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# MICHAEL OAKESHOTT AND THE CONVERSATIONAL PARADIGM OF POLITICS

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As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries.

(Oakeshott 1959, 490.)

There are two popular lines of interpretation as regards Michael Oakeshott and his relationship to politics. The first, which currently seems to be gaining popularity, is to emphasize his character as a philosopher whose real achievements lie elsewhere than in the seedy area of *political* philosophy. His epistemology is seen as separate from and higher in rank than his understanding of politics. Oakeshott's master metaphor of *conversation* is seen as an unproblematic continuation of his earlier theory of modes (Oakeshott 1933), which refers to an epistemological claim of the existence of independent spheres of human experience. Interpreters of this kind also like to suggest that Oakeshott himself actually disregarded politics (see, e.g. Nardin 2001). The second line of interpreters largely share this latter view, although their intention is to emphasize that Oakeshott misunderstood the nature of politics. They maintain that Oakeshott advocated political passivism in the form of the habitual conformation to political tradition. (E.g. Crick 1963; 1991, Gellner 1980, Pitkin 1976) Conversation is seen as an embodiment of this passive understanding of politics.

The politics of conversation is identified with political conservatism, in which the past offers the main source of political consultation.

In this article, I wish to present a part alternative and part complementary interpretation of Oakeshott's metaphor of conversation to the aforementioned views by viewing the metaphor as essentially linked to his conception of political activity. What I refer to as Oakeshott's *conversational paradigm* of politics presents us with a specific understanding of politics that accentuates the importance of manners and procedures in political activity. I also argue here that Oakeshott's understanding of politics models certain features particularly of parliamentary politics. I suggest that the nuances in Oakeshott's understanding of the politics of conversation shift in concordance with both contemporary politics and his time perspective as regards the direction of political deliberation, i.e. the past, present or future and their changing combinations. The metaphor of conversation first signifies a conservative paradigm of parliamentary politics as a place of discussion, although one that is limited mainly to the elite. The elite are seen as hereditarily proficient in the art of politics. Next, the metaphor of conversation underlines the importance of parliamentary procedures and rules in relation to political activity. Lastly, in light of Oakeshott's late theorizing on political activity in the 1970s, we can assign a rhetorical meaning to the politics of conversation, which emphasizes the deliberation between different alternatives.

Furthermore, I suggest that Oakeshott's 'philosophical' understanding of the conversation of mankind as taking place between the "voices" of philosophy, poetry, practice and science has important links to his conception of political activity (Oakeshott 1959). This latter point is implied by the simple fact that Oakeshott formulated his metaphor of conversation in relation to political activity before its formulation in relation to philosophy. Moreover, in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (1959), Oakeshott describes friendship (and love) as an ambiguous, non-utilitarian practical activity that is capable of constituting a "connection between the voices of poetry and practice, a channel of common understanding" (ibid., 538). Oakeshott had previously used the notion of friendship in connection with his conception of *conservative politics*. Rules play an important role in this kind of politics, exemplifying that an activity is carried out for its own sake. The notion of friendship is seen as a predecessor of Oakeshott's famous concept of *civil association*, in which politics, for its own part, is described as possessing attributes that he previously connected more exclusively only to philosophy and poetry. Politics is

about promoting or withstanding a change in the rules, the acknowledgement of which forms the basis of civil association. Importantly, the citizens do not necessarily have anything more in common with each other than this acknowledgement of rules and the preceding authority to prescribe them. (Oakeshott 1975b, 128) It is a type of association that Oakeshott finds morally tolerable for the existence of a modern state as a compulsory association (Oakeshott 1975c, 460). There is no real politics in an *enterprise association*, since rules are only instrumental in the achievement of a known end, which structures this other ideal type of human association. (Oakeshott 1975b, 128). In keeping with this idea, I concentrate on the metaphor of conversation in order to argue below that we cannot view Oakeshott's philosophy as superior to his political philosophy or political thought, but, rather, there exists a sympathetic relationship between the two.

I am not suggesting here that Oakeshott is first and foremost a representative of British conservatism. Nor do I wish to portray him as someone who has retained an essentially unchanged conception of politics throughout his long career. Rather, I examine his position as a significant theorist of political activity whose understanding of politics as conversation can be compared with such eminent contemporary descriptions of politics as Hannah Arendt's new beginnings and Isaiah Berlin's essential conflicts. The politics of conversation can be understood as opposing all attempts to fuse politics with administration or engineering, in regards to the respect of procedures and rules and the opposition to the view that only results matter in politics. It is a significant contribution to a line of twentieth century political theory which both defends and defines politics as a specific activity and deals with the 'essential' contingency of institutions, laws and other arrangements.

### **Conversation and conservatism**

Oakeshott is perhaps most famous for his notion of *rationalism* in politics, which at least partially explains his reputation as someone who dislikes politics in general. In a nutshell, by rationalist politics Oakeshott is referring to the incorrect assimilation of politics into some other activity. His notion of rationalist politics can be seen as an umbrella concept for the criticism of various attempts to reduce "politics" to administration, economic fabrication, engineering, or a scientist understanding. In the essay *Rationalism in Politics* (1947),

in which he outlined this notion, Oakeshott's view of contemporary politics was particularly pessimistic. According to him, in the aftermath of the war, "almost all politics today have become Rationalist or near-Rationalist" and politics aspires to impose a uniform condition upon humankind (ibid., 5). Hence, if taken as a prime example of his understanding of politics, this essay has led to the false assumption that Oakeshott possesses a general disregard for politics. His critique of rationalist politics has been misunderstood as a critique of political activity as a whole.

Namely, it is important to note that in this essay, as in the majority of his other texts on politics, the negative conception as the description of a perverted understanding of political activity is accompanied by a description of 'normal' or 'proper' political activity.<sup>1</sup> Oakeshott thus operates with the *duality* and *ambiguity* of politics. For example, the political styles or languages of rationalist politics and "the politics of faith" are contrasted with 'rational', "proper" or 'traditional' politics and the politics of scepticism (Oakeshott 1947, Oakeshott 1996, compare e.g. with Gallie 1973). I focus particularly on these latter types of descriptions in order to understand Oakeshott's notion of the politics of conversation. This also requires a simultaneous examination of the different levels of Oakeshott's writing, which facilitates an understanding of how his reading of contemporary works and political situations adds a more concrete level of content to his sometimes rather vague philosophical descriptions of political activity. Focusing on Oakeshott's positive descriptions of specifically parliamentary politics also enables us to re-think the question of his political elitism and its transformation.

Namely, in the immediate postwar years, Oakeshott's understanding of rational politics is identical to his understanding of 'traditional', conservative politics. In a personal letter to Karl Popper, in which, to my knowledge, his metaphor of conversation appears for the first time, Oakeshott contrasts his notion of the "politics of conversation" with (Popper's) "politics of argument", which he identifies with rationalist politics. Rationalist politics views a single problem in a society, such as unemployment, as so overwhelming that solving it requires upsetting the entire society (Oakeshott 1948b.).<sup>2</sup> Proper politics, instead, should maintain the society as a whole, with all of its various arrangements, as coherent, stable and progressive (ibid). In conversation, there is "something else much stronger" than reason which unites men, e.g. "a common civilization (where one exists), common habits of behaviour (where they exist) - neither of which are

rational, dependent upon argument or common to *all* men." (ibid.) It is thus in this characterisation that Oakeshott first attaches his politics of conversation to the concept of *tradition*, although he does not use this word in this particular letter.

It can be reasonably argued that it is rather impossible to carry out an unambiguous, "correct" interpretation of Oakeshott's concept of tradition. According to Samuel Coleman, Oakeshott "slips from the employment of tradition to refer to the entire culture or the process of enculturation of a society to the meaning which refers to a single tradition of that society." (Coleman 1968, 249.) In retrospect, it seems possible to read almost anything into Oakeshott's concept of tradition from a theory of human behaviour to the notion of traditions as being appropriate contexts for reading philosophy. (See, Soininen 2003, 109-110).

There has, however, been a rather solid duality in earlier interpretation specifically of political tradition in Oakeshott's texts. The first course has been to emphasize the concept as embodying his conservative traditionalism with its inherent fear of "the democratic principles which challenge privilege and status." (Crossman 1958, 137.) Political cynicism and the mystical qualities of tradition are also stressed (ibid., 136, Thomas 2000, 208). The second course is to stress the fluid and unfixed character of traditions as exemplifying the possibilities for political action (see, e.g. Mouffe 1993; Soininen 2003, 109). I suggest here that it is possible to find a kind of "explanation" of this contradiction in his interpretations by concentrating on the theme of change in Oakeshott's time perspective and his view of proper, parliamentary politics.

The accusations of elitism that are made against Oakeshott tend to be formulated rather generally by referring to his (Burkean) conservatism. And undeniably, in a different sense than his later "conservative disposition" would suggest (Oakeshott 1956, 409), Oakeshott's tone in the postwar years is conservative in his defence of the parliamentary tradition and the English manner of politics. Neil McInnes has observed that the contrast Oakeshott proposed was previously stated by Benjamin Disraeli in 1872: Both admit the inevitability of change yet insisting that change should be brought about in deference to manners, customs and traditions instead of abstract principles or general doctrines (McInnes 2000).

In a tone similar to other critics of central planning (and the Atlee government), Oakeshott insists that the task of the *politician* is to prevent the concentration of power in a society, especially in the

form of monopolies (Oakeshott 1948a, 486; see, e.g. Hayek 1944). The second function of the politician in office is to seek out the current problems within a given society and to set them right by “bringing to bear upon the legal principles which constitute the recognized method of adjustment in any experienced and civilized society.” (Ibid., 487.) Oakeshott adds that the politician must have in mind “not only ‘the individual’... and ‘the government’, but also the vast mass of healthy relations between the members of a society (some established by law and others by custom) which, from any point of view except that of revolutionary *jusqu’aboutisme*, are more important than the few which are morbid.” (ibid.) This description raises a question: Who judges the relations healthy? Hence, the criticism of Oakeshott’s thought as containing a certain kind of political elitism is correct. The politics of conversation is such that it seeks advice from the past:

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 1948a, 489.)

Oakeshott’s conception of politics at the time can quite accurately be criticized with regard to its indication that tradition somehow ‘hints’ at the existence of an inherently correct course of political action. The idea of political deliberation as resorting to advice from the past tends, of course, to favour the status quo. In addition, Oakeshott’s view of politics has been criticized for its “lack of realism” (Miller 1962, 425). For example, Bruce Miller points out that “Oakeshott hardly ever mentions political parties; yet parties are a main part of the driving force behind nearly all modern government, and they are essentially partisan in character.” (Ibid.) Keeping these points in mind, from a parliamentary perspective, we are able to discern another aspect in this ‘traditional’ politics of conversation which indicates a more dramatic change in Oakeshott’s conservatism than is often perceived.

In the essay *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott contrasts “the consciously planned and deliberately executed” rationalist “politics of destruction and creation” with “the politics of repair”, which is unconscious, habitual and customary in nature (Oakeshott 1947, 26). He also speaks of practical and technical knowledge, which are both necessary aspects of political activity. By the latter concept he is referring to knowledge that can be formulated into rules and techniques. Practical knowledge, conversely, cannot be taught or learned, but only

imparted and acquired (ibid., 15). As I see it, Oakeshott's emphasis on the importance of practical knowledge in political activity points primarily to the knowledge of *parliamentary practice*. It is also in this respect that he seemed at this particular time to entertain some views that could even be seen as belonging the sphere of 'old' conservatism.

Firstly, it is a well-known fact that Oakeshott describes rationalist politics as a style of politics that derives from the post-Renaissance period (ibid., 5). However, it is in recent times that the "Rationalist character has become cruder and more vulgar." (Ibid., 23.) Rationalist politics is characteristic of the inexperienced, and in this essay he is referring to those who are politically immature as both politicians and voters, particularly in Great Britain. Oakeshott judges the former in more direct terms:

...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 their 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. (Ibid., 42.)

Thus, Oakeshott does not support contemporary party conservatism, and he rejects e.g. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* for the simple reason that it is a doctrine (ibid., 26). Politicians lack a knowledge of the political traditions of their society that "in the most favourable circumstances, takes two or three generations to acquire." (Ibid., 36.) They lack the knowledge of how to practice their profession, which, "not long ago, was the common possession of even extreme opponents in English politics." (Ibid., 37.) Oakeshott's vision of proper politics is of earlier origin. In a letter to Popper, he writes:

...under the inspiration of *true* rationalism you seem to me to break up political life into atoms of political action and to take the business of politics to be the right & reasonable solution of a series of problems. But political life only becomes this when it is governed by ideologies: *normally*, in the 19th century, it was never this. (Oakeshott 1948b, emphasis; SS.)

The "concrete" model upon which Oakeshott's politics of conversation is based thus seems to be nineteenth century parliamentary politics. Importantly, this model seems to have been particularly remi-



niscient of the period before the introduction of the 1867 Reform Act, after which political parties began more to appeal to wider audiences in their rhetoric. In this sense, the franchise meant an increased emphasis on “ideological politics” in Great Britain.

Thus, at this point, Oakeshott’s politics of conversation can be compared with Burke’s views. Firstly, Oakeshott speaks of political tradition as if there was only one in any given society at any given time, and as if it offered the acting politicians the possibility to consult the voice of the past. In other words, politics is seen as a conversation between the past and the present. In addition, Oakeshott seems to support a view of the concept of parliament that is similar to that of Burke’s. For Burke, in 1774, the parliament was “a *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with one interest, that of the whole.” (Burke 1774, 64.) A member of parliament does not present local interests, but acts first and primarily as a member of parliament (*ibid.*). In 1948, Oakeshott acknowledges the politician’s need for policy and programme, but denies that the Conservative view has something to do with “catchwords, slogans” and visions”, i.e. with a rhetoric that he sees as appealing to the inexperienced voters (Oakeshott 1948a, 486). Oakeshott also speaks of the parliament as emphatically “one” body in a society; a politician, whether in government or in opposition, must understand that his primary *function* is to disperse dangerous concentrations of power in a society.<sup>3</sup> The politics of conversation thus also refers to the inherent parliamentary skills of the politician that differ from those that appeal to wider audiences. In fact, Oakeshott explicitly warns that “under a Labour Administration, Parliament is demoted to the position of an executive body for carrying out the items of a programme determined by an irresponsible body.” (*Ibid.*, 480.) The roots of Oakeshott’s view of parties seem to extend farther back than the twentieth century. In addition, Oakeshott’s view of politics seems to require a certain consensus among parliamentary politicians concerning their primary task as dispersing monopolies and protecting the Parliament from the excessive influence of outside bodies. This consensus, as well as a politician’s mastery of parliamentary skills, characterizes Oakeshott’s view of good parliamentary politics at the time.

## The sea of politics and the rules of navigation

Every debating assembly needs rules by which to conduct its business.

(Bailey 1971, 64.)

..remarkably enough it was Englishmen (who are otherwise not greatly disposed towards conversation) who first explored the recognition that politics is supremely eligible to be an conversational art."

(Oakeshott 2004, 195.)

It is in the book review<sup>4</sup> *The Political Economy of Freedom* (1949) that Oakeshott repeats his formulation of politics as a conversation. Importantly, however, he now states that it is such politics in "which past, present and future each has a voice; and though one or other of them may in occasion properly prevail, none permanently dominates, and on this account we are free." (Oakeshott 1949, 388.) It is freedom rather than tradition as such that is valued here, and the earlier elitist tone seems to have disappeared both in the sense of appealing to the past and reserving political skills for the more "experienced" class in a given society. In my view, Oakeshott did not revert back to this kind of elitism, despite the fact that such accusations were common as regards his inaugural lecture, *Political Education* (1951). (See e.g. Al Anon 1962).

In this lecture, Oakeshott wishes to present a philosophical description - as opposed to a prescription - of how political activity is to be understood. He repeats the formulation of politics as a conversation as opposed to an argument (Oakeshott 1951, 58). The politics of conversation is opposed to ideological politics, in which one *thinks* that he is acting according to some premeditated principles, although in 'reality' doing so is impossible. Oakeshott admittedly seems to regard those who recognize the conversational nature of politics as more politically skilled than those who do not, but he does not limit this education of knowledge to any specific group of people in a society. Political activity springs from "the existing traditions of behaviour," and the politics of a community is learned and practised in the same manner as its language (ibid., 56, 62).

As to the duality of the interpretations of this text in particular as regards tradition, my view is that it is essential to recognize that what he did preserve of his earlier conception of politics is precisely the notion of parliament and parliamentary skills as the embodiment

of the politics of conversation, although he rejected the connotations of one class as being better equipped to engage in politics.<sup>5</sup> When approached from a parliamentary perspective, Oakeshott's notion of political activity loses many of its "mystical" elements and instead presents political education as "a matter of coming to understand a tradition," i.e. the arrangements and institutions of one's society as "the footprints of thinkers and statesmen" and "learning how to participate in a conversation." (Ibid., 62, 64.) For Oakeshott, the politics of conversation is "our manner of speaking." (Ibid., 62.) Oakeshott thus suggests a contingent, anti-foundational view of political activity in which "authority is diffused between past, present and future" and men thus "sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination." (Ibid., 60, 61.) Yet political activity still retains some more established patterns in parliamentary practices which help in the navigation of this bottomless sea. Oakeshott's paradigm of politics thus takes on a conversational character "modelled" after parliamentary politics. He suggests that the art of politics be understood as the possession of parliamentary skills and the command of one's political language, although he leaves the question of the actual content of politics open. In this sense, the traditions of e.g. different groups in a given society are seen as multiple and diverse (see, *ibid.*, 69). The earlier element of consensus, which appeared in the form of the agreement on the primary function of politicians as being that of preventing monopolies, has thus disappeared. Yet, the reference to tradition stresses that a politician must to a certain extent master and respect the rules of parliamentary procedures in order to be successful in politics.

In his later works, the time perspective indeed recommended by Oakeshott in the act of political deliberation tends to be more of an accentuated relationship between the present and the future than a reversion back to the past. In *The Activity of Being an Historian* (1958), Oakeshott seems to warn us about politicians who construct "a 'living past', which repeats with spurious authority the utterances put into its mouth." (Oakeshott 1958, 181.) Although he is primarily concerned with the conditions of invoking an historical past in this essay, he also criticizes "retrospective politics," which uses the past as "a field in which we exercise our moral and political opinions, like whippets in a meadow on Sunday afternoon." (Ibid.) Oakeshott's conservative *disposition* is such that it reveres the present because of its familiarity (Oakeshott 1956, 408). Politics is characterized as an activity of inno-

vation which seeks to improve an existing situation. A conservative prefers small and limited innovations to large and indefinite modes of change; "he has no impulse to sail uncharted seas; for him, there is no magic in being lost, bewildered or shipwrecked. If he is forced to navigate the unknown, he sees virtue in heaving the lead every inch of the way." (Ibid., 412.)

A conservative in politics enjoys the activity as opposed to exploiting it (ibid.). In the late 1950s and 1960s, Oakeshott describes the language of politics as the language of desire and aversion, of preference and choice, of approval and disapproval and of persuasion; as rhetoric, in other words (Oakeshott 1962, 206). Yet, politics is a skill that is not only about "getting things done". The rules of conduct are precisely those tools which enable one to both join the game and enjoy it for its own sake. Although rules can be and often are changed from time to time, they should be altered rather conservatively, as they "prevent extraneous collisions and they conserve human energy." (Oakeshott 1956, 421.) They would quickly lose their value if constantly challenged.

The types of rules that are respected by the conservatives include "the conduct of a public meeting or the procedure of a court of debate in the House of Commons or the procedure of a court of law." (ibid., 421.) Having respect for procedures brings continuity to the politics of innovation, although they are occasionally trimmed. It is clear that Oakeshott wishes to retain the important aspect of parliamentary, conversational politics in a situation in which it is of course the voters who ultimately choose who to elect to Parliament (see, ibid., 432). He believes, or at least hopes, that *individuals*, as opposed to "'anti-individuals'" or "'mass men,'" will choose a candidate who respects their individuality (Oakeshott 1961, 379). He emphasizes the importance of the practice of "'parliamentary government'" as opposed to "'popular government'" ; a debating assembly instead of a "'work shop'" (ibid.). In the latter style of government, an MP's action seems to be limited exclusively to the implementation of ends dictated by the voting public. However, in reality, Oakeshott sees the mandate as an illusion which releases 'mass men' from the burden of choosing for themselves. In a debating assembly, on the other hand, all political goals are pointedly alterable and controversial, which accentuates the significance of political judgement and the responsibility of individual MPs. Oakeshott emphasizes that the existence of rules in politics provides an aspect of moderation, restraint, deflation, pacification and reconciliation to politics as opposed to stoking "the fires of desire." (Oakeshott 1956, 432.)

In short, then, *the first two characteristics* of what I call Oakeshott's conversational paradigm of politics are its *time perspective of political deliberation* as a conversation between the past, present and future and its *clear reference specifically to parliamentary politics*. In addition, when he speaks in more strictly philosophical terms, we can see echoes of this more 'concrete' paradigm in the background of Oakeshott's thought;<sup>6</sup> the manners of conversation that the House of Commons impart are an essential aspect of his view of politics (Oakeshott 1950, 99). Oakeshott appreciates parliamentary practices and procedures of conversation as essential aspects of "British parliamentary democracy," which is not "an approximation to some ideally 'democratic' system of government" but an "instrument of remarkable refinement and responsiveness, thrown up in the course of our political history, capable of digesting the enterprises of zealots." (Oakeshott 1964, xxiv.) For me, this characterization demonstrates Oakeshott's fundamental appreciation of political activity in a diverse society.<sup>7</sup>

### **Conversational relationships: Philosophy, poetry and politics**

...the procedure of the House of Commons has in large measure been inherited from more leisurely times...  
(Bailey 1971, 90.)

As Oakeshott describes it in 1959, in *the conversation of mankind*, the manifold of human activities engage in a discussion of civilization which has no external end, but in which the inherent tension between seriousness and playfulness plays an important role. As a serious engagement, each voice pursues conclusions within its own sphere of activity, and without this the "conversation would lack impetus." (Oakeshott 1959, 493.) Yet, "in its participation in the conversation each voice learns to be playful, learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognize itself as a voice among voices." (Ibid., 493.) There are passages of argument and inquiry in this conversation, but it is the ability to participate in the conversation which is far more important than "the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world, or to contrive a better world." (Ibid., 490.)

The definition of activity as carried out for the sake of its own enjoyment is crucial to the description of the conversation of mankind, and I hope to demonstrate in this article how this view of conversation is also connected to Oakeshott's understanding of politics. Oake-

shott describes conversation in terms that are very similar to his description of a politics in which practices and procedures represent the kind of conversational politics which emphasize the journey as more important than arriving at a destination. The politics of conversation is not, however, identical to the conversation of mankind, because in politics speakers share the same idiom or manner of speaking, while in the conversation of mankind the idioms are plural (see, *ibid.*, 489). Yet, the description of the latter as a meeting-place of a manifold of civilization bears a significant resemblance to Oakeshott's descriptions of 'proper', usually parliamentary, politics.

An important source of support for the argument that Oakeshott's metaphor of conversation builds a kind of bridge between his philosophy and political thought is the book *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, which was published posthumously in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Here, Oakeshott says that the "poles of our politics" may be reformulated as "earnest" and "play". These are both opponents and partners, and they correspond to the politics of faith and scepticism. The first style presupposes power, which sets an activity in a certain direction and is inherently earnest and "serious" due to its sole purpose of achieving a specific result. The latter style, on the other hand, represents extreme play; "it is the play within 'play'." (Oakeshott 1996, 112.) Oakeshott describes the politics of faith as a style of government in terms of debate and argument, not conversation. "Opposition" has no place here, since the direction of activity has already been determined. (*Ibid.*, 111.) Scepticism, for its own part, needs the politics of faith and the belief that there is a victory to be won in order to be rescued from the fallacious "belief that there is *nothing* serious in mortality." (*Ibid.*, 113.) Unlike the "serious" activity of the politics of faith, the politics of "play" and conversation is distinguished from "'ordinary life'." In scepticism, "power is shared conversationally between a multitude of different interests, persons and offices, governments 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.) This kind of politics insists "upon formality in the conduct of affairs; the terminal result subordinated to the manner of its achievement; the understanding of debate as conversation and as a perpetual partner in the activity of governing; the recognition of devices (such as majority decisions) as nothing more than convenient conventions; the understanding of the limited significance of victory." (*Ibid.*, 112.)

Thus, it seems to me that here Oakeshott has constructed one of the 'pre-phase' formulations of his later characterization of the conversation of mankind precisely in relation to his understanding of political activity.<sup>9</sup> And, this description, read together with his other descriptions of the politics of conversation, pose at least a serious challenge to such interpretations which disparage the role of political thinking in relation to his philosophy. This view includes the notion that Oakeshott's philosophy also underwent a change toward a more conversational or sceptical mode. For example, Steven Gerencser, who argues that Oakeshott's philosophy moved from absolute idealism towards scepticism through his reading of Thomas Hobbes, noted that Oakeshott probably quietly retreated from his earlier diminution of politics in the earlier edition of his *Introduction to Leviathan* in 1946 to a more supportive view in the 1975 edition. He dropped the passage disparaging politics as a second-rate form of activity from the later edition (Gerencser 2000, 107, see, Oakeshott 1946; 1975). For me, this is more proof that Oakeshott himself clearly acknowledged the interplay between his political thought and philosophy.

In *The Voice of Poetry*, not only is the essential "playfulness" of the conversation of mankind described in similar terms as the politics of conversation had been before, but Oakeshott also sees politics as assimilated into the voice of *practice* in modern Europe (Oakeshott 1959, 493, fn.). The practical world is composed of both images of desire and aversion and images of approval and disapproval (ibid., 501). "In recent centuries," Oakeshott says, the conversation has become boring, as it has been taken over by the voices of practical activity and the voice of science (ibid., 493). The fact that Oakeshott barely mentions politics at all in this essay should not be taken as evidence of the minor importance of political thinking in relation to his philosophy. Practice is actually described in similar terms to the politics of faith as having previously belonged to the sphere of "ordinary life" and rationalist politics. This view is common throughout his understanding of politics; in 'real life' rationalist politics prevail, but the historical and philosophical understanding of politics and the parliamentary style of politics represent the positive ideal type of political activity. In this essay, the language of approval and disapproval, which belongs to the sphere of the practical world, concerns the moral attitude in which all other selves are recognized as ends as opposed to means to ends (ibid., 502). There are also aspects of essentially conversational characteristics present in practical activity, because we are all equal members of a community of selves in the context of morals (ibid., 502).



Oakeshott also reminds us of the ancient Greek understanding of politics as a "poetic" activity in which speaking was pre-eminent, not only in order to persuade but also in order to compose memorable verbal images (*ibid.*, 493-94, fn.). For Oakeshott, the voice of poetry is such that the mere act of imagining is constitutive of its "contemplation," which is why "'fact' and 'not-fact' do not appear" in poetic activity (*ibid.*, 509). It is a distinctively Aristotelian "non-laborious activity," and because "it is playful and not businesslike, because it is free from care and released from both logical necessity and pragmatic requirement," it seems to be characteristic of inactivity (*ibid.*, 514). Thus, poetry, too, is described in terms that resemble those used to describe the politics of conversation or scepticism earlier; Oakeshott says that the disposition of a conservative in politics is often mistaken for inactivity (Oakeshott 1956, 412). On the other hand, the proper context in which to consider poetic utterances is not that of a "society" engaged in practical enterprise, nor one that is devoted to scientific inquiry. Instead, they should be considered in terms of the conversation of mankind. However, he also notes that intimations of contemplative imagining can be found in practical activity itself that are capable of responding to the voice of poetry, of hearing "the voice of reason" and submitting to its rule, not in behaving rationally (Oakeshott 1959, 536). Thus, although often overlooked, Oakeshott here implies that practice - and thus also politics - are not only able to converse with other voices but may also resemble poetry in the creation of new images.

Thus, in order to understand the later development of Oakeshott's conception of politics, it is important to take into account the mediatory figure of friendship (and love) as a kind of "semi-poetic" practical activity. Unlike other common relationships of practical activity, this relationship does not end with the achievement of some sought-after result. Instead, friends are only concerned with their mutual enjoyment of one other:

A friend is not somebody one trusts to behave in certain manner, who has certain useful qualities, who holds acceptable opinions; he is somebody who evokes interest, delight, unreasoning loyalty, and who (almost) engages contemplative imagination. The relationship of friends is dramatic, not utilitarian. (*ibid.*, 537.)

For Oakeshott, friendship and love are "ambiguously practical activities which intimate contemplation and may be said to constitute



a connection between the voices of poetry and practice, a channel of common understanding." (ibid., 538.) Oakeshott has also previously used this image of friendship to exemplify the character of rules or tools in political activity in the essay *On being conservative* (1956). Here, too, Oakeshott describes the relationship as not based on the achievement of any specific goal or result but as something in which the participants engage solely for its own sake (Oakeshott 1956, 416). The bond between friends is one of familiarity, not usefulness, and the disposition is conservative, not 'progressive'.

Also: And what is true of friendship is not less true of other experiences - of patriotism, for example, and of conversation - each of which demands a conservative disposition as a condition of its enjoyment.

(ibid., 417.)

It is with the help of these images of poetic activity and friendship that we are able to highlight the *two other characteristics* of the conversational paradigm of politics in Oakeshott's thought than the conversation between past, present and future and the specific respect for parliamentary practices. The conversational paradigm of politics can ultimately be formulated, referring to *On Human Conduct* (1975) and other texts of the 1970s, so that *politics is an equal participant in the conversation with the other "voices" of mankind, philosophy, poetry and science. Politics possesses characteristics that resemble the characteristics of both poetry and philosophy.* Yet, we must not forget the earlier formulations of conversation when considering the interaction between Oakeshott's philosophy and political thought (compare with Nardin 2001, 232-233).

Namely, the figure of friendship may be said to be a predecessor of the ideal type of civil association in Oakeshott's thought. As I mentioned above, this association is only constituted in the acknowledgement of the authority of common rules, i.e. *lex*. It has no external purpose and thus never ends in terms of its achievement, as an enterprise association does. The cives recognize themselves as equal to each other. (Oakeshott 1975b, 128-29). Oakeshott also characterizes 'the law' of civil association as being like "rules of a game which are directions, not about how to win but about how to play, or the rules of public debate, which do not tell a speaker what to say and are wholly indifferent to any particular conclusion." (Oakeshott 1975c, 454.)

It is only to civil association that Oakeshott ascribes political activity; an enterprise association can only possess politics in a meta-

phorical sense (Oakeshott 1975b, 163). In this “least burdensome” of human associations, politics is concerned with the deliberation over the rules from the standpoint of their desirability, i.e. it is concerned with the civil obligations of the associates, not with the Lasswellian question of “who gets what, when and how.” (Oakeshott 1975c, 455, 460.) Here, Oakeshott also describes politics in terms that he previously ascribed to poetry; politics imagines the rules different from the present, and not only in the sense of “sensing” the inherent intimations of a tradition. He does not claim that political imagination could discover something “new” as if completely out of the blue, but says that, similarly to the intimations of many moral practices, “a lively political imagination may recognize” what may generate change “before they are half over the moral horizon.” (Oakeshott 1975b, 180.) Similarly to his earlier description of friendship, we can see the rules of civil association as “ambiguously practical activities” that intimate ‘contemplation’, which is political activity as a reflection of the desirability of rules.

Oakeshott says that if the system of rules were “without ‘play’ between its components, or if it would intimate nothing which it did not enunciate, or if this consideration were read as an unconditional principle, this would of course, prohibit innovation.” (ibid., 179.) A politician must also have the capacity to grasp something of the multitude of practices that are at play in a civil association in order to make legal innovations.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Oakeshott also assigns some characteristics of philosophy (and later theorizing) to politics. Political imagination is to some extent able to examine the “quality and style” not of each “voice”, like philosophy, but of a multitude of different practices, which it is then able to use as “platforms” for other examinations (see, Oakeshott 1959, 491; 1975b, 6-13). When speaking of the relationship of theoretical or philosophical knowledge to human conduct, what Oakeshott actually denies is not that theoretical understanding could be of any value to men of practice, but that theory could supersede and take the place of all other understandings and languages (Oakeshott 1975b, 29). In the re-interpretation of Plato’s tale of the cave, Oakeshott says that the returning theorist is recognizable as “a clever fellow from whom there is much to be learned.” (ibid., 30.) Thus practice and theory are not entirely distinguished from one another in the fashion of his earlier notion, e.g. in the *Experience and Its Modes* (1933). And, if we think in terms of the conversation of mankind, we can see that in *On Human Conduct* politics is not only capable of participating in a discussion with the other voices in the

conversation of mankind on equal terms without becoming eristic or dominant, but is also capable of learning from them (see, Oakeshott 1959, 492).

## Conclusion

My aim in this article is to have demonstrated that it is possible to interpret Oakeshott's metaphor of conversation as possessing at least four different characteristics which have shifted in emphasis over the decades. While these characteristics do not necessarily appear in same texts, they demonstrate that his political and philosophical thought should be viewed as going hand in hand as opposed to going separately. I do not wish to claim that there is no continuity between his metaphor of the conversation of mankind and his earlier theory of human experience. Instead, I argue that we cannot paint a full picture of the metaphor by concluding that it simply juxtaposes the necessary differences between the modes and has nothing to do with "real" conversations between people (see Nardin 2001).

I also argue that we can construct a rather accurate view of the development of Oakeshott's conception of politics and refer to it as a conversational paradigm by viewing these four characteristics of the metaphor both separately and together, as I have tried to do in this article. In the late 1940s, the politics of conversation was carried out between the past, present and future, whereas by the late 1950s it was mainly between the present and the future. In addition, the parliamentary model of politics was "outdated" in the postwar years, in the sense that Oakeshott did not seem to even admit the reality of the franchise. From the 1950s onward, the politics of conversation has exclusively emphasized the importance of rules and procedures in politics. Together, these characteristics inform us of the role that the idea of parliamentary politics has played in Oakeshott's philosophical metaphor of playful conversation in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*. On the other hand, this essay anticipated how, in the 1970s, Oakeshott would attach some characteristics of philosophy and poetry to his understanding of politics. As opposed to a demonstrative undertaking, politics is ultimately a deliberative and argumentative or persuasive speaking activity which concerns the desirability of the rules of civil association, emphasizing that the rules of conversation can also be altered politically.

## NOTES

1. This marked a change in comparison to his earlier conception, however. In *The Claims of Politics* (1939), Oakeshott described political activity in general in such negative terms that he later reserved exclusively for rationalist politics.
2. In his reply, Popper says that he fully agrees with Oakeshott's view that "no problem is solved *permanently*," adding that he is happy to replace his politics of argumentation with a politics of conversation (Popper 1948).
3. The conceptions of what we might refer to as Oakeshott's conservatism and liberalism are not always at ease with each other, although I will not delve any deeper into this topic here.
4. This is a review of H.C. Simons's *Economic Policy for a Free Society*. University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1948 (see, Oakeshott 1949a, 384, fn.).
5. This view would be strongly supported if the typescript *Political Maturity*, which has been found among Oakeshott's estate, really was written by him, as would appear to be the case based on its style. There is a passage which reads: "Political maturity, properly so called, seems to me to consist chiefly in these four qualities: high professional standards within the political and administrative class; the ability, about equally distributed among persons drawn from all classes and sections of the community, to use the democratic political vocabulary; a wide variety at every level of society of professional, cultural, and other non-political bodies independent of the state, of all political parties, and of one another; and a high degree of adaptability." (LSE 1/1/41, 4.) The author also says here that the "politically articulate must not, in virtue of this competence, form a class separate from the rest of society," but that it must be politicians who negotiate and compete with each other according to "conventions that it is dangerous for them to set aside." (*ibid.*, 6.) The choice in elections is also genuine in politically mature societies because "the electors have a rough idea what the parties stand for..." (*ibid.*)
6. E.g. many descriptions of the changing nature of speeches in Parliament largely cohere with Oakeshott's differentiation between a debating assembly and a 'work shop' (see, e.g. Halifax 1957, 71).
7. In a typescript of the lecture series "The Study of Political Thought" (1960, LSE), Oakeshott writes: "Politics, from one important point of view, may be said to be the activity in which a society deals with its diversities. And, consequently a society without diversities is apt to be a society without politics." (LSE 1/1/21, 6) He also remarks that a society that has a large variety of beliefs and activities also has room for political activity. This is a significant elucidation from a philosopher who always highly values diversity and individuality.
8. The editor of the manuscripts, Timothy Fuller, estimates that it was written between 1945 and 1952.
9. Oakeshott has also described university education in terms of conversation. In a university, each study has a distinctive voice, and these voices are engaged in a "conversation which occasionally degenerated into an argument." (Oakeshott 1949b, 126.)
10. In *Political Maturity*, which must be of earlier origin if written by Oakeshott, it is said that a full understanding of the political game is rare and usually bookish and sedentary. Politicians only need to know their own part in the play. They need no knowledge of all the parts of it, nor must they see the play as a whole. (LSE 1/1/41, 3-4.)

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