

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S CONCEPTION(S) OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY; THE FIGURE OF A POLITICIAN.

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Abstract

The paper deals with the development of Oakeshott's conception of political activity with the help of concentrating on the figure of a politician as he appears in Oakeshott's texts from 1939 to 1975. Although the politician does not occupy a central role in Oakeshott's work, the figure still offers an excellent indicator of Oakeshott's attitude towards politics: whereas in 1939 politicians are described as callous and simple, in 1975 politics requires a specific kind of intelligence. It is thus argued that his conception of political activity shifted from a near despise of politics toward the applauding of politics as a deliberative and reflective activity. Although Oakeshott cannot exactly be classified as belonging to that group of political theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, for whom politics represents a superior human activity, his later work presents an original view of politics as an art of contingency.

1. Introduction

It seems to me that it is most common to speak about Michael Oakeshott's *conception* of politics. This conception is often seen as unclear and too metaphoric; a "boundless and bottomless sea" which escapes all easy categorization and definition. Yet, despite the difficulties many have indeed attempted to do so. The most common label is of course connected to British conservatism, and Oakeshott's critics also tend to attach his notion of *tradition* to political passivism (see, e.g. Nicholas 1951). For example, Ernest Gellner has argued that:

"What does Oakeshott stand for? A certain romantic conservatism, a sense of historic continuity, an anti-intellectualism in politics which considers politics to be rightful sphere of an instinctual or half-conscious wisdom, born of experience rather than conscious thought. This anti-intellectualism has a certain affinity with populism, but there is a crucial difference: the wisdom is credited not to a *Volk*, *Narod* or peasantry, but to a ruling class with roots and continuity." (Gellner 1980, 12.)

My aim in this paper is not to deny Oakeshott's conservatism, despite the fact that especially his understanding of a conservative *disposition* differs greatly from the aforementioned types of views (see, Oakeshott 1956, *On being conservative*, RP, 407-437). Instead, I argue that, e.g. just political passivism can only be used as a rough description of Oakeshott's conception of political activity at one specific moment of his post-war career, i.e. the publication of the essay *Rationalism in Politics* in 1947, which presents Oakeshott in his most pessimistic mood with regard to the prospects of modern politics¹.

In my view then, it is actually incorrect to speak about Oakeshott's conception of political activity as such, as it must be dissolved into many. Namely, it might initially seem as though there are often only slight differences in nuance between his texts on politics or political activity, but in the long run I think we can argue that there is a clear shift in Oakeshott's understanding. First, his *attitude* toward political activity shifts from a near disdain towards what could be called an applaud of politics. Second, the *elements* that Oakeshott attaches to his description of political activity imply an increasing emphasis of politics as a *reflective* activity as opposed to an habitual continuation or preservation of a political tradition.

This development can be made rather dramatically visible by comparing two quotations which cover a time span of almost four decades. In 1939, Oakeshott wrote:

"Political action involves mental vulgarity, not merely because it entails the concurrence and support of those who are mentally vulgar, but because of the false simplification of human life implied in even the best of its purposes." (Oakeshott 1939, *The Claims of Politics*, RPM, 93.²)

Conversely, in 1975, he characterized politics as calling for:

¹I do not include Oakeshott's early career in this paper for the reason that I see his post-war production as both more politically oriented and politically interesting. The paper is based on my recent dissertation on Oakeshott's political thought (see, Soininen 2003).

²The article was first published as a part of larger symposium in *Scrutiny*, 8, 1939, pp. 146-51.

“...so exact a focus of attention and so uncommon self-restraint that one is not astonished to find this mode of human relationship to be as rare as it is excellent.” (*On Human Conduct*, 180.)

In other words, whereas in Oakeshott's early thought politics was better suited to people who were mentally simple or vulgar, especially in comparison with poets and philosophers, the later Oakeshott's ideal type of politics required a specific and excellent political intelligence (see, *ibid.*). Thus, although one does need not take all of Oakeshott's culminations literally, the differences between them are still so great that I find it important to pointedly examine Oakeshott's different *conceptions* of political activity in order to do justice to the flexibility and sensitivity that his political thought exhibits in relation to its (contemporary) context without compromising any of its originality.

In the following, then, I have chosen to focus my discussion around *the figure of a politician* as he appears in Oakeshott's texts and some of the texts of his contemporaries. Namely, it seems to me that in the British discussions in general, it is perhaps the figure of a politician that works as the most sensitive 'indicator' of the attitudes towards political activity. Lists of the vices and virtues of a politician are especially revealing; of course, there are some 'Machiavellians', but generally speaking, if one were apt to think that the private vices are public virtues in a politician's profession, one would also tend to be more suspicious of politics in general and instead favour e.g. administrative government. On the other hand, a respectful attitude toward politicians or their profession usually goes hand in hand with the praise of eminently political activities and procedures.

In the case of Oakeshott, who explicitly does not write too much about politicians in general, mentioning even fewer by name, one may find it surprising that this indicator works both rather accurately and revealingly in relation to the development of his political thought. Since Oakeshott has always supported a "parliamentary government" and since his conception of the tasks of the politician in a society as "the gradual adjustment of human relationships" has actually largely remained unchanged, this could easily be mistaken for a kind perpetual sameness in his conception of a politician, although in relation to tradition, for example, it is precisely the increasing appreciation of political deliberation that is crucial, highlighting how his almost 'functionalist' view of politics shifts toward the emphasis of the action of an individual (Oakeshott 1948, 489).

I still wish to note, however, that it often seems easier to outline what politics or political activity is not than what it actually is. This remark applies to a large extent also to Oakeshott's production; his descriptions of good or 'normal' political activity are commonly accompanied by the critique of a 'false' or 'perverted' type of politics (see, e.g. *Rationalism in Politics* 1947 & *Political Education* 1951, RP, Oakeshott 1996). Oakeshott then operates with the *duality* and *ambiguity* of politics. For example, the political styles or languages of 'rational', traditional politics or the politics of scepticism are contrasted with rationalist politics or the politics of faith (Oakeshott 1947, RP, Oakeshott 1996, compare, e.g. with Gallie 1973). As a rule of thumb, we can say that Oakeshott's analyses of contemporary and real-life politics usually belong to the negative side of politics, whereas 'normal' politics can be found from a somewhat lost past, or a world of theory.

However, I think we can identify some changes in this composition too; the later appreciation of politics seems also to indicate a somewhat increased belief in the possibilities of political activity to open up different and perhaps unexpected futures, as opposed to the triumph of rationalist politics. Thus, I think the duality of his conceptions of politics should mainly be understood as an interpretative and sometimes rhetorical device that he uses to bring his point to a head: they are tools for analysing one's *political predicament*, which is formed out of the traditions of political philosophy, history and contemporary situation, and which by no means remains stable in Oakeshott's political thought (see, Oakeshott 1946, *Introduction to Leviathan*, RP, 226).

Oakeshott does, of course, distinguish between good and bad politicians, so in this respect this figure also reflects the dual composition in his conceptions of politics. More interestingly, however, the figure of a politician offers a relatively stable 'element' for our examination here: there is no political action without a political actor³ of some kind. And, since in Oakeshott's thought the increased appreciation of politicians also indicates the increased appreciation of political activity, the figure offers us an excellent reference from which to examine and contextualise the development of Oakeshott's conception of politics in a short paper such as this.

2. The Harmful figure

It is a well-known fact that Oakeshott has described politics as being a distinctively "secondary activity" for most people, and that he largely retained this view also in his later production (Oakeshott 1951, *Political Education*, RP, 44). In this sense, then, we cannot naturally classify him as belonging to those modern political philosophers or theorists, such as Hannah Arendt or Bernard Crick, for whom politics appears as the 'highest' activity among human beings. Yet, his reputation for representing an actual "Anti-Politics" or looking down on politicians especially in *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), is highly exaggerated and seems to be based on an incorrectly emphasized reading of it as a coherent book, as opposed to a collection of essays, which it is (see, Al Anon 1962, 1-2)⁴. Especially, reading *Political Education* simply through the essay *Rationalism in Politics* seems to strengthen this kind of misunderstanding. Thus, in order to understand the development in Oakeshott's conception of political activity and actors as well as the fire behind the smoke of his reputation, I find it necessary first to take a closer look back at the aforementioned *The Claims of Politics* (1939).

Namely, it is important to recognise that Oakeshott's early conception of a politician is not only negative in the common sense of the word, but the politician is actually seen as a potentially *harmful* figure in a society by definition: "Indeed, political activity involves a corruption of consciousness from which a society has continuously to be saved." (Oakeshott 1939, RPM, *The Claims of Politics*, 95.) This understanding has very little to do with the view presented in 1951:

³For the sake of clarity, it must be noted that Oakeshott's paradigm conception of a political actor is 'politicians in government' and is used here accordingly. Cases of exception, like political parties, are singled out on occasion.

⁴One question that should be addressed, however, is why Oakeshott left the essays unaltered in the 1962 edition. Commenting on the concept of tradition, Julia Franklin's asks: "Why... does a serious philosopher find it needful to rely on terms that so poorly represent his real intentions?" (Franklin 1963, 814).

“But, as we have come to understand it, the activity is one in which every member of the group who is neither a child nor a lunatic has some part and some responsibility. With us it is, at one level or another, a universal activity.” (Oakeshott 1951, RP 44-45.)

Thus, although Oakeshott does not require actual political participation by all, he insists that politics, i.e. “attending the arrangements of a society,” plays such an important role among human activities that everyone should possess some familiarity with his or her own political tradition and also accept some responsibility for it. Importantly, one can become politically *educated*, the fruits of which will “appear in the manner in which we think and speak about politics and perhaps in the manner in which we think and speak about political activity,” instead of becoming mentally vulgar in politics (ibid., 66).

In 1939, Oakeshott explicitly denies political activity, which is distinct from “such quasi-political activity as the exercise of the vote and the informal discussion of political questions,” as a universal duty (RPM, 91). The political system lies on the surface of a society and must remain there; its function is to provide protection and a “*minor degree of merely mechanical interpretation and expression.*” (ibid., 93, emphasis SS.) Oakeshott describes politics as a “highly specialized and abstracted form of communal activity” which plays a minor role in relation to a society as a whole (ibid., 93). A duty to the communal interests of a society can easily be performed in areas other than politics⁵. The social change and recreation come from other sources; the poet, the artist and to a lesser extent, also the philosopher:

“Societies, in fact, are led from behind, and for those capable of leadership to give themselves up to political activity is to break away from their true genius. And a society in which this becomes common will, in a short while, be a society without leaders, a society ignorant of itself and without the power of recreating itself.” (ibid., 96.)

In Arendtian terms, we could say that for Oakeshott, at this point, politicians are related more to fabrication than to action (Arendt 1958, compare also with Oakeshott 1995). All creativity seems to be devoid of politics:

“Political activity may have given us Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, but it did not give us the content of these documents, which came from a stratum of social thought far too deep to be influenced by the actions of politicians.” (ibid., 93.)

In Oakeshott’s view, politics must be reserved for other minds than the potential re-creators of a society. In fact, since political activity does not produce anything significant to the society or its traditions, and since the political system works almost automatically, a politician’s activity involves an inseparable “limitation of view,” and the minds of politicians become “bogus from repetition and lack of examination, unreal loyalties, delusive aims, false significances” (ibid.).

⁵ Oakeshott’s view of a society here is holistic and his arguments are reminiscent of those of functionalist sociology, which he, later at least, would certainly have understood as a desecration of his work. A *social whole* represents the ‘yardstick’ of all activity in style of organicist conservative thought and is also connected to his idealism. Christopher Dawson’s account is by far similar. For him, the “highest spiritual resources of the community” are not political but lie in the society as a whole (Dawson 1939, 27).

Oakeshott does not of course entirely deny the role of politics as providing protection of a society, but names two figures who “can be strongly tempted to give himself up to political activity,” i.e. the publicist, who writes on questions of political importance, and the leader, if he is prudent and lucky in action. Oakeshott, however, underlines that he is not referring here to a ‘spiritual’ leader here, as a political leader “will retain his fundamental views and opinions almost unchanged, being without time or inclination to examine them afresh.” (ibid., 94.)

All in all then, Oakeshott’s view of political activity and politicians is extraordinarily negative in the article examined above. In my view, however, in order to understand Oakeshott’s conceptions of political activity, we must make the mistake of taking it only as a curiosity written in the context of the anticipation the war, because the article offers us some critical elements for interpreting both the pessimistic tone of *Rationalism in Politics* and the dualistic composition of his conception of politics, especially in *The Politics of Faith and The Politics of Scepticism* (1996), which Oakeshott chose not to publish. That is, read in retrospective, Oakeshott’s earlier understanding of virtually *all* politicians is rather similar to the later account of a *rationalist politician*, whose fundamental views and opinions remain unchanged and who thus does not understand contingency, although he operates in its world. A rationalist, practical politician tries to escape the “intricacy of the world of time and contingency” by relying on the promise of the phoney eternity of an ideology (Oakeshott 1947, RP 34). In the earlier text, however, Oakeshott has faith in the working of a system and tradition. Thus, politics can be left to people with a mind that is “fixed and callous to all subtle distinctions.” (Oakeshott 1939, RPM, 93.) It is because *so little can be achieved politically* that the spiritual callousness is involved with political action (ibid.).

Against this background, then, I argue again that the essay *Rationalism in Politics*, marks a moment of *distrust in the vigour of tradition* as opposed to its appraisal, also in relation to the figure of a politician. The fact that a Rationalist represents a threat to a traditional kind of society seems to indicate a certain fear that political activity has stepped away from its proper place and now threatens the ‘deeper sphere’ of a society. Here, Oakeshott’s thinking seems to contain a rather difficult paradox: politicians *should* work by rather unconsciously relying on traditions, but as this kind of understanding of politics no longer prevails, it is thus difficult to defend or revive, as doing so would certainly again require conscious action. Contemporary politicians and the political spectrum are characterized cuttingly:

“And it is for this reason that, among much else, that is corrupt and unhealthy, we have a spectacle of a set of sanctimonious, rationalist politicians, preaching an ideology of unselfishness and social service to a population in which they and their predecessors have done best to destroy the only living root of moral behaviour; and opposed by another set of politicians dabbling with the project of converting us from Rationalism under the inspiration of a fresh rationalization of our political tradition.” (Oakeshott 1947, RP, 42.)

As said, Oakeshott’s view of contemporary politics is particularly pessimistic in this essay. For him, “almost all politics today have become Rationalist or near-Rationalist.” (ibid., 5.) And, shortly put, rationalist politics means the incorrect assimilation of politics into some other activity. In this essay, this activity is pointedly engineering, but Oakeshott’s notion of rationalist politics can also be seen as an umbrella concept for various attempts to reduce ‘politics’ to administration, scientific understanding or economic fabrication. Alongside *Rational Conduct* (1950, RP 99-131), it can also be read as an example of Oakeshott’s participation in both the

'old' and the contemporary discussion on the meaning of the notions of human reason, irrationalism and rationality (see also, e.g. *A Letter to Karl Popper*, 1948). In Oakeshott's view, rationalism means a misguided, vulgar Baconian or Cartesian belief in the power of Reason, i.e. a belief that 'rational' "conduct is conduct springing from an antecedent process of 'reasoning.'" (RP, 105.) Although politics is an activity requiring both practical and technical knowledge, a rationalist mistakes the latter type, which is "susceptible of formulation in rules, principles, directions, maxims," as adequate alone (Oakeshott 1947, RP, 14).

A rationalist politician dissipates political life into atoms; "a succession of crises, each to be surmounted by the application of 'reason.'" (ibid., 9.) Thus, rationalist politics displays "the politics of the felt need" (ibid.). Oakeshott also characterizes rationalist politics as "the politics of perfection" and "the politics of uniformity" (ibid.). For a rationalist, "there can be no place for preferences that is not rational preference, and all rational preferences necessarily coincide. Political activity is recognized as the imposition of a uniform condition of perfection upon human conduct." (ibid., 10.)

The time span that Oakeshott's essay covers is of course long – rationalism is considered the "most remarkable intellectual fashion of post-Renaissance Europe" (ibid.) and e.g. The Declaration of the Rights of Man is mentioned as an example of the rationalist politics of universal plans or principles. However, I think the target of Oakeshott's sharpest critique is just contemporary, British politics. In an illuminating paragraph Oakeshott writes:

"That all contemporary politics are deeply infected with Rationalism will be denied only by those who choose to give the infection another name. Not only are our political vices rationalistic, but so also are our political virtues. Our projects are, in the main, rationalist in purpose and character; but what is more significant, our whole attitude of mind in politics is similarly determined. And those traditional elements, particularly in English politics, which might have been expected to continue some resistance to the pressure of Rationalism, have now almost completely conformed to the prevailing intellectual temper, and even represent this conformity to be a sign of their vitality, their ability to move with the times. Rationalism has ceased to be merely one style in politics and has become the stylistic criterion of all respectable politics." (Oakeshott 1947, *Rationalism in Politics*, RP, 25-6.)

Oakeshott thus views the traditional elements of *English* politics as opposing the rationalist politics of universal plans or principles, which accommodates ideas such as the The Declaration of the Rights of Man, "the Beveridge Report, the Education Act of 1944, Federalism, Nationalism, Votes for Women... and the revival of Gaelic as the official language of Eire" (ibid., 11). Many of his contemporary critics saw Oakeshott's notion of rationalism as flagging for partisan conservatism and there is of course no denying that there is some truth to this⁶. Focusing on the changes in Oakeshott's conception of political activity, however, it becomes more important to examine the ambiguity of politics also from a positive side – how does Oakeshott see good, normal or 'rational' politics in comparison with rationalist politics?

Namely, on the other hand, by contrasting the politics of engineering or administration with a

⁶ As such, I think Oakeshott's lists of rationalist politics should not be taken too literally. And more commonly, the notion of rationalist politics can also be read as one contribution to the analysis of the 'reasons' behind totalitarianism (see, esp. Oakeshott 1947, *Scientific Politics*, RPM, 102).

proper, traditional kind of politics, Oakeshott implies a growing appreciation of political activity as such - in the fashion of the 19th century British politics. Oakeshott here describes politics as a profession to be learned, and this “sharing of concrete knowledge” and “initiation into the moral and intellectual habits and achievements of his society, an entry into the partnership between present and past” takes “about two generations of practice.” (ibid., 38-9.) Furthermore, it is the *ordinary* practical politics of European nations that is fixed in the vice of Rationalism and is the “politics of the inexperienced.” However, Oakeshott’s wish seems to be that a politician would stay in his proper, rather insignificant place in a society, although in this text the profession would require learning the nuances that comprise the tradition and standard of behaviour of a politician, as well as the understanding of contingency. A *proper politician* - a somewhat lost character - would recognize a change in the customary and traditional, but would refrain from adhering to the Rationalist’s notion of a “self-consciously induced change.” (ibid., 8.)

In fact, political life can be approached from three differing positions: that of a political philosopher, exploring the relations between politics and eternity; a rationalist politician, mistakenly identifying the promise of eternity in ideology, or taking mere technical knowledge as a practical guideline of behaviour; and the proper politician. That is, whereas the philosopher seeks to reflect on political conduct in the language of explanation and avoids recommending any directions for it, the rationalist, ideological politician confuses the language of explanation with that of recommendation: ideologies and abstract principles are seen as an escape from the intricacy of the contingent world in which the proper politician learns to operate.

In sum, then, a comparison of the essay *Rationalism in Politics* with *The Claims of Politics* reveals some rethinking in Oakeshott’s conception of the role of political activity and politicians in a society. Whereas in the earlier text politicians were seen almost as harmless ‘simpletons’, in the latter, Oakeshott does not exactly rebuke all politicians, but he does clearly distinguish between good and bad politicians. Yet, his analysis of the situation is that rationalist politics and politicians are clearly dominant, and he also appears to fear the impact that this kind of politics could have on a society. For example, rationalist politics may aspire to drive a society toward a uniform human condition by e.g. allowing only an exclusively rationalist form of education or by raising one political question ‘permanently’ over all others, such as the ‘legend of mass employment’ or the primary importance of ‘social justice’. In Oakeshott’s view, rationalist politics goes hand in hand with the “morality of the Rationalist,” i.e. the “morality of the self-made man and of the self-made society.” (Oakeshott 1947, RP, 41) In other words, Oakeshott sees tradition, which in the earlier text could be trusted to guide politicians in their proper place in the activity of the protection of a society, as having been considerably weakened, and therefore rationalist political activity now threatens to convert a given society instead of protecting it. Yet, *Rationalism in Politics* exhibits how Oakeshott’s general attitude toward political activity is still negative; he does not see that ‘proper’ political activity could actually have any chance of survival, especially in a situation where tradition is considerably weakened, since a good politician is still seen as a somewhat mechanical interpreter of tradition. Here, Oakeshott actually considered the English political tradition as almost being *dead*: the ‘automatic’ system of politics was no longer functioning, but the Rationalist disposition (and tradition) had managed to convert the informal manner of English politics into an ideology. Since it is just rationalists who place “too high a value on political action and placing too high a hope in political achievement,” it is no wonder that Oakeshott sees the situation as quite hopeless (Oakeshott 1947, RP, 26).

3. A (T)Ra(di)tional Politician

Neil McInnes has observed that the contrast between rationalist or later ideological politics and proper politics, which Oakeshott proposed was previously stated by Disraeli in 1872:

“In a progressive country change is constant and the great question is not whether you should resist change which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws and the traditions of a people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles, and arbitrary and general doctrines.” (Disraeli 1872, cited in McInnes³.)

This is very much what Oakeshott recommends as the ‘appropriate’ form of politics in both his postwar essays and in *Political Education*, although in comparison with his earlier texts, he seems to have a growing appreciation of ‘consciousness’ also in terms of the reliance on tradition.

The articles *Contemporary British Politics* (1948) and *The Political Economy of Freedom* (1949), which explicitly deal with the British day-to-day politics, introduce this increasing emphasis on the ‘conscious’ politician. In these texts, Oakeshott emphasizes that the most important task of a politician is to oppose great concentrations of power and thus preserve freedom in a society. Oakeshott, for example, accuses the Labour Party of neglecting one of the requests of the Nineteen Propositions (1642), i.e. “that the great affairs of the kingdom may not be concluded or transacted by the advice of private men, or by any unknown or unsworn councillors.” (ibid., 480-1.) Furthermore, the Labour Administration has a tendency to turn the House of Commons into a sort of syndicalist assembly that is under the influence of The Trade Union Congress, which is a constitutionally irresponsible body (ibid.). However, as the conservative party politics seems here to be a lesser evil, also the role of the *opposition* is also emphasized:

“The truth is that parliamentary government as we know it depends for its continued existence more upon the Opposition than upon the party in power.” (ibid., 481.)

Importantly, a politician is characterized in positive terms in contrast to a rationalist planner. The limited activity of politics as unspectacular and unimpressive to the “mass of men and women brought up on melodramatic politics” demands “reasonableness, sincerity, patience, self-restraint, moderate foresight and a knowledge of the principles of integration and adjustment imbedded in the history of our society.” (ibid., 489.) These qualities are seen by Oakeshott as emphatically human, and an M.P. might be expected to possess or be capable of acquiring these common qualities in “comparison with the godlike vision and superhuman mental grasp which the successful planner must have and which our planners certainly have not got.” (ibid.) Oakeshott thus takes a stand in favour of the understanding of a politician’s qualities that fairly suits (at least) the “myth” of the distinctiveness of English politics as representing moderation, scepticism and a certain degree of empiricism (Grainger 1969, 82).

Although similar kinds of debates have long appeared for long in various contexts, with no probable end in sight, it may still be illuminating to recall some contrary views, as Oakeshott’s point is to emphasize precisely the ‘ordinary’ qualities of the politician. For instance, Frank Pakenham, who acted e.g. as a junior minister in the Labour government over the period of 1946-1951, placed the well-intentioned and ambitious young politician, “our young idealist,” who supposedly wishes to lead a Christian life, at the mercy of external resources such as money,

connections etc. (Pakenham 1942, 408). The necessities of a politician's work, i.e. the persuasion of vast numbers of his fellow-men of the superiority of his views and his own personality, in collaboration with even antagonistic views and the coercion of the 'masses', leads to the suppression and distortion of one's own personality, which no other profession - like that of a soldier, a lawyer or a businessman - calls for (ibid., 409-10). These descriptions by far apply also to Oakeshott's notion of a politician as facing the current form of the rationalist style of politics, although he certainly does not agree with Pakenham's desire for more Christian ethics in politics and thus more 'good' men entering into political life. Contrasting himself to Aldous Huxley, Pakenham believes that "it makes all the difference in the world whether or not we draw our rulers from among our wisest and best, the time is fully ripe for a codification of the long-suppressed truths of political morality." (Ibid., 413.)

In comparison with Pakenham, Oakeshott emphatically joins those who oppose the figure of the philosopher king and his 'milder derivatives' - vividly redescribed in *On Human Conduct* as a theorist's return to a Platonic cave, along with his attempt to replace the other languages with his own philosophical one (*On Human Conduct*, 29). In the postwar years, however, it seems that the writers most committed to the "open society," also oppose the attachment of some extraordinary faculties to the personalities of politicians, although in other respects their views of political activity may vary. For example, Fairlie cited Harold Macmillan's lucid statement:

"If people want a sense of purpose they should get it from their archbishops. They should not hope to receive it from their politicians." (Macmillan, in Fairlie 1963, 20.)

According to, e.g. R.M. Hare, the idea is that if Plato's philosopher king were to define the laws we could be sure that by obeying them we would be leading absolutely morally blameless lives (Hare 1956, 594). For Hare, however, the decision of ends, i.e. of choosing between policies, belongs to voters, which actually is a good example of the combination of a certain 'engineering' view of politics with the critique of the figure of a 'superior' politician (Hare 1956, 594). Oakeshott, for his own part, already hints at the end of the 1940's at the importance of the (parliamentary) responsibility of a politician who must be vary in discovery and courageous in action.

As such, Oakeshott's characterization of a good or proper politician in the late 1940s can best be characterized as a 'man of common sense' who is initiated into the art of parliamentary politics. Illustratively, Oakeshott writes:

"... he [Morgenthau, SS] says nothing about the art of statesmanship except that it involves 'a knowledge of a different and a higher order' than that which belongs to the social engineer, and the use of 'higher faculties of mind.' This comes pretty close to the higher nonsense, which we should avoid if we can. What, of course, the statesman requires is nothing higher than the ordinary 'faculties' and ordinary knowledge that everyone (even the convinced rationalist) uses everyday in the conduct of his life and in his relations with other men. The vice of the rationalist is not a denial of 'higher faculties', but a misapprehension about the quite ordinary faculties which he and the rest of mankind constantly call upon." (Oakeshott 1947, *Scientific Politics*, RPM, 107.)

However, the art of the politician is connected more obscurely to tradition:

"Such a policy is, indeed a kind of perennial politics, the form of all politics which make use of the past achievements of our society in enterprise and organization and which endeavours to add to those achievements." (Oakeshott 1948, *Contemporary British Politics*,

Thus, although the situation of a politician is contingent in the sense that tradition never has a predetermined end or destination, Oakeshott still allows rather little room for a politician's deliberation. There is room for the differences of opinion and programme that constitute the *differentiae* of political parties, *but* this occurs in a situation that somehow appears ready-made for a politician; he consults "the past achievements" and his art is of "knowing where to go next in the exploration of an already existing traditional kind of society." (Oakeshott 1949, RP, 406.)

It is this feature of Oakeshott's tradition that has been severely criticized; it appears as if tradition would somehow 'hint' at the right course for politics to follow, a notion that can in some extent also be found in the essay *Political Education*. In my view, the essay cannot be interpreted as 'innocent' in the face of this accusation, although it can be fruitfully seen as presenting an optional logic of political judgement in the context of linguistic political philosophy, as was done by W.H. Greenleaf in 1966. Keeping the politician at the center of our examination, however, one of the most revealing passages says:

"The arrangements which constitute a society capable of political activity, whether they are customs or institutions or laws or diplomatic decisions, are at once coherent and incoherent; they compose a pattern and at the same time they intimate a sympathy for what does not fully appear. Political activity is the exploration of that sympathy and consequently, relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it." (Oakeshott 1951, RP, 56-7.)

The skills of the politician are thus mainly confined to the recognition of the situation and the aim of increasing the coherency of legal arrangements in a society at the right moment. Taking Oakeshott's emphasis in the afterwords of the 1962 edition seriously, the exact task of the politician is to act as *an intermediary between the morality of a society*, i.e. its pluralist traditions and the law (RP, 66-69).

Oakeshott's account of a politician begins to really take shape when compared with another eminent writer, Henry Fairlie, who has concentrated more specific attention on precisely this figure. In *The Life of Politics*, Fairlie also considered the readiness to "strike when the moment comes" as pivotal for a politician (Fairlie 1963a, 28). In relation to the 'readiness' of the situation and to the moment of Oakeshott's inaugural lecture, it is interesting that he characterises e.g. the Labour Government's retreat of physical planning between 1947-50 as a situation in which the freedom of choice was not sufficiently "clear to allow us to talk confidently of decision." (Fairlie 1963a, 36.)

In international politics, where the actors are governments, the 'hands are tied' view is dominant. However, although it is often claimed that "at least, in the legislative programme of a government," choices are available and decisions possible, Fairlie argues that this is not entirely clear either (*ibid.*). For Fairlie, too, a politician is a sort of "catalyst" and "free people" "must be patient enough to trust in the right instincts of the House of Commons; to believe that, in the long run, it will respond to common sense, justice and truths." (*ibid.*, 38.) In J.B.D. Miller's view, the politician functions as "a point of contact with the public opinion," being not only a "receiver" but a "transmitter too." (Miller 1958, 9.)

Thus, despite the fickle notion of a ready-made situation - and the hint of the possibility of judging a political decision as 'right' from the hypothetical viewpoint of the whole society - Oakeshott accentuates that there is foolproof way by which to "elicit the intimation most worth" from tradition - it is a matter of judgement (Oakeshott 1951, RP, 57). This once again corresponds to Fairlie's account of the only possible way of judging occasions, i.e. by rule of thumb; by instinct, the characters and moods of those with whom the politician must deal etc. (Fairlie 1963b, *The Lives of Politicians*, 23.) It is also in this sense, that Oakeshott can be seen as belonging to the same camp as Fairlie: both recognize political activity as a learned art in which there is need for both political education and also a certain level of professionalism (see, esp. Oakeshott, 1962, RP, 207, compare with, e.g. Crick 1964)⁷. Additionally, it must be noted that Oakeshott's famous characterization of politics as *conversation* also refers to politics as an art to be "imparted":

"... like the House of Commons or an old established business, it imparts something without having expressly to teach it; and what it imparts in this way is at least the manners of conversation." (Oakeshott 1950, *The Idea of a University*, VLL, 99.)

In comparison to Fairlie, however, it is evident that Oakeshott still makes a sharp distinction between rationalist and 'rational' politicians. Whereas Fairlie seems to accept that a politician also plays the role of persuading people in addition to participating in governmental or parliamentary discussions, Oakeshott arguably here 'legislates' about the proper form of argumentation for politics. His famous example of the "technical 'enfranchisement' of women" as remedying an incoherence in the arrangements of society is defended as the only valid argument in the situation at hand. Instead, he judges e.g. arguments, which are "drawn from abstract natural right, from 'justice,' or from some general concept of feminine personality," as clumsy or irrelevant (Oakeshott 1951, RP, 57). Additionally, in contrast to most liberals, Oakeshott denies the role of *interests* and the conflicts between them as fundamental to politics. Although for Fairlie, among others, politics is certainly public and limited - "too much a game of chance to be played by one's own rules" - Oakeshott is more severe in this account (Fairlie 1963, 28). Oakeshott's famous description of politics stresses its distinction from the party politics perspective as the pursuit of (economic) interests:

⁷ In Fairlie's view, politics in the UK is usually still often understood as a "human pursuit, fit to engage the whole life of a whole man, the supreme art of a highly civilised and polite society. It is the life that matters." (Fairlie 1963, 18.) Fairlie makes a distinction between traditional and less tender attitudes toward politics and cites W.L. Guttman's book *The British Political Elite* (1963), in which Guttman claims that British politics has long depended on the existence of an independent leisured class who have spared their time for the business of government and have benefited from the high esteem of the political career. Slowly, men have begun to receive payment for the political functions they perform. (Ibid, 18-19.) Fairlie also criticizes Bernard Crick's suggestion of recruiting amateurs to Parliament as a part of the parliamentary reform that he advocates. Oakeshott, for his own part, speaks of the skill of political activity as the mixture of amateurism and professionalism "which political and administrative activity among us provokes," as well as, albeit a bit regretfully, of the "absence of settled professional standards" (Oakeshott RP, 207). He notes, however, that a (somewhat unsuccessful) 'vocational' education of political activity stemmed from a situation "when professional political skill ceased to be the exclusive business of Kings and hereditary ruling classes, when (in short) government ceased to be a mystery" (ibid.).

“In politics, then, every enterprise is a consequential enterprise, the pursuit, not of a *dream*, or of a general principle, but of an intimation.” (Oakeshott 1951, RP, 57, emphasis SS.)

Thus, for Oakeshott, an ideal politician would be a rather sensitive interpreter of the moralities in a society, someone who is educated in a certain style of argumentation when engaging in political conversation, which has no other ‘foundation’ than that of an open-ended tradition of behaviour:

“The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.” (Oakeshott 1951, RP, 60.)

To recapitulate: limited strictly to the postwar context and the perspective of a politician, this metaphor can best be interpreted in light of an ideal politician in government, who is preferably a Conservative:

“While others extol the virtues of the particular brand of Utopia they propose to create, the Conservative disbelieves them all, and, despite all temptations, offers in their place no Utopia at all but something quite modestly better than the present. He may, and should, have a programme. He certainly has a policy. But of catchwords, slogans, visions, ideal states of society, classless societies, new order, of all the tinsel and finery with which the modern political charlatans charm their jewels from the modern political savage, the Conservative has nothing to offer.” (Oakeshott 1948, *CBP*, 486.)

However, in favouring a certain kind of situational argumentation over appealing to general principles, it can also be said that Oakeshott supports such a contingent understanding of politics in which a practical politician *cannot* remain ‘tied’ to most general ideas *or* even promises made in the context general elections, at least not in the strict sense of the word. Thus, compared to e.g. Hare’s conception, it is politicians who must also take responsibility for their actions in all cases.

In the inaugural lecture *Political Education* (1951), then, political activity is mostly described in positive terms. However, Oakeshott naturally continuously acknowledges that most contemporary politics involves the use of the language of interests and the pursuit of power. In fact, in the posthumously published *The Politics of Faith and Skepticism*, Oakeshott himself adheres to the notion of politics as “a conversation between diverse interests, in which activities that circumstantially limit one another are saved from violent collision.” (Oakeshott 1945-1952?, 1996, 130.) Here, in addition to viewing the ambiguity of modern political vocabulary as unavoidable, he also gives consideration to the motives of politicians. The Halifaxian “trimmer” represents the paradigm politician of the skeptical style of politics, who recognizes the partisans of power as his true opponent (*ibid.*, 128). However, the skeptic also recognizes that government will always be “an activity for which human beings are not fully qualified: it demands a distinterestedness which is always absent.” (*ibid.*, 37.) Thus, the skeptic also turns to the understanding of government in terms of the manner of “power shared conversationally between a multitude of interests, persons and offices, government appearing, for example as a partnership between a cabinet and the members of a representative assembly, between a minister and a permanent official and perhaps between assemblies representative of different interests.” (*ibid.*, 89.) It is here that the conversational model of politics seems to also include the competition of power and the conflict of interest, and seems to occupy the middle region between the aesthetic politics of skepticism and “play” and the politics of faith as the “serious” pursuit of perfection.

Thus, Oakeshott is again not far from contemporary political thinking. In the afterwords of *Political Education* he says that there is no “description of the motives of politicians nor of what they believe themselves to be doing, but of what they actually succeed in doing” in relation to tradition (Oakeshott 1962, RP, 67). In the other account, in which competition etc. are seen as essential parts of political activity *and* motive, politics is again described as follows:

“Politics at any time are an unpleasing spectacle. The obscurity, the muddle, the excess, the compromise, the indelible appearance of dishonesty, the counterfeit piety, the moralism and the immorality, the corruption, the intrigue, the negligence, the meddlesomeness, the vanity, the self-deception, and finally the futility, Like an old horse in a pound, offend most of our rational and all our artistic susceptibilities. For so far as political activity succeeds in modifying the reign of arbitrary violence in human affairs, there is clearly something to be said for it, and it may even be thought to be worth the cost. But, at the best of times, political activity seems to encourage many of the less agreeable traits in human character.” (Oakeshott 1996, 19-20.)

A contemporary economist reflected on the duality of political activity and actors as follows:

“Politics is full of such contradictions. Take the contrast between politics in practice as a rather dirty game with politicians engaged in party intrigue and the pursuit of power, and politics as one of the highest forms of human activity with the ideal of statesmanship seeking to safeguard the public interest in a dispassionate and disinterested way. Is this not a dichotomy in our own behaviour?” (Ely Devons 1956, 843)

It is my suggestion then, that when viewing Oakeshott’s work from the period immediately surrounding the postwar years and the early 1950’s, we can detect some swaying particularly in Oakeshott’s comprehension of the relationship between tradition and political actors. The less automatic and guiding the working of a tradition is seen as being, the more stress is placed on the character and also to the motives of a politician. It is not that Oakeshott by no means later becomes a supporter of the “higher faculties” view of a politician or a statesman, but in *On Human Conduct*, a politician must certainly be capable of recognizing the special requirements of *political, deliberative activity* as something more than “acquired” conversational skills.

3. A (Wo)Man of Responsibility

On being Conservative (1956) marks an important resting place in Oakeshott’s intellectual voyage. Namely, it is in this essay that the *grip* of tradition on a political actor is decisively loosened in the sense of even a ‘processual’ change. Whereas previously, the job of a politician was to add to the past achievements and to stand in between the past, present and future, now the politician primarily observes the current human circumstance, which most importantly denotes *individuality* - people with a preference for making their own choices (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 427). Importantly, he reminds us of Goethe:

“Reflection may bring to light an appropriate gratefulness for what is available, and consequently the acknowledgement of a gift or an inheritance from the past; but there is no mere idolizing of what is past and gone. What is esteemed is the present; and it is esteemed not on account of its connections with a remote antiquity, nor because it is recognized to be more admirable than any possible alternative, but on account of its familiarity: not, *Verweile doch, du bist so schön*, but, *Stay with me because I am attached to you.*” (ibid., 407.)

In my view, this kind of shift towards the Hobsbawmian idea of “invented tradition” (see, Bauman 1999, 133) is more important than is often recognized: at this point, tradition does not ‘automatically’ carry a past in itself, but in practical politics this ‘past’ must be and *is* invented, as is already implied in *A Review of K.B. Smellie*, in which ‘history was perverted for our purposes’ (Oakeshott 1948, *a Review of K.B. Smellie*, 766.) In 1956, Oakeshott ‘translates’ his multi-faceted concept of tradition into terms of “general rules of conduct,” which he emphasizes as being man-made and the result of human choices; tools to be used in various enterprises.⁸ In a society these rules are multiple, and since the conservative politician regards government as resting upon the “acceptance of the current activities and belief of its subjects” it is the appropriate form of political activity to make and enforce laws (as rules of conduct) that “reflect, and never impose, a change in the activities and beliefs of those who are subject to them.” (ibid., 431.) As the reflected ‘tradition’ or past no longer ‘hints’ at the course of action, it is “enough” for a politician of conservative disposition merely to reply “Why not?” to the question: “Why ought governments to accept the current diversity of opinion and activity in preference to imposing upon their subjects a dream of their own?”⁹ (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 427.)

In short, the paradigm politician is still a politician in government who entertains a “conservative disposition” that allows him to think and behave in a certain manner, to prefer certain kinds of conduct and certain conditions of human circumstances over others and thus be disposed to make certain kinds of choices: to preserve and respect the rules and favour the familiar over the unknown etc. (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 407). And he understands government as a limited activity, the business of which is to keep its subjects at peace with one another - to “inject into the activities of already too passionate men an ingredient of moderation; to restrain, to deflate, to pacify and to reconcile.” (ibid., 243.) The politician is now an interpreter of the present situation, and politics is an activity “...in which a valuable set of tools is renovated from time to time and kept in trim rather than as an opportunity for perpetual re-equipment.” (ibid.) As the task of the politician is to bring laws as compulsory rules of behaving into a closer relationship with current beliefs and activities, it can be called a *politics of innovation* - but not invention. That is, in political activity, one always seeks to improve the prevailing situation and one prefers a small innovation over a great, conscious change. Every innovation, however, creates a new situation, because every change is unavoidably greater than the intended change. In Oakeshott’s view, this kind of conception of politics is contradictory to the brand of politics that claims to derive from e.g. a ‘perfect vision’. Political activity produces rules or laws which are equally binding of everyone. Yet, they are not designed to produce some single, perfect goal, but they are suited for human beings who are accustomed to making their own choices. For Oakeshott, the intimations that are suited to politics are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy. They are found in

⁸ This shift is perhaps more important than is usually recognized, since it is Oakeshott himself who, especially in 1956 footnotes of *Political Education in Philosophy, Politics and Society*, and in the 1962 edition of RP, clearly directs our ‘correct’ interpretation of the concept of tradition towards this course. It is notable, however, that in texts written after 1956, Oakeshott does not revert back to using tradition as a grand concept, but lists it among, e.g. idioms and languages. 4).

⁹ As it seems, this might well also be Oakeshott’s answer to the later questions of why *cives* should go on acknowledging the authority in *respublica* - ‘governing’ is no longer synonymous to politics anymore, but is translated into ‘ruling’, although the ‘anti-foundational’ emphasis remains similar. One need not believe in the general ideas of the absolute value of free human choice or natural rights, but merely accept the contingent, historic situation (see, Oakeshott 1956, RP, 427).

the present of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for perfection or truth. As a conservative would understand it, the government is a specific and limited activity, and it is not – in contemporary language – a management of an enterprise, but a government of many self-chosen endeavours. A government offers authority that is sufficient to ensure certain peacefulness in the pursuit of various interests. Hereby, Oakeshott's conception of political activity can be compared with a more general British liberal conception of politics, for example to Isaiah Berlin's and J.B.D. Miller's views, and by no means to form of party conservatism.

Emphatically, Oakeshott's view of a proper politician is that he entertains a conservative disposition toward governing, which is seen as almost synonymous to politics. He recognizes the contingency of the situation as being a result of human choices and he sees the beliefs and activities of subjects as constantly changing, *but* his task is in a way to work against change: "like the 'governor' which by controlling the speed at which its parts move, keeps an engine from racking itself to pieces." (ibid., 434.) Here, the politician is required to remain in an "indifferent" mood; not being lazy or sheer vanity are simply sufficient characteristics for a politician.

Already a simple comparison with a classic text reveals some aspects of the change that has taken place between *The Claims of Politics* and *On being conservative*. In *The Profession and Vocation of Politics*, Max Weber described the two deadly sins of a politician as "a lack of objectivity" (Sachlichkeit) and "a lack of responsibility," or "vanity" as luring the politician most strongly into committing these sins. The demagogue is liable to become a play-actor who takes his responsibility too lightly, while on the other hand, a lack of objectivity tempts him to enjoy power for its own sake, without any substantive purpose (Weber 1919, 354). For Oakeshott, rather, in 1939, and in some of the late 1940s accounts, vanity and "sheer laziness" can actually be counted amongst the 'virtues' of a politician; it is more tradition that dictates political life more than acting politicians, most of whom are Rationalists in disposition. In 1956, with a parallel to Weber's "ethics of responsibility" and "ethics of conviction," Oakeshott takes a stand in favour of a conscious 'responsibility politician' in contrast to one who takes government as "an instrument of passion" and the art of politics as inflaming and directing desire (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 426-33). Thus, whereas the earlier Oakeshott relies more on the smooth running of a system or tradition, his later account emphasizes the current beliefs and activities of political actors.

With respect to the government, the politician works like an "umpire," who governs the rules of the game but is not one of the players (ibid., 433-34). His opposite is "a private enterprise politician," who mistakes governing for any other activity - e.g. making and selling a brand of soap, developing a housing estate - and sees governing as turning a "private dream into a public and compulsory manner of living. Thus, politics becomes an encounter of dreams and the activity in which government is held to this understanding of its office and provided with the appropriate instruments." (ibid., 426.) A private enterprise politician - a character corresponding to a 'demagogue' or 'leader' in *The Masses in representative democracy* 1957 (RP) - appeals to people with wants so vague that "they prefer the promise of a provided abundance to the opportunity of choice and activity on their own account." (ibid., 432.)

It may seem that Oakeshott now presses the view of politics as 'only suitable for gentlemen' and disregards the conditions of modern politics, although now with a renewed understanding of the contingency of tradition. However, this is not quite the case. In my view, his choice of exemplifying the concept of general rules is not casual at all:

“Consider the conduct of a public meeting, the rules of debate in the House of Commons or the procedure of a court of law. The chief virtue of these arrangements is that they are fixed and familiar; they establish and satisfy certain expectations, they allow to be said in a convenient order whatever is relevant, they prevent extraneous collisions and they conserve human energy. They are typical tools - instruments eligible for use in a variety of different but similar jobs. They are the product of reflection and choice, there is nothing sacrosanct about them, they are susceptible of change and improvement; but if our disposition in respect of them were not, generally speaking, conservative if we were disposed to argue about them and change them on every occasion, they would rapidly lose their value. And while there may be rare occasions when it is useful to suspend them, it is pre-eminently appropriate that they should not be innovated upon or improved while they are in operation.” (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 422.)

Though a bit hidden in the text, here, in light of the earlier reflection we can elicit Oakeshott’s defence of procedural parliamentary politics,¹⁰ which also includes political activity as a ‘dirty game’. Namely, the next example of general rules of conduct in the text directly concerns the rules of a game:

“Indeed, the more eager each side is to win, the more valuable is an inflexible set of rules. Players in the course of play may devise new tactics, they may improvise new methods of attack and defence, they may do anything they choose to defeat the expectations of their opponents, except invent new rules.” (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 422.)

The politician’s game is thus also one of winning and losing, and the politician is not naturally required to exhibit “indifference” in e.g. parliamentary debating, but only in relation to governing, which needs to be seen as a limited activity. In this respect, the question of what kinds of politicians occupy a given office is important for Oakeshott, regardless of e.g. his party affiliation: for the *current* situation of a ‘pluralist’ society, the government must be such that it respects this plurality. Oakeshott’s account is that this kind of government goes hand-in-hand with the great diversity of self-chosen enterprises in a society, and he clearly also wishes this situation to be preserved. Since, in comparison to earlier texts, Oakeshott does not rely on ‘tradition’ or only an acquired ‘traditional way’ of doing things, the ball is now even more in the politician’s court. And, since we live in an electoral system, it is up to the voters to decide both what kinds of politicians they wish to see in parliament and what kind of rhetoric will persuade them to elect the politician of their choice. A private enterprise politician, or the character of a ‘demagogue’, promising to make choices on behalf of the people, may face a situation that:

“...it is not at all as plain sailing as it might appear: often a politician of this sort misjudges the situation; and then, briefly, even in democratic politics, we become aware to of what the camel thinks of the camel driver.” (Oakeshott 1956, RP, 432.)

A strong relationship between the beliefs of ‘subjects’ and politicians, both those in government and those heading for government, thus exists; Oakeshott’s view implies that a human being who cherishes her/his individuality also tends to vote for a politician who shows respect for this condition.

In *The Masses in representative democracy* (1957) and the Harvard Lectures (1958, MPM), Oakeshott continues to connect certain types of politics, as styles of governing, to certain corresponding moralities of subjects, as well as to express the duality of modern political life in

¹⁰ I am inclined to read the passage also as a considerate comment in favour of *contemporary* parliamentary arrangements.

these terms. It can thus be said that Oakeshott continued his critique of rationalism in politics by analysing the 'political' disposition of the "anti-individual". This disposition, longing for communal warmth and shunning the freedom of choice, emerged in the 16th century Europe as if it were a mirror image of the "individual" (Oakeshott 1957, RP, *The Masses in representative democracy*, 371¹¹). In Oakeshott's reading, both the "godly prince" of the Reformation and the "enlightened despot" of the 18th century are "political inventions for making choices for those indisposed to make choices for themselves." (ibid., 373.) Subsequently, anti-individuals came to require "leaders," whereas associations of individuals called for "rulers".¹² Leaders were to tell the "anti-individuals" what to think, to turn their desires into projects and to make them aware of their power, which in relation to the modern "masses" refers, of course, to numbers (ibid.).

By the means of "the vote" and the power in his numbers, the mass man aspires to give governments power so great that the wish for Security is satisfied. It imposes modifications upon 'parliamentary government' that turn it into a "popular government," in which the parliamentary representative acts not as an individual, but as a "*mandataire*" who is charged with the task of imposing the substantive condition of human circumstances required by the 'mass man'. (ibid., 379) Accordingly, the parliament becomes converted into a "work-shop" as opposed to a debating assembly. Although the parliamentary practises have, according to Oakeshott, "this far" been able to accommodate these modifications while still remaining "parliamentary," have authority and power still been effected twofoldly. Firstly, the authority of mere numbers has been confirmed, although it is still an authority that is alien to the practice of "parliamentary government". Secondly, it has given "governments immensely increased power." (ibid.) In Oakeshott's view, however, the "mandate" was an illusion from the beginning. Being incapable and unwilling to make choices for himself, the "mass man" also cannot instruct a delegate, who, as a *leader*, "by a familiar trick of ventriloquism," relieves "his followers of the need to make choices for themselves." (ibid.). The 'mass man' thus gives a leader an "unlimited authority" to make choices on his behalf and is hereby "saved" from the burden of choice (ibid., 380).

Yet, as to the significance of politics on a society, Oakeshott says notably in the Harvard Lectures, that writers are not "apt to argue from morals to politics or from politics to morals; moral and political beliefs and sentiments usually develop in interaction with one another. Consequently, they may be used to elucidate one another as text and context." (Oakeshott 1996, 27-28.) In this sense, we have come a long way from understanding a politician only as a "mechanical interpreter" of the "deeper consciousness of a society".

Furthermore, whereas in the essay Oakeshott still considers the art of politics as 'ruling' (in quotation marks) and corrupted and the "new art of politics" as leading, in the lectures, he separates political activity from governing as the exercise of "authority by the rulers over the ruled" and as something which may be "that of the leader, of the judge or of the administrator." (ibid., 8.) Thus, the character of the "indifferent" ruler disappears from his characterization of political activity. Instead, political activity is a question of determining the manner and matter of government as an activity and of considering the composition and conduct of authority, as

¹¹ The essay was first published in 1961, but given as a lecture in 1957.

¹² This distinction resembles a conception put forth by Bertrand de Jouvenel's, who also gave lectures in the LSE in the 1950s: for de Jouvenel, in 1957, the duality of leadership means that a *dux* is a conductor or a leader and a *rex* is "the man who regularises or rules" (Vauhkonen 2002, 22).

discussed, criticized and modified (ibid., 8). In the late 1950's Oakeshott thus approvingly attaches to politics a possibility set off change in a society instead of primarily guarding of it.

It is hard to single out any general attitude toward politicians and political activity in the British discussions of the late 1950's and 1960's, but perhaps it can still be said that Oakeshott's attitude belongs to the side of those who *defend the way of doing things politically*. The change in his own attitude toward politicians seems to reflect an understanding that is similar to Fairlie's account, i.e. that people who hold their governors in contempt have taken the first step towards rejecting free institutions (Fairlie 1963b, 20). There is no longer so much the fear of even the fall of parliamentary institutions, as in the late 1940's, than a heightened appreciation of parliamentary procedures among 'liberal' writers, a category to which such different kinds of writers as Crick, Crossman, Fairlie, F.A. Hayek (in some extent), Miller and Oakeshott can be included in this respect.

This is especially true if we compare this view with two other 'moods' of writing on politics that were prevalent at the time, i.e. some socialist theories, in which the "distinctiveness of England becomes mere provincialism and the continuity of England is merely 'centuries of staple constipation and sedimentary ancestor-worship,'" as Grainger describes Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson's view (Grainger 1969, 260). The other example is, of course, political *science* in its various manifestations. Of this, Oakeshott wrote already in 1949 that:

"If you want to be frightened, read this book; as a portent of the end of civilised life it is far more unnerving than the atomic bomb. After forty, one naturally prefers a holocaust to the ignominy of being buried alive under the indiscriminative volcanic ash of 'social reconstruction'." (Oakeshott 1949, A Review of Harold D. Lasswell, 326.)

Thus, politics for 'liberal' writers is mostly a way of channelling change in a diverse society and is contrasted with any ideas of 'scientific' or 'certain' ways of doing things. In Miller's words:

"Politics is a means of getting things done, often with a strong sense of moral urgency; but it does not provide this urgency from its own process." (Miller 1962, 23.)

The fact that Oakeshott avoids using the concept of "interests" in his description of 'proper' political activity has, in my view, mainly to do with his even more emphatic separation of political from economical activity than by many of his contemporaries. In comparison with writers like Berlin, Crick and Miller, who essentially define politics as arising out of conflict, this often seems to imply Oakeshott's stricter denial of conflicts between any 'ready' ends in a society. Thus, in comparison with e.g. precisely Miller's conception of politics as an activity that is "always connected with government" and that aims at bringing government to bear in a particular direction, my claim is that especially after the shift in the Harvard Lectures, Oakeshott's conception of politics is more prepared to face the situation of 'new political movements', although this aspect remains speculative in terms of the philosophical outlook of *On Human Conduct* (see, Miller 1962, Jeger 1959, 378).

4. A Reflective Actor

In the 1970's, Oakeshott further separated politics from 'authority' and governing in the ideal character of civil association, as well as in the vocabularies of the state (see, *On Human Conduct*).

It is possible, of course, to interpret that Oakeshott 'solved' the difficulty of theorizing political activity, the idiom of which "is ever ready to impose itself upon the manner in which it is studied," by transferring the focus of examination to the theorization of civil association and the appropriate understanding of political activity and actors solely as its *derivative* (Oakeshott 1962, RP, 218). This is, I think, how Oakeshott himself appears to see the matter, and this view has far been accepted (see, *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott 1976, *A Reply To My Critics*). Yet, I hope to have laid some groundwork for a complementary, not alternative, interpretation of how some connection between Oakeshott's independently growing esteem for political activity and actors and his most refined philosophical description of them in civil association can be detected. As an indication of this, for example, Oakeshott says in a review of J.R. Lucas's *Principles of Politics* that the disappointments of his book are that it "has more to say about the conditions of a 'civil' than of a 'political' society, more about government than about politics, more about *jurisdictio* than about *gubernaculum*, and nothing about the considerations involved in conduct of a foreign policy." (Oakeshott 1967, *A Review of J.R. Lucas*) (Compare this view, with Franco 2003, 500-01.)

The political atmosphere of the 1970's was characterized by new political movements and new political agendas. Lena M. Jeger, a Labour M.P., wrote an excellent 'overview' of this problem already in 1959. She does not speak in terms of 'politicization' but, in retrospect, we can see her as referring to the fact that issues to be tackled politically now had to be newly defined. For her, issues like abortion or homosexuality are ones about which "many Labour Party members refuse to see the political reality of the non-political." (ibid., 378.) Furthermore:

"Yet if they would only take an initiative on matters which concern the well-being of so many individuals it would quickly be reflected in the sensitive mirror of Parliament. If it happened in all the parties represented, the change would come more quickly. Then the Private Member with the lucky ballot paper would no longer face Ellen Wilkinson's problem of a good day on a big issue of a successful Bill on a little one. Parliament would be strengthened by the knowledge that people expected their representatives to deal fearlessly, through the political machinery of government, with the erstwhile non-political, the difficult personal problems of morality. For though, in the end they are for each man and woman to face, it is for the politician and those he represents to ensure that no archaic law, no lack of finance, no prejudice in Parliament, complicates or exacerbates the combat." (Jeger 1959, 378.)

Then, in 1975, Oakeshott emphatically uses the concept of practices in relation to political activity instead of tradition. Importantly, political activity relates to the vernacular language of moral practices which are plural, although otherwise without any essence in a civil association. Practices are expressions of human intelligence which are never 'applied' and can be used only in virtue of having been learned and *understood*:

"This acknowledgement does not reduce conduct to a process or impose upon it the character of a *mere* habit. Customs, principles, rules, etc. have no meaning except in relation to the choices and performances of agents; they are *used* in conduct and they can be used only in of having been learned." (*On Human Conduct*, 57-8.)

Again, it seems to be no accident that Oakeshott describes practices as providing materials for the consideration of the artfulness or propriety of an individual action, "performance," in terms of 'statesmanlike' action (ibid., 120). The language of morals is also emphatically not a fixed stock of utterances but "a fund of considerations drawn upon and used in *inventing* utterances; a fund which may be used in virtue of having been learned and being understood, which is learned only

in being used, and which is continuously reconstituted in use.” (*On Human Conduct*, 120, emphasis, SS.)

In a civil association, moralities are thus in a constant state of change, they are pointedly expressions of human intelligence, and it is the ‘task’ of political activity to transmit these changes to *lex*, i.e. the general rules of conduct as a system of law, the recognition of which relates *cives* to one another as equals in *respublica*. In my view, however, Oakeshott intends here to specifically avoid any hints of speaking in terms of processes or ‘automatic’ systems in relation to political activity - as with human conduct in general. To clarify:

“Nevertheless, where association is solely in terms of *lex*, a procedure in which response may be made to notable changes of belief or sentiment about the desirable conditions of civil conduct by deliberately altering these conditions is at least the emblem of *lex* as a *human responsibility* and it may be said to be a condition of the durability of this mode of association. And while the terms of this procedure may be any that commend themselves to the associates concerned, it is conditional upon their being recognized as authoritative. In other words, legislative procedure in civil association must be composed of rules and it must be recognized as itself a component of the system of *lex*.” (*On Human Conduct*, 138, emphasis SS)

Politics is separated from the accurate *authority* of the procedure of enacting laws¹³, but Oakeshott’s phrase describes politics as an “important characteristic of legislative opinion in civil association... namely the necessary absence of a ready and indisputable criterion for determining the desirability of a legislative proposal,” which, in turn, is concerned with “the desirable composition of a system of moral, not instrumental considerations” (*ibid.*, 140).

Furthermore, ‘private’ and ‘public’ refer here to relationships, not to persons or places: ‘public’ relationships, like those between that of a ruler and his subject and *cives* to one another, are constituted by *lex* and, as such, are distinguished from a ‘private’ relationship in which, e.g. rulers seek a certain imagined and wished-for satisfactions from their subjects (*ibid.*, 144-145). There is no room in civil association for anything but a conditional distinction between so-called ‘private’ and ‘public’ law, and there is *no want which may not* set into motion a project to change *respublica*. (*ibid.*, 151; 169.) In other words, no ‘issues’ or ‘spaces’ are e.g. private *by definition* in the sense of Arendt’s *oikos*, or even in the sense of the private sphere of liberalism. In this sense, Oakeshott’s conception is much more open to the ‘politicization’ of different questions: it is only that a political utterance must lose its idiom of e.g. moral (or economical etc.) sentiment in order to become a political proposal, the result of which is an obligatory rule, prescribing “conditions to be subscribed to by all alike in unspecified future performances.” (*ibid.*, 163.)

To reiterate this point, politics in a civil association is concerned “with an imagined and wished-for condition of *respublica*, a condition in some respect different from its current condition and alleged to be more desirable. It is deliberation designed to specify and find reasons for, utterance designed to recommend and give reasons for, and action designed to promote the change from the one to the other.” (*On Human Conduct*, 168.) Politics is thinking and speaking, deliberative and argumentative engagement directed toward reaching conclusions sustained by reasons for persuading others of their cogency and identified in respect to a focus of attention and a *subject of discourse*; a civil rule (*ibid.*, 165).

¹³I wish to accentuate that these procedures can also be changed and political proposals directed toward them procedures and there is no “‘constitution’ not subject to interpretation and immune from inquiry.” (*ibid.*, 151.)

Here, Oakeshott repeats that he is not concerned with “what may go in the head of a politician” but with the ideal engagement of politics as considering the desirability of rules (ibid., 165). He also states that there is nothing in this view that suggests professionalism in politics, but, on the other hand, he emphasizes that - like morals - political activity can be conducted more or less “civilly,” i.e. ‘artfully’. It seems to me that if considered in a ‘real life context’, Oakeshott still wishes to make a distinction between the ‘private’ quarters in a state, such as political parties, feminist or environmental movements, which tend to make political *utterances*, and politicians, whose responsibility it is to *interpret*, from a plurality of considerations how a political *proposal* shall “adequately reflect what is currently held to be civilly desirable.” (ibid., 172.) On the other hand, a politician must understand that a political proposal cannot be argued in terms of the ‘truth’ or believing certain ‘experts’, but, rather, he understands its intended result as a rule in a *contingent* situation.

Efraim Podoksik aptly describes Oakeshott’s conception of human freedom in terms of “recognized contingency,” which combines the notions of a genuine choice of action and an agent’s awareness of having such a choice (Podoksik 2003b, 57). As such, politics as a deliberative, reflective activity is the “*recognized contingency*” of the human choice and situation in involution: an ideal type politician first (whether professional or ‘occasional’) recognizes a civil association as being constituted in terms of rules with no other ‘back-up’ than their continuing acknowledgement as rules or *lex*. Thus, he/she realizes that his/her concern is with the desirability of these rules; political engagement involves “disciplined imagination,” focusing one’s attention upon civility and the *practice* of just conduct. In Oakeshott’s: lyrical language:

“It is to put by for another occasion the cloudy enchantments of *Schlaraffenland*, the earth flowing with milk and honey and the sea transmuted into ginger beer, it is to forswear the large consideration of human happiness and virtue, the mysteries of human destiny, the rift that lies between the aspirations of human beings and the conditions of a human life, and even the consideration of the most profitable or least burdensome manner of satisfying current wants...” (Ibid., 164.)

In this view, a politician also accepts responsibility for his actions in an ‘extended’ sense; he is dealing with ‘justice’, not in the sense of the promotion of a preconceived notion of justice, but, rather, in terms of its definition. This is one crucial difference between Oakeshott’s anti-foundational political thinking and, e.g. John Rawls’s and Bruce Ackerman’s style of identifying *jus* with a “consideration of ‘fairness’ in distribution of scarce resources” (Oakeshott 1983, 156, footnote). Oakeshott recruits his image of an exploration of the “intimations” in this context, although he now emphasizes that what pushes any chance to the “surface” in *respublica* - in the sense of the subject of discussion - is political intelligence, and a “lively political imagination may recognize them before they are half over the moral horizon.” (ibid., 180.) As choosing is emphatically an inherent part of the contingent situation - “to choose what in this circumstantial flux should receive attention” - a politician also constructs the situation for him/herself, and in this sense, political activity in civil association can be referred to as the politics of innovation and *limited invention*; an art that “calls for so exact a focus of attention and so uncommon a self-restraint that one is not astonished to find this mode of human relationship to be as rare as it is excellent.” (ibid., 180).

In this book, the ‘side’ of rationalist politics is represented by the ideal type of “enterprise association”. This type represents an abstract, theoretical way of describing the relationships between human beings; in this case, the principle of organization is the achievement of a common goal and the rules or laws in this kind of association serve as the means to this end. According to Oakeshott, enterprise association cannot have real politics, but only management. This false type of ‘politics’ is also the prevailing one in the contemporary world. As such, Oakeshott’s description of a negative politician has not changed much; most of the features attached to a rationalist politician hold true here too. Yet, the fact that he chooses to use terms like “enterprise association” and precisely “manager” may imply the critique of blunt ‘capitalism’ as our current political predicament, although it is a well-known fact that Oakeshott employed the vocabulary of the Romans, *lex, respublica* etc., preferably to the ‘modern’ political vocabulary to emphasize the theoretical character of his ideal types.

Yet, I think we can see how Oakeshott clearly assigns politics a more creative role among human activities. In *On Human Conduct*, he emphasizes politics as being an activity that requires deliberation, argumentation and also imagination. Thus, in my view, he has modified his conception of politics precisely with regard to the elements he attaches to the activity of philosophy (and also poetry). In comparison with Oakeshott’s earlier conception of politics as ‘sensing’ the intimations of tradition, I think his understanding of politics as an emphatically reflective and conversational activity is more reminiscent of philosophy than it had been in his earlier production. As such, it seems to me that Oakeshott sees the idea that this kind of politics will be less rare in the future as a *possible* (regardless of its probability) as well as a *desirable* option that this kind of politics will be less rare in the future.

I mentioned earlier the figure of the ‘occasional’ politician. Classically, this expression naturally refers to Weber’s characterization of the citizen voter as an occasional politician during elections. Here, I think the figure is assigned another meaning, i.e. that of a citizen as *acting politically* when addressing a political proposal to the law-enacting authority. There is nothing that prevents “laymen” from participating in political activity and from learning judgement and the skill of presenting political proposals. Keeping in mind that Oakeshott “admired the Roman political experience above all others in European history because the Romans showed a ‘real genius for politics,’” the republican tradition can also be connected to Oakeshott’s thought in this context (see, Oakeshott 1996, 83-4). John Coats contrasts the republican tendency as the willingness to live and intentionally nourish the tension between particular political goals and the concern for the general framework of authority with the democratic tendency to reduce a constitution to a mechanism for the ministration of immediately felt needs, usually physical and material in nature, and to exclude or demote the concern for formality when it comes to fidelity to authoritative procedures: “in Platonic terms, democracy is the regime of the body and its needs, because democracy loves equality, and bodily existence is the one thing we all have in common.” (Coats 1992, 102.) Oakeshott’s deep understanding of the contingency of current arrangements and *lex*, as well as the role of politics in changing them, thus also implies an understanding, or at least the possibility, of the ‘republican ideal’ of citizenship. Certainly, he still does not wish to turn politics into any kind of universal duty, but, rather, citizens in a civil association understand that, in Quentin Skinner’s words, “the key contention is that public service, paradoxically enough, constitutes our only means of ensuring and maximizing our own personal liberty.” (Skinner 1993, 222.) Oakeshott’s conception of political activity as a certain kind of argumentation, deliberation and reflection of the law, which should not conflict with a prevailing educated moral sensibility capable of distinguishing between the conditions of “virtue,” the conditions of moral association

(“good conduct”), and those which are of such a kind that they should be imposed by law (“justice”), is certainly demanding for both the ‘occasional’ and professional politicians. Yet, perhaps, at the end of the day, this talent is the only one that is capable of protecting “our individual rights” from the corruption of politics and politicians in terms of their temptation to make decisions that are in line with their own interests and those of powerful pressure-groups (ibid., 223).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of Oakeshott’s figure of a politician emphatically displays how the meaning and significance he applies to contingency shapes his conceptions of political activity.

Namely, Oakeshott has always seen contingency as an inescapable element of political activity, but whereas earlier the notion of tradition included a notion of change, but not the notion of self-consciously induced change, in 1958 he seems to warn us of politicians who construct a living past, which repeats with spurious authority the utterances put into his mouth.” (Oakeshott 1958, RP, 181.) In my interpretation, the year marks the point in Oakeshott’s thought in which a ‘retrospective’ reflection really loses its authority in the sense of hinting a right course of action, even as primarily protecting current conditions, for a politician to take. This is not to imply that Oakeshott later began to praise some kind of ‘future politics’ as the politics of big projects or the sudden remodelling of civil association. Instead, contingency is seen as indivisible in all human relationships, whether they are long-term, such as states, or short-term practices and thus, all situations comprise a situation of choice for an agent. Political activity does not work against change, because contingency, change and choice are inherent aspects of the understanding of “civil freedom” in a civil association, in which *cives* are related to each other only in their acknowledgement of the authority of *respublica*. For Oakeshott, the deliberate alteration of conditions is the emblem of *lex* as a human responsibility and that it is a condition of the durability of civil association (*On Human Conduct*, 138). If politics were understood in any other manner than as a deliberate and reflected argumentation for change in *lex*, it would not respond to the situation of continuous modification by agents of the vernacular language of morals in their performances and their (hoped-for) self-understanding as contingent agents. That is, it would soon become an association in terms of coercion.

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RP Oakeshott, M. 1991. *Rationalism in Politics*. New and expanded edition. Foreword by Timothy Fuller. Indianapolis: Liberty Press.

MPM Oakeshott, Michael (1993): *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*. The Harvard Lectures. Edited by Shirley Robin Letwin. Introduction by Kenneth Minogue. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

RPM Oakeshott, Michael (1993): *Religion, Politics and The Moral life*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

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