The Genesis of the Modern World: Oakeshott, Machiavelli and the Roots of Individualism

THOMAS CHEESEMAN

Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP

I. INTRODUCTION

In this 50th anniversary year (2025) of the publication of Michael Oakeshott's *On Human Conduct* (OHC), we find ourselves with an opportunity to look back on the work itself and the immediate response of critics. A reader ought to be struck by how Oakeshott's trenchant insights better allow us to understand each of the philosophical issues explored in OHC. Of particular interest in what follows is Oakeshott's attempt to understand "the somewhat novel associations of human beings which came to be called states of modern Europe" (OHC 185). Slowly emerging in Europe, each state "was the outcome of human choices, but none was the product of a design" (Ibid.). In attempting to understand the arguments of OHC, we might pair Oakeshott with an unlikely companion—Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli, the cunning savant of the dark arts and political manipulation, pursued a career in active politics, only turning to writing after being expelled from the ruling elite. In those writings, Machiavelli rejected a neutral inquiry in favor of propounding usable truths. By contrast, Oakeshott pursued a philosophical career, briefly interrupted by his service in World War II, avoiding baubles and accolades. Their personalities and dispositions suffuse their works and provide clues to the kind of interlocutor a reader finds when engaging with their works.

Oakeshott's gentlemanly attempt to understand the emergence of the modern European state, animated by an unresolved tension between two poles, serves as an exemplar of dispassionate philosophical inquiry. This is no mere 'intellectual history' doling out the labels 'hero' and 'villain,' but an attempt to make more coherent the muddle one faces in trying to understand the nature of the modern European state. Nor does Oakeshott impose upon his inquiry the obligation to generate a usable doctrine for altering the practical world. To ask, as so many of his critics did, how Oakeshott intended to generate a praxis to implement his ideas is to entirely miss the point.

Yet, we must also grapple with the deficiencies of the work. His insistence that the morality of the individual both preceded and generated the morality of the individual *manque* constitutes a real blemish and his attempt to include Machiavelli among the theorists of freedom demonstrates that flaw.

II. ON HUMAN CONDUCT

Although in this essay we are primarily focused on Oakeshott's schema set forth in OHC's third essay, to fully separate the three essays in OHC would do violence to Oakeshott's work. Oakeshott first lays out the nature of philosophical inquiry and human conduct to then consider the postulates of human conduct refracted through the lens of human association. Only after having plumbed the philosophical depths of the nature of his inquiry, human conduct and human association, did Oakeshott feel sufficiently armed to inquire into the nature of the modern European state. As we shall see, what is notable about Oakeshott's

posted dichotomies—self-disclosure vs. self-enactment and Civil Association vs. Enterprise Association—is the each is not related in some sort of unresolved Hegelian synthesis in the way he contrasts *societas* and *universitas*.

a. Essay I

The core of Oakeshott's inquiry may be said to be driven by a desire to avoid devolving from theorist to theoretician—to avoid suggesting to 'cave-dwellers' that in light of his exploration of the light outside the cave (here, somewhat humorously, in the philosophical exploration of horses) that he is a "more expert horse-man, horse-chandler, or stable boy" despite "his new learning [having] lost him the ability to tell one end of a horse from the other" (OHC 30). As Oakeshott recognized, "understanding is not such that we either enjoy it or lack it altogether" (OHC 1). Relatedly, theorizing about any topic is "an engagement to abate mystery rather than to achieve definitive understanding" (Ibid.). Oakeshott then listed the key features of this engagement:

> [1] a 'going-on' attended to; [2] a reflective consciousness attending to it and concerned to understand it, a theorist; [3] an inquiry designed and undertaken by a theorist in which he seeks to understand a 'going-on', theorizing; [4] and what emerges from this enterprise, a theorem (Ibid.).

Importantly, although the theorist takes a 'going-on' as an object of study, the conditional understanding that he begins the inquiry with is itself "an achievement in understanding and not therefore (in its distinctiveness) independent of reflective consciousness" (Ibid.). There are ever more layers to peel back on any 'going-on', but to forever ask for definitive understanding and definition hampers the inquiry. There are, however, "conditionally distinguishable gradations in a continuous and unconditional engagement of learning to understand which is well on its way in even the most exiguous acts of attention. Thus, there can be no absolute distinction between 'fact' and theorem'" (OHC 2). Is philosophical inquiry merely a futile, Sisyphean struggle? As Oakeshott recognized, "temporary platforms of conditional understanding are always being reached, and the theorist may turn aside to explore them. But each is an arrival, an enlightenment, and a point of departure. The notion of an unconditional or definitive understanding may hover in the background, but it has no part in the adventure" (OHC 2-3).

Here, we already see a playful element that suffuses Oakeshott's work. Here is a man who can wander in the woods and observe with wonder—observe a bird flitting about, building a nest, observe a species of tree with distinctive features, or simply see mountains through the canopy and contemplate nature's beauty. The purpose of theorizing is to better understand the world, not to change it. In trying to make any 'going-on' more intelligible, the theorist does not merely embrace its particularity but rather tries to understand the 'going-on' in terms of their postulates. Specifically, "a theorist is not provoked to this enterprise by his recognition of identities as compositions of characteristics (these he already understands, perhaps as well as they may be understood), but by what in such identities he does not yet understand; namely, their conditionality" (OHC 9). As a by-product, "[t]he irony of all theorizing is its propensity to generate, not an understanding, but a not-yet-understood" (OHC 11). Oakeshott then recognized that "the theorist who drops anchor here or there and puts out his equipment of theoretic hooks and nets in order to take the fish of the locality, interrupts but does not betray his calling" (Ibid.).

From here, Oakeshott casts his net to theorize on human conduct, shielding it from the imperium of the so-called 'social sciences.' In particular, Oakeshott notes that "psychological mechanisms cannot be the motives of actions or the reasons for beliefs. And so far from it being the case that a science of 'psychic processes is the only valid instrument we have for understanding human actions and utterances', such a science is categorically excluded from providing any such understanding." If psychology and sociology, with the reduction of 'goings-on' to mere processes unduly, fails to understand the 'goings-on' by neglecting the reflective intelligences that compose the agents who compose the 'going-on', what is a theorist to

do? According to Oakeshott, "[h]idden in the confusion, an unambiguous intellectual engagement is to be discerned; namely, the enterprise of theorizing conduct *inter homines* in terms of the conditions imposed upon it by the multiplicity of more or less durable relationships of human beings ('practices') and of theorizing these relationships in terms of their postulates" (OHC 23). By contrast, propounding illusions and myths to generate a stable practical achievement is decidedly not a philosophical engagement.

One must not confuse understanding these reflective consciousnesses engaged in conduct *inter homines*, particularly their subscription to practices, including moral practices, with understanding how to subscribe to a specific moral practice. Indeed, the ability to subscribe to a practice, though a conditional understanding of the world, is "indispensable in engagements of practical life" even if it is "not fully in command of itself because it is unaware of its conditionality" (OHC 27). Importantly, "to discover that a platform of understanding is conditional and to become acquainted with its proximate conditions is a notable step in the engagement of understanding, but it is not like exposing a fraud" (OHC 28). With those important reservations about theorizing set forth, Oakeshott sought to elucidate the key postulates of human conduct.

Oakeshott focuses on the ability of agents to intelligently elect to perform one action rather than another. Without such a postulate, agents' actions are merely reduced to processes. These actions are driven by the agents' understanding of the circumstances in which they act, including each agent's self-understanding. In acting, the agent both engages in both self-disclosure, where the agent acts anticipates a response from those the agent is interacting with, and self-enactment, where the agent's actions are expressive and inward-looking. This reflects both that the agent must have self-understanding and that the agent must interact with other reflective consciousnesses, not merely maneuver around the involuntary spasms of objects in a more or less deft manner. As the agents are reflective consciousnesses irreducible to a mere process, the:

> relationship postulated in conduct *inter homines* is an understood relationship, capable of being engaged in only in virtue of having been learned. And further, it must be a relationship which prescribes conditions for, but does not determine, the substantive choices and performances of agents. In short, what joins agents in conduct is to be recognized as a 'practice'; that is, a procedure proper or useful to be observed and therefore capable of being neglected or violated and capable, also, of being observed only in the chosen subscriptions of agents (OHC 55).

While these practices may provide moral or prudential 'adverbial conditions' to which an agent can subscribe to, no practice is "so definitively contrived or so securely insulated from circumstances as to become immune from modifications incidentally imposed upon it by the performances it qualifies" (OHC 56). Indeed, most practices emerge incidentally from agents' actions and remain forever incomplete. Among the practices that circumscribe agents' actions, without dictating a particular end, are moral practices. As Oakeshott recognized "a moral practice is not a prudential art concerned with the success of the enterprise of agents; it is not instrumental to the achievement of any substantive purpose or to the satisfaction of any substantive want" (OHC 60). Indeed, a "moral relationship is not association for the achievement of a common purpose (e.g. the greatest happiness of those associated); it is relationship solely in respect of conditions to be subscribed to in seeking the satisfaction of any want" (OHC 62). However we might wish to reduce moral practices to a rule book, there remains the individual, exhibiting a reflective consciousness, engaging in self-enactment and self-disclosure in the interminable interactions that constitute this life.

The transitory nature of all human conduct is moderated somewhat when considered as self-enactments, as "[t]here is at least the echo of an imperishable achievement when the valour of the agent and not the soon-to-vanish victory, when his loyalty and fortitude and not the evanescent defeat, are the considerations; and even an action in respect of its being dutiful is released from the transitory arbitrament of substantive inconclusion" (OHC 84). But only an echo. At last analysis, it is religion that intimates immor-

tality, of "the sharpness of death and the deadliness of doing overcome, and the transitory sweetness of a mortal affection, the tumult of a grief and the passing beauty of a May morning recognized neither as merely evanescent adventures nor as emblems of better things to come, but as *aventures*, themselves encounters with eternity" (OHC 85). Here, one cannot help but turn over Oakeshott' short reflection on the deadliness of doing and faith without feeling a certain frisson in one's soul and feel better equipped to face one's diurnal struggles. Not by wrapping oneself is a banner or cause, mimicking lost souls, but by understanding one's moral capacity to act.

Having established a framework for understanding human conduct that focuses on the individual, Oakeshott proceeded to analyze substantive performances (i.e. the choice to go skiing) without reducing the individual to his social circumstances. Importantly, Oakeshott reminded the would-be theorist that "he 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" (OHC 106). Essential to the enterprise of theorizing human conduct is to understand the individual as they understand themselves through the lenses of self-disclosure and self-enactment.

b. Essay II

Building off his theoretical apparatus set forth in the first essay, Oakeshott focuses on durable, freely-chosen human associations—specifically Enterprise Associations and Civil Associations. Importantly, and as was repeatedly ignored by Oakeshott's critics, the essay is focused on exploring the postulates of the two separate ideal types, which might then be used in third essay to help demystify the historical record with which he grapples. Importantly, these ideal types are not 'ideal' "in the sense of being a wished-for perfect condition of things but in being abstracted from the contingencies and ambiguities of actual goings-on in the world" (OHC 109).

Perhaps the more easily understandable of the two associational types is Enterprise Association, an association of agents in terms of the pursuit of a substantive end. According to Oakeshott, an Enterprise Association's associates and associated rules have three key features:

1) "First, these rules do not even identify, much less define, such an association. If such associates are to give an intelligible account of their relationship they can do so only by specifying the object, the purpose, or the interest in terms of which they are related" (OHC 116).
2) "Secondly, these rules are contingently related to the purpose concerned" (Ibid.).
3) "[T]hirdly, although enterprise association may entail the recognition of the authority of such rules, and an associate who persistently failed to observe them might be deemed to be delinquent and even be asked to resign his membership, its purpose cannot be identified as that of observing these rules, nor could this purpose be pursued in conduct specified merely as the observance of them. Indeed, even a denial of the authority of these rules would not itself be an act of disassociation, as it would be if the terms of association were the rules themselves" (Ibid.).

The implications of the above are clear—since the purpose defines an Enterprise Association, adjustments to the rules are of a managerial quality, imposing specific performances upon the association's co-venturers. What Oakeshott recognized is that whereas enterprises formed in virtue of their common purpose have served as a mental map for theorists trying to understand the relationship of citizens in a state there exists an alternative ideal type—Civil Association. For, one cannot produce a durable explanation of the civil relationship by declaring it a "compulsory association in terms of any such common purpose or interest because compulsory enterprise association is a self-contradiction: enterprise association is necessarily constituted by the continuous choice of each associate to be related to others in terms of a common purpose, a choice from which he must be able to extricate himself. There is no such thing a

collective choice. If on the other hand, the common purpose is said to be the 'security' or the *tranquillitas* of the associates, or their 'peace' or moral virtue, then the identification again collapses. These are not substantive purposes and they do not specify enterprise association" (OHC 119). Having previously set forth 'practices' in the first essay as a manner in which agents may be related in terms of adverbial conditions, without imposing substantive ends, Oakeshott turns to that model for understanding more durable relationships like the state.

Importantly for Oakeshott, "to be related in terms of a practice is precisely not to be associated in the reciprocal satisfaction of wants or in making or acknowledging 'managerial' decisions in the pursuit of common purposes; it is relationship in respect of a common recognition of considerations such as uses or rules intelligently subscribed to in self-chosen performances. It is formal, not substantial relationship; that is, association in respect of a common language and not in respect of having the same beliefs, purposes, interests, etc., or in making the same utterance" (OHC 120). By not having to 'sing from the same hymnal,' individual's remain capable of engaging in actions of self-enactment in addition to self-disclosure. Further, Civil Association is a "self-contained association in virtue of not being relationship in terms of doing and of the pursuit of joint satisfactions exhausted in the enjoyment of them" (OHC 121). If a Civil Associations' relationships are defined in terms of the recognitions of rules to be intelligently subscribed to, are these merely prudential considerations or is it a moral relationship? According to Oakeshott, "since civil association is not enterprise association, and since an agent may be 'just' or 'civil' in all or any of his actions, civil relationship is to be identified as association in terms of moral considerations. This of course, does not mean that there is no moral relationship which is not civil relationship; it means only that the conditions of civil association are moral conditions in not being instrumental to the satisfaction of substantive wants" (OHC 122).

Understood in such a manner, Civil Associations have certain other key features. Unlike Enterprise Associations, where a flouting of specific rules is not a rejection of the association itself, as Civil Association is association in terms of rules, the rules must be recognized as authoritative. Agents subscribe to the rules as adverbial conditions but are not required to view the rules themselves as desirable. For instance, an agent may "choose not to conform his conduct to the rule, but to violate or to neglect a rule is neither to deny nor to revoke its status as a rule: rules assert norms of conduct, they do not determine or forecast what will be said or done" (OHC 126). From here, Oakeshott explores the contours of Civil Association, including what it means for the rules to be alterable and the nature of the process through which they may be altered—politics. In each case, and recall this is an ideal type, the revisions must not impose a substantive performance upon agents or impose beliefs upon the agents that would efface their ability to engage in self-enacting actions.

Civil Association also entails 'ruling', but it maintains a character distinct from the managerial decisions of Enterprise Association. Importantly, 'orders addressed to assignable persons and the enforcement of such orders which constitutes the engagement of ruling are not transactions in which rulers seek imagined and wished-for satisfaction of their contingent wants in the responses of other identified persons themselves seeking the satisfaction of their contingent wants; rulers are not persons with substantive wants, they are office-holders with powers and obligations concerned with the observance of a procedure" (OHC 144). Rulers seek to maintain order not impose a substantive end. Rulers' authority flows from agents' recognition of their relationship with each other in terms of rules, not as a result of the enterprise they pursue. Importantly, the "distinctive quality of civil freedom, recognition given in *civitas* to moral agency, springs from civil association being rule and relationship in terms of authority and obligation in contrast to the not less genuine, but wholly different, freedom which belongs to enterprise association" (OHC 157). In an Enterprise Association, where an agent is bound to a substantive purpose, "he is free because his situation is a choice of his own and because he can extricate himself from it by choosing to do so" (Ibid.). Such freedom could not exist where an Enterprise Association is identified with the state.

c. Essay III

Having set forth the ideal types, Enterprise Association and Civil Association, Oakeshott then sought to demystify the muddle that is the modern European state by identifying Enterprise Association and Civil Association as two unreconciled poles tugging at the European conscience. Just as important as the notions of association that drive European's analyses of the state are the rival forms of morality, that of the individual and the individual *manque* which underlie the rival forms of association.

In Oakeshott's telling, in the sixteenth century, "the word 'state' (and its equivalent in other languages) was added to the European vocabulary of association and began, after some hesitations, to be used for an association of human beings, it was not merely a synonym for what had earlier been called a 'realm' or, among the learned, a *regnum vel civitas*" (OHC 196). How then were Europeans to understand what this 'state' was and to what end, if any, was it designed to lead? Already in "the late Middle Ages the words *societas* and *universitas* were already in use to denote and to distinguish some actual associations and communities" (OHC 199). According to Oakeshott, *societas* and *universitas* roughly approximated Civil Association and Enterprise Association, respectively, and were used by thinkers and lawyers to provide coherence to their understanding of the emerging state. The "ruler of a medieval realm was not distinguished from his fellow landlords by the magnitude of his proprietary estate but by the occupation of an office of authority identified by a title, some conditions of legitimate succession to it, a ceremony of induction, some expectations about his conduct, and some beliefs about the source of its authority" (OHC 206). As such, the incipient rulers sought to transcend their status as military ruler into "a ruler and the supreme dispenser of justice among his subjects, however exalted or however distant from him they might be" (OHC 207). Necessarily, the ruler was no mere owner of the territory, but related to his subjects in terms of law. This process was further complicated by the agglomeration of sacramental powers to the incipient states and the concomitant decline in the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

On the individual moral level, there arose a "disposition to cultivate the 'freedom' inherent in agency, to enjoy individuality, and added to this the disposition readily to concede virtue to the exercise of personal autonomy acquired in self-understanding" (OHC 239). Unsurprisingly, this individual disposition intimated to theorists and lawyers that *societas* provided the correct model for understanding the state. Yet there were storm clouds on the horizon. For, in response to the emergence of the individual appeared the individual *manque*. According to Oakeshott, the individual *manque* "is a historic and derivative character, the victim not only of the dissolution of familiar beliefs and relationships but also of another's more lively response to this dissolution. And hidden in his character was a small seed of resentment" (OHC 277). To be sure, Oakeshott also recognized the discovery of the New World and the vast domains obtained by European states and providing a domain upon which a *universitas* would seemingly be appropriate to impose—royal trading companies for instance. Further Oakeshott recognized that in "war itself, the latent or not so latent ingredient of managerial lordship in the office of government of a modern state comes decisively to the surface and is magnified, and what had hitherto been no more than contrivances for collecting revenue, for safeguarding the sources of revenue, or for maintaining civil order becomes devices for controlling the use of resources and for removing substantive choice from the conduct of subjects" (OHC 273). For Oakeshott though, the real driver of the state's impositions upon and degradation of Civil Association comes from the individual *manque*. For such individuals undermine the moral basis of an order based on free agents engaging in their own pursuits, subject to adverbial conditions.

The reaction to On Human Conduct helps clarify certain points in Oakeshott's thought. Interestingly, one critic, Hanna Pitkin, unfavorably contrast Oakeshott with Machiavelli, a theorist of true insight who seeks to achieve 'greatness.' Why is it that Oakeshott's work in so defective? It is so because "all of theorists in [a skeptical, non-utilitarian] tradition other than Oakeshott are led by such concerns to problems of founding, to questions of how such an arena can be created among men and how, once created it can be maintained" (Pitkin 1973, p. 519). In particular, Oakeshott lacks an artistic vision necessary to see that conflict and action, imbedded in active citizenship, are what sustain a successful political system.

Ultimately, Pitkin alleges that Oakeshott fails because "he never seriously considers the possibility of freedom as collective self-determination. Despite his allusion to adventure and risk, Oakeshott is as hostile to heroism and public action as he is to private selfishness in politics" (Ibid., p. 311). Cannot Oakeshott understand the primacy of tumults and transitions? Of our capacity for greatness? Oakeshott eschews an inquiry into human greatness because such an inquiry would then require him to determine a standard that would nullify other agent's notions in self-enactment. Further, generating such a standard would decidedly not be a philosophical inquiry in Oakeshott's eyes. Regardless, the focus on Machiavelli is interesting given the place Oakeshott gives Machiavelli among his theorists of *societas*.

III. OAKESHOTT ON MACHIAVELLI

Unlike his inspirations, Hobbes or Hegel, or his bête noire, Francis Bacon, Oakeshott never dealt systematically with Machiavelli's thought. Indeed, Oakeshott reveals a somewhat equivocal regard for Machiavelli. In OHC, Oakeshott makes two references to Machiavelli. First, in ticking through a whole host of prominent Western thinkers, Oakeshott places Machiavelli among those thinkers whose thought largely conforms to the *societas* notion of the state. Oakeshott makes further reference to Machiavelli as someone who feared the threat the poor posed to a *societas* inflected state. As we shall see, in our analysis of Machiavelli, it's fair to suggest that Oakeshott was too willing to conclude thinkers conformed to Oakeshott's *societas* vision. In particular, Oakeshott's Hegelian historical understanding, which understands the individual manque, the persona underlying the *universitas* vision of the state, as a reaction to the emergence of the individual, results in Oakeshott occasionally simplifying thinkers and the dynamic that resulted in the bifurcated moral poles tugging at the consciences of modern men as they engage in politics. Oakeshott's misstep should baffle us somewhat given his more nuanced understanding of Machiavelli shown elsewhere.

In the 'first draft' of OHC, represented by the posthumously published manuscript entitled *The Politics of Faith and The Politics of Skepticism*, Oakeshott noted that "[t]here were, of course, many before Bacon who understood the activity of governing as the exercise of power: Machiavelli, for example." But unlike Bacon, Machiavelli was not an adherent to the "Politics of Faith" and was not interested in perfecting man (Oakeshott 1996, p. 53). In that work, Oakeshott had proposed a conceptual division, utilizing the categories of the Politics of Skepticism, the analogue to *societas*, and the Politics of Faith, the analogue to *universitas*, to interpret the modern state. In that context, where Oakeshott had not as deeply explored the postulates of the two poles, it does make sense to class Machiavelli as among the skeptics. Yet even there, one would only have to look at Machiavelli's Art of War to have some reservations about Oakeshott's contention. In that work, Machiavelli proposes a rationalistic plan to remodel men's characters to create an elite fighting force to protect republics. While Machiavelli might be skeptical of being able to straightforwardly engage in projects of moral reformation, he certainly believed religion, war and deception could be used to accomplish the goal. Indeed, Oakeshott recognized Machiavelli's significance in altering the course of politics theory. As Oakeshott noted, "in the dawn of the modern European state there appeared a writer who gave the discussion of these questions [questions about the nature of politics and political deliberation] a profoundly new direction; namely, Machiavelli" (2004, p. 400). For "neither an art nor a science can be imparted in a set of directions; to acquire mastery in either is to acquire an appropriate connoisseurship. But what can be imparted in this way is a technique, and it is with the technique of politics that Machiavelli, as a writer, is concerned" (RP, *Rationalism in Politics* 29). It then became common for thinkers to propose their own technique detached from concrete political experience.

Oakeshott recognized that "[t]he Italy of which Machiavelli wrote in the early sixteenth century was, politically, not very different from the Italy of the ninth century: a battlefield of contending 'lords', mostly foreign invaders" (2004, p. 263). In this, Oakeshott might have queried whether, given the context, Machiavelli's thought would have been orthogonal to the moral concerns underlying *societas* and *universitas*. While Oakeshott was keen to "distinguish between, for example, a writer like Machiavelli or Locke

and a writer like Hobbes or Hegel" (2004, p. 43). Oakeshott occasionally neglects the thrust of the writer's analysis. Oakeshott rightly posits that "Machiavelli, for example, is very apt to take the view that a 'state' is a collection of people who owe allegiance to a ruler. But even he believed that even the most authoritative, the most powerful, and the most energetic ruler would be incapable of imposing unity upon his subjects if they were not already a community of some sort. The bond of common allegiance could not be the only bond" (2004, p. 404). This would suggest a broader conception of the state, compatible with either *societas* or *universitas*. Yet, Oakeshott also recognized that where the state was considered a work of human art, those like Machiavelli believed that the ruler was the artist. It is not surprising then that combined with Machiavelli's rationalistic project, that the ruler, particularly a new ruler, would seek to turn the state into an enterprise to help create solidarity and control the people.

On the level of philosophy or the disinterested practice of history, Oakeshott seemed to recognize the teleological mind of Machiavelli. For instance, in *On History* (1991b, pp. 41-44), Oakeshott readily apprehends that Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* are not history. There, Machiavelli sought to elicit lessons from historical vignettes, or to purposively misrepresent the past, in order to produce a 'practical history' that can be used by political actors. Machiavelli eschewed an open-ended inquiry, instead preferring to produce works that he believed put forth his lessons utilizing misrepresentations of the past or present to will others into following his vision. In that way, Machiavelli is not one whom we can converse with on his terms, but with whom we have skeptically disentangle fact from fiction and against whom we must deflect his attempt to instrumentalize others, to gain adherents to his 'moral' vision. Even in his plays, Machiavelli, seemingly self-aware, puts forth disreputable miscreants, such as Davo in the *Woman from Andros* or Ligurio in *The Mandrake*, as the masters of the situation who use half-truth and deception to manipulate others into acceding to their visions for a stable future. In both *The Woman from Andros* and *The Mandrake*, Machiavelli invites the audience (and the reader) to bemusedly laugh at the seemingly happy endings, aware the stable equilibrium is naught but a fraud. While these scenarios may elicit humor, and while Machiavelli may display individuality and undeniable charm, it is a stretch to class Machiavelli, as Oakeshott does, as a devotee of *societas*.

IV. MACHIAVELLI AND HIS INTERPRETERS THROUGH AN OAKESHOTTIAN LENS

No man wholly transcends his context. For instance, we might class Giotto as an 'early' Renaissance painter, but in the brush strokes and perspective, we can still detect the perspective of a Western European painter of medieval extraction. This is not to reject categorization, so much as to be cognizant of the fact that "[b]y marking someone as a precursor one lifts him out of the framework of his own time, within which he should be understood, and in doing so one distorts history" (Huizinga 1959, p. 260). In approaching any Renaissance figure, such as Machiavelli, a writer feels tempted to port the person into contemporary life, denuding them of their context. Yet, "beneath the glory of the Renaissance genuinely medieval popular life continued in Italy in the same forms as in France and the Germanic countries had escaped him just as much as that new life whose advent he hailed in Italy was also emerging in other lands where he could detect nothing but age-old repression and barbarism" (Ibid.). Much as we can see the medieval influence in Giotto's paint strokes, we can see the largely medieval political context's influence on Machiavelli's thought. While Machiavelli sits at the dawning of the new political epoch Oakeshott posits, as with any line drawing, we can readily see that the line is both too early and too late, that it begins in a search for 'precursors' and ceases to be history. But further, it does unravel somewhat Oakeshott's posited place for the individual *manque* in the unsynthesized Hegelian unfolding of modern history torn between *societas* and *universitas*.

How then are we to understand Machiavelli's political thought? Putting aside Machiavelli's personal correspondence, political dispatches and plays, Machiavelli's work is composed of four main texts—*The Prince*, *The Discourses on Livy*, *Art of War*, and *The Florentine Histories*. His political maturity primarily occurred after the Medicis had been expelled from Florence in 1494, having aligned themselves with King

Charles VIII of France during his invasion of Italy, only to see King Charles find himself outmaneuvered and forced to retreat (Unger 2011). But the expulsion of the Medicis was mere prologue for the coming era of Florentine politics. Into the whirling vortex ascended one Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar with a penchant for prophecy, seeking to cleanse the Florentines' souls through the bonfire of the vanities. Near the end Savonarola's reign of fervor in 1498, Machiavelli first stepped forth into Florentine politics, spying upon a Savonarola sermon and preparing a secret report to opponents of Savonarola. It is rather fitting that Machiavelli's first political act was one of intrigue and conspiracy (Ibid., p. 42).

Savonarola soon overplayed his hand and was executed. Shortly thereafter, Machiavelli obtained power, becoming Second Chancellor, a bureaucratic role assisting the head of state, Piero Soderini (Ibid., p. 72). For the purposes of providing context to Machiavelli's thought, both from the narrow perspective of understanding Machiavelli as a historical actor and the broader perspective of understanding European politics around the dawning of the modern age, we will briefly focus on two aspects of Machiavelli's tenure as Second Chancellor—his diplomatic missions to larger, more powerful states and his reforming efforts regarding Florence's military.

Cesare Borgia, a ruthless and violent illegitimate son of the then Pope Alexander VI, descended upon Northern Italy like a plague of locusts from his resignation from the cardinalate in 1498 until his violent death in 1507 at the ripe age of 31. In part enabled by the protection of his father the Pope, Duke Valentino, as Cesare Borgia was known, violently seized land and sought to establish his own domain. Among Borgia's most common companions during his rise were deception, cruelty, and malice. As has been recognized, the impact of Machiavelli first meeting with Borgia "can be judged by the amount of space in Machiavelli's writings devoted to the career of Valentino, out of all proportion to his actual achievement. It is no exaggeration to say that Valentino was his muse, the mythical exemplar of the will to power that to Machiavelli was the engine driving all human history" (Ibid., p. 115). Such an elevated status may seem peculiar, given that upon the death of his father, Borgia soon found himself easily outmaneuvered, jailed and executed by the new pope, Julius II. Yet, in Borgia's actions, Machiavelli undoubtedly found room to fantasize about what dash and daring could accomplish. Given the diminished status of Florence during Machiavelli's service, Machiavelli had solely experienced contempt and disregard during his time spent with the major powers of Europe's courts. We can find Machiavelli, in his dispatches back to Florence, stating that "[t]he French are blinded by their own power, and only think those who are armed or ready to give money worthy of their esteem. They see that these two qualities are wanting in you, so they look upon you as Sir Nihil" (Ibid., p. 93).

Machiavelli regarded such lack of arms as a constant threat to his beloved Florence. Indeed, Machiavelli believed that should Florence "reopen the temple of Mars" (ibid., p. 158) it would reclaim its greatness. For Machiavelli, martial vigor not only would dissuade covetous neighbors from attacking, but would unite and revitalize the city, allow Florence to dominate fortuna and unlock true greatness (Pocock 2016, p. 203). The renewed military strength, however, was not to be obtained by an external force of mercenaries, but by training a citizen army. Indeed, as has been recognized, "Machiavelli's faith in a citizen army went beyond empirical observation; he had an almost mystical belief in the virtue of the citizen soldier and a visceral hatred for the hired gun—a conviction that a man who refused to fight on behalf of his own country was no man at all, and that a nation that relied on its purse rather than its people would soon be reduced to slavery" (Unger 2011, p. 160). We cannot separate Machiavelli's mystical vision for the militia from his concept of virtù—translatable into virtue, but not intended to contain moral scruples. Machiavelli considered virtù to be a manly, impetuous characteristic that would enable a man to bend the world to his will.

Faced with the failure of mercenaries to recapture neighboring Pisa, traditionally a Florentine vassal, Machiavelli sought to exercise virtù with a bold vision for a new military endeavor. Machiavelli presented a plan "to defeat Pisa not by use of brute force but by diverting the Arno…thereby starving the rebellious city of subsistence and commerce" (Ibid., p. 144). Machiavelli had engaged Leonardo da Vinci to complete this daring and bold project. In the end, the sober minds in the Florentine government acceded to Machiavelli's

plan. It was not to be. After construction began, "a violent storm damaged the Florentine fleet guarding the mouth of the river and flooded the ditches [being used to reroute the river]. A few days later the emboldened Pisans emerged from their defensive works and set about punching holes in the weirs. The labor of months was destroyed in a matter of hours, and the entire project collapsed amidst the usual finger-pointing and recrimination." The bold diversion aside, Machiavelli took great pride in the Florentine militia he was charged with forming in 1506. Machiavelli's militia achieved initial success, finally taking Pisa in 1509. Yet, it was the Florentine militia's failure of nerve in 1512, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, that led to the restoration of the Medici and Machiavelli's expulsion from public service (Ibid., pp. 193-214).

a. The Prince

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in the shadow of his failures, in a desperate attempt to ingratiate himself with the Medici and successor regime in Florence. *The Prince* (P) is a work focused on giving rationalistic advice to a new prince (Pocock 2016, p. 160).[1] Given our brief summary of Machiavelli's career, we should be unsurprised to find him declaring that "the main foundations of all States, whether new, old, or mixed, are good laws and good arms. But since you cannot have the former without the latter, and where you have the latter, are likely to have the former, I shall here omit all discussion on the subject of laws, and speak only of arms" (Machiavelli 1992, p. 31, ch. XII). Given Oakeshott's recognition that war posed one of the greatest threats to *societas* in the 20th Century, it is odd that a man like Machiavelli, so focused on war, would have been classed among the defenders of *societas*. Then again, perhaps we might see that while Machiavelli sees the need for force in transitions to *societas*, but that within established polities, strength and violence do not predominate. This potential defense is certainly consistent with Machiavelli's contention in P that "without national arms no Princedom is safe, but on the contrary is wholly dependent on Fortune, being without the strength that could defend it in adversity" (P 37, ch. XIV). Yet, threats to a state would not merely be present in war, but as a result of internal dissension.

How might such threats be contained? Machiavelli asserts that "Fortune is a woman who to be kept under must be beaten and roughly handled; and we see that she suffers herself to be more readily mastered by those who so treat her than by those who are more timid in their approaches" (P 68, ch. XXV). Machiavelli's successful political actor bends the world to his enterprise with the manly exercise of virtù. Machiavelli's princes recognize 'distempers of state' while yet inchoate and manfully rectify the situations. Among the causes of these distempers in the body politic are "the demands of the nobles cannot be satisfied with credit to the Prince, nor without injury to others, while those of the people well may, the aim of the people being more honorable than that of the nobles, the latter seeking to oppress, the former not to be oppressed" (P 24, ch. IX). Here then, we can see Machiavelli's polity is riven with divisions among the classes. Yet, the people, seeking to avoid oppression, might be the sort of citizens interested in a state governed by rules rather than a particular enterprise. In this, P proves interesting in both shading the people as being more virtuous and seemingly endorsing their participation in politics. For as Machiavelli notes, "we may draw another notable lesson, namely, that Princes should devolve on others those matters that entail responsibility" (P 50, Ch. XIX). Evidently not responsibility for all matters, as Machiavelli ends his short tract by exhorting Medici to engage in a grand enterprise to expel the barbarians and unite all of Italy, not merely reform the Florentine state.

b. The Discourses on Livy

Simultaneous with P, Machiavelli began work on *The Discourses* (D), a work ostensibly on the first ten books of Livy's *History of Rome*. Unlike *The Prince*, which is a grasping attempt to regain political influence, Machiavelli humbly dedicated *The Discourses* to "not those who are princes but those who for their infinite good parts deserve to be" (D 3). Machiavelli, title aside, writes with an attempt to set forth general principles for actions in the political domain, both in principalities and republics. We can find certain

passages that readily contradict Oakeshott's understanding of Machiavelli. For, while Oakeshott presents Machiavelli as one concerned with the threat posed by the poor to *societas*, we find Machiavelli proposing two key remedies to enhance and protect a state—"one, to maintain the citizens poor so that they cannot corrupt either themselves or others with riches and without virtue; the other, to be ordered for war so that one can always make war…." (D 255, book 111.16). Rationalism aside, perhaps we might propose that the enterprise to inculcate and preserve virtue and to avoid periods of transition might be consistent with a *societas* vision.

Machiavelli proposes that the disorder in Italy is a product of Italians' confusion about the nature of politics. According to Machiavelli, "[t]his arises, I believe, not so much from the weakness into which the present religion has led the world, or from the evil that an ambitious idleness has done to many Christian provinces and cities, as from not having a true knowledge of histories, through not getting from reading them that sense nor tasting that flavor that they have in themselves" (D 5, book 1). In this dense quote, we can acquaint ourselves with Machiavelli's preoccupations and his method. Christianity has weakened men, who might otherwise shape the world with their will. Further, Machiavelli's attempt to 'taste the flavors' imbedded in ancient histories becomes revealed in his regular misrepresentation of past events to allow him to present his preferred principles for action. How then might the Florentine's shed their weakness and inculcate virtù?

According to Machiavelli, in each of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy—the three forms of government—there are laws which result in the regime degenerating, "so those who prudently order laws having recognized this defect, avoiding each of these modes by itself, chose one that shared in all, judging it firmer and more stable; for the one guards the other, since in one and the same city there are the principality, the aristocrats, and the popular government" (D 13, book 1.2). Taking a step back, we might note that Machiavelli is here focused on the form of government, rather than the nature of its authority, and therefore this work should not be relevant to understanding Oakeshott historical frame put forth in the third essay. But by reading Machiavelli closely, we can see the 'moral' virtues underlying his works and the uncomfortable questions such virtues pose for Oakeshott's schema.

Looking at the underlying individuals' natures, Machiavelli posit that "it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it" (D 15, book 1.3). Instead of assuming a moral frame in establishing a state, Machiavelli actually seeks to counter interest against interest to provide stability. In particular, Machiavelli presents the counterintuitive principle "that to me it appears that those who damn the tumults between the nobles and the plebs blame those things that were the first cause of keeping Rome free, and that they consider the noises and the cries that would arise in such tumults more than the good effects that they engendered" (D 16, book 1.4). This dynamism is a product of a broader principle that "all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall; and to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you" (D 23, book 1.6). Here, we can see the zero sum game mentality that typifies Machiavelli's thought.

Outside of first principles, we find Machiavelli musing "that it never or rarely happens that any republic or kingdom is ordered well from the beginning or reformed altogether anew outside its old orders unless it is ordered by one individual" (D 29, book 1.9). Machiavelli's proposal evinces the influence of the medieval political world, composed of men that had not experienced a depersonalized state. We do see Machiavelli's rationalist tendencies in his proposal that "whoever wished to make a republic in the present times would find it easier among mountain men, where there is no civilization, than among those who are used to living in cities, where civilization is corrupt; and a sculptor will get a beautiful statue more easily from coarse marble than from one badly blocked out by another" (D 35, book 1.11). Yet further, a man seeking to demonstrate the greatest level of virtù "ought to desire to possess a corrupt city—not to spoil it entirely as did Caesar but to reorder it as did Romulus" (D 33, book I.10). Indeed, what could be a greater enterprise?

In pursuing this project, Machiavelli proposes that laws may not be enough, and instead a kingly state might need to be imposed to check the insolence of a state's citizens "by an almost kingly power" (D 51, book 1.18). Even in a republic, princes must "keep the public rich and their citizens poor" because "so great is the ambition of the great that it soon brings that city to its ruin if it is not beaten down in a city by various ways and various modes" (D 80, book 1.37). Indeed, Machiavelli asserts that stable republics refuse to allow "any citizens of theirs either be or live in the usage of a gentleman; indeed, they maintain among themselves an even equality, and to the lords and gentlemen who are in that province they are very hostile" (D 111, book 1.55). Here, we cannot help but wonder whether Machiavelli sees citizens as reflective consciousness making their own choices, or chess pieces to be maneuvered.

Machiavelli does graciously concede that "[i]f princes are superior to the peoples in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and order, peoples are so much superior in maintaining things ordered that without doubt they attain the glory of those who order them" (D 118, book 1.58). Yet, one cannot help getting the sense that Machiavelli views the people as pliable clay for his own endeavors. For now, the people have become beholden to Christianity. Machiavelli avers that "[o]ur religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human; the other placed it in greatness of spirit, strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong" (D 131, book II.2). Is such humility a prerequisite for a respect for the expression of idiosyncrasies and typify the sorts of individuals drawn to a moral order based on adverbial conditions? Certainly, Machiavelli viewed Christianity as eviscerating virtù and impeding his endeavor.

Oakeshott recognized that while at war, the state reaches its closest approximation to *universitas*. Yet, it is not just the state of war, but the mentality associated with war that leads thinkers to reaching for *universitas* as the model for the state. Machiavelli is preoccupied with the belief that if a state will not "molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and the necessity to acquire; and if it does not have an enemy outside, it will find one at home, as it appears necessarily happens to all great cities" (D 173, book II.19). Thus, for Machiavelli, war can be instrumentalized to maintain cohesion in a state and without this grand enterprise, the state will be riven with internal tensions. Most importantly, to revitalize the state, a single man must rebaptize the citizenry in fire "without depending on any law that stimulates [the citizens] to any execution; nonetheless, [the radical leader is] of such reputation and so much example that good men desire to imitate [him] and the wicked are ashamed to hold to a life contrary to [him]" (D 211, book III.1). Here, we come to Machiavelli's great preoccupation—glory. Blazing virtù aimed at bending others to one's will shall propel the select few to glory. But Machiavelli, seemingly aware of his own failures, notes further that "glory can be acquired in any action whatever, because in victory it is acquired ordinarily; in loss, it is acquired either by showing that such a loss did not come by your fault or through doing at once some virtuous action that cancels it" (D 302, book III.43). So much for the intimation of the eternal in a reflective consciousness's self-enactment. Seeking to obtain glory, Machiavelli wrote the *Art of War*, to absolve himself of his own failures.

c. Art of War

No longer a social pariah, as Machiavelli had been while writing P and D, we find Machiavelli in *Art of War* (AW) attempting to justify the failure of his militia and preaching the lessons learned to his beholden audience at the Orti Oricellari. Again, we see Machiavelli asserting that "[f]or all the arts that are ordered in a city for the sake of the common good of men, all the orders made there for living in fear of the laws and of God, would be in vain if their defenses were not prepared" (AW 4). Further, we find Machiavelli's acknowledgment of his militia's failure in his admonition that "these wise men of yours must not gauge this uselessness from its having lost one time; rather, [they must] believe that just as one loses, so can one win and remedy the cause of the loss" (AW 23). Underscoring the essential role a militarized citizenry plays in Machiavelli's thought, we find him noting that the ancients esteemed nothing to be happier "in a

republic than for there to be many men in it trained in arms; for the splendor of gems and gold does not make your enemies submit themselves to you, but only the fear of arms" (AW 44). These true gems remain out of reach because "today's mode of living, on account of the Christian religion, does not impose that necessity to defend oneself that there was in antiquity. For then, men conquered in war were either killed or remained in perpetual slavery, where they led their lives miserably" (AW 59). Christianity has atrophied the modern man's ability to violent dominate others in service of the glory of his country and his own glory. Greedily imbibing Machiavelli's strong brew, the young men of the Orti Oricellari sought to put such theoretical boldness into action and overthrow the Medici rule. All participants in the conspiracy were either killed or exiled. With their disappearance, Machiavelli once again found himself alone (Unger 2011, p. 307).

d. The Florentine Histories

The Florentine Histories (FH) was Machiavelli's last work, containing most of the major themes we have addressed thus far, but with great dexterity, wrapped in an engaging narrative. Despite the name, Machiavelli was not engaged in history understood as the attempt for dispassionate analysis of cause and effect. Instead, one should approach FH as engaging historical fiction. In most sections, Machiavelli starts by setting forth a 'truth' and then demonstrates it in the remaining chapters, 'finding' the truth in history, often torturing the narrative to fit his point. In some ways, being constrained to loosely follow a historical narrative forces Machiavelli to be clearer in his description of Fortuna.

In FH, we find Machiavelli positing that after the collapse of the Roman Empire, "[t]he arms of Italy, therefore, were in the hands either of lesser princes or of men without a state; for the lesser princes, unmoved by any glory, wore them so as to live either more rich or more secure, and the others, nurtured in them since childhood and not knowing any other art, sought to be honored for them by having them or power" (FH 50). Unsurprisingly, we find Machiavelli asserting that "because the pontiffs always feared one whose power had become great in Italy, even though it has grown through the favors of the Church, and because they sought to bring down the power, there arose those frequent tumults and frequent changes that occurred in Italy" (FH 63). Interestingly though for the supposedly republican Machiavelli, we find him reflecting on the ruin of the nobility and concluding that "[t]he ruin of the nobles was so great and afflicted their party so much that they never again dared to take up arms against the people, indeed, they became continually more humane and abject. This was the cause by which Florence was stripped not only of its arms but of its generosity" (FH 104). While we may ponder whether such a representation is colored by the specific audience of the work—the Medici pope who engaged Machiavelli to write the Florentine Histories—we see the recurrent focus on force and strength. Such a preference for force over cultivated leisure comes to a crescendo in Machiavelli's assertion that "[f]or, as good and ordered armies give birth to victories and victories to quiet, the strength of well-armed spirits cannot be corrupted by a more honorable leisure than that of letters, nor can leisure enter into well-instituted cities with a greater and more dangerous deceit than this one" (FH 185). Can one imagine a position more inimical to *societas* and free men engaging in self-enactment?

e. Enterpriser par Excellence

And so what? What if Oakeshott was wrong about Machiavelli being a defender of *societas*? After all, does not Oakeshott qualify his schema with a recognition that war has posed a great threat to *societas*? Oakeshott's schema self-consciously eschews any reliance on any concept of human nature. While Machiavelli's outlook remains medieval in believing the leader imprints his personality on the state, rather than theorizing about a depersonalized state, we can see a similarity to many of the features of the individual *manque* Oakeshott deplored. So, we must dig deeper and explore whether the individual *manque* is not merely a reaction to the emergence of the individual. Might there be some primordial aspects of

human nature that, much like practices, mold human conduct without reducing human conduct to a mere process?

As Oakeshott recognized, "[t]he notion of an unconditional or definitive understanding may hover in the background, but it has no part in the adventure" of philosophy. We must take up Oakeshott's adventure and delve into a more distant past to understand the roots of individualism and the anti-individual. In doing so, we must be grateful that Oakeshott illuminated the conditional platform of understanding from which we started and glory in the intellectual adventure.

REFERENCES

Huizinga, Johan. 1959. *Men and Ideas*. New York, Meridian Books.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1988. *Florentine Histories*. Trs. L. Banfield and H. Mansfield. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

_____. 1992. *The Prince*. Tr. N. H. Thompson. New York: Dover.

_____. 1996. *Discourses on Livy*. Trs. H. Mansfield and N. Tarcov. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____. 2003. *Art of War.* Tr. Christopher Lynch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Oakeshott, Michael. 1975. *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

_____. 1991a. *Rationalism in Politics*. Indianapolis: Liberty Press.

_____. 1991b. *On History and Other Essays*. Indianapolis: Liberty Press.

_____. 1996. *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*. Ed. Timothy Fuller. New Haven: Yale University Press.

_____. 2004. *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*. Ed. Luke O'Sullivan. Charlottesville: Imprint Academic.

Pitkin, Hanna. 1973. The Roots of Conservatism: Michael Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics. *Dissent Magazine*, Fall:519.

_____. 1976. Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory. *Political Theory*, 4(3):301-320.

Pocock, J. G. A. 2016. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Unger, Miles. 2011. *Machiavelli: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

NOTES

1 "Il Principe is a study of the 'new prince'—we know this from Machiavelli's correspondence as well as from internal evidence—or rather of that class of political innovators to which he belongs."