

The Conversational Paradigm of the Human World. Michael Oakeshott^{*}

(Abstract)

After exploring two different meanings of the paradigm of conversation in Oakeshott's philosophy, namely the relation between the modes and experience, and the relation among the various voices, I am discussing the issue of education as an illustration of this paradigm. From a monistic perspective on the idea of the conversation of different ways of representing the world, Oakeshott passes on to a pluralistic and relativistic view, as the voices differ from the modes by giving up their claim of exclusive truthfulness. The ideal of liberal learning models upon the very idea of conversation, and it is an initiation into the art of conversation, by which we learn how to recognize the voices. Teaching is not only about instructing but also about imparting a certain style and a method. By education the pupil is invited to enter a spiritual world and thus he accomplishes self realization by recognizing himself in the mirror of the inherited world of human achievement. The conversation of the human world as a meeting place of the voices actually shows how the practical, the scientific and the artistic modes interact to one another.

Keywords: conversation, mode of experience, voice, education, teacher – pupil, teach, learn, liberal learning, world of human achievement

Introduction

As human beings we are eminently capable of conversation, therefore we are in Oakeshott's view empathic and not dogmatic beings, always interacting with one another, by sharing ideas and enjoying the exchange with childish pleasure, by our characteristic openness towards both giving and taking, meanwhile by our paradoxical mixture of both consequential and inconsequential, by our disciplined mind that is also ready to give up all method, and never make a

reason in itself out of a conclusion to be reached. Among our features as conversational beings there is even more: auto ironically being able to laugh at oneself, but with amused tolerance accepting himself, the conversationalist is skeptical even when it comes to his own opinions, never taking oneself too serious, but always interested in revealing himself, and thus accepting himself without neither alarming nor approving oneself¹. The conversation metaphor, by its multiplicity of meanings, projects itself from the whole of the human world as a magical halo of fascinating incertitude... An-

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¹ Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Conversation in the Education of Mankind”, in *What is History and other essays*, edited by Luke O'Sullivan, Imprint Academic, 2004, p. 193.

other human being, authentic and alive, is revealed to us and the integrity of this conversational being is increased as we give up labeling certain attributes as shortcomings, mal happenings, or bad chances. Among the qualities of a good conversationalist there is also his playful spirit almost miming amateurism, his cheerful inconsequence, and his lack of attachment to the truth, his irresponsibility, his trying not to avoid what leads us to no conclusion, but his passion for the idea that the meaning of a conversation is given not by the conclusion that its interlocutors reach at its end, but by taking part into this new unrehearsed intellectual adventure: 'Like a lover, a good conversationalist must never be more than half – serious, and must never take his partners more seriously than he takes himself'².

By the metaphor of conversation I will refer to the relation between the modes and experience on the one hand, and to the relation among the modes or voices, on the other hand, and, in this way, I will try to point out how Oakeshott's views turn from a monistic to a pluralistic perspective.

Experience and its modes

The premises of Oakeshott's conception of the world as an interwoven conversation of independent modes of thought can be found in his early work *Experience and its Modes*³ that is of Hegelian and Bradleyan inspiration.

When it comes to discussing the problem of the relation between the one and the multiple, Oakeshott intends to explain diversity: its character, the relation between the elements that constitute the diversity of the world, and how these

differences are related to experience as a whole⁴.

With the purpose of explaining the whole of experience in its diversity, Oakeshott introduces his theory of the modes of thought. By the concept of experience he considers the whole, Bradley's absolute, and he defines it as a world of ideas, meaning by it an inter-subjective world of (pre)understandings: 'Experience is a world of ideas'⁵. This world of experience is conditioned towards coherence, unity, and completion. As a whole this *GeistWelt* does not allow either grades or diversities. But, in a certain way, the unique whole of experience suffers disruption or arrest; therefore Oakeshott considers a certain dynamicity that replaces the static unity of the whole.

Actually, experience is given two possible alternatives, *tertium non datur*: moving towards a completely ordered, perfectly coherent, and unique world of concrete ideas, or if this endeavour fails, constructing different worlds of abstract ideas, that he names modes: 'I mean, then, by a mode of experience a homogeneous but abstract world of ideas'⁶.

The different modes of experience (history, practice – moral, art, religion –, science) are different perspectives on the whole of experience, each reflecting the whole from a limited standpoint, but they are not specific kinds of experience⁷. They are mind frames as they give us ways of ordering experience by pre-suppositions that differ from one specific inquiry to another. If from a rationalist point of view there are certain fundamental concepts or categories by which experience is ordered, Oakeshott

⁴ EM, p. 70.

⁵ EM, p. 69.

⁶ EM, p. 75.

⁷ EM, p. 71.

² *Ibidem*, p. 189.

³ 1933, Cambridge University Press, 1985, (EM).

may believe he takes bigger stakes when claiming that there is a possible plurality of modes, each of them offering us a different ordered view of the world built on its own principles.

In this way, the practical mode orders experience on the considerate of stating a harmony between what is and what should be, and the world is being understood by supposing the utility of its things; the historical mode represents the organizing of experience in the terms that the idea of past states, and a past world of experience is consequently built starting from the testimony found in the present; and the scientific mode by which we understand the world in abstract terms implies concepts and generalizations.

The relation between one mode of experience and any other is monadic as it is conceived by Oakeshott in this way: each abstract world of ideas is independent of any other⁸. Each mode is a specific universe of discourse wherein its terms and actions have specific meanings. No idea can be used in two different worlds. For instance, water and H₂O are not two different ways of saying the same thing, but different symbols that serve different worlds of ideas, and that are used according to specific rules; they belong to two entirely different perspectives, to certain modes of organizing experience that is practical life and science⁹. Extrapolating to arguments, whenever one argument tries to break up the barrier between any of the different worlds, it inevitably ends in inconsistency. Therefore what is, for instance, relevant from a mathematical point of view is morally irrelevant etc¹⁰. But since the modes of experience are closed systems, is conver-

sation between them still possible? As communication it certainly is not. As they are but different attempts to confer meaning to the whole of experience, they meet in their general scope and within the whole that they all initially belong to. Each derives its meaning and truth by its being connected to the whole of experience.

The world as in the modes is conditioned by the presuppositions that each of them sets forth, and therefore it is seen but from a limited perspective. But each mode has its claims of exclusive reality and truth. They are modes only when regarded from the outside. The role of philosophy is to explore the different modes of experience, or in another of its pretensions to give an unconditional mode free understanding of the world of experience.

The Voices in Conversation

In the essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" (1959) from the volume *Rationalism in Politics*¹¹, the monadic modes become voices that take part in an authentic conversation where they are aware of their own relativity and do not proclaim their exclusiveness, but admit themselves to be provisory, even giving up the idea that the truth is reachable, but by all these renunciations, they still do not give up their identity.

In this way, conversation becomes a metaphor of the relation among different ways of expression that human interaction manifests: science, history, practice – politics and moral-, art (esthetics). As a paradigm of human interaction the conversation is defined by Oakeshott as a non-argumentative, but not anti-argumentative inquiry: '...It may be supposed that the diverse idioms of utter-

⁸ EM, p. 75.

⁹ RP, p. 222.

¹⁰ EM, p. 76.

¹¹ (VPCM).

ance which make up current human intercourse have some meeting-place and compose a manifold of some sort. And, as I understand it, the image of this meeting-place is not an inquiry or an argument, but a conversation¹².

Although any conversation contains pieces of argumentation, its scope is more likely playful and unconditioned, as it never sets its final end as a conclusion to be reached, and as it does not intend to demonstrate anything, or to convince anyone of anything, e.g. of the priority that any of the voices may have over the others. Moreover, it is not dogmatic, but without suffering of ignorance. As conversation is argument and information, and inquiry all together, it surpasses all characterization because it does not identify with any of these ways in which human beings express themselves.

The ability to enter and to take part in a conversation is inherited (not genetically but in terms of a tradition) and it makes us what we are, civilized and not barbarous men, humans and not monkeys: 'Indeed, it seems not improbable that it was the engagement in this conversation (where talk is without a conclusion) that gave us our present appearance, man being descendent from a race of apes who sat in talk so long and so late that they wore out their tails'¹³.

Also the conversation shapes all sorts of human activity as well as any type of inquiry, therefore Robert Grant takes the liberty of naming it a practice of all practices and a discourse of all discourses: 'In other words, the real link between the modes is no longer a monolithic, substrate Experience perceptible only to the x-ray eye of the philosopher, but a dynamic, continuing discourse of discourses, or practice of practices, implied,

echoed and openly acknowledged by many of them severely'¹⁴.

Last but not least, the conversation is the meeting place of all voices. Each of them represents a certain human activity and is characterized by a specific universe of discourse.

In the essay that I am considering now, Oakeshott talks of three different voices: practice, science, and art (that he names poetry). Influenced by Fichte, he claims that the real world as a world of experience is made possible by the two way generation of the self by the non-self and of the non-self by the self: 'As I understand it, the real world is a world of experience within which self and non-self divulge themselves to reflection'; '...self and non-self generate one another'¹⁵.

When it comes to distinguishing between the meaning of the self and that of the non-self, the former appears to be pure activity and it is identified with the act of imagining, and the latter appears as a result of the act of imagining. With this in mind Oakeshott surpasses Descartes' concept of *cogito*, since here human subjectivity is defined by a variety of acts that considerably enlarge Descartes' view: sensing, perceiving, feeling, desiring, thinking, believing, contemplating supposing, knowing, preferring, approving, laughing, crying, dancing, loving, singing, making hay, devising mathematical demonstrations¹⁶; all these are various modes of the act of imagining, governed by certain implicit presuppositions, and as such belonging to different universes of discourse. As the product of the self, the non-self projects itself as the content of the acts already

¹² VPCM, pp. 197-198.

¹³ VPCM, p. 199.

¹⁴ Robert Grant, *Oakeshott*, typewritten document received from author of the book, *Oakeshott. Thinkers of our Time*, The Clarendon Press, London, 1990, p. 66.

¹⁵ VPCM, p. 204.

¹⁶ VPCM, p. 205.

mentioned above. The non-self is constructed and not given: 'images are made'¹⁷. Such images may be considered to be human deeds that can be revealed in conduct or behind the symbols that we use, including language, speech and gestures.

The conversation of the human world as a meeting place of the voices actually shows how the practical, the scientific and the artistic modes interact to one another. When the self relates itself to another self in one way or another, intersubjectivity is involved.

First, we have practical activity, under the mark of "wishing", which is constituted out of images of desire and aversion (non-self), and out of the adventure that leads us to constructing such images (self). The images of both practical and scientific world are recognizable in factual terms, whereas artistic images that the contemplating and delighting self creates can be accepted as pure images and nothing more. The condition of the factuality of an image is strictly pragmatic: an image is a fact if the self has the possibility of further desire. Therefore, scientific and practical modes meet, but in the shape of a *scientia propter potentiam* (knowing how to get what you want)¹⁸.

The other self for the practical realm is, on the one hand, the one that gives me pleasure, and on the other hand, the producer or the consumer, as economy belongs to practical inquiry. In this way, the other self is nothing but the mere instrument of the self, a thing, and this is why there can be no question of admitting its subjectivity. But since the self that uses another self needs this other self in order to benefit from recognition, and to avoid its own dissolution, it sees

itself obliged to admit the other self, but still we cannot speak of a real proclamation of the other self as another subjective conscience. Oakeshott talks of the dispute of two desiring consciences in an almost Hegelian manner: the recognition of the other self's subjectivity only for the self's own interest is but an evolved version of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*¹⁹. But the moral dimension also belongs to practical realm, and so we can also discuss images of approval or disapproval, or the object of moral judgments. Only now the other self is seen as an end and not only as a means to attaining our own means. The self as well as the other self become equal members of a community of selves²⁰.

The voice of science makes itself heard as an independent mode, apart from our own attitudes and desires. Non-encyclopedic by definition, the voice of science is available to any rational being through constructing deductive systems of ideas that have pretensions of being universal unique perspectives on reality²¹. Just as for the world of practice, the world of nature is a construction but starting from different premises²². The voice of science is eminently conversable, as scientists work together, make communities, share opinions, hypotheses, and results, but their technical language, and their use of symbols are most of the time inaccessible to those that were not initiated in a particular type of inquiry, and therefore the practical and scientific modes find it sometimes difficult to relate to one another.

The artistic voice (poetry) is by far the most important of them all because it is implied by the practical as well as by the

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ VPCM, p. 207.

¹⁹ VPCM, pp. 208-209.

²⁰ VPCM, p. 210.

²¹ VPCM, p. 213.

²² VPCM, pp. 214-215.

scientific, meaning that the different voices are but different ways of the act of imagining. Poetry has a particular place in the conversation of the human world as well, because it represents the activity of making certain images (painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, singing, literary and musical composition) that are not taken for facts but recognized as pure images. Also, the artistic manner of being active is specific and Oakeshott names it contemplating and delighting²³. The distinction between fact and non-fact images that apply to the other two realms (practice and science) do not have anything to say here. Therefore, the categories that seem correct when speaking of objects in practice or science, such as possibility, probability, cause-effect, means-ends, reality, or truth are irrelevant to esthetics. Thus while both practice and science work with images that can be consequently arranged, while they recognize these images as facts or non-facts, and while they use a symbolic language, the realm of esthetics cannot be characterized by these features. The only characteristic that artistic images possess is their being present, and they stir our contemplating with delight, but do not lead to any argumentation or inquiry. Under the sole category of the present, they have no history, they are impermanent and unique. In conversation with practice, poetry often finds disagreement as the image in contemplation can never be pleasurable or painful, and it cannot be morally judged²⁴. Practice can easily pass into science or contemplation, into science if curiosity is involved, into contemplation whenever a practical image gets isolated from its world and thus becomes the object of possible contemplating and delight: for

instance a house that is no longer habitable, or a ship that is at wreck, or unrequited love, or even an image that has an ambiguously practical character, such as a loaf of bread in paint, a man in stone, a friend or a lover²⁵. Here intersubjectivity reveals as the emancipation from utilitarian activity towards contemplating the other self, and delighting as authentically enjoying his/her presence. Friends and lovers open to one another and reveal their unique and true self to one another. Particular qualities and defects are thus transcended into contemplation and delight²⁶.

Education as Conversation

Apart from being just the model of a relation among modes, the conversation may also appear as the model for different activities such as education: 'Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation'²⁷.

As an illustration of the metaphor of conversation, I chose the topic of education as Oakeshott considers it in some of the essays published in the volume *The Voice of Liberal Learning*²⁸.

When speaking of how practice turns into science, Oakeshott is eager to make us understand that science should not be seen in a pejorative sense, since thinking becomes scientific not in a dogmatic manner, but by conducting an activity of a certain sort. It is the same emancipation that happens to universities when

²³ VPCM, p. 217.

²⁴ VPCM, p. 218.

²⁵ VPCM, p. 223.

²⁶ VPCM, p. 244.

²⁷ VPCM, p. 199.

²⁸ (VLL).

they turn from places where settled doctrines are taught from teachers to pupils, into societies of scholars, whose distinctiveness is given not by a certain doctrine that they may sustain but by their particular manner of learning and teaching²⁹. Therefore, the measure of education is not a certain amount of knowledge that one possesses, but a certain style of teaching and learning, and a method.

By education human beings get free access to the *Geistige Welt*, that everyone carries on as a birth datum, but do not fully belong to until one enters the process of learning³⁰. Such a spiritual world is composed of beliefs and not physical objects (abstracts), of facts and not things, i. e. of interpretations of things, of expressions of human minds with meanings that require being understood. It is the role of the teacher to initiate the pupil into this world, 'a whole of interlocking meanings which establish and interpret one another', and it is the more important the more we come to understand that entering it is the essential condition for becoming a human being in its proper sense, and that to inhabit it, to possess it, and to enjoy it means to really be a human being. The process of teaching by which a teacher deliberately and intentionally initiates his pupil into the world of human achievement and contributes to his becoming a human being, is followed by the process of learning by which the pupil under the guidance of its tutor accomplishes self realization by recognizing himself in the mirror of the world of human achievement that he inherits.

What one learns are thoughts and expressions of thoughts³¹. The inheritance

of human achievements that the teacher introduces his pupil to is knowledge, and knowledge is a manifold of abilities, and in each of these abilities there are both information and judgement³². In Oakeshott's view knowledge presents a double composing. First, there is information, the explicit component of knowledge that can be itemized, and that can be found in manuals, dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopedias, and shaped as answers to questions such as who?, what?, where?, which?, how long?, how much?, etc. But knowledge does not reduce to information, and therefore we have a second component of it, namely judgement. By judgement Oakeshott means the tacit or implicit component of knowledge, the specific ingredient that cannot be caught in propositions, that cannot be resolved to information or itemized, and that cannot appear as a rule. It is a "know how" moreover than a "know what", it is that *divinatio* of the interpreter, and it is the sense that doubles reason. Therefore, teaching represents a twofold activity of communicating information that is called instructing, and of communicating judgement that is called imparting. Also learning means, on the one hand, the activity of acquiring information, and on the other hand, the activity of coming to possess judgement³³. Pupils do not just store up pieces of information that each discipline in their curriculum presents in front of them, but they also must learn how to think and, consequently, they should be taught how to think, and this is what imparting judgement means. Actually, one may never teach another how to think and how to think is something that cannot be properly taught. As the teacher teaches information, imparting

²⁹ VPCM, p. 215.

³⁰ VLL, p. 45.

³¹ VLL, p. 50.

³² VLL, p. 56.

³³ VLL, p. 57.

judgement just comes along. It is the method that reveals itself in the very act of exercising it. Information is about painting in general, about canvases and colours, about the rules in mixing up colours and obtaining new ones, about rules about lining and perspective, but no teacher of art could ever teach his student how to look and what to see. However, one's look can be educated by being transmitted a certain flair, like a gift or a style that sometimes passes on from magister to disciple.

Therefore, a university in Oakeshott's view is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result, but it is a style, and a manner of human activity³⁴. It is a special place that successfully avoids becoming an institute where only one voice is to be heard, or a polytechnic where only the mannerisms of the voices are taught³⁵.

All the scholars that constitute a university engage in the pursuit of learning together, by cooperating to one another, all contributing to keeping alive a certain tradition of learning, and maintaining a certain course for the pursuit of learning. What happens in a university made up of scholars, scholars who are also teachers, and undergraduates, is compared by Oakeshott to a conversation because there is no question of competition, of controversy or of patronizing: 'The pursuit of learning is not a race in which the competitors jockey for the best place, it is not even an argument or a symposium; it is a conversation'³⁶. Every voice that speaks in the conversation can be equally heard, there is not a chairman and its audience, but just conversable voices. Also there is no departure and no established end as the conversation has no

predetermined course, no one questions its role, and no one judges it by any conclusions to be reached. It does not tend to conclude, but to always keep an open end to it, as it may be re-engaged the following day from where it was left³⁷.

Extrapolating from university to culture, Oakeshott establishes an ideal of liberal learning from the standpoint of which a culture is not a diversity of ideas, beliefs, sentiments, perceptions, and engagements, but a variety of distinct languages of understanding or modes of understanding or voices. The activity of the instructor is thus doubled by that of showing his pupils how to distinguish the voices, and also make them see that they are not just modes of understanding but different expressions of our humanhood. Our understanding of the world and consequently our self-understanding is conditional, limited to each particular voice. The idea of the conversation of the voices to be heard in a culture comports certain features: that they do not refute one another as they are not parties in a debate, that they are not organized in any hierarchy, but have equal places in the conversation, that they are not in cooperative or transactional relationships, that they are not partners with different roles in a common understanding, and that they are not suppliers of one another's wants³⁸.

Finally, the liberal learning that we may take to be the proper and authentic learning is defined by Oakeshott in the following way: 'an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversation and relationship

³⁴ VLL, p. 96.

³⁵ VLL, p. 126.

³⁶ VLL, p. 98.

³⁷ VLL, p. 99.

³⁸ VLL, p. 39.

and thus to make our *début dans la vie humaine*³⁹.

His definition of education centers on the very idea of conversation. Education is what differentiates us as civilized man from the barbarous, and the teacher is in Oakeshott's opinion an agent of civilization. His activity of civilizing the youth open a brand new universe to them, meaning that the pupils or the undergraduates are invited to experience the

endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure of education as conversation in which they explore our human spiritual inheritance, but also learn how to think of the components of our culture as voices that make themselves heard as different but equally admissible expressions of our conditional understanding of the world and of ourselves. Also they admit that they are different idioms and languages that one learns how to use with no intention to bet for one or another.

³⁹ VLL, p. 39.

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