Religious and Poetic Experience in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott

Glenn Worthington

Oakeshott Studies, Volume 7

Contents

Religious and Poetic Experience in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott

Glenn Worthington

imprint-academic.com

Published in the UK by Imprint Academic
PO Box 200, Exeter EX5 5YX, UK

Published in the USA by Imprint Academic
Philosophy Documentation Center
PO Box 7147, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7147, USA

Digital edition converted and distributed by
Andrews UK Limited www.andrewsuk.com

Print ISBN - 9780907845621
PDF ISBN - 9781845405953

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library and US Library of Congress

imprint-academic.com/idealists

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my indebtedness to David West, who supervised my thesis and gave much of his attention to the detail as well as the overall argument that is presented here.[1] The work owes much, not only to the time spent in conversation with Luke O'Sullivan, a fellow doctoral scholar of Oakeshott's thought at the Australian National University, but also to his generous sharing of research materials which he had gathered for his own doctoral studies. Jim George and Jeremy Shearmur of the Department of Political Science also gave their time in reading the work.

David Boucher extended his help and generous hospitality whilst I was on fieldwork in Britain in 1994. And the comments of Peter Nicholson, Richard Flathman and Conal Condren who examined the thesis provided many helpful suggestions on how the text could be improved as well as encouragement to continue exploring lines of inquiry that opened during my studies. I would also like to express my gratitude to Christel

[1] *The Civil Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott: A Theology of Identity*, (Canberra, Australian National University, 1997).

Oakeshott for allowing me to look over her husband's personal library.

Finally, I am grateful for the time allowed me by the Department of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth Parliament of Australia and the facilities extended to me by the School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University to bring the thesis to publication standard.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Why Study Oakeshott's Account of Religious and Poetic Experience?

The following work is an attempt to set out, in its most comprehensive terms, Oakeshott's characterisation of conduct in terms of the good life; that is his account of what it is to live well. I have described this as a study of Oakeshott's account of the good life to indicate the scope of the subject matter covered. It signals an intention to deal with more than Oakeshott's characterisation of the terms of moral association or political activity, it sets as a frame of reference his understanding and diagnosis of the human condition and modern responses to this predicament.

A passage from one of C. S. Lewis's broadcast talks provides a more detailed map of the scope and structure of the following study. Lewis identified morality as being properly concerned with three things:

> Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonising the things inside each individual. Thirdly with the general purpose of life as a whole: what man was made for.

He went on to observe that 'modern people are nearly always thinking about the first thing [but they] forget the other two.'[1] I shall explore Oakeshott's understanding of the good life in terms of all three areas of morality identified by Lewis: his characterisation of moral association between individuals; the character of the personae that engage in this type of association; and the sense in which he thought it appropriate to talk of a purpose that is general to life as a whole.

It is my contention then, that Oakeshott's work does not suffer the modern obsession identified by Lewis of confining moral considerations to the appropriate terms of association. However, much of the secondary literature on Oakeshott could be taken as proving the point to which I am claiming his work is an exception. Most of the scholarly attention that has been devoted to Oakeshott's account of conduct has focused upon his characterisation of the relations that constitute moral association between individuals and the type of political activity appropriate to these relations. Comparatively little effort has been made to address his account of the type of person (or character) that is capable of entering into and enjoying moral association or whether anything like a purpose that is general to life can be found in his work. When these two other areas of Oakeshott's account of conduct have been noticed, they have tended to be used either to re-iterate or expand upon points being made about his characterisation of the appropriate terms of association. The following exercise, then, consists in an effort to identify Oakeshott's characterisation of conduct in terms of each of the three aspects of morality outlined by Lewis and it does so by attending to his writings on religious and poetic experience together with the better known of his tracts on moral association and political activity.

A proposal to consider Oakeshott's account of the good life using his writings on religious and poetic experience may

---

[1] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Glasgow, Fontana Books, 1975), pp. 66–7.

strike readers who are familiar with his work as a somewhat eccentric or even misguided approach. It might be pointed out that he wrote relatively little on either subject. A more productive approach, on this line of understanding, would concentrate upon the subjects on which Oakeshott himself focused. Undeniably, he wrote more extensively on the character of moral association and political activity than religious or poetic experience (hence the common recognition of him as first and foremost a moral or, even more frequently, a political theorist). The implication is that his accounts of morality and politics reveal more of his characterisation of the good life than his reflections upon religious and poetic experience.

The above argument suffers two shortcomings. First and most seriously, it misconstrues the character of Oakeshott's approach to thinking. Oakeshott did not characterise identities, such as 'conduct' or 'the good life', as collections of individual parts that when brought together form a whole. The various subjects on which he reflected are not individual, self-contained components that can be understood in isolation from one another; they do not form a cumulative whole in the way that individual stones, when stacked together, form a pile.[2] Rather, political, moral, religious and poetic experience are identities that provide a series of lenses or frames of reference that comprehend, in lesser and greater degrees, the good life as a whole. Thus, politics is not a separate sphere of activity within the good life, rather it is a particular manner of reflecting upon and enacting the good life and this is so of moral, religious and poetic experience. Each frame of reference understands the good life variously as a political, a moral, a religious and a poetic whole. Proposing to explore Oakeshott's characterisation of the good life through his writings on reli-

[2] See R.L. Nettleship, *Philosophical Remains*, 2nd edition (ed. A.C. Bradley) (London, Macmillan, 1901), pp. 33-8. I found a copy of Nettleship's *Philosophical Remains* in Oakeshott's personal library when visiting the cottage at Acton in 1994.

gious and poetic experience challenges the (at least implicit) view amongst many commentators on his work that his writings on moral association and politics provide the most adequate available terms in which to understand his characterisation of conduct.

Arguing that Oakeshott's writings on moral association and political activity are more significant than those on religious and poetic experience, simply on the grounds that he wrote a greater volume on morality and politics, offers no reflection of the weight that he attributed to each of these frames of reference. The weight of significance rather than the volume of writing refers to what he actually understood by each frame of reference and its relation to the others. Each frame of reference provides a more or less comprehensive view of the good life so that the more comprehensive frames include (that is, they comprehend) the less comprehensive. And on Oakeshott's view, the character of politics constitutes a less comprehensive view of the good life than the terms of moral association, and the terms of moral association constitute a less comprehensive view of good life than religious or poetic experience.

So the following exercise sets out to interpret Oakeshott's work by placing the common understanding of it as primarily concerned with the appropriate terms of moral association and political activity in a more comprehensive religious and poetic context. This does not entail rejecting current understandings of Oakeshott's writings on moral association and politics, but rather it seeks to place these endeavours in a more comprehensive context. I am not arguing that Oakeshott's political and moral philosophy is of no significance in understanding his characterisation of the good life but that his idea of the good life has a more complete religious and poetic significance. A second response to objections that Oakeshott wrote relatively little on religious and poetic experience observes that he actually wrote more on these subjects than is often recognised. The extent of his writings on religious and

poetic experience will become apparent when they are considered in detail in the body of this work.

2. The Argument

The following study is divided into four chapters. They consider, in turn, Oakeshott's characterisations of the first principles of experience, or metaphysics; religious experience; moral association; and poetic experience. Beginning with a consideration of Oakeshott's metaphysics provides a context in which to understand his characterisation of specific types or orders of experience. Oakeshott argued that truth and reality, at least in their most comprehensive and complete forms, are distinct from truth and reality as they are presupposed in orders of what he called abstract experience. The type of experience that arises in living one's life, which Oakeshott specified as the world conceived *sub specie voluntatis* – the world conceived under the species of will – is one such order of abstract experience (2.1). The presuppositions that underlie the world conceived *sub specie voluntatis* imply the character of truth and reality is change and that identity is constituted in terms of separateness from other identities (2.2). The understandings in terms of which we conduct ourselves is the stuff of the world conceived *sub specie voluntatis*. Among the postulates Oakeshott identified as underlying conduct are the substantive and formal aspects of an action. These postulates provide a basis for exploring his account of the character of two modern responses to the human predicament (2.3).

The consideration of Oakeshott's accounts of religious experience, moral association and poetic experience provide frames of reference that correspond respectively to the second, first and third categories of moral consideration identified by Lewis. Oakeshott's characterisation of religious experience conveys his most comprehensive account of the terms in which moderns have valued the self – religious experience

refers to nothing less than the salvation or damnation of a self. Oakeshott understood modern responses to the human predicament in terms of two moral characters – the individual and the anti-individual (3.1). He also identified two possible conceptions of salvation available to a self: the condition of being saved either within the present or in a future condition (3.2). Each of these conceptions of salvation reflects a distinct idea of the self that Oakeshott elucidated in terms of postulates that the individual and the anti-individual make about the character of a moral self (3.3). Oakeshott's account of the postulates underlying the ideas of self held by the individual and the anti-individual suggest that the individual understands salvation in terms of a present condition and the anti-individual understands salvation in terms of a future condition (3.4).

Oakeshott's characterisation of moral association presents moral relations between individuals as appropriately understood in terms of their authority, rather than their desirability. The propriety of understanding moral association in terms of its authority is reflected in considering the appropriate principle in terms of which the modern state is constituted. Confusing the authority of the terms of moral association with their desirability indicates a morality approving of the anti-individual (4.1). Understanding moral association as constituted primarily in terms of authority does not exclude consideration of these conditions in terms of their desirability, an activity Oakeshott defined as politics. Attending to considerations of the authoritative conditions of moral association in terms of their desirability bears out the vital, that is present, character of these conditions (4.2). Oakeshott identified the complex character of modern politics in terms of two political styles; the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism. A politics of faith unqualified by a politics of scepticism is liable to reduce the terms in which a state is constituted to their desirability. The self-defeat inherent in an unqualified politics of faith reveals

in its most graphic form the unsustainability of moral association understood in terms of desirability (4.3).

Finally, what might be phrased a purpose that is general to life can be discerned in one of the aspects in which Oakeshott cast his account(s) of poetic experience. Before exploring Oakeshott's characterisation of a purpose that is general to life, however, a number of not necessarily consistent views of poetic experience need to be distinguished in his writings. In one mood Oakeshott identified poetic experience with religious experience in understanding both to arise in a self that understands moral achievement in terms of the integrity of the sensibility or motive in which it acts, rather than the gaining of external goals (5.1). In another mood Oakeshott's writings trace the development of a philosophical argument for the autonomy of poetic images from other orders of experience, particularly the order of experience in terms of which we conduct ourselves (5.2). A third understanding of poetic experience can also be detected in Oakeshott's writings. Poetic experience is understood as arising in the reflection upon the self-understandings that a society has of itself. These reflections refer to a predicament that may be recognised as general to life. While the substance of particular poetic reflections invariably occurs within the contingencies of a local situation, in being recognised as referring to a predicament that is general to life they intimate a purpose that is general to life (5.3).

I am not claiming that Oakeshott's responses to the three categories of moral consideration identified by Lewis equate in any significant way with what Lewis may have thought adequate. Lewis's categories are deployed as structural props rather than substantive measures of satisfactoriness. And it should be recognised at the outset that there is a fundamental difference in the writings of the two thinkers. Lewis was engaged in apologetics – he was concerned to justify a particular position and set of responses to the human predicament over others. Oakeshott was engaged in understanding what

responses have been made without justifying this or that particular body of beliefs. However, in exploring Oakeshott's account of the appropriate terms in which selves and associations between selves are constituted as well as the sense in which it makes to refer to a purpose that is general to life, his writings contribute to a tradition of thought in which Lewis can be located; the tradition that Oakeshott called the morality of the individual.

Chapter 2

The Absolute, Life and Conduct

In an unpublished typescript dated 1925 Oakeshott declared the importance of setting in order the first principles of experience before proceeding to treat of the character of this or that particular experience or type of experience: 'the most important problems of political philosophy are solved or mis-solved while the mind is still occupied with metaphysics before it ever reaches politics properly so called'.[1] This statement is consistent with the attention he gave to metaphysics early in his publishing career. The only book-length treatise that he ever published is a consideration of the character of experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification, what he called philosophical experience.[2] While *Experience and Its Modes* constitutes Oakeshott's most comprehensive statement of the first principles of experience, he returned to con-

[1] M. Oakeshott, *A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to a Study of Political Philosophy*, (Unpublished, 1925), p. 3.

[2] M. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985) p. 2.

sider and restate his thoughts on this subject many times throughout his career. Evidence of his on-going effort to clarify and specify the first principles of experience can be found in 'The Conception of a Philosophical Jurisprudence', 'The Concept of a Philosophy of Politics', 'Political Philosophy', *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* and 'On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct'.[3]

A thorough consideration of Oakeshott's characterisation of the first principles of experience would require a study devoted solely to this subject. It would need to canvass his account of the characteristics of philosophical, historical, scientific, practical and poetic experience and the relation of each of these types of experience to the others. It would also need to take account of the vigorous debate among commentators on Oakeshott's work concerning the character of the relations between each of these orders of experience and particularly the relation and status of philosophical experience to other abstract modes of experience, as well as the consistency with which he held these views throughout his long publishing career.[4] Not least of the issues that have provoked debate among commentators is his view of the relations of theoretical reflection upon the character of conduct to conduct, his contribution to the so-called theory-praxis debate.[5]

---

[3] 'The Concept of a Philosophical; Jurisprudence', *Politca*, 3 (1938), pp. 203–22 and 345–60; 'The Concept of a Political Philosophy' and 'Political Philosophy'. in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (ed. T. Fuller) (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993) pp. 119–37 and 138–55; *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, (London, Bowes and Bowes, 1959), pp. 63; 'On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct' in *On Human Conduct*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 1– 107.

[4] For instance, T. Modood, 'Oakeshott's Conception of Philosophy', *History of Political Thought*, 1 (1980), pp. 315–22 and D. Boucher, 'Overlap and Autonomy: The Different Worlds of Collingwood and Oakeshott', *Storia*, 4 (1989).

[5] For instance, D. Hall and T. Modood, 'Oakeshott and the Impossibility of a Philosophical Politics', *Political Studies*, 30 (1982), pp. 157–76 and

The above issues must be of concern to any scholar of Oakeshott's thought. However as I have said, to enter into a full consideration of them would require a complete study in itself. This said, however, an account of some of the elements of Oakeshott's account of metaphysics is not entirely out of place here. At the very least an account of what Oakeshott understood as constituting the defining criterion of experience will set a context for considering his account of the type of experience that arises from, and is constituted by, the understandings in terms of which we conduct our lives. Accordingly, the following chapter begins with an account of Oakeshott's characterisation of truth and reality in their most comprehensive terms and as distinguished from truth and reality as manifest in other orders of experience. Following the parlance of the British Idealists, whose approach to thinking and style of exposition held heavy sway over the pre-World War Two Oakeshott, the first section of the chapter considers the distinction between concrete and abstract experience. It is important to grasp precisely what Oakeshott meant by describing experience in terms of absolute and abstract formations particularly as a preliminary to considering his characterisation of religious experience with its connotations of eternity and infinity and their relation to the temporal and finite. The second section considers Oakeshott's account of the specific order of experience that arises when the world is conceived as a species of will. Both the first and second sections of the chapter refer heavily to *Experience and Its Modes*. I hold, without explicitly making the case here, that Oakeshott adhered consistently to his account of the first principles of experience enunciated in *Experience and Its Modes* throughout

---

J. Liddington, 'Hall and Modood on Oakeshott', *Political Studies*, 30 (1982), pp. 177–83.