International Journal of Philosophy and Theology
June 2019, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 21-35
ISSN: 2333-5750 (Print), 2333-5769 (Online)
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Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/ijpt.v7n1a4
URL: https://doi.org/10.15640/ijpt.v7n1a4

Oakeshott and Rorty on the Nature of Philosophy

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Abstract

Oakeshott was one of the philosophers Rorty acknowledged in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in his effort to rethink the nature of philosophy, following his rejection of traditional epistemology and its associated concept of philosophy as the ground of all disciplines. Given Rorty's explicit acknowledgement of Oakeshott in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oakeshott's view has often been compared with Rorty's view. Indeed many commentators wonder whether there is any difference between Oakeshott's view in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* and Rorty's anti-foundationalist understanding of philosophy. Yet while the affinity between Oakshott's view and Rorty's view is undeniable, Oakeshott's view is arguably not collapsible into Rorty's, so that to read Oakeshott's view with Rorty's lens will be a fundamental mistake as there is a significant difference between the two positions. While Oakeshott is undoubtedly equivocal in *The Voice of Poetry,* it remains to be seen whether Oakeshott will settle for the view that makes philosophy no more than one of the disciplines. Our contention is that if the ambiguities that bedevil Oakeshott's account of Philosophy in the *Voice of Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind* are read against the backdrop of his philosophy of experience, it immediately precludes any reductionist account of the nature of philosophy. Nonetheless the affinity between Rorty and Oakeshott is significant and perhaps, properly understood, it sheds light on the nature of Oakeshott's philosophical project and thus offers a key for interpreting the ambiguity of *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* as well as reconciling it with his position in *Experience and Its Modes.*

Keywords: Oakeshott, Rorty, Philosophy, Foundationalism, Positivism, Historicism

1. Preamble

Oakeshott is one of the philosophers Rorty acknowledged in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in his effort to rethink the nature of philosophy, following his rejection of traditional epistemology and its associated concept of philosophy as the ground of all disciplines. More than Twenty years before the appearance of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Oakeshott had introduced the category of conversation in conceptualizing the nature of philosophy, treating it as one of the many voices in the conversation of mankind.[2] In adopting Oakeshott's category in making his case for a new concept of philosophy Rorty, like Oakeshott, accentuates the claim of the voice of poetry, without affirming the special privilege of philosophy as moderator of other voices.[3]

Given Rorty's explicit acknowledgement of Oakeshott in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oakeshott's view has often been compared with Rorty's view.[4] Indeed many commentators wonder whether there is any difference between Oakeshott's view in *Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* and Rorty's anti-foundationalist understanding of philosophy.

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[2] Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" in his *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1962), pp.197-264. The following abbreviations are employed in this work: EM=Experience and its Modes, AR=*Appearance and Reality* and PMN=*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

[3] See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), pp. 373-394

[4] Ibid., p. 389

If Oakeshott's views are compared to Rorty, this is not surprising at all; for the similarity between their views cannot escape us. This is especially so, if we take into account Oakeshott's later view of philosophy and the ambiguity that bedevils it in respect of the status of philosophy and the new privilege of poetry.

Yet while the affinity between Oakshott's view and Rorty's view is undeniable, it is important to stress that Oakeshott's view is not collapsible into Rorty's, so that to read Oakeshott's view with Rorty's lens will be a fundamental mistake as there is a significant difference between the two positions. While Oakeshott is undoubtedly equivocal in *The Voice of Poetry*, it remains to be seen whether Oakeshott will settle for the view that makes philosophy no more than one of the disciplines. This should be evident from Oakeshott's philosophical aim in *Experience and Its Modes* to overcome what he calls the despotism of historicism, scientism and pragmatism.[5] Viewing Oakeshott's concept of philosophy in this manner allows us to see how it harmonizes with the rest of his philosophy but especially his philosophy of experience as articulated in *Experience and Its Modes*.

Our contention is that if the ambiguities that bedevil Oakeshott's account of Philosophy in the *Voice of Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind* is read against the backdrop of his philosophy of experience, it immediately precludes any reductionist account of the nature of philosophy. Nonetheless the affinity between Rorty and Oakeshott is significant and perhaps, properly understood, it sheds light on the nature of Oakeshott's philosophical project and thus offers a key for interpreting the ambiguity of *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* as well as reconciling it with his position in *Experience and Its Modes*.

For sake of convenient exposition we develop our argument in terms of the following procedure. First we begin with a general account of Oakeshott's concept of philosophy and second by considering Rorty's anti-foundationalist account of philosophy and comparing Rorty's with Oakeshott, we examine how Oakeshott's philosophy of experience provides a key for interpreting the ambiguities that bedevil his views on the nature of philosophy in the *Voice of Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind*. The final step of our reflection considers the significance of the divergence between Oakeshott and Rorty for the situation of the Contemporary discourse on the nature of philosophy. Let us begin then by considering Oakeshott's concept of philosophy.

2. Oakeshott's Concept of Philosophy and the Question of its Background

To understand Oakeshott's concept of philosophy we must place his endeavor in the context of the realism-idealism debate on the nature of knowledge and reality at the turn of the century; his contribution must been seen particularly in respect of the task of dealing with the legacies of various versions of idealism canvassed by Hegel and Bradley. Oakeshott wrote at a time when idealism was in decline; in an environment unabashedly anti-metaphysical and anti-essentialist, thanks to the ascendancy of positivism. The emergence of positivism threatened the autonomy of philosophy and precipitated a crisis of identity for philosophy, as the scientific method was promoted as the ideal method of inquiry in virtually all fields of study, thus blurring the line between philosophy, science and the social sciences.[6]

While Oakeshott's project in *Experience and its Modes* is to defend the autonomy of philosophy in the face of the onslaught of positivism, Oakeshott is not oblivious of the weaknesses of idealism, especially as exemplified by the aftermath of the Hegelian synthesis, so that in drawing from the resources of idealism such as to meet the challenge of positivism, Oakeshott's intent is not so much to issue "an apology for idealism as a restatement of its first principles". (EM, Introduction). In other words, Oakeshott's stance towards the legacies of idealism is critical rather than dogmatic.

But, as we shall, see Oakeshott's concept of philosophy and the over-sight function he attributes to philosophy in relation to other disciplines are a function of the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions he inherited from his idealist predecessors. Indeed, as Oakeshott says in *Experience and its Modes* in recognition of his debts to his idealist predecessors and the task of appropriation of their legacies in dealing with the crisis of philosophy, "What I have to offer…is a view of which derives all that is valuable in its from its affinity to what has been known by the somewhat ambiguous name idealism, and that the works from which I am conscious of having learnt most are Hegel's Phanomenologie des Geistes and Bradley's Appearance and Reality."[7]

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[5] See Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 86-280
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

At the heart of the assumptions Oakeshott derived from his idealist predecessors is a philosophy of experience according to which experience is a concrete whole in which object and subject are present but not divided. In appropriating this philosophy of experience in EM, Oakeshott acknowledges the equivocal status of the concept of experience. But he is also clear about his intention to avoid the problematic expressions of the concept, chief among which is the dualistic expression which pitches the object of experience against the subject of experience.[8] Not surprisingly therefore, Oakeshott begins his account by criticizing these problematic expressions of the concept with the negative exercise then leading to statement of his positive view of experience to the effect that, "experience is a concrete whole; a whole, which, analysis divides into experiencing and what is experienced."(EM, 8)

Without doubt we are confronted here with the classical metaphysical issue of one and many, universal and particular; of course, with the *proviso* that particular cannot account for itself nor be accounted for by another particular; particular must be accounted for by universal; and if accounted for by universal, it is accounted for by universal that is itself not a particular in any sense.[9] Oakeshott is certainly right in telling us that he derived his view of experience as a concrete whole from Hegel and Bradley, so that in applying the doctrine to the modern problem of object-subject relation he is truly following in the footsteps of Hegel and Bradley.[10]

Indeed the doctrine, which has come to be known as the doctrine of concrete universal, is invoked by Bradley and, generally by British idealists, in addressing vagaries of metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and socio-political issues in their various contexts.[11] Indeed the doctrine of concrete universal is a fundamental presupposition of Bradley's philosophy. In fact, some commentators suggest that Oakeshott is influenced more by Bradley's skeptical version of the doctrine than Hegel's speculative version. The close affinity between Bradey and Oakeshott is evident the moment we scrutinize the content and the architectonic of Oakeshott's *Experience and its Modes* in comparison with Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. Arguably the two key categories, namely, "Experience" and Mode" in terms of which Oakeshott establishes the metaphysical basis of his project in *Experience and Its Modes,* clearly reflect the influence of Bradley.

In not speaking of the Absolute directly, Oakeshott appears to abandon the association Bradley establishes between the Absolute and Experience by characterizing the absolute as all-inclusive reality and all-inclusive experience. Nonetheless what Oakeshott does, in fact, is to transpose the concept of the Absolute into the concept of experience whole and entire, while simultaneously burdening the concept of experience with the same metaphysical responsibility of grounding the phenomena, a function which classical philosophical tradition ascribes to the Absolute.[12] Indeed with the transposition of the concept of the Absolute into the concept of experience, Oakeshott can then speak of *Experience and its Modes*, where Bradley speaks of the Absolute and its appearances. True, Oakeshott does not divide *Experience and Its Modes* into two divisions as Bradley does with *Appearance and Reality*. But it is arguable that the logic of exposition that drives the entire architectonic of *Experience and Its Modes* naturally divides Oakeshott's subject matter into two parts, if we consider that his major task in the section 11, titled "Experience and Its Modes" is to work out the logic of experience in terms of which he will later address specifically the issue of the relationship that subsists between the various modes of experience, which he designates as abstract worlds.

Indeed with the first principle for conducting the exercise secured in terms of the articulation of the doctrine of concrete universal he inherited from his idealist predecessors, what Oakeshott then does in the remaining chapters, that is, from Sections 111 to section V, is to deploy this philosophy of experience in scrutinizing the worlds of Historical Experience, Scientific Experience and Practical Experience, while he submits them as abstract worlds of experience rather than concrete worlds of experience.[13] Indeed, this is analogous to what Bradley does in *Appearance and Reality*, for as we have seen, once Bradley has laid down the definition of the Absolute as subsistent individuality, what he then does is to deploy the doctrine of concrete universal to interrogate the being of what he designates as appearance and define them as such, on account of the self-contradiction that infects their being.[14]

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[8] See EM, 9
[9] Damian Ilodigwe, *Bradley and the Problematic Status of Metaphysics* (Newscastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), pp. 58-68
[10] See EM, 6-7
[11] See Paul Franco, *Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 39-45
[12] See Damian Ilodigwe, *Bradley and the Problematic Status of Metaphysics*, pp. 20-30
[13] Cf. Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 13-50
[14] See AR, 403-404

Beyond the similarity between the architectonic of *Appearance and Reality* and *Experience and Its Modes*, one further point we should remark about Bradley's influence on Oakeshott is that despite Oakeshott's transposition of the concept of the Absolute into the concept of experience, the Absolute does not necessarily disappear from Oakeshott's scheme but rather, it becomes etiolated. This is suggested by the fact that Oakeshott equates reality and experience, maintaining, as it were, that we cannot conceivably divorce experience from reality, without involving ourselves in contradiction.[15] Similarly Oakeshott maintains that reality or experience is a world of ideas, meaning that reality cannot be divorced from judgment or from consciousness, as every experience presupposes recognition.[16]

Oakeshott's thesis that reality is experience and experience is consciousness relates with the larger thesis that experience is a concrete whole. Both theses further specify the sort of concrete whole experience is and together with the larger thesis that experience is a concrete whole they enable Oakeshott to do three things. First, they enable him to dispose of Cartesian dualism, since, on his view, it emerges that object and subject are not dualistic opposites but abstract aspects of the same concrete whole, so that the unity of experience cannot be accounted for either in terms of object nor in terms of subject.[17] Second, they enable him to dispose of the view that there could be a level of reality outside of experience, since on his account experience is co-extensive with judgment or consciousness.[18] Third, they enable him also to dispose of the view that there is a level of experience beyond experience.[19] While Oakeshott is one with Bradley in rejecting Cartesian dualism, he is at odds with Bradley in denying there is a non-relational or supra-relational experience.[20]

This means in turn that while he sympathizes with Bradley's skeptical version of idealism to the extent that human knowledge is conditional, he does so for a different reason – that is, not on the premise that reality is supra-relational but rather simply on account of the inadequacy of our ideas, that is, the fact that ideas fail to satisfy the principle of coherence at work in their being by virtue of which they long to qualify reality unconditionally but are unable to do so because of their inherently abstract nature.[21] If ideas fail to quality reality absolutely it is not because reality is outside of our experience or beyond our experience but simply because ideas are epistemologically inadequate.

What emerges from our account so far is that the philosophy of experience that Oakeshott claims to derive from Hegel and Bradley enables him to address a key metaphysical and epistemological issue concerning the nature of experience in the first chapter of *Experience and Its Modes*. But, I think, this is not the only concern at work in that chapter, for Oakeshott is also keen to address the issue of the relationship between philosophy and the modes of experience and his philosophy of experience in no less pivotal in legislating his concept of philosophy.

3. Oakeshott's Concept of Philosophy and the Question of its Credentials

Indeed it is arguable that Oakeshott's account of experience in the early part of EM serves to set to set up his definition of the concept of philosophy and clarify its relation to other disciplines. The link between his philosophy of experience and his concept of philosophy is clear from what Oakeshott tells us in EM,

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[15] As Oakeshott says in EM 54, "the view which takes reality to be separate from experience, and the conception of reality as that which is independent of experience, involve us in a fictitious difficulties and distressing contradictions. It is indeed nonsensical to speak of reality as if it belonged to a separate world of its own. Either it is a character of this world of experience or it must confess itself a non-entity. It is not a unique substance but a predicative conception appropriate only in a world of experience. And the thinker who demands a reality beyond experience is certain of disappointment."

[16] EM 59

[17] As Oakeshott says in EM 59, "Subject and object are not independent elements or portions of experience; they are aspect of experience which, when separated from one another degenerate into abstractions. Every experience does merely involve holding together of a subject and an object, but is the unity of these, a unity which may be analyzed into these two sides but which can never be reduced to a mere relation between them. There is then no object apart from the subject; no subject independent of an object, for again, an object is not something independent of experience but merely what I am obliged to think and for that reason it is real…"

[18] EM 54

[19] EM 22-27

[20] EM 22-27, See F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), 178.

[21] EM 58-61

Experience I have suggested is always thought. And further in experience there is always the pursuit of a fully coherent world of ideas; and there is no point in the process short of absolute coherence at which an arrest can be justified. Experience, however, frequently suffers modification or abstraction. The process submits to arrest and wherever this happens the full obligation of the character of experience have been evaded. Nevertheless it is important to understand that there is in the end only one experience. In experience there are no doubt different levels of achievement, different degrees of satisfaction, but there are never a different criterion admitted. (EM 81-82)

It is instructive Oakeshott admits there are different levels of achievement and satisfaction in experience and the desire to be the whole the criterion all the time; for, in the end, he wants to say that only philosophy is true to this criterion of coherence. In other words, philosophy is defined by the fact that it is true to the telos of experience to be expressed in its totality without any form of arrest. Indeed as Oakeshott says explicitly in underscoring the hallmark of philosophy,

Now wherever in experience the concrete purpose is pursued without hindrance or distraction, I shall call it philosophical experience. And in doing so I shall not, I think be attaching to the word philosophy any new connotation. Philosophy, for me and for others, 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 consequently whenever experience remains true to its concrete purpose and refuses to be divided, to suffer modification or abstraction, philosophy occurs. Philosophy then is not a particular kind of expression and certainly it has no peculiar and exclusive source of knowledge. It is merely experience become critical of itself, experience sought and followed entirely for its own sake." (EM, 81-82)

From what Oakeshott says in the above passage, it is easy to see that the same logic of experience that generates Oakeshott's concept of philosophy as experience without arrests also allows for philosophy to be differentiated from other disciplines (science and social sciences) to the effect that, unlike philosophy, these disciplines are not without presupposition but, on the contrary, they are experience involve arrests. To this extent it would be a mistake to confuse one with the other as they all belong to different spheres.[22]

More important it will be a grave mistake not to respect the boundary between philosophy and other disciplines; for, in truth, given that philosophy is experience without arrest, philosophy belongs to a class of its own and therefore cannot be conflated with any form of non-philosophical experience without undermining the identity of philosophy.[23]

Obviously the move here is analogous to the one Oakeshott established in respect of concrete whole of experience and its various arrests which he designated as modes. The modes are distinguished from the concrete whole of experience by the very fact of their abstract nature, that is, the fact that they are unable to unconditionally realize the criterion of coherence at work in experience. In the same manner, other disciplines are distinguished from philosophy by the very fact that they are unable to be true to the criterion of coherence. To this extent, non-philosophical experience by its very nature is abstract experience whereas philosophy is concrete experience. Oakeshott makes this point clear when he says in *Experience and Its Modes*,

But, as we have observed the full obligations of the character of experience are frequently evaded, experience suffers modifications an end is sought in direction different from that in which the end lies. And from the standpoint of philosophy, from the standpoint of experience itself and for its own sake, this is of course deplorable. Nevertheless it is difficult to see how it can be avoided; and it does not belong to the view I am presenting to show that it can or that it ought to be avoided. The concrete whole of experience is not a totality into which, historically every mode of experience is caught up. It is the logical ground of every mode of experience, the totality of which each mode is a modification. The supersession of the abstract by what is concrete does not take place in the world of merely present fact; and cannot take place in any future world of present fact, but only in the world of logical fact. (EM, 82)

Oakeshott is even clearer about the identity of philosophy and its differentiation from other disciplines in the following passage.

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[22] Cf. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 13-35

[23] Cf. EM Introduction

A mode of experience, a world of ideas seen to be abstract can, indeed no longer satisfy the bare ambition of experience itself, but we are not thereby forever debarred from re-entering it. Philosophy, experience for its own sake, is a mood, and one which, if we are to live this incurably abstract life of ours must frequently be put off. But wherever experience is persisted in for its own sake, we must avoid or overcome all abstractions. To avoid them is a counsel of perfection; and like all such, impossible to follow. And in order to overcome them, we require not merely a general criterion (like that of the principle of coherence) but a detailed criterion for determining what, in experience is abstract; and we require the detailed and conscientious application of this criterion to the actual world of experience (EM, 83)

From our account of Oakeshott's definition of philosophy as experience, without arrest in contradistinction from other disciplines (modes of experience) which are abstract experience, it is evident that Oakeshott is able to recuperate the autonomy of philosophy.[24] Indeed this is the point of Oakeshott's clarification of the identity of philosophy as it is aimed at saving philosophy from what he calls the despotism of positivism, historicism and pragmatism.[25]

Yet aside from securing the autonomy of philosophy and saving it from interference from other disciplines the definition also empowers philosophy to assume certain oversight functions in moderating other spheres of experience. The point here is that given that philosophy is self-critical, philosophy is also self-grounding to some extent. In the same vein, by virtue of philosophy's fidelity to the criterion of coherence at work in other modes of experience, philosophy also secures a *locus standi*, as it were, to moderate other disciplines.

In other words, given that it is true to the criterion of coherence at work in experience philosophy can serve as standard in adjudicating the effort of other modes of experience in respect of their relative success or failure in being true to the same logic of experience at work in its being (philosophy) and their being (other modes) Thus in relation to itself philosophy has the duty to remain self-critical by ensuring it does not lapse into the sort of abstraction that is the stock in trade of other modes of experience. And in relation to other modes of experience philosophy also serves the critical function of criticizing their assumptions so as to ensure they do not overstep their boundaries. It carries out this function both in respect of the relation of one mode to another mode and in respect of the relation between the mode(s) and concrete experience as a whole. As Oakeshott says explicitly in EM 4,

Philosophy when it is taken to be experience without reservation or arrest cannot disdain its responsibility of accounting for the arrests which occur in experience, or at least the responsibility of determining their character. Indeed, this might be considered the main business of a philosophy conceived in this way. For ordinarily our experience is not clear and unclouded by abstract categories and postulates, but confused and distracted by a thousand extraneous purposes. And unless we are exceptionally fortunate, a clear and unclouded experience is to be realized only by a process of criticism and rejection. In philosophy, then, it is not less necessary to be unwearied in rejection than in invention, and it is certainly more difficult. But, further, in philosophy, nothing may be merely rejected. A form of experience is fallacious and to be rejected in so far as it fails to provide what is satisfactory in experience. But its refutation is not to be accomplished merely by ignoring or dismissing it. To refute is to exhibit the principle of the fallacy or error in virtue of which a form of experience falls short of complete coherence; it is to discover both the half truth in the error and the error in the half truth.

3. 1. The Autonomy of Philosophy and the Question of its Over-Sight Function

From this standpoint philosophy emerges fundamentally as a discipline devoted to the exposure of and rejection of abstractions. Indeed it is in this capacity that philosophy obviates the despotism of one mode of experience against another mode of experience and thus maintains peace among the various modes. Thus philosophy as absolute experience helps to maintain some balance within the system of experience, that is, within the concrete whole of experience and all its component elements.[26]

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[24] Cf. Neal Wood, "A Guide to the Classics: The Skepticism of Professor Oakeshott" in *Journal of Politics*, Volume 21, No 24 (November 1959), pp. 647-662

[25] Cf. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 1-5

[26] Much attention has focused on the question of the nature of international relations in recent decades especially with the collapse of the Berlin wall. The end of the cold war has witnessed various attempts to rethink international relations within the framework of a multi-polar world as against the uni-polar or di-polar model that dominated the period of the cold world. At the heart of the effort to rethink the nature of international relations in terms of the multi-polar ideal is the need to maintain a certain

As I see it this understanding of the authority and role of philosophy is a key factor in the way the whole of *Experience and Its Modes* is structured and developed. Indeed Oakeshott does not hide the fact that philosophy is the main focus of *Experience and Its Modes*. Yet it will be a mistake to think that Oakeshott was also not interested in the other modes.[27] Nonetheless the overall point is that if Oakeshott is interested in other modes, his interest in saving philosophy from the despotism of science, history and practice drives his interest in other modes.

Oakeshott's procedure in making philosophy his main focus is understandable if the threat that confronted philosophy at the time he wrote – and perhaps even in our time– came from science, history and pragmatism. By defining the nature of philosophy and clarifying its identity in respect to its relation to other modes of experience, Oakeshott is rightly convinced that the reduction of philosophy to history, science and practice could be checked.[28]

To be sure as Oakeshott himself says, each of the modes is autonomous in its own right and so long as each operates within its own confines its claim remains valid within its domain of discourse.[29] The point is that one cannot hope to use the method and criterion internal to one mode to judge another mode without committing a fundamental category mistake–what Oakeshott calls *ignoratio elenchi*.[30] Indeed this is the core issue raised by scientism, historicism and pragmatism and Oakeshott's intent in *Experience and its Modes* is to address this issue by clarifying the nature of philosophy based on his philosophy of experience.[31]

In view of this consideration we can understand why upon securing the re-conceptualization of the concept of philosophy on the basis of the philosophy of experience he inherited from his idealist predecessors in the first chapter of EM, Oakeshott will proceed in the succeeding chapters to respectively interrogate the being of historical experience, scientific experience and practical experience. Moreover we can understand that while he highlights the positive claims of each of these modes, Oakeshott will also conclude that none satisfies absolutely the criterion of coherence, so that they each represent an abstract world of experience and not a concrete world of experience.[32]

Yet we must see that Oakeshott's ultimate interest in discussing each of the modes of experience is to reaffirm the authority of philosophy and the oversight function it enjoys in moderating other modes on account of its concrete nature. Perhaps the fact that philosophy is the focus of Oakeshott in *Experience and Its Modes* allows us to understand why the work begins with a discussion of the topic of philosophy and concludes by returning to the topic once the claims of historical, scientific and practical experience have been interrogated. Oakeshott's concern to secure the unique identity of philosophy and its oversight function in relation to other modes is clear from the following passage:

I conceive it, then, the main business of philosophy (the main business, that is, of unqualified experience) to determine its own character, and to extend its content by persisting in the concrete purpose implied in its character and by avoiding or overcoming every alluring modification which may offer itself as a distraction. But it is difficult to avoid what is imperfectly recognized and impossible to overcome what is only vaguely conceived. And consequently it must fall within the task of philosophy to consider the character of every world of experience which offers itself, but to consider it solely from the standpoint of its capacity to provide what is satisfactory in experience (EM 83)

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balance of power among the member states of the United Nations such as to preclude conflicts and guarantee peace. Against this backdrop the United Nations plays a crucial role in moderating the various member states in their relationship with another and above all in their relationship with the international community as a whole. It is arguable that Oakeshott's philosophy of modes as articulated in *Experience and Its Modes* can prove a useful resource in this respect. I am not aware of any studies that have explored this idea. It will certainly be a worthwhile project to consider Oakeshott's philosophy of modes in the light of the current situation in International relations.

[27] Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 21-22

[28] As Oakeshott says in clarifying his purpose in *Experience and Its Modes* 4, "what I have undertaken is, first, a study of the relationship which subsists between experience as a whole and for its own sake and the various arrests which experience suffers; and secondly, a study of the relationship of these arrests to one another. It is, as I hope to shown, an investigation of the relation of what is concrete to what is abstract, and of the relation of any one abstract world to any other. Of the first of these topics I will say no more now. It has been frequently considered and fro many different standpoints. The second however has less frequently been discussed; and since it has about it an air of unreality, some apology may be required for considering it."

[29] EM 71

[30] EM 72-76

[31] Cf. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 21-30

[32] EM 76-78

We have maintained all through our account so far that the philosophy of experience Oakeshott derived from his idealist predecessors is pivotal in the formulation and development of the argument of *Experience and Its Modes,* as should be evident from Oakeshott's concept of philosophy and the over-sight function he attributes to philosophy and how both of these considerations constitute the lynch-pin of his defense of the autonomy of philosophy against the despotism of positivism, historicism and pragmatism. We have also maintained that his debt to Bradley in this respect is perhaps even more significant than his debt to Hegel, given that it is apparently through the prism of Bradley that Oakeshott pursued his interpretation and appropriation of Hegelian idealism.[33]

Indeed the significance of Bradley's influence on Oakeshott seems to be borne out in Oakeshott's concept of philosophy and the over-sight function he attributes to it *vis-v-vis* other modes of experience. The relevant consideration here is that, just like Oakeshott, Bradley has a unique conception of philosophy, one that is interestingly predicated on his metaphysics of the Absolute which makes two fundamental claims, namely, that the absolute is all-inclusive reality and that the absolute is all inclusive experience.[34] This double characterization of the Absolute translates into two fundamental theses to the effect that the Absolute is immanent in all its appearances and that the absolute is irreducible to any of its appearances.[35]

The similarity between Oakeshott's account of the relation between *Experience and Its Modes* and Bradley's account of the relation between the Absolute and its appearances cannot escape us. What Bradley says about the Absolute, being the one that obviates the despotism of one appearance against another appearance, while simultaneously ensuring that each appearance obtains the justice due to it, invites comparison with the oversight function that Oakeshott attributes to philosophy in relation to other modes of experience.[36] Similarly what Bradley says about the transcendence of the Absolute, without prejudice to its immanence in its appearances, also invites comparison with Oakeshott's commitment to defending the autonomy of philosophy and obviating its reduction into science, history or practice.[37]

Yet despite Oakeshott's transposition of the concept of the absolute into the concept of experience, the concept of the absolute does not disappear entirely but becomes etiolated. This thesis seems to be borne out in Oakeshott's conception of philosophy, for, it is apparently the absolute character of experience that legislate the absolute character of philosophy, given, as we have seen, that "philosophy is experience without arrest" (EM), according to Oakeshott. Oakeshott may have derived his conception of experience from Hegel and Bradley but the influence of Bradley may have been more significant for Oakeshott as far as the formation and development of the argument of *Experience and Its Mode*s is concerned.[38] This is what I take to be the implication of the similarity between their conception of philosophy and the over-sight function Oakeshott attributes to philosophy.

Of course the essential point here is the correlation established between experience and philosophy, for, in the end, it is the correlation that grounds the unique identity of philosophy and guarantees the oversight function attributed to it *vis-à-vis* other disciplines. Yet we can raise the question as to the nature of this correlation between experience and philosophy, that is, whether it is a one to one correspondence in respect of their identity or whether it is a case of identity in difference, in which case the relation is contingent rather than absolute. Bradley's answer is no. The correlation is not absolute but contingent in the sense that there is an irreducible difference between the structure of experience and the structure of reason in the final analysis such that the determination of reason falls short of the nature of the real. This emphasis marks the skeptical strain in Bradley's idealism.[39]

On my account the skeptical idealism of Bradley continues to assert its influence on Oakeshott in the matter of how the correlation between philosophy and experience is understood as well as the over-sight function of philosophy the correlation legislates.

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[33] Cf. Stuart Isaac, *The Politics and Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, p. 33-39
[34] See Damian Ilodigwe, *Bradley and the Problematic Status of Metaphysics*, 41-46
[35] Ibid.
[36] Cf. EM, pp. 1-8
[37] Ibid
[38] Cf. Stuart Isaac, *The Politics and Philosophy of Oakeshott,* pp. 32-35
[39] See Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*. See also Timothy Fuller, "Editor's Introduction to Michael Oakeshott", *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, xii-viii

For, despite Oakshott's affirmation of Philosophy's authority to mediate other modes of experience, Oakeshott maintains that philosophy cannot and should not dictate to other modes of experience as what obtains and should obtain within this internal constitution.[40] Philosophy may be an umpire but not the sort of umpire that goes dictating to other modes about what to do in respect of their internal affairs.[41]

Thus while philosophy inarguably serves the critical function of checking the excesses of the modes when they venture beyond their limits, that is while philosophy specializes in exposing abstractions – abstract experience (false absolutes) that disguises as concrete experience, Oakeshott remains deeply skeptical about the sovereignty of reason largely on account of the irreducible conditionality of human knowledge.[42] I think this skeptical emphasis in Oakeshott's thought – a feature deriving from his peculiar appropriation of Bradley's version of idealism– has to be taken into account in order to understand the rest of his philosophy.[43]

4. Philosophy and Its Equivocations: Oakeshott and Rorty

Some commentators suggest that Oakeshott's view on philosophy did not remain the same all through his career. Such commentators focus on his *Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* in which Oakeshott returns to the topic of the nature of philosophy. While there are significant continuities between *Voice* and his earlier works, there is nonetheless a subtle shift in Oakeshott's characterization of philosophy, as philosophy is no longer accorded the privileged status it enjoyed in the earlier works. As Voice of poetry opens the privilege status of philosophy as standard for assessing other voices seems to be is up for reconsideration. Thus as Oakeshott says,

There are philosophers who assure us that all human utterance is in one mode. They recognize a certain variety of expression, they are able to distinguish different tones of utterance but they hear only one authentic voice. And there might be something to be said for this view if we were considering some primordial condition of the race when death was close, when leisure was scarce, and when every utterance (even religious rites and magical spells) may be supposed to have a had a practical bearing. But it is long now since mankind has invented for itself other modes of speaking. …In these circumstances the task of discerning a single-ness in the human utterance has become more difficult. Nevertheless the view dies hard that Babel was the occasion of a curse being laid upon mankind from which it is the business of philosophers to deliver us; and a disposition remains to impose a single character upon significant human speech. We are urged for example to regard all utterances as contributions (of different but comparable merit) to an inquiry or a debate among inquirers, about ourselves and the world we inhabit. But the understanding of human activity and intercourse as an inquiry while appearing to accommodate variety of voices, in fact recognizes only one, namely, the voice of argumentative discourse, the voice of "science, and all the others are acknowledged merely in respect of their aptitude to imitate this voice. Yet it may be supposed that the diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse have some meeting place and compose a manifold of a sort. And, as I understand it, the image of this meeting place is not an inquiry or an argument but conversation (Voice of Poetry, 488-489)

4. 1. Question of Identity of Philosophy and the Problem of one and Many

From this passage it evident that Oakeshott is returning here to a problematic he addressed in *Experience and Its Modes*, namely, the question of the status of philosophy relative to other disciplines such as science, history, religion and practice. The one and many issue which occurs in several contexts makes its re-appearance in terms of the relation between philosophy and its others.[44] On the traditional reading philosophy understandably is the one voice into which other voices melt, or, put differently, in terms of which they are mediated. This role of philosophy in Western culture has gone unchallenged until recently.

But from the tone of the opening passage of Oakeshott's work, it appears he is poised to review the matter. The question is: is there one voice in terms of which other voices are mediated? Or do we have a case whereby the many voices do not melt into one voice even though there is a meeting point for the voices?

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[40] Ibid.

[41] The Role of the United Nation in peace-keeping around the world and the balance it helps to maintain in the international community cannot be under-estimated. Perhaps Oakeshott's account of the relationship between Experience and its Modes can help to illumine the relationship between the UN and the various member states that makes it up.

[42] See Noel O'Sullivan, "The Place of Enlightenment in Oakeshott's Conception of Liberal Education" in *Politeja* 3 (17) 2011, pp. 10-12

[43] Cf. Paul Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, pp. 1-12. See also his *Michael Oakeshott, An Introduction*, pp. 27-31

[44] See William Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 15-60.

From the manner Oakeshott concludes his opening statement it is clear that while he wants to maintain a form of unity among the voices he does not want to say that the source of this unity is philosophy. Instead one is at a loss as to whether philosophy is one of these many voices and if not how precisely philosophy relates to the conversation which according to Oakeshott is the meeting of all the voices.[45]

The indication is that there is a subtle shift so far as Oakeshott is not vigorously affirming the privileged position of philosophy relative to the other voices as he does in *Experience and its Modes*. This becomes clear when he introduces his celebrated distinction between inquiry and conversation. The concept of conversation is pivotal in his effort to offer an account of the relationship between the various voices. But the point all the time is that philosophy itself is not identified with the conversation as its essence. On the contrary the genre of philosophy is distinguished from the conversation which serves as a meeting point for the other voices. As he says in respect of the difference between conversation and inquiry,

In conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no truth to be discovered, no proposition to be proved; no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform; to persuade or to refute one another and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing. Of course a conversation may have many passages of argument and a speaker is not forbidden to be demonstrative, but reasoning is neither sovereign nor alone, and the conversation itself does not compose an argument (*Voice of Poetry* 489)

Oakeshott continues with his clarification of the distinction between conversation and inquiry by indicating that there is hierarchy in the ordering of the voices in the conversation, meaning they enjoy the same relevance and status:

Voices which speak in the conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not, an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit; a contest where a winner gets a price, nor is it an activity of exegesis, it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling. Its significance neither lies in winning nor losing, but in wagering. Properly speaking it is impossible in the absence of diversity of voices; in it difference universes of discourses meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to another (Voice of Poetry, 490)

Some take such passages as the above as evidence of radical shift in the role of philosophy *vis-a-vis* other disciplines, arguing that Oakeshott eventually abandoned the mediating role of philosophy so far as the metaphoric of conversation he introduces as the unifying fulcrum is apparently ontologically vacuous. It is ontological neutral so far as the other voices are concerned to the extent that while it facilitates an interaction it lacks any real moderating power, as the notion of hierarchy is ineffectual in this conversation, so that the point is not for one voice to be assimilated into another as each voice is irreducible in its own right. Yet the question is: where is philosophy in all of this? What is its position in this conversation? Is it part of the conversation and if so how does it relate to other voices or is it just one of the voices in which case it is arguable philosophy has relinquished its traditional role of supervising other voices?

4. 2. Rorty's Antifoundationalist Account Of Philosophy And The Equivocal Status Of Oakeshott's Voice Of Poetry In The Conversation Of Mankind

We must begin immediately by admitting there are a lot of ambiguities in the *Voice of Poetry* in respect of the situation of philosophy. These ambiguities make it difficult to determine what Oakeshott's position really is, whether Oakeshott changed his views on the nature of philosophy substantially or whether the change was merely marginal, bordering on a matter of semantics. At face value the understanding of philosophy as a voice in the conversation of mankind seems irreconcilable with the exalted image of philosophy as "experience without arrest"– the logical ground of other modes of experience– and the oversight function philosophy enjoys as moderator in relation to other modes of experience.

No doubt the seeming incommensurability between the views encourages the belief that Oakeshott might have radically altered his view concerning the nature of philosophy and its relation to other disciplines. It is not surprising, therefore, that commentators are divided on how best to read Oakeshott's concept of philosophy.

[45] Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry and the Conversation of Mankind", in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays,* 489

The interpretive confusion is not helped by the fact that the American neo-pragmatist, Richard Rorty adopted and popularized Oakeshott's metaphor of conversation in his celebrated *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* twenty five years after it was first used by Oakeshott.

Like Oakeshott's *Experience and Its Modes*, a central focus of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is the question of the status of philosophy. Beginning with a sustained critique of epistemology as first philosophy, Rorty proposes the abandonment of the traditional view of knowledge as justification and its replacement with the view of knowledge as social practice, so that knowledge is not a matter of epistemic justification of our representation but simply social justification to the extent that what counts as knowledge is the representation with cash value. In other words representations that enables the pragmatic subject to adapt effectively to the exigencies of his environment.[46]

In recommending the dismissal of epistemology in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty believes that the replacement of traditional epistemology with epistemological behaviorism has inevitable consequences for the nature of philosophy. With this development, on Rorty's view, it cannot be business as usual for philosophy anymore in respect to its claim as foundational for other disciplines; for the cessation of the epistemological culture comes with the inauguration of a new philosophical culture. The hallmark of the new philosophical culture is that philosophy gives up the search for objectivity and redefines itself in terms of the quest for solidarity.

All through its history philosophy has been known for its concern for truth and objectivity, with truth understood as an epistemic relation between reality and representation. This is evident from the definition of truth as correspondence and coherence – the two views of truth that have been recurrent in philosophical tradition.[47] However with the emergence of epistemological behaviorism and the new culture of philosophy it inaugurates, Rorty's contention is that philosophy gives up its essentialist ambition and contents itself merely with the quest for truth with small letter rather than truth with capital letter; it no longer aspires to ground other disciplines but rather contents itself with being seen as one out of many disciplines.[48] With philosophy cut to size, philosophy no longer concerns itself with grand narratives but settles rather for mini-narratives.[49] In appropriating Oakeshott's metaphor of conversation, Rorty's intent is to accentuate the new situation of philosophy in which it has been stripped of its exalted traditional image as the ground of all disciplines.[50]

Given Rorty's explicit acknowledgement of Oakeshott in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oakeshott's view has often been compared with Rorty's view. Indeed many commentators wonder whether there is any difference between Oakeshott's view *Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* of philosophy and Rorty's anti-foundationalist understanding of philosophy that evacuates philosophy of its traditional role as foundation of other disciplines. If Oakeshott's views are compared to Rorty, this is not surprising at all; for the similarity between their views cannot escape us. This is especially so, if we take into account Oakeshott's later view of philosophy and the ambiguity that bedevils it in respect of the status of philosophy and the new privilege of poetry.

Indeed like Rorty, Oakeshott appears to accentuate the claim of poetry with relish as he explicitly presents it as one of the modes of experience. Nonetheless, the telling point, as noted, is that, unlike the traditionalist would maintain, Oakeshott does not say that philosophy is the queen of sciences, the measure in terms of which the value of other disciples is determined. On the contrary, Oakeshott maintains what later emerges twenty five years later as Rorty-like position, namely, that philosophy is a voice in the conversation of mankind without affirming explicitly that it has special privileges over other voices.

Surprisingly while Oakeshott is silent about the privilege of philosophy, he explicitly maintains the irreducibility of one voice in the conversation to another.

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[46] See Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 195-203

[47] Cf. Damian Ilodigwe, ""Bradley's Account of Truth: Between Metaphysics and Epistemology" in *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Volume 19, Number 2, 2013, pp. 219-250

[48] See Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minnesota; University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. xii-xxx. See also his "Objectivity or Solidarity" in Richard Rorty, *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* edited by Michael Karausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), Chapter 7

[49] Cf. Francis Lyortard, *Just Gaming,* translated by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 30-31

[50] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 31

Indeed he maintains that the hallmark of a conversation is one in which there is no super voice or moderator or if there is moderator, such moderator is no less a passive umpire who only ensures that no voice usurps the position of another voice. Here, in short, Oakeshott leaves matters rather ambiguous with respect to the status of philosophy.

Nonetheless it is evident that a subtle transformation is taken place or has taken place with respect to his concept of philosophy. More and more the impression is that a weaker concept of philosophy is coming to emergence to succeed or rather to modify the concept of philosophy at issue in Experience and its Modes. As indicated already as a consequence of the transposition of the concept of the Absolute into the concept of experience and the weakening of the erstwhile ontological and epistemic function of the absolute as the source of unity of the entire gamut of appearance already in EM, the position of philosophy is also equivocal even though Oakeshott still maintain it in its privilege of adjudicating other modes of experience.

Clearly he does not yet say in EM that philosophy is one of the modes. Now philosophy is cast in the light of experience without arrest whereas other modes are said to be experience with arrest. We must read between the lines to see what is happening here Oakeshott is alredy moving away from idealism of Hegel and Bradley. But the movement is subtle. By the time the 1959 essay emerges the movement is explicit although because of the ambiguity that persists in the 1959 essay it is hard to say he has broken loose from idealism.

One could be pardoned to say that he is still at pain to restate the argument of idealism in a mode that is acceptable an audience which becomes more and more secular. The view point seems to be supported by the fact that less than 20 years later, his concept of philosophy as understanding appears in magnum opus. Interestingly here as well there is an equivocation between two concepts of understanding, namely conditional understanding, a situation which still allows one to see his commitment to the traditional role of philosophy as arbiter at the same time a certain commitment to a weakening of the this role so far as the impression is that the level of discourse that is relevant is the one that deals with conditional understanding as the level of unconditional understanding now seems utopic.

So it is not the case that he does not recognize this level. But the point is that he is skeptical about its effectiveness in a manner analogous to Kant's attitude to the noumenal. He is not skeptical about its existence. Yet he thinks it is not a domain where pure reason can be applied without some negative repercussions.

In a similar vein Oakeshott does not deny the existence of this realm but in a manner that suggests that the concept of the Absolute and the traditional concept of philosophy that undergird it becomes etiolated, his choice is to concentrate on conditional understanding and with attention focused on conditional understanding the role of philosophy becomes a ceaseless effort to moderate our conditional understanding such that it becomes adequate. In this sense philosophy becomes a heuristic discipline that investigates the foundation of other disciplines.

Yes this retains some function for philosophy. Yet it is already subtly toned down because the implication now is that philosophy is not unconditional but is dependent on the result of other disciplines even if it involves an attempt to moderate other disciplines. But even here the language of moderation has to be cautiously applied. The point in fact is that while philosophy is anchored on the result of other voices, it is doubtful whether it introduces anything significantly different from the internal constitution of other voices.

If this is how we are to understand his claim in respect of the unconditional understanding and conditional understanding and this relation mirrors the role of philosophy there may not be a complete break from the 1959 essay after all for part of the level of ambiguity in the 1959 essay is that while philosophy is not a super voice but one of the voices he is rather silent about the role of philosophy. The 1975 magnum opus helps us to determine the ambiguity so far as while it maintains that philosophy is one of the voices, philosophy plays the important role of grounding others but in the weak sense that it does so heuristically.

Yet while the affinity between Oakshott's view and Rorty's view is undeniable, it is important to stress that Oakeshott's view is not collapsible into Rorty's, so that to read Oakeshott's view with Rorty's lens will be a fundamental mistake as there is a significant difference between the two positions. While Oakeshott is undoubtedly equivocal in *The Voice of Poetry*, it remains to be seen whether Oakeshott will settle for the view that makes philosophy no more than one of the disciplines. To my mind this view represents an extreme position that Oakeshott would wish to avoid as should be evident from his philosophical aim in *Experience and Its Modes* to overcome what he calls the despotism of historicism, scientism and pragmatism.

That Oakeshott is poised to overcome these extreme positions is a service to philosophy, so far as success in this endeavor means preserving the boundary between philosophy and other disciplines. Yet preserving the boundary between philosophy and other disciplines, while maintaining philosophy in its over-sight function of exposing and rejecting abstraction, is not a license for philosophy to dictate to other disciplines in respect of what should obtain in regard to their internal constitution.

I do not think that Oakeshott repented of these ideals that drove him in *Experience and its Modes*, so that if we read his preoccupations in his later thought in the light of these ideals, it surely precludes any reductionist account of the nature of philosophy. Indeed I am convinced that is how we must read Oakeshott's concerns in his later works. True he may have become more and more interested in matters political. Yet, as suggested, in preoccupying himself with matters political, it was always from the standpoint of critical interrogation of the assumptions that belie political theorization, so that the oversight function of philosophy as fundamentally committed to the exposure and rejection of abstractions remain a pivotal hallmark of Oakeshott's project all through his life.[51]

If we take into account this emphasis we must reject any attempt to collapse his view of philosophy into Rorty's view. That said the affinity between Rorty and Oakeshott is significant and properly understood, perhaps it sheds light on the nature of Oakeshott's philosophical project and thus offers a key for interpreting the ambiguity of *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* as well as reconciling it with his position in *Experience and Its Modes*.

5. Question of the Significance of the Divergence Between Oakshott and Rorty on the Nature of Philosophy

The relevant consideration here is the need to grasp the point of Oakeshott Rorty-like hesitation in affirming that there is a super voice in the conversation of mankind. One way to look at this is to see it as an indication of Oakeshott's break with the traditional concept of philosophy as science of wisdom with all its essentialist commitments. He may share this anti-essentialist bias towards traditional philosophy with Rorty, but this is where the affinity ends, for recall that his major motivation in the face of the disrepute into which Idealism has fallen is to restate the principles of idealism such as to revive their appeal to the contemporary audience.

Thus the anti-essentialist moment in Oakeshott's thought is part and parcel of his strategy in rethinking and renewing the claims of idealism. Understood in this sense it is a concession to positivism by toning down the claim of traditional philosophy. Yet the concession does not witness the deconstruction of the traditional image of philosophy as is arguably the case with Rorty's epistemological behaviorism. On the contrary the concession leaves us with a concept of philosophy that occupies a middle position between the postmodern view that Rorty canvasses and its traditional counterpart.

The overall point then is that Oakeshott appears to steer a mid-point between tradition and modernity or post-modernity, if we prefer this. Oakeshott is certainly for the weakening of the position of philosophy but not such as to collapse it into the domain of particularity, for despite his anti-essentialism, he still thinks there is something universal about the vocation of philosophy. Yet the universal vocation is not understood in the traditional sense of its privileged association with the Absolute, since, as we have seen, the concept of the Absolute, on Oakeshott's view, has been transposed into the concept of experience with the resultant loss of its credential as the ground of unity of appearances in any transcendental sense.

Indeed this loss of credential on the part of the absolute as the transcendental ground of the unity of appearances already started in Bradley – and, Oakeshott's inspiration for the transposition of the concept of the absolute into the concept of experience derives from Bradley's initiative, so that Oakeshott's skepticism is but an extension of Bradley's skepticism. Significantly nonetheless despite the moment of skepticism that Bradley introduces into the claim of idealism, Bradley, unlike Oakeshott, explicitly maintains philosophy in its traditional role as the arbiter of other domains of appearances, even though in what obviously is a counter-point to the pan-logistic pretensions of Hegelianism, Bradley says also that philosophy is appearance, albeit a special appearance. Philosophy is special appearance because of its privileged affiliation with the absolute.

Yet given that philosophy is not the absolute qua absolute, philosophical representation is nonetheless fraught with limitation that forbids the absolute identification of concept and reality as Hegelianism does. Indeed, as we have seen, Bradley makes it a point of duty to deny a basic dogma of Hegelianism by maintaining that existence is irreducible to thought in the final analysis while affirming in the same vein the identity between thought and reality.

[51] EM 4

The denial of one to one correspondence is to check the sovereignty of reason which is seemingly proclaimed by Hegelian claim that the real is rational and the rational real. By denying the absolute identity between reality and rationality, Bradley moderates the claim of idealism without necessarily abandoning the intuition concerning the identity between reason and reality. What he denies is that the identity is absolute, so that while he maintains the Absolute is immanent in reason, he also maintains the transcendence of the Absolute.[52]

Thus if philosophy is cut to size, on Bradley's view, it is as a consequence of the thesis that rationality is not sovereign over existence. But notice that while Bradley's skepticism occurs against the backdrop of a positive articulation of the transcendence of the absolute same cannot be said of Oakeshott's skepticism.[53] Indeed that Oakeshott gives up the transcendence of the Absolute explains why his appropriation of Bradley's skeptical version of idealism yields a different result – one that not only witnesses to the disintegration of the Absolute but also to a concentration on the domain of modes and the relation that subsists between them with the task of philosophy, being the minimum one of heuristically grounding the appearances and maintaining peace between them.

Because Bradley maintains a positive concept of the Absolute, Bradley is able to delimit philosophy without stripping it of its privileged status.[54] Similarly, Bradley is also able to maintain that appearances are not mere appearances but appearances of reality. Thus as a consequence of the immanence of the absolute in its appearances, philosophy has access to the internal constitution of appearances and do not relate with them merely extrinsically, albeit there is always limitation.[55]

On the contrary because the concept of the absolute becomes etiolated in Oakeshott, Oakeshott is not able to maintain a similar claim in respect of the function of philosophy. True philosophy retains its over-sight function, yet philosophy's moderation of the modes is limited to their extrinsic constitution because each mode is autonomous and do not relate with another. In other words it only serves to account for the modes heuristically.[56] Thus it emerges that philosophy is grossly limited and cannot be relied upon as far as the internal constitution of the modes are concerned. We are faced with similar limitation in respect of the question of the grounds of the modes, for while Oakeshott does not deny the relevance of the realm of the unconditional, his concern is to focus attention on the realm of the conditional.[57]

In other words, rather than interrogate further the ground of experience beyond the submission that it is the logical ground of the modes, Oakeshott is content to concentrate on the internal situation within each of the modes from the standpoint of how it relates with concrete experience and how peace can be secured as far the relation of one mode to another is concerned.

What emerges from our account so far is that Oakeshott's concept of philosophy is not collapsible into Rotrty's view given there is a significant difference between them without prejudice to their affinity. Similarly although Oakeshott's concept of philosophy is closer to Bradley, the manner of Oakeshott's appropriation of Bradley's skeptical version of idealism underscores Oakeshott's break with the traditional conception of philosophy so far in transposing Bradley's concept of Absolute into the concept of experience, Oakeshott jettisons all commitment to the transcendence of the Absolute so that in its etiolated version, all that Oakeshott can guarantee is a weak concept of philosophy that heuristically grounds the modes without any capacity to adjudicate in respect of matters that pertain to their internal constitution.

In this sense philosophy remains an umpire but an umpire that merely watches without being able to make any intervention in respect of what obtains within the domain of appearances apart from what the modes themselves provide. In my view this weak concept of philosophy might explain the equivocations that bedevil the *Voice of Poetry and the Conversion of Mankind*, the fact that he is hesitant in affirming that there is a super voice in the manner in which the privileged position of philosophy as foundation is maintained in philosophical tradition.

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[52] See AR 398
[53] AR 421
[54] Cf. Damian Ilodigwe, *Bradley and the Problematic Status of Metaphysics, pp. 431*
[55] Ibid
[56] EM 39-45
[57] See Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 20-25

Yet it is arguable that this emphasis is already at work in *Experience and its Modes* so far as while Oakeshott affirms the oversight function of philosophy as moderator he is also keen to stress that philosophy lacks the authority to dictate to each of the modes.[58] This is no doubt an equivocal position to maintain and it is not surprising that the ambiguity comes out explicitly in *The Voice of Poetry*, so that one can argue that there has been no substantial change in Oakeshott;'s concept of philosophy.

6. Summary and Conclusion

What is clear however is that from start to finish the challenge posed by positivism is a recurrent factor in the manner in which Oakeshott both conceived and executed his philosophical project. On the one hand, the challenge of positivism led him to accentuate the autonomy of philosophy and its oversight function, all in attempt to obviate any reductionist understanding of the nature of philosophy.[59] Nonetheless with the autonomy of philosophy secured the influence of positivism asserts itself in a negative respect so far as Oakeshott feels the need to tone down the claim of philosophy by stripping it of its essentialist commitment. Indeed this move, in fact, is a subtle appeasement of positivism, so that in the end Oakeshott steers a middle course between positivism and traditional philosophy. Thus while positivism is rejected, traditional philosophy is rejected as well, so that while one presses forward in search of a lasting panacea, care must be taken not to repeat the mistake of tradition. Similarly care must be taken not jettison what is good in tradition but recuperate and integrate it in a new system. This seems to me to be the double concern that drove Oakeshott.

There is no question that Oakeshott's contemporary relevance turns on his unique reception of positivism, especially his effort to overcome what he calls the despotism of positivism, historicism and pragmatism. We certainly cannot understand his initiative in these respects without reference to the broader philosophy of experience that undergird them – a consideration which we have maintained throughout our exposition essentially defines Oakeshott's idealist inheritance.

In this specific context Oakeshott transposition of the concept of the Absolute into the concept of experience becomes a key moment in the formation and exposition of Oakeshott philosophical project in *Experience and its Modes* and indeed in his later thought as well, if the correlation we established between Oakeshott's later philosophy and his philosophy of experience is effective.

Be that as it may, we must raise the question whether Oakeshott's mitigation of the concept of the Absolute by re-conceptualizing it in terms of experience is resourceful enough to contain the challenge of positivism. The move, as we have seen, is a key moment in Oakeshott's critique of the despotism of historicism, science and pragmatism. Yet if the concept of philosophy that results from the transposition of the concept of the absolute into the concept of experience is weak, it remains to be seen how enduring the victory over positivism and all forms of reductionisms.

Oakeshott's view of philosophy may be different from Rorty's view as we have maintained, yet, in the final analysis, it may be hard to sustain the difference practically if indeed the transcendence of the Absolute is jettisoned. For, in the event of the concept of the absolute becoming etiolated, as is the case with Oakeshott, what we are bound to have, is a deluge of fragmentation of reality into various modes with no means of thinking them together. With this scenario Oakeshott becomes merely a half-way house to the complete secularization of the Absolute by replacing it with surrogate absolutes.

Of course with the abandonment of essentialism, we must search more and more for an immanent framework of mediation. Yet it remains to be seen how this descent into the realm of particularity offers us a lasting panacea. The descent into the realm of mere particularity as a result of the so-called "death" of the absolute and the back and forth movement within the domain of mere appearances in search of lasting panacea to the aporaia of appearance and reality sums up the paradox of modernity. No doubt Oakeshott rejects the postmodern option that jettisons tradition entirely. Yet while Oakeshott's version of idealism offers us a framework for negotiating the paradox, obvious tension persists between the demands of tradition and modernity so far as the question of the ground of experience is recurrent.

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[58] EM 36-7

[59] EM 10