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To cite this article: Rasoul Namazi (2021): Machiavelli's Critique of Classical Philosophy and His Case for The Political Life, Perspectives on Political Science, DOI: [10.1080/10457097.2021.1894057](https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2021.1894057)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2021.1894057>



Published online: 19 Mar 2021.



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Machiavelli's Critique of Classical Philosophy and His Case for The Political Life

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ABSTRACT

This article illuminates how Machiavelli's critique of classical philosophy is fundamental to his teaching. It will argue that Machiavelli criticized classical philosophy for its ineffectiveness and its endorsement of the leisurely philosophic life as the best way of life. In contrast, Machiavelli's optimistic depiction of the scope of human power in controlling chance and his critique of the life of contemplation promote his new understanding of the best life, in which political life and its glory occupy the highest rank. I will then contend that in Machiavelli's writings there is a coherent and powerful defense of the political life as the alternative for the philosophical life of contemplation.

Although Niccolò Machiavelli is commonly studied as a major political philosopher, the idea that he is a philosopher simply or even has something to say about philosophy at all is not widely accepted among commentators. In his famous essay on Machiavelli, Isaiah Berlin remarked, as if he were casually restating a known fact, that Machiavelli “was of course not a philosopher.”¹ Like almost all other opinions, this view can be justified in a certain light. A study of Machiavelli's major works shows that he does not often speak of philosophy or philosophers, or discuss philosophical subjects. In Machiavelli's four major writings, Aristotle is mentioned only once: to explain the causes of the ruin of tyrants (D III.26.273).² Plato is mentioned twice: once when Machiavelli speaks about a failed assassination plot devised by his disciples, and once when he calls Marsilio Ficino the “second father of Platonic Philosophy” (D III.6.230; FH VII.6.283). Cicero, the classical philosopher who was admired the most by the Renaissance humanists, is also named three times: once for saying that peoples are ignorant, once in the discussion about the errors of Pompey in dealing with Caesar, and once when he is criticized for his dealings with Mark Antony and Octavian (D I.4.17, I.33.72, I.52.105). The only philosopher who seems significant for Machiavelli is Xenophon: He mentions him eight times. Other than a single reference to *Hiero*, however, Machiavelli only appears interested in Xenophon's pseudo-historical

work on Cyrus the Great (P XVI.60; D II.2.130, II.13.155, III.20.262, III.22.266, III.22.267, III.39.298, III.39.298). The words “philosophy” and “philosopher” are not Machiavelli's favorite words, either: he uses them only five times in his four major books. Marcus Aurelius is called a philosopher, but only to specify which Marcus is meant (P XIX.75). There is one discussion about philosophy which, while rather brief, is more significant: Machiavelli discusses the place of philosophy and philosophers in the cycle of civilizations (FH V.1.185). Other references are more laconic: He mentions a philosopher who believes the air is full of intelligences that foresee the future, some unnamed philosophers who subscribe to the idea that the world is eternal, and “certain moral philosophers” who think necessity is important for the perfection of human beings (D I.56.114, II.5.138, III.12.246).

While these points might seem to confirm the well-established opinion that Machiavelli is not interested in philosophy, a limited study of indexes has its own shortcomings. To study the place of philosophy in Machiavelli's thought, one must pay attention to the substance of the teaching of his works. Leo Strauss is one commentator who gave serious thought to the status of Machiavelli as a philosopher while evaluating the substance of Machiavelli's writings. He argues that Machiavelli is indeed a philosopher, and emphasizes the “presence of philosophy” in his thought. It seems that Strauss bases his judgment mainly on a passage

in *Discourses* (III.31.281). In this passage, Machiavelli calls Camillus “an excellent man” who always remained “the same in every fortune,” one of those men over whom “fortune does not have power.”³ Apparently, Strauss believes this passage shows that Machiavelli’s highest type of man is a quasi-philosopher of sorts, who, because of his knowledge, is indifferent to the variations of fortune. However, Machiavelli’s excellent man is actually an excellent *military commander* and prominent *political* figure of “firm spirit,” not a private man in a lucid state of robust tranquility (*ataraxia*) born out of wisdom. If Machiavelli genuinely believed in the superiority of philosophic life, he could certainly find more suitable exemplary men than a seasoned politician like Camillus who simply waited out the adverse times to return to power. Furthermore, Strauss ultimately concedes that the clearest aspects of Machiavelli’s thought are incompatible with the idea of philosophical life. However, he tries to rescue his original judgment by adding that Machiavelli *cannot* “give a clear account of his own doing,” of “what is greatest in him.”⁴ In other words, according to Strauss, the status of philosophy in Machiavelli’s thought is “obfuscated.” As we shall see, I will argue that contrary to Strauss’s judgment, Machiavelli’s understanding of his own intellectual activity is in harmony with his views about best life and classical philosophic tradition.

Another scholar who has paid special attention to this question is Erica Benner. Contrary to accepted interpretations, Benner argues that Machiavelli is a philosopher and follows Greek philosophical tradition. She believes that Machiavelli continued an ancient tradition of philosophy that did not conceive philosophy as a purely contemplative activity but a kind of civil engagement necessary for a well-ordered civil life. She takes issue with those interpretations of Machiavelli that frame him as primarily a product of his time and consider him an heir to a specific Italian humanistic tradition that stems from the confrontation with philosophical contemplation. This tradition made a sharp distinction between philosophy as a private activity centered on metaphysical and abstract contemplations on the one hand, and politics as a public activity centered on practical engagements on the other. The followers of this tradition sought to elevate the status of politics relative to philosophy and praised political activities over the apolitical contemplative mode of life characteristic of classical philosophy.⁵ Benner rightly mentions other Italian humanist writers who upheld a very different concept of the relationship between civic life and philosophy whose

repertoires were available to Machiavelli and could have influenced his thought. Here, however, lies the major problem with Benner’s argument: She shows that contextualist interpretations always provide several traditions available to a thinker, many in tension with one another, that could influence his thought. We therefore need some kind of independent evidence to determine which of these traditions □ if any □ has influenced Machiavelli. A study of Machiavelli’s own writings, in which he discusses his relationship with the classical tradition as well as the relationship between philosophy and politics, can provide such an independent evidence. But Benner does not provide any evidence from Machiavelli’s writings to show that he had such a conception of philosophy. She builds her own conception of Greek philosophy not divorced from politics and then tries to show how Machiavelli’s thought is *compatible* with such a conception. Furthermore, she ignores the conflict between philosophic and political life at the center of classical philosophy and in Machiavelli’s understanding of that tradition. When Machiavelli directly criticizes philosophers and their place in politics, Benner therefore is compelled to write that Machiavelli cannot mean what he says.⁶

I will argue that by applying Machiavelli’s own “judicious” style of reading to his works, one can see not only his awareness of and engagement with the classical tradition of philosophy. I will first argue that there is a specific and coherent Machiavellian critique of classical philosophy: this critique aims ineffectiveness of this tradition as well as its understanding of the leisurely philosophic life as the best way of life. Next, I will argue that, Machiavelli’s critique is based on his understanding of glory and its place in human happiness.

Ineffective Imagination of the Classics

Machiavelli does not always provide clear indications about the identity of his adversaries. The most famous of these unnamed adversaries are mentioned in Chapter XV of *The Prince* where Machiavelli speaks about those who “have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth.” He opposes these unnamed adversaries and intends to go “directly to the effectual truth of things” since he believes the prince who follows these writers’ precepts “learn[s] his ruin rather than his preservation.” Machiavelli instead wants to write something “useful” for real princes. But who are the adversaries? Many commentators tend to believe the humanist

writers of the *quattrocento* are those Machiavelli has in mind.⁷ It is very difficult, however, to find any reference to Machiavelli's contemporaries in his writings. It seems, then, that we are left in the dark regarding the identity of Machiavelli's adversaries in this passage. Nevertheless, two pieces of evidence might prove decisive in identifying them. The first is found in Machiavelli's short essay, *Discursus florentinarum rerum*:

And so much has this glory been esteemed by men seeking for nothing other than glory that when unable to form a republic in reality [*in atto*], they have done it in writing [*in iscritto*], as Aristotle, Plato, and many others, who have wished to show the world that if they have not founded a free government, as did Solon and Lycurgus, they have failed not through their ignorance but through their impotence [*impotenza*] for putting it into practice.⁸

The distinction between forming a republic *in atto* and *in iscritto* brings to mind the distinction in Chapter XV between imaginary regimes and those regimes that have really existed. Another piece of evidence supporting this interpretation is a letter from Francesco Vettori to Machiavelli. In it, Vettori comments on fortunes of the Swiss, believing they are not posed to become the next Romans because a study of Aristotle's *Politics* shows that "a republic divided" like theirs cannot make progress. In his reply, Machiavelli writes that he can only say "what might reasonably exist, what exists, and what has existed" (L 255, 258, 510n17, 511n7). Again, Machiavelli seems to distinguish between his own position, based on what really exists, and Aristotle's, which is based on unreal or *imaginary* things. If these points lack perfect clarity, one should recall that both Plato and Aristotle in fact speak about the "city in speech" in contradistinction to real existing cities.⁹ In other words, it is safe to assume that Machiavelli's adversaries in Chapter XV are Plato, Aristotle, and their followers, what I will hereafter call the "classical tradition of philosophy."¹⁰

But what is the substance of Machiavelli's critique? He is concerned with what is "useful" and "effectual." His political doctrine is true if it succeeds and is effective. Therefore, it must be the "effectual truth." Since Machiavelli is concerned primarily with what is useful, he is more concerned with historians than with philosophers. Historians are more useful than philosophers because the former illustrate men as they are while the latter describe men as they should be. This seems to be the motivation behind Machiavelli's keen interest in Xenophon's "historical" works. Further proof that Machiavelli is concerned with the ineffective character of the classical tradition is that it

is always mentioned in the context of failure. In his major works, Machiavelli names Plato only when discussing the failed conspiracy attempted by two of his pupils (D III.6.230). Machiavelli's judgment of Cosimo de' Medici also echoes the complaint that classical philosophy promotes ineffective doctrines. This great promoter of classical philosophy was deceived by Francesco Sforza. Machiavelli does not hide that he "was compelled of necessity to praise" Cosimo, even though this patron of classical philosophy was an unsuccessful politician and far from Machiavelli's ideals (FH VII.6.283–4). Machiavelli also mentions Boethius in *Florentine Histories*, but he seems only interested in that philosopher's fall from power and death (FH I.4.14).

The number of failed conspiracies attempted by the heirs and followers of classical philosophy—the humanists whom Machiavelli mentions—is remarkable. He recounts the story of the failed conspiracy of Cola Montano's disciples, a "lettered" republican who taught the Latin language to the youth of Milan. He encouraged his disciples to free their fatherland from the yoke of Galeazzo Maria Sforza and establish a republican regime. One of the conspirators, quartered and about to die, said his last words in Latin: "for he was lettered" (FH VII.33.312). Stefano Porcari likewise wanted to "take his fatherland from the hands of prelates," rescue it from their "evil customs," and "restore its ancient way of life." Machiavelli, in a work dedicated to the pope, approves of Porcari's mission and declares that his intention "could be praised by anyone." His description of Porcari's personality is brief, but we know that Porcari was an admirer of Livy who befriended Leonardo Bruni and other contemporary humanists, and some extant humanist literary works are dedicated to his conspiracy. Machiavelli alludes to Porcari's "learning," which is probably a passing reference to his humanistic background (FH VI.29.263–4).¹¹

Machiavelli's understanding of classical philosophy is not incorrect, as we discover in the works of the ancients themselves. Both Plato and Aristotle consider their best regime the result of "wish" or "prayer." The best regime is the regime for which one would wish or pray.¹² Its actualization is improbable; only "some divine chance" can bring it about. The best regime is not meant to be one "which most cities can share."¹³ Classical political science is imaginary or ineffective because for the classics, chance plays a very great role in human affairs. For instance, Aristotle thinks that there is no single pattern of regime change. Since chance is omnipresent, "it is impossible to determine" how regimes come about and which direction they

take. For Aristotle, the fact that there is a variety of regimes and laws follows from the great variety among human beings and the circumstances they confront. It is impossible that one type of regime would work for all situations.¹⁴

Another point demonstrating the importance of chance in classical political philosophy is the fact that in Aristotle's extant corpus, references to prayer and praying are most abundant in the *Politics*.¹⁵ In Book VII of the *Politics*, where Aristotle discusses the best regime, he writes that, "we pray for the city to be constituted on the basis of what one would pray for in those matters over which fortune [*tuche*] has authority." The necessary conditions of the best city are the "work of chance."¹⁶ According to Aristotle, chance plays an important role in the happiness of man. To reduce the influence of chance on the happiness of the individual, Aristotle tells us that the noble individual "bears up under all fortunes in a becoming way." He would act like a good general who uses "the army he has" and a shoemaker who makes the most beautiful shoe "out of the leather given to him." There is no speculation about how to improve what we have or what is given to us; there is no battling against luck, but only "bearing up." Although Aristotle thinks that to "entrust the greatest and noblest thing to chance would be excessively discordant," he does not believe happiness is among the things that can come about through one's own doing: "We wish to be happy and we declare this, whereas to say that we choose to be happy is not appropriate."¹⁷ The same outlook on chance and its role in human life is found in the works of Plato. The Athenian Stranger of *The Laws* answers the question of how to establish the best regime by saying, "give me a tyrannized city," a city ruled by an exceptional young tyrant "with good luck." The young tyrant should be lucky to live in a time when a praiseworthy lawgiver lives and "some chance should bring two of them together."¹⁸ Human affairs are changeable, volatile, and unstable. Dissimilarities among human beings coupled with the instability of human things do not allow any political art to advise something for all times and places.¹⁹ Plato goes so far as to say that "no human being ever legislates anything, but that chances and accidents of every sort ... legislate everything for us." War, poverty and disease overturn every political planning, and it seems that "almost all human affaires are matters of chance."²⁰

It seems that Machiavelli's radical confidence about the scope of our power in controlling chance and fortune goes beyond anything found in classical

philosophy. He goes much further than merely recommending adjustment to the whims of fortune, instead speaking of the possibility of subduing fortune by extreme force and impetuosity; like a woman, one can "hold her down, to beat her and strike her down." The young can win her to themselves by ferocity and audacity (P XXV.101). Machiavelli's contention in chapter VI of *The Prince* that his model princes, the likes of Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus, can "introduce any form they please" into the matter given to them resembles a common scholastic formula used for describing God's power to transform nature *ex nihilo*.²¹ He believes that even when the matter you obtain is corrupt, "one individual who with an extreme force" can ensure that the observance of well-ordered laws can make the matter good (D I.17.48, I.55.111–2). Machiavelli even asserts that two virtuous princes in succession are sufficient to "acquire the world" (D I.20.54). These extraordinary men do not have to "pray [*preghino*]" like the classical philosophers, but can use "force" and "regulate" fortune (P VI.24, D II.31.202). Brute force in the form of military power plays a major role in subduing fortune, since where the military is good, there must be good order, and, "it rarely occurs that good fortune will not be there" (D I.4.16). The ineffective character of the classical tradition originates in its specific understanding of the world and the limits of human power over existence. Contrary to those who believe that fortune helped the Roman people in acquiring the empire, Machiavelli tells us that other republics did not acquire such an empire because they had not been ordered like Rome. It seems that the experience of Rome can be successfully replicated by others (D II.1.125–6). While the influence of climates on men, their military prowess, and stock is central for Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli abstracts from these causes and effects.²² For Machiavelli, founding a good military order is entirely within the power of the ruler:

It is more true than any other truth that if where there are men there are no soldiers, it arises through a defect of the prince and not through any other defect, either of the site or of nature. (D I.21.55, III.39.297)

Machiavelli's understanding of chance and fortune is ambiguous, however. He generally presents a very optimistic view regarding the power of men to control chance, a view opposed to the classical one. But we can hardly call him unequivocal on this point. On the one hand, at times he seems to share the classical understanding of fortune's irresistibility and the powerlessness of men. Fortune is compared to violent

rivers that flood the plains and ruin the trees and buildings. Men have fixed natures, and often the quality of the times do not conform to their nature and procedures. They cannot counter fortune's variations since no man may be "found so prudent as to know how to accommodate himself" to the times. He tells us that men can second and warp fortune, but they cannot oppose and break it. Yet on other occasions he departs from this pessimistic view by speaking in conditional and ambiguous terms: "if he would change his nature with the times and with affairs . . .," "when fortune varies and men remain obstinate in their modes . . .," etc. Elsewhere, he *recommends* considering times and accommodating oneself to them and thereby intimates the possibility of what he presented as impossible (cf. D II.29.199 and P XXV.100–1 with the title of D III.8.238). Concluding his comparison of Hannibal's cruelty and Scipio's humanity, Machiavelli says that a captain must possess "the great virtue that seasons both modes of life." Over such an excellent captain, "fortune does not have power." He also offers a remedy for accommodating oneself to the inflexibility of human nature: one can found a republic in which there are diverse citizens and humors, and elect the man with the right humor for the situation (D III.22.264, III.31.281, III.9.240, III.22.266). One is therefore not surprised when Machiavelli goes so far as to speak about the possibility of a "perpetual republic" that can defeat the variations of time and fortune; one is merely puzzled when he also seems to deny the possibility of such a perpetual republic (cf. D III.17.257 & III.22.266 with I.2.13). What is then Machiavelli's final position? Is there a reason for the ambiguity of his position? As we shall see later on, this ambiguity is related to Machiavelli's understanding of the best life, and the place of glory in that life.

Leisure and Philosophic Life

If Machiavelli rarely speaks about philosophy, he speaks regularly about something concomitant with philosophy and necessary for its pursuit: *ozio*, which is often translated as "leisure" or pejoratively as "idleness." *Ozio* is the Italian translation of the Latin *otium*, which is itself a translation of the Greek *schole*. For Plato and Aristotle, *schole* has mainly a positive connotation.²³ But in the Roman world it acquires a pejorative one. This transformation is so powerful that even Greek writers such as Plutarch and Polybius in the Roman world use *schole* in a negative sense.²⁴ *Otium's* pejorative sense is above all observed in Cato the Elder's criticism of *otium Graecum*, the Greek

habit of idleness that goes hand in hand with talkativeness and useless intellectual activities, i.e., philosophical discussion and contemplation. This negative connotation of *otium* is opposed to *negotium*, business worthy of a real man. The Roman ideal of the active, glory-seeking military life tended to emphasize the negative effects of idleness.²⁵ The dual assessment of *otium* is characteristic of Latin thought. Even Cicero, the great Roman admirer of the Greek tradition of philosophical contemplation, had to studiously guard himself against the pejorative connotations of *otium*. He often uses formulas such as *honestum otium*, *otium cum dignitate* and *otium cum honestate* to legitimize his own leisurely and retired philosophical activities and presents them as public service.²⁶ The legacy of the Roman condemnation of *otium* persisted through the Christian Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Many, however, did not lose sight of the central place and importance of leisure in philosophical contemplation. For instance, Petrarch, one of Machiavelli's favorite writers, presents his influential defense of leisure and the philosophical life in *De vita solitaria*.

Machiavelli's view of philosophical contemplation and leisure, as can be observed in his private correspondence, is more in line with the Roman aristocracy than with Petrarch and the classical tradition. With the rise of the Medici in Florence and Machiavelli's exclusion from public service, he retired to his farm at Sant'Andrea in Percussina. His letters in this period of exile and unemployment are full of complaints and bitterness. He laments the malice of Fortune that had brought him to his miserable state. He believes he has been left "lying on the ground" by his friends and complains about his poverty. He wants to be put to work again, so he can help himself and bring utility and honor to all his friends (L 222, 228). His famous letter to Francesco Vettori, one of the most celebrated of Renaissance literature, gives an account of his daily life on the farm: passing his time catching thrushes with his own hands, supervising woodworkers, chatting and playing with farmers, and engaging in other "contemptible" diversions. Machiavelli writes that he wants to see whether fate is ashamed of treating him maliciously. He desires that the Medici engage his services, even if they start out by having him "roll along a stone" (L 263–5). In his letter, Machiavelli also writes about his studies. In the evening, he steps "inside the venerable courts [*corti*] of the ancients" and converses with them. He tells Vettori that he questions them "about the motives of their actions" [*actioni*] and has composed *The Prince* based on what

he has learned “from their conversation” (L 264). From Machiavelli’s remarks in this letter, we see that his imaginary conversations are *not* with ancient philosophers, but with men of action: kings, emperors, and military commanders. Machiavelli is not describing his philosophical contemplation: His nightly studies are in the service of action, not disinterested knowledge. One might say that his intellectual activity is a continuation of politics by other means.²⁷

But even this activity, which is ultimately in the service of politics, proves unsatisfying for Machiavelli. His ideal is to return to the world of political action. Far from being content with the rustic simple life of the intellect, Machiavelli is deeply unhappy, putting him deeply at odds with the accounts of the ancients. Cicero, a classical philosopher who was even more deeply engaged in political action than Machiavelli, considered public life a burden and could leave behind his former active life with few regrets, dedicating his life to *vita contemplativa*. He welcomed his banishment as an opportunity to engage in a leisurely life of philosophy.²⁸ Sallust also considers himself happy for abandoning public life and dedicating his life instead to leisurely activities of the mind from which his “ill-starred ambition” had diverted him.²⁹ Machiavelli’s view of his banishment and leisure is even more opposed to that of Petrarch. In fact, Machiavelli’s letter to Vettori can be read as a parody of Petrarch’s defense of solitude.³⁰ Petrarch argues that the retired life of intellect and the pursuit of literary studies are superior to the distractions of the urban and active life of *negotium*. But Machiavelli paints a grim portrait of his life in the country to rouse the reader’s sympathy. Exiled to his farm, Machiavelli acts like an abandoned lover preoccupied with his former flame. While in the classical tradition, the Socratic philosopher had to be forced to come into the city to rule and forsake contemplation, Machiavelli had to be banished to Albergaccio to pursue a contemplative life. Aristotle believes that happiness resides in “leisure” [*scholē*], since it is the condition of philosophic contemplation. The life of the statesman lacks leisure.³¹ On the contrary, as we shall see, leisure and peace are among Machiavelli’s prominent objects of criticism.

The clearest discussion of this topic is found at the beginning of the fifth book of *Florentine Histories*, where Machiavelli writes about the cycle of civilizations: “virtue gives birth to quiet, quiet to leisure, leisure to disorder, disorder to ruin.” He further explains that by “leisure,” he means “letters.” Philosophers arise after captains. Nothing can corrupt the strength

of well-armed spirits more than the “honorable leisure of letters.” Philosophy is called “deceit”; Cato is praised by Machiavelli for saying that no philosopher should be accepted in Rome and that one must protect the Roman youth from the evil of this honorable leisure by which men “become wise from their afflictions” (FH V.1.185–6). The passage reminds us of another in *Art of War*: Finding himself in the shade of very tall trees of the Orti Oricellari and being told that these trees are in fact ancient trees that were celebrated by the ancients, Fabrizio claims that when the study of philosophy began to please the Romans, their “fatherland went to ruin.” Fabrizio considers it preferable to “be like the ancients in the strong and harsh things, not in the delicate and soft ones, and in those that they did under the sun, not in the shade.” The study of letters belongs to “the false and corrupt antiquity,” while one must imitate “the true and perfect antiquity” of arms and war (AW I.13–18). For Machiavelli, the gentlemen “who live idly [*oziosi*] in abundance from the returns of their possessions without having any care either for cultivation or for other necessary trouble in living ... are pernicious in every republic” and are “hostile to every civilization.” Leisure is the enemy because it is founded on an illusion of rest, peace, and plenty, while the reality is movement, war, and penury: “human things are always in motion,” and therefore “they must either rise or fall”; men “desire everything and are unable to attain everything,” so they are always discontent with what they possess and therefore “ascend from one ambition to another.” “Men are desirous of new things” and even “get bored with the good and grieve in the ill” (D I.55.111, II.Pref.123, I.6.23, I.37.78, I.46.95, III.21.263). The competition of ambitious men results in war: those who possess begin tumults stemming from the fear of loss, and their ambitious behavior inflames the appetites of those who do not possess. Thus commences the cycle of violence. However, leisure could not be so pernicious if it were merely illusory. There is in fact rest and plenty, and they corrupt men. For Machiavelli, such moments of rest and peace breed idleness, corruption, and disunion, while “fear and war” are the cause of union (D I.5.19, I.37.78, I.5.19, II.25.190, I.3.15, I.1.7). But such moments of rest are short-lived: Men do not cope well with rest. In the long run, war, movement, and scarcity rule over human beings: “there be nothing perpetual or quiet in human things.” Men should always be prepared for unrest and war. Machiavelli acts like those provident intelligences in the air who prepare men for defense. He does not look at

ambition merely as a problem to be contained. He also considers it a remedy for the ills of republics. One remedy for containing the worthy citizens who might disturb the republic in the pursuit of the satisfaction of their ambitions is to order the republic for war “so that one can always make war” and thereby occupy the mind of these ambitious men: if a republic “does not have an enemy outside, it will find one at home” (FH III.5.111; D II.19.173, I.56.114).

One should not conclude, however, that for Machiavelli war and movement are in the end merely instruments for keeping a political regime healthy; they are also necessary for providing men with what is highest. This is why while, for Aristotle, “war must be for the sake of peace, occupation for the sake of leisure,” for Machiavelli war breeds necessity, and necessity forces men to act virtuously. Necessity makes men strong and pushes them forward. Virtue in Machiavelli’s view is sustained and produced by necessity. He teaches us that if men were content to live off their own and “did not wish to seek to command others,” it would be wiser to build cities in sterile places that make men industrious and “less seized by idleness.” Since this is not the case, though, one must build cities in fertile regions and avoid idleness by “imposing such necessities as the site does not provide.” Fertile countries are apt to produce idle men who are unfit for virtuous life; the laws should create an artificial necessity to oppose idleness (D III.16.255, II.19.173, I.1.8–9, II.12.153, I.1.8).³² Idleness is the enemy of active life and is an unfertile ground in which no glorious action can grow. In contrast, war and movement provide opportunity for acquiring glory. The Machiavellian critique of *otium* and leisurely life of contemplation is a direct descendant of the Roman ideal of the active, glory-seeking political life.

Philosophy, Politics, and Glory

As we saw, in the end Machiavelli does not seem to be fundamentally opposed to the classical view of chance. It does not seem that his critique of the classical tradition of philosophy is essentially dependent on his *seemingly* optimistic depiction of the scope of human power in controlling chance. In contrast, Machiavelli’s critique of leisure and philosophic life appears highly dependent on his positive view of the glory-seeking life of action. It therefore seems that Machiavelli’s understanding of glory is one fundamental principle which more than anything else gives coherence to his confrontation with the classical

philosophy. In other words, to understand the difference between the classical philosophy and Machiavelli’s thought one must go beyond the question of power of human beings in shaping their lives and their respective evaluations of leisure. The decisive difference between Machiavelli and his classical predecessors seems to be the relative importance of glory and its relationship to politics.³³

One can gain a better understanding of the question of glory by studying the relationship between leisure and Christianity in Machiavelli’s thought. Machiavelli asks himself why the people of antiquity prized freedom more highly than his contemporaries; he concludes that this transformation arose from the differences between “education” in his own time and that of the ancients. At this stage, it is not clear what Machiavelli means when he refers to education. He makes his intention clearer by noting that education is closely related to religion. Christianity despises “the honor of the world,” whereas the Gentile religion “esteemed it very much.” The Gentile religion beatified men who were “full of worldly glory,” like princes and warriors. On the contrary, Christianity glorifies the “humble and contemplative more than active men.” According to Machiavelli, the mode of life promoted by modern education and Christianity has rendered “the world weak,” “effeminate,” and “heaven disarmed.” It seems that for Machiavelli, there is an alliance between Christianity and philosophical contemplation (D II.2.131; AW II.305–9; FH V.33.227, VI.1.230). The Christian mode of life, through its glorification of humility and contemplation, has rendered “the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men.” Machiavelli, however, says the fault is not in the Christian religion, but in the men who have “interpreted our religion according to *ozio* and not according to *virtù*.” Virtue is presented as the antithesis of leisure, as elsewhere it is the antithesis of fortune (D II.2.131–2).

Christianity and classical philosophy both denigrate the glory of the world. The “ambitious idleness” [*ambizioso ozio*] is the word that more than anything shows the synthesis of the classical philosophy and Christianity (D Pref.6). Machiavelli does not criticize ambition per se. The highest for Machiavelli is “honor of the world” and “worldly glory” (D II.2.131: “*il sommo bene*”; P XXV.99). His perfect human being is a “lover of honor” (*philotimon*) not “lover of wisdom” (*philosophos*). He censures Giampaolo Baglioni for not killing the pope and his entourage when he had the chance, an act that according to Machiavelli could have brought Baglioni “perpetual fame” and by which

he would have left “eternal memory of himself” for posterity. He dedicated his book to his friends, who wish to load him with “ranks, honors, and riches” and mentions those who are ready to blame instead of praising him. He expects praise from his readers and believes that the opportunity to acquire glory by reordering a corrupt regime is the highest man can hope for (D I.28.63, I.10.33, I.29.64, II.5.138, Ded.3, I.Pref.5, I.10.33). Machiavelli’s outlook is closer to the imperialism of Periclean Athens with its “sempiternal monuments” than to the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.³⁴

As Hannah Arendt explains, the classical philosophers’ discovery of the eternal was one of the reasons why they tended to look down upon all political striving for glory and immortality.³⁵ In classical philosophy, politics and the sphere of action are subordinated to philosophy and contemplation because, compared to the eternity of the truth accessible only to philosophers in their quiet of leisurely contemplation, the *bios politikos* of the citizen and striving to achieve sempiternal glory and recognition appear delusory. In the classical tradition, the love of renown, glory, and honor held in such high esteem by the statesmen, warriors, and legislators is traced to the most fundamental desire of human beings, namely, the desire for immortality.³⁶ But a proper understanding of the limits of politics makes us realize that our deepest longings cannot be fulfilled in political action. The dialectical discussions of civic virtue and political life in the classical tradition point toward the difficulties inherent in the lived experience of political life and the impossibility of satisfaction of man’s deepest longings.³⁷ Immortal glory is in fact impossible. Someone can be praised only while people exist and while he is remembered. And even aside from the possibility of annihilation of the human race, glory in the mind of future generations depends on chance. Many great statesmen are forgotten simply because their exploits did not survive the malignity of times. Human life is exposed to the assaults of nature. Chance and fortune play a huge role in man’s destiny. The classics did not propose any program to conquer fortune and chance. They believed such a program would prove impossible because the forces of nature are too great to be mastered by human beings. The philosophic life is superior to all other forms of life because it alone is not enslaved to fortune. This is why the classical philosopher looks at politics in the light of man’s highest good: philosophic contemplation of the whole. Only through contemplation of the eternal things, “the science of the most honorable

matters” which, contrary to human things are eternal, can one “make oneself immortal.” The superiority of the philosophic way of life overshadows and dwarfs anything possible in politics. The classics look down on human things because the truly immortal things are more divine and honorable than human beings.³⁸

Machiavelli, on the contrary, looks down on the philosophic life. His exemplary prince, Castruccio Castracani, is made to say that he wishes to die like Caesar, while in the original classical version of the anecdote, the ancient philosopher Aristippus wishes to die like Socrates.³⁹ In Machiavelli’s enumeration of the men who are praised the most, “literary men” occupy the last place. He puts two options before those who follow the footsteps of the classical philosophers and despise political ambition: private life or political life. He then proceeds to paint a shocking picture of the political life that forces us to “enter into the evil way.” Later, however, political life is painted in a more positive light, while private life does not receive any rehabilitation. He tells philosophers that it is not enough to say: “I do not care for anything; I do not desire either honors or useful things; I wish to live quietly and without quarrel!” For “these excuses are heard and not accepted; nor can men who have quality choose to abstain even when they choose it truly and without any ambition, because it is not believed of them; so if they wish to abstain, they are not allowed by others to abstain.”⁴⁰ For him, the possibility of a leisurely life of contemplation far from politics is only an illusion.

Although Machiavelli borrows elements of his cosmology from the classical hedonism represented by Lucretius, he does not share that tradition’s understanding of the best way of life.⁴¹ Lucretius’s poem is addressed to Memmius and tries to turn him away from politics and toward philosophy. For Lucretius, honor and immortal glory are unworthy of the best man. For Machiavelli, they are genuine goods and even the highest good. While Plato’s Socrates moderates the tyrannical ambition of his two aristocratic interlocutors, Adeimantus and Glaucon, by introducing them to the charms of philosophy, Machiavelli tries to satisfy the tyrannical ambition of his books’ young patrician dedicatees, Cosmio and Zanubi, by showing them the greatness of the expansive Roman Empire and promising them the rank of princes guiding imperial armies of people in conquering new acquisitions. Machiavelli encourages the young aristocrats to include ordinary citizens in the political regime and create a more democratic republic which deploys such citizens in the army. The patrician

princes become the head of this popular army to expand their empire and achieve sempiternal glory for themselves.

It is not negligible that Machiavelli's treatises are handbooks of political ambition while the central political teaching of the classics is political moderation and awareness of the limits of politics. If Machiavelli, unlike classical philosophers, refrains from defining the *grandi* and the nobles in terms of virtue, moral superiority, or wisdom, it is not for "rhetorical reasons" alone.⁴² Machiavelli refrains from acknowledging other criteria apart from what is strictly political because other distinctions always point toward things which surpass and go beyond politics. For Machiavelli there is nothing above and beyond politics. Men's desires must find their satisfaction in what is offered in politics. "Sempiternal infamy" or the fame offered in politics is the highest man can acquire; their distinction is effaced by Machiavelli's disregard of virtue and wisdom (D I.10.33). It is not surprising that Machiavelli sides with Rome, even though it was Rome which "with its arms and its greatness, eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life" (D II.2.132). When it comes to choosing between liberty and the glory of empire, Machiavelli chooses glory, because it is for him the highest. It is for this reason that Machiavelli is always ready to advise any seeker of glory who has "any enterprise, either in favor of freedom or in favor of tyranny" or any who wishes to "put a wicked form" in a republic. For Machiavelli there is no such a thing as bad glory, or bad publicity for that matter. He criticizes other historians for refraining from documenting the "despicable things" done by the ancestors of prominent citizens so as not to "offend" them. He believes praiseworthy actions are equally legitimate means to acquire fame as unpraiseworthy ones; in fact, there is even glory in losing (D III.8.238–9, III.10.243, FH Pr.7–8).

Machiavelli's endorsement of glory and the life dedicated to the pursuit of political glory does not mean that he was unaware of the limitations of glory and honor. He dwells on the attractions of sempiternal fame, but it is a mistake to believe that he has not scrutinized the limitations of glory and honor: while discussing Egypt he mentions "the most excellent men" who arose in the kingdom of the Egyptians and reminds us that if "their names had not been eliminated by antiquity, they would be seen to merit more praise than Alexander the Great and many others whose memory is still fresh" (D I.1.9). Machiavelli knows that "memories" often become old and forgotten (D I.32.70). From "the Tuscans" only "some little

memory and some sign of their greatness" has remained and "at present there is almost no memory of it" (D II.4.135, II.4.138). The glory and honor of the most excellent men only survives if their memories are preserved. Men celebrate and wish to imitate the ancient times because of "the memory that writers have left of" those ages (D II.Pref.123). Many such memories and glorious deeds are forgotten simply because they were not recorded by historians. Some memories and glorious actions are even destroyed intentionally, such as the memories of pagan times by the new Christian religion. The Christians have suppressed all the orders and ceremonies of paganism and "eliminated every memory of that ancient theology." If the Church had not maintained the Latin language, it could have succeeded in eliminating entirely the knowledge of the things done by the excellent men of antiquity (D II.5.139). But if Machiavelli is in the end conscious of the limitations of a life of glory and fame, what prevents him from embracing the classical view of philosophy? Perhaps Machiavelli thought that despite these limitations, the life of glory and fame provides us with the only possible form of immortality, as it has been often said that glory is above all what keeps man alive after his death (D I.10.33 *in fine*). Politics is the best chance for a kind of limited "immortality," which, despite its limitations, is still superior to the false immortality born out of the contemplative life. Machiavelli writes to Vettori that it is while conversing with the ancient kings, emperors, and military commanders about their glorious acts that he approaches immortality and forgets the fear of death. It is the possibility of the same kind of immortality that he promises to the house of Medici.⁴³ Compared to the limited immortality provided by politics, the eternity of philosophical contemplation seems entirely illusory; after all, how could one become immortal by contemplating the eternal universe? Isn't this philosophic immortality a consoling myth which prevents us from satisfying our desire for immortality in politics? If the classical tradition of political philosophy is above all concerned with "the limits of politics," Machiavelli seems concerned with "the limits of philosophy."

In Machiavelli's writings one can find a coherent and powerful defense of the political life as the alternative for the philosophical life of contemplation; in these writings he makes an extraordinary effort to restore the dignity of the political life. Machiavelli's exaggeration of human power in shaping his destiny and his recourse to populist rhetoric are in the service of his deepest insight into the best way of life. If, as

Machiavelli believes, politics ultimately provides the only opportunity for acquiring a limited kind of immortality, one must approach politics with seriousness, with the right spirit, and for the right reasons. Moderation, slowness, caution, and circumspection—or, briefly, the spirit of rest that the classical tradition celebrates—must be replaced by daring, versatility, hope, and enterprising zeal—or, briefly, the spirit of motion. The classical tradition’s rhetoric of fortune and its portrait of the helplessness of human beings facing mighty powers beyond their reach is not conducive to awakening the daring spirit of the glory-seeking princes; the anti-democratic rhetoric of the classical tradition does not assist in the acquisition of great empires, which are only possible with the help of the people.⁴⁴ These ideas must then be replaced: with the optimist view of human power, for which no task is too great for the right kind of man; with the pro-democratic attitude which can recruit the people for grand enterprises. Machiavelli’s own literary career harmonizes perfectly with his critique of classical philosophy and his new attitude toward the best way of life. This critique can justify Machiavelli’s own enterprise: in his works, he always actively seeks a hearing from any statesman, ambitious individual, or even tyrant, regardless of their ends; he hopes to become recognized by everyone as the teacher of truly effectual truths. He expects that his teaching will bring him fame or infamy and guarantee his immortal glory. His desire to bring “common benefit to everyone” is in the service of his own personal glory as the explorer of “new modes and orders,” for which he expects praise and acclaim from his readers. In this sense, he must have counted himself among those who through their writings “have wished to show the world that if they have not founded a civil way of life, as did Solon and Lycurgus, they have failed not through their ignorance but through their impotence for putting it into practice.”⁴⁵

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank (in alphabetical order) Peter Ahrens Dorf, Daniel J. Mahoney, Peter Minowitz, and the anonymous reviewers of the *Perspectives on Political Science* for their careful reading of the manuscript and their insightful comments and suggestions.

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Notes

1. Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, 1980), 36. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 135; Gilbert Felix, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini. Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 193.
2. The following abbreviations are used for citing Machiavelli’s works: AW = Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War*, trans. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); D = Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); FH = Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Laura F. Banfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); L = Niccolò Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); O = Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte Le Opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971); P = Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
3. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1958), 290, 294. For a more subtle treatment of Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli see Heinrich Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, trans. Robert Berman (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 33n20, 48.
4. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 294.
5. Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 37–39.
6. Benner, 53–54.
7. Gilbert Felix, “The Humanist Concept of the Prince and The Prince of Machiavelli,” *Journal of Modern History* 11 (1939): 450n3; Michel Senellart, *Les arts de gouverner: du régime médiéval au concept de gouvernement* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 215–30; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Vol. 1: The Renaissance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 120, 129, 132–33.
8. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*. Vol. 1, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), 114; Pierre Manent, *Enquête sur la démocratie: Etudes de philosophie politique*, ed. Jean-Vincent Holeindre (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 304–5.
9. Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a30–33; Plato, *The Republic* 369a–c, 473a5–b1, 499c.
10. The question of whether there is a homogenous “classical” tradition goes beyond the scope of this study. I am only following what seems to be Machiavelli’s understanding of the tradition, though I shall provide [supplementary material](#) that implies the plausibility of his vision.
11. Arjo Vanderjagt, “Civic Humanism in Practice: The Case of Stefano Porcari and the Christian Tradition,” in *Antiquity Renewed: Late Classical and Early Modern Themes*, ed. Zweder von Martels and Victor M. Schmidt (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 63–78.

12. Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a30, 1265a18–19, 1295a27–30, 1331b20–21, 1332a29–33; Plato, *Republic* 457d4–9, 540d1–3, *Laws* 709d, 841e4–6.
13. Plato, *Republic* 592a11; Aristotle, *Politics* 1295a31.
14. Aristotle, *Politics* 1316a5–6, 23–30, 1316b24–25, 1289a9–25; Jed W. Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason. The Republic and Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82.
15. Robert Mayhew, “Aristotle on Prayer,” *Rhizai* 2 (2007): 300; Richard Bodéüs, *Aristotle and the Theology of the Living Immortals*, trans. Jan Garrett (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 2000), 147.
16. Aristotle, *Politics* 1332a30–33, 1331b21.
17. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100b37–1101a6, 1199b23–25, 1111b20–31.
18. Plato, *Laws* 709e–d.
19. Plato, *Statesman* 294b.
20. Plato, *Laws* 709a–b; cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.1.8, *Cyropaedia* I.6.46.
21. Cf. P VI.23 with Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 44 a.3 and q. 93 a.2. I owe this point to Waller R. Newell, *Tyranny. A New Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 30.
22. Plato, *Republic* 435e–426a; Aristotle, *Politics* 1327b24–38.
23. Friedrich Solmsen, “Leisure and Play in Aristotle’s Ideal State,” *Rheinisches Museum Fur Philologie* 107 (1964): 193–220; Jean-Marie André, *L’otium dans la vie morale et intellectuelle romaine des origines à l’époque augustéenne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 149–50.
24. Brian Vickers, “Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: The Ambivalence of Otium,” *Renaissance Studies* 4 (1990): 6; André, *L’otium dans la vie morale*, 35; Julia Conaway Bondanella, “Petrarch’s Rereading of Otium in *De Vita Solitaria*,” *Comparative Literature* 60, no. 1 (2008): 15; Catherine Connors, “Imperial Space and Time: The Literature of Leisure,” in *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A New Perspective*, ed. Oliver Taplin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 493.
25. André, *L’otium dans la vie morale*, 16–17; Vickers, “Leisure and Idleness,” 6.
26. Cicero, *Republic* I. 9–14, 26–30, *De Oratore* I. 1–3, *De Officiis* III. 1, *De Natura Deorum* I. 4.
27. Cf. Nathan Tarcov, “Machiavelli in The Prince: His Way of Life in Question,” in *Political Philosophy Cross-Examined: Perennial Challenges to the Philosophic Life*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle and J. Harvey Lomax (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 117.
28. *De Officiis* III. 1. Cf. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Vol. 1: The Renaissance, 108.
29. *The War with Catiline* IV, 1–2.
30. Cf. Petrarch, *La vie solitaire*, trans. Christophe Carraud (Grenoble: Editions Millon, 2011), I. II with Machiavelli’s daily routine.
31. Plato, *Republic* 519d, 521a–b; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b4, 1177b10–22, 1178b30.
32. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1333a30–37.
33. The importance of glory in Machiavelli’s writing has not eluded other scholars and it has been argued that “education in glory” is an important aspect of his thought. See Russell Price, “The Theme of Gloria in Machiavelli,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 588–631; David Owen, “Machiavelli’s Il Principe and the Politics of Glory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (2015): 2.
34. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* II.40, 41.
35. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 20–21.
36. Plato, *Symposium* 208c–209e.
37. Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 54, 59; Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), 91.
38. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141a1–23, 1177b30–1178a1, 1178a23, 1178b30, *Politics* 1324a25ff; Plato, *Laws* 803b, 688b, 817b, 831c–d, 963a, *Republic* 583a1–5, 585c1–3, *Apology* 29d–e; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* II.1093–6; James H. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), 22, 173.
39. *Life of Castruccio Castracani* is of particular importance for understanding Machiavelli’s relationship to philosophy. At the end of this short work, Machiavelli devotes about four pages to Castruccio’s alleged sayings. Almost all of the aphorisms (31 out of 34) can be traced to Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives*. But Machiavelli changes the original anecdotes and thereby contrasts his understanding of the perfect role model with that of the classical philosophical tradition. His only biographical writing is dedicated to a military leader of questionable qualities and not to the life of a traditional wise man, Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates or Aristotle’s “Anaxagoras, Thales and the wise of that sort.” See O 618; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b5–6, 1179a14–16; Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 223–25; Theodore A. Sumberg, “Machiavelli’s Castruccio Castracani,” *Interpretation* 16 (1988): 292–93.
40. cf. D I.10.31 and Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*. Vol. 1, 113–14 with Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 59–60; D I.26.62, III.2.214
41. Paul Rahe, “In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli’s Political Thought,” *History of Political Thought* 28, no. 1 (2007): 30–55.
42. John. P McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60.; D I.5.18.
43. Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*. Vol. 1, 114.
44. One must also bear in mind that pro-democratic rhetoric has some obvious advantages for a political reformer like Machiavelli, as has the pro-aristocratic (and anti-democratic) rhetoric of Plato and Aristotle for recruiting the young men who might become philosophers, “those who have the most leisure, the sons of the wealthiest,” of whom Socrates speaks. See Plato, *Apology* 23c2–5, *Republic* 539b–d; Aristotle, *Politics* 1278a20–24.
45. Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*. Vol. 1, 114.