. 152.

> Consequently, the present in historical understanding is distinguishable as a subject exclusively concerned with past (an 'historian' as such) related to objects which speak only of past (that is, things understood exclusively in terms of their relation to past). This is the most general of the modal conditions of the present in historical understanding, and it is absolute.[1]

The Idea of a Historical Situation

Historical enquiry, says Oakeshott, begins with a present composed of objects recognized as exploits which have survived, each being a 'fragment of a bygone present.' These objects are evidence of past performances. They are not past performances themselves as they exist only in the present. It is the task of the historian to use these evidences of past performances to construct an account of what actually happened in the past. This is the past of the historian.

> It is the conclusion of an enquiry designed to infer from surviving utterances and artefacts what they do not and cannot themselves tell him, namely, what has not survived but did in fact happen.[2]

It might be thought that the basic unit of historical understanding is the past event or occurrence. Yet this is not the case, for no occurrence can be understood as an isolated, single event. An event in history is always understood and meaningful as part of a system of events to which it is related. The blow that killed King Harold is only understood in terms of its relationship to the Battle of Hastings, Saxon Kingship, William of Normandy, Senlac Hill, Norman cavalry and so on. This context within which a past event is understood Oakeshott calls the *historical situation*.

> An historical situation is … a coherent structure of mutually and conceptually related occurrences abstracted from all that may be going on there and then and made to compose an answer to an historical past which has not survived. It is the conclusion of an historical enquiry.[3]

This conception of a historical situation has obvious affinities with the notion of history as a world of ideas present in *Experience and Its Modes*.

Change

Whereas in *Experience and Its Modes* Oakeshott was chiefly concerned to emphasise the nature of history as a mode of experience consisting of a coherent world of ideas, in *On History* he was not content to depict history as merely a system of occurrences since such an understanding

[1] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 27.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 53.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 54.

of a past situation was inherently unstable: this was because any historical situation (as depicted, say, in Namier's *Structure of English Politics on the Accession of George III*) was an abstraction in a world of change – it was snap-shot taken of a flow of events.[1] A distinctly historical understanding of the past, he argued, must therefore be in terms of *change* – which he calls the 'third postulate' of historical understanding, the others being the idea of the past and the idea of an historical event. An historical event, in other words, was not just an occurrence or situation inferred to have actually taken place at a certain point in time: it was also to be 'understood in terms of the mediation of its emergence; that is an *eventus* or outcome of what went before.'[2] And what went before was, of course, itself something that emerged out of antecedent events. Hence:

> The attention of an enquiry designed to understand the character of an historical event in terms of the mediation of its emergence (this mediation being itself composed of nothing but events) is necessarily directed to antecedent events and to their antecedence.[3]

So Oakeshott concludes that an historical enquiry is an engagement to assemble a changing past situation composed of passages of related events.

Significant Relationships between Events: The Question of Causality

A historical past consists of passages of antecedent and subsequent events. But what is the relationship between antecedent and subsequent events? The fact of one event happening prior to another event is not, in itself, sufficient grounds to link the two in a passage of events. What does it mean, in history, to say that an antecedent event is significantly related to a subsequent event? According to Oakeshott the answer is: *the antecedent events specify the character of the subsequent events and help us to understand what they are historically*.[4] Of course, this still leaves the question: which antecedent occurrences are significantly related via a passage of events to the subsequent?

It is common to hear it said that the relationship between historical events is causal. The idea of the 'causes' of an event like a revolution or a war is a familiar one in history, and Oakeshott notes that philosophers like Hempel and Popper have argued that it is possible to explain historical events using a logic of causation in terms of general laws. According to this formulation of causality, an event of a kind E can be attributed to a set of prior causes of a kind C, C_1, $C_2 \ldots C_n$, where these causes are connected to an event through some universal laws derived from, primarily, the social sciences. For example, it might be said that the events in Russia in 1917 were of the kind called 'revolution', and the causes of a revolution will be kinds

[1] This point is well explained in Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, p. 141. See also O'Sullivan, 'Worlds of Experience: History', p. 46.
[2] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 62.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 71.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 70.

of prior events such as rising food prices, the alienation of class interests, and defeats of an elite in war. From this perspective the antecedent events are designated causes which are related to the subsequent event by means of universal laws of the 'if X then Y' variety.[1]

Oakeshott utterly rejects this model of historical causation, labelling it 'muddled and untenable'.[2] He makes three key arguments against it.

1. The model of causality conflicts with the nature of history as a mode of enquiry. It says: an event E happened; what caused it? It then works back from E to antecedent events that are then held to be causes of E on the basis of general laws. The problem with this way of thinking is that it assumes a 'past' of events already exists with reference to which E can be explained. But there is no such past. This past must first be constructed by the historian, which means the historian must structure events according to relations of significance between events. These relations must be established *before* a causal past can be entertained – yet of course, in constructing a past in this way, the historian is constructing the very world upon which the language of causality is then imposed. The concept of cause adds nothing to what is already there and isn't really part of the practice of historical enquiry at all.
2. The causal model starts with event E and then says – what caused event E? To answer this question we must first know the character of event E. However, we cannot *know* the character of event E without first knowing its antecedents. Hence, we require to know the antecedent events that are significantly related to E in order to define the character of E as an event. Like all events, E can only be understood within the context of a historical situation, where that historical situation includes the antecedents of E. To identify the causes of an effect we must first understand that effect, and that means knowing already the antecedents which a causal analysis is meant to isolate.

   > A cause may be sought only for an already known and understood effect. Here, both the 'events' which are recognised to be the causal conditions of the 'event' whose occurrence is to be explained, and the 'law' in terms of which they are recognised as causal, may be distinguished from all the events which accompany it and from inappropriate 'laws' only in terms of the character already attributed to the 'event' whose occurrence is to be explained. In short, it assumes to be already known what it is the purpose of an historical enquiry to ascertain.[3]

3. Causal statements involve propositions about 'kinds' of events – civil wars, riots, the fall of dynasties and so forth. But to talk of 'kinds' of events involves us in an act of abstraction, departing from the specific individual events that history is concerned with. The historian is concerned to construct an inferred situation of related events to understand what actually happened. He wants to discover what actually happened in

[1] *Ibid*., p. 79.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 81.

> Russia on particular days in 1917 – not abstract from those events an unhistorical abstract idea of 'revolution' which never actually happened.[1]

Thus, the word 'cause', while used by historians, is inappropriate if understood in a scientific or logical fashion. What historians mean by 'cause' is something different: what they mean to do is understand the character of an historical event in terms of its significant relationships to antecedent events – to make it, in short, intelligible.[2] History is an enquiry 'concerned with events and with understanding their characters in terms of their antecedents…'[3] It seeks to understand an individual event in the context of its significantly related antecedents. When historians use the word 'cause' it is:

> no more than an expression of the concern of an historical enquiry to seek significant relationships between historical events and to distinguish between those antecedent conditions which are significant for understanding the subsequent and those that are not.[4]

Significant Relationships between events through Time

In what, then, do relations between antecedent and subsequent events consist if the relationship is not one of causality? The relationship, says Oakeshott, is one of *understanding*. The historian seeks to understand an event in the context of its antecedents. In a 1950 review of Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Oakeshott argued that historians could only really free themselves from the recurring temptation to write linear accounts of the past which privilege events and individuals which seem to have played a role in forwarding some current (valued) state of affairs if they 'achieved a manner of thinking for which every subsequent situation is understood … as the product of the total previous situation…'[5] By the time of *On History* he had refined this understanding of how successive events in history stood in relation to each other, such that an historical event was to be regarded as a 'convergence of significantly related historical events', and 'an historical enquiry is an engagement to infer and to assemble a passage of related historical events' in order to answer a question about the past.[6] These relationships between events have several defining characteristics.

1. They are always contingent. They are not necessary relations, but ones which are generated by a particular combination of events which might have been different. 'Historical events … are related to one another contingently.'[7]

[1] Oakeshott had made this point in 1928, when he pointed out that the statement 'the French Revolution produced Napoleon' was a unique historical fact, whereas the general law 'anarchy must invariably be followed by despotism' was not, and 'no knowledge of history could ever warrant us to construct' such a law. Oakeshott, 'The Philosophy of History', p. 121.
[2] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 85. C.f. Martin, 'How the Past Stands with Us', p. 143.
[3] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 91.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 88.
[5] M. Oakeshott, 'The Whig Interpretation of History', in O'Sullivan (ed.), *What is History?*, p. 221.
[6] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 92.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 94.

2. They are contiguous. This means that related events are in immediate proximity to each other. They touch one another in such a way that, writes Boucher, 'each occurrence stands in such close proximity with another that there is no interval between them, and the pattern they form exhibits an intelligible or continuous unity.'[1] Given such a continuity there is no need to bind events together by means of an appeal to an extrinsic covering law or such like.

> When an historian assembles a passage of antecedent events to compose a subsequent he builds what in the countryside is called a 'dry wall': the stones (that is, the antecedent events) which compose the wall (that is, the subsequent event) are joined and held together, not by mortar, but in terms of their shapes. And the wall, here, has no premeditated design; it is what its components, in touching, constitute.[2]

3. Those antecedent events to a subsequent event are held to be significantly related to the subsequent when they are found to have made a difference. History, as we have seen, studies not static systems, but changing situations. Any situation in history is the product of an assembled passage of antecedent events which coalesce to explain the character of that situation and how it comes to be. The past, as constructed by the historian on the basis of present evidence, consists of passages of antecedent events converging upon a subsequent event which they thereby account for and make comprehensible. These antecedent events are contingent and contiguous events which are united to form an identity by means of the principles of coherence and continuity. An event in history is explained by seeing it as the confluence of a series of passages of historical events, where these 'passages of events' are constituted – rather as a dry stone wall is constituted – by a principle of *continuity*.

> What unites an assemblage of historical differences, gives it an identity and makes it recognisable as a passage of change … this identity may be found in its own coherence; that is, in its character as a passage of differences which touch and modify one another and converge to compose a subsequent difference.[3]

Each event, or subsequent difference, can be at the centre of a series of such coherent contiguous passages of events. To quote Oakeshott:

> Thus, an historical event is itself a convergence of significantly related historical events. And an historical enquiry is an engagement to infer and to assemble a passage of related events as itself an answer to an historical question about the past. Its design is to compose and to understand the character of historical events by assembling the passages of related events which constitute their characters.[4]

[1] Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past', pp. 209-10.
[2] Oakeshott, *On History*, p. 94.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 114.
[4] *Ibid*., pp. 92-93.

Of course, it is a corollary of this model of historical change that the past will be composed of small and gradual changes – 'a past without surprises and devoid of great changes.' Significant change does occur through history, but properly understood this significant change will be seen to occur through a series of small, gradual, continuous changes.[1] It is only by building up the succession of small, contiguous, events in as great a detail as is possible that the meaning of any given event or change will be understood – and *this* is what causality consists of in history.

> And it is my contention that when an historical writer uses the word 'cause' what he implicitly refers to is this contingent, circumstantial relationship of antecedent events to a subsequent whose differences converge to compose the difference which constitutes the character of the subsequent.[2]

To describe the succession of events is to explain them – the doctrine which Oakeshott first enunciated in *Experience and Its Modes*. Thus, for example, when discussing the causes of a war, a historian won't talk of 'economic' causes or 'imperialist' causes or 'political' causes. Rather:

> He knows only a set of happenings which, when fully set out, make the outbreak of *this* war seem neither an 'accident', nor a 'miracle', nor a necessary event, but merely an intelligible occurrence. This, for example, is what de Tocqueville does in *L' Ancien Regime*: the French Revolution is come upon, and its character exhibited, not as the necessary and inevitable consequence of preceding events, but as an intelligible convergence of human choices and actions.[3]

Conclusion

In its essentials, Oakeshott's conceptualisation of history as a form of understanding changed very little between the 1930s and 1980s. 'Historiography', reflects Robert Grant, 'is the only topic on which Oakeshott seems never to have shifted his ground.'[4] Franco agrees: Oakeshott's answer to the central questions of any account of historical understanding 'does not differ radically from the answer he gave 50 years earlier in *Experience and Its Modes*.'[5] There *were* changes: references to experience and the world as a totality of ideas are absent; Oakeshott is no longer concerned to expose history as a self-contradictory mode of experience; the past is not dismissed as unreal simply on the grounds that *nothing* is real beyond present experience. Yet, fundamentally, the apparatus of understanding remains the same.

---

[1] *Ibid*., pp. 115-16.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 95
[3] Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 157.
[4] Grant, *Thinkers of Our Time: Oakeshott*, p. 99.
[5] Franco, *Michael Oakeshott*, p. 143.

1. The Past does not, and never has, existed. The events history describes happened in a present. The idea of a past is constructed by historians.
2. Historians construct the past on the basis of present experience – which Oakeshott now designates more carefully as present evidence in the form of artefacts that have survived from the past but which are not themselves the past.
3. The historian is concerned with the past only for its own sake as past. An interest in the past growing out of present practical interests is certainly possible and indeed common: but it is not a historical way of thinking and does not yield an historical past but a practical past.
4. The facts of history exist within a system of facts, not as isolated units. This is the concept of an historical situation. The coherence theory of truth is not referred to, but it is implicit in the idea of a system of facts – which must, if it is to be a system at all, be coherent. Oakeshott continued to acknowledge this in 'The Activity of Being an Historian', where he observes that the historian is not seeking 'the elucidation of a single ideal coherence of events which may be called "true"', but is rather 'elicits a coherence in a group of contingencies…'[1]
5. The rejection of scientific conceptions of causality is sustained. Causal propositions of the form 'If A, then B' are denied applicability to history. The relationship between events is explained, in both cases, by an enumeration of the events *between* A and B in the greatest possible detail. By *explaining* event B, what the historian actually means is understanding the character of B in the context of the events that led up to it.

In *On History* more attention is devoted to the idea of *change* than is the case in *Experience and Its Modes*. Historical situations are to be understood in a context of change, where change is accounted for in terms of the coalescence of passages of events, each constituted by a continuity of touching events. But this is really just an elaboration of the reasoning implicit in his earlier work. To use language Oakeshott himself would have appreciated, between the early and later Oakeshott, there is much more identity than difference.

[1] Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', p. 167.

Bibliography

Boucher, D., 'The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May 1984)

'Human Conduct, History, and Social Science in the Works of R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott', *New Literary History*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Summer 1993)

Collingwood, R.G., *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946)

Franco, P., *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (Yale, 1990)

Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction (Yale, 2004)

Fuller, T., 'Michael Oakeshott, 1901-1990', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 71. No. 1 (Winter 2009)

Grant, R., *Thinkers of Our Time: Oakeshott* (London, 1990)

Greenleaf, W.H., *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London, 1966)

Hughes-Warrington, M., *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (2000)

Jessop, T.E., 'Review of *Experience and its Modes*', *Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 35 (July 1934)

Martin, R., 'How the Past Stands with Us', *History and Theory*, vol. 44. No. 1 (February 2005)

Nardin, T., *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (2001)

Oakeshott, M., 'The Philosophy of History' (1928), in L. O'Sullivan (ed.), *What is History and Other Essays*.

Experience and Its Modes (Cambridge, 1933)

'The Whig Interpretation of History' (1951), in O'Sullivan (ed.), *What is History?*

'The Activity of Being an Historian' (1955), in *Rationalism in Politics*.

'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' (1959), in *Rationalism in Politics*.

'What is History?' (1961), in O'Sullivan (ed.), *What is History?*

Rationalism in Politics (London, 1962)

On History and Other Essays (Oxford, 1983)

O'Sullivan, L., *Oakeshott on History* (Exeter, 2003)

(ed.), *What is History and Other Essays* (Exeter, 2004)

'Worlds of Experience: History', in E. Podoksik (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*.

Perry, L.R., 'Review of *Experience and Its Modes*', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (February 1968)

Podoksik, E. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott* (Cambridge, 2012)

Smith, S.B., 'The Character of Historical Understanding', *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 47. No. 1 (January 1985)