



Machiavelli's Moral Theory: Moral Christianity versus Civic Virtue

Felipe Lamus

Faculty Advisor: Thomas Robisheaux Ph.D.

Professor of History

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Abstract

Nicolas Machiavelli is deemed to be the representative *par excellence* of the lack of morality and ethics in politics. The theory that “the end justifies the means” encapsulates his political and moral thought. The adjective *Machiavellian* means a total lack of scruples. The popular conception is that Machiavelli’s political methods are amoral, evil, rational and pragmatic. But the reality is that what Machiavelli said was not new. Before Machiavelli there were politicians that used murder, lying, treachery, malice, deceit, conspiracy and disloyalty to achieve their political goals – some of them very noble ones, like the preservation of the republic, the peace of the empire or the security of the city – and, in doing so, saved millions of lives and sometimes silenced millions of others. Was then Machiavelli a Machiavellian? Was he, alternatively, a thinker and philosopher with structured moral principles in the tradition of other moral philosophers for whom there was an objective right and wrong, good and bad, that apply both to private and public life? Or was he a relativist for whom there is no good or bad in politics and for whom every action is valid and justified for the sake of accomplish political results? In this paper, I will explore the ethical and moral foundations of Machiavelli, seeking to answer the following question: What is for Machiavelli the relationship between politics and morality, means and ends, tactics and results? I conclude that Machiavelli was not an amoral thinker but defended a different morality, one based on civic virtue, in contraposition to Christian morality.

Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Life, time and main concepts.....	7
Machiavelli's life and age, critical moments that defined his moral thought	
<i>The Prince</i> and <i>The Discourses</i> , a path not yet trodden by anyone	
Men are bad and they don't change	
Fortuna, the great enemy	
<i>Virtú</i> , a bold challenge to Fortuna	
Necessity, a call to action	
Chapter Two: The moral theory that Machiavelli dared to propose.....	22
Morals from two murders	
Stern reality, the truth of the matter as facts show	
Successful politics or the abandonment of conventional ethics	
Aristotle's ethical fancies	
The deed accuses, but the result excuses	
Chapter Three: Moral interpretations: accusing or excusing Machiavelli.....	36
The originality of Machiavelli: Two moral worlds	
Machiavellianism as immoral doctrine	
Machiavelli's philosophical dissimulation	
Conclusion: Right or wrong, Machiavelli is a classic.....	51
Bibliography.....	59

Introduction

My purpose is to consider Machiavelli's moral theory and the way moral values apply to politics. Nicolas Machiavelli is deemed to be the representative *par excellence* of the lack of morality and ethics in politics. The famous quote attributed to Machiavelli, but not present textually in any of his works – that “the end justifies the means” – encapsulates his political and moral thought, and is used randomly to rate and label it as amoral and immoral. The adjective *Machiavellian*, negative by consensus, implies a total lack of scruples, and is used to describe a person with a cool head and heart who does not hesitate to commit the vilest and wicked deeds to achieve his or her objectives. The popular conception is that Machiavelli's political methods are amoral, evil, rational and pragmatic.

If we follow his maxims, and what he said in *The Prince*, *The Discourses* and *The History of Florence*, we can understand why so many were scandalized by Machiavelli's ideas throughout history. Here are some of them: “It is necessary for a prince to learn how not to be good.”¹ “A Prince never lacks legitimate reason to break his promises.”² The Prince “is often obliged to act against his promise, against charity, against humanity, and against religion.”³ It is necessary to know “how to be a great hypocrite and a liar.”⁴ The Prince “should know how to enter into evil when necessity commands.”⁵ “A prince who wishes to accomplish great things must learn to deceive.”⁶ “In most cases a man who makes himself feared is better followed and more readily obeyed than one who makes himself loved.”⁷

¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV. *The Chief works and others* (Translated by Allan Gilbert, Duke University Press, 1989)

² *The Prince*, XVIII

³ *The Prince*, XVIII

⁴ *The Prince*, XVIII

⁵ *The Prince*, XVIII

⁶ Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, II-23. *The Chief works and others* (Translated by Allan Gilbert, Duke University Press, 1989)

⁷ *The Discourses*, III-21

What Machiavelli said was not new. Before Machiavelli there were politicians that used murder, lying, treachery, malice, deceit, conspiracy and disloyalty to achieve their political goals – some very noble ones – like the preservation of the republic, the peace of the empire or the security of the city. Several examples of deception are explained in detail by Machiavelli’s historical sources, including Livy, Cicero and Virgil. So, those methods were not introduced or invented by him. And those are the same methods that several politicians used after Machiavelli, and are using even today to maintain power. So, why are Machiavelli’s ideas considered scandalous?

This project sets aside the presumption that Machiavelli’s objective was to scandalize to draw attention. None of his works, with the exception of *The History of Florence*, were published during his lifetime. If that were the case, his books would not have aroused such interest by thinkers of the stature of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, to mention only a few. *The Prince* is not, as some have suggested, a “handbook for gangsters” or a “vademecum for statesman” as Bertrand Russell famously said.⁸ Nor can we say that Machiavelli did not mean what he said because clearly *The Prince* or *The Discourses* are not satires. There is something more profound in the thought of Machiavelli that attracts so many people and generates such polarized opinions, heated debates and controversy.

Hundreds of books and articles have been written about Machiavelli’s works, each trying to discover his true intentions. All political thinkers and many philosophers have sought to clarify the meaning of his ideas and, especially, his views on morality. It is true that Machiavelli is a puzzle, a contradiction, but at the same time a fascinating thinker that addresses traditional political issues and dilemmas with freshness, candidly and openly. Machiavelli was at the same time a great writer, with a clean, precise and acute prose. So, why so many different and radical interpretations of his thoughts? Why so much scandal about what he said? The answer to these questions can be found in the most controversial issue of Machiavelli’s thought: his moral philosophy.

⁸ Berlin, Isaiah. *The Originally of Machiavelli. (In Against the Current: Essays in the history of ideas*, Princeton University Press, 1979), 35

Was then Machiavelli a Machiavellian? Was he, alternatively, a thinker and philosopher with structured moral principles in the tradition of other moral philosophers for whom there was an objective right and wrong, good and bad, that apply both to private and public life? Or was he a relativist for whom there is no good or bad in politics and where every action is valid and justified for the sake of accomplish political results? In this paper, I will explore the ethical and moral foundations of Machiavelli, seeking to answer the following question: What is for Machiavelli the relationship between politics and morality, means and ends, tactics and results?

One of Machiavelli's main contributions to political thinking was, for the first time, to consider politics as a unique sphere of conduct, with its own principles and rationality, and with its own set of values. Before Machiavelli, politics was subsumed into Christian ethics or law, and consequently governed by their rules. Machiavelli, however, drew inspiration for understanding political morality from his own experience as an official of the Florentine government and from the histories of Rome and Greece, for which he had especial admiration. Far from relativistic, this paper argues, Machiavelli's political ethics were based on specific values.

One of the main reasons why Machiavelli is so debated is based perhaps on the fact that he broke with the tradition. This break happened when he clearly articulated a new moral theory for politics, one that subordinated philosophy to politics and placed the emphasis of the political action in the realm of "what is" instead of "what ought to be." This new moral theory differentiates between the theoretical truth and the effective truth or the truth that produce good results. In some way, he departed from the assumption that good decisions, meaning morally correct decisions, produce good political results and that bad decisions, meaning morally wrong decisions, should produce bad results. He distinguished between – and even posed as contradictory – political morality and personal morality. And he warned that the two can collide when it comes to defending the republic, and that political morality should reign over personal morality if that is the case. In chapter XV of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes that "It is necessary for a prince who wants to maintain his state to learn how not to be good, and use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity,"⁹ which summarizes the concept of the "means justify the end." Does this mean that politics need to be amoral to succeed? That

⁹ The Prince, XV

philosophy and morals are not and cannot be related to practical behavior? That Machiavellian thinking is not rooted in a metaphysical conception of the world? That Machiavelli excused the Prince of any ethical principle when the existence of the republic is in question? Does this mean that good governments are necessarily ethical or virtuous governments? And that republics can survive if they follow the traditional morality expected for individuals? These are just some of the basic dilemmas that Machiavelli explored and openly addresses, and the response to these issues has generated, consequently, a lot of debate.

Certainly, Machiavelli does not depend on any religion or theology. But from this we cannot conclude that he favors an amoral view of the world. Then, to understand him properly, we need to understand his ethical foundations and, based on those, his political philosophy. Only this way we can understand what was his thinking about the relationship between morals and politics, means and ends, tactics and results and how these ideas are reflected in some of his general principles.

To explore Machiavelli's thought regarding politics and morality, this project focuses on the analysis of his primary works, including *The Prince*, *The Florentine Histories*, *The Discourses*, some of his plays and correspondence with his friends. I will restate as carefully and fully as I can what Machiavelli has to say about the question in these primary texts, especially in those chapters focused on morals and ethics. Then I will engage in what he says critically: that is, to make my own judgments about the position he takes, and to ground those judgments in argument. My method involves a close reading of these texts with particular attention to his discussions of ethics and political behavior.

I will put special focus on some of the concepts that most concerned Machiavelli and are key to understanding his philosophical thought and ethical foundations. One is the historical conflict between *virtú* and *fortuna*, or between agency and contingency, a subject that fascinated Machiavelli to explain the irrationality of human history and the inclination of people to error and sin. Also, I will explore his conception of free will and necessity.

To assess what Machiavelli says, I will use —and engage the arguments from— several secondary sources, mainly from a group of scholars who have written about Machiavelli and his ethics, moral philosophy and political philosophy. I will briefly discuss the reception of

Machiavelli and changing views – anchoring it at different times and particular scholars. The way that Machiavelli is seen today is very different from the way he was seen in the past, especially between 1700 and 1900. Political thinkers like Francis Bacon, Benedict Spinoza and Jean-Jacques Rousseau considered Machiavelli as a moral and a political philosopher. I will explore briefly some of their claims.

I will engage with recent interpretations of Machiavelli's ethics and politics, especially those from Maurizio Viroli, Erica Benner and Alejandro Bárcenas, that cast new light on the meaning of his works and much debated ethics. Viroli, in *Redeeming the Prince*,¹⁰ disregards most defenses of Machiavelli, including that *The Prince* was a "book of Republicans," that politics is autonomous from ethics and that Machiavelli invented political realism. Viroli's theory is that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* for political redemption to invoke a redeemer and restore glory to Italy. The last chapter of *The Prince*, "The Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians," is for Viroli key to understanding not only the whole book, but its ethical foundations as well and the relationship between ethics and politics.

Benner, in her *Machiavelli's Ethics*¹¹ and *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading*,¹² looks as well to redeem Machiavelli as a political philosopher and ethical thinker. In her detailed work, she made three fundamental claims. The first one is that Machiavelli should be regarded as a moral and political philosopher in line with ancient philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Cicero. Second, that Machiavelli defended the rule of law against the rule of man. And third, that his philosophy was based on Roman and Greek traditions and that those are more in line with the humanist republicans than amoral political realism. For Benner, Machiavelli's main concern and preoccupation in all his works was to identify what is right and reasonable in politics.

Alejandro Bárcenas, in his *Machiavelli's art of Politics*,¹³ reexamines Machiavelli's

¹⁰ Viroli, M. (2014). *Redeeming The prince: the meaning of Machiavelli's masterpiece*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

¹¹ Benner, Erica. (2013), *Machiavelli's Ethics*, Princeton University Press

¹² Benner. E. a. (2013). *Machiavelli's Prince: a new reading*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

¹³ Bárcenas. A. a. (2015). *Machiavelli's art of politics* Leiden; Boston, Brill Rodopi.

political thoughts, with particular consideration to the influence of Xenophon, one of the Greek authors that inspired the Florentine author, and based on this defends his moral philosophy.

In the first chapter, to frame the analysis, I will cover briefly Machiavelli's life and his age, with special emphasis on the critical moments that defined his thought, his intentions in writing both *The Prince* and *The Discourses* and his historical and dialectical approach and style. Then I will lay out the key concepts of his political philosophy: first his conception of man, human nature and the permanence of human conflict; then the three fundamental concepts to understand his work: *virtù*, *necessità* and *fortuna*. These concepts are crucial not only to capture Machiavelli's ideas but the core of the specific relationship between political decisions and moral purposes.

In the second chapter I will present the moral philosophy of Machiavelli —what we might call his ethics— or the relationship between means and the political ends he is proposing.

In the third chapter, I will offer a synthesis of the best-known interpretations of Machiavelli's political views. The different interpretations of the work of Machiavelli through history can be grouped into three groups, each representing a specific interpretation: the moralists, for whom Machiavelli totally separated political and morals; the realists, for whom Machiavelli was the founding of the real politics or politics based on considerations of primarily given circumstances and factors, rather than ideological notions or explicit moral and ethical premises; and the third, between these two, according to which Machiavelli was a political philosopher in line with other political philosophers from tradition, as is suggested by the new interpretations of Machiavelli's thought from Brenner, Viroli and Bárcenas. Then I will present my own conclusions about Machiavelli's thought about morals and politics.

Chapter 1: Life, time and main concepts

Machiavelli's life and age; critical moments that defined his moral thought

Nicolas Machiavelli (1469-1527) was born during a critical period in one of the most outstanding artistic, economic and political centers of the time, Florence. Italy was the cradle of the Renaissance. This rebirth, *Rinascimento*, during the 13th, 14th, 15th and 16th centuries that began in Italy and spread later to all Europe, wanted to bring back the world of classical antiquity —the world before Christianity— and was a clear reaction, a revolt against the Middle Ages and its focus on scholasticism and its perceived dogmatisms. A very important part of the antiquity to be recovered and discovered was from Rome and was Latin. The Renaissance spirit illuminated all human activities, including arts, moral philosophy, rhetoric, grammar, poetry and politics —this last in grand part thanks to Machiavelli. If the Middle Ages were focused on God, the Renaissance wanted to be focused on man. Several classical authors were discovered or rediscovered, including the orator Cicero, the historian Livy, the poet Virgil and the moral philosophers Aristotle and Plato. And once they were discovered, artists, poets and philosophers wanted to imitate them and their values. These moral values shaped Machiavelli's approach to morals and politics and gave him the “matter” for his political science. The political theory and moral ideas of Machiavelli clearly contrast two epochs of humanity: antiquity and modern times. Machiavelli puts a contradiction between Antiquity, with its pagan values, and modernity with its Christian values. And among this struggle of visions, Machiavelli bets on the past, a glorious and grand past in contrast to an uncertain present full of pettiness.

At the peak of this Renaissance humanist world was born Machiavelli in a Florence governed by the Medici family for more than 60 years. Lorenzo de Medici, also known as the Magnificent, was the ruler of Florence during its golden age (1469-1492). He was a patron of the arts, supporting and nurturing such artist as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sandro Botticelli and Andrea del Verrocchio. But the seed of political instability was already present in Lorenzo's legacy. The peace he was able to maintain collapsed with his death. In 1494, King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy and threatened Florence. This invasion put Italy

in disarray. Lorenzo's son, Piero, capitulated to France. While Spain, France and England became strong states, Italy descended into chaos, each of its cities and regions fighting against other. This same year, Florence reestablished the republic, a political structure where all citizens have the right to vote and be elected, and where the common goal was to have and live in freedom, far from the rule of a prince or a family. But this government of the people, good in theory, was not able to sustain itself. Influenced by the radical ideas and anti-Medici sentiment of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, the Medici were expelled from Florence. Savonarola's message resonated with Florentines who saw the French invasion as a divine punishment. But political tensions changed again and Savonarola was hanged and incinerated publicly in 1498.

At Florence, Machiavelli had a life of ups and downs and instability. After the execution of Savonarola, and under the new government of Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli was appointed to the chancery (1498), overlooking the production of all official Florentine documents and starting his career as a senior official of the Florentine Republic. He would occupy high level diplomatic and military positions, including chancellor of the Nine and the direction of the Florentine Militia that defeated Pisa in 1509. This political job would shape his outlook on politics, war and morality. Machiavelli was sent on several missions to meet with Florence allies and enemies accompanying Florentine ambassadors. He was in charge of sending back home accounts on what happened on those meetings with foreign rulers, generals and kings. During these years, he wrote extensively and with clarity and perspicacity about politics and war. He was a direct witness of the main political events of the moment and in particular was able to see in action political leaders, to know firsthand how they thought and how they acted, their motivations, their fears, the way they made difficult political decisions. Machiavelli was able to witness what worked in politics and what not, the difference between strong and weak political men, how promises were broken, how agreements were negotiated, how people won and how they lost wars and how destiny sometimes acted decisively in favor or against the prince. During these years Machiavelli met figures like Cesare Borgia who were the object of his fascination: men with strength, decision, ambition and character who happen to be at the right

time of history. All these events and experiences will be the matter of his moral and political theory.¹⁴

In 1512, the Medici returned to Florence with the help of the papacy and the Spaniards, and the Florentine republic was dissolved. Machiavelli was expelled from the government and arrested and tortured for suspected participation in a plot against the Medici. He was released after three weeks of confinement and went to live at his country estate outside Florence where he decided to write about the recent political situation and to convey all he had learned during his years at the Florentine Republic. During this fruitful time for his intellectual production, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, *The Discourses on Livy*, *Mandragola*, *The Art of War* and *The Life of Castruccio Castracani*, among other works. In 1520, now in a good relationship with the Medici, Machiavelli was commissioned to write a history of Florence, *The Florentine Histories*.

The instability of Italy, a subject that would disturb Machiavelli through all his books, was famously summarized by him in *The Prince*, “Italy has been overrun by Charles, plundered by Louis, violated by Ferdinand, and insulted by the Swiss...with the result that they conducted Italy to slavery and infamy.”¹⁵ And as a consequence, this was the Italy he had to suffer, like a father suffers from the failures of his sons, “more slave than the Hebrews, more servant than the Persians, more scattered than the Athenians, without head, without order, beaten, despoiled, lacerated, devastated, subject to any sort of ruination.”¹⁶ These ups and downs, this instability, these movements from glory to hell, from order to anarchy, will shape Machiavelli’s political theory. Machiavelli will want to answer key political and moral dilemmas: Why has this happened? Why do cities flourish and decay? Why do people take wrong political decisions? What makes a good and effective political leader? What is the role of destiny in all these events? What is the relationship between means and ends? Is a Prince allowed to commit a crime to save his people? How to choose between two evils? And with these answers Machiavelli will formulate a new political science with the hope of liberating Florence and Italy from anarchy.

¹⁴ Celenza, Christopher, *Machiavelli: a portrait* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2015), 31-56

¹⁵ *The Prince*, XII

¹⁶ *The Prince*, XXVI

Within this framework Machiavelli developed his political theory. Its main axes were determined by what he himself lived in his life: abrupt changes, political tensions, uncertainty, betrayal, conspiracies, assassinations and within all this dithering, failed and misguided political decisions from the Italian and Florentine leaders. And all his political experiences at the Florentine republic were enriched and contrasted with what he learned from historical events, especially the history of Rome narrated by Titus Livius, known as Livy. In history, Machiavelli found parallels and patterns, based on historical facts, to elaborate and give life to his political ideas.

The way he approached the past searching for wisdom is depicted in a letter he wrote during his exile to his friend Francesco Vettori. "When evening comes, I go back home, and go to my study. On the threshold, I take off my work clothes, covered in mud and filth, and I put on the clothes an ambassador would wear. Decently dressed, I enter the ancient courts of rulers who have long since died. There, I am warmly welcomed, and I feed on the only food I find nourishing and was born to savor. I am not ashamed to talk to them and ask them to explain their actions and they, out of kindness, answer me. Four hours go by without feeling any anxiety. I forget every worry. I am no longer afraid of poverty or frightened of death. I live entirely through them."¹⁷ This respect for the past, for people like himself interested in the glory of an empire, in creating something big and glorious, in the "deeds of great man"¹⁸ is what Machiavelli was passionate about. His food will be those ancient events from where he will deduct his political laws. His great dream will be to recover that glory from the past to Italy. If the Romans were able to live in peace and harmony and to create great empires, why could the Italians not do it again? What was the obstacle to recreate that past? Machiavelli found the answer intuitively, and creatively formulated a new moral and political theory, one that would scandalize future generations to this day. Machiavelli will not suggest just a few simple tips on how to best govern a state. As a man of the Renaissance, he will go far beyond and propose a

¹⁷ Machiavelli, Private letters. The Chief works and others (Translated by Allan Gilbert, Duke University Press, 1989)

¹⁸ The Prince, Dedication

revolution of Copernican dimensions. And once he finds those answers, his next step is try to create the foundations, the rationales, to replicate that glorious past.

The Prince and The Discourses, a path not yet trodden by anyone

The Prince, Machiavelli's most famous book, and perhaps most famous Renaissance book, was dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici, Duke of Urbino (1492-1519) to provide him advice on how to create and maintain a good government in Florence and unite Italy. Machiavelli gives Lorenzo advice on how to keep power even at the cost of sacrificing some moral values, presenting a new morality that will effectively secure power to princes. If Lorenzo wants to be serious in ruling successfully, then he will need to follow some political rules contrarian to the moral principles generally accepted at the time. *The Prince* was written in 1513 when Machiavelli was 44 years old, and was never published during his lifetime. It was printed for the first time in 1532 and 27 years later placed on the Papal Index of Prohibited Books. *The Prince* has 26 chapters, and the constant theme is the prince, as the one who could bring new models and orders, and the founder of new principalities. It included several examples of past princes, both from antiquity and modern times. Although *The Prince* is recognized as the main work of Machiavelli, it contains only a part of his political thought. The totality of Machiavelli's thinking is in *The Discourses*. Going further, some suggest one must read *the Prince* in light of *The Discourses*.¹⁹

In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli presents his political thinking in more detail and with more reasoning. In the dedication of *The Discourses*, Machiavelli states that in the book "I have set out all I know and all I have learned in the course of my own experience and steady reading in the affairs of the world."²⁰ From the beginning, he is clear he is exploring a new land "I have determined to enter upon a path not yet trodden by anyone,"²¹ meaning that he has discovered, like Columbus, a new world, something which can be applied not only to *The*

¹⁹ Strauss, Leo, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26

²⁰ *The Discourses*, Dedication

²¹ *The Discourses*, I-1

Discourses but to *The Prince* as well. This new world, this new path, is a new political theory that departs from the past, a new morality inspired by Roman history. *The Discourses*, probably written between 1513-1517, is dedicated to republics, in contrast to *The Prince*, a work dedicated to analyzing the rule of princes. It is composed of three books that comment on the First Ten Books of Livy. Book One Covers the Roman Decisions on Internal Affairs; Book Two the Roman decisions on external affairs or the expansion of the empire, and Book Three the impact of all political decisions on Roman individuals. The seed of this discovery from Machiavelli is history, Roman history, from which he will deduce his political ideas. Roman history is the matter from which he will formulate his principles. And because his form is history, his political theory is factual, focused on treating “what is” and not “what it should be,” dealing with facts and not with dogma. The same principle applies to his moral theory, based on realities and not idealities. Machiavelli believed that all subjects must be discussed and debated. He does not expect human affairs to produce an absolute truth, but presents the truth as it is.²² We start to see the tension between two different worlds, the one from antiquity and the present one, between paganism and Christianity.

Machiavelli argues not only for the need to know the past but for the benefits of imitating it. He wants the reader to imitate the examples he lays out, to put them into practice, to apply the virtues and the morality implicit in those events he brings to life in *The Discourses* and *The Prince*, which he believes led to the greatness of Rome and Athens and the survival of Egypt. This imitation of history should happen in politics the same way that happens in other areas of knowledge. It happens in art: people always want an old sculpture and are willing to pay a lot of money to bring one home. Artists try to imitate classical work. It happens in law: most of the laws are based on the opinion of ancient jurists and classical codes. It happens in medicine: physicians base their knowledge on experiments and remedies discovered and practiced in the past. But politics is different: “in setting up states, in maintaining governments, in ruling kingdoms, in organizing armies and managing war, in executing laws among subjects, in expanding an empire, not a single prince or republic now resorts to the examples of the

²² The Discourses, I-18

ancients.”²³

Machiavelli’s idea is not only to go back to the past and learn what worked and what not; that would be a mere academic exercise. Machiavelli makes the case that the ancient modes can be and should be imitated by contemporaries. For him, the reason modern man does not learn from the past is because people do not have a “true understanding of books on history.”²⁴ And this misunderstanding arises from the presumption that imitation is impossible, thinking that the past is radically different from the present. But the reality is not only that the heavens, the sun and the elements are the same, but man is the same as well. For Machiavelli, the man before Christ is exactly the same man after Christ. Nothing has changed. The men from Rome and Greece are the same as those from Florence and Italy. And if that is the case, why not imitate the past, especially when that virtuous past brought glorious empires like the Roman and the Greek? The historian of Rome’s glory is Livy, and what Machiavelli wanted to do in *The Discourses* is to describe Livy’s lessons and reduce them to rules readily available to his contemporaries. Rome is the ideal that needs to be imitated and lessons from Rome’s histories are the way to do it. “He who considers present affairs and ancient ones readily understands that all cities and all peoples have the same desires and the same traits and that they always have had them. He who diligently examines past events easily foresees future ones in every country and can apply to them the remedies used by the ancients.... The same dissensions appear in every age.”²⁵

Machiavelli illustrates both the virtues and the vices of Rome and from that moral learning shows how to build a republic similar to or even better than that one. Founders from the past had only one idea in mind —either to conquer new territories, to save their people or to secure the empire— and they did it with determination, strength and ambition, leaving aside moral prejudices. This is what the prince, and especially a wise one, should do. “A prudent man will always choose to take paths beaten by great men and to imitate those who have been especially admirable... and he will act like prudent archers, who, seeing that the mark they plan

²³ The Discourses, I-1

²⁴ The Discourses, I-1

²⁵ The Discourses, I-39

to hit is too far away and knowing what space can be covered by the power of their bows, take an aim much higher than they mark, not in order to reach with their arrows so great a height, but to be able, with the aid of so high an aim, to attain their purpose.”²⁶

Men are bad and they don't change

Machiavelli has a pessimistic view of human nature and assumes that all men are evil,²⁷ without any possibility of redemption. This pessimistic conception of men is central to his moral philosophy. Political decisions, especially in judging the morality of the prince, should take this reality into account. What good is it for the prince to always be honest if he is dealing with people who are dishonest? Why should the prince be good, fair, loyal, generous when the people to whom it governs are bad, unjust, disloyal, stingy? “All men are evil and they are going to act according to the wickedness of their spirits whenever they have free scope.”²⁸ This pessimistic view denies the possibility that man can improve, that he can be redeemed. Man, instead of looking up for what he should be, at the world of ideas, at Plato's forms or at the virtues that can be attained from Christianity, should rather look down. This is the man that the prince must rule.

This evil nature does not change or evolve positively, as history demonstrates with multiple examples. Sometimes this evil is not evident at first look but will be sooner or later when time reveals the truth, because “men are more prone to evil than to good.”²⁹ The only way for men to be good is out of necessity, meaning they will be good because they have to, are forced to, or because there is no other option for his survival. A wise politician then needs to first know the human condition, the true nature of the men he will rule, and govern then accordingly. A wise prince needs to face the truth. It would be foolish to rule a community of

²⁶ The Prince, VI

²⁷ The Prince, XVII: “We can say this about men in general: they are ungrateful, changeable, simulators and dissimulators, runaways in danger, eager for gain.” “Men forget more quickly the death of a father than the loss of a father’s estate.” “Let no one oppose this belief of mine with that well-worn proverb: “He who builds on the people build on mud.” (P, IX).

²⁸ The Discourses, I-3

²⁹ The Discourses, I-9

demons with principles created for angels. “If all men were good.... But because they are bad and do not keep their promises to you, you likewise do not have to keep your promises to them.”³⁰ The prince can use deception as an effective means to govern because men let princes to deceive them: “so simple minded are men and so controlled by immediate necessities that a prince who deceives always finds men who let themselves be deceived.”³¹

For Machiavelli, man is closer to an animal than to an angel, or perhaps a mixture of part man and part animal. Men are beasts, so in order to govern them, the Prince needs to act like Chiron the Centaur who was half animal and half man. To govern the half man, the Prince should use laws, and to govern the half animal, the Prince should use force.

And men share the same passions, either in Rome sixteen centuries before or in Florence sixteen centuries after. Again, nothing has changed in history. “I have heard it said that history is the teacher of our actions, especially when it comes to how to exercise rule. And the world has always been inhabited by men who share the same passions. There are those who serve and those who rule, and there are those who serve unwillingly and those who serve willingly. And are those who rebel and who are retaken.”³² Additionally to being evil, men live in permanent conflict. In a republic, there are the rich and the people. And one group is always against the other. One principality is in war with the others. This is the human condition that needs to be worked out and influenced by the prince according to Machiavelli’s political theory.

Fortuna, the great enemy

Like a physician, Machiavelli examines human behavior and, based on those observations, formulates his political and moral laws, rooted in man’s reality and not his ideal state. In the body of human affairs, one of the most intriguing mysterious variables is fortune. And for the principality to be healthy, *fortuna* must be controlled, held and neutralized. Fortune is a complicated, difficult matter to sort out. But lacking other evidence, Machiavelli can say

³⁰ The Prince, XVIII

³¹ The Prince, XVIII

³² The Discourses, I-24

that fortune controls at least half of men's actions. Yes, but the other half is controlled by us, so moral actions still control half of what happens. Machiavelli is saying that God does not control history in its entirety, and that man has a say and needs to act decisively. Fortune is the enemy. To trust in Fortuna is madness. "Any prince who relies exclusively on Fortuna fall when she varies."³³

Machiavelli has seen, in books and by experience, several instances when princes and societies, instead of acting with resolution to solve problems, leave the outcome to forces outside them, be it gods, God, luck or chance. Fortune is a force that often inhibits man from acting, from choosing between two possible goods, and from political and moral decisions, in the hope that someone else will decide. *Fortuna* is one of the elements most intriguing for Machiavelli. Machiavelli uses *Fortuna* to describe the cause perceived in human affairs that is not the result of human decisions, a force that is beyond human control and that happens without human involvement, without anyone taking a deliberate decision. Fortune is not God. Fortune is not Providence. Fortune is not human action. Fortune is the cause when all other causes are ruled out. Fortune is a cause that is not caused by human decisions or free will. Fortuna is fickle, moody, erratic and arbitrary. Princes need to be prepared to face it at any moment and specially to be aware that it is present, that it exists. Machiavelli reports the presence of fortune in the successes and failures of political Rome, in the chaos and confusion of Florence and Italy and in his own personal life when, after being one of the most illustrious men of Florence, he suddenly becomes a political prisoner who is tortured like a criminal.

But the existence of *Fortuna* does not mean in any way that the course of history is predetermined and nothing can be done, the fatalistic view that our fate is decided in advance. Let's see what Machiavelli has to say about fortune in the chapter XXV of *The Prince*:

As I am well aware, many have believed and now believe human affairs so controlled by fortune and by God that men with their prudence cannot manage them – yes, more, that men have no recourse against the world's variations. Such believers therefore decide that they need not sweat much over man's activities but can let Chance govern them. This belief has been the more firmly held in our times by reason of the great variations in affairs that we have seen in the past and now see every day beyond all human prediction. Thinking of these variations, I myself now and then incline in some

³³ The Prince, XXV

respects to their belief. Nonetheless, in order not to annul our free will, I judge it true that Fortune may be mistress of one half of our actions but that even she leaves the other half, or almost, under our control.³⁴

Machiavelli uses a metaphor to better understand fortune. He compares fortune with a river, that when is full, floods the plains, destroys trees and houses and moves everything around and nobody can stop it. But when the river is quiet and peaceful, men can take actions and be prepared. They can build locks and ports and dykes such that when climate changes and water starts pouring and the river is filling up, at least the damage can be reduced or alleviated. The same happens with Fortune, “she shows her power when strength and wisdom do not prepare to resist her, and directs her fury where she knows that no dykes or embankments are ready to hold her.”³⁵

Machiavelli believes that those princes that are able to adapt to the times succeed and those who cannot adapt fail. The prince needs to be in harmony with the times. The prince needs to read the times, to be cautious when the time requires caution and be impetuous when time demands impetuosity... “if he could change his nature with times and affairs, Fortune will not change.”³⁶ Men that are in close harmony with times can feel and sense Fortune, and that way dominate it when she wakes up. He compares Fortune with a woman. “It is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortuna is a woman and it is necessary, in order to keep her under, to cuff and maul her. She more often lets herself be overcome by men using such methods than by those who proceed coldly; therefore, always, like a woman, she is the friend of young men, because they are less cautious, more spirited, and with more boldness master her.”³⁷

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli cites the examples of those who with “their own ability and not through Fortune” have been transformed into princes. This is the case of Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Thesus, who had “from Fortune nothing more than opportunity.” Opportunity in the case of Moses that the Israelis were in Egypt, that Romulus lived not in Alba, for Cyrus that

³⁴ The Prince, XXV

³⁵ The Prince, XXV

³⁶ The Prince, XXV

³⁷ The Prince, XXV

Persians be sicken with Medes. These situations made them prosper. “Their opportunities, then, made these men prosper, since their surpassing abilities enabled them to recognize their opportunities. As a result, their countries were exalted and became very prosperous.”³⁸ To be successful, princes need to suppress Fortuna: they cannot leave anything to chance, they cannot let other’s control their destiny. In the background, we hear Machiavelli whispering that Christianity is wrong, that God is not in control of human affairs, he is not the owner of history. The owner is man, the prince with virtue who suppresses and vanquishes Fortuna.

The higher the role of fortune, the less *virtú* in any individual man. When *virtú* is present, the role of fortune diminishes and fortune is more controlled. Strong and virtuous men control *fortuna* and *fortuna* controls the weak men. If men want to have good fortune, then they need good virtue and good institutions. “Great men are always in every sort of fortune just the same; if that varies, now raising them, now putting them down, they do not vary, but always keep their courage firm and so closely united with their way of life that we easily see that Fortune does not have power over a single one of them. Quite different is the conduct of weak men, because they grow vain and are made drunk with good fortune, assigning all their prosperity to an ability which they have not displayed at any time.”³⁹ Cosimo de Medici had already foreshadowed it when he said that states cannot be kept with paternosters.⁴⁰

Virtú, a bold challenge to Fortuna

Virtú, along with Fortuna and Necessity, are the foundational blocks of Machiavelli’s political and moral theory. States can be gained either through Fortuna or through strength and wisdom says Machiavelli in the first chapter of *The Prince*.⁴¹ This strength and wisdom in politics is *virtú* for Machiavelli. The same role that moral virtues play in private morality, *virtú* plays in public morality or politics. And this *virtú* is the skill, wisdom and strength to save, maintain and rule a state. It’s a civic virtue.

³⁸ The Prince, VI

³⁹ The Discourses, III-31

⁴⁰ Strauss, Leo, Thoughts on Machiavelli, 175

⁴¹ The Prince, I

Machiavelli's *virtú* departs from the classic conception of virtue as moral excellence and approaches the old concept of *virtú*, considered as civic virtue. It encompasses the skills to participate successfully in politics, which requires courage and prudence, strength and wisdom but overall, ambition. A virtuoso man is for Machiavelli the one who has a strong mind and a strong will, not the one who is morally correct. The prince has virtue when he is willingly to advance the general good and, as the Romans, restore the greatness of the empire. The more virtue on the part of the ruler, the less the role that fortune plays in human affairs. A man of supreme *virtú*, like Moses and Cesare Borgia regulated and managed fortune. With *virtú*, man can control a better share of his future, instead of being controlled by Fortuna. *Virtú* is a bold challenge to Fortuna.

Necessity, a call to action

The third component of Machiavelli's moral theory is necessity, *Necessita*. When necessity is present there is no space for moral considerations. Necessity excuses and justifies. Necessity is part of the laws that govern nature and human life. The same way Machiavelli recognizes the existence of Fortune, free will and virtue in human affairs, he needs to give room to the concept of necessity. Necessity means a serious limitation on action, a situation that must be addressed and to which there is no alternative, something to be done for the preservation of the city or to the survival of the government. When necessity is present, there is very limited ability to maneuver or to choose. If the prince wants to maintain power - the ultimate political goal for Machiavelli- then he may need to take some specific actions, like murdering an enemy or lying to his allies; the morality of those actions is secondary and is subordinated to the political goal, the exercise of power.

When Machiavelli says that The Prince is "being often forced, in order to keep his position, to act contrary to truth, contrary to charity, contrary to humanity, contrary to religion," he is saying that the prince is necessitated, obliged to use practices contrarian to morality in order to keep his position. For Machiavelli, the conflict between what is effective and advantageous for the prince and what is moral, just or unjust, is resolved by choosing

necessity. The preservation of the state is always above any personal dilemma. For the prince, political decisions nullify personal morality. In case of contradiction, public morality has pre-eminence over personal morality. Due to necessity, princes are exonerated of moral responsibility or at least the praise or blame can be attenuated. Additionally, necessity can be used as an explanation of an action or to justify a decision for having taken an action, or as an instrument to assign or excuse political responsibility.

Machiavelli argues that “Men never do anything good except by necessity, but where there is plenty of choice and excessive freedom is possible, everything is at once filled with confusion and disorder.”⁴² The meaning of necessity is straightforward: it is something that needs to be done but at the same time constrains human freedom. For Moses to show his ability, Israelites needed to be enslaved in Egypt. Cyrus’s greatness needed the Persians to be oppressed by the Medes. Theseus’s greatness needed the Athenians to be scattered. Romulus needed a city to reform. Machiavelli is saying that necessity allows virtú and makes men obstinate and good fighters. Referring to Rome Machiavelli states that to “found a state it is necessary to be alone; and Romulus deserves excuse and not blame for the death of Remus and of Titus Tatius.”⁴³ Romans acted under necessity when, after interpreting the auspices, they acted according to what was demanded by the situation ignoring the auspices, but doing that with prudence, meaning pretending to follow their signals but, in reality, ignoring them. For the prince, there are always times of necessity, when he needs to act and take a decision. The Roman senate took decisions contrary to its policies when “necessity gave command”⁴⁴ allowing Latins to take arms and defend themselves. “That senate always judged things as they ought to be judged.”⁴⁵ But necessity can be used as well as an excuse, as a short-circuit to avoid any responsibility. In the *Florentine Histories* one of the politicians says that: “You must always have heard that when things are done through necessity, neither praise nor blame is or can be deserved.”⁴⁶

⁴² The Discourses, I-3

⁴³ The Discourses, I-9

⁴⁴ The Discourses, I-38

⁴⁵ The Discourses, I-38

⁴⁶ The History of Florence, V-11

History showed to Machiavelli crucial elements for understanding political realities and human affairs. The first one was the evil nature of man, which makes him more like an animal than a spiritual being. Second, the presence of Fortune, a force that needs to be dominated if the prince wants to have full control of human affairs. Third, Necessity, that brings the opportunity to princes with *virtú* to take the right decisions, meaning the ones that produce effective results to keep and maintain power. With these basics, let's explore the moral philosophy of Machiavelli in the next chapter —what we might call his ethics— the relationship between means and the political ends he is proposing.

Chapter 2: The moral theory that Machiavelli dared to propose

The novelty and uniqueness of Machiavelli lies in his moral ideas. Machiavelli elaborated a new moral philosophy, a new set of values for public life, for those willing to participate in politics and govern people successfully. Machiavelli was aware of the difficulty of his task. He knew he was departing from solid ground –tradition— to a new land. He was convinced that public life cannot be governed by the same values that rule private life. He knew that in order to build and maintain a stable, peaceful, strong society on earth, one needs to abdicate traditional moral values in politics and replace them by new values that guaranty, and more importantly justify, effectiveness. What perhaps everyone knew but no one dared to say, Machiavelli dared to formulate in a solid political theory.

Machiavelli's approach is a very pragmatic one. He wants to lay out what the prince needs to do to succeed. For Machiavelli, political success is either to create or to maintain a solid, stable and prosperous state, one that can satisfy men's interests and desires, one that men would like to be part of, one that brings glory and pride to his citizens. This can be a republic or principality with solid laws, where citizens obey either by law or by arms, and the prince is willing to do whatever it takes to maintain and keep order. This political success is not wishful thinking or utopian. For those who doubt that it can happen, Machiavelli has an answer: It already happened in history, so we can know with certainty that is doable and especially, how to do it. Looking back to the past, we can know why men succeed some times and fail at others. The morals, or set of values they used, were the ones that allowed this success. One only need to imitate them.

Machiavelli's most striking moral arguments can be found in *The Prince*, especially chapters XV to XIX, the central part of the book. But his other works, mainly *The Discourses*, included clear references to moral behavior in line with those exposed in *The Prince*. His moral thinking can be found both in maxims, expressed as general laws for politics, and in the historical examples he chooses to deduct those laws, inform the discussion and frame the analysis. All elements Machiavelli puts in motion are intermeshed and closely related: his pessimistic views on the nature of men, the role of free will, fortune, virtue and necessity,

converge in one way or another, and shape Machiavelli's political ideas. But, at the same time, there are very distinctive moral ideas related to what is good and what is bad that differentiate Machiavelli in comparison to other political philosophers. Those moral ideas are the ones I will try to isolate and dissect as much as possible in this chapter without losing the context in which they were exposed. I will follow the principle that what Machiavelli said was what he meant.

Morals from two murders

Machiavelli invites the reader to recognize and savor the contradiction between good and bad politics. Or, following Machiavelli's terms, the conflict between good intentions and bad deeds. If the prince acts morally right, that is, following the prevailing moral principles, most of the times these decisions will yield bad political results. And if he acts morally wrong, that is against the prevailing moral principles, most of the time these decisions will yield good political results. If the goal of the prince, and here we are referring generally to any ruler, is to keep a stable and safe principality —and here we are referring to any political organization be city, country, empire— then he will need to use whatever means necessary to achieve his goal. Machiavelli has seen, both personally and historically, many examples of princes who acted good, producing ruin to their people, and princes who acting bad, producing glory and stability for their people. How to conceptualize and elaborate a theory about these moral dilemmas is what Machiavelli wants to accomplish, looking to clarify the tension between what is justifiable and what is not in politics. Machiavelli wants to reconcile in one harmonious set of principles, that can be used by any prince or any citizen, the realm of knowledge or philosophy with the realm of power or politics. With this knowledge, they will be better equipped to rule successfully, to know “scientifically” what is allowed and what not, maintaining, under the conviction that they are doing the right thing, a clear conscience.

The moral discussion starts to gain shape in Chapter VIII of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli subtly discusses moral virtues in politics, based on two historical examples of princes, one old and one recent. Although Machiavelli explicitly says he will not discuss the merits of the methods used by these two princes who are acquiring principalities, he endorses

both of them as enough models for imitation, in case someone is forced, by necessity, to use their methods.

The first example comes from Agathocles, showcasing morally reprehensible actions that produced politically successful results. Agathocles, who was “low and abject” became king of Syracuse. He lived a wicked life from the start to the end. Yet, “while acting wickedly” he displayed strength of mind and body. Agathocles entered the army and rose to the highest position. From here he was determined to become prince and decided to do it by force instead of consent, to avoid having to owe anything to the Senate or the people. His master plan was to convene all senators and wealthy citizens in one place to discuss city policies and kill them at once. With all his future enemies dead, he ruled the city without any resistance from citizens, and was able to free Syracuse and destroy the Carthaginians, his enemies.⁴⁷

After recounting this macabre and bloody ascent to power, Machiavelli makes two judgments on Agathocles’ methods. The first is that Agathocles left nothing to *Fortuna*, neutralizing it. The second is that the methods that he used cannot be called “virtuous” in the proper sense. These methods produced important political results like freedom and sovereignty, yet they did not bring him fame, argues Machiavelli. “It cannot, however be called virtue to kill one’s fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be without fidelity, without mercy, without religion.”⁴⁸ Saying this, Machiavelli highlights the tension and the conflict between virtue in one hand and successful political outcomes in the other. Machiavelli claims that to kill, betray, show no mercy, infidelity and irreverence cannot be called virtuous, but immediately questions why Agathocles “must be judged inferior to any of the most excellent generals,” in some way inferring that he cannot be judged inferior — for his lack of virtues — due to his abundance of effective results. He finished the case by saying that what Agathocles achieved cannot be attributed to fortune or virtue, but to both. He was able to suppress Fortune, meaning he did not leave anything to chance, and at the same time he took advantage of the situation, using *virtú* as Machiavelli conceives of it: courage, boldness, determination and

⁴⁷ The Prince, VIII

⁴⁸ The Prince, VIII

audacity. Machiavelli is excusing Agathocles for the murders he committed in order to rule successfully, implying that you have to be a murderer if necessary.

The next historical example is from more recent history. The character is Liverotto of Ferno, an orphan who was raised up by his good uncle Giovanni. Liverotto became the first man in his army and decided to visit his uncle in Ferno to check what was going on with his inheritance. In Ferno, he is welcomed with all possible honors. Uncle Giovanni was kind and did not fall short in any duty to Liverotto. But Liverotto, exerting all imaginable evil, invited his uncle and friends to a banquet and massacred them at once, even committing parricide. After this bold and unexpected criminal action, Liverotto rules Ferno for a year successfully, but was later deceived by Cesare Borgia —Machiavelli's hero— and was strangled.

Based on these two historical examples, Machiavelli wonders how it is possible that men like Agathocles, using all kinds of cruelties, lived in peace and prosperity and the citizens never tried anything against them, while others cannot, even using cruel methods, cope with their own governments. This disparity in the results using the same cruel methods, sometimes effective and sometimes not, leads Machiavelli to wonder why this happens.

The answer is very surprising from the moral point of view. Machiavelli argues there are cruelties *badly used* and cruelties *well used*. That is, if we follow the examples, that there are murders and parricides well used — those producing good political results— and murders and parricides badly used — those producing bad political results. How is this possible? A conqueror uses cruelty well when, upon seizing a state, he makes a list of all harmful actions he must do against his enemies and performs them all at once, not needing to repeat them again in the future to gain the support of the people or to rule. A prince uses cruelty badly when, instead of performing the harmful deeds at once, he does them gradually, having to always wield his sword, and consequently preventing people from feeling secure.

Machiavelli concludes this historical lesson whose protagonists are two murderers of the worst kind with an even more shocking maxim. When no one could expect worse, Machiavelli ends with a stab of surprise: "Injuries are to be done all together, so that, being savored less, they will anger less; benefits are to be conferred little by little, so they will be

savored more.”⁴⁹ From here we can conclude that the greater cruelty made all at once, the better. Not only is it not bad to commit something wrong, but also it must be done wickedly and skillfully. In politics, to be effective, there is no space for halfway measures: “an injury done to a man should be such that it does not fear revenge.”⁵⁰

Let’s stop and reflect on what Machiavelli is arguing regarding morality in these passages. He begins to outline the moral dilemmas that arise in politics, when bad deeds produce good effects and good deeds produce bad consequences. One way to interpret this contradiction is putting the dilemma in the sphere of perceptions, what people believe and see at first glance when there is no effort to see beyond appearances to articulate a more critical assessment. But clearly this is not the case. Both Agathocles and Liverotto consciously made morally bad actions that guaranteed them positive political results. They performed vices that Machiavelli recognizes as vices, to produce political results that qualify as positive virtues. The fact that Machiavelli chooses to elaborate part of his moral theory around these two examples is evidence of the deep contradiction Machiavelli wants to expose. From Agathocles and Liverotto we can deduce that to produce durable political results, it is justified to kill all opponents, and that one needs to do it as viciously as possible so that the enemy does not even have the chance to think about rebelling in the future. Machiavelli is advising to do all harm at once instead of doing it progressively in order to get the most political good effect. In other words, he is advocating achieving political success applying morally defective means skillfully.

When discussing justifiable and unjustifiable cruelty Machiavelli is showing a contradiction between what is considered good in private life but is useless in politics. He is then advocating that some cruelty is good and other cruelty is bad, implying that good and bad actions do not have an intrinsic moral value and that their morality depends on the goal and end to which they are directed. In politics, this is called consequentialism, meaning that the morality of an act depends on the consequences and not on its intrinsic morality. What matters are the results independent of the tactics, or the idea that “the ends justify the means.”

⁴⁹ The Prince, VIII

⁵⁰ The Prince, III. For the translator Allan Gilbert, this expression means: “An injury done to a man should be so nearly total that the doer need not fear that the injured man will ever become strong enough to take revenge” The Prince, III notes, p 15

Consequences are the main consideration for a moral judgement. An act is morally right if it produces good, or may produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The opposite to moral consequentialism is moral deontology, according to which the act has a morality by itself, independent of the goal.

Stern reality, the truth of the matter as facts show

Machiavelli wants to show he is doing something transformational in morality. He wants to pursue the truth that is effective, the practical truth or the stern reality, instead of the theoretical truth, the one imagined or the ethical fancies. He wants to examine the wise prince's methods, those methods that are useful and produce good results in reality, not in the imagination. He wants to find the cause of men succeeding sometimes and failing in others. And the first obstacle to overcome, the first barrier to cross to get to the effectual truth, the "truth of the matter as facts show" is to realize that good actions do not produce always good results and consequently that bad actions can produce good results.

The core of Machiavelli's overall moral ideas come to light in Chapter XV of *The Prince* under the title "Those things for which men and specially princes are praised or censured." And then, the first subtitle of the chapter is more than eloquent: "Ethical fancies and stern reality." He starts the chapter saying for the first time that he is doing something new and departing from other's opinions.

Machiavelli is arguing in these passages that good and bad acts are not intrinsically correct or wrong in themselves but instead that the moral value of an act depends on the results. The results, the end, is what matters. "Because any man who under all conditions insists on making it his business to be good will surely be destroyed among so many who are not good. Hence a prince, in order to hold his position, must acquire the power to be not good, and understand when to use it and when not to use it, in accord with necessity."⁵¹ In other words, if a prince insists in using the traditional morality, to be good all times or at least to try to be good most of the times, he surely will fail. So, the prince, to be successful, needs a

⁵¹ The Prince, XV

different approach, a different vision, a contrarian vision. He needs to be bad to succeed. This means that the traditional moral goals are illusory; that sometimes, the preservation of the state has a prevalence over personal moral excellence because the whole is more important than the part. To succeed in politics, the prince needs to be bad when needed. A prince could be good if that goodness brings good political results; that is fine. But most of the time, this is not the case because men are bad. So, if the prince cannot do good with good actions as history shows, then is not worthy to be good politically; it's a fantasy, a mistake. The prince has to resort to other methods that guarantee success and do not place him under moral limits. Under this approach, either morality is in practice subordinated to politics, or private and public morals are two separate spheres that should not conflict with each other.

Successful Politics or the abandonment of conventional ethics

If the Prince is called cruel — a bad thing— but keeps his subjects united —a supreme political value for Machiavelli, essential to the wellbeing of the republic— it's better than being called merciful —a good thing— but yielding murders and evils —a very bad political result or consequence. Machiavelli recognizes that there are virtues and vices, that what people call good is good and what people call bad is bad, even for the princes. He is not advocating or defending any relativism. But Machiavelli is proposing that what matters in politics is the result, especially for the Prince.

In the chapter XVIII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli explains the core of his new moral philosophy, under the title, “The prince ready, in Necessity to abandon conventional ethics.” He starts by saying that the prince does not have to have the qualities he discussed before, but that is necessary to appear to have them. He then says that he will be so bold as to say that if the Prince has these qualities and practices them always, that would be harmful for him. If the Prince has them and appears to have them, he needs to be prepared to not practice them if necessary.

It is essential to realize this: that a prince cannot practice all those things for which men are considered good, being often forced, in order to keep his position, to act contrary to truth, contrary to charity, contrary to humanity, contrary to religion. Therefore, he must have a mind ready to turn in any direction as Fortune's winds and the variability of affairs require...he holds to what is right when he can but knows how to do wrong when he must. ⁵²

In *The Discourses*, he reinforces his new truth, a practical one:

Therefore a prudent organizer of a republic and one whose intention is to advance not his own interest but the general good, not his own prosperity but the common fatherland, ought to strive to have authority all to himself. Nor will a prudent intellect ever censure anyone for any unlawful action used in organizing a kingdom or setting up a republic. It is at any rate fitting that though the deed accuses him, the result should excuse him; and when it is good, like that of Romulus, it will always excuse him, because he who is violent to destroy, not he who is violent to restore, ought to be censured. ⁵³

Everything must be subordinated to the political good, in this case, the general good, be this order, greatness of the country or the safeguard of the state. And the prince must have all the authority for himself, without having to give an account to anyone, nor his people, nor God nor his conscience. Machiavelli is defending power as the supreme good to which all other goods are subject.

Again, a virtuous prince is not the one who practices moral virtues (although having moral virtues is good, if possible), but mainly the one who uses them according to the moment and the circumstances. Machiavelli arrived to new lands and in some way discovered a new continent where the end is what matters despite the means. This is a new morality, different and separate from private morality.

Machiavelli starts by listing all virtues and vices deserving praise and blame. He is not arguing at the philosophical level on the meaning of virtues and vices. He is arguing at the moral political level, about virtues that deserve praise and the ones that deserve blame.

⁵² The Prince, XVIII

⁵³ The Discourses, I-9

Machiavelli recognizes the traditional virtues: liberality, generosity, mercy, boldness, kindness, chastity, tolerance and religiosity. But in politics, some virtues that look good are in reality bad and some vices that look bad are in reality good. This is the new land that Machiavelli found, the great discovery, the new America: "Some qualities that look like virtues, yet if the prince practices them – they will be his destruction, and other qualities that look like vices, yet – if he practices them – they will bring him safety and wellbeing."⁵⁴ In other words, some vices are justifiable for the preservation of political power and some virtues are unjustifiable for the preservation of political power. What vices are justifiable and what virtues are unjustifiable? This depends on the political situation at the moment. If the prince needs to kill as the only option to achieve his political goals, for Machiavelli is fine to kill. If the prince needs to preserve the life of his enemies to achieve his political goals, then he should do so. Good morals can be bad and bad morals can be good ones, depending on the final political goal. If we assume that the goal is to preserve political power, the means could be good or bad. If this is the goal, then the use of some virtues not only represent bad politics but wrong actions, and using some vices for political preservation is plainly good and effective. Machiavelli is saying that to be good does not guaranty good. Goodbye to the old morality, at least to the one Machiavelli is fighting against. According to that old morality, if the prince behaves following the accepted moral rules, then his government will last and will prosper. So, he does well when he does good. This is the moralistic view that Machiavelli is criticizing in *The Prince*: to be good and to be right is not enough to maintain political power. The prince needs civic virtue, the determination to achieve its ultimate goal leaving aside moral considerations.

Aristotle's Ethical Fancies

But if this teaching is new for Machiavelli, what was the old view that he wanted to overcome? What was the old world from where he is departing and that created such failed political realities? The prevailing ethics during Machiavelli's time and the one that he is

⁵⁴ The Prince, XV

criticizing so acutely is the classical ethics of Aristotle from his *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵⁵ If we compare Aristotle with Machiavelli, the differences between both are quite evident. For Aristotle, the end of political activity is the happiness of the citizens; for Machiavelli, it is to secure the kingdom. For Aristotle virtue is only one, with private and public consequences. For Machiavelli, there is a fundamental distinction between public and private life and each of them has its own rules. Machiavelli is proposing one morality for private citizens but a totally different one for public figures and politics. Yes, private life is ruled by virtues and vices but public life is not and could not be constrained by these ideal limits. If Aristotle proposes the exercise of virtue in politics for the pursuit of happiness, Machiavelli denies that the exercise of virtue could possibly bring political happiness.

For Aristotle, politics is the science of the polis or the city and its end is the good life, the happiness of the citizens. This applies both for individuals and for societies (*Nicomachean Ethics*). The good life is the highest end, and is not subordinated to any other good, like health, wealth, friendship or success. And happiness consists of the use of reason well during life. But to do anything well requires virtue. Human good is for Aristotle an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue. For Aristotle, there are two kind of virtues, intellectual and moral. Learning is the way to grow intellectual virtue. The repetition of good actions or habits is the way to grow moral virtue. For Aristotle, the moral virtues do not come from nature, but are something one needs to exercise. Virtue is then a state of character related to choice, a mean point between two vices, one of excess and one of defect. This way, between the feeling of fear – the defect – and the feeling of confidence – the excess – the mean is courage – the virtue. With regard to the feeling of pleasures and pain, licentiousness is the excess, and insensibility is the defect, and the mean between these two extremes is temperance, the virtue. Regarding the activity of getting and spending money, the excess is prodigality and the defect is meanness, and the mean between these two vices, the virtue, is liberality. Regarding honor and dishonor, the excess is vanity, the defect is pusillanimity and the mean between both, the virtue, is magnanimity. Regarding anger, the excess is irascibility, the defect is lack of spirit and

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (Random House, NY, 1945) Book 1, 935

the mean between both, the virtue, is patience. Regarding self-expression, the excess is boastfulness and the defect is mock modesty and the mean between both of these extremes, the virtue, is truthfulness. For Aristotle, the political regime that a society uses is a reflection of the internal order or the virtue of their citizens. For him, during most of history, people have lived in bad regimes, either democracy or oligarchy, due to the lack of virtue of their citizens. For Aristotle, when they did well, they did good, but when they did wrong – most of the time – they did bad.

After the initial Chapter XV on morality in *The Prince*, Machiavelli goes ahead and discusses in detail ten pairs of virtues and vices. This is what Allan Bloom calls Machiavelli's ten commandments. It's a fundamental moral examination on each of the classical Aristotelian virtues and its reinterpretation according to the new Machiavellian political views. This new theory will produce unthinkable consequences. Sometimes politically, the vice will be more respectable than the virtue and the virtue will not be virtue at all. Machiavelli is formulating a new moral order for politics, one where, in practicing vice, public virtue can be accomplished. In politics, doing good is not good anymore and doing bad could be good. Moral constraints do not exist anymore. Now the prince is in charge, in total command and control and he sets his own limits.

Let's go back to Machiavelli's texts and take the virtue of liberality for example. Liberality is a virtue according to both Aristotle and Machiavelli. However, if the prince practices liberality, Machiavelli argues, he will be considered lavish, will be forced to spend all resources and will need to raise taxes and people will not be happy. Machiavelli is equating liberality with prodigality. Instead of practicing this virtue, the Prince needs to be frugal. Machiavelli is equating frugality with meanness, the defect vice. Frugality means fiscal responsibility that politically will make people happy. So, frugality is the true liberality in politics. That way, in politics, the meanness that for Aristotle is a vice is for Machiavelli a virtue. Additionally, there are mitigating factors to this law, or aggravating factors we might say. If money belongs to others, then it is advisable to the prince to squander it. If it's yours, better not to spend it. "Nothing hurts you except to spend your own money,"⁵⁶ says Machiavelli.

⁵⁶ The Prince, XVI

Let's take another pair of virtue and vice: cruelty and mercy. Machiavelli arrives at the conclusion that "wise cruelty is true mercy" and that is better to be feared than loved in politics. "Cesare Borgia was thought cruel; nevertheless, that well-known cruelty of his re-organized the Romagna, united it, brought it to peace and loyalty. If we look at this closely, we see that he was much more merciful than the Florentine people, who, to escape being called cruel, allowed the ruin of Pistoia." ⁵⁷ For Machiavelli, if the prince keeps his subjects united and loyal, then it's fine to be cruel.

The deed accuses, but the result excuses

In Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli explicitly discusses the means and the ends. Machiavelli states that everybody looks at the result of political actions. "So if a prince succeeds in conquering and holding his state, his means are always judged honorable and everywhere praised, because the mob is always fascinated by appearances and by the outcome of an affair; and in the world the mob is everything; the few find no room there when the many crowd together." ⁵⁸ And then Machiavelli, to give a concrete example refers to Ferdinand of Spain, who "never preaches anything except peace and truth, and to both of them he is utterly opposed. Either one, if he had practiced it, would many times have taken from him either his reputation or his power." ⁵⁹ In conquering and holding a state – the ultimate end of political action – all means are good. Because people look at the result, success is the only valid outcome to people, so the prince needs to do anything possible, even immoral actions, to be successful. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli discusses again the topic. Referring to the dangerous thing that is advising princes, he says: "Since men judge things by their results, all the evil produced by an undertaking is charged to the man who advised it; if good results, he is indeed commended; but by a great deal the reward does not weigh as much as the harm." ⁶⁰

In Chapter XIX of *The Prince*, Machiavelli offers another support for his philosophy,

⁵⁷ *The Prince*, XVII

⁵⁸ *The Prince*, XVIII

⁵⁹ *The Prince*, XVIII

⁶⁰ *The Discourses*, III-35

when discussing that a Prince may be hated for his good deeds. Hate could be generated by good or bad actions. The Prince needs to please people and adapt himself to their corrupt nature, whether the populace, the military or the rich. “The good works are your enemy.”⁶¹ Then he brings to life several examples of Roman emperors to support his thesis that good can cause ruin and bad can bring about a happy end. For example, Severus, who acted as a fox and a lion, who murdered his enemies Nigellus and Albinus, pretended to be his allies.

In *The Discourses* Machiavelli discusses the foundation of Rome. He argues that Romulus “deserved excuse for the death of his brother and his companion, and what he did was done for the common good and not for his own ambition.”⁶² Here again there is a transformation in morals. To murder for ambition is bad, but to murder for a good cause, the common good, is good and acceptable. The deed accuses, but the result excuses.

Chapter XIX of *The Prince* is the longest chapter of the book. It’s more important and revealing in terms of morality and where the moral teaching, contrary to the times, is clearly articulated. We learn that the political virtue the prince needs to practice the most is good reputation. The prince needs to avoid being hated or despised. Machiavelli reviews the life of several Roman emperors in light of these new teachings, “Marcus, Pertinax, and Alexander, all being of modest life, lovers of justice, enemies of cruelty, humane, and kindly, all came – Marcus excepted – to unhappy ends.”⁶³ And the reason for this is again explained by Machiavelli very clearly. In order to keep power, the prince needs to please people, be they the rich, the soldiers or the masses. And because they are corrupt, the prince needs corrupt methods to please them. “If a prince wishes to keep his position [the ultimate political end for Machiavelli], he is often forced to be not good, because when that group –whether the masses, the soldiers, or the rich – which you decide you need to sustain yourself, is corrupt, you have to adapt yourself to its nature in order to please it. Then good works are your enemies.”⁶⁴ Machiavelli brings the examples of Alexander, who has great goodness and who during his 14 years of rule did not kill anybody without justice. But because he was considered effeminate,

⁶¹ The Prince, XIX

⁶² The Discourses I-9

⁶³ The Prince, XIX

⁶⁴ The Prince, XIX

the army murdered him. In comparison, Severus, who oppressed the people but pleased the soldiers, came to a happy end. Again, hate and contempt is the reason princes fall.

In *The Discourses*, after reviewing and comparing Caesar and Romulus life's, Machiavelli writes that "two roads are put before them: one makes their lives secure and after death renders them famous [meaning Romulus]; the other makes them live in a continual anxieties and after death leave an ill repute that never ends [meaning Caesar]." ⁶⁵ The dilemma is very clear, there are two options in politics: to be successful or to fail.

Machiavelli represented a radical break with the past. He is very explicit about this. How can we interpret what Machiavelli wrote? In the next chapter, I will offer a synthesis of the best-known interpretations of Machiavelli's political views: different interpretations of the work of Machiavelli through history, which can be grouped into three groups, each representing a specific interpretation. First, there are the moralists, for whom Machiavelli totally separated political and morals. Next, there are the realists, for whom Machiavelli was the founder of the real politics or politics based on considerations of given circumstances and factors, rather than ideological notions or explicit moral and ethical premises. And the third group, which is between these two, sees Machiavelli as a political philosopher in line with other political philosophers from the tradition, as suggested in the new interpretations of Machiavelli's thought from Brenner, Viroli and Bárcenas.

⁶⁵ The Discourses, I-9

Chapter Three: Moral interpretations: accusing or excusing Machiavelli

There is no doubt that Machiavelli divides the history of political thought into two. His work created a before and after. Machiavelli exposed the human being like Nietzsche and Marx, revealing sordid truths, but in the process of doing so, harmed our souls. Hundreds of books and essays have been written on the subject, trying to unveil the true meaning of Machiavelli, always motivated by the curiosity, or perhaps the astonishment, of finding out what were the reasons for him to write what he wrote. Why the disagreement about Machiavelli is so deep and so wide? There are more than 12 different and opposite interpretations of Machiavelli's moral ideas based on Berlin's account.⁶⁶ Some argue *The Prince* is a satire, because he cannot have meant what he said (Alberico Gentili and Garret Mattingly). For others, *The Prince* is a cautionary tale, a warning against what tyrants can do and how they operate because Machiavelli was a patriot, a democrat and a believer in liberty. There are those who claim that, because Machiavelli could not write freely (he had the Medicis and the Roman Church watching over him), he had to use encrypted messages in his works (Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ugo Foscolo, Luigi Ricci). Others say that *The Prince* is a "mirror for Princes," a characteristic book of the Renaissance (Allan H. Gilbert). Some argue that *The Prince* is an anti-Christian book, a book that defends the pagan way of life and attacks Christian morals (Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Giuseppe Prezolini, Hiram Haydn). Some think that Machiavelli was fundamentally a humanist, one who divorced ethics from politics and the one who said that political ends can be achieved only by using immoral means (Benedetto Croce). Others argue that he was a cold technician who introduced the inductive scientific method in politics and who was not really interested in morality at all; he wanted to discover the permanent laws of politics and apply rational principles (Ernst Cassirer, Augustin Renaudet, Leonardo Olschki, W.K. Hancock). Others think he was an Italian patriot talking to his own generation, a son of his age who just wanted to discuss Florentine problems (Johann Gottfried Herder, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Thomas Babington Macaulay). Some claim that Machiavelli was obsessed with

⁶⁶ Berlin, Isaiah. *The Originally of Machiavelli. (In Against the Current: Essays in the history of ideas, Princeton University Press, 1979)*

some classical authors and wanted to bring back the past, as a realist who wanted to avoid political utopias (Bacon, Spinoza, Lasalle). There are some who suggest that Machiavelli instituted politics as an art, removing it from the control and supervision of moral principles (Jacob Burckhardt, Friederich Meinecke, Charles Singleton). And finally, some claim that Machiavelli was inspired by the devil, and wrote “a handbook for gangsters” (Bertrand Russell, Jacques Maritain, Leo Strauss).

Why this disagreement, especially taking into account that Machiavelli was a very clear writer with very clear ideas? Let’s focus on the main interpretations, those who could shed light on Machiavelli’s moral values and his overall moral thinking.

The originality of Machiavelli: Political reality

Each political idea carries with it, immersed, a profound, philosophical and metaphysical interpretation of the human being. Marx did not propose the class struggle and historical materialism in the void: his political ideas assume a precise conception of man, his destiny, his objective and his final end. Yes, Marx started with economical, historical and sociological categories but arrived at philosophical insights, such as the idea that *religion is the opiate of the people*. The same happens with Machiavelli. He is not merely suggesting a political theory in the void; his theory assumes a particular conception of man and his final destiny. For this reason, I have chosen to analyze the following interpretations of Machiavelli, for I believe they offer a complete view of the problem, and in doing so, they also reveal, in its entirety, Machiavelli's thought.

One of the most famous and controversial interpretations of Machiavelli was written by the Russian-British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), and published in 1957.⁶⁷ For Berlin, the originality of Machiavelli is that he proposes a new set of moral values: the pagan ones. Machiavelli wanted to return to Rome, ignoring fifteen centuries of Christianity.

⁶⁷ Berlin, Isaiah, *The Originality of Machiavelli*

For Berlin, Machiavelli represents a clear break from the past, a break with tradition. Through all his work (not only in *The Prince*), he does not use the same categories that previous thinkers used, like natural law, as a foundation for analyzing the world at that time. There is no clear articulation or acceptance of the existence of God, divine law, conscience, metaphysical realities or a teleological development of history. There are no absolute values or any acknowledgement of the existence of progress. Men are always the same. His rhetoric is completely different and departs from tradition: “there is no trace of Platonic or Aristotelian teleology, no reference to any ideal order, to any doctrine of man’s place in nature in the great chain of being, with which the Renaissance thinkers are deeply concerned.”⁶⁸

Let’s summarize what Berlin thinks is the core of Machiavelli’s original thinking. For Machiavelli, what every man seeks is the glory derived from a well-governed society. But only those who understand this and the important knowledge behind it will be able to accomplish it. The first task is then to acquire true knowledge. And this knowledge could be acquired from current experience, but is mainly from the past. History, and especially Roman history, taught Machiavelli that we require a strong and solid government – and how to achieve it in practice. Governments are needed to establish order, security, and freedom from external enemies. Men are not as the ideal has depicted them but as they are in reality: ungrateful, changeable, simulators, eager for gain, and so on.⁶⁹ Because of this, there is always conflict in society. To solve this conflict, we need to know how it was solved in the past, we need proven solutions from antiquity. Italy was going through a bad time, economically, socially and morally, and what

⁶⁸ Berlin, Isaiah, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, 37

⁶⁹ *The Prince*, XVII, “because we can say this of men in general: they are ungrateful, changeable, simulators and dissimulators, runaways in danger, eager for gain... they break at every chance for their own profit...”

was required was a stable, harmonious, secure, meaningful society, like Athens, Sparta and Rome.^{70 71 72}

For Berlin, Machiavelli does not distinguish between moral values and political values or the emancipation of politics from ethics or religion. “What he institutes is something that cuts deeper still – a differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life, and therefore two moralities.”⁷³ These moralities are the morality of the pagan world and its values: toughness, courage, fortitude, order, discipline, strength, determination, bravery, the knowledge of one's own goals and the certainty of being able to achieve them. Those were the values that Livy found in the best hours of the Roman empire. And those are precisely the values that Machiavelli finds lacking in Italy –to its ruin– and thus those he dreams to restore.

The moral of the pagan world contrasts radically with Christian morality and its values. The values of Christianity are faith, hope, humility, charity, fortitude, justice, temperance, poverty, love of your enemy, prudence but overall the certainty that the kingdom of God is not of this world, that the time on earth is transient and that we have to earn treasures for Heaven. Christian religion values contemplation more than action. Eternal happiness is in no way comparable with the temporary and fragmented happiness on earth, with the riches of this world or even with political glory. “Machiavelli lays it down that out of men who believe in such ideals, and practice them, no satisfactory human community, in his Roman sense, can in principle be constructed.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ The Discourses, II-2. “Truly it is a marvelous thing to consider to what greatness Athens came in the space of a hundred years after she freed herself from the tyranny of Pisistratus. But above all, it is very marvelous to observe what greatness Rome came to after she freed herself from the kings.”

⁷¹ The Discourses, II-2. “In our times there is but a single land that can be said to have in it free cities, yet in ancient times there were in all lands many people completely free.”

⁷² Prince, VII, “Anyone, therefore, who thinks it necessary in his principedom newly won to secure himself against his enemies, to win friend, to conquer by force or by fraud, to make himself loved or feared by the people, followed and respected by the soldiers, to destroy those who can or are likely to injure you, to replace ancient customs with new ways, to be severe and agreeable, magnanimous and liberal, to destroy disloyal armies, to raise new ones...”

⁷³ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, 45

⁷⁴ *Idem*, 45

Machiavelli truly believes, argues Berlin, that central Christian virtues are insurmountable obstacles to the kind of society that he wishes to see, that he saw in classical Rome. The problem is not only the impossibility of achieving such an ideal because of human imperfection, sin, lack of Fortune or virtue. The problem is much more profound. For Machiavelli, it is impossible to blend Christian virtues like charity, humility, poverty, or love of your enemy with a stable, vigorous society on earth. So, men need to choose between a Christian life and political impotence, or virtuous political life and greatness.

These two goals are in practice incompatible.⁷⁵ The reason there were fewer republics in Machiavelli's time than in ancient times is because of education: men are trained to be good Catholics but not virtuous princes. What Christianity has done is to "lead, on one hand, to corruption and political division – the fault of the papacy – and on the other, to otherworldliness and meek endurance of suffering on earth for the sake of the eternal life beyond the grave. It is this last strain that dissolves the social fabric and helps bullies and oppressors."

76

Machiavelli, argues Berlin, like "every humanist thinker from his own days to ours, believes that if only the truth were known – the real truth, not the fairy tales of shallow

⁷⁵ The Discourses, II-2. "Pondering, then, why it can be that in those ancient times people were greater lovers of freedom than in these, I conclude it came from the same cause that makes men now less hardy. That I believe is the difference between our religion and the ancient. Ours, because it shows us the truth and the true way, makes us esteem such honor and believing in their greatest good, were fiercer in their actions. This we infer from many of their institutions, beginning with the magnificence of their sacrifices, compared with the mildness of ours." And he continues forward, Ancient religion "attributed blessedness only to men abounding in worldly glory, such as generals of armies and princes of states. Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men rather than active ones. It has, then, set up as the greatest good humility, abjectness and contempt for human things; the other put it in grandeur of mind, in strength of body, and in all the other things apt to make men exceedingly vigorous. Though our religion asks that you have fortitude with you, it prefers that you be adapted to suffering rather than to doing something vigorous." Machiavelli continues: "this way of living, then, has made the world weak and turned it over as prey to wicked men, who can in security control it, since the generality of men, in order to go to Heaven, think more about enduring their injuries than about avenging them."

⁷⁶ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, 48

moralists – it would help to make men understand themselves and make them go farther.”⁷⁷

And the truth, the real truth is that those who pursue Christian values “are bound to be defeated and to lead other people to ruin, since their view of the world is not founded upon the truth, at least not upon *verita effettuale* – the truth that is tested by success and experience – which (however cruel) is always, in the end, less destructive than the other (however noble).”⁷⁸

Christian teachings have debilitated civic virtues. For Berlin, Machiavelli’s central point is that Christians are good men, but if they follow these teachings to govern states, they will be led to destruction. Good men like Gonfalonieri and Savonarola will be defeated by realists like the Medici, the Pope or King Ferdinand of Spain, who understood how to create solid institutions and, if needed, will do so on the bones of innocent victims. Yes, Machiavelli was concerned with morals, but for him Christian morality cannot be used in politics. The conflict is between two morals, Christian and pagan, and not between ends (morals) and means (politics). Machiavellian values are not Christian but this does not mean they are any less values. If you disagree with the methods used to maintain and preserve political realities and consider those methods immoral, Machiavelli has nothing to respond. Those are values for the private life but not for public life, where you need to defend the lives of hundreds of peoples. Machiavelli argued that brutal and cruel methods are necessary to deliver good results in politics. Killing, deceiving, lying, are reprehensible actions in terms of private morality and Machiavelli recognizes this. He does not deny private morality as several others had try to do throughout history, including Marx, Hegel, Hobbes and Spinoza, who proposed a single moral system.

Considering the great social end of the stability of the state, these reprehensible acts are no longer wicked but rational, they are not immoral but justified. Brutus killed his children to save Rome. Soderini did not and ruined Florence. King Louis XII of France made several mistakes, but the main one was to follow his conscience, his Christian conscience, causing political failure. “Machiavelli’s cardinal achievement is his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity. It stems from the fact recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire

⁷⁷ Idem, 49

⁷⁸ Berlin, The Originality of Machiavelli, 49

systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality or accident or error but as part of the normal human situation.”⁷⁹

The preservation and security of the state is the main consideration, and the prince must be willing to defend the state even against his own conscience or his moral principles. This was the great discovery of Machiavelli. The question then is: Is everything permitted for Machiavelli? The answer is yes if the preservation of society cannot be defended by any other way: “when it is absolutely a question of the safety of one’s country, there must be no consideration of just and unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praiseworthy or disgraceful; instead, setting aside every scruple, one must follow to the utmost any plan that will save her life and keep her liberty.”⁸⁰

I agree with Berlin’s analysis that Machiavelli revealed two moral systems, taking sides with the one that he considers is needed for a successful public life. But, by giving preeminence to the public good over the particular good, to the public morality over the private morality and separating them in a radical juxtaposition, Machiavelli opted for dehumanizing society. By suppressing Christian roots and values, Machiavelli is suggesting a return to barbarism. And here is where other Machiavelli’s ideas bloom naturally, like the need of arms to maintain and defend any principality or the need to expand the empire constantly to keep enemies away. Machiavelli clearly articulated the pros and cons of these two moralities, but he was not the first to find the discrepancy. Augustine, several centuries before, reasoned about the existence of two cities with incompatible values, the City of Man and the City of God, and the citizens of these two cities are radically different, their wills are directed either toward God or toward the self. And if the goal is the preservation of the self on earth, as Machiavelli assumes, then the City of God is an obstacle, an enemy that needs to be eradicated. Something that Marx will propose three centuries later and something that even today, Western society is struggling with: to envisage a society with God or one without God.

My second reflection is this: if the main goal is the preservation of the state, once is

⁷⁹ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, 75

⁸⁰ *The Discourses*, III-41

preserved, who will put limits on the state? Once we suppress all moral limits who will limit the prince? Additionally, we can say that, contrary to Machiavelli's claims, all empires have failed, including the Roman. And perhaps, if we keep history as proof, all empires will fall, sooner or later. And the reason is that they all have inscribed the seed of their own destruction: the city of God and the city of men. Machiavelli is changing one moral system for another, one religion for another, some values for others. And to justify his own theory he chooses the historical events that serve him and that prove his hypothesis and leaves aside those who bother him because they do not fit his model. In that sense Machiavelli seems like a new prophet, like all prophets, trying to sell a new truth as the only "truth."

Leo Strauss and Jacques Maritain: Machiavellianism as immoral doctrine

There is a second interpretation of Machiavelli's moral and political philosophy: that Machiavelli ejected ethics, metaphysics and theology from the realm of political knowledge. He did not only break with the political tradition but instituted a new moral theory for politicians, one that lowered moral standards and eliminated the tension between good and bad, liberating political actions from moral constraints. From here, the first seeds of the Enlightenment were planted. The best representatives of this view are the political philosophers Leo Strauss (1899-1973) with his critical study on Machiavelli, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* ⁸¹ and the French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) with his *The End of Machiavellianism*.⁸²

For Strauss, Machiavelli's works are admirable, because of "the intrepidity of his thought, the grandeur of his vision, and the graceful subtlety of his speech." ⁸³ To understand the full meaning of books like *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, one needs to "ponder[s] over them day and night for a long time." ⁸⁴ For Strauss, Machiavelli's style is obfuscation, the obscuring of intended meaning of communication, making the message confusing, ambiguous or harder to understand.

⁸¹ Strauss, Leo, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (University of Chicago Press, 1995)

⁸² Maritain, Jacques, *The End of Machiavellianism*, In *Review of Politics*, (1942) 4 1942

⁸³ Strauss, Leo, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 13

⁸⁴ Idem, 174

Strauss, like Berlin, agrees that Machiavelli's teaching broke completely with the past. But Strauss adds that his ideas are immoral and irreligious. "He says in his own name shocking things which ancient writers had said through the mouths of their characters. Machiavelli alone has dared to utter the evil doctrine in a book and in his own name."⁸⁵

According to Strauss, Machiavelli wants to end the idea that one cannot imitate the past. Modern men do not consider that ancient virtue can be or is worth being imitated because they think they are radically different, having been transformed by Christianity. By contrast, Machiavelli sees the difference between the man from the past and the modern man in the education. "To prove that ancient virtue can be imitated and ought to be imitated is tantamount to refuting the claims of Biblical religion."⁸⁶ This is Machiavelli's intention, mainly in *The Discourses*: to learn from the past, and from history deduct laws that can be understood and applied to all. Machiavelli dissects the history of Rome and exposes its vices and virtues so that they can be imitated by modernity to build a new Rome. The construction of the new Rome must be the national objective. By equating the good with the ancestral, Machiavelli supposes that we must return to the past. Christianity is thus the present that must be finished. Whereas pagan religion was conducive to the triumph of the world, Christianity has rendered the world weak.

For Jacques Maritain, before Machiavelli there were politicians and princes who applied immoral methods like murder, lying and robbery to achieve their political goals, whether they were respectable or not. But in doing so they felt remorse for themselves and for their souls; their conscience told them that there was something wrong. Machiavelli aims to end this dichotomy, this tension between good and evil. "Machiavelli belongs to that series of minds...which all through modern times have endeavored to unmask the human being (...). Yet in unmasking the human being he maimed its very flesh, and wounded its eyes. To have thoroughly rejected ethics, metaphysics and theology from the realm of political knowledge

⁸⁵ Strauss, Leo, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 10

⁸⁶ *Idem*, 86

and political prudence is his very own achievement, and it is also the most violent mutilation suffered by the human practical intellect and the organism of practical wisdom.”⁸⁷

Machiavelli’s thought is based on radical pessimism in human nature. His concept of man is merely animal. He cancels the image of God in man. Machiavelli thinks men are beasts. This is why, in order to govern man, the Prince needs to act like Chiron the centaur, to be fox and lion at the same time. Animal fear is then a supreme rule. To the evil that he sees everywhere, he gives his consent.

For Maritain, the practical result of Machiavelli’s approach has been a division between politics and morality. An irreconcilable confrontation between idealism and realism, creating a conflict that is considered insurmountable between the ideal and the ethical which places ethics as something that is almost impossible to reach. “For Machiavelli the end of politics is power’s conquest and maintenance: which is a work of art to be performed. On the contrary, according to the nature of things, the end of politics is the common good of a united people; which end is essentially something concretely human, therefore something ethical.”⁸⁸ For Maritain, this common good is not only material but at the same time intellectual and moral. And this is precisely the main concept that Machiavelli destroyed. If the aim of politics is common good, peace is the consequence and justice is the main virtue. But if the aim of politics is power, as Machiavelli suggests, war is the consequence and military strength is the way to secure it.

Both Strauss and Maritain are Christian philosophers and they are defending very specific political and philosophical values. And I agree with their assessments. There is something very specific and realistic in Machiavelli. In trying to show reality as it is, he is in practice eliminating the ideal world – but he is certainly also lowering moral standards. Machiavelli makes very true observations. He shows the world and man as they are. But doing so, he eliminates the ideal state, a topic that he never discusses. All those crimes and deceptions that Machiavelli included in his books are in fact the average political behavior in history, from leaders that had decided not to rule with virtues but virtú, with brute power. The

⁸⁷ Maritain, Jacques, *The End of Machiavellianism*, 3

⁸⁸ *Idem*, 10

fact that history deals more with tragedy than with good is perhaps the reason ideal world is conceived as utopia. But this does not mean such a good world is impossible or could not exist.

Erica Benner, Machiavelli's philosophical dissimulation

Erica Benner has recently published two books with the aim of restoring and redeeming Machiavelli's reputation as a moral and political philosopher instead of just being considered as a political realist and republican. In her *Machiavelli's Ethics*⁸⁹ and *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading*,⁹⁰ she makes three fundamental claims. The first one is that Machiavelli was a moral philosopher, in the tradition of Plato and Cicero. The second is that Machiavelli was a republican, preferring the rule of law over the rule of men. And the third one is that Machiavelli's work is based on Greek and Roman sources, methods and disciplines. Benner wants to renew a "very old tradition of Machiavelli readership: one that sees him as a moral philosopher whose political theory is based on the rule of law, and whose 'manner' and 'matter' of writing are heavily indebted to ancient Greek ethics."⁹¹ In a nutshell, Benner's interpretation suggests that "Machiavelli's positions are closer to those of other humanist republicans than to amoral political realism."⁹²

For Benner, Machiavelli's main concern and preoccupation in all his works was to identify what is right and reasonable in politics and to educate people how to think politically. This is why Machiavelli tried so hard to differentiate between unreflective opinions and well-founded knowledge. Benner claims Machiavelli's works include a Socratic style: they present several opinions, most of the time contradictory to each other, attributed to leaders, people from the street, academics and politicians. These opinions represent a large range of options, like the opinion of the believer who attributes everything to a higher being or divine will, or the opinion of the naive man for whom things in reality should be as they appear in the ideal world, or the opinion of the pragmatic, who cares about results and is not sensible about methods or

⁸⁹ Benner, E, *Machiavelli's Prince: a new reading* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013)

⁹⁰ Benner, Erica, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, (Princeton University Press, 2013)

morality, just or unjust means. After those opinions are presented, they are examined in light of historical examples (mainly from Rome) and reflective reasoning. The final aim of the whole exercise is to invite and force the reader to make his own judgement and to decide what is best according to the circumstances.

Machiavelli's writings therefore seek to teach people how to avoid appearances and be able to discern between good words and bad deeds. This is why it is so important to understand Machiavelli's philosophical approach to problems and situations. This was the approach followed by philosophers like Plato, Cicero and Aristotle. First, they present basic opinions that look reasonable and then they evaluate those opinions from several angles and analyze them in light of different political questions. The reader is the one who then needs to make the final decision. Machiavelli suggests this should be the approach of any citizen who wants to depart from common opinions and to seek the truth behind the appearances. "Machiavelli's texts seek to challenge, exercise and improve reader's capacities to make discriminating moral and political judgements."⁹³

What is reasonably possible? The approach that Machiavelli used was dialectical reasoning, how to imitate history and apply evaluative judgement. Benner characterizes Machiavellian ethics as one of "self-legislation." Citizens have no choice but to create their own laws and regulations using their own reason. To do that, they must apply their free will and should not expect help from nature, any supernatural power or external factors to "impose and uphold human orders." Machiavelli defends then the rule of law against the rule of men. This way, if people are better equipped to think politically, to discern between good and bad causes, between appearances and realities, the city or the state will be better governed and people will not be deceived by eloquent politicians. Benner wanted to rehabilitate the thinking of Rousseau, for whom *The Prince* "is the book of republicans" and for whom "Machiavelli wanted to teach lessons to people pretending to teach lessons to princes." These are the premises that influenced the moral thinking of Machiavelli, and from them he develops his principles and arguments according to Brenner.

⁹³ Benner, Erica, Machiavelli's Ethics, 484

Benner argues that Machiavelli always looked for what is right and reasonable. After examining all details mentioned above, Benner arrives at the conclusion that Machiavelli was not a consequentialist, for whom the results, the consequences, are the only things that matter regardless of the means. She argues that the passages where Machiavelli is seen as consequentialist should be reexamined taking in consideration his dialectical methodology. Those passages that suggest that the end justify the means have been read without taking into consideration the context and without considering ancient writers that used the same style to motivate critical reflection on these opinions. For Benner, we cannot assume that those passages express Machiavelli's opinion, they might reflect the opinion of someone else or widespread views that need further examination. They could be opinions from street people that Machiavelli used to invite reflection. Benner argues that Machiavelli, like Plato, never expressed his opinion straightforwardly but rather used historical characters to present different opinions. "My reading does not deny that Machiavelli treats judgements about ethical end and strategic results as extremely important for evaluating actions. I argue only that he does not treat ends or results as the primary basis for assessing the quality of actions." ⁹⁴

For Benner, Machiavelli used "philosophical dissimulation" most of the time. Machiavelli's texts "cannot simply be taken at face value, whether one focuses on the most shocking passages of *The Prince* or on the moderate-sounding parts of *The Discourses* and *The Histories of Florence*." ⁹⁵ As Benner writes in her conclusion,

Machiavelli's texts seek to challenge, exercise, and improve readers' capacities to make discriminating moral and political judgments [...] Perhaps the main 'realist' lesson of Machiavelli's writings is that it is unrealistic to think that power or victory can be secured by mendacious, violent, or wholly self-regarding means [...] [He] says in effect that the true foundation of any agents' own security, victories, greatness, and glory is respect for justice, since this is the foundation of stable order in all human relationships: public or private, within or between cities, and notwithstanding great differences in power. ⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Benner, Erica, Machiavelli's Ethics, 326

⁹⁵ Idem, 491

⁹⁶ Benner, Erica, Machiavelli's Ethics, 484

My assessment of Benner is that she brings very important elements to the discussion, such as the dialectical and rhetorical style of Machiavelli, including his dissimulation –elements that have been ignored and neglected by other authors. However, despite the style, it is impossible to ignore that what Machiavelli said is what he meant. The only way to understand his work as a whole is to give him a complete, philosophical interpretation, and Machiavelli, as we have seen before, had very precise ideas about the morality that he was proposing, choosing very specific examples to illustrate his points and drawing very clear conclusions. Pretending to ignore the meaning of his maxims for the sake of style makes no sense to me. Benner had to write more than 500 pages to come to the conclusion that what Machiavelli said was not what he meant. A single reading of the main works of Machiavelli is enough to realize that what he says is what he meant. On the other hand, there are examples that have no double reading, and those are precisely the ones that Benner does not dispute, the ones that are not susceptible of dissimulation.

Viroli, The Prince as a Redeemer

Viroli, in *Redeeming the Prince*,⁹⁷ argues that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* for political redemption to invoke a redeemer and restore glory to Italy. The last chapter of the *Prince*, “The Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians” is for Viroli key to understand not only the whole book, but its ethical foundations as well and the relationship between ethics and politics. For Viroli, the Prince is an oration, a rhetorical work from beginning to end, and in the final chapter Machiavelli is demanding a redeemer.

For Viroli, what Machiavelli is telling his readers is “not that politics is autonomous from ethics but that the redeemer, because of the moral excellence of his task, deserves special consideration.”⁹⁸ Viroli claims that Machiavelli wrote to persuade and educate. “All his greatest works were designed to shape souls, to teach, to revive forgotten ways of life and to bring back dead ideas and principles.”⁹⁹ If we consider the Prince as a rhetorical work, most of the

⁹⁷ Viroli, M, *Redeeming The prince: the meaning of Machiavelli's masterpiece* (Princeton University Press, 2014)

⁹⁸ Viroli, M, *Redeeming The prince: the meaning of Machiavelli's masterpiece*, 18

⁹⁹ Idem, 92

examples should then be considered rhetorical in the sense that they want to stimulate a specific way of acting. This means he is using metaphors and irony, and those cannot be taken at face value.

There is to doubt that Machiavelli, both in the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, defended the view that there are circumstances in which utility and safety must be put before honesty. For Viroli, what Machiavelli is doing in chapters XV to XVIII of the *Prince* is rejecting the doctrine from Cicero that “what is useful is also honest and what is honest is also useful,” especially in those moments when necessity enters the equation.^{100 101}

In the Exhortation, Machiavelli is justifying the methods exposed before for a great cause, an enterprise that would be just and righteous. “In addition to the people’s love, the redeemer can count on the help of God himself, the God of the Exodus who loves justice and a civil way of life, and therefore is the friend of those who want to found and reform states and redeem people.”¹⁰²

Yes, Italy can be resurrected, reborn by the virtue of one man, the Prince, and for that Prince, morals do not apply, they are put in suspense: he is allowed to do whatever he thinks necessary to accomplish his goal.

My assessment is that Viroli follows literally Machiavelli's argument in the sense that when actions accuse, the results excuse. For the sake of the liberation of Italy, any means is justifiable and God Himself will excuse the sin and the redeemer. However, Viroli does not analyze the philosophical consequences of this nationalism, or even the political consequences, which, as we have seen, lead Machiavelli to justify moral decisions for political purposes.

¹⁰⁰ Viroli, *Redeeming The prince: the meaning of Machiavelli's masterpiece*, 107

¹⁰¹ The Prince, XVIII “a Prince cannot observe all those things for which man are held good, since he is often, under necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion.”

¹⁰² Viroli, *Redeeming The prince: the meaning of Machiavelli's masterpiece*, 110

Conclusions

Nicolas Machiavelli secured for himself and his ideas a critical place in the history of political theory. Thanks especially to *The Prince*, his works are still read and debated around the world. With fresh and direct prose, Machiavelli captures the political imagination and does so without philosophical grandiloquence or academic pedantry. His works involve the reader in an intimate conversation, a talk that stirs up ideas, puts fingers in wounds, calls things by their proper name and reveals, sometimes in a crude manner, the most hidden fears about power. Machiavelli's works discuss what everyone thinks but nobody dares to say. Machiavelli is perennial for the simple reason that the dilemmas about morality and politics are perennial.

After reading and studying Machiavelli, these few conclusions stand out:

1. Machiavelli broke with the past, with a tradition that subordinated political action and decision to ethics. Morality is directly influenced and dependent on philosophy, metaphysics and religion. True, political decisions had never been autonomous and had therefore involved moral constraints. However, Machiavelli separated political morality from individual personal morality and warned that the two can collide when it comes to defend the republic. Breaking with this tradition left political decision-making to the discretion of the political, excluding the moral. Under this view, politics has pre-eminence over philosophy, placing the "doing" over the "knowledge." If holding power is the most desired goal, then wisdom only involves how to achieve it. This break with the past also meant a break with the tradition of Aristotle and Plato. It meant the suspension of moral calculations in political action. Politics thus becomes an art, freed from ethics. The objective of politics becomes the conservation of power at any price, above the common good and sometimes the rational good. Machiavelli proposed a new moral theory that differentiates between the theoretical truth and the effective truth or the truth that produce good results. Machiavelli departed from the assumption that good decisions, meaning the morally correct decisions, produce good political results – like the stability of the state, the order of the kingdom or the glory of the empire– and that bad decisions, meaning morally wrong, should produce bad results. In such a case, political calculation trumps moral reflection.

2. Machiavelli put man at the center of history. That means a return to paganism. It means to completely ignore Christianity. In this sense, Machiavelli is a man of the Renaissance. And if man is at the center of history, if everything depends on him, it means that God does not play a role in human history. Machiavelli never drew out this idea directly but it flows logically from his ideas.

3. Man does not have any capacity for redemption. Machiavelli's political realism, that of considering political realities as they are and not as they should be, means a mutilation of human reason. The rational man realizes how things are, but at the same time imagines how they should be, what to do to change them. The pessimism of Machiavelli and his negativism with respect to the nature of man is a sad aspect of his thinking. The evil Machiavelli sees everywhere, and that cannot be denied, is a trait of humanity, but not the only one. There are other traits, the longing for beauty, for reason, and for the truth. Machiavelli does not reflect on the positive side of mankind. History, unfortunately, reflects more on negative or critical events than on positive ones.

4. Machiavelli exposes the central dilemma of Christianity's conflict with paganism.

Machiavelli exposes and accurately presents the struggle between two moral systems, between two sets of values, between two conceptions of man. And these two systems are Christianity, on the one hand, with its moral values, and paganism, on the other, with its secular civic moral values. He is able to describe the clash of these two worlds brilliantly. At the end, we must choose between two clear conceptions of the world: Christian or pagan; religious or secular. The struggle is the always same, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Was Machiavelli right? Is his theory correct? The answer depends on which side of the dilemma you fall.

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