

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Why Oakeshott?

1: Oakeshott and Politics: The Perspective

It is quite common to speak about Michael Oakeshott's (1901-1990) conception of politics. One famous formula is, of course, Oakeshott's metaphor of politics as a "bottomless and boundless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination."¹ As Oakeshott himself anticipated, this characterization of politics has affected many people representing many different genres: for progressivists, it represents the death of ideals, but it also delights *die Schwindelfreien*,² who feel no vertigo in the face of it and welcome its anti-foundationality. Equally famously, politics appears as the custody of a manner of living, reflecting Oakeshott's reputation as a conservative. Furthermore, some have characterized his conception of politics as a "politics of conversation," further accentuating its anti-foundational and rhetorical nature. For me, none of these characterizations alone is satisfactory. Yet, each one has its own place in the portrait of Oakeshottian politics that I paint in this book.

My main theme can perhaps best be expressed by presenting two quotations. In 1939, Oakeshott wrote on politics:

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.³

In 1975, politics was characterized instead as calling for:

- [1] M. Oakeshott 1951, *Political Education*, RP, p.60.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] M. Oakeshott 1939, *The Claims of Politics*, RPML, p. 93. The 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.⁴

Whereas in Oakeshott's early thought politics was seen as better suited to people who were mentally simple or vulgar, especially in comparison with poets and philosophers, in the later account the ideal type of politics required a specific and high level of political intelligence.⁵ Thus, although one need not need take all of Oakeshott's most pointed expressions literally, the differences between the texts from the late 1930s and the mid 1970s, which is also the period examined in this book, are still so great that I find it important to pointedly examine the *development* of his conception of political activity in order to do justice to the flexibility and sensitivity exhibited by his political thought in its contemporary context without compromising any of its originality.

I will argue that it is incorrect to speak about Oakeshott's conception of political activity as such, as it must be dissolved into many different conceptions. It might initially seem as though there are 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* towards political activity shifts from near disdain towards what could be called applauding of politics. Second, the *elements* that Oakeshott attaches to his description of political activity imply an increasing emphasis on politics as a *reflective* activity as opposed to the habitual continuation or preservation of a political tradition.

In short, then, I examine in the following why and how Oakeshott's attitude towards political activity changed. Further, I deal with the question of what *specific aspects* are present in Michael Oakeshott's conception(s) of politics and the related terms in the context of other contemporary ideas and theories. How does Oakeshott's vocabulary change over the course of this period? Are these changes significant? What kind of relevance does Oakeshott have in the contemporary discussions on political theory and thinking? These questions form the main body of the problematic examined in this book.

I will examine Oakeshott's conception of political activity in the British context, mainly within the specific context of post-

[4] OHC, p.180.

[5] Ibid.

war political thought. It is important to clarify some of the aspects which contributed to my decision to limit my examination to this primary context. First, in my view there *is* something called “British postwar political thought,” which should be distinguished from the broader genre of “Anglophone political thought” that includes the United States. Secondly, I claim that Oakeshott occupies a significant place in the sphere of British postwar political thinking. Thirdly, we must take a specific interest in the relationship between the two. My assertion in this book is that the examination of Oakeshott’s vocabulary and its connection to the vocabularies of other contemporary thinkers enables us to uncover innovative ways of conceptualizing the ‘political’ and ‘politics’ in relation to some key concepts of British political thought. I also argue that Oakeshott’s political thought develops through interaction with his interpretations of ‘real’ contemporary British politics; Oakeshott’s paradigm conception of political activity is inherently British.

The perspective from which I approach Oakeshott’s *oeuvre* and the British and Anglo-Saxon debate is that of an “outsider.” By this I mean that I retain a certain detachment from the academic discussions and research conventions of Great Britain, which allows me to focus my research on this proximate period. Of course, some problems do arise in relation to this specific period. To use an Oakeshottian term, the postwar discussion surrounding politics is already so “thickly orchestrated” that any attempt to write a kind of overall ‘truth’ about it would be futile. This, however, is by no means my intention here. Rather, placing a rather limited bulk of texts, i.e. Oakeshott’s postwar *oeuvre*, at the centre of my study and examining them in relation to other texts allows me to seriously examine even the fine nuances in the use of concepts. My aim is not to produce any great sweep of political theory, but to contribute to the re-evaluation of Oakeshott’s work. Also, I leave Oakeshott’s early works largely unexamined, as politics was not his major concern during that time.

Despite a very recent expansion in the field of Oakeshott research,⁶ in general, it can be said that Oakeshott remains rather unknown outside the English-speaking academic

[6] See, e.g., S. Gerencser 2000, *The Skeptic’s Oakeshott*, A. Farr 1998, *Sartre’s Radicalism and Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, the five books in *British Idealist Studies: Series 1*, Imprint Academic, 2003-04.

world. This is rather curious considering that he has often been described as the most significant English political philosopher of the 20th century. In part, his being persistently labelled as a High Tory or, to a lesser extent, a Libertarian is certainly a factor in his unfamiliarity. In the "ism" discussions, the general view on Oakeshott is often oversimplified to the extent that his significance may seem to be confined exclusively to them. And it is in this area that my insistence on the recognition of changes in his conception of politics would most likely be rejected. This is, however, not to say that there are no grounds for also discussing Oakeshott in terms of "isms." Especially in his early works, Oakeshott contributed to the tradition of British Idealism. He also published a few 'libertarian' texts (*Contemporary British Politics* 1948, *The Political Economy of Freedom* 1949) and described himself as having a "conservative disposition" in the 1950s.⁷ It should also be noted here that for him, the latter meant the propensity to "enjoy what is present and available" and experience changes as deprivation as opposed to the "ignorance" and "apathy" by which those who "notice nothing" and "esteem nothing" react to changes – not as a 'party-ism'.⁸ Yet, the fact that many of Oakeshott's contemporaries viewed him as "the ultimate conservative" with a political education that was "a striking contrast to the liberal humanism of Wallas and the stimulus of Laski" cannot be ignored.⁹ The Labour MP Richard Crossman's description of Oakeshott's specialities as centring on "deflating and debunking the ideas which have been the motive force of British democracy" may, for example, complicate Oakeshott's own understanding of the separation between theory and practice.¹⁰

From the perspective of my problematic, the earlier research can be divided into three main categories. To begin with, Oakeshott's early philosophical presuppositions are alleged to have essentially remained intact throughout his work. The chief argument concerning his political thinking is that it either reflects or 'fits' his idealist presumptions. Paul Franco's

[7] M. Oakeshott 1956, *On Being Conservative*, RP, p. 409.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] R.H.S. Crossman 1958, p. 135.

[10] *Ibid.*

The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott (1990) is a well-argued example of this view. Franco emphasizes Oakeshott's Hegelian influences and the underlying theory of experience as the key to his interpretation. Franco's book also examines Oakeshott in the context of postwar political thought and thus offers one excellent point of comparison for the present study.

The 'intact' assertion is partly rejected by the second type of interpretation, which identifies three distinct phases in Oakeshott's work, i.e. the early phase, the postwar phase and the late production. It is argued that Oakeshott's postwar texts comprise a departure from his earlier idealism by placing politics at the centre of his sphere of interest and by dropping philosophy from the top of the hierarchy of experience. In his essays in *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott is said to express a rich "dialectical understanding"¹¹ and to view "philosophy as parasitic upon and as non-contributory to the conversation,"¹² only to return to his even "more extreme idealist claims"¹³ of separating philosophy entirely from politics in *On Human Conduct*. In sketching an overall picture of Oakeshott's career I have largely ignored both the 'intact' and 'return' types of interpretation in this book. Both, however, include many thematic insights on various aspects of Oakeshott's work which are also of value to this study and which, as such, are referred to accordingly.

Thus, one point of departure in my reading of Oakeshott's postwar production is to argue in favour of *the thesis of significant changes* in his 'thinking' and vocabulary, the relations of which are by no means transparent. Naturally, continuities exist alongside changes; it is not my intention to argue that there is any sudden reversal of philosophical orientation or any kind of schizophrenic lack of consistency in his works. Continuities can indeed be found in Oakeshott's themes, topics and rhetoric, but not in the sense of writing under a certain system of philosophy, for example.

For a more general account, it is important to note that Oakeshott's overall *oeuvre* escapes any easy categorization. He did not publish an extensive number of major books, but they present such a profound mastery of philosophy, political philosophy and the philosophy of history that he is entitled to be

[11] H. Pitkin 1976, p. 316.

[12] T. Modood 1980, p. 320.

[13] H. Pitkin 1976, p. 316.

referred to as a classic of 20th century thought in all the aforementioned genres.

Oakeshott began his academic career in Cambridge at Gonville and Caius College, where he studied history, acted as a fellow and taught until the year 1949. He was elected to the chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1951, from which he retired in 1968.¹⁴ His major publications include the doctoral thesis *Experience and its Modes*, published in 1933, the essay collection *Rationalism in Politics*, published in 1962, *On Human Conduct*, published in 1975 and *On History*, which was published in 1983.

His first philosophical work, *Experience and Its Modes*, was an original contribution to the tradition of British Idealism especially after F.H. Bradley. The book indicated his enduring independence in relation to prevailing academic moods; in this case to logical positivism. Here, Oakeshott defines philosophy as the search for perfect coherence, the totality of experience. Worlds of historical, scientific and practical experience present abstract and defective modes of experience, but only from the standpoint of philosophy.

The conception of philosophy and the presentation of the modes of experience and their inter-relationship remain at the core of the main theoretical disputes concerning Oakeshott's production today. Very generally, it can be said that here Oakeshott kept theory separate from practice; the modes of experience were by definition destined to remain limited worlds resting on unquestioned presuppositions, whereas philosophy was seen as aspiring to transcendence in the absolute coherence of experience.

The essay collection *Rationalism in Politics* is arguably the most famous of his works. The book was first published in 1962 and it soon evoked intense discussion. The two most famous pieces in this collection are the title essay *Rationalism in Politics* (1947) and *Political Education* (1951), both of which were rather heatedly viewed as examples of doctrinaire conservatism. Particularly the latter text had already caused a small storm in a tea-cup when it was delivered as his inaugural

[14] For a short biography, see Robert Grant's (1990) presentation in *Thinkers of Our Time: Oakeshott*, pp. 11-23.

lecture at the LSE;¹⁵ the 'conservative skeptic' filling Harold Laski's chair was severely criticized both within the School and academic circles. In these essays, Oakeshott presents his anti-foundational understanding of political activity, although they can also be read as contributions to the discussion and understanding of the teaching of political philosophy or the theory of human knowledge – just to mention a few possibilities. The versatility of Oakeshott's thought is extensive in this respect.

On Human Conduct is composed of three intertwined essays: *On the Understanding of Human Conduct*, *On the Civil Condition* and *On the Character of a Modern European State*. This book is primarily a refined philosophical undertaking, defining human conduct as conditional and intelligent free action and the civil condition as a mode of association in terms of its rules. The question of whether Oakeshott has modified his original account of the distinction between theory and practice in this book is basically unsolvable, although a stand on the matter will be taken at the end of this book, although acknowledging its partiality. Here, I feel it safe to say that the act of theorizing as an unconditional engagement requires a different kind of understanding than that which is required particularly in engaging in practical conduct.

On History presents a philosophical understanding of history as a mode of enquiry. Oakeshott elaborates the central notions of writing history, such as the notions of past and change. Similarly to the understanding presented in *On Human Conduct*, the central concept of *contingency* refers here to a principle of understanding that is circumstantial in that it is distinguished from something that is necessary or essential.

Oakeshott is famous both for his style of writing, which is admittedly sometimes difficult to grasp but always well-considered and beautiful, and for his avoidance of 'minute' philosophy. He is also notorious for his scarce presentation of references in his work. Yet it is clear that Oakeshott was exceptionally learned in the history of philosophy and political thought and his thought can be examined from the perspective of its relation to many great (and smaller) names of the

[15] For the 'Fabian' history of the School and its 'composition' during Oakeshott's time, see R. Dahrendorf 1995: *LSE. A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1885-1995*.

'canon'.¹⁶ However, Oakeshott also participated in contemporary discussions both in his essays and in his reviews of other authors' works.¹⁷ His activity in *The Journal of Theological Studies* in the 1920s and 1930s indicates the significance of his reflection on religion, however philosophy and politics are also obviously present. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Oakeshott was published mainly in the *Cambridge Journal* and, to a lesser extent, in *The English Historical Review*, but his texts also appeared in such forums as *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Spectator*, making them accessible to a wider audience. The latter was also Oakeshott's main 'public forum' during the 1950s. The later decades were more diffused in this respect. *The Philosophical Quarterly* and *Political Studies* were among the several strictly academic forums in which his work appeared. Additionally, *Crossbow*, which was mostly read by the conservative public, and *The Daily Telegraph* also published Oakeshott's reviews. Yet despite the conservative party bias of some forums, they are more indicative of his continuous intellectual voyage as an historian, a philosopher and a political philosopher than of his possible 'policy-commitments'. And perhaps more than his actual essays, the reviews also reveal him to be a thinker who cannot be described as having lived in an ivory tower in relation to contemporary life and thought.

2: Politics, History and Political Philosophy; Remarks on the Style of Reading and Presentation

At one level *every* political philosopher has concerned himself with what he thinks to be a vital problem of his day... No political thinker concerns himself exclusively with the past any more than he seeks to speak solely to the distant future; the price in both

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- [16] An illuminating example is Wendell John Coats's (2000) book *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries*, in which the 'contemporaries' include such figures as Montaigne, St. Augustine, Hegel, Hobbes, Benjamin Constant, Rousseau and Hume. Aristotle, Bodin and Nietzsche could be added, again just to mention a few.
- [17] On Oakeshott's character and influence as a teacher of political thought, see e.g. the symposium on Michael Oakeshott in the *Cambridge Review*, October 1991. Kenneth Minogue's *Michael Oakeshott and the History of Political Thought Seminar* is particularly informative in this respect. As is the case with regard to his character as a teacher, Oakeshott's other academic activities also extend beyond the scope of this study, although it is worth mentioning that he was one of the founders of the *Cambridge Journal* in 1947 (-1952) and acted as a member of the Editorial Board of *Political Theory* from its inception in 1973, for example.

cases would be unintelligibility... At another level, however, many political writings have been intended as something more than *livres de circonstance*; they have been meant as a contribution to the continuing dialogue of Western political philosophy.¹⁸

Similarly to Sheldon Wolin's aforementioned conception, one can find a version of this 'dual character' of political philosophy, as both actual and enduring, in Oakeshott's thought. In a typically bright sentence he wrote:

Every masterpiece of political philosophy springs from a new vision of the predicament; each is the glimpse of a deliverance or the suggestion of a remedy.¹⁹

The inspiration of political philosophy that Oakeshott describes here as a human predicament "is a universal appearing everywhere as a particular."²⁰ And for this reason it is no wonder we can find "an apparently contingent element in the ground and inspiration of a political philosophy, a feeling for the exigencies, the cares, the passions of a particular time, a sensitiveness to the dominant folly of an epoch" in all political philosophy. Whereas Plato and Hobbes are united in their pervading sense of human life as a predicament, the difference between them lies in Plato's thought as animated by "the errors of the Athenian democracy" and Hobbes's thought as coloured by the disputes between those claiming too much "Liberty" or "Authority." In Oakeshott's more recent terms, the examination of Plato's utterances as actions and events in their immediate context and into their links to other contemporary actions in terms of a relationship of contingency represents an inquiry into an 'historical',²¹ i.e. 'dead', past. Instead, if we read Plato as a reflective endeavour of an unhindered impulse with "political experience" as its point of departure, but which is searching for "the permanent character of political activity" on the map of human experience, we approach his thought as philosophy.²²

[18] S. Wolin 1960, p. 25.

[19] Oakeshott 1946, *Introduction to Leviathan*, RP, p. 226.

[20] Ibid.

[21] OH, p. 9

[22] M. Oakeshott 1946-1950, *Political Philosophy*, RPML, pp. 144,151. The essay is estimated to have been written between 1946 and 1950 by Timothy Fuller, the editor of the RPML collection. Later, Oakeshott replaces "political philosophy" with "political theory" and prefers to use "theorizing" for "philosophizing." See M. Oakeshott 1973, *What is Political Theory?*, WH, pp. 391-402; OHC, p. 1. I will only speculate on this change in the concluding chapter, as my chief

However, for Oakeshott, there is also a third way of approaching political philosophy, which is to examine the singularity – not uniqueness – of a given text within the *traditions* of political thought. It is not the fact that Oakeshott distinguishes three distinct traditions of political philosophy that peaks our interest here, but rather the idea that these traditions offer an additional *context* of interpretation for a text of political philosophy. In short, every “masterpiece of political philosophy” has as its context not only the “entire” history of political philosophy as the elucidation of the predicament of mankind, but also “a particular tradition in that history.”²³ This is also what rules out the existence of any kind of uniqueness in the case of political philosophies; they always belong to one or another of the main traditions of thought. The singularity that a masterpiece enacts, however, occurs within these traditions since they have the capacity to tolerate and unite internal variety and do not insist upon conformity to a single character.²⁴ Here, we are one step away from speaking in terms of Pocockian “languages”²⁵ or Skinnerian “conventions”²⁶ as being ‘appropriate’ contexts in which to understand political texts – political philosophy included.

My aim in this book is to find a way to examine Oakeshott’s conceptions of politics from all three of these points of view, as I think concentrating on his conception of politics both requires and enables it to a certain degree. I hope to do so without lapsing into irrelevancy, although I must admit that ‘combining’ a philosophical explanation with an historical one is, for Oakeshott, the equivalent of committing a “‘category mistake’,”²⁷ to use Gilbert Ryle’s terminology. It is, however, often so notoriously difficult to neatly categorize the two in Oakeshott’s own work that I do not see myself as violating his spirit to any great extent in this endeavour. Although Oakeshott wishes to keep the historical mode of understand-

concern lies elsewhere. This also excludes, e.g. examining Oakeshott’s ‘theory of modality’ or his ‘theory of plurality’. See T. Nardin 2001, E. Podoksik 2003. Because of the priority of the contemporary context, my work does not focus much attention on Oakeshott’s ‘Aristotelianism’ or ‘Hegelianism’ etc., also for the simple reason that these aspects have already been examined rather extensively by other scholars. See, e.g., P. Franco 1990b.

[23] Oakeshott 1946, *Introduction to Leviathan*, RP, p. 227.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] J. Pocock 1985, p. 19.

[26] Q. Skinner 1972, pp. 154-5.

[27] T. Nardin 2001, p. 42n.

ing separate from philosophy, his main body of production consists of essays, which accommodate both historical and philosophical reflection in a single text.

Today, disputes between textual and contextual methods, normative and 'standpoint-independent' political philosophy, interpretation and over-interpretation, and revisionist and traditional approaches – just to mention a few – definitely leave room for the interpreter of an author's texts to choose her own style of reading. One clear available path would be to faithfully follow the method applied by the author himself. Another option is to carefully report all the significant features and aspects of his works. However, Oakeshott is no methodologist himself. He does not apply any consistent methodology in his work, and, as implied, he moves between different levels of thinking about politics – practical, ideological and philosophical – a bit more liberally than his self-understanding would seem to allow. It is occasionally possible to translate his philosophical conceptions 'back' into the languages of practice or history, as for example the wandering of the metaphor of "conversation" from politics to education and philosophy exemplifies. This operation must, however, be understood as one or another type of *explanation*, not as a prescription. The fact that I also take practical politics into account does not imply that Oakeshott was a covert ideologue, but rather that his thinking is sensitive to the contemporary context. As to the second path, it is not my aim to write a comprehensive study on Oakeshott's entire work, but rather to concentrate on its political aspects, mostly bypassing the level of description.

However, although I do not directly apply any specific method of interpretation in this book, I still utilize some views of conceptual history and the so-called "Cambridge school of history" as well as share some of their commitments, such as treating concepts as Wittgensteinian tools or Weberian instruments in human activities and the understanding of them. In addition, Quentin Skinner's treatment of concepts as "uses in argument" or as "dimensions in linguistic action" is also present in this book.²⁸ I consider Oakeshott as a conscious contributor to both academic and broader discussions on politics who intends to move his audience and shape the discussions, whether they be contemporary or "eternal," i.e. philosophical, in each individual case.

[28] K. Palonen 2003c, p. 17.

As regards the relationship between Oakeshott's conception of politics and the British discussions, my style of reading articles, books reviews and discussions in periodicals and newspapers could be described as a kind of 'dismantling'. I aim at developing a more concentrated view of the understanding of political activity in Great Britain, mainly from the postwar period to the 1970s, than would be possible by merely reflecting on a few 'big names'. I examine Oakeshott's key concepts in relation to both their usage by other writers and their conventions of writing. I end up arguing that Oakeshott's original conception of politics was rather typically 'British' in its emphasis on parliamentary debates and its preference for statesmen over politicians. The shift in this emphasis was completed by 1975, when Oakeshott published his major work, *On Human Conduct*. In this later account of politics, he emphasizes the contingency of human associations and the state, acknowledging more emphatically the role of politics in their arrangements. Oakeshott was by no means merely a detached academic scholar, as is often maintained, but rather intimately involved in contemporary discussions.

Briefly, with regard to my style of reading and presentation in this book: I utilize a consciously one-sided perspective in my reading and interpretation in order to articulate something new and innovative about Oakeshott's political thought, particularly the development of his conception of political activity. My interest is centred more on the discontinuities and conceptual changes in his work than on presenting a kind of great line. After noticing that, especially in terms of the contemporary perspective, some of the most significant changes emphatically take place in his 'smaller' writings, such as book reviews, I ended up emphasizing the inherent inter-textuality that is present in reading Oakeshott's works without representing more summaries of his main texts.²⁹ As my title suggests, however, the changes in Oakeshott's thought are not treated merely as an internal process, but are also viewed in relation to political events and shifting constellations in politi-

[29] I have mainly limited my examination to Oakeshott's published work and some posthumously published texts, as I think my perspective both allows for and perhaps even requires this kind of emphasis. The comprehensive online catalogue of Oakeshott Archives at the Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science, collected in 2001 by Anna Towlson and updated by Efraim Podoksik, has also been an extremely valuable resource both for checking details and gaining an overview of Oakeshott's work.

cal power relationships. Yet, I also limit the overall presentation of the historical events, persons and academic schools of thought that are related to his work by assuming that most of the readers of this volume are already familiar with them.

In a review of R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, Oakeshott writes: "The task of the historian of ideas, as he saw it, was precisely to understand a writer more profoundly than the writer understood himself,"³⁰ and the aim of my book is to gain at least a glimpse of this understanding. After all, at the end of the day, all the "flashy technicalities" of methodological reflections are rather irrelevant.³¹ The reasons behind the continuing interest in Oakeshott's political philosophy seem to lie in the combination of its vivid awareness of the past, its diagnosis of the contemporary predicament and, above all, its ability to serve as a new touchstone for further thinking. This at least comes close to Oakeshott's own comprehension of a great work of political philosophy, and it certainly corresponds to mine. In the following, I thus hope to present reflections on all three of these aspects in Oakeshott's work on politics.

As to the organization of the book, in Chapter II, I begin by engaging in a closer examination of the earlier interpretations of Oakeshott's thought. In Chapter II.2, which deals with *Liberalism*, I examine Oakeshott's views on politics, individuality and society, particularly in relation to Isaiah Berlin's and Joseph Raz's respective versions of British liberalism. I compare Oakeshott's anti-foundational 'version' of liberalism both to Berlin's conflict-based, individualist "agonistic liberalism" and Raz's more society-based theory. Comparatively, Oakeshott presents a different kind of conception of freedom than that of mainstream liberalism, and he places greater emphasis on the contingent historicity of Western democracies than the aforementioned writers. In these respects, Richard Rorty's "ethnocentric liberalism" offers us a 'natural' point of comparison for Oakeshott's thought, although the American debates surrounding liberalism are otherwise largely neglected in order to retain a contextual closeness to the British discussions. Each version of liberalism as presented by these authors presents a specific understanding of political activity. In Chapter II.3, I examine Oakeshott's persistent leg-end of conservatism through a contemporary interpreter, Ber-

[30] M. Oakeshott 1947, A Review of R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 85.

[31] K. R. Minogue 1976, p. 143.

nard Crick, whose own conception of politics surprisingly bears similarities to Oakeshott's. I also focus on Robert Devigne's approximation of Oakeshott to Thatcher's governmental policy – an interpretation in which a 'system' created by a philosopher was 'put into practice' by its exponents. I argue that in the 1940s it would not have been a grave mistake to even liken Oakeshott's views to party conservatism, although the later approximations are usually based on false exaggerations of Oakeshott's conservative disposition. The philosophical "ism" of idealism is examined in Chapter II.4, in which I focus my attention on Steven Gerencser's book *The Skeptic's Oakeshott* (2000), which presents a thorough version of the defence of the thesis of the occurrence of significant shifts in Oakeshott's thinking towards a more skeptical position.

Going through the thesis of the shift in Oakeshott philosophical position helps us to leave philosophical reflection in the background in Chapter III, which focuses on the changes in Oakeshott's use and meaning of the concept of politics, their related vocabulary and their connection to contemporary discussions and ideas on politics. I begin by clarifying the main idea of my examination, which is to assess how Oakeshott's conception of political activity has changed over the years and how this change relates to contemporary discussions on politics, both in terms of affinity and specificity. For this purpose, in the next sections I examine several concepts that are of key importance in terms of understanding Oakeshott's conceptions of politics. As there is an inherent duality in these conceptions – between politics and rationalist politics, the politics of skepticism and faith etc. – which constitutes the continuity of themes in Oakeshott's thinking, it is reflected in the organization of the concepts within the chapters. For example, authority and power are presented as counter, parallel and complementary concepts in Chapter III.2. The treatment of concepts adheres more to a thematic than to a chronological approach, although dates are followed in order to keep track of the changes and shifts in Oakeshott's usage of the vocabulary.

In Chapter III.3, I examine the concepts of ideology and tradition in a similar manner. It is perhaps in this chapter that the change in Oakeshott's conception of political activity becomes most clearly visible. Oakeshott's role in the linguistic turn is

also briefly evaluated. It is concluded that he was one of those scholars who were 'ahead' of the mainstream in the social sciences or philosophy in the early 1950s. My view is that Oakeshott's name needs to be added to the list of "exceptions" of 20th century philosophers who have a "lively appreciation of the historicity and mutability of our moral and political concepts."³² Thus, although my examination is decidedly oriented towards the British and Anglophone discussions mainly from a contemporary perspective, my hope is that it will help to ensure that Oakeshott, along with Martin "Heidegger, R.G. Collingwood, Hannah Arendt and Alasdair MacIntyre," is included amongst the ranks of "Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche" in this respect.³³ My claim is not that Oakeshott in any sense 'invented' the critical apparatus of, for example, contemporary conceptual history, although I do think that we can justifiably include Oakeshott amongst those thinkers who pioneered the analysis of human conduct in terms of conventions, idioms, languages and practices. He shared their Collingwoodian distrust of perennial questions – the human predicament always changes – and an understanding of the contestability of concepts.³⁴ Language is treated as constructed and artificial, not referential. As such, one early precept for my study stems from Oakeshott himself:

It has been the unfortunate illusion of some historians to think that something less than a first-class knowledge of the languages involved in their subject of study will serve their purpose, and to think that a minute and exact attention to the words of a text is unnecessary: they believe themselves to be dealing with things, not words. But the study of a text is a study of its words, and no text will reveal its meaning unless the interpreter goes to it with the questions, 'why this word and not that?', and, 'what precisely, in this literary and historical context, is the connotation of this word?' And the whole answer is never supplied by the text itself.³⁵

I hope that, for example, my examination of the concept of tradition, the change in its use and its partial replacement by the concept of practice exemplifies how the choice of words and their specific contexts really does matter in our attempt to

[32] T. Ball 1988, p. 4.

[33] Ibid.

[34] T. Ball 2002, p. 25. See W.B. Gallie 1956.

[35] M. Oakeshott 1950/51, A Review of R. H. Barrow: *Introduction to St Augustine. The City of God*, p. 570.

more fully understand the development of Oakeshott's conception of politics.

In Chapter IV, *Rationalism in Politics/Rational Politics*, the earlier discussions are condensed into Oakeshott's different conceptions on politics through his most famous imageries and descriptions of political activity, which are especially distinct in terms of their understanding of contingency. Aspects of agency, anti-foundationalism, contingency and historicity are recalled as central to his view.

In the concluding chapter, *Oakeshott and the Voyage of Theorizing Political Activity*, a re-evaluation of the practice/theory relationship in Oakeshott's thought is presented. I suggest that in his late thought, political activity as a reflective activity is capable of engaging in a dialogue with philosophy on equal terms and, thus, of widening the horizons of political imagination.