

Sophists in Academic  
Dress: Oakeshott's  
"The Study of 'Politics'  
in a University"

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**Abstract:** What sort of activity should Politics academics aim to inculcate in their students? Only truth-seeking, logical thinking, and the ability to scrutinize evidence for themselves? Or also the will and ability to perform supposedly beneficial extra-academic functions, including political activism in the cause of "social justice"? This dilemma, it appears, is presently opening a schism between "Truth Uni" and "Social Justice Uni" (see Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018, pp. 253–62). Here I am proposing that this ongoing general debate about the true nature and purpose of the university can be partially disentangled with the aid of Michael Oakeshott's essay, "The study of 'politics' in a university", first published in *Rationalism in Politics* in 1962. That essay remains relevant, instructive, and extremely challenging, and is especially valuable because of its focus on what happens in Politics departments, where it is perhaps more obvious than in any other of the university's departments how the two implicit *teloi*, (1) discovering truth, and (2) realizing "social justice", tend to frustrate and obstruct each other. I close with some reflections on how university teachers of Politics can defend themselves against Oakeshott's challenge, so long as they can resist the temptations of modern sophistry.

**Keywords:** Michael Oakeshott; Politics; Universities; Higher education; Activism.

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"Politics has always been three-quarters talk"  
(Oakeshott 1991, p. 206).

I. THE STUDY OF "POLITICS" IN A  
UNIVERSITY

My copy of Michael Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1991) was a gift from my doctoral supervisor. As a teacher, this very experienced professor had always held his own political cards very close to his chest, at least when we undergraduates were present. On the basis of his published work, we would speculate that he was probably either a Burkean conservative, or an agrarian socialist—though it could also be that he was now so widely read in the history of political thought that his understanding transcended all such particularity, and had completely liberated him from partisanship. Later, a fellow doctoral student observed that the most political thing he had ever heard our supervisor say was that he had grown up "following West Ham". Actually, our professor had once disclosed that, al-

though his politics were of “a pinkish tinge”, he nevertheless recognized with Burke the importance of beginning political analysis with “where we are”. That was the closest thing to a personal view of politics that we ever got out of him.

By contrast, certain of his (younger) colleagues in the department plainly used our lectures to advocate their own views. Some would build their case fairly logically, but others allowed rhetoric to do much of the heavy lifting, *ad lib*-ing sneering comments and jokes about their conservative or “neoliberal” enemies. Others simply preached. All of them, I am sure, meant well, and thought that such teaching methods were justified by their moral obligation to “teach for social justice”—that is, to transform centrist/conservative/apathetic undergrads into graduates committed to the same views and causes as themselves.

The rights and wrongs of the practices I have just described are hotly contested. At stake is whether academic teachers should only aim to (as Stanley Fish puts it) “teach materials and confer [academic] skills”, or whether they should try in addition to “produce active citizens, inculcate the virtue of tolerance, redress injustices, and bring about political change” (Fish 2008, p. 66). It is the latter view that is presently hegemonic: it has gripped not only activist lecturers, but also the high-minded elite authors of university “strategy” documents. But it is still possible to take the opposite view, and for now it is not career-ending to do so openly.

This debate is, I think, the current incarnation of an ancient quarrel which usually concerns the idea of a university in general, and of course it has therefore been shaped by milestone contributions from Cardinal Newman, Karl Jaspers, and others. But it especially concerns the academic teaching of Politics. (I will use an upper-case “P” for the academic field: see Connelly 2005). This is why Oakeshott’s essay, “The study of ‘politics’ in a university”, which I first encountered in the volume given to me by my mild-mannered professor, is especially relevant. Though he takes the unfashionable side of the quarrel, which was perhaps less troublesome in 1962 than it is now, Oakeshott’s questions are still our questions. He asks “What study under the plausible name of ‘Politics’ is an appropriate component of a university education?”, and what is the “suitable body of information to be imparted” by the teaching of it? (Oakeshott 1991, p. 186). His answers are chastening, but they are also helpful.

## II. A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

### 2.1 Academic and vocational education

Oakeshott’s contention is not that Politics cannot be taught, but that it is not “appropriate” to do so in a university, because the teaching of Politics adopts a mostly *vocational* character, and this is alien to the true nature of a university (1991, p. 195). Vocational education teaches a person to think “practically” in relation to a particular manner of living. It imparts “skills” pertinent to current life, and these skills have intellectual content, consisting of certain facts, theories, and doctrines, which Oakeshott calls “technical” knowledge, or “technique” (1991, pp. 191–3). Technical knowledge is valuable insofar as it can advance or continue a manner of living in practice—that is, insofar as it is useful for getting something *done* (1991, p. 195). So its content is not incidental: it is the content needed for answering typically “technical” questions, such as “How does it work?”, and “How can it be improved?”. “Technical” questions are of course presupposed by many of the vocations that are now part of every university’s prospectus, especially (in the UK) since the difference between universities and polytechnics was cancelled in 1992: “How should the illness be cured?”, “How can it be made to run on less fuel?”.

The teaching of Politics in universities, Oakeshott says, has assumed a *de facto* vocational character, primarily because some academics are “interested in politics in the vulgar sense” (1991, p. 213). Facing “the problem of raising the study of politics above the level of ‘current affairs’ and [attempting] to give it a respectable intellectual content”, they have adopted the model of “technical” knowledge—i.e. the sort of knowledge a student needs for “doing” something (1991, p. 214).

But a university education is different from a vocational education—though also, for Oakeshott, civically complementary to it (1991, p. 190). Properly, a university education is *detached* from the “*hic et nunc*,

the here and now, of current living”, and is “liberated from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants” (1989, pp. 24, 28). It is peculiar to academic teaching that its value does *not* derive from the usefulness of the facts, theories, and doctrines that are studied. Instead, academic teaching attempts to impart familiarity with the *languages* peculiar to academic disciplines (1991, pp. 196-7). Academics are not necessarily any better at teaching than teachers of other kinds—or any worse. But where a school history teacher must know his subject, and may explore in his spare time a good deal of historical literature, he is not usually involved in original historical research. An academic historian, however, is necessarily also a “learner”. He *is* involved in historical research, and is therefore proficient in the research methods of his discipline, which enables him to solve historical problems independently. In Oakeshott’s terms, the academic historian explores not only the “literatures” of his field (discoveries made and recorded by others), but also the “language” of history—the manner of thinking of the historian. And it is this *latter* that academic teaching is uniquely suited to imparting.

The university, then, offers “an education in ‘languages’ rather than in ‘literatures’”; it imparts the manners of the “conversation”, and maintains “the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization” (1991, pp. 193-4). It is the role of the university to perpetuate the conversation between “a variety of human activities, each speaking with a voice, or in a language, of its own” (1991, p.187). Thus civilization reinvests some of its “capital”, its investigative manners of thought and conversation, in itself, rather than consuming them all in *practical* ends. Accordingly, the teaching objective of a university is to induct undergraduates into this “conversation” by familiarizing them with one or more of the languages in which it is held—to make *convives* of them (1990, p. 214; see also Burwood 2009, p. 501). The academic teaching objective is not to supply students with a lot of technical information for some practical use; indeed no *particular* information is necessary to meeting the teaching objectives of a university at all. Undergraduates are thus “recognized spectators” (1991, p. 196); they may “enjoy the ‘leisure’ which is denoted by thinking without having to think in the pragmatic terms of action and talking without having to speak in terms of prescription or practical advice” (1991, p. 199).

## 2.2 Politics as a vocation

There seem to be good reasons for accepting that at least some teaching in Politics adopts the vocational character as Oakeshott defines it. Our courses of study seem to meet Oakeshott’s three conditions of a vocational education (1991, p. 205): there is, first, “a specific skill generally recognized to be entailed in a current manner of living” (1991, p. 201). (One who denies that there is such a thing as “political skill” would have Machiavelli to contend with, as well as today’s special advisors and political strategists.) There is, second, a population of people who desire to acquire this skill—a population which, owing to the nature of modern politics, is “larger, more miscellaneous and consequently less precisely determined” than those that pursue other vocations. And, third, this skill has some intellectual content, “something in connection with this skill which is capable of being taught” (1991, pp. 192, 201).

Thus, Politics academics disseminate information about “government and the instruments of government” (1991, p. 201), and they seem to do so for implicitly practical reasons: this knowledge is to be put to use in a manner of living—i.e. in political work, in getting political things *done*. It is assumed that the Politics student should be equipped to answer characteristically vocational questions, such as “How does it work? How can it be improved? Is it democratic? and so on” (1991, p. 210). A prospective politician would obviously be disadvantaged by lacking the “technical” knowledge that other prospective politicians might have acquired: how political parties choose their leaders, how candidates are elected to office, how laws are made, the duties of civil servants, how to write a persuasive speech, and so on. But this attempt to teach Politics vocationally has resulted, Oakeshott says, in “a curriculum of study of unimaginable dreariness ... enlivened only by some idle political gossip and some tendentious speculation about current policy”, a curriculum of “no conceivable interest to anyone except those whose heads were full of the enterprise of participating in political activity or to persons with the insatiable curiosity of a concierge” (1991, p. 208).

But most disturbingly for today's Politics academics, a proper vocational education, Oakeshott says, teaches not only *technical* knowledge, but also *practical* knowledge—the “knack” that cannot be adequately formulated as a text. “[T]o learn a profession”, he explains, “is to learn how to *do* something” (1991, p. 190). And the best preparation for this is to do it for real; “*not* to learn how to act *as if* you were doing it” (ibid., emphasis added; see also Williams 2007, pp. 162-7).

The means by which practical knowledge of political work can best be acquired is, then, what we ordinarily call “apprenticeship”. And yet the sort of placement in relevant working institutions, without which the training of a nurse would be utterly unthinkable, is very rare in Politics. There are of course some examples of exactly this, such as the Westminster–Hull Internship Programme, but even these comprise a small portion of the degree programme. And, such cases excepted, Politics graduates are hardly better equipped for a career in practical Politics than graduates from Law, Maths, or Computing—especially where the graduate, whatever it says on his degree certificate, has a record of activity with one of the university's political societies, and is trusted by party officials.

There is something else about Politics academics that distinguishes them from those who teach other vocations. In the polytechnic (before they were “converted”), teachers usually imparted practical skills that they themselves had acquired and used. Conversely, it has never been required of a Politics academic that he have proven political skill. There are of course exceptions, but the general rule is that teachers of engineering have a portfolio of engineering achievements, whereas teachers of Politics do not have a record of success in political activity. More commonly Politics academics might supply tolerable political commentary, though they often prove less skilled, less readable, and less “impactful” in that vocation than full-time journalists.

There are two possible ways of addressing this discrepancy—if it is a discrepancy. The first is to recruit more Politics academics from practical politics. I will not comment on the haunting coincidence here of two apothegms: “all political careers end in failure”, and “those who can, do; those who can't, teach”. The second “remedy” might require Politics academics to become more active in political practice. Something like this has in fact been happening, though not in quite the way that might have been hoped. Few Politics academics have deepened their knowledge of political processes by getting themselves recruited into existing political institutions and producing reports on clandestine processes from the inside. For every Philip Norton or Raymond Plant, there seem to be two hundred Politics academics who have done “industry” merely by attempting to add their professional voices to extra-institutional political campaigning. Indeed, the situation is such that Politics academics are now encouraged to cite any activism as evidence of their value *as academics*. Advocating a cause is now categorizable as “research”, even if the connection to anything that the public might recognize as expertise is extremely tenuous. And under the guise of “research-led teaching”, these activities can be exhibited for admiration in the lecture theatre. Against Fish's advice (2008, pp. 66-97), activist academics are rewarded for saving the world *not* “on their own time”, but on the contact time that their students are paying for—as if being instructed in the correct political opinions and most laudable forms of “resistance” were a legitimate academic learning objective.

### III. POLITICS, “LANGUAGES”, AND “LITERATURES”

Oakeshott's attack upon the study of Politics in the university appeals to a distinction between “languages”, and “literatures” (or “texts”) (1991, p. 197). This distinction appears in an earlier essay, “The idea of a university” [1950], where teaching languages and literatures is contrasted with “training” (1989, p. 103). We of course find attention to the “languages” of things in the work of Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and others in mid-twentieth century philosophy. But Oakeshott's usage here is stipulative. A *language* is a “manner of thinking” (1991, p. 192); not “a fixed stock of possible utterances, but a fund of considerations drawn upon and used” (1990, p. 120); “not *information* but *practice in thinking*” (1991, p. 197, emphasis added). By learning a language, one learns “what it is to think historically, mathematically, scientifically or philosophi-

cally”; languages are “instruments to be played upon”, rather than specific tunes (1991, p. 192; see also 1990, p. 56).

Oakeshott’s “languages” obviously correspond to his earlier “modes” of experience (1966, pp. 69-81; see also 1989, pp. 37-9). He is elucidating these “modes” in the new “linguistic” idiom. But importantly, the “practical” mode analysed in *Experience and its Modes* would not count as an *academic* language. This is because academic languages are “*explanatory* enterprises of different sorts”; they are “not prescriptive languages” (1991, pp. 192-3; see also 1990, pp. 50, 100). This is not to say that prescriptive language is unimportant for Oakeshott, that it should not be learned, or that it is not appropriate to other institutions. It is also not to say that prescriptive utterances and performances should not be the *subject* of academic study. It is simply that prescribing is never the primary intention of an academic language (though see Fish on academic rigour, 2008, p. 20).

Academics have traditionally assumed that their languages are best learned in conjunction with appropriate literatures/texts, which are suitable examples of “what has been said from time to time in a ‘language’”. Thus the “language” of poetic imagination is learned in conjunction with the “literature” of poems or novels, and “the ‘language’ or manner of thinking of a scientist” is contrasted with “a text-book of geology”, which latter is merely a “text” (1991, p. 192). Now some texts, Oakeshott points out, are in a more appropriate condition than others for introducing students to a language (1991, p. 197), since the student has an existing level of proficiency. The most appropriate texts will not necessarily be of great recent significance, or correspond with the teacher’s own research interest (1991, p. 198). Descartes’ *Meditations* are more appropriate for first-year undergraduates than Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, for example. The former has the quality of being *useful* for introducing students into the philosophical mode of explaining things, even if it is “outdated”. An “outdated” text is only disqualified for the purpose of *vocational* education, where the value of content (facts, theories, and doctrines) comprises efficacy for getting something done today. An electrician’s apprentice rightly has no use for an obsolete Victorian manual. But because a university teacher’s objective is different from a vocational teacher’s, his rationale for selecting texts is also different. He might well have more pedagogical use for a 1651 theory of “justice” than he has for one written in 1971 (1991, p. 194).

### 3.1 Politics as “literature”

In reply to Oakeshott, we might treat politics (broadly conceived) as a “literature”, and point out that it offers a library of “texts” which we can treat as an “occasion for learning how to handle and manage some of the ‘languages’ of explanation”—perhaps especially the languages of *history* and *philosophy* (1991, p. 214). Modern history, mathematics, and natural science each impart *one* language. But Politics is more like the “Greats” tradition. In conjunction with a canon of certain “multilingual” texts it imparts “historical, philosophical, poetic, legal, and perhaps scientific” languages (1991, p. 198).

But in existing university teaching, Oakeshott thinks, the “literature” of Politics—by its nature the most difficult of all literatures (1991, pp. 216-17)—is not really used for imparting explanatory languages. Indeed, in practice, the use of political literature tends to *obstruct* that goal (1991, pp. 214-15). This is because, too often, the texts selected for study are chosen for reasons other than their heuristic value (1991, p. 216). They may be central to the teacher’s own area of research (or “research”), and therefore appropriate primarily to him; they may concern issues prevalent in contemporary political practice, or reflect what the teacher believes is presently needed to further the cause of “social justice”. Or, more recently, a text may be selected for teaching because its author has some personal characteristic that qualifies him/her for inclusion as part of the programme of “decolonizing the curriculum”.

These are problems of present execution. But political literature is an additionally unfavourable medium for teaching historical and philosophical thinking, Oakeshott says, because this literature is *essentially prescriptive*. Political literature comprises...

the language of desire and aversion, of preference and choice, of approval and disapproval, of praise and blame, of persuasion, injunction, accusation and threat. It is the language in which we make promises, ask for support, recommend beliefs and actions, devise and commend administrative expedients and organize the beliefs and opinions of others in such a manner that policy may be effectively and economically executed; in short, it is the language of everyday practical life (1991, p. 206).

This literature—which academics now like to call “the discourse”—includes campaign rhetoric, parliamentary gossip, broadsheet journalism, rolling news, diaries and memoirs, political satire, Twitter storms, and so forth. This sort of stuff can of course be studied and explained. But in practice, Oakeshott thinks, it proves “too difficult for most people to turn their backs upon the enterprise of participating”. Students sense that political texts prompt them to respond with a performance of their own in the same practical mode (1989, pp. 52-3). Often for teaching staff too it proves too tempting to neglect the historical or philosophical explanatory modes of which they are custodians, and to attend instead to “finding reasons for holding favourite political opinions” (1991, p. 217)—or to avail themselves of the opportunity to slay their own *bêtes noires* before a live captive audience.

The effect of this upon how undergraduates discuss great texts, which Oakeshott observed at Cambridge—Plato’s *Republic*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Rousseau’s *Social Contract*—will be uncomfortably familiar to today’s Politics academics. Such texts, he recalls, were “assumed to have a political ‘ideal’, or programme, or policy, or device to recommend”, “injunctions about political conduct”, which must be elicited and criticized (1991, pp. 208-9). The undergraduate attitude towards texts, which ought to have been used as occasions for cultivating philosophical and historical conversation, was in fact “a mixture between the manner in which one might read an out-of-date text-book on naval architecture and the manner in which one might study a current election manifesto” (1991, pp. 208-9). Students seemed “alive only to the political quaintness (or enormity) of these books”, and their critical skill was “narrowed down to listening either for the political *faux pas* or for the echoes of political modernity” (*ibid.*).

### 3.2 Politics and philosophical “language”

The traps and temptations that Oakeshott identifies are real enough. But it seems to me that they can be overcome, and the strongest case for the study of Politics in a university is probably that which appeals to the explanatory language of philosophy. Just as the study of religion is useful for imparting philosophical thought, so for undergraduates already interested in politics, or at least in “the discourse”, there can hardly be a more convenient occasion for learning to think philosophically—at least for learning to spot fallacies and to identify what is “postulated” by political claims (see Oakeshott 1990, pp. 12, 28, 33; 2004, pp. 391-402; see also Nardin 2001, pp. 183-224).

Further, it is acceptable to treat political philosophy as sufficiently distinct as a “literature” that it might be the focus of a university education in its own right. Indeed, this was Oakeshott’s own view when, in an essay of 1924, he sketched a reorganization of “political science” at Cambridge, proposing a canonical history of political thought curriculum, and “the construction of a theory of the State” (2004, pp. 62-4). The literature of political philosophy, very old or very recent, is in fact compatible with Oakeshott’s account of philosophical “experience” (1966), as his own contributions to the field amply demonstrate (see Greenleaf 1966; Franco 2014, pp. 67-106, 161-6). Undergraduates quickly realize that reading the political works of Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, *et al*, is a major component of a university education in Politics. And although the tendency is strong at the beginning for students to assess them in the way Oakeshott describes, it is easier than he supposes to demonstrate that such texts are not best read as “repositories of useful information or advice” (Williams 2007, p. 389). It is also easier than he thinks to introduce a more philosophical and historical mode of discussion, especially once students begin to sense that it is clumsy and vulgar to apply to such texts the slogans and clichés of today’s political posturing.

### 3.3 The historical “language” of politics

The same argument can be made for using political speech and action as an occasion for learning the “language” of history. Oakeshott’s own account of historical thought developed during his life (see Oakeshott 2004; O’Sullivan 2003), but in *On Human Conduct* he explicitly identifies the mode of understanding appropriate to conduct as the “historical”. What the student must bring to this understanding is...

a deep respect for the individual action, patience in exploring its connections, an exact appreciation of its provenance and circumstances, an eye for shades of difference between plausible likenesses, an ear for echoes and the imagination, not to conjecture what was likely, but to devise, recognize, entertain, and criticize a variety of contingent relationships, each sustained by a reading of the evidence. And it is an engagement of theoretical understanding: the theorist here, is not concerned to understand the performance merely in order to respond to it. He is not one of the parties in the transaction he is theorizing (Oakeshott 1990, p. 106).

Much of today’s academic study of contemporary politics, which Oakeshott seems to dismiss as “gossip”—a study of a current political figure, for example—is perfectly compatible with the historical mode of investigation. Indeed, viewed from the perspective of historical enquiry, political thought is a component of political history as well—as of course Oakeshott recognizes (2004, pp. 403-21). He is right that much political history is extremely complex and difficult for undergraduates to handle. But despite his example of the obscurity of contemporary Soviet politics (1991, p. 216), politics broadly conceived is the most ancient of historians’ focuses, and its literature surely contains a good deal of very suitable material in conjunction with which students can be introduced to the language of academic historical explanation. Further, if “explanation” is in the end indistinguishable from description, then teaching undergraduates to describe political processes with historical accuracy is perfectly appropriate.

## IV. SCHOLARSHIP AND RHETORIC

Politics academics might however contend that Politics is an appropriate course of study for a university even on Oakeshott’s own terms, for as well as having a literature of its own, it is also a “language” in its own right. The *language of politics*, as Oakeshott himself points out, has a peculiar lexicon, featuring words such as:

Democratic, liberal, equal, natural, human, social, arbitrary, constitutional, planned, integrated, communist, provocative, feudal, conservative, progressive, capitalist, national, reactionary, revolutionary, fascist, privileged, private, public, socialist; open, closed, acquisitive, affluent, responsible and irresponsible societies; the international order, party, faction, welfare and amenity (1991, pp. 206-7; see also 1990, pp. 312, 318).

Today we might add to this lexicon the heavily loaded words of the recent “discourse”, such as “marginalized”, “underrepresented”, “underfunded”, “exclusionary”, “populist”, and so on—and even the flourishing family of slur words carrying the suffix “phobic”.

It might seem to be the pedagogical goal of a teacher of Politics to impart mastery of this *language of politics* (1991, p. 211). And of course precisely that is the technical skill that was traditionally offered by one kind of political teacher in particular: the sophist. The sophist’s product is valuable, because without it the student is (allegedly) unable to understand or deploy the language of politics effectively. This would be, as Oakeshott observes, “a serious hindrance to anyone who, either as an amateur or as a professional, wishes to participate in the activity” (1991, p. 206). Hence, Oakeshott observes, books are now available which prom-

ise “to provide an education for those whose business or pleasure it is to speak the current language of politics”. “Indeed”, Oakeshott continues...

an expression has been invented (or seconded) to specify this literature; it is the so-called literature of ‘political theory’; and ‘political theories’ (in this usage) are appropriately qualified by adjectives such as ‘democratic’, ‘socialist’, ‘conservative’, ‘liberal’, ‘progressive’—that is, by adjectives which themselves belong to the current vocabulary of politics and are designed to indicate the political colour of the theories (1991, pp. 206-7).

Now, it is hard to see why, in an open society, there should *not* be specialized rhetorical training for political activists—whether their allegiances are “progressive” or “conservative”. And such a training centre could fairly be called a “School of Politics”—especially since “seminary” is already taken. Oakeshott’s idea of a School of Politics is, however, one in which teaching is *academic*—that is, it imparts explanatory rather than prescriptive languages. Thus, he warns, in a university “we should never *use* the language of politics; we should only use the explanatory ‘languages’ of academic study” (1991, p. 216, emphasis added). And nobody, he says, could mistake these terms—“democratic”, “liberal”, “progressive”, “reactionary”, “fascist”, “privileged” and so on—“for scientific expressions” (1991, p. 439). Where political words are introduced, it should be “in order to take them to pieces and write them out in the long-hand of historical or philosophical explanation” (1991, p. 216). It is, then, a sort of category error to use words which are the instruments of political rhetoric and manipulation as if they were also appropriate as tools of analysis. The danger, Oakeshott explains, is that the “idiom of the material to be studied is ever ready to impose itself upon the manner in which it is studied” (1991, p. 218).

#### 4.1 Academics and sophists

It seems that the impact of applying this rule today—that is, avoiding rhetorical words in the academic study of politics—would be highly iconoclastic, since the rhetoric and grammar of political literature has saturated many academics’ ostensibly analytic language (Oakeshott 1990, pp. 46-50). Oakeshott might however be criticised for positing a sharp distinction between explanation and prescription. We might observe that prescriptive language always posits some sort of explanation, and that explanatory language always prescribes something, at least implicitly. Oakeshott is aware of these considerations, but, he says, they “lie to one side of what I am suggesting”: namely, that however the two may be in practice inseparable, there is nevertheless a crucial difference of priority. The focus upon explanation makes practical advice incidental, a by-product; whereas the focus upon technique renders explanation subordinate (1967, pp. 136-7). Where political discourse does contain explanation, as it very often does, it does so for prescriptive purposes, not scientific purposes. To treat advice as the product, and explanation as subordinate to it, is common in practical political talk—and it would be appropriate for the sophist to teach students to use explanation selectively for their own practical ends. But the academic seeks the explanation that is *true*, whatever its possible practical uses. This is where the shoe pinches for “Social Justice Uni”. If the outcome of recent research is a discovery that, in the view of the teacher, will likely frustrate or damage the cause of “social justice”, then it seems ethical to suppress knowledge of that discovery—just as the sophist teaches his students how to suppress facts that weaken their own arguments.

Further, if politics were both a literature and an academic language in Oakeshott’s sense—i.e. an *explanatory* mode of thought—then the language of politics would actually be self-explanatory. Having within its remit both prescription and explanation, the language of politics could provide not just practical political proficiency, but also all the tools needed for explaining political talk and action. Historians and philosophers might still apply their peculiar explanatory languages to political affairs, but there would appear to be no reason why Politics academics should have to speak in the same terms, when *prima facie* the correct way to explain politics is in “the language of politics”. The only explanations we could need would

be those expounded by political speakers themselves. Approached thus, students may not acquire an “philosophical”, “historical”, or “scientific” understanding of politics, but they would acquire a “political” understanding, and what could seem more appropriate than that? It would obviously be very worrying if this were the case, especially for Politics academics, whose vocational failings and methodological inconsistencies would eventually be noticed.

However, although it is obvious that political activity is, as Oakeshott says, “three-quarters talk” politics it is not an academic “language” in Oakeshott’s sense, because it is not primarily explanatory. Political talk is primarily a prescriptive form of discourse. It is not a *logic*, but a *rhetoric*.

Still, many rhetorical terms are used by Politics academics as if they are scientific terms. The process by which such terms have been adopted has usually begun with the offering of some shared definition for a term such as “liberal” or “progressive”, a putative scientific concept or category. But it is quickly noticed that the definition is itself subject to contestation. The discovery that political terms are “essentially contested” is still frequently celebrated, but it should never have surprised anyone in the first place. It is obvious that vocabulary harvested from political rhetoric will be laden with normative significance. Likewise, it should be recognized that it is impossible to analyse a political debate in rhetorical terms without thereby joining it, and that many terms (such as “progressive” or “exclusionary”) must be left behind if another, non-rhetorical mode of conversation is to be initiated and sustained.

This observation, that the objectivity of scholarly language breaks down when contested political terms are involved, ought to prompt Politics academics to adopt less troublesome instruments of analysis. But many have preferred to draw the exactly opposite conclusion: namely, that open, active political contestation legitimately counts as “research”; and that Politics academics can (or should) put their research and teaching activity, and the weight of their professional profiles, to the service of their favoured political causes. Indeed, the idea of “research impact” tells us that research that is *not* oriented towards recommending, prescribing, and changing behaviour, to building a case, to fuelling a campaign—that research that does *not* do any of this—is what is indulgent in academic work, rather than the contrary. The question is not whether we have a civic right, as private citizens, to advocate a cause. It is whether it is “appropriate” we should advocate particular uses for our research, use our workplace and contracted hours to recommend causes to students, or adopt what Oakeshott thinks should be unnatural to us: the voice of the preacher or the instructor (1989, p. 99). It seems to me that all of this is only appropriate if we accept that the teaching of Politics in the university is now assessing itself by the success criteria of sophistry.

## V. CONCLUSION

Oakeshott is not attacking the idea that political campaigns should be adequately evidenced, risks fairly assessed, and the case well made. But he does invite us to consider whether this case-building, the politically-motivated construction of prescriptive political argument, is what academic research and teaching are for. And because he identifies that political language encompasses “idle political gossip and some tendentious speculation about current policy” (1991, p. 208), he certainly invites us Politics academics to reflect on whether it is appropriate for us to engage in the sort of discourse also provided by satirists, commentators, and axe-grinding columnists—and, further, whether the future of Politics in a university is best served by eroding the ancient distinction between academics and sophists.

There is also the pedagogical duty to consider. Academics are role models for students. We cultivate in them the explanatory languages of civilization (1967, p. 138), and show them what is entailed by the mode of association traditionally assumed between academics—a “civil” association, a *res publica* of letters, in which languages and practices are explored and analysed freely within laws and rules specifying conditions for self-chosen academic activity. We should of course uphold and transmit these languages and modes of association to the highest possible standard. After all, undergraduates already know all too well how *political* language is spoken, with varying standards of civility. It is not surprising that, if we enter the rhetorical language of campaigning *as academics*, then our students will learn to confuse languages, to code switch

between logic and rhetoric, in the same way. And it is clear what is lost when the School of Politics as a “civil” association becomes another “enterprise” association (Oakeshott 1990, pp. 313-16), such as a pressure group, or a school of sophistry. Whether one privately approves or disapproves of the “common purpose” sought by an enterprise association, it is obvious that full-time campaigners are incapable of fostering *convives* of the traditional academic kind, who should be (as Oakeshott puts it) “capable of ‘answering back’ in civil tones with whom to pass eternity in conversation” (1990, p. 324).

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