

MACHIAVELLI ON THE ART OF THE STATE AND THE TRUE WAY

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Abstract

This monograph reopens a central and contentious question about Machiavelli's thought: how does he understand the relation between morality and politics? In the twentieth century, three of the most influential answers were those of Benedetto Croce, Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin. In 1925, Croce argued that Machiavelli values morality and thus discovered the "autonomy of politics" with bitterness. In 1958, Strauss argued that Machiavelli is both "an evil man" and "a teacher of evil." And in 1972, Berlin argued that Machiavelli's political philosophy is *moral*—but based on a "pagan morality."

My dissertation reexamines the question of Machiavelli through a close reading that analyzes his political vision in both its historical and intellectual context. I argue that Machiavelli esteems the moral virtues but insists that to be a successful ruler one must know how to act against them, when necessary. Throughout his writings, he takes for granted that the state's security is a necessity without which virtue, honour and greatness are themselves not possible; thus he argues that the necessity of security overrides moral considerations when the two come into conflict. Further, since expansion increases security, expansion itself is necessary. This is a far-reaching argument. First, it means that the struggle for power is inherent in affairs of state, not only due to avarice and ambition but also due to the desire for security itself; second, since expansion is necessary for security, the argument that rulers may violate moral norms for the end of security extends to expansion. At the same time, Machiavelli's realist mode of analysis also puts limits on

ambition, avarice and expansion, though they derive largely from a prudent understanding of necessity, the limits of power and the indignation aroused by injustice.

When it comes to the art of the state, for Machiavelli, the true way is to be in accord with necessity. Necessity resolves the conflict between politics and morality and subordinates the orthodox notion of the true way—whether associated with Christianity, the middle way or both—to the true way revealed by necessity.

In memory of Judy Sayer

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The View from the Palazzo

Justice, it has been said, is more wondrous than the evening and morning star. Yet, like the glow of Venus at dusk and dawn, justice is not only beautiful but elusive and fleeting. And as Mars often forsakes the beauty of Venus to stir up wars, human beings often forsake justice; the reasons for this seemingly senseless betrayal are manifold. Firstly, there is no universally acknowledged standard of justice; different individuals, societies and epochs may hold conceptions of justice that are themselves in conflict. Secondly, even when people share a concept of justice, there is often disagreement about the particulars of justice, such as, who has been wronged and how to correct it. Thirdly, the actions of individuals and groups often fall short of their own ideals of justice. The first problem is epistemological: in order to use power justly, one must know what is just and unjust or, to put it in moral terms, what is good and evil. In the domestic context, the second and third problem may be addressed by a well-ordered political community: disputes may be settled by impartial, authoritative courts, while violence and fraud may be constrained by the force of law. A further restraint at both the domestic and international level is that moral standards themselves act as a form of power insofar as they restrain those who accept them as standards. Yet even in our age of the United Nations it still remains the case that there is no supranational body with the competence to make, adjudicate and enforce international laws (though a patchwork of organizations has emerged to try to fill that gap: United Nations' resolutions, the International Criminal Court, coalitions of the willing and so on). Thus, the appeal to justice—whether

originating from the United Nations, governments, groups or the street—is often not enough to restrain the use of violence by one group against another. That being the case, realists—those who assume that material power, not justice, is the *principal* force in international relations—may offer some insight on the prudent conduct of foreign affairs.

Since E. H. Carr’s assessment that Machiavelli “is the first important realist” is widely shared, Machiavelli is a fitting place to begin to study the relation between morality and politics.¹ As a man of the late Renaissance, his thinking is influenced by the ancients, medieval thought and Italian humanism, but what makes him stand out from that background is his frank descriptions of internal and external affairs as well as his bold and original prescriptions for how to deal with them.² Although many of his principles were controversial in his own time, and have been ever since, there may be wisdom in his underlying premise that “men cannot secure themselves except with power” (*D I.I.4*).³ His counsels are based on pessimism about human nature and the belief that neither human desires nor the human condition change over time—though he recognizes that human values change due to what he calls *educazione* (“education” or “upbringing”).

¹ *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, p. 62.

² Throughout my thesis I try to stay close to Machiavelli’s language in order to enter into his thought as well as to avoid imposing a later vocabulary on him. Likewise, I generally use male pronouns since, as Hanna Pitkin notes, “Machiavelli and his intended audience were males” (*Fortune is a Woman*, p. 175 n. 4). There were, however, esteemed female rulers at his time, such as Isabella of Spain and Caterina Sforza.

³ Quotations from *The Prince*, *Discourses* and *Florentine Histories* are from the translations by Harvey Mansfield et al. References to the *Discourses* cite book, chapter and paragraph. References to the *Art of War*, translated by Christopher Lynch, cite book and section. I provide the Italian only when particular words, or the wording itself, are especially important. All quotations from *Il principe* are from the edition edited by Jean-Jacques Marchand. The Italian from Machiavelli’s other works, except where noted, is from *Tutte le opere* edited by Mario Casella.

Like no other, Machiavelli faces the problem of power directly: power is necessary for security but may be abused out of ambition or avarice; fear and the love of liberty lead states to rob others of their liberty; what should be done is often forsaken for what is useful. Machiavelli takes us to the heart of a problem still without remedy.

The Heart of the Enigma

While Machiavelli's works may still have something to teach us today, they also present puzzling questions. One of the most contentious and persistent is how he understands the relationship between politics and morality. In all his works, his concern for the common good is palpable, and he uses the common moral vocabulary of his time. Yet he often analyzes events and offers counsels with little or no discussion of their justice or injustice. I will, as is almost customary, point to some of the most egregious examples in a cursory fashion. He teaches that to maintain a new principality, one must eliminate the bloodline of the previous prince (*P* 3). He explains what Louis XII—a “barbarian” power—should have done to maintain his acquisitions in Italy (*P* 3, 26). He demonstrates how one can use “crime” to gain power “for whoever would find it necessary” (*P* 8). In both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, he gives it as a general rule that “men should either be caressed or eliminated” (*P* 3, *D* 2.23.4). In the *Discourses*, he advises not only princes and republics but also tyrants. As he dispassionately writes, “tyrants” can secure themselves against leading citizens either “by getting rid of them” or by having them share in enough honours that they will be content (1.16.5). In *Discourses* 1.26.1, he elaborates on how to make a successful tyranny and says men who desire to rule

must be willing to commit acts “altogether wicked.” In the next discourse, he gives as an example the murder of the pope and the cardinals, saying that such “honorably wicked” acts have something great or generous in them. He teaches that an uncorrupt republic should offend citizens whom it ought to reward and have suspicion of those in whom it ought to have confidence in order to check their ambition for power (1.29.3). He notes that if a victorious captain shows insolence toward his lord, the latter will deserve “some excuse” for seeking either to have him killed or to take away his reputation (1.29.1); the following chapter advises a victorious captain either to leave the army after a victory or to use the army to punish the prince for the ingratitude he would have shown his victorious captain (1.30.1). In *Discourse* 1.40, he examines with seeming indifference how a people may maintain freedom and how a ruler may seize a tyranny. In *Discourses* 3.16.2, he argues that a republic should always be ordered to make war so that the most worthy citizens do not foment imprudent wars merely to see themselves given the positions of command that they deserve (*D* 3.16.2).

Machiavelli’s reason for offering such counsels can be puzzling: are they merely analyses or also prescriptions? Those who see some merit in his argument that a good end may excuse immoral means often cede some justification to his more well-known precepts—for example, that cruelty should be used well (*P* 8), that promises to other rulers may be broken (*P* 18), that a ruler should appear good even when forced to act against morality (*P* 18). Others have concluded that all such counsels are simply evil.

Reginald Pole, in his *Apologia ad Carolum Quintum*, written in 1539, writes:

Among other works, he composed *The Prince* (for this is the title he has given to one of his books), in which he portrays for us such a prince, that, if Satan were to

reign in the flesh and were to have a son, to whom he were to bequeath his sovereignty after his death, he would give him no other instructions than those found in this book.⁴

Over four hundred years later, Strauss declared himself to be “inclined to the old-fashioned and simple opinion according to which Machiavelli was a teacher of evil.”⁵

However, if Machiavelli were simply a teacher of evil, his writings would not also have garnered centuries of praise—unless he has duped everyone except his condemners.

Certainly, his writings have put those who see some virtue in them on the defence. In order to better situate my own reading, I will delineate the more sympathetic interpretations of the past five centuries.⁶

In light of all the hostile attacks on Machiavelli, it is noteworthy that the first printing of *The Prince*, *Discourses* and *Florentine Histories* was sanctioned, in 1531, by Pope Clement VII.⁷ However, at that time *The Prince* already had its detractors, leading the Florentine printer Bernardo Giunta to dedicate the work to a churchman in the Papal Curia, writing: “may your lordship defend it from those persons who, because of its subject, go about lacerating it so harshly, all day long, not knowing that those who teach herbs and medicines equally teach poisons too, only so that we may defend ourselves

⁴ In Kraye, *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Political Texts*, vol. 2, p. 275 (hereafter cited as *Cambridge Translations*). On the date of the text see Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State*, p. 6. Donaldson notes that although Pole’s *Apologia* was not published until the middle of the eighteenth century “his views had some circulation during his lifetime” (p. 88).

⁵ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 9.

⁶ For reviews of Machiavelli’s reception see Burd, ed., *Il principe*; Meinecke, *Machiavellism*; Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, vol. 2; Cochrane, “Machiavelli: 1940-1960”; Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*.

⁷ Burd, ed., *Il principe*, p. 2.

from them because we know them.”⁸ Giunta does not challenge the notion that *The Prince* teaches poison but defends Machiavelli’s intention for doing so. The reason some Florentines were lacerating *The Prince* is accounted for Giovanni Busini (1501-74). Although Busini is generally hostile toward Machiavelli, and he is writing twenty-two years after his death, Roberto Ridolfi still accounts it a faithful picture of how many Florentines felt about Machiavelli in 1527 (the last year of his life):

The populace hated him on account of *The Prince*: to the rich it appeared that his *Prince* was a document to teach the duke to take from them all of their property, to the poor it was to take all of their liberty. To the Savonarolans, it seemed he was a heretic; the good thought he was dishonest; the wicked thought he was more wicked, or more effective, than they were; so that everyone hated him.⁹

Busini’s “everyone” is, however, clearly an exaggeration, for in addition to Giunta’s defense of *The Prince*, another early justification was that Machiavelli intended it as an act of fraud. Reginald Pole relates that while in Florence around 1538, he discussed *The Prince* with some Florentines who excused the work by saying that Machiavelli had told them his intention was to write things pleasing to a tyrant and thus expedite his “swift downfall.”¹⁰ While Pole is presumably a reliable witness that such an interpretation was

⁸ The prefatory letter is translated in Connell, ed., *The Prince*, pp. 151-52. Two editions were published in 1532, one by Antonio Blado in Rome and one by Bernardo di Giunta in Florence. On these two editions see Burd, ed., *Il principe*, pp. 2, 35-36; Connell, ed., *The Prince*, pp. 147-52.

⁹ In *The Prince*, ed. Connell, p. 160. Burd quotes the Italian: “e l’ universale per conto del suo Principe ; ai ricchi pareva che quel Principe fosse stato un documento da insegnare al Duca tor loro tutta la roba, e a’ poveri tutta libertà. Ai Piagnoni pareva che e’ fosse eretico, ai buoni disonesto, ai tristi più tristo, o valente di loro : talchè ognuno l’ odiava” (Burd, ed., *Il principe*, p. 40). For Ridolfi’s judgement see *Life of Niccolò Machiavelli*, p. 248 (hereafter cited as *Life of Machiavelli*). Viroli shares Ridolfi’s view, *Machiavelli*, p. 114. For more on the letter see Connell, ed., *The Prince*, pp. 159-60.

¹⁰ *Apology*, in Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, vol. 2, p. 285. In the *Apology*, Pole says this conversation took place “last winter.” Since he composed the work in 1539, Pole is

in circulation at that time—about ten years after Machiavelli’s death—it seems unlikely that Machiavelli himself was the source of it since he refers to its analyses positively in his later writings. Nonetheless, Pole’s comment again shows that Machiavelli’s sympathizers felt *The Prince* required some justification. The argument that it contains intentionally bad counsels is later found in Giovanni Toscano (1578), André Rossant (1589) and Thomas Fitzherbert (1606).¹¹ On the other hand, Alberico Gentili, an Oxford jurist and law professor, expands on the exposé interpretation in his *De legationibus libris* (1585):

It was not his purpose to instruct the tyrant, but by revealing his secret counsels, to strip him bare, and expose him to the suffering nations. Do we not know that there have been many princes such as he describes? That is the reason why princes of that type object to the survival and publication of his works. The purpose of this shrewdest of men was to instruct the nations under pretext of instructing the prince.¹²

Since the Roman Church placed Machiavelli’s writings on the *Index librorum prohibitorum* in 1557, Gentili’s stab at tyrannical princes who wish to repress the work in order to conceal their secret counsels seems aimed at the papacy. Francis Bacon also sees the work’s merit in its exposé of wicked princes. In his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), he writes:

presumably referring to the winter of 1538-39. In another anecdote from an even later source—Riccardo Riccardi (1558-1612)—it is alleged that Machiavelli presented *The Prince* to Lorenzo de’ Medici but that he showed more enthusiasm over a gift of hunting dogs; Machiavelli is then said to have told some friends that “if [the Medici] observed his methods [in *The Prince*], they would see that conspiracies resulted from it, as if he meant to say that his book would get him his revenge” (see Connell, ed., *The Prince*, p. 142).

¹¹ Toscano, *Peplus Italiae* (Paris, 1578); Rossant, *Les meurs, humeurs et comportemens de Henry de Valois* (Paris, 1589); Fitzherbert, *First Part of a Treatise Concerning Policy and Religion* (Douai, 1606) (Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State*, pp. 88-89).

¹² Quoted in Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State*, p. 10 n. 15, p. 89. See also Viroli, *Machiavelli*, p. 115.

we are much beholden to Machiavel and others, that write what men do and not what they ought to do. For it is not possible to join serpentine wisdom with the columbine innocency, except men know exactly all the conditions of the serpent; his baseness and going upon his belly, his volubility and lubricity, his envy and sting, and the rest; that is, all forms and natures of evil. For without this, virtue lieth open and unfenced. Nay, an honest man can do no good upon those that are wicked to reclaim them, without the help of the knowledge of evil.¹³

By discussing political life as it is, Machiavelli's writings forewarn honest men about "deceits and evil arts."¹⁴ Bacon is not, however, wholly sympathetic to Machiavelli, criticizing him for teaching "that it belongeth to the education and discipline of princes to know how to play the part of the lion in violence and the fox in guile."¹⁵

Spinoza in his *Political Treatise* (1677) and Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762) both see Machiavelli as a lover of liberty and interpret *The Prince* as a warning to the people about the nature of princes. Spinoza comes to this conclusion by reckoning that such a "wise statesman" and "advocate of freedom" must have had "some good purpose in mind."¹⁶ Rousseau takes the differences between *The Prince* on the one hand and the *Discourses* and *Florentine Histories* on the other as evidence that *The Prince* only pretends to give lessons to kings while really warning the people about the king's aim of keeping them weak.¹⁷

In the nineteenth century, the relationship between *The Prince* and Machiavelli's other works began to be re-evaluated. Burd attributes this in part to the fact that

¹³ *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), p. 254.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁶ *Political Treatise*, ch. 5, paragraph 7.

¹⁷ *The Social Contract*, bk. 3, ch. 6 and the note added by Rousseau to the 1782 edition. Since Machiavelli advises the prince to arm his subjects, Rousseau's interpretation is clearly too narrow.

Machiavelli's now famous letter of December 10, 1513, to Francesco Vettori was published for the first time in 1810.¹⁸ In the letter Machiavelli explains: "[I] have composed a little work *De Principatibus*, where I delve as deeply as I can into reflections on this subject." He also says he plans to dedicate the work to Giuliano de' Medici as he desires employment with the "Medici lords."¹⁹ As Burd points out, the letter helps establish that *The Prince* was written in good faith, not as an exposé, fraud or satire.²⁰ Thomas Macaulay, basing his argument on a close reading of *The Prince*, makes the same point in his essay entitled *Machiavelli* (1827). As Macaulay points out, *The Prince* contains many passages which preclude the view that it was intended either as a satire of ambitious princes or as a calculated fraud against the Medici.²¹ He then proposes that all of Machiavelli's works exhibit "the same obliquity of moral principle" alongside "elevation of sentiment" and "zeal for the public good." The solution to this "enigma," he finds not in Machiavelli himself but "in the state of moral feeling among the Italians of those times." The view that the immorality in Machiavelli's writings reflects his times more than his own character was also maintained by Herder, Hegel, Fichte, Ranke and Burd.²²

¹⁸ Burd, ed., *Il principe*, p. 14 n. 1.

¹⁹ Quotations from the translation in Mansfield, ed., *The Prince*, pp. 110-11.

²⁰ Burd, ed., *Il principe*, p. 20.

²¹ This reference and the following may be found in *Critical and Historical Essays*, vol. 2, pp. 2-4.

²² Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, pp. 154-55; Burd, ed., *Il principe*, pp. 14-15, 24, 28.

In Machiavelli's own view, are his writings a reflection of the times or tracts for all times? The former view is partly substantiated by Machiavelli's contempt for the corruption and weakness of his own period. As he writes in *Florentine Histories*:

if in describing the things that happened in this devastated world one does not tell about either the strength of soldiers, or the virtue of the captain, or the love of the citizen for his fatherland, it will be seen with what deceits, with what guile and arts the princes, soldiers, and heads of republics conducted themselves so as to maintain the reputation they have not deserved. (5.1)

Nonetheless, while Machiavelli was naturally affected by his times, his thought cannot be reduced to a mirror for his times. Machiavelli draws on the ancients because, in his view, affairs of state do not change. The principles he draws from the ancients and from his experience are intended as remedies for his own times, but as principles he recognizes them to be true for the past, present and future. To take one example of this conviction from among many:

Prudent men are accustomed to say, and not by chance or without merit, that whoever wishes to see what has to be considers what has been; for all worldly things in every time have their own counterpart in ancient times. That arises because these are the work of men, who have and always had the same passions, and they must of necessity result in the same effect. (D 3.43.1)

At the same time, Machiavelli knows that the lessons of the past cannot be applied regardless of particulars. For example, in *Prince* 20, he points out that he must speak in a "broad mode" since one must consider "the particulars of those states where any such decision has to be made."

The seed of the argument that Machiavelli took a "scientific" approach to politics is already evident in Burd's 1891 "Introduction" to *Il principe*: "Machiavelli in *The Prince* has eliminated sentiment and morality, though the interest to him was not merely

scientific, but practical also.”²³ That interpretation bloomed in the 1940s as writers such as Leonardo Olschki and Ernst Cassirer characterized Machiavelli as a proto-political scientist, coldly examining the laws of politics free from moral judgments.²⁴ In Machiavelli’s “entirely detached” analysis in *Prince* 3 of the mistakes that led Louis XII to lose his acquisitions in Italy, Cassirer sees Machiavelli looking at politics as if it “were a game of chess.”²⁵ However, Chabod and Strauss have both argued that Machiavelli’s analysis of Louis’ mistakes prescribes the policies that would be necessary to piece together a strong Italian state.²⁶ Thus, what sometimes seem to be detached analyses may perhaps be veiled prescriptions. A further problem with the political scientist interpretation is that Machiavelli indeed makes normative judgments and shows partisan passions, something pointed out by several commentators.²⁷ Despite these weaknesses with the thesis that Machiavelli treats politics scientifically, the fact remains that he does often adopt a shockingly amoral tone. This leads back to the question about his own view of morality—does putting morality to the side mean that he devalues it?

In the twentieth century, three of the most influential answers were those of Benedetto Croce, Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin.²⁸ As already mentioned, Strauss aligns

²³ Burd, ed., *Il principe*, p. 16.

²⁴ Olschki, *Machiavelli the Scientist* (1945); Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (1946). For a review of this literature see Cochrane, “Machiavelli: 1940-1960,” pp. 119-21.

²⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, p. 143.

²⁶ See Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 75 and n. 2; Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 66-67.

²⁷ See, for example, Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 11, 233; Anglo, *Machiavelli: A Dissection*, p. 272; Wood, “Machiavelli’s Humanism of Action,” p. 34; Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, p. 21; Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, p. 7.

²⁸ In a review of Machiavelli scholarship published between 1940 and 1960, Eric Cochrane states that Croce’s thesis is one of the most widely discussed and has achieved

his interpretation with the opinion that Machiavelli “was an evil man” and “a teacher of evil.”²⁹ In other words, he aligns his interpretation with the view of religious writers such as Reginald Pole and Innocent Gentillet. An interpretation of Strauss’ *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and why he chose such unlikely allies would take us too far afield as we would first have to question the very sincerity of his claim; after all, he himself admits that it is a “simple opinion” and indicates that “the considerate ascent from it leads to the core of Machiavelli’s thought.”³⁰ Thus, Strauss hints in his introduction that his exoteric position is qualified by an esoteric position. Further, although he condemns Machiavelli’s teaching, he argues that “he does not bring to light a single political phenomenon of any fundamental importance which was not fully known to the classics.”³¹ Strauss’ position on Machiavelli has an interesting relation to Machiavelli’s own claim to reveal the ancient esoteric teaching symbolized by Chiron since it seems they agree on that point. However, Strauss, the defender of the ancients, publicly discredits Machiavelli’s teaching as “an evil teaching.” In other words, his condemnation of Machiavelli’s teaching seems aimed at relegating it to the esoteric position it had in ancient thought, even if in making such a claim he condemns himself to some “harmless ridicule.”³²

general acceptance in Italy (“Machiavelli: 1940-1960,” p. 115.). Berlin refers to it as “[t]he most influential of all modern interpretations” (*The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 177). In John Geerken’s 1976 literature review, “Machiavelli Studies since 1969,” he supports Berlin’s thesis and calls the essay “one of the most interesting of the quincentenary papers” (p. 365). Of the numerous commentators who write on Machiavelli in a Straussian vein, Harvey Mansfield wears the affiliation most openly.

²⁹ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13, emphasis added.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

I will now turn to a brief summary of Croce's and Berlin's more straightforward interpretations. Croce first stated his influential interpretation that Machiavelli discovered "the autonomy of politics" in *Elementi di politica* (1925). As he writes:

It is known that Machiavelli discovers the necessity and autonomy of politics, of politics which is beyond or, rather, below moral good and evil, which has its own laws against which it is useless to rebel, politics that cannot be exorcised and driven from the world with holy water.³³

Since in Croce's view Machiavelli values morality, he argues that Machiavelli made his discovery with "sharp bitterness."³⁴ Isaiah Berlin's essay *The Originality of Machiavelli* (1972) rejects Croce's interpretation. Berlin argues that in Machiavelli's writings, the reader finds conventional objective morality existing side by side with a social pagan morality. By pagan morality, he means taking the creation of "a strong, secure and vigorous society" as an ultimate value sought after for its own sake.³⁵ He argues that such an ultimate end is, by definition, a moral end and thus posits that pagan morality is an alternative to the type of morality that rests on an objective criterion (such as the word of God or eternal reason).³⁶ He then argues that although Christian morality and pagan morality exist side by side in Machiavelli's writings, he places little value in the former and instead embraces the latter: "he chose his side, and took little interest in the values that this choice ignored or flouted. The conflict between his scale of values and that of

³³ *Politics and Morals*, p. 59.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60. Federico Chabod endorsed Croce's autonomy thesis in an essay also published in 1925 (see his *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 116). Croce reaffirmed his interpretation in an essay published in 1949 (see Cochrane, "Machiavelli: 1940-1960," p. 115).

³⁵ *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 173; also see pp. 169, 177.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 177-78.

conventional morality clearly did not (*pace* Croce and the other defenders of the “anguished humanist” interpretation) seem to worry Machiavelli himself.”³⁷

Both interpretations are persuasive insofar as both account for a peculiar aspect of Machiavelli’s thought: that he speaks as though morality has some sort of objective validity, yet often addresses affairs of state in isolation from that morality or even in contravention of it. In Croce’s reading this is because Machiavelli recognizes politics and morality as autonomous spheres, in Berlin’s because he has little interest in conventional morality. The question of whether Machiavelli is an “anguished humanist” is a matter of where one places the emphasis. On the one hand, Berlin is right that Machiavelli generally does not show any anguish in imparting his counsels; on the other, Croce is right that he does show much bitterness over men’s malignity and corruption.

My dissertation reexamines the question of Machiavelli through a close reading that focuses on the relation between morality and politics in his writings and that analyzes his political vision in terms of both its historical and intellectual context. My reading concurs with two of the essential elements of Croce’s thesis: the argument that Machiavelli values morality and the argument that he emphasizes the role of necessity in politics (the third element, the question of his anguish, I just briefly addressed). Croce’s framing however overgeneralizes the degree to which Machiavelli separates morality and politics. While he does indeed often analyze affairs of state according to cold reason, he does not envision a general break between morality and politics since the very context of affairs of state is praise and blame, the virtues, honour and glory.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 196.

I argue that Machiavelli esteems the moral virtues but insists that to be a successful ruler one must know how to act against them, when necessary. Throughout his writings, he takes for granted that the state's security is a necessity without which virtue, honour and greatness are themselves not possible; thus he argues that the necessity of security overrides moral considerations when the two come into conflict. Further, since expansion increases security, expansion itself is necessary. This is a far-reaching argument. First, it means that the struggle for power is inherent in affairs of state, not only due to avarice and ambition but also due to the desire for security itself; second, since expansion is necessary for security, the argument that rulers may violate moral norms for the sake of security extends to expansion. At the same time, however, Machiavelli's realist mode of analysis also puts limits on ambition, avarice and expansion, though they derive largely from a prudent understanding of necessity, the limits of power and the indignation aroused by injustice. When it comes to the art of the state, for Machiavelli, the true way is to be in accord with necessity. Necessity resolves the conflict between politics and morality and subordinates the orthodox notion of the true way—whether associated with Christianity, the middle way or both—to the true way revealed by necessity.

My exploration of Machiavelli's political vision falls into seven chapters. The remaining part of the introductory chapter will argue for the merits of an exegetical approach to Machiavelli's texts, provide a brief introduction to the historical and intellectual context of his thought, and justify reading *The Prince* and *Discourses* together.

The underlying purpose in the second and third chapter is to show that despite Machiavelli's argument from necessity he does esteem honour and the moral virtues. Chapter 2, "Machiavelli's Princes and Principality," sets up the argument through a brief history of Cesare Borgia's rise and fall. As is well known, Machiavelli holds Cesare up as a model for imitation in *The Prince*. To understand why, it is important to paint a contemporary portrait of him which gets under the rumours that later historians recorded as history. Further, since Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia were contemporaries whose paths crossed on three separate occasions, the brief history of Cesare will also shed light on Machiavelli's political context and development as a thinker. The historical account of Cesare then provides the basis for analyzing his role in *Prince* 7 and that chapter's relation to chapter 6 on *virtù* and chapter 8 on crime. I argue against the view that Machiavelli's intention in the three chapters is to undermine the differences between *virtù*, fortune and crime, but rather that his aim is to hold them up as useful and important distinctions. Nonetheless, when it comes to the art of the state, Machiavelli himself argues for the necessity of what could be called, to adapt an expression from Sheldon Wolin, an economy of moral transgression.³⁸

Chapter 3, "The Human Basis of Morality and Justice," shows that Machiavelli allows the violation of the moral virtues only for the sake of the security and well-being of the state; in other words, his argument does not extend to a critique of honour and the moral virtues in general. The chapter also focuses on the place of justice in his thought, for, although he minimizes it, he also points out the deleterious effects that disregarding

³⁸ For Wolin's argument that Machiavelli's political theory is premised on "an economy of violence" see *Politics and Vision*, ch. 7, sec. 5.

justice can have for a ruler. Further in the *Discourses* he adopts a theory from Polybius that finds the origin of both morality and justice in human nature. Although Machiavelli honours the virtue of justice, when it comes to the art of the state, he censures the desire to acquire only when it leads to acquiring more than one can hold. While that is a merely practical limit, he still thinks justice has a role in restraining a power from betraying a friend, warns about the hatred generated by flagrant acts of injustice and points out the importance of treating the people where one's army is camped justly. Thus, while Machiavelli takes a pragmatic approach to affairs of state, his theory still puts limits on ambition, avarice and expansion, though they derive from a prudent understanding of necessity, the limits of power and a psychological understanding of the role of justice.

Chapter 4, "Of Natural Things," develops an interpretation of what Machiavelli considers to be in accord with nature. The first part analyzes his frequent deployment of the argument from "necessity" or, what he calls in *Prince* 3, "natural necessity." In his view, the argument from necessity resolves the conflict between the moral good and the political good since security and well-being are the sine qua non. The second part of the chapter analyzes his concern with the relation between a ruler's particular nature and his *fortuna* (or fortune). I argue that in his view a ruler has enough free will to harness the virtue of his state as a defense against *fortuna* and also to accommodate his own nature to the needs of the times, though not enough to change his nature altogether. The final part focuses on Machiavelli's statements about the true way and its relation to Christianity, the middle way, the Roman way and necessity. While Machiavelli refers in passing to

Christianity and to the middle way as “the true way,” this section argues that he subordinates the orthodox true way to a more efficacious rival, the true way of necessity. Since the Roman republic followed necessity in its ascendancy, its example teaches the true way. However, Machiavelli also shows that once Rome attained supremacy over its enemies and began to overextend, corruption set in. Thus, the corruption that began to eat away at Roman virtue reveals another necessity: all things have a natural limit that, once crossed, initiates their decline.

Chapter 5, “Of Supernatural Things,” treats the question of Machiavelli’s religious beliefs and how they bear on his understanding of the relation between morality and politics. The chapter argues that Machiavelli never questions the existence of God but is ultimately most concerned with human things, that is, the freedom left to human agency in a world partly determined by suprahuman causes. When it comes to the question of divine punishment, he argues in *Prince* 8 that a ruler can have “some remedy” with God for cruelty if it serves the common good. Thus I argue that Machiavelli believes in God but assumes that religion correctly interpreted is not in conflict with natural necessity.

Chapter 6, “Machiavelli and the Ancients,” begins with a critique of Isaiah Berlin’s argument that Machiavelli adopts a pagan morality. The chapter shows that Berlin misrepresents both Machiavelli’s writings and ancient thought by too quickly explaining away the existence of the objective moral standards evident in both; that is, in both Machiavelli’s thought and pagan thought there are moral concepts that transcend the good of the polis and act as measures by which political conduct may be morally judged. Further, Machiavelli knew it was not possible to simply leap over (what was already

coming to be known as) the Middle Ages in order to adopt a pagan morality; rather, his argument for the imitation of antiquity must be understood in the context of the Christian education and humanism of his time. To that end, the final section of the chapter traces the origin of humanism, or the *studia humanitatis*, in ancient Rome and its rebirth in Renaissance Italy. It will be shown that where Machiavelli parts from his humanist peers is in his argument that the inhumane aspects of ancient politics should also be imitated. However, I argue that his call for the imitation of the ancients is nonetheless still tempered by the Stoic and Christian ideal of *humanitas* (or humanity).

The concluding chapter, “Machiavelli and the Quality of the Times,” shows that most twentieth-century realists share Machiavelli’s premise that for the sake of one good, the security of the state, rulers must be willing when necessary to act against another good, moral norms. The chapter then traces the development of the balance-of-power concept, a norm that appeared in Machiavelli’s own time, became generally accepted by the end of the seventeenth century and was still generally accepted by twentieth-century realists. In light of the spread of the balance-of-power principle, the rise of more fixed territorial borders and technological advancements (allowing power to be increased internally rather than through expansion), Machiavelli’s argument that expansion is necessary for the sake of security has lost much of its explicit rationale. Nonetheless, his enthusiasm for the Roman model suggests that his argument for the necessity of expansion is also mixed up with what is simply his admiration for political grandeur. In the penultimate section of the conclusion, I suggest that Nietzsche’s concern with cultural greatness is as, or more, pressing for our times than Machiavelli’s concern with political

greatness. In particular, whereas one of Machiavelli's main concerns is how morality and religion affect the art of the state, one of Nietzsche's main concerns is how morality and religion have themselves become groundless. Thus I use Nietzsche's writings to show that a pressing problem pervades our times: morality and religion have themselves fallen into question.

Although Machiavelli's writings presuppose the existence of both internal and external struggles for power, I believe that in our times Machiavelli's writings have more currency in terms of external affairs. One reason for this is that it remains true, as Machiavelli says in *Prince* 18, that in foreign affairs there is no court for princes to appeal to. Since there is no authoritative body with the competence to make and enforce international laws, foreign affairs tend to exemplify the problem of the relation between morality and politics in a more naked form than domestic politics. Secondly, although contemporary situations occasionally remind us that internal affairs can devolve into a revolutionary situation, they are generally less volatile now than at Machiavelli's time. Such an argument was already made by Fichte in 1807 in *On Machiavelli as Author* (*Über Macchiavelli als Schriftsteller*); therein, he writes that Machiavelli's maxims still apply to external affairs but that, with the pacification of relations between princes and peoples, civil law has become sufficient for the direction of internal affairs.³⁹ Consistent with the pacification of internal affairs described by Fichte, Jerrold Seigel dates the origin of more stable internal affairs to the centralization of the European monarchies in the

³⁹ See Douglas, "Fichte's Engagement with Machiavelli," p. 575.

eighteenth century.⁴⁰ For those reasons my study of the relation between politics and morality in Machiavelli's thought focuses more heavily on external affairs.

Postcards to Machiavelli

The host of interpretations that haunt Machiavelli's corpus bear witness to "the death of the author." According to this poststructuralist critique of traditional hermeneutics, a text lacks any authoritative presence that could assure it of an intended meaning. As Paul de Man puts it: "There is no escape from [deconstruction], for the text also establishes that deconstruction is not something we can decide to do or not to do at will. It is co-extensive with any use of language."⁴¹ From that point of view, texts remain irreducibly open to interpretation as well as the creativity of the reader. In Machiavelli's writings, the indeterminacy of language is heightened by his characteristic pithiness, shocking boldness and polemical style.

While interpretation admittedly faces uncertainties and rests on some degree of reasoned speculation, my interest nonetheless lies in the hermeneutic pursuit of trying to understand Machiavelli as he understood himself. One reason is sheer curiosity: what did Machiavelli really intend? A related reason is respect: due to his remarkable political experience and incisive intellect, I take for granted that trying to grasp Machiavelli's intention is the most valuable way to approach his work (regardless of whether one agrees with him). If, in accordance with the postmodern contention, the standard of the author's

⁴⁰ "Virtù in and since the Renaissance," pp. 483-84. For the same point, also see Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 284.

⁴¹ Quoted in Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 13 n. 54.

intention is abandoned, what is left? At best, creative interpretations, strategic appropriations or playful deconstructions. At worst, slapdash readings, ideologically-motivated caricatures and purely subjective interpretations. While the latter are merely arbitrary, the first three also have shortcomings (particularly if they are not based on a more comprehensive engagement with the author's intention): going straight to a creative interpretation privileges one's own acuity over the author's; making strategic appropriations without grasping the whole of which they are a part can bring along unrecognized implications, and undoing a text by deconstructing it may undermine precisely what is most challenging and thought-provoking about it. For those reasons, my aim lies in an interpretation of Machiavelli's understanding of the relation between morality and politics as he himself saw it.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli himself writes: "my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it" (*P* 15).⁴² This shows that he thought he had something useful to teach but recognized that not everyone would hear it. If we now approach texts as haunted graveyards of dead signifiers, then we lose the great pleasure which Machiavelli himself found in entering the courts of ancient men, speaking with them and hearing their replies.⁴³ Yet those who enter Machiavelli's own study to ask him questions cannot even agree on how to hear the tone of his replies. Is he forthright or artful, detached or passionate, benevolent or diabolical?⁴⁴ My interpretation takes most of his replies to be

⁴² "I'intendo mio, scrivere cosa utile a chi la intende" (p. 215).

⁴³ As Machiavelli says in his letter to Vettori of December 10, 1513.

⁴⁴ On the question of his sincerity, Burd writes that Machiavelli "has taken the greatest pains to avoid ambiguity, and to say exactly what he means"; however, he also says that *The Prince* "bears the stamp of what a modern writer may call an esoteric treatise" (*Il*

forthright, though delivered with his famous wry smile. Some believe such an approach to be naïve or lacking in sophistication. However, when Machiavelli is taken to speak frankly, he is most clear and salient. A reading that stays close to his explicit sayings also has the merit of sounding like Machiavelli. On the other hand, focusing on silences, imputed contradictions and alleged double meanings may easily drift into arbitrariness. While it is necessary to consider what is happening between the lines, the search for esoteric meanings can take on a parasitical relationship with the text. How could Machiavelli show his knowledge of affairs of state, if he writes in such a mode that one must guess at his meaning? And what would he need to obfuscate when he already denounces the wickedness and foreign policy of the Roman church, says Christianity has been falsely interpreted as a passive religion, writes that the greatness of killing the pope would overcome its infamy and condones fratricide for the sake of the common good?

As J. H. Whitfield jests, it is unfortunate that all these disputes over Machiavelli's intention cannot be resolved by simply sending him a postcard.⁴⁵ However, despite the death of our author, my interest remains an interpretation of his intention; thus, I take as my aids the traditional humanist strategies of interpreting a text in light of the writer's life as well as his or her linguistic, intellectual and historical context.

principe, pp. 12, 14). According to Whitfield, those who pride themselves on reading under the surface miss his "ingenuousness" (Whitfield, *Discourses on Machiavelli*, pp. 4-5). Geerken writes: "Machiavelli was much too careful and deliberate a writer to indulge in anything which might lead to his reader's confusion and possible disagreement" ("Machiavelli's Moses," p. 591). Ledeen says of *The Prince*: "few great books are as clearly and unambiguously written" (*Machiavelli on Modern Leadership*, p. ix). On the other hand, Mansfield writes: "Machiavelli is sincere and never tries to trick his readers.... Nothing would have amused our Niccolò more" (Quoted in Nederman, *Lineages*, p. 302).

⁴⁵ *Discourses on Machiavelli*, p. 4.

Honour and the Art of the State

In the *Discourses* Machiavelli relates a saying of the people—“They have one mind in the piazza and another in the palazzo” (I.47.3)—and inverts its meaning. In the mouth of the people, it accuses popular citizens who rise to a magistracy of abandoning the ideals they had espoused in the piazza. In Machiavelli’s mouth, it means that in the piazza one does not see things as clearly as when in the palazzo. His writings invite us to see the view from the palazzo. Of course a diversity of opinions still compete within the palazzo itself, but those views are based, one hopes, on informed knowledge and a responsibility for the outcome.

Machiavelli entered the palazzo at a time when the love of pagan antiquity had taken deep root in Italian culture but while Christianity still held sway. In Florence, under the influence of the Dominican friar Savonarola, a popular government was established after the expulsion of the Medici in 1494. During this republican period, the chief magistracies were the Signoria, the Ten of War, the Council of Eighty and the Great Council (what is often referred to as the Ten of War in English was called the *Dieci di Libertà e Pace* or the *Dieci di Balìa*). The Republic’s official head was the Gonfalonier of Justice; he was the presiding magistrate of the Signoria, a body composed of the Gonfalonier and Eight Priors of Liberty. The Signoria was responsible for deciding on policy and formulating legislation. The Ten of War dealt with foreign affairs, diplomacy

and the conduct of war.⁴⁶ The Eighty was a council of review and advice.⁴⁷ The approval of the Great Council was required to pass new laws and taxes. Appointments to the paid and honorary offices were made through the vote of the Great Council and a process of allotment.

Under the law passed on December 23, 1494, a Florentine would become a member of the Great Council if he, his father or his grandfather had been a candidate for any of the three most honourable offices: the Signoria, the Twelve Good Men or the Sixteen Gonfalonieri. As a result of the law, over three thousand Florentines attained membership in the Great Council and with it the right to hold both paid offices and unpaid honorary offices. Cerretani, a contemporary historian, celebrated that "almost the whole of Florence were members of the government."⁴⁸ However, if Florence had a population of approximately seventy thousand at the time, then in fact only about one of every four or five adult males held full citizenship rights.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, this new republic was considered a popular or broad government (*governo popolare* or *largo*). According to contemporary usage, those in the Great Council were often referred to as the *moltitudine* (mass) or the *popolo* (people) and those excluded from it the *plebe* (plebs) or the *vulgo* (mob). The upper class of the *ottimati* (best) was made up of the wealthy (*ricchi*) and the

⁴⁶ My main sources for the constitutional arrangement of the Florentine Republic are Gilbert, "Florentine Political Assumptions in the Period of Savonarola and Soderini," pp. 189-93, as well as his *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 8-23, 29, 65.

⁴⁷ Pesman, "Machiavelli, Piero Soderini, and the Republic of 1494-1512," p. 49.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence*, p. 165.

⁴⁹ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 20.

old ruling families (*grandi*).⁵⁰ The *ottimati* who shared Savonarola's vision supported the new constitution, but many of the *ottimati* were grieved by the amount of authority the Great Council granted to the people. In their view, the new constitution gave too much power to those who were, in Guicciardini's words, "men of lesser brain and quality," taking authority from themselves, "the wise and qualified citizens."⁵¹ Thus, many of the *ottimati* sought a reform which would limit the authority of the Great Council, returning more power to themselves, or to eliminate the Great Council altogether and establish a narrow government (*governo stretto*) modeled on the Venetian constitution.

In the spring of 1498, Savonarola's enemies gained the upper hand. On April 8, he was arrested; he was then tortured and found guilty of conspiring to tamper with the government and falsely claiming to speak with God.⁵² On May 23, in the piazza of Florence, he and two of his most devoted disciples were hanged in chains and burned. After his execution, many of his supporters were removed from office. According to the criteria for membership in the Great Council, citizenship did not reach as far as the Machiavelli family; however, Niccolò's name was one of four put forward by the Council of Eighty to fill the administrative post of Secretary of the Second Chancellery.⁵³ Four days later, on June 19, the Great Council elected him to the post. He was twenty-nine. On July 14, the Signoria appointed him to also serve as Secretary to the Ten of War. At that

⁵⁰ For a more detailed account of these terms see Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 24-25; also see Pesman, "Machiavelli, Piero Soderini, and the Republic of 1494-1512," p. 49.

⁵¹ *History of Florence*, ch. 25, p. 248, and ch. 23, p. 222.

⁵² Watkins, *Humanism and Liberty*, p. 227.

⁵³ On Machiavelli's election see Rubinstein, "The Beginnings of Niccolò Machiavelli's Career in the Florentine Chancery," and Black, "Florentine Political Traditions and Machiavelli's Election to the Chancery."

time Florence had to contend not only with the other major Italian powers—the duchy of Milan, the Venetian republic, the Papal States and the kingdom of Naples—but also with Italy’s powerful neighbours: the French, the Spanish, the Swiss and the Germans. The invasion of Charles VIII in 1494 had shaken all of Italy, and after the French returned in 1499 and then jointly took the kingdom of Naples with the Spanish in 1501, some Italians began to look back on the first French invasion as the signal of a new age in Italian politics. The string of foreign conquests inaugurated by Charles’ unstoppable descent into Naples made clear the decisive role of arms in affairs of state.⁵⁴ In the first years of the sixteenth century, Bernardo Rucellai wrote his *History of the French Invasion*, claiming that Charles’ invasion was “by far the greatest event of this age, which has had an impact on the entire human race.”⁵⁵

On August 26, 1502, the Florentines passed a law to transform the office of Gonfalonier into a position for life. On September 22, Piero Soderini was elected by the Great Council to the new office.⁵⁶ Machiavelli became a close aide of Soderini, but this meant that enemies of Soderini also became enemies of Machiavelli. In 1506, Alamanno Salviati—who had supported Soderini’s election but came to oppose him when he failed to use his authority to advance the interests of the *ottimati*—expressed his opinion about Machiavelli at a dinner party: “I never entrusted anything at all to that rascal [*ribaldo*]

⁵⁴ See Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 129ff.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Gilbert, *ibid.*, p. 259.

⁵⁶ See Gilbert, *ibid.*, p. 74; Pesman, “Machiavelli, Soderini, and the Republic of 1494-1512,” pp. 50-51.

since I have been one of the Ten.”⁵⁷ Cerretani in his *Istoria fiorentina* refers to Machiavelli as Soderini’s “*mannerino*” (lackey).⁵⁸ In 1512, Machiavelli would pay the price for this close connection to Soderini.

Since the main role of the Great Council was voting on legislation and electing officials, deliberation took place in the smaller magistracies and in consultative meetings (*pratiche*). The surviving *pratiche* of the Ten of War are particularly informative about the types of concerns and arguments that arose in their deliberations.⁵⁹ Some of the Ten’s *pratiche* are recorded in Machiavelli’s own hand.⁶⁰ In these meetings, participants would often try to justify a particular course of action by supporting it with a proverb, a well-known historical precedent or a classical authority, the most privileged history being that of Rome and the most authoritative sources classical and Christian texts. The Florentines prided themselves on their skillful application of *ragione*, or reason. In their meetings it was commonly argued that they should take “the middle way” (*via di mezo*), “enjoy the benefit of time” (*godere el beneficio del tempo*) and, when war broke out, remain neutral as long as possible.⁶¹ But they also knew that reason and force were not the only factors in political affairs; there was necessity, fortune and God. Necessity was seen to trump freedom of action: “necessity dictates” (*la necessità constringue*) and “necessity knows of

⁵⁷ See the letter from Biago Buonaccorsi to Niccolò Machiavelli of October 6, 1506 (*Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 141). On Salviati, see Butters, “Machiavelli and the Medici,” p. 65.

⁵⁸ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Gilbert first published his study of this material in “Florentine Political Assumptions in the Period of Savonarola and Soderini” (1957). He then gave a slightly briefer account in his book *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (1965). I rely on both as noted.

⁶⁰ Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions,” p. 192 n. 17, p. 213.

⁶¹ Quoted in Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions,” pp. 198, 201, and *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 33-34.

no laws” (*la necessità non ha legge*).⁶² Fortune, a concept inherited from the ancients, signifies the role of chance in human affairs, and, when seen as a goddess, her caprice was subordinated to God’s Providence.

Religious belief runs throughout the *pratiche*. For the Florentines, the very success of their city was a sure sign of God’s favour. One meeting records a participant saying: “in many ways God has shown that He will not abandon this city.”⁶³ Such care was manifested to them in the sudden death of their Milanese enemy Giangaleazzo Visconti in 1402 and in the decision of Charles VIII to withdraw his occupying forces from Florence in 1494.⁶⁴ Since they saw signs of God’s intervention in their affairs, debate would often turn around whether a particular threat should be dealt with by trying to win God’s succor or by resorting to the same wayward practices used by other states.⁶⁵ Most speakers tried to balance their religious convictions with worldly wisdom, though some held more one-sided views. One of the extremes was to argue that they should strictly follow Christian principles. The other was to argue that they had to follow the ways of the world; as one speaker put it, when another “tries to trip us, we must try to trip him.”⁶⁶ A debate which occurred in August of 1505 shows two of the key considerations around which debate turned: *securtà* and *honore*. In this *pratica*, we see them weighed against each other: “Piero Popoleschi said that Messer Francesco Gualterotti’s counsel

⁶² Quoted in Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions,” p. 206, and *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 41.

⁶³ Quoted in Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 44.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44. For Machiavelli’s account of the first incident see *FH* 3.25.

⁶⁵ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 42-44, 71.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions,” p. 208, and *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 43.

was secure, and Giovanni Vittorio Soderini's honourable, but not so secure, and that one had to consider which of the two should be adopted. And, with the city in its current situation, it seemed to him that its first priority should be ensuring its own security."⁶⁷

This summary of the debate and the speaker's decision in favour of security shows it was not uncommon to argue that in normal circumstances the first place goes to honour but that when the very security of the state is at risk security takes precedence.

Florence's republican institutions saw their demise in 1512. Piero Soderini, who had been elected Gonfaloniere for life in 1502, maintained a policy of friendship with France, both for the sake of protection and due to commercial interests. In 1510, Pope Julius II turned against France, and, by the end of 1511, Spain, Venice and England had joined his Holy League. This put Florence in a dangerous position. However, on April 11, the French were victorious in the Battle of Ravenna, and Soderini's policy seemed vindicated. Fortune then turned against Florence again: the French victory was pyrrhic and when the Swiss entered Italy on the side of the Pope the French withdrew from northern Italy. The Pope sent an envoy to demand that Florence now join the league, but Soderini still failed to change sides. As a result, the league agreed to depose Soderini and to restore the Medici as private citizens. With no French arms to defend Florence, Soderini's hope rested in Florence's national militia, a militia which Machiavelli had

⁶⁷ Quoted in Cox, "Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*," p. 1135. "Piero Popoleschi dixit che il discorso di messer Francesco [Gualterotti] era sicuro, et quello di messer Giovanvittorio honorevole et non tanto sicuro, et che era da pensare quale de' dua fussi da pigliare. Et che trovandosi la città in termini che l'è, li pare che in primis debba cercare la securtà sua" (*Consulte e pratiche 1505-1512*, ed. Fachard, p. 40). For three similar examples which prioritize, respectively, the profitable (*utile*), safety and security, see the same essay by Cox, p. 1135 (two of those examples may be found below in chapter 6 in the section on "Morality and Security").

been instrumental in creating and organizing over the previous six years. On August 29, the Spanish forces allied with the Pope confronted the militia at Prato and as soon as the city's walls were breached the soldiers fled. The Spanish sacked the city, murdering and raping. The Spanish viceroy was now in a position to enforce the Pope's demands. Soderini fled to Siena on August 31, and the next day Giuliano de' Medici entered Florence. On September 16, the Medici seized power by using the presence of armed men stationed in the piazza to coerce the approval of a committee with absolute power.⁶⁸ The committee, dominated by partisans of the Medici, reformed the constitution to maintain the semblance of a republic while concentrating power in the Medici's hands. Machiavelli, who had worked closely with Soderini, was dismissed from office on November 7. The following February, his name was found on a list drawn up by two men plotting against the Medici. Although he was imprisoned and tortured, no evidence was found against him, and, with the payment of a fine, he would be freed. Fortune, however, freed him in another way. Following the death of Julius II in February, 1513, Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici became Pope Leo X on March 11. During Florence's celebration for the election of the first Florentine Pope, Machiavelli was freed as part of a general amnesty.

After being released from prison, Machiavelli spent his idle time in the latter part of the year penning *The Prince*. Therein, he addresses the debates seen in the *pratiche* about whether policy should be conducted according to the counsels of Christianity or the ways of the world. Chapter 15 offers a decisive judgment: "it is so far from how one lives

⁶⁸ See Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 130; Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 132.

to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.” In chapter 18, Machiavelli is even more explicit, arguing that rulers must “know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity.” In Machiavelli’s view, rulers should not place their hope in God but in prudence and when necessary in the same wayward practices used by other states. His poem *The Ass* (1517) confirms this: “To believe that without effort on your part God fights for you, while you are idle and on your knees, has ruined many kingdoms and many states.”⁶⁹ For one who is secular or has a deist conception of God, the need for such an argument now seems archaic; however, at Machiavelli’s time it was a necessary polemic against a conventional belief.

Machiavelli’s very use of the expression “to enter into evil” suggests that he himself believes in the moral categories of good and evil. Nonetheless, he is unflinching about the types of evil that a prince must be willing to enter into: “acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion” (*P* 18). Since he takes the goodness of morality for granted, he is clear about the cost of his argument: he recognizes evil as evil but still condones it. Although *The Prince* argues that rulers must colour their immoral acts, Machiavelli himself does not colour his argument. Rather, the matter is so vital and misunderstood that he speaks as boldly as possible. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli challenges the orthodox view, proclaiming he will deal with “the effectual truth” rather than modes of government “that have never been seen or known to exist in truth” (*P* 15). His critique

⁶⁹ *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 764. These lines echo the sentiment of Cosimo de’ Medici’s saying “that states were not held with paternosters in hand” (recorded by Machiavelli in *Florentine Histories* 7.6).

of idealism may in part be directed at works like Plato's *Republic*, but it was also directed at his more recent predecessors.⁷⁰ By focusing the issue on "ruin," Machiavelli makes the reader face the risk that comes from basing affairs of state on idealism: there are times when a ruler must *either* be willing to act against virtue in hope of safeguarding the state *or* ignore "what is done for what should be done" and thereby risk ruin (*P* 15). While his argument for the contravention of virtue is shocking and polemical, he is careful to justify it with the already accepted idea that necessity knows no law.

Having taken this opportunity to introduce Machiavelli's historical and intellectual context, I must still justify my use of *The Prince* and *Discourses* as if they are cut from the same cloth, despite their different orientation.

The Relation between *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*

One persistent issue in the literature on Machiavelli is the chronological and theoretical relation between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. The chronological problem arises because in *The Prince* Machiavelli refers to having reasoned on republics elsewhere—"I shall leave out reasoning on republics because I have reasoned on them at length another time" (Io lascerò indietro el ragionare delle repubbliche, perché altra volta ne ragionai a lungo) (*P* 2). What exactly he is referring to is uncertain since what we know about the composition of *The Prince* and *Discourses* does not quite square with it. In a letter he wrote to Vettori on December 10, 1513, he says he has "composed a little

⁷⁰ Gilbert writes: "I am inclined to agree with Villari that Machiavelli was thinking mainly of the humanist literature of the quattrocento" ("The Humanist Concept of the Prince," p. 472 n. 3). Anglo argues he was thinking not only of the ancients but also of medieval and Renaissance texts on princely rule (*Machiavelli: A Dissection*, p. 189.)

work *De Principatibus*” and that he is still “continually fattening and polishing it.”⁷¹

Using external evidence from his letters and internal evidence from *The Prince*, scholars generally agree that Machiavelli began the work in the summer of 1513 and finished it in December 1513 or early 1514. However, as Claude Lefort points out, there is no reason he could not have begun working on a theoretical tract earlier and there is some evidence he did so. In particular, Lefort points to a letter from Machiavelli’s chancery colleague Agostino Vespucci who, when he published Machiavelli’s *Decennale* in 1506, told him he still expected to see “the more extended work that with no less secrecy he is hatching in his store.”⁷²

When it comes to the composition of the *Discourses*, scholars disagree over the precise dates due to a lack of solid evidence. Since Machiavelli refers to having reasoned on republics at another time in *The Prince*, many scholars have assumed that he must have begun the *Discourses* in 1513. His dedication to the *Discourses* is taken as another clue about the time of composition as he therein acknowledges his obligation to Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai for having “forced me to write what I would never have written for myself.” It is assumed that they fed Machiavelli this encouragement while he was associated with the group of Florentine and foreign literati who met for discussion in the Rucellai family gardens, the Orti Oricellari. Filippo de’ Nerli, one of the members of the group, later recalled the main interests of their discussions and how two of Machiavelli’s most famous works grew out of them:

⁷¹ Quotation from the translation in *The Prince*, ed. Mansfield, p. 110.

⁷² Quoted in *Machiavelli in the Making*, pp. 84-85.

they cultivated themselves by means of classical works and the lessons of history, and on the basis of them and the request of his friends Machiavelli composed his book of discourses on Titus Livy and also the book of those treatises and discussions on the militia.⁷³

Scholars debate when Machiavelli first joined these meetings, arguing as early as 1514 and as late as 1518.⁷⁴ Since Cosimo Rucellai died in 1519 and Machiavelli addresses him in his dedication, Cosimo's death provides the *terminus non post quem*. Machiavelli's references within the work itself provide evidence that he was working on it from around 1516 to 1518.⁷⁵ To indulge the view that he may have started the work in 1513, we can then date the time of composition to the period between 1513 and 1519.

Although *The Prince* was finished before the *Discourses*, many scholars nonetheless assume that Machiavelli's allusion to having reasoned on republics must refer to some part of the *Discourses*. Federico Chabod has argued that after Machiavelli was released from prison, he began a work on the collective virtue of republican Rome but then—realizing the opportunity the present afforded for himself, the Medici and Italy—put it aside to focus his thoughts on the individual virtue of a prince.⁷⁶ Felix Gilbert concurs with Chabod's chronology but suggests that Machiavelli's reference in *The*

⁷³ Quoted in Gilbert, "The Composition and Structure of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*," p. 128 (translation modified). Gilbert also provides the original: "si esercitavano costoro assai, mediante le lettere, nelle lezioni dell'istorie, e sopra di esse, ed a loro istanza compose il Machiavello quell suo libro de' discorsi sopra Tito Livio, e anco il libro di que'trattati, e ragionamenti sopra la milizia" (ibid., p. 484 n. 50).

⁷⁴ Burd places Machiavelli's entrance into the group in 1518 (*Il principe*, p. 151). Gilbert argues it was 1515 at the earliest ("Composition and Structure," p. 128). Ridolfi argues for 1516 as the earliest date (*Life of Machiavelli*, p. 300 n. 10). Sices suggests Machiavelli may have attended meetings as early as 1514 ("Introduction," p. xiv).

⁷⁵ See Gilbert, "Composition and Structure," pp. 117-18; Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, pp. 132-34 n. 49.

⁷⁶ See Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, pp. 12, 30-41, 137.

Prince to a work on republics may have been to a draft of what later became the first eighteen chapters of the *Discourses*.⁷⁷ Hans Baron has more recently argued for a quite simple and probable solution: Machiavelli could have inserted the reference at a later date, in particular between late 1515 and early 1518.⁷⁸ David Wootton argues for an altogether different explanation: his reference to having reasoned about republics another time was a humorous way of acknowledging the awkward business of his interrogation and torture after the Medici took control of Florence.⁷⁹

According to Baron, the *Discourses* represents an evolution in Machiavelli's thought, growing out of his acquaintance with the circle that met at the Oricellari Gardens.⁸⁰ He further argues that the orientation of the two works is "irreconcilable."⁸¹ While Machiavelli's participation in the meetings at the Oricellari Gardens surely provided him with a wonderful opportunity to share in discussions on affairs of state and ancient literature, I will argue that in Machiavelli's own view *The Prince* and *Discourses* are complementary works. Further, if they are reconcilable, then the uncertainties about the chronological relation between them recede in importance. Four reasons vindicate the view, dominant since the nineteenth century, that they are reconcilable: the quality of Machiavelli's times, the similarity of the principles in the two works, the different ends

⁷⁷ Gilbert, "Composition and Structure," p. 127.

⁷⁸ Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, p. 133.

⁷⁹ "Introduction," p. xxv. It could be added that reasoning "*a lungo*" (at length) would be a grimly ironic way to describe his torture by strappado; also, he says he reasoned about republics at "*altra volta*" (another time), not in another work.

⁸⁰ Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, pp. 143-47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

served by principalities and republics and the belief that states naturally cycle through different forms of government.

The first reason—the quality of Machiavelli’s times—rests upon an appreciation of his historical context. During the struggle between papacy and empire, Italian cities began to carve out independence for themselves by forming local governments of nobles and an elected governor.⁸² By the end of the 1100s, such a communal form of self-government was in place in Venice, Parma, Padua, Milan, Piacenza, Florence, Pisa, Siena and Arezzo. This new form of government soon came to be marred by power struggles between the rising merchant class and the ruling noble families. In most of the communes, an end to the often violent factional conflict was achieved by the more or less willing acceptance of princely rule. By the end of the 1200s, such a transition had taken place in Ferrara, Verona, Milan, Mantua, Treviso, Pisa, Parma, Piacenza, Ravenna and Rimini.⁸³ A few communes survived into the 1300s. Padua maintained its liberty until 1328. In Siena, the popular party seized control from the nobility in 1287 and set up an oligarchy of merchants which ruled through a Board of Nine Governors until 1355.⁸⁴ Florence and Venice maintained their liberty throughout the 1300s, but in the quattrocento Cosimo de’ Medici made himself, in Machiavelli’s words, “prince of the republic” (*D* 1.33.3). In the same century, the Republic of Genoa found itself locked in a struggle with Milan, variously losing and regaining its liberty. And in Milan, the short-

⁸² Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, p. 4. For a detailed history see Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria*.

⁸³ On this early transition see Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, p. 118, and Skinner, *Foundations Of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, pp. 23-26 (hereafter cited as *Foundations*).

⁸⁴ Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 24.

lived Ambrosian Republic which succeeded the death of Filippo Visconti in 1447 fell into the hands of Francesco Sforza in 1450; as a result, Milan returned to a duchy. While northern Italy was going through this political and economic turmoil, southern Italy remained subject to foreign powers and feudal in character. Thus, by the middle of the fifteenth century, autocracy was the dominant mode of government in Italy.

Responding to this new political landscape, many quattrocento humanists turned their attention to the mirror-for-princes genre.⁸⁵ To cite a few examples, Francesco Patrizi, who had written *The Institution of a Republic* in the 1460s, wrote *The Kingdom and the Education of the King* in the 1470s.⁸⁶ Bartolomeo Sacchi, showing the same flexibility, wrote *On the Prince* in 1470 and turned it into a republican treatise entitled *On the Best Citizen* in 1474.⁸⁷ Giovanni Pontano, a Neapolitan humanist, wrote *On The Prince* in 1468. There was nothing unique in Machiavelli's turn to the mirror-for-princes genre; what was unique, as he himself proclaims in *Prince* 15, was his break with the traditional counsels given to princes.

The letters Machiavelli wrote to Francesco Vettori after he was released from prison in March 1513 tell us much about his own motives for writing a handbook for princes. Vettori, a friend of Machiavelli since his time in the chancery, was in Rome in early 1513, acting as a Florentine ambassador to the Pope. The day after Machiavelli was released from prison, he wrote to Vettori: "If it is possible, remind Our Lordship about

⁸⁵ On the re-emergence of this tradition see Gilbert, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince," pp. 93-96; Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, pp. 113-18.

⁸⁶ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 90 n. 56; Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, pp. 116-17, 182.

⁸⁷ See Kraye, ed., *Cambridge Translations*, vol. 2, p. 88.

me in order that, if it should be possible, either he or his family might start engaging my service in some way or other.”⁸⁸ On June 20, 1513, he wrote to Vettori: “the pope, aware of his brothers’ and nephews’ lack of territory, is unwilling to give any less account of himself than did his predecessors.” Vettori’s response of July 12 concurs with Machiavelli about Pope Leo’s intention: “his aim is to maintain the respect for the Church as he found it, not to want its states to be diminished, unless what is diminished should be handed over to his own, namely, to Giuliano and Lorenzo, to whom he is thinking of giving states in any case.” In Machiavelli’s famous letter of December 10, 1513, he again expresses his desire “that these Medici lords begin to make use of me even if they should begin by making me roll a stone.” With that end in view, he tells Vettori he has “composed a little work *De Principatibus*” and that he wishes to offer it to Giuliano de’ Medici, the pope’s brother, as it should be welcome “to a prince, and especially to a new prince.”⁸⁹ Although Machiavelli in fact later dedicated the work to Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Pope’s nephew, it is noteworthy that at the time he wrote the letter to Vettori, Leo X had given Giuliano de’ Medici the same position that Pope Alexander had given Cesare Borgia: Captain-General of the Church.⁹⁰ With the Medici holding power in both Rome and Florence, Machiavelli’s desire for the *vita activa*, his drive to comprehend the art of the state, and the quality of the times (both the ubiquity of principalities and, due to their lack of unity, Italy’s weakness), all conspired to suggest the utility of a tract on princes.

⁸⁸ All translations of Machiavelli’s personal correspondences are from *Machiavelli and His Friends*, unless noted otherwise.

⁸⁹ Quotations from the translation in *The Prince*, ed. Mansfield, pp. 110-11.

⁹⁰ See *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 220.

A second reason *The Prince* and *Discourses* may be reconciled is that many of the principles found in the former recur in the latter. As Macaulay noted in 1827, the two works are based on “the same principles,” the first discoursing on them in relation to “an ambitious man,” the later in relation to “an ambitious people.”⁹¹ Further in the *Discourses* Machiavelli addresses his counsel not only to republics but also repeatedly to princes. That his works are based on the same principles is evident from the way Machiavelli himself refers to his earlier works when discussing an issue he has already written on. If he were not concerned with discovering true principles—or if he came to reject his earlier views—he could not have referred to his other works in such an unqualified way. A brief consideration of this intertextuality shows how consistent his fundamental beliefs remained. In the *Discourses*, he makes four references to *The Prince*. *Discourses* 2.1.3 refers to “our treatise of principalities.” In *Discourses* 2.20.1, he refers to his discussion of mercenaries in “another work of mine,” suggesting chapters 12 and 13 of *The Prince*. In *Discourses* 3.19.1, he says he has “broadly discoursed” on the motives of princes and how they can avoid hatred in “another treatise.” *Discourses* 3.42.1 refers to chapter eighteen of *The Prince* and names “*nostro trattato De Principe*.” In *Florentine Histories*, he writes it would be proper “to reason on the qualities of conspiracies and their importance...if I had not spoken of it in another place” (8.1). Such discussions can be found in *Prince* 19 and *Discourses* 3.6. Finally, as we have seen, he refers in *Prince* 2 to having reasoned on republics “at length another time.”

⁹¹ *Critical and Historical Essays*, vol. 2, p. 30.

A related consideration is that the word “*principe*” can mean not only “prince” but also “ruler” or “leader.” For example, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli refers to Camillus and other leading citizens of republican Rome as “princes of the city” (1.12.1). Likewise, he writes that one of the advantages of being born in a republic is that men “can, through their virtue, become princes” (*D* 2.2.3). In *Florentine Histories*, he refers to the republican rulers of Florence as “the princes of the state” (*i principi dello stato*) (3.23), and he calls the leader of a republican party the “prince of the Party” (*principe della Parte*) (4.28).⁹² Thus, it is not surprising that the principles found in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* pertain to *principi* in both senses of the word: princes and rulers.

Thirdly, *The Prince* and *Discourses* complement each other because principalities and republics serve different but complementary ends. As the *Discourses* explains, principalities are necessary to found, republics to maintain. Regarding the first, Machiavelli argues that “to order a republic anew or to reform it altogether outside its ancient orders” requires the authority of a single law giver (*D* 1.9 heading). Likewise, in a corrupt city, good laws can be enforced only if one individual uses “an extreme force” to ensure their observance (*D* 1.17.3). Then, if a state is to last long, it must pass to the care of the people (*D* 1.9.2, 1.17.3, 1.58.3). Rome, which for Machiavelli was the greatest republic history has known, serves as the greatest model of a state that began as a principality and developed into a republic.

⁹² That this looser usage is not particular to Machiavelli is seen in Savonarola’s *Treatise Against Divinatory Astrology* where he calls Ptolemy “*il principe di questi astrologi*” (the prince of these astrologers) (quoted in Parel, *Machiavellian Cosmos*, p. 20).

Fourthly, the two works serve a complementary purpose by addressing the classical view that states naturally cycle through different forms of government. In *Discourses* 1.2.3, Machiavelli adopts the version of that view presented by Polybius in *Histories*, book 6. For a republican who accepts that theory, the only question can be how to prolong republican rule. Machiavelli himself notes that since there is not a remedy for every disorder that arises in a republic, it is impossible to create “a perpetual republic” (*D* 3.17.1).⁹³ Further, he argues that the form of government depends upon the condition of the people: where there is no equality a republic cannot be made (*D* 1.55 heading). The existence of a feudal nobility in Naples, Rome, the Romagna and Lombardy make republican governance impossible in those places (*D* 1.55.4). Also, where citizens have become corrupt, a republic is “the worst” form of government (*D* 1.18.3). Since a suitable constitution depends upon the condition of the people, the princely form of government remained relevant in both theory and practice. It should also be noted that support for the rule of one could be found in such esteemed authorities as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Dante.

In light of these reasons, it should be apparent that for Machiavelli *The Prince* and the *Discourses* were complementary works. Nonetheless, his own preference for republican governance is clear. He became secretary when Florence was a broad-based republic, and he served his city faithfully for fourteen years. In the second chapter of *The Prince*, he mentions that he has reasoned on republics elsewhere as if to alert the reader to

⁹³ Though compare *Discourses* 3.22.3 where he writes that “if a republic were so happy that it often had one who with his example might renew the laws, and not only restrain it from running to ruin but pull it back, it would be perpetual.”

the fact that he has written on both topics. In the *Discourses*, he states: “governments of peoples are better than those of princes” (1.58.3). He also argues that the best constitution is a republic that has a kingly power, a senate and a popular government (1.2.5-7). Further, at least as early as the *Ghiribizzi* (a letter he wrote in 1506), Machiavelli identified one of the fundamental problems of princely rule: since men cannot change their disposition their success or failure depends upon whether or not their way of proceeding is in accord with the times. He returns to this problem in *Prince* 25 but points to its remedy only in the *Discourses*: “a republic has greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality, for it can accommodate itself better than one prince can to the diversity of times through the diversity of the citizens that are in it” (3.9.2).⁹⁴ A final point that can be made here is that those who wish to see Machiavelli as, above all, the republican author of the *Discourses* must confront the uncomfortable fact that one of his principal reasons for favouring republics is that they are better at acquiring empire.⁹⁵

In his famous letter to Vettori, Machiavelli confidently asserts: “through this study of mine, were it to be read, it would be evident that during these fifteen years I have been studying the art of the state I have neither slept nor fooled around.”⁹⁶ Likewise, in *The Prince*’s dedicatory letter, he attributes his knowledge of the art of the state to both his political experience and his classical studies: “I have found nothing in my belongings that I care so much for and esteem so greatly as the knowledge of the actions of great men,

⁹⁴ Hörnqvist reads Machiavelli’s omission of this solution in *The Prince* as a rhetorical strategy with a republican intent, see his *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 251-53.

⁹⁵ *D* 1.58.3, *D* 2.2.1; for the private advantages of republicanism see *D* 2.2.3. Recent literature has emphasized the imperialism underlying Machiavelli’s republicanism; see, in particular, Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* and Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*.

⁹⁶ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 265.

learned by me from long experience with modern things and a continuous reading of ancient ones.” The coherence of Machiavelli’s opinions rests on the learning and experience he had already acquired when he wrote *The Prince* at age forty-four. Of course, he continued to read, discuss and judge, but he did so on the firm foundation of experience and study he had already acquired over a long period. Machiavelli himself again makes this same point in the *Discourses*’s dedicatory letter: “in it I have expressed as much as I know and have learned through a long practice and a continual reading in worldly things.” Since his texts grow from this firm foundation of experience and study, I draw from them freely in order to try to clarify his understanding of the art of the state and the true way.

Machiavelli's Princes and Principality

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli offers Cesare Borgia, the Duke of Valence, as an example to be imitated—"I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of his actions" (*P* 7). While many shocking rumours about the Borgia family came into circulation during the papacy of Cesare's father, Pope Alexander VI, many later historians and writers presented the unsubstantiated rumours as facts and even invented new ones.⁹⁷ As the Borgia legend grew, so did confusion over Machiavelli's choice of Cesare as a model to be imitated. Rousseau's interpretation of *The Prince* in the *Social Contract* (1762) shows the influence of such defamation: "The mere choice of his execrable hero sufficiently manifests his secret intention" (3.6).⁹⁸ To get under the hostile rumours and recover a more nuanced view of Cesare Borgia, we may turn to contemporaneous judgements and a brief history of his actions. One of the best sources for such contemporaneous judgements is Machiavelli since their paths crossed three times while he was on diplomatic missions for Florence. Thus, to get a taste of Renaissance politics, to recover a more historical picture of the Duke and to see how Machiavelli's

⁹⁷ For example, Guicciardini's *History of Italy* (1540), Tomaso Tomasi's *Vita del Duca Valentino* (1655), Gregorio Leti's *Vita di Cesare Borgia* (1670), Victor Hugo's *Lucrèce Borgia* (1833), Alexandre Dumas' *Les Borgias* (1840) and even Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). On this genre of literature see Hillgarth, "The Image of Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries."

⁹⁸ This line comes from a note Rousseau added to the second addition of 1782 in order to further support the contention he made in the first edition that *The Prince* is really a warning to the people about the nature of princes. Garrett Mattingly is a modern defender of the same view: "Only in a satire can one understand the choice of Cesare Borgia as the model prince" ("*The Prince: Political Science or Political Satire?*," p. 184).

experiences as Florentine secretary affected his later writings, this chapter begins by reviewing the major events of Cesare's life, with particular attention to those occasions on which Machiavelli met with him as an envoy of Florence.

Cesare's father, Rodrigo Borgia, was crowned Pope Alexander VI in August of 1492.⁹⁹ That very month, Alexander made Cesare the Archbishop of Valencia and, in September of the following year, Cardinal of Santa Maria Nuova. Five years later, in August 1498, the College of Cardinals allowed Cesare, then twenty-three years of age, to remove his cardinal's hat.¹⁰⁰ As Machiavelli put it in his first *Decennale* (a poem written in 1504 summarizing the major events of the previous ten years):

Si volve al figlio, che seguia la setta
De' gran chercuti, e da quei lo rimosse
Cambiandoli el cappello a la berretta.

He turned to his son, who followed the sect
Of the great clerics, and withdrew him from them,
Changing the hat to the beret.¹⁰¹

In the lead up to this change of hats, Pope Alexander and the new French King, Louis XII, had come to agreement on several matters. Alexander would grant Louis a divorce from his barren wife, a dispensation to marry the widow of Charles VIII and a cardinal's hat for his closest councilor, Georges d'Amboise; in exchange, Louis would confer the

⁹⁹ My principal sources for this history are Burd, ed., *Il principe*; Sabatini, *The Life of Cesare Borgia*; Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*; Hibbert, *The Borgias and Their Enemies*, as well as Machiavelli's own writings as noted throughout. All quotations from his legations are from *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli*, vol. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Due to the existence of contradictory documents, Sabatini argues that Cesare's birth can only be fixed between 1474 and 1476. He thus uses 1475 as his birth-year (bk. 1, ch. 2).

¹⁰¹ *Tutte le opere*, ed. Casella, p. 803, lines 178-180; Machiavelli, *Chief Works*, vol. 3, p. 1449 (translation modified).

duchy of Valence on Cesare, support his proposed marriage with Carlotta of Aragon and give him command over a body of French soldiers.¹⁰² In October of 1498, Cesare left Italy with the papal dispensation, the cardinal's hat and the hope of securing his marriage with Carlotta. Once in France, he joined Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, a cardinal who had openly made himself an enemy of Alexander by seeking his deposition but now at least feigned to seek Alexander's friendship.¹⁰³ In December, Louis received his papal dispensation and d'Amboise his cardinal's hat. On January 18, 1499, Cardinal della Rovere wrote to Alexander praising Cesare's performance at the French court:

I cannot refrain from informing Your Holiness that the most illustrious Duke is so endowed with prudence, ability and every virtue of mind and body, that he has conquered everybody.... He has found so much favour with the King, and all the princes of this court that everyone holds him in esteem and honour of which fact I willingly and gladly give testimony.¹⁰⁴

Even allowing for flattery, Rovere's account of Cesare's conduct and reception presumably contains some accuracy. Adding further interest to his description, his use of the expression "every virtue of mind and body" shows "virtue" being used in its classical sense of "excellence."

Cesare returned to Italy with Louis XII, riding in the king's train as he triumphantly claimed Milan for France on October 6, 1499. Baldassare Castiglione was

¹⁰² Although Cesare was Cardinal of Santa Maria Nuova, he continued to use the title of his archbishopric and was thus known as Cardinal of Valencia, a city in Spain. After giving up the purple, he became the Duke of Valence (or Valentinois in French), a duchy in France. When he gave up his role as Cardinal of Valencia and became the Duke of Valence, his name in Italian happened to remain Valentino (see Sabatini, *Life of Cesare Borgia*, bk. 2, ch. 5). As Machiavelli notes, Cesare is "called Duke Valentino by the vulgar" (*P* 7), his more correct title being Duke of Valence (or Duke of Valentinois).

¹⁰³ On his reasons for now seeking peace with Alexander see Sabatini, *Life of Cesare Borgia*, bk. 3, chs. 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Hibbert, *The Borgias and Their Enemies*, p. 133.

also present in the procession, and in a letter he wrote describing it he praises Cesare's "very gallant bearing."¹⁰⁵ With the aid of his French arms, Cesare took Imola in December and Forlì in January. Louis was then pressed to recall his soldiers to defend Milan from an attack by its former ruler Ludovico Sforza. However, Sforza's mercenary army betrayed him, and he spent the rest of his life in prison. Having secured Milan, Louis returned his auxiliaries to Cesare, and the following October, he took Rimini and Pesaro without a shot being fired. To congratulate Cesare on this victory, the Duke of Ferrara sent Pandolfo Collenuccio to Pesaro; in his report to the Duke of Ferrara, Pandolfo wrote: "He is accounted valiant, joyous, and open-handed, and it is believed that he holds honest men in great esteem. Harsh in his vengeance, according to many, he is of great spirit and of ambition, athirst for eminence and fame."¹⁰⁶ In time, this reputation for qualities such as vengeance and cruelty would help to darken his more admirable qualities.

On April 25, 1501, the prince of Faenza, Astorre Manfredi, surrendered his city to Cesare after a prolonged assault. In June, Astorre and his half-brother were imprisoned in the dungeon of Castle Sant' Angelo in Rome; the following June their bodies were found in the Tiber. After Cesare took Faenza and Castle Bolognese, he sent Florence a request for free passage through Tuscany; then, without awaiting reply, he entered Florentine territory.¹⁰⁷ Meeting with a Florentine ambassador in Barberino (about fifteen miles from

¹⁰⁵ Letter of October 8, 1499, in Cartwright, *Baldassare Castiglione: the Perfect Courtier*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Sabatini, *Life of Cesare Borgia*, bk. 3, ch. 6. Hibbert also quotes from the report, *The Borgias and Their Enemies*, p. 170.

¹⁰⁷ For Machiavelli's analysis of this event see *D* 1.38.2.

Florence), he demanded that the city become his ally, sign a *condotta* paying him 36,000 ducats a year for his military services and change their government to one he could trust. To give force to these demands he advanced to Campi, less than seven miles from the city's walls. The Signoria had little choice but to sign a treaty, agreeing to the alliance and payment demanded by the Duke. Cesare was committed to joining the King of France on his Neapolitan campaign and had also received letters from both the King and the Pope telling him not to persecute the Florentines; pressed thus, he moved on to besiege Piombino. The Florentines, relieved of the immediate threat, evaded the first payment requested by Cesare.

On June 4 of the following year (1502), Arezzo rebelled from Florence with support from Vitellozzo Vitelli. He was a condottiere allied with Cesare and bent on avenging the execution of his brother by Florence in October of 1499; Florence nonetheless suspected that Cesare was the one ultimately behind the rebellion. Vitelli took Arezzo and within a few days possessed all the strongholds of the Valdichiana. Piero de' Medici, who was also part of the plot, ominously took up residence in Arezzo, hoping to return to power in Florence. With Vitelli holding the Valdichiana, Pisa still defending its freedom and Pistoia torn by civil conflict, Florence was at risk of losing half its empire.¹⁰⁸ Cesare capitalized on Florence's weaknesses by asking the city to send an envoy with whom he could discuss important matters. On June 22, the Signoria sent Francesco Soderini and Niccolò Machiavelli. While on their way to meet with Cesare, they heard that he had suddenly taken the state of Urbino from Duke Guidobaldo da

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 63.

Montefeltre through deceit and force of arms, though without bloodshed. That day Machiavelli wrote to Florence: “Your lordships should take note of this stratagem and of this remarkable speed combined with extraordinary good fortune.”¹⁰⁹ Machiavelli and Soderini arrived in Urbino on June 24 and, over the course of two evenings, discussed their differences with the Duke. Accusations and justifications went back and forth. The Duke wished Florence to make good on their treaty:

This government of yours does not please me, and I cannot trust it; you must change it and give me a pledge that you will observe everything you promised; otherwise you will soon realize that I have no intention of going on like this, and if you do not want me as a friend, you will find me your enemy.¹¹⁰

The Florentines in turn asked the Duke, “What reason have we given you to have your generals and men to attack us?”¹¹¹ The Duke responded by saying the responsibility for the attacks lay solely with Vitellozzo Vitelli, but he added “there can be no half measures between me and you: you must either be friends to me, or enemies.”¹¹² At the end of the letter informing the Ten of these exchanges, Machiavelli added his impression of the Duke:

This prince is very splendid and magnificent, and in war he is so bold that there is no great enterprise that does not seem small to him, and to gain glory and territory he never rests or knows danger or weariness: he arrives at a place before anyone has heard that he has left the place he was in before: he wins the love of his soldiers, and has got hold of the best men in Italy. These things make him victorious and formidable, and are attended with invariable good fortune.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, pp. 48-49.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49. The primary source is the legation to the Ten dated June 26, 1502. It is signed by Soderini, but written by Machiavelli.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, p. 116.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹¹³ Quoted in Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 50.

The danger from the rebellion soon passed, as Cesare, knowing he had to respect King Louis' protection of Florence, threatened to punish Vitelli if he did not retire from Arezzo and the Validichiana. That summer Leonardo Da Vinci accepted Cesare's offer to employ him as his architect and general engineer. Leonardo retained the position for about a year and a half, producing some amazingly accurate maps, renovating fortresses and designing military technology.¹¹⁴

In October, Vitelli, some of the Duke's other condottieri and some of the rulers on the outskirts of Cesare's dominion met at the castle of Cardinal Orsini in Magione to form a league against the Duke, fearing that his expanding state may engulf their cities one after the other. As Machiavelli tells us in *The Prince*, the result of their conspiracy was "rebellion in Urbino, tumults in Romagna, and infinite dangers for the duke" (P 8). The conspirators had also asked Florence to join them; instead, the Signoria sent Machiavelli to Cesare's court with instructions to offer Florence's friendship, but not to commit them to anything. Machiavelli arrived at Imola on October 7, 1502. Upon this, their second meeting, the Duke was twenty-seven and Machiavelli thirty-three. Machiavelli remained with the duke's train until January 20, 1503. During this period the Duke accomplished two particularly notable acts, both of which Machiavelli praises in *The Prince*. After conciliating the condottiere who had conspired against him, Cesare moved to Cesena in preparation for the conquest of Sinigaglia with their aid. While in Cesena, he summoned his Governor-General, Ramiro de Lorqua, from Pesaro. When Ramiro arrived on December 22, the Duke had him arrested and published the charges against him: fraud,

¹¹⁴ By early March 1504 he was back in Florence. See Masters, *Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power*, pp. 14, 16, as well as his *Fortune is a River*, pp. 78-79, 91, 94.

corruption, extortion and rapine.¹¹⁵ Rumours were also circulating that Ramiro had conspired against the Duke. In Machiavelli's legation of December 23, he predicted the Governor-General's end: "Messer Ramiro, one of the Duke's first officers, returned yesterday from Pesaro, and was immediately confined at the bottom of the tower by order of his Excellency. It is feared that he will be sacrificed to the populace, who are very desirous that he should be."¹¹⁶ On the morning of December 26, the fully clothed corpse of Ramiro was found lying on a block in the piazza of Cesena next to his decapitated head on a pike.

As Cesare was now reconciled with his condottiere—Francesco Orsini, Paolo Orsini, Oliverotto da Fermo and Vitellozzo Vitelli—they took the town of Sinigaglia, which surrendered without a struggle, in his name. The Duke arrived there on December 31, greeting the condottiere amiably and asking them to join him at the house he would occupy. Once they were inside, he gave a signal and the four condottieri were taken prisoner; Vitelli and Oliverotto were garrotted late that night. He held the Orsini prisoner, sending an urgent letter to the Pope telling him to arrest Cardinal Orsini, the man who had held the meetings at his castle in Magione. When the Cardinal arrived at the Vatican on January 3 to congratulate the Pope on the Duke's capture of Sinigaglia, he was surrounded by armed men and imprisoned. Isabella d'Este, wife of the Marquis of Mantua, wrote to congratulate Cesare on "these glorious undertakings" and sent him a gift of one hundred carnival masks.¹¹⁷ Machiavelli was still with Cesare's court when this

¹¹⁵ The manifesto is quoted by Sabatini in *Life of Cesare Borgia*, bk. 3, ch. 16.

¹¹⁶ Legation of December 23, 1502.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Hibbert, *The Borgias*, p. 239.

occurred, and on January 8 he wrote to the Ten: "People here wonder that you have not written, or in some way sent your congratulations to the Duke upon what he has lately done for your advantage."¹¹⁸ After having killed Vitelli, the lord of Città di Castello, ambassadors from the city surrendered it to Cesare on January 5. Cesare then turned towards Perugia to rid it of Gianpaolo Baglioni, who had also conspired against him. Baglioni fled to Siena, and, on January 6, ambassadors from Perugia offered the city to Cesare, telling him the people had raised the cry of "Duke, Duke."¹¹⁹ On January 18, after he received news that Cardinal Orsini was imprisoned, he had his two Orsini prisoners, Paolo and Francesco, strangled.

That summer, 1503, the Duke was at the height of his power. He had created his own militia and killed many of his enemies. Ostensibly in the name of the Church, his dominion now included Imola, Forlì, Cesena, Piombino, Urbino, Camerino, Rimini, Sinigaglia, Pesaro, Faenza, Castel Bolognese, Città di Castello and Perugia. In Machiavelli's short piece *On How to Treat the Populace of Valdichiana after Their Rebellion*, he raises the pressing topic of Cesare Borgia's threat to Florence:

One can only conjecture that he intends to create such a powerful state in Italy that he will be unassailable, making allegiance to him desirable for any ruler. Should this be his design, then he is clearly aspiring to possess all of Tuscany in order to form a greater kingdom with the states surrounding Tuscany that he already holds.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Legation of January 8, 1503.

¹¹⁹ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 63.

¹²⁰ *Essential Writings*, p. 363. The date of the work is contested. Some place it in the summer of 1503 (see Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 269 n. 25; Pesman, "Machiavelli, Piero Soderini, and the Republic," p. 55; Constantine, *Essential Writings*, p. 359); others think it may have been a later piece intended as part of a historical work (see Machiavelli, *Chief Works*, vol. 1, p. 161; Black, "Machiavelli in the Chancery," p. 39).

Here Machiavelli shows his devotion to the well-being of Florence, yet, despite that devotion, we see in his official reports to the government of Florence that he did not hide his admiration for the skill, fortune and ambition of this new prince.

Pope Alexander was the cause of both the Duke's initial good fortune and his sudden turn of fortune. When the Pope died of tertian fever on August 18, 1503, Cesare himself was also gravely ill of the same disease. The Venetians and Florentines, while always wary of each other's power, both seized the opportunity to detach what cities they could from the Duke. As Machiavelli writes in his *Decennale*:

Poi ch' Alessandro fu dal ciel ucciso,
Lo stato del suo duca di Valenza
In molte parte fu rotto e diviso.

When Alexander was by Heaven killed,
The state of his Duke of Valence
Was broken and divided into many pieces.¹²¹

With the conclave for the next Pope at an impasse, the Cardinals settled upon the ailing Cardinal of Siena. On September 22, he assumed the name of Pope Pius III, and only four weeks later, on October 18, he died. After his death, the Ten sent Machiavelli to Rome as an envoy, instructing him to "keep us diligently informed from day to day of all that may occur worthy of notice."¹²² Machiavelli arrived in Rome on October 27. Two days later Cardinal della Rovere—a man who had spent years in exile due to his fear and hatred of the Borgias—came to an agreement with Cesare: in exchange for the votes of the Spanish cardinals, Rovere would confirm Cesare's appointment as Gonfaloniere of

¹²¹ *Tutte le opere*, ed. Casella, p. 809, lines 463-65; Machiavelli, *Chief Works*, vol. 3, p. 1455 (translation modified).

¹²² Commission and Instruction of October 24, 1503, in *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. 3.

the Church and help preserve him in his dominion in the Romagna.¹²³ On November 1, with all but three votes, Rovere was elected Pope, taking the name Julius II. On November 4, Machiavelli wrote the Ten a clear-sighted letter: "it is not to be supposed that Julius II will so quickly have forgotten the ten years of exile which he had to endure under Pope Alexander VI. The Duke meantime allows himself to be carried away by his sanguine confidence, believing that the word of others is more to be relied upon than his own." This is the one error for which Machiavelli criticizes him in *The Prince*, that is, for having believed that by benefiting a man who hated him, he could make him forget old injuries (*P* 7).

Machiavelli kept the Ten informed about the three meetings he had with the Duke in Rome. Then, on November 19, Cesare left the city with the intent of returning to the few strongholds in the Romagna that still held out for him. He planned to sail from Ostia since Florence had denied him safe-passage through its territory, but an envoy from the Pope arrived at Ostia, asking him to hand over the castle of Forli and his other fortresses. When the Duke refused, he was arrested. Seeing Cesare further reduced to these straits, Machiavelli wrote to the Ten: "We see now that the Duke's sins have little by little brought him to expiation. May God guide things for the best!"¹²⁴ After surrendering his fortresses to the Pope, Cesare regained his freedom, but his fortune only declined further when he put his faith in Gonsalvo de Cordoba, the Spanish viceroy in Naples. Ferdinand and Isabella, at the behest of Julius, had Gonsalvo arrest Cesare, and, in August of 1504,

¹²³ For Gonfaloniere of the Church translators often use a more descriptive title such as Standard-bearer, or Captain-General, of the papal forces.

¹²⁴ Legation from Rome, November 28, 1503.

he was sent to Spain as a prisoner.¹²⁵ Near the end of Machiavelli's first *Decennale*, written in 1504, he shows the conventional Florentine contempt for Cesare:

E benchè fussi da Consalvo visto
Con lieto volto, li pose la soma
Che meritava un rebellante a Cristo.

Though Gonsalvo looked upon him
With a pleasant face, he put on him
The burden deserved by a rebel against Christ.¹²⁶

Nine years later, in the final chapter of *The Prince*, he alludes to Duke Valentino as someone who almost became powerful enough to free Italy from foreigners: "although up to now a glimmer has shone in someone who could judge that he had been ordered by God for her redemption, yet later it was seen that in the highest course of his actions, he was repulsed by fortune." In these two conflicting portraits—the *Decennale* and *The Prince*—we see Cesare's two faces: a man who used force and fraud to become so powerful that he threatened Machiavelli's beloved Florence, and a man who, through that very acquisition of power, could have brought much needed strength to a weak and divided Italy.

Eight years later, in 1512, the Medici were able to return to power in Florence by taking advantage of Julius II's ire at Piero Soderini. After Julius' death in February of 1513, Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici became Pope Leo X. Although Machiavelli lost his

¹²⁵ He escaped from prison in October 1506 and died the following March fighting as Captain-General for his brother-in-law, the King of Navarre.

¹²⁶ *Tutte le opere*, ed. Casella, p. 810, lines 511-513; *Chief Works*, vol. 3, p. 1456 (translation modified). De Grazia suggests that Machiavelli may have been motivated to make such a pointed critique of the Duke in this—a poem intended for a public audience—in order to counter the opinion that he had shown too much admiration for this Florentine enemy, see *Machiavelli in Hell*, pp. 303-305.

political office when the Medici returned to power in Florence, he nonetheless hoped to find employment under them. Further, he saw the benefit a Florentine Pope could bring to Florence: what Alexander VI and Duke Valentino had achieved through their fortune and *virtù* could be achieved by Leo X and his brother Giuliano de' Medici on terms more favorable for Florence. Roused by these thoughts, he started to systematize in a concise handbook for princes what he had learned about the art of the state through his reading and experience.

Virtue, Fortune and Crime

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses five ways that a prince may come to power: heredity, virtue, fortune, crime and election. Chapter 2 briefly discusses hereditary princes, pointing out that a hereditary principality is easier to maintain than a new principality since a hereditary prince has less need to offend his subjects and is thus more loved. In chapter 6, he discusses attaining a principality through virtue and one's own arms. His primary examples are the greatest classical founders: Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus. Machiavelli emphasizes that their success was due not only to their virtue but also to their ability to use force, force being necessary in his view since men are easily persuaded to follow new orders but then just as easily waver. Founding a principality through virtue is difficult along the path, he writes, but once it is founded it is easy to maintain and "very happy." Chapter 7 discusses those who become new princes through the fortune and arms of others. For them the path to the principate is easy; the difficulty occurs after they have attained it, for they must still lay its foundation if they wish to

maintain it. For such a prince, Machiavelli advises that he imitate the actions of Cesare Borgia. Chapter 8 discusses the criminal path to the principate, using the ancient example of Agathocles of Syracuse (361-289 BCE) and the modern example of Liverotto of Fermo (d. 1502).

The interpretation of the relation between these three paths tends to take one of two lines of argument. Some see Machiavelli's discussion of crime as a clear demarcation of a moral limit. In Isaiah Berlin's view, Machiavelli's key point is that Agathocles and Liverotto "went too far, and so did not gain glory."¹²⁷ Skinner follows the same tack: "for Machiavelli a man of completely vicious character, like Agathocles, can never be considered a man of true *virtù*."¹²⁸ On the other hand, some readers argue that the chapter on crime points in a veiled manner to the very permeability of the distinction between virtue and crime. Strauss, for example, writes: "It is true that he contrasts Cesare with the criminal Agathocles by not calling Cesare a criminal. But if one looks at the actions of the two men, the contrast vanishes."¹²⁹ Coby makes a similar argument: "Machiavelli—quietly, discreetly—redeems Agathocles and nominates him for glory."¹³⁰ In Victoria Kahn's view, Machiavelli's distinction between virtue, fortune and crime is "an ironic concession to the reader's moral sensibility."¹³¹ In order to examine this question, I will turn to a close analysis of chapter 8 as well as a comparison of Cesare Borgia and

¹²⁷ *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 176. Whitfield also makes this argument, see *Machiavelli*, pp. 80, 104.

¹²⁸ *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 138.

¹²⁹ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 310 n. 53. Sydney Anglo makes the same argument: "It is quite impossible to distinguish Cesare and Agathocles, or, for that matter, Oliverotto da Fermo" (*Machiavelli: A Dissection*, p. 232).

¹³⁰ *Machiavelli's Romans*, p. 236.

¹³¹ "Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *Prince*," pp. 206, 210.

Agathocles. I argue that Machiavelli carefully separates the three types of princes of chapters 6-8 because he sees important moral as well as analytic distinctions between them.

Chapter 8 is entitled, "Of Those Who Have Attained a Principality through Crimes." Machiavelli begins the chapter by summarizing the four ways one may rise from private individual to prince: virtue, fortune, crime or the support of fellow citizens, the respective topics of chapters 6 through 9. His reason for discussing the criminal path would be justifiable if it were merely for the sake of completeness (as his two examples show, such methods were sometimes used); however, in what must be one of *The Prince's* most troubling sentences, he seems to condone the criminal path: "it will be shown with two examples, one ancient, the other modern, without entering into the merits of this issue, because I judge it sufficient, for whomever would find it necessary, to imitate them."¹³² The sentence at least contains two qualifications and is delivered with coldness rather than any zeal. The first qualification is seen in his scruple of mentioning that he is leaving the moral question aside. His second qualification rests in his reference to necessity. When is such a crime necessary? In the example of both Agathocles and Oliverotto, their crime was necessary only in relation to their ambition. Thus, for one who desires the principate but lacks sufficient virtue, fortune or support, crime would be necessary. Is Machiavelli stooping to counsel such a man? Indeed, he is making the same counsel available to all, though surely he would find little to commend in one who must

¹³² "E parlando del primo modo, si monterrà dua essempli, l'uno antiquo, l'altro moderno, senza intrare altrimenti ne' meriti di questa parte, perché io iudico, a chi fussi necessitato, che basti imitargli" (p. 150).

resort to crime to fulfill his own blind ambition. On the other hand, his counsel could be used by a man willing to resort to crime for the sake of the common good. It may be thought, for example, that the way Agathocles and Liverotto seized the principate shows what would be required to unite Italy, that is, to do what they did on a much larger scale. Yet, in *Prince* 4, Machiavelli points out that in a province with many lords “you can neither content them nor eliminate them.” Thus the crime committed by Agathocles and Liverotto is useless as an example of how to unite Italy where numerous cities with their own militias and strongholds are dispersed across a large province. The more relevant example for how to create a strong central state in Italy is Duke Valentino.

While the purpose of chapter 8 still appears enigmatic, the *Discourses* sheds further light on Machiavelli’s view of the type of crime committed by Agathocles and Liverotto. In *Discourses* 1.9.2, Machiavelli argues that having “the common good” as one’s “intent” makes a bad deed excusable. Thus, in his view, crime is excusable for the sake of ordering a state, for renewing a corrupted state or for founding equality. Romulus and Moses provide examples of the first case. Romulus “killed his brother” to found Rome (1.9.1-2). Moses, to found his new orders, “was forced to kill infinite men” (3.30.1).¹³³ Yet, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses Romulus and Moses in chapter 6 since their end was the common good.

Cleomenes offers an example of the second case: using crime to renew a corrupt state. In *Discourses* 1.9.4, Machiavelli writes that in order to return Sparta to its original

¹³³ When Moses came down from the mountain and discovered his followers worshipping a golden calf, he ordered faithful volunteers to “kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.” The result was that “about three thousand of the people fell on that day” (Ex. 32.27-28).

laws and ancient virtue, Cleomenes “had all the ephors and anyone else who might be able to stand against him killed.” In Machiavelli’s view, this action was “just and worthy.” However, while he justifies eliminations for the sake of renewal, he also notes how rare it is that someone will be willing to use violence for the sake of a good end:

Because the reordering of a city for a political way of life presupposes a good man, and becoming prince of a republic by violence presupposes a bad man, one will find that it very rarely happens that someone good wishes to become prince by bad ways, even though his end be good, and that someone wicked, having become prince, wishes to work well, and that it will ever occur to his mind to use well the authority that he has acquired badly. (1.18.4)

The argument of *Discourses* 1.18 would suggest that Agathocles is a sort of border example: although he seized the principate out of private ambition, he then used his authority well insofar as he used it to preserve Sicily’s liberty from the Carthaginians. Thus, Machiavelli treats him ambivalently in *The Prince*.

A third case that requires violence is changing a feudal state to the condition necessary for the maintenance of a republic, namely, equality. Machiavelli discusses the case in a neutral tone, simply noting that a republic cannot successfully be ordered where powerful men live in castles and hold the people down with force. The only way to order a lasting republic in such a place would be to eliminate all the lords and gentlemen (1.55.5). However, as he points out in *Discourses* 1.17.3, to do so would require “many dangers and much blood.”

Machiavelli also discusses the case of those who use violence for a destructive end. His judgement of such princes is stated in the title of *Discourses* 1.10: “As Much As the Founders of a Republic and of a Kingdom Are Praiseworthy, So Much Those of a Tyranny Are Worthy of Reproach.” In the first paragraph of that chapter, he says “men

are infamous and detestable who are destroyers of religions, squanderers of kingdoms and republics, and enemies of the virtues, of letters, and of every other art that brings utility and honor to the human race” (1.10.1). Considered together, the three cases where violence is excusable and the counterexamples where it is inexcusable clearly show Machiavelli’s framework for thinking about crime. He takes a bold and unorthodox position in not opposing the elimination of men if the act serves the common good. He does not, however, push the argument further than that; rather, he takes it for granted that no one will ever be “so crazy” or “so wicked” as not to blame those who use violence for the sake of destruction (1.10.1).

Returning to *Prince* 8, there is no reason to doubt that when Machiavelli discusses Agathocles and Liverotto under the ignoble heading of crime he has not already condemned them. Nonetheless, one of the things that makes *Prince* 8 disconcerting is that Machiavelli not only condemns Agathocles but also gives him praise. His source for the life of Agathocles is Justin’s *Epitome of the Philippic History*, and he relates the details in an abridged but accurate manner. Machiavelli attributes Agathocles’ success in rising through the military ranks to his “virtue of spirit and body” (*virtù d’animo e di corpo*). He then describes how Agathocles seized the principate through the murder of the senators and the richest of the people, and how, once he made himself prince, he defended Sicily against Carthage. In line with the schema he develops to categorize the princes of chapters 6-8, he points out that nothing in Agathocles’ life was the gift of fortune. While the main idea of the sentence pointing that out is clear, it has two readings: “whoever might consider the actions and *virtù* [or *vita*] of this man will see nothing or little that can

be attributed to fortune.” While scholars are split fairly evenly on which variant is correct, I would add in favour of “*vita*” that it would point to the status of Agathocles’ low birth, a detail noted by Machiavelli and which further evinces his lack of fortune.¹³⁴ Machiavelli also points out that Agathocles neither attained nor maintained the principate through moral virtue: “one cannot call it virtue to kill one’s citizens, betray one’s friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory [*acquistare imperio, ma non gloria*].” While Machiavelli recognizes that *virtù* has a range of meanings, he imposes a limit on how far it can be taken (“one cannot call it virtue...”). Agathocles’ success was wholly the result of his military virtue and his criminal actions. Machiavelli follows the previous sentence by again praising him for the former and condemning him for the latter:

For if one considers the virtue of Agathocles in entering into and escaping from dangers, and the greatness of his spirit in enduring and overcoming adversities, one does not see why he has to be judged inferior to any most excellent captain. Nonetheless, his savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes, do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men. Thus, one cannot attribute to fortune or to virtue what he achieved without either.

At this point in the chapter Machiavelli has twice or thrice (depending upon the text) mentioned Agathocles’ virtue yet also said his actions cannot be called virtue. He is of course using the word *virtù* in its two different senses: moral excellence and military excellence (these two senses go back to the Latin *virtus* and the Greek *aretē*, but a fuller discussion of them will have to await chapter 6 on Machiavelli and the ancients). To fit

¹³⁴ The edition by Casella uses “*vita*.” The editions by both Bertelli and Martelli use “*virtù*.” The edition by Flora and Cordié uses “*vita*.” Among the English translations, Mansfield follows Casella’s text but chooses “virtue.” Wootton follows Bertelli, using “virtue.” Connell uses Casella, Martelli and Inglese and chooses “life.” Alvarez, following the text by Flora and Cordié, uses “*vita*.”

Agathocles into his schema, Machiavelli needs to show that he rose to the principate through neither virtue, like the princes of chapter 6, nor fortune, like the princes of chapter 7. Yet, while maintaining that Agathocles lacks both moral excellence and good fortune, he polemically points out that Agathocles possessed military virtue. He likely took some pleasure in pointing out against the tradition that Agathocles had some virtuous qualities, just as he does in chapter 17 when he argues against “the writers” that the much praised unity of Hannibal’s army would not have been possible without the cruelty for which they condemn him.¹³⁵ Although Machiavelli acknowledges Agathocles’ military prowess, he still maintains the moral difference between Agathocles and the men of chapter 6; that is, he concedes that Agathocles was a “most excellent captain” but maintains that his criminal nature prevents him from being classed among the “most excellent men.”

At the end of the chapter, Machiavelli asks how it was that Agathocles was able to rule securely despite his cruelty. His answer is that cruelty can be “badly used or well used.” He explains: “Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of *the necessity to secure oneself*, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility of the subjects as one can.”¹³⁶ We should first note Machiavelli’s presupposition that cruelty is evil. However, since in his view

¹³⁵ Justin never uses the word “*virtus*” to describe Agathocles; he merely speaks of his “audacity” (*audacia*) in attacking Carthage while Syracuse was under siege (*Epitome of the Philippic History* 22.4.2. Latin text is from <http://www.forumromanum.org/>.)

¹³⁶ Emphasis added. “Credo che questo avvenga dalle crudeltà bene usate o male usate. Bene usate si possono chiamare quelle, se del male è licito dire bene, che si fanno a un tratto per necessità dello assicurarsi, e dipoi non vi si insiste dentro, ma si convertiscono in più utilità de’ sudditi che si può” (pp. 160-61).

cruelty is necessary for a new prince, he argues that the most effective way to use it is to be decisive. Cruelty is badly used when a prince tries to avoid it in the beginning but, as a result, is pressed to use cruelty on an ongoing basis, or, as Machiavelli graphically puts it, to always “hold a knife in his hand.” For that reason, those who advise a new prince to avoid cruelty offer “bad counsel.”

What here justifies cruelty is “the necessity to secure oneself.” However, the murders ordered by Agathocles and Liverotto were necessary for neither their own security nor that of their state. The murders were necessary only in regard to their own ambition. We must then differentiate necessity to secure oneself and necessity resulting from ambition. Machiavelli does not explicitly formulate this difference, though he notes ambition was the motivation for both men. Agathocles “decided to become prince and to hold with violence and without obligation to anyone else that which had been conceded to him by agreement.” Liverotto thought it “servile to be at the level of others.” Thus, their criminal act was not necessary to secure themselves but merely to satisfy their ambition. Machiavelli nonetheless points out that Liverotto’s crime allowed him to rule securely since in one stroke he had eliminated all those who could have hurt him. His mistake was letting himself be deceived by Cesare Borgia, and Machiavelli suggests the fittingness of his ignoble death by recalling that it occurred “one year after the parricide he committed.” Agathocles also committed his most offensive crime in one stroke, and, as Machiavelli points out, he turned it to the good of the people. According to Machiavelli, those two factors explain how he was able to rule securely (a rule which lasted for about twenty-seven years). Machiavelli even argues that such a prince will not be punished by

providence: “Those who observe the first mode [cruelty well used] can have some remedy for their state with God and with men, as had Agathocles.”¹³⁷ By writing that Agathocles found some remedy with God, Machiavelli expands the belief that God condones just wars to his acceptance of the principle that a good result excuses an evil act.¹³⁸ Since Agathocles turned his crime to the good of the state he was able to maintain his rule, yet his crime was committed out of ambition and due to his criminal nature. Thus, Machiavelli’s position on Agathocles is ambiguous and ambivalent, part praise, part condemnation.

We may now turn to a comparison of Agathocles and Cesare. The outline of Cesare’s actions and life at the beginning of the chapter should serve to dispel the notion that Machiavelli’s praise was intended to be ironic or that he presents an idealized account of the Duke. In *Prince* 17, Machiavelli provides a succinct assessment of the Duke’s character and accomplishment: “Cesare Borgia was held to be cruel; nonetheless his cruelty restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and faith.” *Prince* 7 also points to the good ends Cesare achieved in the Romagna: “well-being,” “good government,” “obedience,” “peace and unity.” This judgement is shared by Guicciardini—no friend of the Borgias—as well as many modern historians.¹³⁹

Both Cesare and Agathocles used cruelty well by turning it to the good of the state, but we can efface the difference between them only if we are prepared to say that

¹³⁷ “Coloro che oservano el primo modo, possono con Dio e con li òmini avere allo stato loro qualche remedio, come ebbe Agatocle” (p. 161).

¹³⁸ I return to this important sentence in chapter five in the section on “Princes and God.”

¹³⁹ Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, bk. 6, p. 168; Cochrane, “Machiavelli: 1940-1960,” pp. 117-18, 121 n. 30.

the actions of Borgia are no different than the actions of Agathocles. As we saw, Borgia used the cruelty of Ramirro de Lorqua to pacify the Romagna and then appeased the people by having him beheaded and establishing a civil court in his place. Secondly, the Duke used deception to kill four of his condottieri who had plotted to ruin him.

Agathocles, on the other hand, “had all the senators and the richest of the people killed” in order “to hold with violence and without obligation to anyone else that which had been conceded to him by agreement” (P 8). Machiavelli calls Agathocles’ act a crime whereas he singles out Cesare’s above two acts for praise. Agathocles attained the principate through the murder of the leading citizens, Cesare became Duke of Romagna through the fortune of his father, the aid of French arms and his own *virtù*. To argue that Machiavelli’s secret intention is to efface the difference between the two men is to be more Machiavellian than Machiavelli. While he shows admiration for Agathocles’ military *virtù* and even the swiftness with which he executed his terrible cruelty, he shows no admiration for him as a criminal man. On the other hand, even when Cesare Borgia presented a threat to his beloved Florence, Machiavelli still admired his fortune and *virtù*. The mere fact that the representatives from chapters 6, 7 and 8 all rely on force to become new princes does not erase the differences between them in terms of the path they trod and the end they sought. Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus cut a path through their own virtue and arms. The end they achieved was to found happy states (Israel, Persia, Rome and Athens) ennobled by their *virtù*. These princes are “the most excellent” (P 6). Then there are princes like Cesare Borgia who find a path opened for them by the fortune and arms of others, but who then, through their own *virtù*, set about laying a firm

foundation for their state. Agathocles represents a much more ignoble class of men. From the start of his career his path was marred by his predilection for crime, and, although he possessed military virtue, his crimes “do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men” (P 8).

As we have seen, Machiavelli argues that rulers may have to resort to immoral actions to maintain their rule and that cruelty, when used wisely, will be seen to be merciful. Nonetheless, Machiavelli takes for granted that, under normal conditions, moral goodness is itself praiseworthy. In *Prince* 18, he makes both points clearly—that morality is praiseworthy and that it must sometimes be violated. If a ruler “always” observes the traditional virtues, he argues they will be harmful, adding that “by appearing to have them, they are useful, as it is to appear merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, *and to be so*” (emphasis added).¹⁴⁰ While his polemical point is that the traditional exhortation to princely virtue needs to be qualified, his addition of “*e essere*” (“and to be”) shows beyond doubt his valorization of the moral virtues. He even repeats both points in the same paragraph, writing that a ruler should “*not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity*” (emphasis added). He could not have made these two points more clearly nor more carefully; the virtues are praiseworthy, but they cannot always be observed by a ruler who wishes to maintain his

¹⁴⁰ “parendo di averle, sono utile, come parere pietoso, fedele, umano, intero, relligioso *e essere*” (pp. 239-40, emphasis added).

state. Machiavelli argues for what we could call, to adapt an expression from Sheldon Wolin, an economy of moral transgression.¹⁴¹

The necessity and utility of an economy of moral transgression is one of the central ideas running throughout Machiavelli's writings. By being parsimonious, one will come to be seen as liberal (*P* 16). By being cruel in effecting justice, one will come to be seen as merciful (*P* 17). Cruelties should be done in a stroke and then "not persisted in"; what is much worse is when cruelties "grow with time" (*P* 8). Machiavelli's economy of moral transgression is also set forth in his poem *The Ass*: "when evil comes—for it always does come—take it down / like a medicine, for he is crazy who tastes it and gets its flavor."¹⁴² The idea takes on a comic guise in *Mandragola* where the issue is adultery: "Flee from evil, but if you can't bear it like a man" (4.1). In his *Exhortation to Penitence*, he states that one need not fear divine punishment as long as one repents and does not persist in evil. We see then that in Machiavelli's view it is difficult to avoid all evil in life, especially for a ruler, and so, if the necessity arises, one should be able to do it but take no pleasure in it nor draw it out. While the drive of this Machiavellian thesis is the disconcerting claim that rulers must know how to do evil when forced by necessity, the argument shows his belief that evil is evil and that it is only excusable for a good.

¹⁴¹ For Wolin's thesis that Machiavelli's political theory is premised on utilizing "an economy of violence" see *Politics and Vision*, ch. 7, sec. 5.

¹⁴² Ch. 4, lines 40-42, in Gilbert, *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 751.

The Human Basis of Morality and Justice

Machiavelli ignores natural law in all his writings.¹⁴³ This silence shows his disdain for the importance of natural law in scholastic philosophy. But since the natural law the scholastics found in Aristotle is also evident in other canonical Greek and Roman writers, Machiavelli's silence on it shows a more general disregard for that aspect of ancient thought. He also gives little consideration to what scholastics and devout Christians consider the most important type of law: divine law. While Machiavelli breaks with those two aspects of tradition, he remains highly concerned with civic law, honour, the virtues and the distinction between good and bad.¹⁴⁴ In both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, he shows his awareness of tradition and of where he parts from it. He generally uses moral words such as "good" (*buono*) and "bad" (*cattivo*) according to their conventional meaning; commentators, however, disagree over whether he valorizes them in the conventional manner. In short, some believe he shares conventional moral beliefs, while others argue that his conventional statements are merely provisional.

To get a sense of those two positions, I will begin with Benedetto Croce's argument since it has been influential on the side of those who believe that Machiavelli

¹⁴³ On this point see Mansfield, "Introduction," *The Prince*, p. xii; Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, p. 22; Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁴ On civic law see, e.g., "On Ambition," lines 79-99; *P* 12; *D* 1.3.1, 1.10.4, 1.45.1-2. He also cites "the law of nations" when commenting on Livy in *D* 2.28.1 and twice in 3.1.2.

accepts the validity of morality. His *Elementi di politica* appeared in 1925 and was translated into English as *Politics and Morals* in 1945.¹⁴⁵ In its second chapter, he writes:

It is known that Machiavelli discovers the necessity and autonomy of politics, of politics which is beyond or, rather, below moral good and evil, which has its own laws against which it is futile to rebel, politics that cannot be exorcised and driven from the world with holy water.¹⁴⁶

Croce here acknowledges that this thesis—for which he is so often quoted—was already “known.” This vague acknowledgement points to Francesco de Sanctis, a nineteenth-century Italian literary critic, who wrote that Machiavelli’s “revolutionary” conception was to distinguish “man as he is” from man “as he ought to be.”¹⁴⁷ After Croce eloquently casts this thesis in his own words, he adds what he considers to be his more original contribution: the observation that Machiavelli discovered the autonomy of politics with “sharp bitterness” (*acre amarezza*).¹⁴⁸ According to Croce, Machiavelli’s bitterness—or anguish, as it is sometimes translated—is occasioned by his “sorrowful moral conscience” and his “moral disgust” for brutality and treachery.¹⁴⁹ Thus, in Croce’s view, the talk of Machiavelli’s immorality rests on the failure to appreciate the bitterness with which he discovered the autonomy of politics and because “the common people term as moral only moralistic unctuousity and bigoted hypocrisy.”¹⁵⁰ The Italian scholar Federico Chabod

¹⁴⁵ In 1931, *Elementi di politica* was included in a larger work *Etica e politica*.

¹⁴⁶ *Politics and Morals*, p. 59. “Ed è risaputo che il Machiavelli scopre la necessità e l’autonomia della politica, della politica che è di là, o piuttosto di qua, dal bene e dal male morale, che ha le sue leggi a cui è vano ribellarsi, che non si può esorcizzare e cacciare dal mondo con l’acqua benedetta” (*Etica e politica*, p. 256).

¹⁴⁷ De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, p. 464. On this point see Whitfield, *Discourses on Machiavelli*, pp. 1-3; Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 169 n. 66.

¹⁴⁸ Croce, *Politics and Morals*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 66.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61; “l’unzione moralistica e l’ipocrisia bacchettona” (*Etica e politica*, p. 257).

accepted Croce's separation thesis, arguing that Machiavelli's discovery of the autonomy of politics was "his true and essential contribution to the history of human thought."¹⁵¹

There are, on the other hand, those writers who argue that Machiavelli's references to conventional moral views cannot be given much weight. For Meinecke, they are merely a relic of his Christian inheritance; Machiavelli, he writes, "retained the basic Christian views on the difference between good and evil" but was "at heart a heathen."¹⁵² Some of the more recent writers skeptical about Machiavelli's commitment to conventional morality have shifted the terms of the debate from morality to rhetoric. Maurizio Viroli writes that Machiavelli's argument excusing Romulus' fratricide in *Discourses* 1.9 "is not a philosophical discussion about moral truth which assumes the existence of stable moral standards and of a clear way of demarcating right and wrong, but a rhetorical discussion on opinions about what is praiseworthy and what is blameworthy which assumes that there are no stable moral standards."¹⁵³ He makes the same argument about Machiavelli's discussions of praise and blame in *The Prince*. Likewise, Virginia Cox uses classical rhetorical theory to question Croce's line of argument: "considerable weight has been attributed within certain modern traditions of criticism to *The Prince*'s not infrequent gestures of deference to conventional moral values, such as the series of statements on the desirability of virtue in the opening lines of chapters 16 through 18 or the moral reflections on Agathocles." Her counter is that such

¹⁵¹ *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 116. The essay was first published in 1925 as *Del 'Principe' di Niccolò Machiavelli*.

¹⁵² *Machiavellism*, pp. 31-33.

¹⁵³ Viroli, *Machiavelli*, pp. 94-95.

statements are better seen as “strategic qualities of Machiavelli’s rhetoric.”¹⁵⁴ Strauss pushes this line of argument to its logical conclusion since in his view Machiavelli’s rhetoric has a philosophical aim. According to Strauss, the reason Machiavelli appeals to patriotism when questioning morality is to make his “questioning of morality” appear publicly defensible.¹⁵⁵ Thus, in Strauss’ view, Machiavelli’s questioning of morality in the name of the common good in fact masks a critique of morality in general.

In my view, the interpretation outlined first—the one shared by de Sanctis, Croce and Chabod—is correct. In particular, I argue that Machiavelli believes honour and virtue to be praiseworthy and that he excuses their violation not for any end but only for the sake of political utility (and, as I argue in chapter six, his concern for political utility is based on a genuine concern for security, well being and *virtù*). While Machiavelli questions the received tradition on certain essential points that does not mean he intends to undermine the whole tradition or that he was unconcerned with moral truth. My aim in this chapter is more exegetical than evaluative, but if the view that Machiavelli esteemed honour and the virtues is correct, he then appears in a less “Machiavellian” light.

Since Machiavelli’s treatment of the virtues is one of his most original contributions, it will be helpful to begin with an outline of the tradition that he and his contemporaries received. Since the meaning of virtue is twofold, I will begin with a historical sketch of how it came to have those two meanings—in Greek, in Latin, in Italian and even in English. I will then narrow my focus to the tradition of the virtues

¹⁵⁴ Cox, “Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*,” p. 1132.

¹⁵⁵ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 285; also see pp. 11, 79-81.

which stems from Plato in particular since it remained influential throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

The two meanings of virtue can be traced to both the Greek word *aretē* and the Latin word *virtus*. The original meaning of *aretē* referred to the “skill” or “excellence” of someone or something. For example, in the *Iliad*, the *aretē* of horses refers to their speed (23.276). In the *Odyssey*, Penelope says her *aretē* is her beauty and form (18.251). For Homer’s warriors their *aretē* is courage.¹⁵⁶ After the time of Homer, some of the pre-Socratic poets and philosophers began to give *aretē* a new interpretation, focusing on excellence as a moral or intellectual virtue.¹⁵⁷ The sixth century poet Theognis, for example, writes: “In justice (*dikaiosunē*), in a word, is every virtue (*aretē*).”¹⁵⁸ And, according to Heraclitus, “thinking soundly (*sōphronein*) is the greatest virtue (*aretē*).”¹⁵⁹ Plato’s writings on moral virtue became particularly influential; in the *Republic*, Socrates distinguishes four traditional Greek values as the virtues needful for both city and man: wisdom (*sophia*), courage (*andreia*), self-restraint (*sōphrosunē*) and justice (*dikaiosunē*).¹⁶⁰ Aristotle adopted the same view, arguing that the best way of life for both individuals and cities is that accompanied by courage, moderation, justice and prudence (*Politics* 7.1). And in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he argues that moderation, courage and the other virtues are a mean between excess and deficiency. We see then that in the Greek

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, the conversation between Meriones and Idomeneus in book 13 of the *Iliad*. On this topic, see Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers*, pp. 8-9; Geerken, “Homer’s Image of the Hero in Machiavelli: A Comparison of *Aretē* and *Virtù*.”

¹⁵⁷ See Xenophanes, fragment 1 in Diels-Kranz (hereafter DK).

¹⁵⁸ Gagarin, ed., *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152, fragment 112 DK.

¹⁶⁰ Bk. 4, 427e and the following. Also see Plato’s *Protagoras* (330b) where the same virtues are listed with the addition of piety (*hosiotēs*).

tradition *aretē* originally referred to any type of excellence, but was later given a moral interpretation, though continuity between the older and newer conceptions remained in the *aretē* of courage.

Turning to the Latin word *virtus*, its original sense referred to the qualities that Romans considered manly: courage, strength, excellence, ability, manliness.¹⁶¹ To translate *aretē* into Latin, Roman writers used *virtus* (or *honestas*); thus, just as *aretē* had a wide range of semantic possibilities, *virtus* did too. Cicero, in *On Invention*, writes: “*Virtus* may be defined as a habit of mind in harmony with reason and the order of nature” (2.53.159). In *Tusculan Disputations*, he tries to square *virtus*’ older heroic meaning with its moral interpretation: “it is from the word for ‘man’ [*viro*] that the word virtue [*virtus*] is derived”; all the virtues “have got the name from the single excellence [*excello*] which was found to outshine the rest,” that is, courage (*fortitudo*) (2.43). In classical Roman texts, we can see the broad range of meanings *virtus* had, something which causes problems for translators. In William Batstone’s translation of Sallust’s works, he variously translates *virtus* as “virtue,” “excellence,” “courageous virtue,” “manly virtue” and “merit.”¹⁶² Likewise, Livy uses *virtus* in the old sense when he has Camillus proudly say that the Roman way of capturing a city is “*virtute opere armis*” (virtue, works and arms) (5.27). Machiavelli uses *virtù* with the same polysemous range it has in the Roman authors he admired, but even in Machiavelli’s time that usage was not unique. For example, to translate the various senses of *virtus* in Leonardo Bruni’s celebrated *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (1403-4), Benjamin Kohl uses “skill,”

¹⁶¹ *Catiline’s Conspiracy*, pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

¹⁶² See for example *Catiline’s Conspiracy* 1.4, 2.3, 6.5, 58.1; *Jugurthine War* 1.1.

“military skill,” “excellence,” “valor,” “courage” or simply leaves it as “virtue,” letting the context suggest whether it has the sense of military virtue, moral virtue or a combination of both. We see then that during the Renaissance, *virtù* was commonly used in both a moral sense and a non-moral sense, the non-moral sense simply referring to excellence or the power of an action to achieve a certain end.¹⁶³ As many commentators have noted, Machiavelli’s discussion of Agathocles in *Prince* 8 brings these two senses into direct conflict: Machiavelli attributes *virtù* to Agathocles while saying many of his actions lacked *virtù*. Only the context indicates when Machiavelli is referring to military virtue, the type of *virtù* Agathocles possessed, and moral virtue, the type of *virtù* he lacked.

As we will here see, the influence of Plato’s categorization of four virtues extended, with only slight variations, from classical Greece to Rome to Renaissance Europe. (Since virtue ethics died out in the Enlightenment, Alasdair MacIntyre characterizes it as “a peculiar kind of darkness”¹⁶⁴). As we saw above, Socrates in the *Republic* argues that the good city—and the individual who is ordered like it—possesses four virtues: wisdom (*sophia*), courage (*andreia*), self-restraint (*sōphrosunē*) and justice (*dikaiosunē*).¹⁶⁵ Cicero, in *On Invention*, his earliest work, follows this fourfold schema, translating these virtues into Latin as *prudentia*, *fortitudo*, *temperantia*, *iustitia* (2.159).¹⁶⁶ In *On Duties*, he devotes the majority of the first book to describing the duties which fall

¹⁶³ For examples see Seigel, “*Virtù* in and since the Renaissance,” pp. 476-77.

¹⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 92.

¹⁶⁵ Bk. 4, 427e and the following.

¹⁶⁶ The anonymous writer of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* cites the four virtues as *prudentia*, *fortitudo*, *modestia*, *iustitia* (3.2.3).

under each of the four types of virtue. As in *On Invention*, he divides the honourable (*honestum*) into four parts, but in *On Duties* he classifies them more broadly: the first part includes both *sapientia* (wisdom) and *prudentia* (practical wisdom or prudence); the second consists of *iustitia* (justice) and *liberalitas* (liberality), the third of *magnitudo animi* (greatness of spirit) and *fortitudo* (courage), and the fourth includes all the virtues related to *temperantia* (restraint). *On Duties* was greatly influential throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but Cicero's broad presentation of the virtues presented a few difficulties for later writers. For one, in order to present a neat schema based on four principal virtues later writers had to choose one type of wisdom, either *sapientia* or *prudentia* (a difference based on the Greek distinction between the type of reasoning that deals with universals (*sophia* and *epistēmē*) and the type that deals with particulars (*phronēsis*)). Also, by equating *fortitudo* and *magnitudo animi* (a word he coined to translate the Greek *megalopsukhia*) (1.61), his text made the exact relation between them a question for later commentators.¹⁶⁷

Saint Ambrose, in the late fourth century, was the first to graft this pagan tradition to Christianity, coining the expression "the cardinal virtues."¹⁶⁸ In *On the Duties of The Clergy*, written about 391, he marries Cicero's *On Duties* with the Bible, writing that "the holy men of Old Testament time...were well furnished with what men call the cardinal virtues."¹⁶⁹ He then shows how their acts embodied prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (written around the turn of

¹⁶⁷ For how later thinkers resolved this question, see Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, pp. 64-67.

¹⁶⁸ Macrobius, *Commentary*, pp. 120-21 n. 2.

¹⁶⁹ Bk. 1, ch. 24.

the fifth century) names the same four virtues—prudence, temperance, courage and justice—arguing that they are not only philosophical virtues but also “political virtues.”¹⁷⁰ Through influential pagan texts such as Macrobius’ *Commentary* and the numerous appropriations in Christian writers such as Ambrose and Augustine, pagan ideas continued to exert an influence throughout the Middle Ages. In the twelfth-century the texts of Cicero, Virgil, Macrobius and other Latin writers experienced a new popularity, reawakening the question of the proper relation between the pagan virtues and the Christian virtues.¹⁷¹ The authoritative source for the theological virtues is the canonized letters of St Paul, in particular 1 Corinthians 13.13 where he writes: “And now faith, hope, and love, these three; and the greatest of these is love [*agapē*].”¹⁷² The Greek word “*agapē*” was translated into Latin as “*caritas*,” and *caritas* is usually translated into English as “love” or “charity.”

Abelard, in his *Dialogue Between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian* (1130s), discusses the pagan virtues but argues they are incomplete without the Christian virtues.¹⁷³ Alan of Lille, writing in the 1170s, stresses the usefulness of the pagan virtues for political and social life, adding that charity can transform them into virtues which lead to man’s heavenly end.¹⁷⁴ Brunetto Latini’s *The Books of Treasure* (1266) discusses the Christian virtues of charity, faith and hope as well as the pagan virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice. This twofold schema of Christian and ancient virtues is

¹⁷⁰ Bk. 1, ch. 8.

¹⁷¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 167.

¹⁷² Also mentioned by Paul in 1 Thess. 1.3 and 5.8; Col. 1.4-5.

¹⁷³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 168.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

also adopted by Aquinas, the most influential of the scholastic writers.¹⁷⁵ The Renaissance writers of handbooks for rulers inherited this dual tradition and warned that any advantage found through dishonourable conduct would find its due in the afterlife.¹⁷⁶

As Skinner points out, Renaissance writers on princely government concur on the ends of a prince: maintaining his state, achieving great things, attaining honour and glory.¹⁷⁷ As the means to those ends, they generally prescribed the observance of Christian and classical virtues.¹⁷⁸ That Machiavelli takes the same ends for granted is seen through their various iterations in *The Prince*: to found or acquire a state (*P* 3, 6, 18, 19), to maintain your state (*P* 6, 18, 19), to secure yourself (*P* 9), to maintain your reputation (*P* 18), to avoid ruin, maintain oneself and save one's state (*P* 15), to acquire more territory (*P* 3, 12), to acquire empire and glory (*P* 8), to do "great things" (*P* 18), to acquire "glories and riches" (*P* 25). Machiavelli also states the virtues for which a ruler is commonly praised: being "liberal," "a giver," "merciful," "faithful," "fierce and spirited," "humane," "chaste," "honest," "hard," "grave" and "religious" (*P* 15). Indeed, he accepts that there is such a thing as "what should be done" (*che si doverrebbe fare*), that is, acting in accord with the virtues. He does not question the goodness of honour itself, and in *Prince* 18 he is clear that rulers should "not depart from good, when possible." Where Machiavelli parts from the orthodox tradition is in his insistence that "human conditions" (*condizioni umane*) do not allow rulers to act according to the virtues at all times (*P* 15). Without abandoning his respect for the moral good, he rejects its consistent applicability

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁷⁶ Skinner, *Machiavelli*, pp. 56-58.

¹⁷⁷ Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, pp. 131, 134.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 134, 182-83.

to the art of state: “it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good” (P 15). While earlier writers allowed some concessions when advising on affairs of state, for Machiavelli the necessity of acting against morality in order to avoid ruin becomes a central idea.¹⁷⁹ However, when it comes to subjects and citizens, the place of the virtues remains unshaken in his writings—except as a matter of comedy, as in *Mandragola*. When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* at age forty-four, he could claim to his friend Vettori: “one should not doubt my faith, because having always observed faith, I ought not now be learning to break it. Whoever has been faithful and good for forty-three years, as I have, ought not to be able to change his nature, and of my faith and goodness my poverty is witness.”¹⁸⁰ In the *Florentine Histories*, we hear a guildsman rouse his fellow partisans to reject the type of conduct that Machiavelli himself observed: “For faithful servants are always servants and good men are always poor” (3.13). While that criticism may apply to Machiavelli himself, he nonetheless chose to remain a poor and faithful servant of Florence. He considers honest dealings in citizens to be a sign of “goodness” and “religion” (D 1.55.1-2).

Since Machiavelli assumes the ends of security and well-being to be paramount, he critically examines how the virtues correspond to that end. His conclusion is that “if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and well-being [*la sicurtà et il bene essere suo*]” (P 15). He

¹⁷⁹ On scattered precedents for “Machiavellian” arguments see in particular Allan Gilbert’s *Machiavelli’s Prince and its Forerunners*. Chapter 6 below discusses some important classical precedents.

¹⁸⁰ Letter to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513 (*The Prince*, ed. Mansfield, p. 111).

shows this in the next two chapters by arguing that a ruler who is liberal will eventually have to maintain his liberality at the expense of the people, whereas a parsimonious ruler will not have to burden his subjects and thus will come to be seen as liberal (*P* 16); the same reversal happens when a ruler's mercy results in an unsafe, disordered state, whereas a few cruel punishments can provide security for all—for the state as a whole, cruelty is more merciful than mercy badly used (*P* 17). While this makes the virtues relative to the ends of security and well being, Machiavelli's analysis follows the advice given in the influential classical text the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. After the *Rhetorica* summarizes the conventional praises of the four virtues, it then discusses the case where one is "urging that they be disregarded." In such a case, one of the strategies the text offers is to show "that the virtue consists rather of qualities contrary to those here evinced" (3.3.6). Cicero uses this strategy in *On Duties*: "For often the occasion arises when something that is generally and customarily considered to be dishonourable is found not to be so" (*On Duties* 3.2); he gives the example of killing a man, an act which under normal circumstances would be dishonourable but becomes honourable if the man is a tyrant. The idea that the virtues are relative qualities, dependent upon the people, the time, the place and so on goes back to Aristotle's analysis of the virtues.¹⁸¹ Thus while Machiavelli's arguments on liberality and cruelty were unique, his rhetorical methods were not. Further, although his arguments are hardheaded, the reasoning behind them is clear; similar reasons are still often offered for the Right's policies on low spending and being tough on crime.

¹⁸¹ See for example *Nicomachean Ethics* 1195a, 1104a-b, 1120b, 1131a.

Prince 18 comes to the virtue of faith, a virtue held up by scholastics and humanists alike. According to Aquinas, it is “always unlawful” to lie or break a promise, even to enemies.¹⁸² Leonardo Bruni, in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, writes that “nothing can be judged more proper to the dignity of a state than a reputation for observing all its commitments,” and he claims that Florence “has scrupulously observed agreements even with its enemies.”¹⁸³ In *On the Prince* (1468), the Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Pontano maintains “there is nothing more despicable than not keeping faith. This is so important that once you have given your word, even to an enemy, it is still right to keep it.”¹⁸⁴ When Machiavelli turns to the topic of faith in *Prince* 18, he takes its praiseworthiness for granted: “How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his faith, and to live with honesty and not by astuteness [*astuzia*], everyone understands.” He then points out that there are nonetheless “infinite modern examples” of rulers failing to observe their word. In light of that fact he writes: “A prudent lord, therefore, cannot observe faith, nor should he, when such observance turns against him” (*P* 18). Machiavelli now uses prudence as a more respectable name for the astuteness that he just granted is commonly shunned. In his view astuteness or prudence is a quality which a prince should have.¹⁸⁵ Later, in *Prince* 21, he gives a definition of prudence which accords with his view that political options are rarely black and white: “prudence consists in knowing how to recognize the qualities of inconveniences, and in picking the less bad as good.”

¹⁸² *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, question 40, article 3 (*Political Writings*, p. 246).

¹⁸³ Bruni, *Panegyric*, p. 161.

¹⁸⁴ Pontano, *On the Prince*, p. 71.

¹⁸⁵ As Kahn points out, *astuzia* was sometimes used at Machiavelli’s time to signify a demoralized prudence (*Machiavellian Rhetoric*, pp. 255-56 n. 5).

Machiavelli returns to this point in the *Discourses*, arguing that republics should follow the “prudence” of the Roman Senate since it “always took the less bad policy for the better” (1.38.1-2). The most influential definition of prudence goes back to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*; therein, he writes that *phronēsis* (which was translated into Latin as *prudentia*) “is a true and practical state involving reason, concerned with what is good and bad for a human being” (1140b).¹⁸⁶ This definition is not as different from Machiavelli’s as it may at first seem since Aristotle himself recognizes that what is good and bad are relative: “the lesser evil is counted as a good in comparison with the greater evil; the lesser evil is more worthy of choice than the greater, what is worthy of choice is a good” (*NE* 1131b). The same idea can also be found in Pontano’s *De obedientia*, Diomede Carafa’s *I doveri del principe* and Guicciardini’s *Ricordi* (series c, maxim 126).¹⁸⁷ According to this argument, the good is sometimes the less bad. While this introduces some relativity into the judgement of what is good and what is bad in a particular case, that relativity exists within a larger and more stable conception of what is good and bad in general, and the ultimate end is still to choose the good, the better or the more choice worthy.

Which Ends Excuse Which Means?

While Machiavelli speaks to a prince’s desire to attain and secure his rule, a thoughtful reading of *The Prince* makes it apparent that the prince’s private good is

¹⁸⁶ For similar definitions see Cicero, *On Invention* 2.53.159; *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 3.2.3; Macrobius, *Commentary* 1.8.

¹⁸⁷ For quotations see Gilbert, *Machiavelli’s Prince and Its Forerunners*, p. 127 n. 34, p. 177 n. 59, p. 177 n. 58.

inseparable from the common good. That is, if a prince were to carefully follow all of Machiavelli's counsels, the prince's good would redound to his subjects, further securing his rule.¹⁸⁸ This inseparability becomes clear when one assembles a picture of Machiavelli's ideal prince and principality from the various counsels he offers in different chapters of *The Prince*.

If the prince is a new prince, he commits all necessary cruelty in one stroke and then turns his rule to the benefit of his subjects (8). He then founds his state on "good laws and good arms" (12). As a model to imitate, he takes one of the excellent men from antiquity (6, 14). He knows how to command, is full of heart and keeps the people inspired (9). He hunts to accustom his body to hardship and to learn the nature of the land, and he reads histories in order to imitate the actions of great men (14). He arms his subjects to show he trusts them and goes to battle as their captain (12, 14). He is careful to avoid hatred, in particular by abstaining from great cruelty and the property and women of his subjects (10, 16, 17, 19, 20). He avoids contempt by never appearing variable, light, effeminate, pusillanimous nor irresolute (19). He does not fear a reputation for parsimoniousness since it means he does not have to burden his subjects (16). He is more concerned to be feared and revered than to be loved (17, 19). To those who bring disorder into the state by killing or robbing, he is cruel, executing them rather than letting criminals hurt the whole community (17, 21). He breaks promises to other princes according to the state's interests but always points out the legitimacy of his reason for

¹⁸⁸ Hörnqvist provides an excellent discussion of how Machiavelli turns the prince's selfish desire for security and grandeur to the common good (*Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 281-82).

doing so (18). He is merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, but when such virtues would harm the state he does what is necessary while taking care to appear to uphold them (18). Those who do extraordinary good, he rewards in an extraordinary fashion. He honours those who excel in an art and encourages the citizens to pursue their livelihoods by providing security for their goods and keeping taxes low; he meets with the different communities in his city and keeps the people entertained with festivals and spectacles (21). He asks questions of his counselors and listens to them patiently but decides by himself and is obstinate in his decision (23). While the times are calm, he develops the *virtù* of his principality as a defense against the ravages of *fortuna* (25). Taken together, these counsels conjure the image of a united, content, secure and martial principality. Although it is not the most just state one could imagine, it is, for Machiavelli, the most ideal principality that accords with human conditions. A prince following his counsels would find that his security goes hand-in-hand with the common good (though, as we will see, in a more limited sense than the common good of a republic). While a bad prince may pick and choose the maxims that suit him, the type of prince and principality that Machiavelli yearns for is clear enough.¹⁸⁹

The *Discourses* maintains many of the same principles and counsels that are found in *The Prince*. However, in the *Discourses*, where Machiavelli is freed from the constraint of appealing to a prince, he himself argues that the prince's "particular good" is at odds with the people's interest in acquiring dominion, riches and honour (2.2.1). This is because the prince does not want his subjects to elevate themselves to the level of

¹⁸⁹ On this point also see Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 164.

competitors. In the *Discourses*, the common good means maintaining freedom from internal tyranny and external domination, engendering virtue, acquiring riches and glory, expanding in dominion and maintaining the safety of the fatherland.¹⁹⁰ Renaissance writers generally accepted the idea, found in the ancients, that one of a city's ends is to expand. Petrarch, in *How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State*, begins his mirror-for-princes by quoting from Cicero's *On the Commonwealth*:

all these who have preserved, aided or enlarged their fatherland have a special place prepared for them in the heavens, where they may enjoy an eternal life of happiness. For nothing of all that is done on earth is more pleasing to that supreme god who rules the whole universe in justice, which is called the State.¹⁹¹

We also get a glimpse of this ethos in Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People* (c. 1414-29) when a speaker in favour of purchasing Lucca lays out the common understanding of the common good: "I confess that I am moved by what men think good: to extend one's border, to increase one's power [*imperium augere*], to extol the splendor and glory of the city, to look after its utility and security."¹⁹² Although the city of Florence had a long history of pursuing territorial aggrandizement, it was not until the middle of the trecento that Florentine writers began to openly justify and praise Florentine imperialism.¹⁹³ The view that one end of a republic is expanding in dominion leads to the difficulty that the common good of one republic signifies the common bad of another

¹⁹⁰ Machiavelli reiterates these ends in *D* 1.6.4, 1.29.3, 2.2.1, 3.41.1.

¹⁹¹ Petrarch, *How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State*, p. 41.

¹⁹² Quoted in Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 61, 64 n. 82.

¹⁹³ On the mid-trecento as a turning point see Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, p. 41, and Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 40. On the various and changing Florentine attitudes towards imperialism see Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pp. 40-42; Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, pp. 12-18, 26, and, especially, Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 38-75. Hörnqvist meticulously shows how deeply and pervasively the theme of imperial expansion runs throughout Florentine humanist writings.

state. While earlier writers who upheld Florentine imperialism colour their arguments with one thinly-veiled justification or another (defending liberty against tyranny, Florentine security, Florence's Roman heritage, the other city's own good, Florence's observance of justice), Machiavelli is more frank about the matter: "the end of a republic is to enervate and to weaken all other bodies so as to increase its own body" (2.2.3). In Machiavelli's writings the common acceptance of imperialism is stripped of its rhetorical justifications and instead based on the necessity of a city's own well-being and security.

Having considered the ends of both principalities and republics, we may now look more closely at which ends excuse which means. Machiavelli's morality of ends is evident in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. In *Prince* 18, he declares: "in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no court to appeal to, one looks to the end." While he claims that the actions of both citizens and rulers are judged by their end, this is "especially" true for princes since, unlike citizens, they have "no court to appeal to." Thus, his comment points to the fundamental difference between internal and external affairs. For a prince, the most important judge of his actions is the opinion of his subjects. His argument rests on what he claims happens in fact: "So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone. For the vulgar [*il vulgo*] are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar" (*P* 18).¹⁹⁴ Not only do people judge a prince's actions by their end, but if the result is good they will think the prince's actions were honourable (at least his domestic audience will and perhaps also other objective

¹⁹⁴ According to Gilbert, "*il vulgo*" in the Italian of Machiavelli's period had the sense of "the mob" (*Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 24).

observers impressed by the result). Machiavelli's point is, however, far from a praise of consequentialism as the only measure of a ruler's conduct. In describing those who judge this way Machiavelli could have said "the people" or "the multitude" but decided upon "the vulgar" with its more base connotation. The prudent understanding is limited to the few, those who are close to the ruler or see through his dissembling, but the people, being forced to judge "by their eyes," judge by the appearance and the outcome (*P* 18).

Machiavelli already recognized the significance of popular opinion in a letter he wrote to Piero Soderini's nephew in 1506: "I think not according to your perspective, wherein nothing but prudence is visible, but to the perspective of the many, which must see the ends, not the means, of things."¹⁹⁵ While Machiavelli himself accepts consequentialism of the common view, he is not one of the vulgar taken in by the mere appearance and outcome of a prince's action. Rather, his point in *The Prince* is twofold. First, when a prince must act against virtue he should dissemble it (and we can say it is a merit of the people that they are offended by the dishonourable conduct of their rulers). Second, it is easy to dissemble because as long as the end is good, the vulgar will judge the means to be honourable. Machiavelli ends the chapter with the example of an unnamed prince who always preaches "peace and faith" while repeatedly breaching them in order to maintain his state. Thus, his example shows that while a prince needs to act against the traditional virtues, he can maintain his reputation so long as he is careful to always appear virtuous. What Machiavelli advises is nothing novel, but rather the practice of successful princes. It is ironic, however, that he was willing to risk bringing public calumny upon himself by

¹⁹⁵ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 134.

openly counseling such offensive but, in his view, necessary arts of state. Perhaps, it is simply the case that he hoped to impress the prudent with his understanding of affairs of state without concerning himself with how “the vulgar” may misinterpret it.

Machiavelli returns to the morality of ends in *Discourses* 1.9 but without going as far as in *The Prince*. The principal example in the *Discourses* is Romulus killing his brother and consenting to the death of his co-ruler. Machiavelli agrees that Romulus’ actions would set a “a bad example” if it were not for the fact that his intention was “the common good” (1.9.1-2). Machiavelli’s argument is premised upon the further claim that it is necessary for one individual alone to have authority when ordering or reforming a republic; otherwise, “diverse opinions” give rise to conflict (1.9.2). Based on Romulus’ example, he states: “It is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him; and when the effect is good, as was that of Romulus, it will always excuse the deed” (1.9.2). Implied in this example is the notion that the greater the end, the more excusable the act. The founding of the greatest city excuses fratricide, one of the greatest crimes. While the argument is similar to that of *Prince* 18 it goes less far in that Machiavelli argues such means will merely be “excused” rather than “judged honorable.” Further, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli specifies that “he who is violent to spoil, not he who is violent to mend, should be reprov’d” (*D* 1.9.2). With these two essential qualifications—that the end must be “the common good” and “to mend”—all the Machiavellian guidebooks to the pursuit of private goods lose their claim to his name.

In *Discourses* 3.3, Machiavelli discusses a counterfactual example that particularly speaks to his fellow disenfranchised republicans. If Piero Soderini had taken

extraordinary power in order to eliminate those who wished to return the state to the Medici, the maintenance of the republic would have excused his act: "Since his works and his intention had to be judged by the end, he should have believed that if fortune and life had stayed with him, everyone could certify that what he had done was for the safety of the fatherland and not for his own ambition" (3.3.1). Although the intention behind the extraordinary measure would at first appear ambiguous and fortune may thwart the plan, Machiavelli advises the gamble since one "should never allow an evil to run loose out of respect for a good, when that good could easily be crushed by that evil" (3.3.1). Even if fortune does not allow one to carry one's plan for the common good to its desired end, as happened in the case of Cleomenes, Machiavelli maintains that such a course is still "just and praiseworthy" (1.9.4).

Machiavelli's principal examples of ends which excuse unjust means are all based on the notion of "the common good." The end of ordering a good constitution excuses murder and even fratricide (1.9.2). The end of returning Sparta to the virtue of its ancient laws excuses Cleomenes' murder of those who opposed it (1.9.5). The end of "the safety of the fatherland" excuses the means of assuming extraordinary authority (3.3.1). The end of maintaining the "life" and "liberty" of the fatherland excuses any policy necessary to achieve it (3.4.1). While the above means are grave, their ends are good governance and the survival of the state. Risking the ruin of the state means risking property, rape, death and a change of governing power from within or subjection to a foreign state. Machiavelli prioritizes having a well-ordered state as well as maintaining the state's security and well-being over the rulers' strict adherence to moral virtue. Thus he argues that a ruler's

violation of moral virtue for the sake of security and well-being will be either praised or at least should be excused.

Machiavelli was aware that the idea that the end excuses the means could also be applied in a more unfettered way. He applies it to love in his comedy *Mandragola*, and in *The Life of Castruccio Castracani* and *Florentine Histories* he puts the idea into the mouth of others in circumstances where its danger is more apparent. *The Life of Castruccio Castracani* (1520) is a fictionalized biography of Castracani, a prince of Lucca who menaced Florence in the 1320s. Describing this prince, Machiavelli writes: “If he could win through deception, he never sought to win through force. ‘Victory brings glory’ was his motto—it mattered little how victory was achieved.”¹⁹⁶ This formulation makes more apparent one of the problems inherent in the view that a good end excuses bad means: the problem, as stated earlier, that the common good of one state (expansion through victory) may be the common bad of another state (submission through defeat). Castracani’s motto makes it clear that a good end has no necessary relation to justice; he puts the argument that the end excuses the means to the service of imperial expansion, and Machiavelli’s other works show that he shares the argument. In the case of imperial expansion the idea that victory, however it is achieved, brings glory may describe the common way of praising, but it hardly masks the injustice of it. Machiavelli’s argument is radical and offensive on this point since he does not scruple about neglecting the question of justice altogether.

¹⁹⁶ *Essential Writings*, p. 425.

In *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli shows the destructiveness of the argument that the end justifies the means when it is applied to partisan politics. In the aftermath of a violent revolt against the Florentine nobility in 1378, a plebeian guildsman encourages his fellow plebs to further violence by telling them: “neither conscience nor infamy should dismay you, because those who win, in whatever mode they win, never receive shame from it” (3.13). In the speech, the guildsman pushes this identifiably Machiavellian argument to its extreme; however, he uses it to justify their particular good, not the common good. As the violence is intended to further spoil, not to mend, the guildsman should be reproved (according to the argument of *Discourses* 1.9.2). The guildsmen, however, follow the pleb’s advice, and Machiavelli in his own voice twice refers to their acts as “evils” (3.13-14).

In *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli also uses the people’s rash judgment over losing a single battle to show why it is not true that only the end matters in judging an action. When the growing power of duke Filippo Visconti of Milan was threatening Florence, the leading citizens persuaded the Florentines that it would be prudent to aid the city of Forlì which had just been acquired by the duke. When the two sides then came to arms, the duke’s troops defeated Florence’s in the battle of Zagonara. Due to that defeat, the people turned against the citizens who had advised the war. In response, a high-ranking Florentine, Messer Rinaldo, tells the people: “it was not prudent to judge things by their effects, because many times things well advised do not have a good outcome and things ill advised have a good one” (4.7). Good advice, Rinaldo adds, should be praised even if it is not successful, for otherwise men will lose the incentive to give good counsel.

Machiavelli evinces his approval of the prudent perspective by praising Rinaldo's "good words" and his disapproval of the popular view by writing that they "said all the things an angered people are wont to say" (4.7). Since the people are quick to judge a thing by its end, they may condemn a prudent course merely because the end did not come out as planned. Although Machiavelli himself insists on taking the end as the most important standard, he knows it is not prudent to judge things solely by their end, as the intention also, of course, matters.

To sum this section up, I will draw together some of the main problems that arise from Machiavelli's argument that the end excuses the means. In *The Prince*, the ruler's most fundamental ends are security and well-being, and they may excuse dishonourable conduct on the part of the ruler. But, in addition to security, a ruler also seeks "glories and riches" (P 25) or, as he says in the *Discourses*, "empire and glory" (2.9.1). Many of Machiavelli's statements, as well as explicit arguments, show that in his view those latter ends may also excuse dishonourable conduct.¹⁹⁷ However, he extends his justification of dishonourable conduct only so far, for when a ruler goes too far he loses one of the very ends he is seeking: glory. As he famously says about Agathocles: he acquired "empire, but not glory" (P 8). In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli's argument that the end excuses the means rests on "the common good." The problem, as discussed above, is that when it comes to foreign affairs Machiavelli does not distinguish between the just common good and the unjust common good. In relation to internal affairs there is a further problem:

¹⁹⁷ See for example his praises of Cesare Borgia and Castruccio Castracani, as well as his praise of deceit in discussing Cyrus and Rome in *Discourses* 2.13.1-2.

different factions may hold different notions of the common good and, in pursuit of those ends, may apply the argument that the end excuses the means. Although Machiavelli himself has a fairly clear notion of the common good (*virtù*, strength, order, lack of partisan conflict, expansion), where the pursuit of different ends leads to armed conflict, Machiavelli's theory provides the means to judge the matter only afterwards; that is, only the end that is instituted may demonstrate whether the victor was acting for the common good. His discourse on Romulus makes his thoughts on this matter clear. Since men have "diverse opinions," the founding of new orders must be done by "one alone." Further, that Romulus' crimes were motivated by the common good "is demonstrated by his having at once ordered a Senate with which he took counsel and by whose opinion he decided" (1.9.2). In such cases, different ideas about the common good may lead to extralegal internal conflict, but, in the case of Romulus, Machiavelli excuses his crimes since his good intentions were revealed by the good he did for Rome.

The argument that the end excuses the means is most convincing in the case of preserving the security of the state. When it comes to maintaining the well-being of the state, the closer well-being is tied to security the more justification the argument still has. However, if the argument itself rests on necessity, then it becomes increasingly less justified when it comes to cases that relate to well-being in the sense of increasing power and grandeur. For those who accept the reasonableness of Machiavelli's argument in its more limited applicability, his writings offer only general principles and a few examples as guidance for deliberating about which particular ends excuse which particular means (something I tried to outline above). Machiavelli's main goal is simply to make a case for

the argument itself. My own concern is not with the difficult and troubling questions raised by particular modern situations, but only to put the problem's thought-worthiness on the table and to consider its moral and religious implications.

The Chain of Obligation and the Role of Justice

In the tradition which Machiavelli's period received, justice was a paramount virtue. The handbooks for princes written by other humanists make this point evident. Pontano, in *On the Prince*, written for the son of Ferdinand I of Naples in 1468, begins by emphasizing the importance of "justice, piety, generosity and clemency."¹⁹⁸ Bartolomeo Sacchi, in *On the Prince* (1470), highlights justice as the greatest of the virtues: "as Aristotle maintains, justice is not a particular part of virtue, but the whole of virtue."¹⁹⁹ When he comes to discuss military matters, he allows wars only for "just causes," and his list of such causes shows the influence of Cicero's *On Duties*. Thus, it is anomalous that Machiavelli mentions justice only twice in *The Prince* and that it is not to be found in his list of princely virtues in chapter 15. Rather, the first time he mentions justice is in chapter 21 when discussing what a ruler should do if a friendly power requests your aid against another power while the other power asks you to remain neutral. In such a situation he advises against neutrality:

when the prince discloses himself boldly in support of one side, if the one to whom you adhere wins, although he is powerful and you remain at his discretion, he has an obligation to you and has a contract of love for you; and men are never so indecent [*disonesti*] as to crush you with so great an example of ingratitude.

¹⁹⁸ Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, vol. 2, p. 71.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Then, too, victories are never so clear that the winner does not have to have some respect, especially for justice.

According to Machiavelli, neutrality turns you into the prey of both powers since it shows you are not “a true friend” to either. On the other hand, if you aid one power and he is victorious, he will be restrained from turning on you by his obligation for your aid; if he loses, he will give you what help he can and you will have the friendship of one whose power may revive (*P* 21). Florence found itself facing such a choice in 1510 while Machiavelli was Florentine Secretary. The King of France wanted Florence to declare its support for France in the event of war with the Pope, and the Pope wanted to detach Florence from France. Machiavelli was sent to France to temporize and, in a letter to the Ten of War from France, hinted at the importance of avoiding neutrality: “Your Lordships may believe as you believe the Gospels, that if the King and Pope make war, you will be obliged to declare for one side or the other.”²⁰⁰

Some scholars have questioned the consistency of Machiavelli’s argument in *Prince* 21 that “obligation,” “a contract of love” and “justice” will restrain a powerful ally. Chabod sees the assertion as an improvisation to buttress his argument against neutrality, pointing out that it is inconsistent with his argument in *Prince* 18 that since other men are wicked they will not keep faith with you.²⁰¹ However, Machiavelli’s point is not as inconsistent as it may seem since he often presupposes, what could be called, the affective power of obligation. To cite a few examples: since a new prince is obligated to those who called him into the state, he “cannot use strong medicines against them” (*P* 3);

²⁰⁰ Quoted in Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 115.

²⁰¹ *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 63 n. 1. Mansfield points to the same contradiction in his “Introduction” to *The Prince*, p. xi.

“men who receive good from someone from whom they believed they would receive evil are more obligated to their benefactor” (P 9); difference of treatment obligates those who are shown preference (P 20); the prince should obligate his ministers to himself (P 22); virtue obligates men to you (P 24); if a prince benefits his subjects only when he is facing adversity, they will not feel any gratitude for it (P 8); he expands on the last point in the *Discourses*: a republic or prince should win over the people with benefits during times of peace so they will oblige the people; if benefits are bestowed in a time of war, the people will think the rulers were forced to bestow them and feel no obligation (1.32.1). So although Machiavelli knows (as he puts it in *Prince* 15) that the “chain of obligation” is easily “broken” he nonetheless is serious about its affective power. Further testimony to Machiavelli’s respect for obligation is seen in Felix Gilbert’s description of how Machiavelli himself “felt so obligated to Soderini that in the years of the Medici restoration, he hesitated to go to Rome, where Soderini was living, because he thought that while a visit to Soderini would damage his chances with the Medici, he could not go to Rome without calling on his former chief.”²⁰² Thus, returning to Machiavelli’s argument in *Prince* 21, there is more reason for supporting a friend in war than remaining neutral since the bond of obligation may have some effect, and, without it, “you have no reason, nor anything, to defend you or give you refuge.” For a friend whom you have aided in war to turn around and crush you would be “indecent” (*disonesti*) and a great “example of ingratitude” (P 21). Guicciardini makes the same point in his *Dialogue on the Government of Florence* when he has Bernardo del Nero say that in a war between

²⁰² Machiavelli and Guicciardini, p. 172.

two powers who are more powerful than you, “neutrality is a bad policy, because you will be at his mercy, whoever wins, and he won’t have to consider you; whereas if you had adhered to one of them, you could at least hope that if he won you wouldn’t be destroyed.”²⁰³ Both of these realistic thinkers are willing to resort to hope in a victor’s decency when that policy seems to offer the most security.

Machiavelli also offers another reason for trusting in a more powerful ally. If the ally considers breaking, or does break, the chain of obligation, it still has to worry about justice: “Then, too, victories are never so clear that the winner does not have to have some respect, especially for justice” (*P* 21). Although he does not elaborate on this point the thrust of the idea is that the ally’s disregard for justice may reverse its fortunes. Perhaps he means it would not be too late to switch to the other side and reverse the perfidious power’s victory or even that such an indecent betrayal would also rally others against such an unjust power. Victors, then, should have some respect for justice because where there is great injustice the spirit of justice will be animated with arms. Thus the first mention of justice in *The Prince* shows that rulers must have some regard for it, if only out of prudence.

Machiavelli’s concern with indecent violations of justice is also seen in the *Discourses*. In book 2, chapter 28, he argues against such conduct based on an event from Livy book 5. When the Romans sent three ambassadors to warn the French against making war on the Tuscans, war broke out while the ambassadors were with the Tuscans. The ambassadors, disregarding their neutral status, fought with the Tuscans against the

²⁰³ *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, bk. 1, p. 64.

French. The French, indignant over the conduct of the ambassadors, turned their anger towards Rome and demanded that the Senate hand over the three men. The Romans instead honoured them with high office. Enraged further, the French assaulted Rome, taking all of the city, except the Capitol. From this event, Machiavelli draws the following point: “This ruin arose for the Romans only through the inobservance of justice, for when their ambassadors sinned ‘against the law of nations’ and should have been punished, they were honored” (2.28.1). He thus counsels that princes and republics should avoid such a flagrant violation of justice since the indignation that arises from it creates an implacable enemy. We see here that Machiavelli pays particular attention to the relation between affect and justice: in this case the indignation of the French over the way the Romans flaunted justice twice in a row. Thus, in Machiavelli’s view, it is prudent to observe justice because of “what indignation makes men do” (2.28.1). A third example of Machiavelli’s concern with justice for prudent reasons occurs in the *Art of War*. Machiavelli has Fabrizio explain that armies are constrained to “observe justice” where they encamp because if they fail to do so food supplies will not come to them from those who live nearby (6.150-52). Although these three examples of the need to observe justice are far from the rigorous natural law of the scholastics, respect for justice in each of these cases rests on the solid ground of prudence.

On the other hand, returning to *Prince* 21, Machiavelli’s advice on asking a greater power for aid and being asked by a lesser power for aid shows how limited his concern with justice is. In the first case, Machiavelli advises princes “never” to associate with a greater power in order to attack another, unless pressed by necessity. He repeats

the point in the *Discourses*: a prince or republic that calls in a powerful state for aid in offense (or defense) usually becomes its prey due to the power's "malignity" or "ambition" (2.20.1). In neither work does he ask if the acquisition one seeks is just; he only argues that it is imprudent to call in a larger power to make such an acquisition. In this case his focus on power and mistrust of human nature again have a moderating effect for a prince or republic that would follow his counsel. However, in the obverse case of a smaller power requesting one's aid in making an acquisition, Machiavelli advises it:

when those who fight together are of such quality that you do not have to fear the one who wins, so much greater is the prudence of joining sides; for you assist in the ruin of one with the aid of the other who ought to save him, if he were wise; and when he has won, he remains at your discretion. (P 21)

While it is unwise to request the aid of a stronger power unless it is necessary, if a weaker power makes that mistake by requesting your aid, it is prudent to join them. Again Machiavelli raises no question about the justice or injustice of joining together to ruin a third state. After the ensured joint victory, Machiavelli does not advise preying on the one who called you in—he merely points out that "he remains at your discretion." The different counsels he gives on making alliances depends on the relative power of the parties and who contracts the obligation: when you aid a stronger power, it contracts an obligation to you. If a stronger power aids you, you acquire the obligation (and find yourself at its discretion). When you aid a lesser power, it acquires an obligation to you (and you have nothing to fear from it). Machiavelli's concern here is merely with calculations of physical power and the affective power of obligation.

In *Prince* 21, Machiavelli's understanding of justice seems merely to signify honoring an obligation that has accrued through receiving someone's aid (as we will see

in the following section, this view is consistent with the theory of justice that he adopts in the *Discourses*). The second and last time Machiavelli refers to justice in *The Prince* occurs in the work's concluding chapter. He exhorts the Medici to free Italy from the barbarians to "put an end to the sacking of Lombardy, to the taxes on the kingdom and on Tuscany, and cure her of her sores that have festered now for a long time" (P 26). In this context, Machiavelli quotes a line from Livy: "Here there is great justice: 'for war is just to whom it is necessary, and arms are pious when there is no hope but in arms'" (P 26). When it comes to the justice of freeing Italy from foreign powers, Machiavelli turns not to Cicero or the Christian writers who drew on him but to Livy's history of Rome. According to this definition, the only requirement of a just war is that war is necessary. And in *Prince* 26 the context is war for the sake of liberty from foreign rule.

The quotation from Livy in *The Prince*'s concluding exhortation recurs in the *Discourses* where Machiavelli provides its context. After the Samnites broke their treaty with Rome by raiding Roman confederates, they offered to return what had been plundered and asked for peace with Rome. The Romans, however, rebuffed the Samnites. When this news reached Samnium, the captain of the Samnites encouraged the people, telling them: "War is just to whom it is necessary, and arms are pious to those for whom there is no hope save in arms" (3.12.2). The context here provided by Machiavelli shows that it was Rome which rejected peace and the Samnites who claimed to fight a just and pious war. Machiavelli's citation of this line here and in *Prince* 26 shows that he accepts wars fought for liberty to be just. About the injustice of offensive wars he is, however,

silent. The latter is not the case for those writers who uphold the tradition stemming from Cicero.

In *On Duties*, Cicero bases the definition of a just war on Rome's ancient religious laws:

a fair code of warfare has been drawn up, in full accordance with religious scruple, in the fetial laws of the Roman people. From this we can grasp that no war is just unless it is waged after a formal demand for restoration, or unless it has been formally announced and declared beforehand. (1.36)

Cicero also defines a just war in book 3 of *On the Commonwealth*, a work lost around 600 CE but known through quotations in Augustine and other writers.²⁰⁴ Augustine draws from Cicero in his definition of a just war: "A just war is customarily defined as one which avenges injuries, as when a nation or state deserves to be punished because it has neglected either to put right the wrongs done by its people or to restore what it has unjustly seized."²⁰⁵ Aquinas, in his treatment of the question "*Whether it is always a sin to wage war*," lays down what became the three authoritative requirements for a just war: it must be commanded on the authority of a prince in order to protect the commonwealth from enemies; it must have a just cause, that is, be waged against those guilty of wrongdoing, and the prince must have the intent of promoting a good or averting an evil.²⁰⁶ The just war tradition was adopted by the Florentine humanist Matteo Palmieri in

²⁰⁴ Zetzel, "Introduction" to *On the Commonwealth*, pp. xv, xx; Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 77.

²⁰⁵ From *Quaestiones in heptateuchum*, quoted in Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 240-41.

²⁰⁶ *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, question 40, article 1 (*Political Writings*, pp. 240-41).

his *Vita civile* (1435-40).²⁰⁷ Bartolomeo Sacchi in *On the Prince* (1470) allows wars only for “just causes,” and his list of causes shows the influence of Cicero’s *On Duties*.²⁰⁸

Leonardo Bruni’s *Panegyric to the city of Florence* (1403-4) incidentally shows how just war theory may be put to misuse. Bruni first states: “the fact that the Florentine race arose from the Roman people is of the utmost importance.” Based on that premise, he then argues:

there was no people on this side of the ocean that had not been subdued and brought under Rome’s power by force of arms. Therefore, to you, also, men of Florence, belongs by hereditary right dominion over the entire world and possession of your parental legacy. From this it follows that all wars that are waged by the Florentine people are most just, and this people can never lack justice in its wars since it necessarily wages war for the defense or recovery of its own territory. Indeed, these are the sorts of just wars that are permitted by all laws and legal systems.²⁰⁹

Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories* also shows just war theory being abused in a debate over whether Florence should attack Lucca. On one side it was argued that “no other campaign ever undertaken by the Florentine people was easier, more useful, or more just.” On the other side, Niccolò da Uzzano argued that such a war would be “unjust”; he added, however, that “since one lives today in such a way that just and unjust do not have to be of much account, he wished to leave out this point and think only of utility to the city” (4.19). While Uzzano cares for justice and believes that a war against Lucca would be unjust, he knows he must address himself to the spirit of the times. In order to argue against war with Lucca in a language persuasive to his fellow citizens, he argues, unsuccessfully, that such a war would bring loss rather than profit to the city. Machiavelli

²⁰⁷ On Palmieri see Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 65-66, 78.

²⁰⁸ Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, vol. 2, pp. 103-104.

²⁰⁹ Bruni, *Panegyric*, pp. 149-50.

comments disapprovingly on this episode, pointing out that the same multitude which censured the defensive war against duke Filippo Visconti was now set on an offensive war to seize the freedom and belongings of others (4.18). The way he frames the two wars shows the prudence of the defensive war and the imprudence of the offensive war. Machiavelli uses Uzzano's speech to show that "today" everyone openly cares more for profit and loss than justice. Machiavelli also shows how appeals to justice may be used as a rhetorical tool and how the prudent appeal to utility can in fact be more just. His own departure from just war theory should perhaps be seen in this light and at least has the merit of being more honest than using justice as a rhetorical weapon.

Machiavelli is considered the first important realist because he sees relations between states functioning in terms of avarice, ambition and power more than justice. In his vision, external relations are little more than an endless power struggle. As we have seen, he himself never scruples to question whether an acquisition is just or unjust. Rather, he condones the desire to acquire as natural (*P* 3), and in the *Discourses* he states as a generality that men "wish to seek to command others" (I.I.4). Because he accepts the desire to acquire as natural, he only censures it when it leads to acquiring more than one can hold.²¹⁰ While failing to question the justice of acquisition, he holds it is just to fight to defend or regain your liberty. Further, as we saw above, he thinks justice has a role in restraining a power from betraying a friend, warns about the hatred generated by flagrant acts of injustice and points out the importance of treating justly the people where one's army is camped. Although his silence on just war theory presents a major rupture with

²¹⁰ See *P* 3 and *D* 1.6.4 for example.

tradition, his writings still show it is prudent to have some respect for justice even if it is only for consequentialist reasons. While this is an impoverished normative position, it avoids hypocrisy, rests on the solid ground of prudence, and still has a restraining effect.

Machiavelli and Polybius on Justice

Discourses 1.2 contains one of the most important passages for showing that Machiavelli's understanding of justice and morality rests on a human foundation and that such a morality provides an objective standard for moral judgement. His account of the origin of justice is based closely on book 6 of Polybius' *Histories*, leading to debate about how and when he came to know it. A Latin translation of books 1-5 was printed in Rome in 1473 and in Venice in 1498 but no complete translation of book 6 was printed in Latin until 1549, and there is no evidence that any Italian writer used book 6 before Machiavelli.²¹¹ Yet considering how closely he follows Polybius' argument, its order of presentation and even word choice, it seems he must have had a Latin translation at hand. Since Machiavelli uses book 6 in the *Discourses* but not in *The Prince* it seems likely that he acquired access to a translation through the discussions he joined at the Oricellari Gardens after writing *The Prince*.²¹²

To see how much Machiavelli takes from Polybius and what he changes, we first have to consider the origin of cities and justice in book 6 of his *Histories*. We have been told, Polybius writes, that in the past natural causes have reduced the human race almost

²¹¹ Hexter, "Machiavelli, and Polybius vi: The Mystery of the Missing Translation," p. 76 and p. 76 n. 7.

²¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91; Whitfield, *Discourses on Machiavelli*, pp. 197-98, 206.

to extinction. Based on that supposition Polybius speculates that the scattered survivors would be stripped of their culture and arts and that their weakness would cause them to herd together like animals for protection. The strongest or most brave would emerge as a ruler, and, since his rule is based on strength, it should be called “despotism” (6.5).

Machiavelli follows this sequence in the *Discourses*, writing that “in the beginning of the world” men were dispersed and lived like beasts. As they multiplied they gathered together and, to better defend themselves, chose as “head” whoever was “more robust and of greater heart” (1.2.3).

Polybius’ account of how justice would arise in such a rudimentary society is worth quoting at length in order to compare it to Machiavelli’s condensed version:

as soon as the idea of family ties and social relation has arisen amongst such agglomerations of men, then is born also the idea of kingship, and then for the first time mankind conceives the notion of goodness and justice and their reverse.

The way in which such conceptions originate and come into existence is this. The intercourse of the sexes is an instinct of nature, and the result is the birth of children. Now, if any one of these children who have been brought up, when arrived at maturity, is ungrateful and makes no return to those by whom he was nurtured, but on the contrary presumes to injure them by word and deed, it is plain that he will probably offend and annoy such as are present, and have seen the care and trouble bestowed by the parents on the nurture and bringing up of their children. For seeing that men differ from the other animals in being the only creatures possessed of reasoning powers, it is clear that such a difference of conduct is not likely to escape their observation; but they will remark it when it occurs, and express their displeasure on the spot: because they will have an eye to the future, and will reason on the likelihood of the same occurring to each of themselves. Again, if a man has been rescued or helped in an hour of danger, and, instead of showing gratitude to his preserver, seeks to do him harm, it is clearly probable that the rest will be displeased and offended with him, when they know it: sympathizing with their neighbour and imagining themselves in his case. Hence arises a notion in every breast of the meaning and theory of duty, which is in fact the beginning and end of justice. (6.5-6)

For Polybius, the offense, annoyance and displeasure that arise when one observes an act of ingratitude make human beings understand the meaning of duty, justice and goodness through a combination of empathy and self-interest. In Machiavelli's account, Polybius' two examples of parenthood and a helper are reduced to their basic affective and moral structure:

From this [having united under a head] arose the knowledge of things honest and good [*oneste e buone*], differing from the pernicious and bad [*perniziose e ree*]. For, seeing that if one individual hurt his benefactor, hatred and compassion among men came from it, and as they blamed the ungrateful and honored those who were grateful, and thought too that those same injuries could be done to them, to escape like evil they were reduced to making laws and ordering punishments for whoever acted against them: hence came the knowledge of justice [*la cognizione della iustizia*]. (1.2.3)

For both Polybius and Machiavelli, the knowledge of justice is not based on the observations and reasonings of a particular community but on human nature. Machiavelli, however, elides Polybius' argument about duty, emphasizing instead that justice must be upheld through "laws" and "punishments."

It is noteworthy that this theory begins with the good deed of a benefactor. Problems only arise due to ingratitude: human beings feel hatred towards one who hurts a benefactor and compassion for the benefactor. Because men blame the ungrateful, ingratitude is seen to be bad; on the other hand, because the grateful are honoured, gratitude is seen to be good. According to this view, human emotions and judgements arise predictably and universally. From the observation of these causes and effects, human beings gained knowledge of good and bad; from knowledge of good and bad arose knowledge of what is just and unjust. The standards of this innate morality are the honest, the good, the pernicious and the bad (*oneste, buone, perniziose, ree*). The universal moral

emotions are gratitude and ingratitude, compassion and hatred. The universal response is to honor the good and to blame the bad. The good—gratitude—is just, and the bad—ingratitude—is unjust. Machiavelli posits a standard of morality which rests on a universal moral psychology. It is rooted not in divine law or natural law but in human nature.

In Polybius' book 6, Machiavelli found a moral theory he could wholly appropriate (though shifting the emphasis from voluntaristic duty to law and punishment). Justice in this theory originates from a combination of empathy for benefactors, condemnation of the ungrateful and self-interest in avoiding injury from others. It explains his understanding of justice in *Prince* 21 where it means not betraying a friend who benefited you. However, as Machiavelli points out in *Prince* 18, there are no courts to uphold justice between rulers; thus, there is no assurance they will act justly. Nonetheless, as seen above, Machiavelli argues that rulers must have some respect for justice if they wish their acquisitions to be secure.

Of Natural Things

This chapter develops an interpretation of Machiavelli's view of natural things. The first part analyzes his frequent deployment of the argument from "necessity" or, what he calls in *Prince* 3, "natural necessity"; the second part analyzes his concern with the question of a ruler's particular nature and his *fortuna* (or fortune); the final part builds upon the foregoing to argue that for Machiavelli the true way to govern affairs of state is to be in accord with natural necessity. For Machiavelli, necessity is the greatest teacher; it challenges the orthodox notion of the true way—whether associated with Christianity, the middle way or both—and establishes an alternative notion of the true way based on the effectual truth, a truth to which he subordinates everything else.

The Nature of Necessity

When Machiavelli appeals to nature, he rests his argument on a long tradition: nature as a universal standard. According to Leo Strauss, the discovery of nature (*phusis*) marks the birth of philosophy itself; this discovery was, he writes, the recognition that some things are "always and everywhere the same" and that other things are merely by convention (*nomos*).²¹³ Aristotle presents this Greek view when he writes: "What is natural is what has the same force everywhere and does not depend on people's thinking."²¹⁴ The idea that nature is a normative standard for conduct can be seen as early

²¹³ *Natural Right and History*, pp. 82, 90.

²¹⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b20-21.

as Heraclitus: “wisdom is saying what is true and acting with understanding according to nature.”²¹⁵ Cicero points out that almost all the ancient philosophers accepted the view that a life is good because it is in accord with nature.²¹⁶ Nature as a universal normative standard was also incorporated into Christian theology through the appropriation of Greek and Roman thought on natural law. However, in Greek thought there were two views of what is natural; according to one, nature signifies moral norms; according to the other, nature is something harsh. Thucydides expresses the latter view in his *History* when he writes: “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessity [*anankē*] of their nature [*phusis*] they rule wherever they can.”²¹⁷ Thus when Machiavelli appeals to nature as an objective standard he has a long tradition behind him. While he accepts that one ought to act in accord with nature, for him nature is not a moral norm; rather, acting in accord with nature usually means acting against morality for the sake of maintaining—and even for the sake of expanding—the state. In Machiavelli’s view, nature is closely associated with necessity. This becomes particularly clear in *Prince* 3 when he combines the authority of nature with the authority of necessity in the expression “natural necessity” (*necessità naturale*).

Like the argument from nature, the argument from necessity rests on an ancient and authoritative standard. It is not a coincidence that the importance of necessity is prefigured in the oldest fragment of Greek philosophy, the saying of Anaximander:

²¹⁵ DK fragment 112 in Gagarin et al., eds., *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 152.

²¹⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 95 n. 19. See *De finibus* 4.6.

²¹⁷ 5.105.2 (translated by Crawley, p. 354; translation slightly modified). On the darker view of nature also see Thucydides 3.82.2; the fable of the hawk and nightingale in Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 235-44; Polybius, *Histories* 6.5; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, sec. 45.

“according to necessity [*chreōn*]; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time.”²¹⁸ The notion of necessity also appears in Greek tragedy. A pertinent example occurs in Sophocles’ *Electra* when the eponymous character justifies her father’s sacrifice of Iphigenia by saying that he did so under “compulsion” (*biazō*).²¹⁹ The idea that acting under compulsion excuses what under normal circumstances would be evil encapsulates Machiavelli’s use of the argument from necessity. Also germane is the political use of *anankē* by writers such as Thucydides and Xenophon, and *necessitas* by Livy. The legacy of the argument from necessity is also apparent in the adage “*necessitas legem non habet*” (necessity has no law), a saying recorded in Gratian’s twelfth-century legal compilation the *Decretum*, but which goes back earlier.²²⁰ While the argument from necessity was limited to extraordinary circumstances during the medieval period, by Machiavelli’s time the idea that “necessity has no law” was a commonplace among Florentine policymakers, also embodied in the sayings: “when *necessità* chases us, we don’t need to deliberate” and “*necessità* dictates.”²²¹ Felix Gilbert, describing policymaking at Machiavelli’s time, explains: “*Necessità* entered when the accumulation of adverse circumstances was so great that no choice was left to man and human calculations were reduced to automatic reactions.”²²²

²¹⁸ DK fragment 110 in Kirk et al., eds., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 118. For an example of *chreōn* (necessity) in Heraclitus see DK fragment 80, and for an example of *anankē* (necessity) in Parmenides see DK fragment 8, lines 30-31.

²¹⁹ Sophocles, *Electra*, line 575.

²²⁰ Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 24; Giesey, review of *Studies in Medieval Legal Thought*, p. 1072.

²²¹ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 41, translations slightly altered.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Machiavelli also takes up the argument from necessity in his writings, but he uses it with such frequency as to suggest its general application in affairs of state. In *The Prince* alone he evokes necessity seventy-six times in its various grammatical forms.²²³ Machiavelli uses the argument from necessity in his writings in at least three ways. First, it can be used to justify acting against the moral virtues. On the other hand, he also argues that necessity can make human beings act more virtuously. As an example of the latter, he writes that “there is greater virtue” where men cannot afford to be idle but rather must work due to necessity (*D* 1.1.4). Similarly necessity produces virtue when soldiers’ only choice is to fight obstinately or to die.²²⁴ A third way he uses the argument from necessity is, as we saw in the previous chapter, to justify defensive wars and wars for liberty. My concern here is largely with the first case: Machiavelli’s deployment of necessity to argue against orthodox moral positions. He uses necessity not in the strict causal sense but with the understanding that any other option spells ruin. For Machiavelli, necessity has its own laws, and rulers should follow them even when it means acting against the moral virtues. As he makes an old, wise man say in *Florentine Histories*, “things done out of necessity neither should nor can merit praise or blame” (5.11). In Machiavelli’s view, it is prudent to act in accord with necessity, and those who understand that will neither praise nor blame others for doing so.

Some writers have explained Machiavelli’s break with orthodoxy by arguing that his perspective was so focused on affairs of state that he simply failed to see the conflict between his counsels and morality. According to Chabod, his singular passion for affairs

²²³ Whitfield, *Machiavelli*, p. 67.

²²⁴ See *D* 3.12.1-2 and 2.12.3.

of state blinded him to the conflict between politics and ethics, and the conflict only became apparent to those who came after him.²²⁵ Meinecke suggests that Machiavelli was insensible to the contradiction in arguing that a state needs religion, morality and law, yet that rulers can act against them for the sake of the state's self-preservation: "He was not able to feel it, for the reason that his cast-iron theory of *necessità* concealed it from him, or because (as he believed, at least) the theory of *necessità* resolved the contradiction."²²⁶ According to Isaiah Berlin, Machiavelli himself experienced no moral conflict because he embraced pagan morality and ignored Christian morality.²²⁷ It is hard to believe, however, that Machiavelli did not see the implication of his argument while repeatedly marshalling it in a polemical fashion throughout his works. Thus I will try to show that Machiavelli himself believed—as Meinecke suggests in parentheses—he had resolved the conflict between morality and politics through his theory of *necessità*. That is, Machiavelli's writings do not only incidentally pose the problem of politics and morality for posterity; rather, he uses the argument from necessity to resolve it.

An analysis of what Machiavelli means by "nature," the "natural" and "necessity" reveals that they are the keys to his thought. To begin with *The Prince*, it is in chapter three that he uses the expression "natural necessity" to excuse acting against the moral virtues. The surprising argument he makes is that it is a "natural and ordinary necessity" (*necessità naturale e ordinaria*) that a ruler "must always offend [*offendere*] those over whom he becomes a new prince" (*P* 3). A hereditary prince, on the other hand, has "less

²²⁵ *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 191.

²²⁶ *Machiavellism*, p. 40.

²²⁷ See the quote on pp. 13-14 above and for an explanation and critique of Berlin's interpretation chapter 6 below.

necessity to offend” since he is maintained by ancient tradition (P 2). However, a new prince, in order to give his power a foundation, is forced to use measures that injure some of his new subjects, though the degree of injury will depend upon the way he holds his new acquisition. If the prince goes there to live in person “it is enough to have eliminated the line of the prince whose dominions they were” (P 3). If he does not go there in person he must hold the acquisition either with men-at-arms, which offends many, or send colonies, which offends only those who are stripped of their fields and houses. Thus, Machiavelli, economizing, concludes that the latter is the better remedy. In *Discourses* 1.26.1, he expands upon what a prince must do to hold a new city or province taken by him: “not to leave anything untouched in that province, so that there is no rank, no order, no state, no wealth there that he who holds it does not know it as from you.” He bluntly acknowledges that “[t]hese modes are very cruel, and enemies to every way of life, not only Christian but human.” He even concludes it is therefore best to live a private life but that “he who does not wish to take this first way of the good must enter into this evil one if he wishes to maintain himself” (1.26.1). These injuries to which a new prince must subject the people he attains rule over are, as Machiavelli argues in *Prince* 3, natural necessities. While Machiavelli was of course interested in the practical problem of how a new prince may secure new acquisitions, he may also have been interested in new princes because their situation exemplifies the conflict between the moral good and the political good and how the political good requires acting in accord with necessity.²²⁸

²²⁸ Wolin similarly argues that for Machiavelli the new principality presents “a purer form of politics” (*Politics and Vision*, p. 179).

The natural necessity to offend new subjects in turn gives rise to “a natural difficulty”: those inhabitants who supported the new prince find they fare worse rather than better due to the offenses perpetrated by the new prince (*P* 3). Thus, acquisition leads to difficulties for both the new prince, since he must commit inhumane offenses, and to those inhabitants who supported him, since they find themselves among the offended. Nonetheless, although acquisition naturally leads to these difficulties, Machiavelli maintains that the desire to acquire is natural: “And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire” (*È cosa veramente molto naturale e ordinaria desiderare di acquistare*) (*P* 3). By calling the desire to acquire “natural,” Machiavelli gives acquisition the normative authority of nature. By saying it is “ordinary,” he also gives it the authority of convention. He justifies acquisition by both *phusis* and *nomos*, nature and convention.

After positing that the “desire” to acquire is natural, Machiavelli makes a further claim:

and always, when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when they cannot, and wish to do it anyway, here lie the error and the blame. Thus, if France could have attacked Naples with his own forces, he should have done so; if he could not, he should not have divided Naples. (*P* 3)

In making the claim that acquisition will be praised or not blamed, Machiavelli ignores the question of whether or not the acquisition is just. For him, it is merely a question of power, thus, his cold analysis that the king of France should have attacked Naples if he had the power to conquer it or left it if he did not (*P* 3). Setting aside the fact that Machiavelli ignores justice, his argument that acquisition will be praised or not blamed is still rather one-sided since there are several points of view to consider. Firstly, the prudent

observer, objectively analyzing from the point of view of power, may praise or not blame the prince for making new acquisitions (as Machiavelli does of Cesare Borgia). Secondly, those who benefit from the acquisition may praise the victor, but, thirdly, the disenfranchised surely will not. When Machiavelli himself considers foreign conquerors in Italy from an Italian point of view, he refers to them as barbarians, castigating their “barbarous cruelties and insults” (*P* 26). While he neither praises nor blames the conquerors, he does blame the Italians. Comparing foreign invasions to a flood, he places the blame for their ruin on Italy’s lack of “knowledge of arms” and “suitable virtue” (*P* 12, 25). From Machiavelli’s perspective, a prince’s ambition should not exceed his power, and men should be able to defend themselves against others through their own virtue and prudence. His detachment when he is being the cold analyst of power is the basis for the interpretation of Machiavelli as a proto-political scientist as well as a realist. However, he is not a scientist in the sense of avoiding all normative judgments, nor is he a realist in the sense of reducing political life only to power since he also considers other factors such as the power of obligation and the importance of winning glory.

One reply to the argument from necessity is that one always has moral freedom. Machiavelli’s assumption, however, is that using moral freedom in a situation constrained by necessity is to invite ruin. For him, necessity likewise trumps reason. He begins *Discourses* 1.6.4 by admitting that “the true political way of life” would be to remain within one’s boundaries, ordered only for defense, without posing any threat to one’s neighbours. However, he then rejects the feasibility of the true political way of life, arguing that “since all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must

either rise or fall” (1.6.4). His argument is not that a state must have imperial ambitions, only that it must be ordered such that “if necessity leads it to expand,” its expansion will not be its ruin. By “motion” and “necessity” he means such things as population growth, another city jumping in your lap, the necessity of increasing one’s strength to defend oneself against an enemy and so on. When such motion brings a state to expand, it must have the type of constitution that will allow it to expand with a strong foundation. The Spartan and Venetian constitutions provide a weak foundation: the Spartan because it admits no foreigners and thus has a small population, the Venetian because it does not arm its people. A state must be ordered like Rome—admitting foreigners and arming the people—so that if it expands it will have enough arms to hold what it acquires (1.6.3). Thus, “the true political way of life and the true quiet of a city” is, according to Machiavelli, an impossibility. He backs up this radical conclusion with a generalization: “to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you” (1.6.4).

Another reason Machiavelli favours a constitution ordered for expansion is that a quiet city becomes “either effeminate or divided” (1.6.4). Thus, the result of being ordered for peace is not only a lack of arms but also effeminacy and internal division. Machiavelli resolves a topical question of his day—which type of constitution is better, the Roman or Venetian—by an appeal to “necessity.” When he returns to the topic of the best constitution in *Discourses* 2.3.1, he there appeals to “nature,” comparing a small population to a weak tree trunk: “And since all our actions imitate nature, it is neither possible nor natural for a thin trunk to support a thick branch.” According to Machiavelli, a constitution like Rome’s is not only necessary but also in accord with nature.

At Machiavelli's time, the Venetian republic was seen as a model of stability.²²⁹ On the other hand, the Roman republic, as Machiavelli acknowledges, was seen to have good military orders but to be too tumultuous due to the power the plebs held (1.4.1). Machiavelli argues, however, that the greater "inconvenience" rests with the Venetian constitution since it maintains its serenity by keeping its people unarmed and thus must depend upon mercenaries (1.6.3). The city's weakness became apparent when it was put to the test and lost all its acquisitions "in one day" (1.6.4).²³⁰ Since it is then necessary to arm citizens as Rome did, tumults cannot be avoided. However, Machiavelli, judging the tumults by their end, argues they in fact had a good effect. He notes that they rarely led to blood or exile but rather resulted in "laws and orders in benefit of public freedom" (1.4.1). In particular, the tumults led to the creation of the tribunes of the plebs, an office that balanced the power of the consuls and the Senate; thus, by accident, Rome came to what, according to Machiavelli, is the best form of government: a mixed constitution of "the principality, the aristocrats, and the popular government" (*D* 1.2.5). According to Skinner, Machiavelli's argument that tumults advance freedom was "completely heterodox."²³¹ Likewise, Strauss sees his praise of tumults as "wholly new."²³² However, since Machiavelli argues that it is "necessary" for a republic to be ordered for expansion, it was necessary for him to excuse Rome's tumults. Thus one of his most original arguments originated as a necessary buttress for his privileging of the Roman constitution.

²²⁹ See Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought," particularly pp. 182-83.

²³⁰ On this point also see *D* 3.31.3. In *Prince* 12, Machiavelli had already censured the weakness of Venice due to its "mercenary arms."

²³¹ *Foundations*, vol. 1, pp. 180-83.

²³² *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 95.

Nonetheless, Machiavelli himself acknowledges that the tumults between the senate and the plebs eventually devolved into civil war and that with the final victory of Caesar Rome was never again free.²³³ Thus tumults gave birth to public liberty and then maintained it but eventually “altogether ruined Roman freedom” (1.37.2). This history of the rise and fall of Roman liberty also accords with Machiavelli’s acceptance of another natural necessity: “all worldly things have a limit to their life” (D 3.1.1).

Machiavelli’s defense of the Roman constitution vis-à-vis the Spartan constitution is likely in part directed at Polybius. In book 6 of his *Histories* (a book that Machiavelli himself borrows from in the *Discourses*), Polybius posits that once a country has enough power to ensure its security, further expansion is merely a matter of preference:

for guarding their own country with absolute safety, and for preserving their own freedom, the legislation of Lycurgus was entirely sufficient; and for those who are content with these objects we must concede that there neither exists, nor ever has existed, a constitution and civil order preferable to that of Sparta. But if any one is seeking aggrandizement, and believes that to be a leader and ruler and despot of numerous subjects, and to have all looking and turning to him, is a finer thing than that,—in this point of view we must acknowledge that the Spartan constitution is deficient, and that of Rome superior and better constituted for obtaining power. (6.50)

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli refutes such a position by making the imitation of the Roman constitution a matter of necessity rather than preference. But is his argument as definitive as he claims, or is it mixed up with what, according to Polybius’ terms, is really just a preference for aggrandizement? Machiavelli’s fervour for political greatness does suggest that his own argument is at least partly coloured by what is really a preference for Roman grandeur over the more limited grandeur of Sparta and Venice. Another clue that

²³³ See in particular *Discourses* 1.37 but also 1.6.1 and 3.24.1.

his argument is mixed up with his own preference is found in his admission that the Spartan state “lasted more than eight hundred years” (1.2.6), whereas the period of Roman greatness—from the creation of the republic to the civil wars spurred by the Agrarian law—lasted only “more than three hundred years” (1.4.1). It seems then that for Machiavelli what makes Rome greater than Sparta and Venice is its public freedom, its mixed government and the glory of its empire. Also, expansion makes *virtù* necessary, and it is clear that for Machiavelli *virtù* and the greatness achieved through it are two of the things that make human life meaningful.

For Machiavelli, when it comes to affairs of state, necessity is the greatest teacher, a higher law than reason. In *The Prince*, necessity and nature justify acquisition and the offenses that come with it. Further, as Machiavelli makes clear in the *Discourses*, the only choice for a city is to “molest others” or to be “molested” (2.19.1). In his view, this constant struggle necessitates being ordered for expansion. Since a city cannot simply opt to stay “within its limits” (*D* 1.6.4), there is no possibility of taking a middle way. This is Machiavelli’s most “Machiavellian” argument, for if expansion is necessary for the sake of security then the moral contraventions permissible to preserve security also become permissible for the sake of expansion. The idea that expansion increases security was a commonplace at his time, and the argument that exceptions can be made in extreme situations is found in several ancient texts (to be discussed in chapter 6). Machiavelli, however, combines the two arguments to endorse a vision of political life where the perpetual struggle for survival, liberty and imperium means that the rational end of natural justice must be subordinated to the dictates of natural necessity.

Whether One Can Vary One's Way of Proceeding to Match the Times

How a ruler's particular nature affects his success or failure is a question Machiavelli considers on several occasions: a letter written in 1504, another written in 1506, his poem "On Fortune," *Prince* 25 and *Discourses* 3.9.²³⁴ The problem he keeps returning to is that a ruler must vary his conduct with the times to be successful, yet Machiavelli takes it as axiomatic that one "cannot deviate from what nature inclines him to" (*P* 25). Since he consistently maintains these two antithetical positions, his final view is unclear. Is his point simply that a ruler is doomed to failure when his nature is out of accord with the times? Is his point that a ruler can and must learn to deviate from his nature? Or, was Machiavelli himself unresolved about the remedy to this problem? In this section I will argue that what his writings presuppose, and sometimes state, is that although one cannot change one's nature, one can accommodate oneself to the times if constrained by necessity or if one is prudent enough to accommodate necessity.

In 1504 Machiavelli wrote a letter to Bartolomeo Vespucci, a Florentine doctor of arts and medicine and professor of astronomy at the University of Padua. Although Machiavelli's letter has been lost, the professor's reply explains in passing the classical view of the relation between the influence of the planets and free will. As Vespucci writes:

²³⁴ Machiavelli's long interest in this question has been considered by many writers; I go over it again to focus on what it tells us about Machiavelli's understanding of nature. See, e.g., Burd, ed., *Il principe*, notes to chapter 25; Flanagan, "The Concept of *Fortuna* in Machiavelli"; Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*; Parel, "Natural Philosophy in Machiavelli"; Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, p. 72ff.

It is better that I pass over the praises of astronomy, and what utility it has for humankind, with dry feet rather than be drowned in the deepest whirlpool. Suffice it that your opinion must be called absolutely correct, since all the ancients proclaimed with one voice that the wise man himself is able to alter the influences of the stars—although of the stars' influences themselves no change can happen throughout eternity. But that statement is understood with reference to changing one's own step, now one way and now another.²³⁵

The "statement" the professor alludes to and explains in his reply is presumably the popular aphorism *vir sapiens dominabitur astris* (the wise man may overcome the stars), a view he attributes to all the ancients. A similar saying, upon which the former is thought to be based, is aphorism 5 of the *Centiloquium*, a collection of one hundred aphorisms attributed to Ptolemy.²³⁶ According to this view, the influence of the stars cannot be altered, but the wise man may change his way of proceeding to remain in accord with the stars. Vespucci, in accepting that view, assumes that human beings possess the free will to change their way of proceeding; only the wisdom of the wise man is needed to know how to change one's step to stay in tune with the stars. Machiavelli's later reflections on this topic show that while he agrees with that view as an ideal, his understanding of human nature makes it impossible in practice.

The first writing we have where Machiavelli examines the relation between a ruler's nature and his fortune dates to September 1506 when he was travelling with the papal court as a Florentine envoy. At that time, Pope Julius II took Bologna from the Bentivogli and Perugia from Giovampagolo Baglioni. Machiavelli used the occasion of a letter in reply to Giovan Battista Soderini, one of the Gonfalonier's nephews, to meditate

²³⁵ Machiavelli and His Friends, p. 103.

²³⁶ Parel, *Machiavellian Cosmos*, p. 11. The aphorism is: "He that is skillful may divert many effects of the stars when he knows their natures, and will prepare himself before their event or coming" (Ptolemy, *Centiloquium*).

on the theoretical implications of the pope's unlikely success. Due to the letter's importance as a seed of *The Prince*, it has been given a name: the *Ghiribizzi* (or *Fantasies*). Reflecting on the pope's success, Machiavelli writes: "This pope, who has no scales or measuring stick in his house, obtains through chance—and disarmed—what ought to be difficult to attain even with organization and with weapons."²³⁷ The pope's success leads Machiavelli to reflect on how opposite modes of proceeding can lead to the same good result. To support his observation he turns to the ancient examples of Hannibal and Scipio since the former attained success through "cruelty, treachery, and impiety" and the latter through "compassion, loyalty, and piety."²³⁸ He also observes that a way of doing something which is successful one time may lead to failure another time. The problem underlying his observations is the difficulty they present for finding successful principles to follow in affairs of state. To be successful it seems a ruler must be able to act differently at different times; thus, he airs the wise-man solution:

anyone wise enough to adapt to and understand the times and the pattern of events would always have good fortune or would always keep himself from bad fortune; and it would come to be true that the wise man could control the stars and the Fates.

However, he immediately rejects it:

But such wise men do not exist: in the first place, men are shortsighted; in the second place, they are unable to master their own natures; thus it follows that Fortune is fickle, controlling men and keeping them under her yoke.

Machiavelli rejects both of the assumptions implicit in the view that the wise man can control the stars: first, that men can have enough wisdom to know in advance how to

²³⁷ For the letter see *Machiavelli and His Friends*, pp. 134-36.

²³⁸ Machiavelli returns to this comparison in *Discourses* 3.21.

adapt to the times; second, that a person's nature is flexible enough to change. His reason for rejecting the latter is based on his view of human nature: "I believe that just as Nature has created men with different faces, so she has created them with different intellects [*ingegno*] and imaginations [*fantasia*]. As a result, each man behaves according to his own intellect and imagination"²³⁹ According to Anthony Parel, this argument is based on the "scientific" view of Machiavelli's day: "Each individual has his or her temperament, sometimes called also 'particular nature.' Being determined by its material basis, it remained inflexible in the face of choices the person had to make. Thus it was not possible for a person of choleric temperament to act as a person of phlegmatic one."²⁴⁰ Guicciardini shares the same view: "To be sure, if a man could change his nature to suit the conditions of the times, he would be much less dominated by Fortune. But that is most difficult, and perhaps even impossible."²⁴¹ The idea can also be traced back to Dante's

Paradise:

Should natural disposition find itself
not in accord with Fortune, then it must
fail as a seed in alien soil must die. (canto 8, lines 139-141)

Rather than calling this a scientific view, it seems more adequate to call it a materialist view since what it really opposes is the idea that one's will is free from one's material substratum. According to the materialist view, since altering one's nature is difficult or impossible, hope for success lies strictly in one's character being in accord with the needs

²³⁹ "Credo che come la natura ha fatto all'uomo diverso volto, così gli abbia fatto diverso ingegno at diversa fantasia" (Italian quoted by Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 97 n. 23, from *Lettere*, ed. Gaeta, pp. 230-31).

²⁴⁰ Parel, "Natural Philosophy in Machiavelli," p. 18.

²⁴¹ *Maxims and Reflections*, series C, maxim 31.

of the times. There is, on the other hand, a tradition stemming from Boethius' argument in book 5 of the *Consolation of Philosophy* that despite divine providence, the human mind still has free will. Aquinas, who was influenced by Boethius, follows a similar position when he discusses the influence of the heavenly bodies in the *Summa Theologiae*. While positing that the heavenly bodies influence material things, including the bodily organs and the passions, he argues: "nothing stops a man from resisting his passions by his free-will [*liberum arbitrium*]. Thus these very astrologers say that the wise man is master of the stars in that he is the master of his own passions."²⁴² Machiavelli, however, accepts the materialist view, a position consistent with his emphasis on necessity and natural necessity.

When Machiavelli revisits the question of one's disposition in his poem "On Fortune," his position remains the same, though he entertains a little more hope about the possibility of some flexibility. The poem was written between 1506 and 1512 and is dedicated to Giovan Battista Soderini, perhaps suggesting that the poem grew out of the letter he had written him.²⁴³ On the question of what causes one's success or failure, the poem offers the same view as the *Ghiribizzi*: "the inclinations [*gli umor*] that make you act, so far as they conform / with her [Fortune's] doings, are the cause of your good and your ill."²⁴⁴ While in the *Ghiribizzi* he called that which determines one's disposition "nature," here he uses heaven: "you cannot change your character nor give up the

²⁴² *Summa Theologiae* 1a, question 115, article 4 (vol. 15, pp. 105-107).

²⁴³ On the dating see Albert Ascoli and Angela Capodivacca, "Machiavelli and Poetry," p. 196. The poem can be found in *Chief Works*, vol. 2, pp. 745-49.

²⁴⁴ *Chief Works*, vol. 2, lines 103-105.

disposition that Heaven [*ciel*] endows you with.”²⁴⁵ Again, he muses that a man who could change his character “would always be happy and fortunate” but maintains it is impossible due to “the occult force [*occulta virtù*] that rules us.”²⁴⁶

While Machiavelli argues that one cannot change one’s nature, he offers three remedies for dealing with the power of Fortune. One is to choose “a wheel befitting her wish.”²⁴⁷ Secondly, he counsels that “a man should take her for his star and, as far as he can, should every hour adjust himself [*accomodarsi*] to her variation.”²⁴⁸ This argument seems to be the key to Machiavelli’s view since it carves out a sort of middle way between strict determinism and free will. Finally, he adopts the conventional wisdom that, as he puts it, “Audacity and Youth make highest showing.”²⁴⁹ To support that view he cites the examples of Alexander and Caesar. However, the main point of the poem is the tyranny of Fortune, as can be seen in the poem’s closing lines: “few have been successful, and they have died before their wheel reversed itself or in turning carried them down to the bottom.”²⁵⁰

In chapter 25 of *The Prince* Machiavelli returns to the topic of “How Much Fortune Can Do in Human Affairs, and in What Mode It May Be Opposed.” He restates his earlier arguments, though he adds a further existential speculation: “so that our free will [*libero arbitrio*] will not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is

²⁴⁵ Ibid., lines 112-14.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., lines 115-20.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., line 102. Dante makes the same point in *Paradise*, canto 8, lines 142-48.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., lines 124-26. “Però si vuol lei prener per sua stella, / E quanto a noi è possibile, ogni ora / Accomodarsi al variar di quella.”

²⁴⁹ Ibid., line 75.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., lines 190-93.

arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern.” Rejecting the view that everything is determined “by fortune and by God,” he carves out a place for sweaty virtue. The power of fortune may, he argues, be averted through preparation and ordered virtue, just as the power of a flood may be averted through the construction of dikes and dams. Thus, for Machiavelli, the remedy for the power of fortune is not wisdom but *virtù*.

Machiavelli makes his argument about free will in relation to his discussion of “opposing fortune in general”; it does not, however, seem to extend as far as changing one’s particular nature, for, when he moves on to that topic, he returns to his usual view:

if one governs himself with caution and patience, and the times and affairs turn in such a way that his government is good, he comes out happy; but if the times and affairs change, he is ruined because he does not change his mode of proceeding. Nor may a man be found so prudent as to know how to accommodate [*accomodare*] himself to this, whether because he cannot deviate from what nature inclines him to or also because, when one has flourished by walking in one path, he cannot be persuaded to depart from it.

In addition to his earlier argument that one’s nature is determined by nature or heaven, he adds the argument that people become habituated to acting in a certain way. He has no remedy for this other than the one prefigured in “On Fortune”; as he puts it in *The Prince*: “it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman” and “she is a friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity.” This idea goes back to the ancient Roman belief that Fortune’s favour can be won through manly virtue, a belief summed up in the old Roman saying

“fortune favours the brave.”²⁵¹ Three hundred years before Machiavelli, the idea was already adopted by Giraldus Cambrensis in his *De principis instructione* (c. 1217): “fortune aids and exalts the bold [*audaces*].”²⁵² The idea is also found in Piccolomini’s *A Dream of Fortune* (1444) where Fortune says she is most aroused “by those who put me to flight.”²⁵³ However, in light of Machiavelli’s view that one cannot change one’s particular nature, this remedy depends upon one already having an impetuous nature and coming to power at a time when impetuosity is effective (something he acknowledges is not always the case). For example, he writes that although impetuosity brought Julius II great fortune, if he had lived longer, the needs of the times would have changed and his impetuosity would have brought him to ruin (*P* 25).

The last iteration of the problem occurs in *Discourses* 3.9, “How One Must Vary with the Times If One Wishes Always to Have Good Fortune.” As Machiavelli acknowledges it is a topic he has “often considered,” and, as one may now expect, his discourse rules out precisely the happy solution proclaimed in the chapter’s heading. As he explains: “Two things are causes why we are unable to change: one, that we are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us; the other, that when one individual has prospered very much with one mode of proceeding, it is not possible to persuade him that he can do well to proceed otherwise” (3.9.3). As in *The Prince*, this means that good fortune depends upon a match between one’s particular nature and the quality of the

²⁵¹ On this topic see Skinner, *Machiavelli*, pp. 37-46. For classical topoi see Terence’s *Phormio*; Livy, *The History of Rome* 8.29; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.4.11; Virgil, *Aeneid* 10.284.

²⁵² In Gilbert, *Machiavelli’s Prince and Its Forerunners*, pp. 204, 239.

²⁵³ Quoted in Skinner, *Machiavelli*, p. 46.

times.²⁵⁴ He provides his usual example of Julius II as a ruler whose impetuosity brought good fortune; he also adds the example of Fabius Maximus to show a ruler whose hesitation produced good fortune. However, when it comes to the possibility of a ruler varying with the times, his examples are all negative: Fabius acted “by nature and not by choice” and “he did not know how to vary his procedure as the times varied” (3.9.1). When Piero Soderini “needed to break with patience and humility, he did not know how to do it, so that he together with his fatherland was ruined” (3.9.3). Julius II would have been ruined if other times had come for “he would not have changed either mode or order in managing himself” (3.9.3).

Machiavelli’s remedies for this problem in *Discourses* 3.9 reveal much about his political vision (a topic to be discussed further in the following section). He begins the discourse by acknowledging that it is an error to proceed with either impetuosity or hesitation since both exceed the mean: “because in both of these modes suitable limits are passed, since one cannot observe the true way, in both one errs.”²⁵⁵ While he grants it is an error not to observe the true way—that is, avoiding impetuosity and hesitation—he offers some remedy in the next sentence: “But he comes to err less and to have prosperous fortune who matches the time with his mode, as I said, and always proceeds as nature forces you [*e sempre mai si procede secondo ti sforza la natura*]” (3.9.1). In light of his argument later in the chapter (quoted above), the first remedy is a matter of chance

²⁵⁴ We can see the continuing relevance of this view in Henry Kissinger’s description of Reagan’s Cold War policy during the 1980s: “The phenomenon of Reagan sprang from a fortuitous convergence of personality and opportunity: a decade earlier, he would have seemed too militant; a decade later, too one-track” (*Diplomacy*, p. 802).

²⁵⁵ “perchè nell’uno e nell’altro di questi modi si passano e’ termini convenienti, non si potendo osservare la vera via, nell’uno e nell’altro si erra.”

since only fortune determines if one's mode of proceeding matches the times. His second remedy for good fortune—that one “always proceeds as nature forces you”—counsels acting in accord with one's nature even if it exceeds suitable limits. In other words, rather than trying to accommodate oneself to the middle way, one should follow one's nature. Machiavelli already expressed such an idea in the *Ghiribizzi*: “each man must do what his mind prompts him to—and do it with daring.”²⁵⁶ Seen in a certain light, this argument shows Machiavelli's humanity, for he advises accepting the character nature has given one rather than trying to battle its excesses with reason as the tradition stemming from Greek thought teaches. Machiavelli's point is to stake one's fortune on the character one has. Compare this to Aristotle's influential text on the ethics of the mean: “we each have different natural tendencies.... And we should drag ourselves in the opposite direction, because we shall arrive at the mean by holding far off from where we would miss the mark [*hamartanō*], just as people do when straightening warped pieces of wood.”²⁵⁷ *Hamartanō* is also often translated as “error,” a translation which fits more closely with the vocabulary Machiavelli uses.

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli also points to another remedy, one which would have been out of place in *The Prince*.²⁵⁸ In a republic, there are “diverse citizens and divers humors” (3.9.1); thus, the problem of matching the needs of the present with a certain humor is not totally in the hands of fortune. From that point of view, republican

²⁵⁶ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 134.

²⁵⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b2-8.

²⁵⁸ On this point also see Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 251-52.

governance is the best way to have good fortune. However, the danger for republics, he cautions, is that they are slow to vary their way of proceeding (3.9.3).

When it comes to the question of how one should inwardly face one's fortune, Machiavelli maintains the traditional Stoic position: "great men are always the same in every fortune; and if it varies—now by exalting them, now by crushing them—they do not vary but always keep their spirit firm and joined with their mode of life so that one easily knows for each that fortune does not have power over them" (*D* 3.31.1). Likewise, in *The Ass*, he writes: "because weeping has always been shameful to a man, he / should turn to the blows of Fortune a face unstained with tears."²⁵⁹ When it comes to the question of whether one can vary one's way of proceeding, it seems his underlying view is the one expressed in "On Fortune" where he says one cannot change one's nature but should, as far as is possible, accommodate oneself (*accomodarsi*) to the variations of fortune.²⁶⁰ In *Prince* 18, he says, without questioning it, that a prince "needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him." And, in *Discourses* 3.8.2, he writes that men "should consider the times and accommodate [*accommodarsi*] themselves to them." To make sense of these various pronouncements, it seems we must accept his view to be that one cannot change one's nature but that one can accommodate oneself to fortune if one is prudent enough.

Further, his writings presuppose that rulers can accommodate themselves to the times. *Discourses* 3.21.4 gives an example of how Scipio did so, for, although his nature was humane and merciful, when faced with a rebellion among his soldiers, he "was

²⁵⁹ *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 757, lines 85-87.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 748, lines 124-26.

constrained to use [*usare*] part of the cruelty he had fled from.” Scipio, recognizing the necessity of acting against his nature, was able to accommodate himself to the needs of the times. The expression “to use” is also important in *Prince* 18 where Machiavelli says, “since a prince is compelled of necessity to know well how to use [*sapere bene usare*] the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion.” A prince must know how *to use* the lion and the fox. Although one cannot change one’s nature, one can *use* cruelty, the lion, the fox. Even a beastly prince must know how to use the man: he must “know well how to use the beast and the man,” for “the one without the other is not lasting” (*P* 18). It seems then that for Machiavelli prudent men may learn how to deviate from their nature enough to accommodate themselves to the times. If one could not vary one’s way of proceeding at all, then Machiavelli’s writings would have no purpose. He wrote a handbook for princes because successful leadership is a matter of “know-how” and he teaches that “know-how.”²⁶¹ The half of our actions that fortune leaves to free will allows a virtuous prince to prepare for fortune’s rages, but also to learn how to use different modes to accommodate oneself to the times.

The True Way

This final section will focus on Machiavelli’s statements about the true way and its relation to Christianity, the middle way, the Roman way and necessity. Machiavelli himself alludes to the Gospel of John in *Discourses* 2.2.2 when he refers to “our religion” as “the truth and the true way” (*la verità e la vera via*). As we saw above in *Discourses*

²⁶¹ For other instances of “know how” see *D* 1.17.3, 1.27.1, 3.27.2, 3.30.1.

3.9.1, Machiavelli also associates the true way with the middle way. Further, Christianity and the Aristotelian middle way were woven into the same fabric by scholastic writers such as Aquinas. While Machiavelli acknowledges these orthodox notions of the true way in passing, this section will show that he subordinates the orthodox true way to another more efficacious rival, the true way of the Romans and of necessity.

At Machiavelli's time, taking the middle way was a conventional Florentine policy, supported by the authority of both Aristotle and scholasticism.²⁶² Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, famously defines virtue (*aretē*) in terms of the mean: "there is an excess, a deficiency and a mean in actions. Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency constitute misses of the mark, while the mean is praised and on target."²⁶³ Aquinas, the most influential of the scholastics, follows Aristotle on the doctrine of the middle way; comparing moral virtue (*virtus moralis*) to works of art, he writes that for both of them, "evil consists in discordance from their rule or measure, and it may come about either by exceeding the measure or by falling short of it."²⁶⁴ When Machiavelli discusses the extremes of impetuosity and hesitation in *Discourses* 3.9, he begins, as we saw, by acknowledging the orthodox position that they are an error, whereas conduct that remains within "suitable limits" is "the true way" (3.9.1). However, he then flatly states: "one cannot observe the true way" (3.9.1). According to an implicit logic of the excluded middle, Machiavelli rejects the idea that nature makes people with middling dispositions or that one is free to chart one's way between the extremes. As he

²⁶² On the middle way in Florentine policy see Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 34; Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 99.

²⁶³ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b25-26.

²⁶⁴ *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae, question 64, article 1 (vol. 23, p. 167).

puts it in the *Ghiribizzi*: “it is impossible to be both cruel and compassionate.”²⁶⁵ Thus, despite his initial concession, Machiavelli’s argument in fact challenges the doctrine of the middle way, excusing impetuosity and hesitation, or, in other words, excess and deficiency. Since his argument implies that one’s “nature” and “the true way” are in conflict, there is some ambiguity about which, in his view, has greater authority. The answer is supplied, it seems, by his argument that acting in accord with the way that nature forces you to leads to “prosperous fortune” (3.9.1). The conflict between the two is then resolved by the end. Thus, for Machiavelli, the conventional notion of the middle way, or the true way, is not a good guide in affairs of state. In his view, nature does not produce people in accord with the middle way, and even the quality of the times seems to favour extremes, usually impetuosity but sometimes hesitation.

Machiavelli continues his polemic against the middle way in *Discourses* 3.21.3 when he states: “One cannot hold exactly to the middle way, for our nature does not consent to it, but it is necessary to mitigate those things that exceed with an excessive virtue, as did Hannibal and Scipio.” In this chapter, Machiavelli again equates “the middle way” with “the true way” but again holds it up as an ideal that is out of reach. The two extremes under consideration in this discourse are wanting too much to be loved or too much to be feared. Machiavelli recognizes that both lead to trouble: “he who desires too much to be loved becomes despicable, however little he departs from the true way; the other, who desires too much to be feared, becomes hateful, however little he exceeds the mode” (3.21.3). Since Machiavelli rules out the possibility of holding to a middle way,

²⁶⁵ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 134.

the only hope for correcting the error that arises from either extreme is to mitigate it by possessing “*una eccessiva virtù*” (3.21.3). Thus, a good type of excess, an excess of virtue, can mitigate the bad types of excess that arise from one’s inability to take a middle way.

A third example of Machiavelli’s rejection of the middle way occurs when he addresses the question of whether one should distance oneself from a prince or bind oneself to him:

It is true that some say that with princes one should not wish to stand so close that their ruin includes you, nor so far that you would not be in time to rise above their ruin when they are being ruined. Such a middle way would be the truest if it could be observed, but because I believe that it is impossible, one must be reduced to the two modes written above—that is, either to distance oneself from or to bind oneself to them. (*D* 3.2.1)

This last example has a Stoic poignancy since Machiavelli’s own ruin came about through binding himself to Piero Soderini. We also see here that what the tradition considers to be the true way, that is, the middle way, “would be the truest” but is in fact an impossibility.

These three arguments against the middle way present a further interpretive conundrum: on the one hand, Machiavelli argues that men cannot hold to a middle way; on the other, his argument aims precisely at men’s propensity for taking a middle way. While his emphasis on the impossibility of taking a middle way seems in part tendentious (rather than based on its actual impossibility), his main point is to excuse the extremes and, further, to imply that greatness comes from them. Aiming for a middle way, on the other hand, leads to mediocrity. In this light it is interesting to compare his use of the archer metaphor in *The Prince* with Aristotle’s in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle, to demonstrate the usefulness of searching out the chief good for human beings, writes: “if,

like archers, we have a target, are we not more likely to hit the right mark?"²⁶⁶

Machiavelli, to justify his counsel that a prince should imitate one of the great men of antiquity, writes: "He should do as prudent archers do when the place they plan to hit appears too distant, and knowing how far the strength of their bow carries, they set their aim much higher than the place intended, not to reach such height with their arrow, but to be able with the aid of so high an aim to achieve their plan" (*P* 6). While both analogies concern attaining one's end, Machiavelli's example suggests that in order to hit the mark, excess is a necessary part of one's calculation. Thus we see the method in his fervour: without aiming above the mark, one falls short of it. This assumption is again evinced when Machiavelli, recalling the executions of several prominent Roman citizens, writes: "Because they were excessive [*eccessive*] and notable, such things made men draw back toward the mark whenever one of them arose" (3.1.3). If a city's end is security, well-being and greatness, then, in Machiavelli's view, excess, not the middle way, leads to the mark. In his polemic against the middle way, he is not, however, dogmatic; he himself sometimes points to the utility of the middle way (*D* 1.47.1; *AW* 1.167). Likewise, he points to the prudence of measuring one's power so as not to "pass beyond the mark" and come to ruin (see *D* 2.27). Further, some of his positions implicitly promote a sort of middle way; for example, his position on accommodating oneself to the times takes a middle way between free will and determinism. Likewise, his argument that laws in

²⁶⁶ *NE* 1094a23-24.

favour of public freedom arise from the conflict between the great and the people celebrates the compromise that results from the conflict (*D* 1.4.1).²⁶⁷

When it comes to the middle way being the true way, Machiavelli usually adopts his familiar strategy of acknowledging the orthodox position as an ideal but then rejecting it in practice. However, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli also speaks of another “true way,” one which refers neither to the middle way nor to Christianity. He presents this other true way as the best guide for affairs of state, and he learns it from the Romans and from necessity. In *Discourses* 3.27.2, Machiavelli declares that “the true” can be found in the judgments of “antiquity.” His example is how the Romans killed the heads of a tumult; unlike the Florentines who could not bring themselves to execute the heads of a tumult the Romans avoided any middle path (3.27.1-2). This connection between the Roman’s greatness and their avoidance of the middle way is also made in *Discourses* 2.23.2 where he writes “in judgments of state they always fled from the middle way.” This position is something he learned from Livy early in his political thinking; in his short oration *On How to Treat the Populace of Valdichiana after Their Rebellion* (likely 1503), he already held up the Romans as a model for imitation: “The Romans regarded any middle way as harmful. In their resolutions, they chose one extreme or the other.”²⁶⁸ If the Romans, in Machiavelli’s view, acted according to the true, and if they always fled from the middle way in affairs of state, then the orthodox middle way is not, in fact, the true way. Rather,

²⁶⁷ Also see Whitfield’s essay “Machiavelli and the *Via di Mezzo*” where he shows that Machiavelli’s proposals in 1506 on how to organize Florence’s new militia urge a middle way (one of which, as just alluded to, he repeats in *AW* 1.167); Whitfield also highlights instances where Machiavelli, in his major works, advocates prudent compromise over fervour and the extreme (see *Discourses on Machiavelli*, pp. 37-55).

²⁶⁸ *Essential Writings*, p. 361. On the date of the text see above, p. 53 n. 120.

the Roman way is the true way. This connection between the Romans and the true way is also seen in Machiavelli's analysis of the best way for a state to expand: "That which the Romans took is known therefore to be the true mode, which is so much more wonderful inasmuch as before Rome there is no example of it, and after Rome there was no one who imitated it" (2.4.1-2). Thus, for Machiavelli, it is the way of the Romans that is the true way. The orthodox true way, on the other hand, he deals with in one of two ways. When it comes to matters of conduct, he presents it as an ideal that human things cannot measure up to, and, when it comes to religion, he brings it into harmony with the truth revealed through Rome's example.

In *Discourses* 3.16, Machiavelli uses "the true way" to mean giving rank based on military virtue. This is another practice that was followed by Rome, for when the city had dangerous enemies and failed to, "so much disorder and danger soon followed for it that it at once returned to the true way" (3.16.2). However, after Rome defeated Carthage and Antiochus, it had no enemy to give it cause for fear and stopped appointing military ranks based on virtue (3.16.2). In this discourse, Machiavelli refers the reader to his earlier discussion of the same topic where he argued that once Rome attained supremacy it began to give rank to those who "knew better how to entertain men rather than those who knew better how to conquer enemies" (*D* 1.18.3). Because people follow the true way only out of necessity, even Rome erred from the true way once the necessity of fighting for its security was removed. Thus, ultimately, the true way is to be in accord with necessity and Rome followed the true way only until it reached its zenith.

The problem of ensuring that the highest ranks go to the most virtuous men is tied to Machiavelli's argument for why "the true political way of life" cannot be observed (1.6.4). In *Discourses* 1.6, he rejects the middle way of ordering a state only for defense: "since one cannot, as I believe, balance this thing, nor maintain this middle way exactly, in ordering a republic there is need to think of the more honourable part and to order it so that if indeed necessity brings it to expand, it can conserve what it has seized" (1.6.4). Since things are either rising or falling there is no viable middle path. Further, by being ordered for acquisition, "the more honourable part" receives their due honours by attaining military ranks (1.6.4). Thus Machiavelli's solution for ensuring that the highest ranks go to the most virtuous men is "to be ordered for war so that one can always make war" (3.16.2). The spirit of this argument is in keeping with Machiavelli's realist mode of analysis; that is to say, he is not looking at this problem from the point of view of justice, but from the point of view of how to order a lasting state. In terms of ordering such a state, his remedy of always being ordered for war solves three problems: it means the republic is ordered so it can hold its acquisitions if it expands (1.6.4); it allows the most virtuous men to be honoured with high rank (1.18.3; 3.16.2), and it prevents the ruin that arises when a "neglected and virtuous citizen" foments an imprudent war merely to attain the rank he would hold in a time of war (3.16.2).

However, as we saw above, even Rome failed to appoint the most virtuous men once it attained its zenith. Further, *Discourses* 3.24 shows that the remedy of always having captains outside the city only defers the onset of corruption because, as Roman armies moved further outside the city, the command of the captains had to be prolonged,

and, as their command was prolonged, the soldiers became more loyal to them than to the common good. The personal loyalty that captains attained in that way allowed them to start civil wars for their partisan good and eventually allowed Caesar to turn the republic into a principate (3.24.1). Thus, another natural limit—the corruption that results from overextension—arises from Machiavelli’s realist mode of analysis. If we consider all of Machiavelli’s foregoing arguments, we see that it is necessary for a state to be ordered to expand, but that once it has no enemy that can equal it, corruption begins to set in since command is no longer awarded based on virtue; further, once an empire’s reach grows too great, the commanders in the field are able to turn their soldiers from the common good to their partisan good. Thus, as Machiavelli acknowledges, there are so many ways a state can be disordered that “it is impossible to order a perpetual republic” (3.17.1). While necessary, expansion also has its natural limit, a limit that once crossed signifies the downward turn of the wheel of fortune.

Of Supernatural Things

The cause of this I believe is to be discoursed of and interpreted by a man who has knowledge of things natural and supernatural, which we do not have.

Discourses 1.56.1

Although it is difficult to pin down exactly what Machiavelli means when he speaks of “*fortuna*,” “the heavens” and “God,” the three terms are woven into both his texts and the worldview of his time. Part of the difficulty may arise from the fact that Machiavelli, as he himself acknowledges, does not have knowledge of supernatural things. Nonetheless, he does make scattered assertions about the supernatural throughout his oeuvre. This chapter focuses on those assertions to three ends: to consider how they bear on his understanding of affairs of state; to draw a picture of how he presents religion in his writings and, finally, to offer an interpretation of his personal beliefs about religion. In order to interpret his opinions about the supernatural it is essential to contextualize them within Renaissance thought and, in particular, Florentine thought. Otherwise, we run the risk of inadvertently distorting the premodern aspects of his thought by reading them through a post-Enlightenment view.

To enter the worldview Machiavelli was born into, we must see ourselves at the centre of the cosmos on a spherical, motionless earth. Through the heavens above, the moon, sun, five planets and fixed stars revolve in perfect harmony. The moon, being the closest planet, divides the cosmos into the sublunar world and the seven spheres of the heavens. God created—and is the prime mover of—the universe. His care for humans is evident in his interventions, as inscrutable as they often are. The movements of the

heavens affect sublunar things, and Fortuna turns her wheel causing the rise and fall of people, cities and empires.²⁶⁹

Influential Christian writers reconciled Christianity with heavenly causation by taking God's providence to be its source and with Fortuna by subordinating her to God.²⁷⁰ Machiavelli, in accord with the dominant beliefs of his time, speaks of God's involvement in human affairs, attributes agency to the heavens and speaks of Fortuna as a goddess with her own will.²⁷¹ He wrote two short religious works: the *Hymn of the Blessed Spirits (Canto degli spiriti beati)* and a sermon on penitence.²⁷² He also refers to religious matters in his letters, poems and plays. He makes several passing references to the afterlife (almost exclusively in his lesser works), though in his play *Mandragola* and his novella *Belfagor* he treats the underworld as something to make light of.

What his religious references mean for his personal view is a controversial topic. Since the diversity of interpretations is itself a marvel, I will briefly outline the major variations. On the one hand, from Cardinal Pole in the sixteenth century to Leo Strauss in the twentieth, many have seen him as not only an atheist but as an evil man. In 1557, the Church placed his writings on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*; they remained there until 1890. The Italian writer Botero refers to Machiavelli as "an ingenious man, but scarcely a

²⁶⁹ Witt writes that in trecento Italy "belief in fortune was almost universal" (*Hercules at the Crossroads*, p. 63).

²⁷⁰ For examples see pp. 157-58 below.

²⁷¹ Machiavelli speaks of God's involvement in his own voice in *P* 6, 11, 26; *FH* 6.34, 8.19. He mentions God's involvement, not in his own voice, in *FH* 4.7, 6.20, 6.21, 7.29, 8.23.

²⁷² As his autograph manuscript is untitled, this sermon is referred to as the *Esortazione alla penitenza* after its genre (see Germino, "Blasphemy," p. 150 n. 11).

Christian.”²⁷³ In Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, written around 1589, “Machevil” walks on stage and proclaims, “I count religion but a childish toy / And hold there is no sin but ignorance.” Fichte, writing in 1807, defends the merits of Machiavelli as a political writer but grants he was “a professed pagan.”²⁷⁴ Meinecke maintains he was “a heathen” for whom “the fear of hell was unknown.”²⁷⁵ Cassirer contends that for Machiavelli religion is merely a means to a political end, not an end in itself.²⁷⁶ Hülling holds he was an atheist who wished to destroy Christianity.²⁷⁷ Parel opines: “Machiavelli is a neopagan whose aim is to paganize rather than to secularize Christianity.”²⁷⁸ Coby contends he was an atheist who wants “to paganize Christianity” but “never finally decides what to do about Christian modes and orders.”²⁷⁹

On the other hand, many have defended his faith. The diplomat and Catholic humanist Gaspare Scioppio provided the first sustained defense of Machiavelli in his *Apologia* (1617), arguing that a proper understanding of his work shows that nothing he says violates the Catholic faith.²⁸⁰ Louis Machon in his *Apologie* (1643) states that Machiavelli writes with “fervor, justice and piety.”²⁸¹ Henry More uses Machiavelli’s

²⁷³ Quoted in Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, p. 233.

²⁷⁴ Quoted in Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 329 n. 2. Also see Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, pp. 152, 154, and Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, p. 123.

²⁷⁵ *Machiavellism*, p. 29.

²⁷⁶ *The Myth of the State*, p. 138.

²⁷⁷ *Citizen Machiavelli*, pp. 210-11, 251.

²⁷⁸ *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, p. 62.

²⁷⁹ *Machiavelli’s Romans*, p. 274.

²⁸⁰ Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, pp. 238-39; Ruffo-Fiore, *Niccolò Machiavelli: an Annotated Bibliography*, pp. 185-86.

²⁸¹ Quoted in Donaldson, *Machiavelli*, p. 188; also in Prezzolini, *Machiavelli*, p. 243.

writings to defend theism in his *Antidotus adversus Atheismus* (1653).²⁸² In the nineteenth century, a book appeared entitled *Religious Maxims faithfully extracted from the works of Niccolò Machiavelli*.²⁸³ In the twentieth century, defenses of his faith become notably pronounced. In 1920, Giuseppe Toffanin acknowledges him to be a Christian.²⁸⁴ In 1930, Felice Alderisio describes him as a sincere Catholic.²⁸⁵ While Luigi Russo criticizes Alderisio for going too far, he himself writes that “Machiavelli is a religious man, typically Christian in his religiosity.”²⁸⁶ According to Federico Chabod, Machiavelli’s “emotion is still tempered by faith.”²⁸⁷ Roberto Ridolfi and Sebastian de Grazia, his two most distinguished twentieth-century biographers, both believe he was a Christian. Dante Germino is in the middle; he points out the principal challenges to the atheist interpretation, which leads him to suggest that the enigma of Machiavelli’s thought remains unsolved.²⁸⁸

Despite all the disagreement, at least a few things seem clear. For one, he puts no stock in the type of fire and brimstone Christianity preached by radicals like Savonarola. In his life and writings, we see no anguish over what some Christians take to be the conflicting demands of this world and the next. Nonetheless, he never questions the existence of God in any of his works, and, in his letters and legations, he makes

²⁸² Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, p. 169 n. 41.

²⁸³ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 152.

²⁸⁴ *Idid.*, p. 152; Cochrane, *Machiavelli: 1940-1960*, p. 117.

²⁸⁵ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 152; Cochrane, *Machiavelli: 1940-1960*, p. 117 n. 13.

²⁸⁶ See Russo, *Machiavelli* (1st ed. 1945), quoted in Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, p. 1 n. 1. Also see Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 332 n. 14.

²⁸⁷ *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 147.

²⁸⁸ For a summary of the evidence in support of the thesis that Machiavelli was a Christian see his “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” p. 803 n. 16.

spontaneous references to God and Christ the way any Christian of the Renaissance would (and it is hard to imagine that even in those seemingly spontaneous and casual references, whether to the Ten, a close friend or a family member, he was self-consciously maintaining the illusion of piety).²⁸⁹ While the argument that he is an atheist may seem to account for some of his more unorthodox religious statements, it also means having to read against the letter of his text on numerous occasions.

The argument I develop in this chapter is that while Machiavelli's main concern is worldly things, he shares in the general religious worldview of his age. While arguing that he accepts Christianity as the truth and the true way for his age, I suggest that he has a deeper commitment to theism than to Christianity per se; that is, he does not seem to see Christianity as the one true religion for all times, but rather as a religious sect that has succeeded previous ones and will in turn eventually be succeeded. Underlying that view are his provocative hints that all religions, even Christianity, are in fact interpretations of the supernatural. Nonetheless, despite his acceptance of the obscurity of the supernatural, Machiavelli has the conviction that religion is not in conflict with the necessities of affairs of state. In other words, religions, which do change, should be interpreted in accord with the nature of man, which does not change. Thus he does not reject Christianity but rather interprets it in accord with his understanding of affairs of state.

The Early Period and Letters

²⁸⁹ For the point that Machiavelli never questions the existence of God see Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, p. 3. Likewise, as de Grazia writes: "Niccolò cannot be found to speak irreverently of God" (*Machiavelli in Hell*, p. 87).

To begin with Machiavelli's early influences, it is of considerable interest that he transcribed Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*). Circumstantial evidence suggests that he produced his copy in 1497, the year before he entered the Chancery.²⁹⁰ *De rerum natura* poetically expounds not only Epicurus' atomistic theory but also his argument that the soul is mortal. Further, on the question of the gods, the text states:

For perfect peace gods by their very nature
Must of necessity enjoy, and immortal life,
Far separate, far removed from our affairs. (2.646-648)

In the margin of his copy of *De rerum natura*, Machiavelli glossed these lines by writing: "*deos non curare mortalia*" (the gods don't care about the affairs of mortals).²⁹¹ Since the poem makes such arguments, those who were interested in the text had to keep quiet about it. Indicative of the need for self-censorship, the Church's Fifth Lateran Council of 1513 condemned both Epicureanism and Averroism. And, in 1516, the Florentine synod prohibited the reading of Lucretius in Florentine schools.²⁹² This is the milieu which nurtured Machiavelli, a time when Christianity and the *studia humanitatis* (humane studies) could go together harmoniously but could also find themselves dangerously at odds. Machiavelli's father made sure to provide his son with a solid humanist education, and, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli writes, "it is very important that a boy of tender years begin to hear good or bad said of a thing, for it must of necessity make an impression on him, which afterward regulates the mode of proceeding in all the times of his life"

²⁹⁰ Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, p. 69.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 14, 68, 77, 108.

(3.46.1). Machiavelli is presumably also speaking of his own experience.²⁹³ In that regard, it seems that his reading of Lucretius and Livy, among other ancients, helped him place his understanding of religion in a larger view of the relation between human beings and the supernatural. However, Machiavelli, unlike Epicurus, argues that religion, and even superstition, is essential to a well-ordered society. Also, as we well see, he questions the Epicurean (and Biblical) view that the world is of recent creation. Finally, the references to God in his writings and letters show a man who—while novel in so many ways—does not break with belief in a God who cares about the affairs of mortals.

Machiavelli occasionally begins and ends letters with such customary expressions as: “In the name of God,” “Christ keep you” or “Christ watch over you.” As de Grazia—who does not question Machiavelli’s faith in God—admits, the use of colloquial religious language cannot be taken to signify much on its own: “Such expressions in such contexts can easily be perfunctory, a linguistic habit without much fideistic import.”²⁹⁴

Nonetheless, if Machiavelli were a hardened atheist, he could easily avoid such theistic invocations. It is, rather, the very naturalness of his references to God that suggest his adherence to a theistic worldview. Several of such occurrences are particularly revealing.

In a letter to his nephew dated June 26, 1513, Machiavelli writes:

it is a miracle that I am alive, because my post was taken from me and I was about to lose my life, which God and my innocence have preserved for me. I have had to endure all sorts of other evils, both prison and other kinds. But, by the grace of God, I am well and I manage to live as I can—and so I shall strive to do, until the heavens show themselves to be more kind.

²⁹³ That Machiavelli’s statement in *Discourses* 3.46.1 is autobiographical is suggested by Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 4; Brown, *The Return of Lucretius*, p. 69, and Atkinson, “Niccolò Machiavelli: a Portrait,” p. 15.

²⁹⁴ *Machiavelli in Hell*, p. 62.

He ends the letter, “Christ keep watch over you.”²⁹⁵ Writing to his nephew again on August 4, he says, “no other hope remains for me but that God may help me, and, until now, He has not in fact abandoned me.”²⁹⁶ These two letters show that Machiavelli’s God is a God who cares about and is involved in human affairs. We may also note that he uses “God” and “the heavens” interchangeably. If he were an atheist, we must read these seemingly passionate and pious references—made at a time when fortune had brought him to his lowest point and written to a family member with whom he could be frank—as nothing more than colloquialisms, metaphors or methodical deception. In a letter written to his son Guido in 1527, he ends the letter with “Christ watch over you all.”²⁹⁷ In this case, the context of the letter adds poignancy to the words as Machiavelli was in Imola away from his family while the army of Charles V was descending on Tuscany. As the editors of his letters point out, in this case it is hard to read his use of the expression “as merely a conventional one.”²⁹⁸

Letters have also been used to suggest that Machiavelli is of little faith. In a letter written by Francesco Vettori on November 23, 1513, he teases Machiavelli: “On feast days I go to mass and I do not do as you do who sometimes miss it.”²⁹⁹ A month later, on December 19, Machiavelli writes to Vettori about an apocalyptic sermon delivered in Florence adding, “I myself did not hear the sermon, for I do not observe such

²⁹⁵ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 239.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414. Letter of April 2, 1527.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 561 n. 7.

²⁹⁹ Quoted in Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 332 n. 16.

practices.”³⁰⁰ However, on June 10, 1514, Machiavelli wrote to Vettori, “I cannot possibly go on like this for long, because I am rotting away and I can see that if God does not show a more favorable face to me, one day I shall be forced to leave home and to place myself as tutor or secretary to a governor.”³⁰¹ While the first two letters show that Machiavelli was not always present at mass on feast days and that he was not one for sermons, the last letter shows that he and Vettori nonetheless share the same conception of a God who has power over human affairs.

Other citations also support the case that Machiavelli was a theist. On January 3, 1526, he wrote to Francesco Guicciardini and, in regards to the death of the latter’s nephew, comments “since God has willed it so, so it must be.” On his imminent visit to Faenza he writes, “nothing can hold me back except illness, may God protect me from it.”³⁰² While these two references to God’s intervention in human affairs could be considered customary, Guicciardini was a man with whom he could be frank and a man for whom he would have no need to put on religious airs. His sincerity is further attested when he speaks of a more momentous expression of God’s intervention in a letter to Bartolomeo Cavalcanti written around October 6, 1526; here he writes: “if God does not help us out in the south, as He has already done in the north, then there are few remedies left to us.”³⁰³ Machiavelli and Guicciardini also exchanged some telling letters in May of 1521; however, since they make reference to the popular conception of Machiavelli’s

³⁰⁰ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 267.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 377.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

religious views, it will be useful to first consider the writings upon which that popular view must partly be based.

“Hymn of the Blessed Spirits”

There is disagreement about when Machiavelli wrote his carnival song entitled “*Degli spiriti beati*.” Tommasini dates it to soon after the election of Clement VII in 1523, whereas Ridolfi argues he wrote it for the election of Leo X in March 1513.³⁰⁴ As the song is written for a pope, its religious tone is dictated by the addressee; the main theme of the song, however, is political: blessed spirits come from heaven to advise “the new shepherd” to put an end to the fighting in Italy and instead unite against the Turks. In the song, Machiavelli fears not to interpret religion according to political dictates. In that regard, one stanza is particularly interesting:

Dunque, alzate le mani
Contr'al crudel nemico,
Soccorrendo a le vostre gente afflitte;
Deponete, cristiani,
Questo vostro odio antico,
E contro a lui voltate l'armi invitte;
Altrimenti, interditte
Le forze usate vi saran dal cielo,
Sendo in voi spento di pietate il zelo. (lines 37-45)³⁰⁵

Therefore, lift up your hands
Against the cruel enemy,
Relieving your afflicted people;
Lay down, Christians,
This your ancient hatred,

³⁰⁴ On Tommasini see *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 878. Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, pp. 139, 291 n. 21. Whitfield provides additional reasons for supporting Ridolfi's judgement (*Discourses on Machiavelli*, p. 20).

³⁰⁵ *Tutte le opere*, p. 856.

And against him turn your arms invincible;
Otherwise, your accustomed
Strength will be forbidden to you by heaven,
Since in you pious zeal is exhausted.³⁰⁶

According to the stanza's closing lines, heaven grants strength only to those with pious zeal. The piety of the Italians, Machiavelli warns, is exhausted but can be relit by turning their arms from each other to the Turks.

Princes and God

In *The Prince* Machiavelli never mentions the conscience, heaven, hell or the soul.³⁰⁷ The word "Dio," however, appears twelve times, six in chapters 1-25 and six in the final exhortation. The first references to God occur in *Prince* 6, where Machiavelli includes Moses among the excellent men who became new princes through their own virtue and arms. The other excellent princes he names are Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus. The justification he gives for discussing Moses in this context shows that he anticipated criticism: "although one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God, nonetheless he should be admired [*ammirato*] if only for that grace which made him deserving of speaking with God."³⁰⁸ Machiavelli acknowledges the orthodox view that Moses acted in accordance with God's will; however, he argues that Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus are also "admirable" (*mirabili*) and that their "particular actions and orders" were no different from those of

³⁰⁶ *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 880 (translation modified).

³⁰⁷ Strauss, "Niccolo Machiavelli," p. 303.

³⁰⁸ For an analysis of this passage in terms of ancient rhetorical strategies, as well as more biblical and historical context, see Geerken, "Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics."

Moses. Thus, despite his acknowledgment that one should not class Moses among pagan founders, he in fact does so and justifies doing so. While he analyzes the actions of all of them in political terms, his acknowledgment that God was Moses' "teacher" underlines God's approval of Moses' use of force.³⁰⁹ Further, by comparing Moses' success with Savonarola's failure he shows that even with God as a friend one must be armed. As Machiavelli anticipated, some early readers of *The Prince* criticized him for analyzing Moses' actions as if he were a secular prince.³¹⁰ On the other hand, one of Machiavelli's defenders, the Catholic writer Gaspare Scioppio, goes to the trouble of explaining in his *Apologia* (1617) that he did so because, as a politician, he wished to consider only natural causes.³¹¹

While it seems such a political analysis of Moses was unorthodox, Machiavelli's tone is hard to read; on the one hand, he speaks piously of Moses, but, on the other, his political analysis raises the question of whether he means what he says literally: that Moses was an instrument of God's will and that he spoke with God. While in *The Prince* his personal view is concealed by ambiguity, the *Discourses* seems to supply the answer, though still obliquely. After Machiavelli therein lauds Numa's ploy of pretending to speak with a nymph in order to acquire authority, he adds:

And truly there was never any orderer of extraordinary laws for a people who did not have recourse to God, because otherwise they would not have been accepted. For a prudent individual knows many goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others. Thus wise men who wish to

³⁰⁹ As God says to Moses, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Ex. 4.11-12).

³¹⁰ See Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, p. 279 n. 21; Donaldson, *A Machiavellian Treatise*, p. 18.

³¹¹ Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, p. 239.

take away this difficulty have recourse to God. So did Lycurgus; so did Solon; so did many others who have had the same end as they. (*D* I.II.3)

Machiavelli does not name Moses, but his pointed comments ineluctably evoke him. By writing “there was *never* any orderer,” his categorical words necessarily include Moses, the greatest orderer of extraordinary laws who had recourse to God. If that were not enough, his—“So did Lycurgus; so did Solon; *so did many others*”—again evokes Moses.³¹² Based on these comments in the *Discourses*, it seems likely that in *The Prince* Machiavelli also views Moses as a prudent and wise man who used the authority of God in order to found his new orders. If that is the case, then Machiavelli does not believe what he says about Moses speaking with God, yet he recites the orthodox view in order to justify his own point, namely, that the other essential element of Moses’ success, in addition to his *virtù*, was his recourse to arms. If Moses did not in truth speak with God, then, like Numa, he was merely a prudent interpreter of religion. This then suggests that for Machiavelli even Judeo-Christian laws are not the result of revelation but rather are “goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others” and thus required the authority of God (*ibid.*).

The next reference to God occurs in *Prince* 8, “Of Those Who Have Attained a Principality through Crimes.” In this chapter Machiavelli summarizes how Agathocles had the senators and the rich killed in order to seize the principate of Syracuse but then used his authority to defend Sicily from the Carthaginians. Machiavelli asks how

³¹² Emphasis added in both quotations. Fontana also argues that Machiavelli intended for the reader to make this comparison (“Love of Country and Love of God,” p. 646). For a more literal reading of *Prince* 6 see Nederman, *Lineages*, pp. 296-98. In *Discourses* I.II.5, Machiavelli points out that Savonarola was able to persuade modern Florentines that he spoke with God.

Agathocles could live securely in his state despite his cruelties and answers that since he did them at a stroke and turned them to the good of his subjects, he used cruelty well. He then adds: "Those who observe the first mode [cruelties well used] can have some remedy for their state with God and with men, as had Agathocles." The basis for the theological aspect of his claim is presumably the empirical fact that Agathocles "could live secure for a long time in his fatherland." In other words, he was not ruined by either God or his subjects. It is also noteworthy that this claim assumes God is operative in the pagan world. Such an assumption is however not unusual. As Nederman points out, it is present in the Hebrew Bible and was accepted in the Middle Ages.³¹³

What is original is Machiavelli's argument that despite Agathocles' "savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes," he met no punishment from Providence. His specific wording, as we saw above, is that those who turn crime to the common good "can have some remedy for their state with God and with men" (*possono con Dio e con li òmini avere allo stato loro qualche remedio*). His choice of the expression "remedy for their state" is interesting since it echoes the expression "remedy for one's soul," which signifies money in one's will designated for prayers.³¹⁴ Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, speaks not of remedy for one's soul but for one's "stato." In this sense, *stato* refers to the personal possession of the bases of power (such as men, money, property, territory and authority) but could also refer to his "status."³¹⁵ If we consider both senses of *stato*, then Agathocles found some remedy with God for his

³¹³ Nederman, *Lineages*, pp. 298-99.

³¹⁴ Brown quotes from the will of Marcello Adriani which designates "fifty florins to be spent 'for the remedy of his soul'" (*The Return of Lucretius*, p. 109).

³¹⁵ On "*stato*" as "status" see Mansfield, ed., *The Prince*, p. 5 n. 2.

“state” and his “status.” Although Machiavelli qualifies the completeness of the remedy with the word “some” (*qualche*), even with that qualification his argument has far-reaching implications: cruelties well used, even those of someone as criminal as Agathocles, will be excused by God and men.³¹⁶ Machiavelli attributes this lenient disposition to God himself. As noted above, he has some justification in making the claim since, from the point of view of Providence, it is evident that God allowed Agathocles to hold his state despite his crimes. Nonetheless, it is striking that Machiavelli presumes to know God’s intention and further that, in his view, God, like the vulgar, judges things by their end. Such a judgment would seem presumptuous unless Machiavelli believes either that religion is no more than an *instrumentum regni* or that God himself makes allowances for human conditions. While I am trying to build the case that in Machiavelli’s view religion and natural necessity are not in conflict, and thus that his view accords with the latter of the two above positions, it is at least clear that Machiavelli portrays God to be rather lenient, especially compared to the God of fire and brimstone.

The fourth reference to God occurs in chapter 11, “Of Ecclesiastical Principalities.” Speaking of such principalities, Machiavelli writes: “as they subsist by superior causes, to which the human mind does not reach, I will omit speaking of them; for since they are exalted and maintained by God, it would be the office of a presumptuous and foolhardy man to discourse on them.”³¹⁷ While Machiavelli says he

³¹⁶ Viroli, drawing on several texts, makes a similar argument about Machiavelli’s view of God: “God forgives and gives His friendship even to those founders of states, redeemers of peoples, and rulers who are obliged to be bad in order to achieve their goals” (*Machiavelli’s God*, p. 63).

³¹⁷ Some editions read “superior cause” (see Mansfield, ed., *The Prince*, p. 45 n. 1).

will refrain from the foolhardy task of interpreting papal history in terms of God's providence, his pious acknowledgment in fact serves as an apologia for discussing papal history in secular terms. And, just as he analyzed Moses' actions in terms of *virtù* and arms, he discusses the temporal rule of the papacy in terms of "money and forces." It is also of note that Machiavelli subscribes to the view that the human mind cannot reach to the superior cause of God. Based on the way he discusses religion, the conclusion he draws from the former seems to be that any statement about God is necessarily an interpretation. And, as we saw in his discussion of Agathocles, Machiavelli himself does not refrain from interpreting religion in accord with his understanding of worldly things.

The following chapter discusses different types of military forces. Therein Machiavelli argues that one of the reasons mercenaries are useless is because they have "no fear of God" (*P* 12). He does not explain how fear of God makes men better soldiers, but it is a theme he returns to several times in *Art of War*, where he spells out how a lack of religion leads to wickedness and the failure to observe discipline.³¹⁸ On the one hand, it seems Machiavelli wants to decrease a prince's fear of divine punishment, but, on the other, he recognizes the usefulness of fear in soldiers and citizens.³¹⁹ This is, however, a difficult duality to maintain since the private view intended for the prince may come to undermine the public view.

In *Prince* 25, Machiavelli acknowledges the common opinion according to which worldly things are "governed by fortune and by God." Since Machiavelli uses "*fortuna*," "the heavens" and "God" interchangeably depending on the context and rhetorical need,

³¹⁸ See *AW* I.129, 4.141-46 and 6.125.

³¹⁹ In addition to the above, see *D* I.II.

he was evidently not concerned with differentiating their domains or clarifying their relation. As John Geerken points out—citing passages where Machiavelli variously attributes sublunar causality to “God,” “Heaven” and “a hidden power”—“[s]uch passages suggest if not a conceptual identity, at least a degree of conceptual overlap—of the sort likely still tolerable in the relatively easy going eclectic intellectual milieu that preceded the Protestant and Tridentine Reformation.”³²⁰ Boethius, in the sixth century, made an important contribution to that eclectic milieu by reconciling the pagan concept of Fate with the Christian belief in Providence. As he writes in *The Consolation of Philosophy*:

whether Fate is carried out by divine spirits in the service of Providence, or by a soul, or by the whole activity of nature, by the heavenly motions of the stars, by angelic virtue [*angelica virtute*] or diabolical cleverness, or by some or all of these agents, one thing is certain: Providence is the immovable and simple form of all things.... It follows then, that everything which is subject to Fate is also subject to Providence, and that Fate itself is also subject to Providence.³²¹

While Boethius leaves the agent of Fate open, his argument set the standard for reconciling Providence with that which goes under the name of Fate or Fortune. Further, one of the agents he proposes for the carrying out of Fate is heavenly motion, which shows the antiquity of the connection between God, the heavens and fate. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asserts that the heavenly bodies affect sublunar material things and that the “pre-ordaining cause” of the heavenly bodies themselves is “divine Providence.”³²² Dante in the *Inferno* makes the power of Fortune a part of God’s creation:

³²⁰ “Machiavelli’s Moses and Renaissance Politics,” p. 584.

³²¹ Book 4, prose 6, p. 71.

³²² *Summa Theologiae* 1a, question 116, article 1 (vol. 15, p. 119). Also see 1a, question 115, articles 3-4.

for worldly splendors He decreed the same
and ordained a guide and general ministress
who would at her discretion shift vain wealth
from nation unto nation, house to house,
without a chance of mankind's interference;
so while one nation rules, another falls
according to whatever she decrees. (canto 7, lines 77-83)

While such major writers incorporated pagan concepts into Christian cosmology, some of Machiavelli's contemporaries saw the need to fend off astrology. Pico della Mirandola, in his *Disputations Against Astrology* (1496), produced a systematic critique of astrology, defending the view that God alone governs all things through divine Providence. The following year Savonarola popularized Pico's arguments in a pamphlet entitled *Against Divinatory Astrology*.³²³ Pontano responded to Pico in his *De rebus coelestibus* and *De fortuna* (1501), arguing for the natural causality of the heavens, subject to Providence, and that God leaves matters of wealth and power to Fortune.³²⁴

Machiavelli often recognizes the influence of supernatural powers in his writings, but at the same time he rejects determinism: "so that our free will not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern" (*P* 25). In the following chapter of *The Prince* he writes: "God does not want to do everything, so as not to take free will from us and that part of the glory that falls to us." His insistence on the point that rulers have some control over and responsibility for their fortune is evident throughout *The Prince*. Like other Renaissance writers, he adopted the Roman view that fortune favours men of virtue. The idea that virtue is necessary for good fortune is also seen in

³²³ Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, pp. 7, 18-23, 58.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25, 58.

Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (a work Machiavelli cites in *Prince* 14); therein, Cambyses reminds Cyrus that one's piety must heed natural cause and effect: "we decided that it was necessary to ask for the good things from the gods only after rendering ourselves such as we ought to be" (1.6.5). In *The Prince*, Machiavelli is evidently more concerned with *fortuna* than God; however, since the main issue for him is *virtù*, it is fitting that *fortuna*, its classical counterpart, plays such an important role in the work.

Having referred to God only six times in the first twenty-five chapters, Machiavelli calls on God six times in the final "Exhortation to Seize Italy and to Free Her from the Barbarians." According to the classical rules of rhetoric, a political oration should end with either a conclusion or an exhortation.³²⁵ Machiavelli, following this tradition, ends with an exhortation praising the Medici and encouraging them to act. He writes that God was friendly to all the excellent founders mentioned in chapter 6 and that God will be as friendly to the Medici as he was to them. However, when it comes to a call to arms, he turns to the pagan Livy: "for war is just to whom it is necessary, and arms are pious when there is no hope but in arms." In chapter twenty-six, we see that Machiavelli's God leaves men with some free will and is friends with great founders, and also that arms are pious when used for liberation.

Discoursing on Religion

In the *Discourses*, the importance of religion is evident from the "Preface," where Machiavelli writes "the present religion" has led the world into "weakness." However, the

³²⁵ See Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, p. 122.

problem, he specifies, is not Christianity itself but the lack of “a true knowledge of histories”; something, he says, that may be rectified through his discourses on Roman history. Although moderns imitate the ancients in the arts, law and medicine, they think it is “not only difficult but impossible” to imitate their political judgments. Machiavelli thus laments that while men “take pleasure” in reading ancient histories, imitating their actions is “shunned by everyone.” He returns to this critique of the modern ethos in 3.27, writing: “the weakness of men at present, caused by their weak education and their slight knowledge of things, makes them judge ancient judgments in part inhuman, in part impossible.” We see then that it is the Christian education which makes men shun ancient remedies. In the “Preface” he argues that the ancient judgments are still true since the heaven and men do not change. This explains why a lack of knowledge of history is the problem rather than Christianity. The Christian education which has made men weak can be corrected by interpreting it “according to virtue” (*D* 2.2.2). This is not impossible as the Swiss “live according to the ancients as regards both religion and military orders” (*D* 1.12.2).

Chapters eleven to fifteen of book 1 deal with Roman religion, how it made Rome strong and how the rulers used it well. From this knowledge of history, Machiavelli derives some universal prescriptions regarding religion:

princes of a republic or of a kingdom should maintain the foundations of the religion they hold; and if this is done, it will be an easy thing for them to maintain their republic religious and, in consequence, good and united. All things that arise in favor of that religion they should favor and magnify, even though they judge them false; and they should do it so much the more as they are more prudent and more knowing of natural things. Because this mode has been observed by wise men, the belief has arisen in miracles, which are celebrated even in false religions [*celebrano nelle religioni eziando false*]; for the prudent enlarge upon them from

whatever beginning they arose, and their authority then gives them credit with anyone whatever. (I.12.1)

While this passage may seem to show an indifference to the truth of religion, the context is Machiavelli's elucidation of ancient history and in particular of Roman history. He points out that "every religion has the foundation of its life on some principal order of its own" and that the foundation of the pagan religion was its oracles, divinations and auguries (I.12.1). To demonstrate the importance of venerating religion, he writes that once the oracles became a tool of the powerful, and were exposed as such, "men became incredulous and apt to disturb every good order" (I.12.1). For Machiavelli, the religious devotion of the people and their good conduct are indissolubly linked. As a way to maintain their religiosity, Machiavelli argues that wise men enlarge upon natural occurrences to increase their faith. To demonstrate how such so-called miracles arise "even in false religions," he praises Camillus for magnifying his soldiers' belief that a statue of Juno nodded and spoke. Machiavelli advises rulers to magnify whatever favours religion even if one is "more knowing of natural things" and thus does not believe it to be a miracle oneself. While his comment that miracles are "celebrated even in false religions" differentiates pagan religion and Christian religion, his comment on the origin of miracles is made in a universal manner. Further, immediately after his comments about how the Romans used belief in miracles he writes: "If such religion had been maintained by the princes of the Christian republic as was ordered by its giver, the Christian states

and republics would be more united, much happier than they are” (I.I2.I).³²⁶ Since his comment on Jesus follows immediately after his discussion of Camillus, Machiavelli seems to be implying that Jesus himself was a prudent man who used belief in miracles to increase people’s faith. In that case, we would have to add not only Moses but also Jesus to Machiavelli list of “orderer[s] of extraordinary laws” who had “recourse to God” (D I.II.3).³²⁷ While that would be a radical interpretation of Jesus, the nature of miracles had been contested in the West since Avicenna’s *On the Soul* was translated into Latin around 1160. In it Avicenna provides a naturalistic explanation of prophecy and miracles, thereby sparking a philosophic debate about the nature of miracles that was still very much alive at Machiavelli’s time.³²⁸

While Machiavelli’s discussion of miracles seems to obliquely suggest that Jesus, like Camillus, was a prudent knower of natural things, what is explicit in his comment on Jesus is his praise for the political utility of the religion he originally ordered. Machiavelli then goes on to say that it is “the wicked examples” of the Roman church that have brought Christianity into decline (I.I2.2). Discussing the same matter in a later chapter, he writes that Christianity would have been “altogether eliminated” if Saint Francis and Saint Dominic had not drawn it back toward its beginning. Here again we see his praise for early Christianity: “with poverty and with the example of the life of Christ they brought back into the minds of men what had already been eliminated there” (3.I.4).

³²⁶ “La quale religione se ne’ principi della republica cristiana si fusse mantenuta, secondo che dal datore d’essa ne fu ordinate, sarebbero gli stati e le republiche cristiane più unite, più felici assai, che le non sono.”

³²⁷ On Moses, see pp. 151-53 above.

³²⁸ Hasse, “Arabic Philosophy and Averroism,” pp. 121-25.

Although in the earlier chapter Machiavelli does not explicitly say what the foundations of Christianity are, based on his comment about Francis and Dominic, it would seem to be poverty and the example of the life of Christ. He also emphasizes the importance of religiosity when discussing Savonarola, pointing out that his followers, without having seen him do anything “extraordinary,” put their faith in him due to “his life, learning” and claim “that he spoke with God” (1.11.5). In *Florentine Histories*, he attributes the success of early Christianity to the miracles and the holy lives of the pontiffs: “the first ones after Saint Peter had been revered by men for the holiness of their lives and for the miracles, and their examples so extended the Christian religion that princes had necessarily to submit to it” (1.9). In all three examples, Machiavelli emphasizes that credit for religion stems from the piety of the religious heads. Thus it seems that in his view the essential foundations of Christianity are the pious example of the religious leaders, miracles and poverty (the poverty of citizens, in contradistinction from the state, being an ideal Machiavelli often praises).³²⁹ Likewise, in his view the princes of a republic or of a kingdom should show veneration for their religion (1.12.1). However, we again see that his understanding of religion presupposes two classes of people: those who are knowers of natural things but use religion well and the generality of people who are kept good through religion.

The locus classicus on interpreting religion occurs in *Discourses* 2.2, a chapter which resumes the comparison of pagan and Christian religion begun in *Discourses* 1.12. Machiavelli begins, as usual, by acknowledging the orthodox position: “our religion,

³²⁹ On the last point, see, for example, *D* 1.37.1, 3.16.2.

having shown the truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honor of the world.” However, since Christianity places “the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human,” it has “rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men” (2.2.2). The religion of the Gentiles, on the other hand, placed the highest good in the honor of the world. As a result, they were stronger and greater lovers of freedom. Calling Christianity the truth and the true way but then saying it has led to the ruin of Italy could be seen as a thinly veiled condemnation of Christianity tout court; however, Machiavelli clearly explains it is only Christianity interpreted as it has been that leads to ruin: “although the world appears to be made effeminate and heaven disarmed, it arises without doubt from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue” (2.2.2). As in *Discourses* 1.12.1, we see that the problem is not the religion ordered by Jesus; the problem is the way Christianity has been interpreted.

Machiavelli’s criticism of the way Christianity has been interpreted raises the question of which writers he has in mind. The men most responsible for interpreting western Christianity are the Latin Church Fathers, men such as Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. Of those early interpreters, Augustine was the most influential and gave to Christianity the concept of the City of God.³³⁰ Machiavelli’s object of critique in *Discourses* 2.2 is precisely the Augustinian view that the heavenly patria, not the earthly patria, is the highest good. For Augustine, the glory of the City of God far surpasses that of Rome:

³³⁰ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 70-71.

that city in which it is promised that we shall reign is as far removed from Rome as heaven is from earth, as eternal life is from temporal joy, as solid glory from empty praise, as the fellowship of angels from that of mortal men, and as the light of the sun and moon from the light of Him Who made the sun and moon. (*City of God* 5.17)

Machiavelli reverses that valuation, praising love of the terrestrial fatherland and interpreting Christianity in accord with the virtues that makes it great. The “false interpretations” of Christianity that Machiavelli speaks of are those with such an otherworldly orientation; he counters that if men “considered how it permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland, they would see that it wishes us to love and honor it and to prepare ourselves to be such that we can defend it” (2.2.2). While this claim is foreign to the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, the seed of a more worldly interpretation of Christianity can be found in Augustine himself.³³¹ As the latter points out, the New Testament tacitly condones just wars:

If Christian teaching condemned war altogether, those who sought wholesome counsel in the Gospel would have been told to cast aside their arms and withdraw altogether from the military profession; whereas it was said to them: ‘Do violence to no man and be content with your wages’ (Luke 3:14). If He commanded them to be content with their wages, He did not forbid them to be soldiers.³³²

Thus, since at least the time of Augustine, the Gospel had already been interpreted as allowing for the defense of one’s fatherland. Further, a string of Italian writers who preceded Machiavelli brought together the ideas of Christian *caritas* and Roman *caritas*

³³¹ Sullivan, for example, argues that Machiavelli’s “new interpretation of Christianity” conflicts with the Sermon on the Mount (“Neither Christian nor Pagan,” p. 264 n. 12).

³³² Quoted with approval by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, question 40, article 1 (*Political Writings*, p. 240). The counsel recorded in Luke 3.14 is spoken by John the Baptist. The translation in the New Oxford Annotated Bible reads: “Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’”

patriae (love of the fatherland).³³³ To avoid the error of evaluating Machiavelli according to an idea of religion foreign to his milieu, I will make a brief detour through this literature.

After Aristotle's works were translated into Latin in the trecento, one passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* was particularly useful for establishing a relation between the common good and God: "while the good of an individual is a desirable thing, what is good for a people or for cities is a nobler and more godlike thing" (1094b). Aquinas, explaining this passage in his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, says that procuring the common good is "divine because it shows greater likeness to God, who is the universal cause of all goods" (2.30).³³⁴ The same passage is mentioned in *On the Government of Rulers*, a work influential in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance; it was often attributed to Aquinas but is now thought to be largely the work of his student Ptolemy of Lucca.³³⁵ In it, Ptolemy uses the above passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* to support his claim that love of the fatherland "participates in the divine nature" (3.4.2). Further, the heading of the chapter reads: "God provided for the lordship of the Romans because of their zeal for their fatherland."³³⁶ Remigio de' Girolami, another student of Aquinas and the prior of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, argued that love is the foundation of civil life and love of the fatherland a Christian duty.³³⁷ Coluccio Salutati, a Florentine chancellor whose intellectual leadership made Florence the centre of humanist

³³³ For a more developed genealogy of this tradition see Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, pp. 46-61; also see Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, pp. 74-75, 342-44.

³³⁴ Also see Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, p. 46.

³³⁵ Blythe, *On the Government of Rulers*, pp. vii, 1-5.

³³⁶ Ptolemy, *On the Government of Rulers*, p. 153.

³³⁷ Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, pp. 46-47.

studies, wrote in 1377 that *caritas* “alone fosters the family, expands the city, and guards the kingdom.”³³⁸ He also wrote that Jesus’ love for his fatherland was apparent in his return from Egypt to Israel to suffer martyrdom there; thus, Jesus’ example shows that one’s *caritas* for others is greatest in relation to one’s own *patria*.³³⁹ Leonardo Bruni, who became Florentine chancellor four years after Salutati’s death, claims that one’s fatherland is sacred and that those who give their life for its liberty will be rewarded in the heavens.³⁴⁰ In light of this particularly Florentine tradition, Machiavelli’s call for Christianity to be interpreted according to virtue should not be taken as a sign of atheistic indifference to religion. He even takes care to preempt such a judgement by referring to Christianity as “the truth and the true way.” The question, as he makes explicit, is one of interpretation. Thus we should be diligent about not reading modern presuppositions about religion into a different period, a period in which different views of God could overlap as well as vie: the God of the Sermon on the Mount, the God of the Hebrew Bible, the God of the scholastics, the God of the laity, the God of civic-minded thinkers who believed the greatest good one can do is a good for one’s city.

In *Discourses* 2.5 Machiavelli addresses the question of whether the world is created or eternal. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Aristotle’s argument that the world is eternal was given a renewed life through Latin translations of the Arabic philosopher Averroes. His commentaries on Aristotle were influential in universities throughout Europe, particularly in Renaissance Italy, and one of the positions identified

³³⁸ Quoted in Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*, p. 355. On Salutati, see Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, p. 272.

³³⁹ Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, pp. 343-44; Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, p. 49.

³⁴⁰ Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, p. 90. See Bruni’s *Oratio in funere Iohannis Strozze*.

as “Averroist” was the belief that human reason, which begins from the senses, necessarily teaches the eternity of the world.³⁴¹ Petrarch is witness to the tension created by this Aristotelian position when he fires back at four friends who turned against him for his willingness to question the authority of Aristotle: “Except for Plato and the Platonists, nearly all the philosophers tend toward this view [the eternity of the world], together with my four judges, who wish to appear philosophers rather than Christians.”³⁴² By 1513, the influence of Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle was seen to be such a threat to orthodoxy that the Fifth Lateran Council condemned Averroist doctrines as heretical, in particular, banning belief “in the unity of the soul and the eternity of the world.”³⁴³ When Machiavelli discusses the question in book 2, chapter 5, he begins, following his usual method, with an argument supporting the orthodox position that the world is of recent creation: there is no memory of things beyond “five thousand years.” This lack of any more ancient history casts doubt on “those philosophers who would have it that the world is eternal.” Interestingly, Dante, in *Purgatory*, places the story of Adam and Eve “five thousand years” before the birth of Jesus.³⁴⁴ Thus the argument that there is no historical record beyond five thousand years is in accord with the biblical view that the world is of relatively recent creation. However, the second clause of Machiavelli’s sentence then undermines the argument by pointing out that memories of ancient times are eliminated by many causes. Some of these causes are from “heaven” and some from “men.” The two

³⁴¹ Hasse, “Arabic Philosophy and Averroism,” pp. 113-14, 117; Hankins, “Humanism, Scholasticism, and Renaissance Philosophy,” pp. 35-38.

³⁴² Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*, paragraph 87.

³⁴³ Quoted in Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, pp. 77-78.

³⁴⁴ Canto 33, line 61-63. Musa points out that Dante here follows the chronology of Eusebius (Alighieri, vol. 4, p. 325).

which come from men are the variations of language and the emergence of new religions. Machiavelli immediately proceeds to the example of “the Christian sect” (*la setta Cristiana*), without in any way distinguishing it from any other sect. His argument pointedly disregards the claim of revelation: religions, including the Christian religion, come not from heaven but from men. This classification of religion again shows how important interpretation is for Machiavelli, for in saying that religion comes from men, it seems we can only understand religions as interpretations, that is, the *ordini* of good and prudent men.

Machiavelli uses the example of the Christian sect to show how religious founders try to eliminate the previous religion, though, as he points out, since Christianity had to use the Latin language, it could not completely eliminate all Gentile history. Machiavelli extrapolates that the previous Gentile sect must likewise have attempted to eliminate the memory of the sect prior to it. Thus, since “sects vary two or three times in five or in six thousand years,” and since each new sect tries to eliminate the memory of the previous one, no memory remains of anything more ancient than five thousand years. Machiavelli’s explanation discredits an argument in favor of creation and also refutes one of the arguments made by Lucretius in *The Nature of Things*, a poetic exposition of Epicurus’ atomic theory. To support the claim that the earth is of “recent” birth Lucretius sings:

Now here’s another point. If earth and sky
Had no beginning or no time of birth
But have been always everlasting, why,
Before the Theban war and doom of Troy
Have the poets not sung other things? (book 5, lines 324-328)

Although Christianity and atomic theory disagree on the cause of creation, they do agree on the world's recent creation. Machiavelli, however, argues against this essential point of Judeo-Christian theology and Epicurean cosmology. Instead, he provides an argument which supports the position of the philosophers he refers to at the beginning of the chapter, a position which obviates God's role as creator of the world. Machiavelli's argument also aligns him with the heretical Averroist position, and more generally shows his alliance to reason over faith. As he states elsewhere: "it is good to reason about everything" (*D* 1.18.), and the Bible must be read "judiciously" (*D* 3.30.1). Nonetheless, the argument that the world is eternal is not synonymous with atheism since in Aristotle's famous formulation the first cause is ascribed to an unmoved mover. The one position which removes God's role in creation altogether is atomic theory, and Machiavelli's argument counters the recent creation of the earth whether that creation is ascribed to God or to atoms.

When Machiavelli moves on in the next paragraph to the causes which come from heaven—plague, famine and floods—his discourse further undermines Judeo-Christian history. As he writes, floods eliminate the memory of ancient things most pervasively since they are "more universal" and because the only survivors are "mountain men" lacking any knowledge of antiquity. He further specifies:

if among them someone is saved who has knowledge of it, to make a reputation and a name for himself he conceals it and perverts it in his mode so that what he has wished to write alone, and nothing else, remains for his successors. That these inundations, plagues, and famines come about I do not believe is to be doubted, because all the histories are full of them. (2.5.2)

For anyone in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the most well-known history about a universal flood is of course the biblical one. If we assume, as it seems we must, that the “someone” saved from the flood and possessing knowledge of antiquity includes an allusion to Noah, then the unstated conclusion of his argument is that Noah invented the story of the creation, the fall of man and his distinguished genealogy in order to make a name for himself. Strauss thus suggests: “Any tradition transmitted through Noah would then be no better than fraud.”³⁴⁵ To put it more charitably, we could say it was a case of “religion well used” (*D* 1.15). Machiavelli’s skepticism about the truth of any antediluvian history further explains why he says religion comes from men and why he is willing to question the Biblical account of creation. It is true that he begins his poem “On Ambition” (1509) with the story of God’s creation, Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel; however, the latter story there serves the purpose of showing the origin of ambition and avarice, and his poetic license is apparent later in the poem when he mentions, not God, but the gods (“*gli Dei*”).³⁴⁶ In the *Discourses*, a work which he says contains “as much as I know,” he classifies religions as human creations, shows that a lack of history cannot be an argument against the world’s eternalness and suggests that any antediluvian history is fictional.³⁴⁷ Nonetheless, from a willingness to use reason to question dogmas, it is still a long way to atheism and a denial of the supernatural.

³⁴⁵ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 146. For Strauss’ discussion of this chapter see *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 142-43, 146, 202-203.

³⁴⁶ See “On Ambition” lines 16-60 and line 140.

³⁴⁷ Quotation from the *Discourses*’ dedicatory letter.

That Machiavelli did believe in supernatural signs is evident from *Discourses*

1.56. To provide more context for his discussion of them, it is worth considering

Guicciardini's reflection on a similar topic:

I think I can affirm the existence of spirits—I mean those things we call spirits, those airy ones who converse familiarly with people. I have had the sort of experience with them that makes me think I can be quite sure. But I believe that their nature, what they are, is just as obscure to those who profess to know as to those who never give it a thought. This knowledge of spirits and the prediction of the future, which we sometimes see people making either through their art or in a frenzy, are occult potencies of nature—or rather, of that higher agent who sets everything in motion. They are known to him, secret to us; the minds of men cannot reach them.³⁴⁸

Turning to *Discourses* 1.56, Machiavelli writes that the truth of signs is not to be doubted since they have been observed before all grave events in both ancient and modern times.

He gives four modern examples. Savonarola foretold the invasion of King Charles.³⁴⁹ The invasion was also forecast by the sound of fighting in the air above Arezzo. Lightning that hit the highest part of the cathedral presaged the death of Lorenzo de' Medici the Elder.³⁵⁰

The Palazzo was hit by lightening as a sign of Piero Soderini's imminent ruin. Lest we are tempted to think Machiavelli is dissembling, he himself, after the last sign, had a

³⁴⁸ *Maxims and Reflections*, series C, maxim 211.

³⁴⁹ Although here in 1.56.1, he appears to flatly accept “how much had been foretold by Friar Girolamo Savonarola,” in 1.11.5, he says he will not “judge whether it is true or not” that Savonarola spoke with God. About twenty years before finishing the *Discourses*, Machiavelli wrote to a friend describing two sermons by Savonarola which he himself attended on March 2 and 3, 1498. At the end of his letter, Machiavelli notes that once Savonarola no longer feared his Florentine adversaries, he turned from his claim that God had told him someone in Florence was seeking to make himself tyrant to vilifying the pope, adding: “Thus, in my judgment, he acts in accordance with the times and colors his lies accordingly” (Letter of March 9, 1498, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 10).

³⁵⁰ Machiavelli also takes this event as a sign in *FH* 8.36.

testament drawn up on November 22, 1511.³⁵¹ Machiavelli's final example is an ancient one from Livy: a plebeian heard a greater than human voice warning, in Machiavelli's words, "that the French were coming to Rome." While Machiavelli argues that signs occur, he grants that their cause should be "discoursed of and interpreted by a man who has knowledge of things natural and supernatural, which we do not have." Like Guicciardini, he accepts that the human mind cannot reach to God.³⁵² For Machiavelli, even one who has knowledge of the natural and supernatural is still reduced to interpretation. In that regard, he tentatively puts forward the view of "some philosopher" that signs may be warnings from "intelligences" in the air.

Although Machiavelli shows himself to be rather indifferent to metaphysics, the question remains of what he regards as "natural" and what he regards as "supernatural." The risk of imposing modern views on these terms may be limited by trying to draw an understanding of them from what Machiavelli himself says about the natural and supernatural elsewhere in his writings. In *Florentine Histories*, he gives a longer account of the storm mentioned as a sign in *Discourses* 1.56. While attributing the cause of the storm to God, he nonetheless writes: "This whirlwind, driven by superior forces, whether they were natural or supernatural, broke on itself and fought within itself" (6.34). He ends the description of the storm by saying:

Without doubt, God wanted to warn rather than punish Tuscany; for, if such a storm had entered into a city among many and crowded houses and inhabitants, as it did enter among few and scattered oaks and trees and houses, without doubt it would have made ruin and torment greater than that which the mind can

³⁵¹ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 127; also see Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, pp. 17-18.

³⁵² Also see his statement in *Prince* 11, quoted above on page 155.

conjecture. But God meant for then that this small example should be enough to refresh among men the memory of His power. (6.34)

While clearly assuming God to be the first cause of the storm, Machiavelli again shows his uncertainty about whether the forces driving it were natural or supernatural; presumably natural forces would be just that, the forces of nature, while supernatural forces would involve some type of supernatural intermediaries. As we also saw in the above maxim from Guicciardini, the natural and supernatural are closely connected when the latter acts through the former. In another chapter of *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli attributes the Turkish sack of Otranto in the Kingdom of Naples to God's "particular care" for Florence, since, in one stroke, it removed the Italian powers threatening Tuscany from its vicinity (8.19-20). In this second example, God intervenes through a worldly cause: the Turkish sack of Otranto (a claim which would seem to imply that even God sometimes has to choose the lesser evil).

In the *Art of War*, Machiavelli sets forth a natural interpretation of lightning, eclipses and earthquakes by stating they all have "a natural cause" (6.207-8). He also says in *Discourses* 1.12 that what are said to be miracles actually have natural causes. "Natural," then, means the cause and effect of the natural elements. Yet, it seems that in his view both natural phenomena and worldly things may sometimes have a supernatural cause. While Machiavelli acknowledges the existence of signs, his little inquiry into their cause only further shows that his true concern is the room left in sublunar affairs to human prudence and *virtù*.³⁵³

³⁵³ For this reason, Hörnqvist terms Machiavelli's style "sublunar writing" (see in particular, *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 232-33).

Machiavelli sometimes speaks of *fortuna* as a power with a will of its own; other times, it is left ambiguous whether he is referring to a supernatural power or simply to chance. One of the strongest examples of *fortuna* as a willing being occurs in *Discourses* 2.29, “Fortune Blinds the Spirits of Men When It Does Not Wish Them to Oppose Its Plans.” He begins the chapter by saying: “If how human affairs proceed is considered well, it will be seen that often things arise and accidents come about that the heavens [*i cieli*] have not altogether wished to be provided against.” Following Livy’s history, he describes the numerous errors made by the Romans that allowed the Gauls to take all of Rome, except the Capitol. Machiavelli then quotes Livy: “So much does Fortune [*fortuna*] blind spirits where it does not wish its gathering strength checked.” He adds that Livy’s “conclusion” is “true,” and as we can now see the chapter’s title is based on this quotation. Livy’s “*fortuna*” finds her way directly into Machiavelli’s text and thought. Although Machiavelli’s heading indicates the discourse will be about “*La Fortuna*,” the first sentences proceed to mention “the heavens” and “the power of heaven,” showing that he equates *fortuna* and the heavens (and does not distinguish between “the heavens” and “heaven”). Further just as he incorporates the pagan *fortuna* into his thought, he transposes “the heavens” into Livy’s history: “Because this place [Rome] is very notable for demonstrating the power of heaven over human affairs, Titus Livy demonstrates it extensively and in very efficacious words, saying that since heaven for some end wished the Romans to know its power, it first made the Fabii err.” However, in Livy 5.36 where he mentions the error of the Fabii, what Livy writes is: “There the envoys took up arms, contrary to the law of nations, and the fates [*fatis*] began to bring down ruin on the city of

Rome.”³⁵⁴ What Livy attributes to the fates, Machiavelli interprets as the heavens. Machiavelli also expands on Livy’s interpretation, concluding that “to make Rome greater and lead it to that greatness it came to, fortune [*la fortuna*] judged it was necessary to beat it [*necessario batterla*]...but still did not wish to ruin it altogether” (2.29.2). It is notable how closely this follows the wording of *Prince* 25 where Machiavelli notoriously writes of *fortuna*, “it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her” (*è necessario, volendola tenere sotto, batterla e urtarla*). In *Discourses* 2.29 the roles are reversed: fortune judges it “necessary to beat” Rome for the sake of the city’s future greatness.

While Machiavelli’s understanding of *fortuna* cannot be reduced to a purely figurative personification of chance, it is another metaphysical matter he is content to leave obscure—or rather that he believes *is* obscure to human reason; fortune, as he says, “proceeds by oblique and unknown ways” (*D* 2.29.3). He speaks of fortune as he speaks of God and the heavens: as powers that intervene in human affairs, but can only be interpreted through their effects, and even then often remain enigmatic. Further, he seems to use the three almost interchangeably depending on the context and rhetorical point. To reduce them to metaphors for chance is to read Machiavelli’s oeuvre against itself and against the worldview of his time, with its mingling of Christian and pagan concepts. While his texts indicate that he believed in a supernatural power that intervenes in human affairs, he was evidently unconcerned with clear metaphysical distinctions. As a true

³⁵⁴ *The Rise of Rome*, p. 320.

humanist, his concern is human things; the only metaphysical point he insists on rejecting is fatalism, that is, that *fortuna*, the heavens or God leave no room for free will.

Machiavelli and the Republic of Wooden Clogs

The letters exchanged between Machiavelli and Guicciardini in May of 1521 shed some interesting light on the question of Machiavelli's private beliefs. The Florentine government gave Machiavelli, age fifty-two, a commission to a meeting of Franciscan friars in Carpi (which Machiavelli and Guicciardini derisively refer to as the Republic of Wooden Clogs). The Wool Guild took advantage of Machiavelli's commission by asking him to obtain the assent of a certain friar to preach in the Duomo for Lent.³⁵⁵ Since their exchange of letters shows so much familiarity, it is believed that Machiavelli visited Guicciardini in Modena on his way to Carpi.³⁵⁶

Guicciardini's letter of May 17 initiates the exchange, Guicciardini pointing to the irony of the Wool Guild entrusting Machiavelli with the task of finding a preacher:

It was certainly good judgment on the part of our reverend consuls of the Wool Guild to have entrusted you with the duty of selecting a preacher, not otherwise than if the task had been given to Pachierrotto, while he was alive, or to San Sano to find a beautiful wife for a friend. I believe you will serve them according to the expectations they have of you and is required by your honour, which would be stained if at this age you started to think about your soul, because, since you have always lived in a contrary belief, it would be attributed rather to senility than to goodness.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, pp. 186, 189; Najemy, "Introduction," p. 1.

³⁵⁶ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 189; Najemy, "Introduction," pp. 1-2.

³⁵⁷ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 335.

As Pachierotto and San Sano were two well-known Florentine pederasts, Guicciardini jokes that asking him to find one a preacher is like asking a pederast to find one a wife.³⁵⁸ Guicciardini's jocosely comments reveal the popular perception of Machiavelli: he was known as one who did not worry about his soul. As will be shown below, Machiavelli's corpus justifies this perception.

Machiavelli responded to Guicciardini the same day and in the same vein, picking up where Guicciardini's jokes left off. He begins by informing him that he "was sitting on the toilet" thinking about the type of preacher he would like to find for Florence when his letter arrived. He goes on to explain: "They would like a preacher who would show them the way to paradise, and I should like to find one who would teach them the way to go to the Devil.... For I believe that the following would be the true way to go to Paradise: learn the way to Hell in order to steer clear of it."³⁵⁹ Machiavelli's comments playfully turn the Florentines' concern about the afterlife into an allegory about the art of state. As in many of his works, knowing the way to hell, or in other words, knowing how to commit the actions that lead to hell, is, for Machiavelli, a necessary quality for a ruler. His desire for a preacher who would teach the way to hell fits quite well with the teaching of *The Prince*: that governance sometimes requires acting against religion in order to maintain the state. In an epigram about Soderini, he asserts that only manly men are permitted into Hell:

La notte che morì Pier Soderini,
L'anima andò de l'inferno a la bocca;
Gridò Pluton: "Ch' inferno? anima sciocca,

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 536 n. 1.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 336.

Va su nel limbo fra gli altri bambini”

The night that Piero Soderini died,
His soul went to the mouth of hell.
Pluto roared: “Why hell? Silly soul,
Go up into limbo with the other boys!”³⁶⁰

Machiavelli likely wrote this humorously rhyming epigram after Soderini was forced from office and the Medici returned to power. From the point of view presented in his letter to Guicciardini, we could say that Soderini failed to maintain the state because, in his childlike innocence, he did not know “the way to Hell” and thus did not deserve a place there. Further, since the ruin of the republic brought about a sort of personal hell for Machiavelli, including imprisonment and torture, it is not hard to see why he would emphasize knowing the way to hell in order to avoid it. Playful comments about hell also occur in his comedy *Mandragola* and his novella *Belfagor*. In *Mandragola*, Callimaco fortifies his determination to commit adultery by telling himself, “the worst that can happen to you is to die and go off to Hell. How many others have died! And how many excellent men have gone to Hell! Why should you be ashamed to go there, too.”³⁶¹ In *Belfagor*, life in the underworld is found to be preferable to marriage on earth. However, that Machiavelli’s writings undermine fear for one’s soul is not necessarily indicative of atheism; rather, as we see in *Prince* 8 and the *Exhortation to Penitence*, he assumes that God has a charitable understanding of human affairs and political necessities.

³⁶⁰ *Tutte le opere*, p. 872; *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 1463 (translation modified). In “Machiavelli’s *City of God*,” Wright connects this letter and epigram, arguing that for Machiavelli rulers must be willing “to risk Hell for Heaven on Earth” (p. 305).

³⁶¹ *The Mandrake* 4.I, in *The Comedies of Machiavelli*.

In the same letter, Machiavelli also responds to Guicciardini's concern that "the air of Carpi might make you become a liar, because that has been its influence not only in the present age but also for centuries gone by." In response, Machiavelli writes: "for some time now I have never said what I believe or never believed what I said; and if indeed I do sometimes tell the truth, I hide it behind so many lies that it is hard to find."³⁶² We should be wary of taking this playful response to Guicciardini's warning about the infamous air of Carpi out of context and turning it into some sort of general interpretive heuristic.³⁶³ At the same time, Guicciardini's comment clearly resonated with Machiavelli, spurring him to claim a greater proficiency in lying than the citizens of Carpi. Since he emphasizes that "it has been a while since I have become a doctor of this art," his comment could refer to his practice, evident in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, of stating an orthodox religious position just before leading the reader into an unorthodox one. It could also hint at his solution to the problem of his previous support of the republican government once he desired to stay involved in affairs of state under the Medici; in that regard, when considering what "truth" he needed to hide and what "lies" he used to hide it, one could think of his high praise of the Medici in *The Prince* as well as the *Florentine Histories*, a text he was working on at the time.

Machiavelli's Exhortation to Penitence

³⁶² *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 337.

³⁶³ In 1891, Burd wrote that this sentence has been "strangely misinterpreted" as support for the idea that *The Prince* has a hidden meaning (*Il principe*, p. 39 n. 1).

In Florence it was customary for citizens of various social classes to join together in a lay confraternity and for members or guests to recite sermons. Since Machiavelli was known not to trouble about his soul, it may seem a little surprising that we have one such sermon written in his hand. However, according to his grandson Giuliano de' Ricci, Machiavelli belonged to a number of religious lay confraternities and was requested to write an exhortation to penitence.³⁶⁴ While penance was a customary theme for Good Friday, it seems to me unlikely that Machiavelli wrote it for Holy Week since he omits altogether any mention of the Passion or crucifixion.³⁶⁵ The handwriting indicates a late date, perhaps some time in the last two years of his life, that is, between 1525 and 1527.³⁶⁶ Opinion on the sermon's intent has varied. Villari sees "a certain veiled irony" and Malagoli "feigned religious zeal."³⁶⁷ Croce calls it "a frivolous joke."³⁶⁸ Ridolfi, on the other hand, sees it as "the climax of the author's Christian thought."³⁶⁹

Writing a sermon would offer Machiavelli the opportunity to interpret religion according to virtue, and, in my view, the theology of his *Exhortation* is profound, and

³⁶⁴ Capponi, *An Unlikely Prince*, p. 285; Viroli cites the letter but questions its truthfulness; in his view the sermon is simply "a commissioned text" (*Niccolò's Smile*, p. 258). Sumberg writes that Machiavelli "was no doubt a member" of a confraternity ("Machiavelli's Sermon on Penance," p. 171), yet according to Ciliotta-Rubery, "he was not likely a member" ("A Question of Piety," p. 20); Najemy writes, "we know nothing" about the sermon's "context and purpose" ("Papius and the Chickens," p. 663). Also see de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, p. 59.

³⁶⁵ In an essay on humanist lay preaching in Florence, Weissman discusses the various themes appropriate to each holy day ("Sacred Eloquence," pp. 256-57). Capponi suggests it was written during the Advent of 1526 (*An Unlikely Prince*, p. 285).

³⁶⁶ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 328 n. 2; Germino, "Blasphemy and Leo Strauss's Machiavelli," p. 149.

³⁶⁷ Villari quoted in Germino, "Second Thoughts," p. 799 n. 10; Malagoli quoted in Whitfield, *Discourses*, p. 10.

³⁶⁸ Quoted in Germino, "Second Thoughts," p. 799 n. 10.

³⁶⁹ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 253

even majestic, precisely because it strips religion to its universal elements and accepts the human condition as it is. Machiavelli places the emphasis more on the relation between God and human beings and between human beings than on the institution and doctrine of the Roman church. The principal messages of his sermon are that one should have gratitude to God and charity for one's neighbours and that God is merciful so long as one repents of one's sins and does not persist in evil.

He begins by describing the origin and role of penitence:

[God] could not with a more merciful remedy provide against human frailty than by admonishing the human race that not sin but persistence in sin could make him unforgiving; and therefore he opened to men the way of penitence so that, having lost the other way, they could by it rise to heaven.³⁷⁰

Although humans have lost the way of living free from sin, sin need not bar one's way to heaven. Machiavelli emphasizes that God knows "how easy it was for man to rush into sin," but that he is "all merciful." Thus in Machiavelli's view what is unforgivable to God is "not sin but persistence in sin." This two-sided argument—that human life occasions sin but that only persistence in sin is unforgivable—recurs in many of his writings.³⁷¹

Sins, Machiavelli writes in the *Exhortation*, "can be divided into two groups: one is to be ungrateful to God, the second is to be unfriendly to one's neighbour."³⁷² As his audience would have recognized, Machiavelli takes as his model Jesus' first and second commandments: "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as

³⁷⁰ *Chief Works*, vol. 1, p. 171.

³⁷¹ For a collation see p. 69 above.

³⁷² *Chief Works*, vol. 1, pp. 171-72.

yourself" (Matt. 22.37-39).³⁷³ These two commandments define the orthodox definition of Christian *caritas*. However, since Machiavelli is here outlining the two types of sins, he expresses them negatively, classifying them as being "ungrateful to God" ("*ingrate a Dio*") and being "unfriendly to one's neighbour" ("*inimico al prossimo*").³⁷⁴ To show all we have to be grateful for, Machiavelli lists the gifts God has given to human beings. His list is rather pagan as it is made up exclusively of natural things that human beings share in common: the earth, dry land, oceans, animals, plants, fish, the sky, the sun, speech, sight, hands and reason. By saying that God gave us hands in order to "build temples [and] offer sacrifices in His honor," Machiavelli expresses those two ideas in a way that embraces religious practice in general. He also writes that the "marvelous workmanship" of the heavens brings upon us "a thirst and a longing to possess those other things that are hidden from us." Machiavelli evidently desires to convey piety in a universal manner, emphasizing the things of nature, marvel at the heavens, temples and sacrifices. His focus on the common element in religious experience may explain his silence on two central tenets of Christianity—the passion and resurrection. The omission of the first is particularly striking since Christ's passion is a central feature in the exhortations written by other Florentine humanists.³⁷⁵ In this sermon we see Machiavelli interpreting religion according to what he believes is most essential to it.

³⁷³ Also in Luke 10.27, Mark 12.30-31. The first commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6.5.

³⁷⁴ *Tutte le opere*, p. 778. This point is made by Norton, "Machiavelli's Road to Paradise," pp. 36-37, and Ciliotta-Rubery, "A Question of Piety," pp. 22-26.

³⁷⁵ See Ciliotta-Rubery, "A Question of Piety," pp. 34-35, and her source Weissman, "Sacred Eloquence," p. 257.

After pointing out all we have to be grateful for, Machiavelli then points out all the ways we show ingratitude to God by perverting his gifts to evil ends. According to Machiavelli, ingratitude to God is also the cause of unfriendliness towards neighbours. Here Machiavelli teaches the traditional Christian virtue of “*carità*” (*caritas* in Latin), and, although he omits the passion in his sermon, he does mention Jesus, writing that *carità* “is that heavenly garment in which we must be clad if we are to be admitted to the celestial marriage feast of our Emperor Jesus Christ [*imperadore nostro Cristo Iesù*] in the heavenly kingdom.” This is a clear allusion to Jesus’ parable of the marriage feast in Matthew 22. Machiavelli also conflates Jesus and God when he writes that “God” (*Iddio*) forgave “Saint Peter for the offense of having denied him not once but three times.”

When Machiavelli describes the *carità* that allows one into the celestial marriage feast he closely follows Paul’s famous description of *caritas* in I Corinthians 13.4-7. Machiavelli then describes what *carità* means for this life; one who has Christian love aids one’s neighbour, endures his faults, consoles him in tribulation, teaches the ignorant, advises those who err, helps the good and punishes the evil. For Machiavelli, *caritas* is then not only a “divine virtue” but also a civic virtue. In his account, *caritas* meets the needs of this world and the next.

Some scholars have been pointed out that Machiavelli’s description of penance departs from the ecclesiastical practice of his time in that he fails to mention the role of priests in hearing confession, offering absolution and prescribing satisfaction.³⁷⁶ His audience, however, could expect this since an anti-ecclesiastical bias had been common in

³⁷⁶ See in particular Sumberg, “Machiavelli’s Sermon on Penance,” p. 172, and Ciliotta-Rubery, “A Question of Piety,” p. 32.

lay confraternities since the quattrocento.³⁷⁷ Lay confraternities instead emphasized public confession to the confraternity as well as the practice of self-flagellation. The remedy Machiavelli recommends is to “sincerely resort to penitence”; self-flagellation he interprets symbolically: to give alms and to honour and do good to one’s neighbour.

Machiavelli points out that there can be no greater transgression than the “adultery and murder” committed by King David, and yet, due to David’s great penance, he was forgiven by God. Thus, although Machiavelli’s sermon mentions “the everlasting fire” and “the Devil,” he assures the audience that God’s mercy will embrace anyone who repents and practices *caritas*. This point resonates with what I earlier called Machiavelli’s economy of moral transgression: his insistence that due to human frailty it is not sin that is unforgivable to God but persistence in sin.

Machiavelli’s Soul

In the last year of his life Machiavelli wrote to Vettori, “I love my native city [*patria*] more than my own soul.” According to Strauss this statement “presupposes a comprehensive reflection regarding the status of the fatherland on the one hand and of the soul on the other.”³⁷⁸ Regarding Machiavelli’s reflection on his *patria*, Strauss does not question his patriotism but argues that he strategically uses it as a cover for teaching evil.³⁷⁹ Regarding Machiavelli’s reflection on the soul, Strauss argues he was an atheist, writing, for example, that Machiavelli sees religion as “untrue,” that he “blasphemies”

³⁷⁷ Weissman, “Sacred Eloquence,” pp. 265-66.

³⁷⁸ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 10.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, 285.

and that he replaces God by Fortuna.³⁸⁰ Restoring Machiavelli's comment about his fatherland and his soul to its context provides an example of the distortion that can arise by treating Machiavelli as a thinker engaged with "all thinking men regardless of time and place," rather than as a thinker embedded in a certain historical discourse (though this is surely not to deny that Machiavelli also wrote for posterity, nor that he often addressed universal human concerns).³⁸¹

We should first note that the words "my own soul" is a textual emendation; the extant version, copied by Machiavelli's grandson Giuliano Ricci, reads: "I love my patria more than"—and the rest of the sentence is blotted out. Since the saying "*amare la patria più dell'anima*" was common in Florence, editors have taken for granted the conjecture of "my soul." However, in 1989, Giorgio Inglese observed that the letters "st" appear to be faintly visible beneath the blotted out words, leading him to speculate that Machiavelli's sentence may have ended with "Cristo."³⁸² If Machiavelli had added emphasis to the common saying by writing "Christ" instead of "soul," it would further explain why Ricci felt it necessary to censor his grandfather's letter.

The original letter was written by Machiavelli to Vettori on April 16, 1527.

Without the emendation, the whole passage reads:

I love Messer Francesco Guicciardini, I love my native city more than...; and I tell you as a result of the experience I have had over sixty years that I do not believe there were ever more difficult problems than these, where peace is necessary and war cannot be renounced.³⁸³

³⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 226, 51, 209; also see p. 12.

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁸² Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, pp. 35-36; *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 562 n. 5; Capponi, *An Unlikely Prince*, p. 290.

³⁸³ *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 416.

The context is Guicciardini's decision to send the papal and French forces under his command to defend Florence in case the large imperial army allied with emperor Charles V attacks Tuscany as it descends south.³⁸⁴ Thus Machiavelli's comment was inspired by a burst of patriotism, gratitude and relief. Whether he wrote "soul" or "Christ," how far can we go in taking this outburst to indicate an atheistic indifference to the soul? Looking at the statement in its context, there is much to militate against such an interpretation: it was written to a friend at a time when the safety of Tuscany (including Machiavelli's own family) was at risk; it was a common saying in Florence and it was understood in Florentine civic Christianity as the proper Christian attitude. The expression itself goes back at least as far as Gino Capponi's *Ricordi* of 1420.³⁸⁵ Therein, this respected Florentine soldier and statesman writes: "Appoint as the Ten of Balia men of wisdom and temper, more interested in the welfare of the Commune than in their own good or in their soul."³⁸⁶ The latter seems to be merely a poetic way of pointing out that politics should be separated from religion, for he then shows on the very same page his concern for the soul: "A divided and disunited Church is good for our city and for our freedom but contrary to the good of the soul." On the other hand, he also argues that religion should be separated from politics: "If possible, see that the Church is interested only in spiritual matters." In Guicciardini's *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, one of the interlocutors brings up Capponi's *Ricordi*: "your great-uncle Gino wrote in those last memoirs of his, that it

³⁸⁴ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. 241; *Machiavelli and His Friends*, pp. 411-12.

³⁸⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 289 n. 19.

³⁸⁶ Quoted in Sereno, "The *Ricordi* of Gino Di Neri Capponi," p. 1121. Sereno includes the two page *Ricordi* as an appendix to his essay.

was necessary to appoint as members of the Ten of War people who loved their country more than their soul.”³⁸⁷ For Guicciardini, the saying points out the contradiction between “the precepts of Christian law” and “the reason and practice of states” (*la ragione e l’uso degli stati*).³⁸⁸ Of the same spirit is Cosimo de’ Medici’s saying that “states were not held with paternosters in hand” (*FH* 7.6). And Machiavelli, after describing how a new prince must make everything new in a city or province taken by him, makes a similar confession in the *Discourses*: “These modes are very cruel, and enemies to every way of life, not only Christian but human” (1.26.1). While the latter is an important acknowledgement that political necessity often conflicts with not only Christian values but also with human values, Machiavelli’s general tendency is to interpret religion in light of the needs of the fatherland. For example, when he uses Capponi’s expression in *Florentine Histories* he shows that it does not conflict with religion. Discussing Florence’s war with Pope Gregory, which lasted from 1375 to 1378, Machiavelli writes that the eight citizens who were appointed to conduct the war “were called Saints even though they had little regard for censures, had despoiled the churches of their goods, and compelled the clergy to celebrate the offices—so much more did those citizens then esteem their fatherland than their souls [*tanto quelli cittadini stimavano allora più la patria che l’anima*].”³⁸⁹ Despite going to war against the Church for the good of their fatherland, the Eight were, as Machiavelli points out, called “Saints.” Further, with the qualifier “then,” Machiavelli

³⁸⁷ Bk. 2, p. 158.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158-59. According to Viroli, this was the first use of the expression reason of state (*Machiavelli*, p. 50).

³⁸⁹ *FH* 3.7. For a history of what Machiavelli so briefly summarizes, see Peterson, “The War of the Eight Saints,” especially pp. 178, 200-201.

makes a disparaging contrast with his own times, suggesting that citizens now worry more about their own good than the good of their fatherland. When Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) speaks about the War of the Eight Saints in his *Historia Florentina*, he writes: “the fear of religion is to be set aside when liberty is at stake, and that the censures of unfaithful men are not to be feared.”³⁹⁰ When his son Iacopo Bracciolini (1442-1478) translated his father’s history into Italian, he explained that the Florentines put “the charity of the fatherland” above “the fear of religion,” which “was right to do inasmuch as they were good citizens and good Christians.”³⁹¹ While an interpretation of Christianity that is faithful to the letter of the New Testament may dictate that one choose between one’s soul and one’s patria, many Florentines did not see a contradiction between being a good Christian and pursuing the good of their fatherland. While Capponi’s saying points to the need to separate religion and politics, doing so for the sake of the fatherland was also interpreted as a properly Christian attitude. In the latter case, the saying seems to simply emphasize with rhetorical exaggeration that one should put the common good above one’s own good and that in political life it is an admirable and necessary thing to do even when it means engendering some risk to one’s soul, whether this is taken in a worldly sense as risking a stain on one’s honour or in the sense of needing to overcome the fear of religion. In the expression’s affirmation of the patria, there is, however, no sense of agonizing over the literal perdition of one’s eternal soul.

³⁹⁰ Quoted in Peterson, “The War of the Eight Saints,” p. 195.

³⁹¹ Quoted in Viroli, *As If God Existed*, p. 300 n. 48; also see his *Machiavelli’s God*, p. 35 n. 34.

Coming to the fate of Machiavelli's soul, the authenticity of the two stories about his death has been questioned; despite this uncertainty, together they make a fitting capstone for his approach to religion.³⁹² On the one hand, it is said that in his last words to his friends he joked about having a vision of the afterlife in a dream, saying he would prefer to go to hell to discuss affairs of state with noble ancient writers than to keep company with the few blessed poor in the kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, a letter allegedly written by his thirteen-year-old son, Piero, records that after his friends said their final farewell, Machiavelli confessed his sins to a friar.³⁹³

Machiavelli's Civic Religion

As we have seen, Machiavelli questions several Christian dogmas and interprets Christianity in accord with worldly virtue. Nonetheless, it seems (unless we read irony into almost everything he says about religion) that he does believe in God. If that is the case, then Machiavelli shares in the fundamental theistic assumption of his age: belief in a God that cares about human things. Similarly, the weight of evidence suggests that he

³⁹² Capponi, who gives credence to both stories, makes the same point (*An Unlikely Prince*, p. 296).

³⁹³ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, pp. 249-50. The first extant account of the story occurs in Binet's *On the Health of Origen* (1629) (the relevant passage can be found in Connell, ed., *The Prince*, p. 164). Ridolfi argues that since two of Machiavelli's contemporaries—Paolo Giovio and Giovan Busini—refer to the story of the dream there is no reason to doubt its authenticity (p. 330 n. 24). He also argues that the letter is authentic (p. 330 n. 25) but in a later essay comes to argue that it is an eighteenth century forgery (Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," p. 355). Viroli, on the other hand, goes so far as to identify the friar that Machiavelli allegedly confessed to as Andrea Alamanni (*Machiavelli's God*, p. 41). Regarding the story of the dream, Viroli aptly points out that it "fits him perfectly well" (*Machiavelli*, p. 27), and Connell makes the same point (Connell, ed., *The Prince*, p. 163).

takes for granted the existence of the supernatural, though—depending on the context, rhetorical need or whim—he attributes this greater-than-human causation to *fortuna*, the heavens or God. The question of his relation to Christianity seems more ambiguous. In his preface to the *Discourses*, he points out that “heaven, sun, elements, men” do not change, and in his *Exhortation to Penitence* he emphasizes what is common to religion: gratitude for God’s gifts to humankind, marvel at the heavens, the building of temples, the offering of sacrifices. Thus in his view the relation between humans and the supernatural does not change. On the other hand, he points out that the interpretation of that relation does change. Religions, as he puts it, “come from men” (*D* 2.5.1). When he states that sects are replaced every 1666 to 3000 years, he shows no concern that this will also mean the elimination of “the Christian sect” (*D* 2.5.1). His statement that religions come from men need not be a denial of the existence of God, though it does seem to be a denial of revelation. Such a denial is also implicit in his argument that religions are founded by “wise men” who “have recourse to God” (*D* 1.11.3). Similarly, he argues that apparent miracles are in fact based on natural phenomena (*D* 1.12.1). A religion, in his view, is simply a set of extraordinary laws and certain foundational practices. In that sense, he clearly accepts that the religious order of his time is Christianity; it is, as he acknowledges, “the truth and the true way” (*D* 2.2.2). But he is a Christian who interprets religion in such a way as to close the gap between the city of God and the earthly city. As he tells Pope Leo X in his *Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*: “I believe the greatest good to be done and the most pleasing to God is that which one does

to one's native city."³⁹⁴ Although the human mind cannot reach to God (*P* 11), Machiavelli takes it for granted that religion should be interpreted in accord with what is taught by nature and necessity; in other words, religion should be interpreted "according to virtue" and supporting "the exaltation and defense of the fatherland" (*D* 2.2.2).

By considering the civic-minded interpretations of Christianity in Renaissance Italy and in Florence in particular, it becomes apparent that the interpretation of Christianity need not be confined to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. Some orthodox Christians did, however, fight against this civic interpretation; for example, the Paduan Sperone Speroni (1500-88) argues that the "civil religion" of the men who live in republics is contrary to the true Christian religion.³⁹⁵ Thus we see that Christianity in this period stretched between two poles: a Christianity of humility and resignation that is often in conflict with the needs of this world and a civic Christianity that is better adapted to affairs of state. Since Machiavelli interprets religion according to his understanding of political necessity, he provides one of the most radical expressions of civic Christianity. In particular, his interpretation of Christianity does away with the principal problem presented by orthodox Christianity: God, in Machiavelli's view, forgives evil done for the good of the state so long as it is not persisted in (*P* 8, *Exhortation to Penitence*). It seems Machiavelli could not believe that God's will conflicts with the requirements of political life, as if the human condition were a divine comedy where God metes out punishment for actions that serve the good of one's fatherland. He takes humanist studies to its logical end: human things and the teaching of virtue are his greatest concerns. When the religious

³⁹⁴ *Chief Works*, vol. 1, pp. 113-14.

³⁹⁵ Quoted in Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, p. 232.

education of a period conflicts with political life, then religion has become idle and corrupt. Religion correctly interpreted instills worldly *virtù*.

Machiavelli and the Ancients

In *Prince* 15, Machiavelli proclaims that an idealistic approach to affairs of state is ruinous, arguing that rulers must act according to “what is done” rather than “how one should live.” In the vivid words of Meinecke this argument was “a sword plunged into the flank of the body politic of Western humanity, causing it to shriek and rear up.”³⁹⁶ While Machiavelli himself recognizes the novelty of his teaching, he also claims it is an exposition of what the ancients taught esoterically:

it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man. This role was taught covertly to princes by ancient writers, who wrote that Achilles, and many other ancient princes, were given to Chiron the centaur to be raised, so that he would look after them with his discipline. To have as teacher a half-beast, half-man means nothing other than that a prince needs to know how to use both natures; and the one without the other is not lasting. (*P* 18)

Machiavelli’s argument that a prince must know how to act in the manner of a beast presents a rupture with both orthodox Christian thought and Christian humanist thought, but it also reveals his awareness that even ancient writers did not openly divulge this teaching.

This chapter argues that Isaiah Berlin’s essay *The Originality of Machiavelli* simplifies both pagan morality and Machiavelli’s morality on a point of fundamental importance, namely, his argument that they derive their concept of the virtues solely from political ends. I make this case through a critique of Berlin’s essay and brief analyses of Thucydides, Cicero, Sallust and Livy. The penultimate section of the chapter examines

³⁹⁶ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 49.

the classical argument that the practice of the virtues first requires security; this, I claim, is the pagan precedent on which Machiavelli bases his argument that a ruler may act against moral virtue in order to avoid ruin. The final section situates Machiavelli in the context of Italian humanism, showing that he was a humanist who argued for pushing the imitation of antiquity into the inhumane aspects of ancient politics—the knowledge symbolized by Chiron.

Berlin's essay *The Originality of Machiavelli* (1972) offers a challenge to Croce's influential interpretation. According to Berlin, Croce's argument that Machiavelli divorced morality and politics disregards the fact that "there is an equally time-honoured ethics, that of the Greek *polis*, of which Aristotle provided the clearest exposition."³⁹⁷ The heart of this alternative ethics is as follows: "Since men are beings made by nature to live in communities, their communal purposes are the ultimate values from which the rest are derived."³⁹⁸ According to Berlin's explanation of this pagan morality, the virtues of the ancient city-states were derived solely from the communal purpose of making their city great. He contrasts this type of morality with "non Aristotelian" moralities such as Stoicism, Christianity and Kantianism where good and evil are determined by a criterion independent of the polis.³⁹⁹ Aristotle and Machiavelli, on the other hand, are said to share an understanding of "good and evil" that is "social through and through."⁴⁰⁰ Mark Hulliung summarizes Berlin's view of pagan morality succinctly: "Whatever favors the

³⁹⁷ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, p. 178.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178; also see pp. 179, 189.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

interests of the community is good in pagan morality.”⁴⁰¹ When Aristotle in the *Politics* discusses different opinions regarding the best way of life for a city, he does acknowledge the dominance of such a morality among “the many.” Speaking of those who hold such a view, he writes: “among themselves they seek just rule, but they care nothing about justice towards others.”⁴⁰² However, in Aristotle’s own view practice and reason show that “the best way of life both separately for each individual and in common for cities is that accompanied by virtue.”⁴⁰³ The particular virtues he mentions in *Politics* 7.1 are courage, moderation, justice and prudence. Thus Aristotle determines the virtues based on what is best according to experience and reason. Cassirer makes the same point about classical rationalism more broadly:

The ethical systems developed by Greek thinkers, Socrates and Democritus, Plato and Aristotle, Stoics and Epicureans, have a common feature. They are all expressions of one and the same fundamental *intellectualism* of Greek thought. It is by rational thought that we are to find the standards of moral conduct, and it is reason, and reason alone, that can give them their authority.⁴⁰⁴

Although Berlin identifies pagan morality with that of the city (in particular Athens, Sparta and Rome), even the morality of the ancient polis had to contend with the claims of justice and rational morality. Croce’s interpretation of Machiavelli acknowledges that fact: “debates like those on just and unjust law, on natural and conventional law, on force and justice, etc., show how the contrast was sometimes felt and how the correlative

⁴⁰¹ *Citizen Machiavelli*, p. 250.

⁴⁰² *Politics* 7.2, 1324b35. For a similar point from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* see the section below entitled “Morality and Security.”

⁴⁰³ *Politics* 7.1, 1323b40.

⁴⁰⁴ *The Myth of the State*, p. 81.

problem appeared in outline.”⁴⁰⁵ Machiavelli too, as his statement about Chiron shows, was aware of that contrast. Berlin’s description of pagan morality, on the other hand, makes it sound more like Thrasymachus’ view of justice in the *Republic*. Therein he claims that “justice is nothing other than what is advantageous for the stronger” (338c). If we imagine the community as a tyrant asserting that whatever serves its communal interests is just, then we have a pagan morality close to the one Berlin describes. However, even if Greek city-states did tend to seek their own advantage as their communal purpose, other concepts such as justice and the unwritten laws could come in conflict with self-interest. We see this conflict between advantage and justice in Thucydides’ *History* when Pericles admits that Athens’ empire is “a tyranny” and adds “to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go unsafe” (2.63.2). While Pericles argues against relinquishing any of their subjects, he acknowledges that it was perhaps wrong to subject them. Such a dual position—the assertion of self-interest while tacitly acknowledging the injustice of it—is also apparent in the speech of the Athenian ambassadors to Melos (as it is presented by Thucydides). Since I will discuss their position below, for now it suffices to say that they openly base their claim to rule the Melians on their strength, not justice. Yet, in making such a claim, they implicitly admit that their act of subjecting the Melians is unjust.

Based on the various positions sketched above, we can differentiate at least three views of justice in classical Greek thought. The view that identifies a city’s own advantage with justice can be equated with the position of Thrasymachus. In that view

⁴⁰⁵ *Politics and Morals*, p. 58.

justice is relative since it is identified with whatever one has the strength to impose. Nonetheless, even this cynical view appeals to the name of justice. In the second view, justice is recognized as an objective good, but it is granted only within the polis, and it is extended between poleis only when both are compelled to grant it to the other due to their equal power. This is the position of the Athenian ambassadors to Melos as well as the one Aristotle identifies with “the many.” The third position, as stated by Aristotle himself, uses reason and experience to defend the virtues of courage, moderation, justice and prudence as the best mode of conduct for both individuals and cities (*Politics* 7.1). Berlin’s characterization of pagan morality is closest to the first position since both recognize no objective moral standard external to the polis.

Turning to Berlin’s interpretation of Machiavelli, he argues that the latter’s writings impress upon the reader the necessity of choosing between two incompatible moralities: pagan and Christian. For those who accept the validity of Machiavelli’s political analysis but also hold an objective morality, Berlin argues that his writings induce “acute moral discomfort.”⁴⁰⁶ The latter argument is essentially no different from Croce’s. Where Berlin differs from Croce is in his argument that Machiavelli himself “merely takes for granted the superiority of Roman *antiqua virtus*.”⁴⁰⁷ Machiavelli’s choice, he argues, is not based on “the very nature of things,” nor the argument that “necessity knows no law,” but simply on his valorization of political life.⁴⁰⁸ According to

⁴⁰⁶ Berlin, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, pp. 196-97.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 191, 204.

Berlin, anyone who chooses such a political morality will experience no moral agony in political life.⁴⁰⁹

The third and final part of Berlin's essay offers a new interpretation of the originality of Machiavelli and the reason posterity has found him so shocking. Berlin argues that Machiavelli, by confronting the reader with a choice between two incompatible moralities, unknowingly undermined a fundamental assumption of Western thought: that there exists one ultimately valid solution to the question of how human beings ought to live.⁴¹⁰ Thus what makes Machiavelli's writings original and shocking is that they inadvertently uncovered "the uncomfortable truth" of pluralism.⁴¹¹

Berlin's argument that this rupture first comes to the surface in Machiavelli's writings rests on his argument that Machiavelli simply took for granted the superiority of pagan morality, that it was a simple "choice."⁴¹² On the other hand, if Machiavelli's preference for Roman grandeur were based on a reasoned argument, then, rather than revealing two incompatible moralities, it would establish one of them as the true way. Since Berlin fails to give any philosophical weight to Machiavelli's arguments, Machiavelli appears to him to be blind to the conflict between morality and politics. However, as I argued in chapter 4, Machiavelli's political judgements are not made in the absence of reasoned argumentation but rather based on the ancient and authoritative

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 180, 184, 190, 192, 196.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 196, 203.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 205.

⁴¹² Ibid., pp. 189, 192, 196, 198, 201, 202, 204.

standards of nature and necessity.⁴¹³ Further, as I tried to show in chapter 5, Florentines who were involved with politics tended to deal with Christianity in one of two ways: either to separate politics and religion (symbolized by the saying that one should love one's patria more than one's soul) or to reconcile Christianity with the needs of the state. Machiavelli in his writings can be seen to use both strategies. Further, he esteems the moral virtues but gives priority to necessity when the two come into conflict: a ruler should "not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity" (*P* 18). Thus in my view Berlin's argument about what constitutes Machiavelli's originality is the least interesting part of his interpretation.

Berlin attributes the evident lack of moral agony in Machiavelli's writings to the pagan monism that he projects onto him, but that lack is more adequately explained by Machiavelli's advocacy of a "manly" acceptance of the necessity of acting against moral virtue.⁴¹⁴ The simple but profound point that makes his writings disturbing is that he highlights the conflicts that occur between moral values and political life and offers a morally difficult yet reasoned solution to that problem: moral virtues should be followed except when doing so will lead to ruin. For anyone who would like to see morality as the best guide to all spheres of human life that is a challenging conclusion, but what makes Machiavelli's writings even more shocking is that he also accepts acting against the moral virtues for the sake of expansion.

⁴¹³ Coby offers a similar critique of Berlin's position: "Necessity settles the issue and justifies the choice," *Machiavelli's Romans*, p. 230.

⁴¹⁴ For textual examples see p. 69 above.

To better compare Machiavelli's writings to ancient thought, the next four sections will focus on the relation between politics and morality in the writings of Thucydides, Cicero, Sallust and Livy, respectively, and briefly consider Machiavelli in relation to each of them.

Thucydides and the Greek Polis

The Greek understanding of the conflict between advantage and morality may be examined by turning to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It is a work which Machiavelli himself shows knowledge of in *Discourses* 2.2, 2.10 and 3.16. The speeches that occur throughout Thucydides' history show that justice (*dikē*) is one of the principal Greek values. Focusing on a few of its instructive occurrences will outline the Greek understanding of justice as it pertains to relations between states.

Before war broke out between Sparta and Athens, Corinthian ambassadors visited Sparta, their ally, to warn against Athenian aggression and to persuade them "to show their determination not to submit to injustice [*adikeō*]" (1.71).⁴¹⁵ In response to the Corinthians' accusation, the Athenians invoked the treaty between their two leagues, telling the Spartans: "we bid you not to dissolve the treaty, or to break your oaths, but to have our differences settled by arbitration according to our agreement" (1.78). In Sparta's private deliberations on the matter, Archidamus, the King of Sparta, argues against war: "they are prepared to submit matters to arbitration, for one should not proceed against a party who offers arbitration as one would against a wrongdoer" (1.85). The concepts seen

⁴¹⁵ English translations are from *The Landmark Thucydides*, except where noted. The Greek text is from Thucydides, *Historiae*.

in these discussions—“treaty” (*spondē*), “oaths” (*horkos*), “arbitration” (*dikē*) and “wrongdoer” (*adikeō*)—all pertain to the concept of justice (*dikē*) and serve to constrain naked self-interest. Although Thucydides’ *History* shows that claims of justice and accusations of injustice often mask self-interest, it is nonetheless clear that the different parties accept justice as the common standard for action, at least in principle. In addition to justice, we also see that the unwritten laws and fear of the gods are moral beliefs that serve to restrain narrow self-interest.⁴¹⁶

Before Thucydides lays out the complaints that led to the breaking of the treaty, he begins with his own judgement on the cause of the war: “The real cause, however, I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable” (1.23). As we saw above, the stated causes of the war revolved around claims of justice and allegations of injustice, but in Thucydides’ estimation the real cause had to do with power or, more precisely, fear of the other’s power. Sparta was compelled to break the treaty because Athens was growing so powerful that the Spartans and their allies feared they might soon find their life and liberty in the hands of Athens. Despite being compelled by fear, the Spartans still sent to the oracle of Delphi to inquire if they should go to war; they received from the god the answer that victory would be theirs (1.118).

One of the most noted discussions about justice and power is the dialogue between the Athenian ambassadors and the rulers of Melos. Thucydides’ Athenian ambassadors are particularly frank, admitting “we have come here in the interest

⁴¹⁶ For the first see 2.37.3, and also 3.59.1, 3.84.3; for the second see 2.53.4.

[*ōpheleia*] of our empire,” that is, to make the Melians a “tributary ally” (5.91, 5.111). As the stronger power they insist on leaving justice out of the negotiations: “we both know that decisions about justice (*dikaios*) are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion; but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that” (5.89).⁴¹⁷ By appealing to strength rather than justice, the Athenians tacitly admit that their demand for the Melians to submit is unjust. The Melians, being weaker, are reduced to pointing out the common usefulness of justice:

As we think, at any rate, it is expedient—we speak as we are obliged, since you enjoin us to let right [*dikaios*] alone and talk only of interest [*sumpherō*]*—*that you should not destroy what is our common protection, namely, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair [*ta eikota*] and right [*dikaios*].
(5.90)

Thucydides’ own sympathy for this view is clear since earlier in the *History* he professes in his own voice the value of preserving the common laws of piety and justice, noting that one may need to call on their aid oneself in a time of danger (3.84).

The Melians also place hope in the justice of the gods: “we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust” (5.104). And they further warn the Athenians that the Spartans will not betray their Melian colony as that would show the Spartans to be faithless to their friends (5.106). The Athenians reply that interest lies in safety, while doing what is just and noble brings danger (5.107). With this comment they again acknowledge the injustice of their demand but correctly calculate that Sparta will not bring danger upon itself to stop injustice to their Melian colony. But are not the Athenians’ words also an indictment of themselves, for there is no

⁴¹⁷ *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature*, p. 103. Here I use Woodruff’s more literal translation.

justice and nobility in their treatment of the Melians. With the latter unwilling to submit and the Athenians set upon their immediate interest, the Athenians besiege them. After the Melians surrender, the Athenians “put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and settled the place themselves” (5.116). Even the gods seem indifferent to the Melians’ unjust fate, though retribution does perhaps come to the Athenians—too late for the former—in the form of their eventual defeat.

In the *History*, we see three basic criteria at work to determine if an act is just or unjust. To break a treaty or oath is unjust (2.74). To willfully injure someone without reason is unjust (4.40). To punish one who has done injustice is just (5.89). According to these judgements, justice simply means not doing wrong and punishing those who do wrong. Such an understanding of justice is evident in the prayer of the Spartan king Archidamus before he besieges the city of Plataea: “Graciously accord that those who were the first to offend [*adikia*] may be punished for it, and that vengeance [*timōria*] may be attained by those who would righteously [*nomimos*] inflict it” (2.74). Here we see that the one who is first to offend (*adikia*) is unjust (*adikos*). This simple criterion of wrong is also seen in the earliest Greek texts: the *Theogony* and the *Iliad*. In the former, Kronos agrees to redress the evil [*kakē*] of his father, saying: “Mother, I would undertake this task and accomplish it—I am not afraid of our unspeakable father. After all, *he began it* by his ugly [*aeikēs*] behaviour” (*Theogony* 169-172, emphasis added). In the *Iliad*, Menelaus supplicates Zeus before engaging in combat with Paris, pointing out that Paris was the first to do wrong: “Zeus, King, give me revenge, he wronged [*kakos*] me first!” (3.409).

While this distinction between the just and unjust is clear in principle, in practice disputants rarely agree over who was the first to do wrong, and a cycle of vengeance may then lead to a string of wrongs, clouding the whole matter. In the Peloponnesian War, the Spartans technically broke the treaty, but in their own minds felt it was the Athenians who were guilty (1.118).

Machiavelli himself accepts imperialism as both natural and necessary (*P 3, D 1.6.4*). His acceptance of it is also clearly stated in *On How to Treat the Populace of Valdichiana*: “The world has always been inhabited in the same way by men who have the same passions: There have always been those who rule and those who serve.”⁴¹⁸ Since Machiavelli does not denigrate justice but simply does not bother to question the justice or injustice of imperialism, his position is similar to that of the Athenian ambassadors to Melos. They too believe it is in accord with nature: “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist forever after us” (5.105). Machiavelli’s acceptance of imperialism does not mean he was blind to its barbarism. In *The Ass*, he remarks that ambition “destroys our states; and the greater wonder is that all recognize this transgression [*error*], but not one flees from it.”⁴¹⁹ And in his poem “On Ambition” (written around 1509) he graphically presents war’s terrible consequences:

A man is weeping for his father dead and a woman for her husband;
Another man, beaten naked, you see driven in sadness from his own dwelling.
...

⁴¹⁸ *Essential Writings*, p. 361.

⁴¹⁹ *Chief Works*, vol. 2, p. 762, lines 46-48.

Foul with blood are the ditches and streams,
Full of heads, of legs, of arms,
And other members gashed and severed.⁴²⁰

But since Machiavelli accepts that ambition always has and always will lead to war, the only solution he offers in the poem is to join man's natural ambition with a ferocious heart (*un cor feroce*), an armed virtue (*una virtute armata*), a stern education (*fiera educazion*), as well as a sound judgment and intellect (*il iudicio e l'intelletto sano*).⁴²¹ In short, his only solution to the problem of imperialism is to rely on one's own military virtue. However, when it comes to the question of the best mode of expanding, Machiavelli argues against the method used by Athens. In *Discourses 2.4*, he explains that their mode of expansion is "useless" since it acquires "subjects" rather than "partners." Holding subjects through "violence" is "difficult and laborious," and Athens came to ruin since it acquired an empire too difficult to keep (*Discourses 2.4*). Thus it is prudence rather than justice that makes Machiavelli criticize the Athenian mode of holding dominion. Nonetheless, his argument provides a realist check on imperial ambition.

Cicero

Cicero was largely responsible for introducing, and justifying, Greek philosophy to a Roman audience. His philosophical writings span 55 BCE to 44 BCE. *On Duties (De officiis)* was his last work, written the year Caesar was assassinated and a year before he met his own death at the hands of the Triumvirate's henchmen. During the Middle Ages

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p. 738, lines 133-35, 148-150.

⁴²¹ *Tutte le opere*, pp. 851-52, lines 92, 117, 164.

and Renaissance, it was the most widely read classical Latin prose work, and Cicero, through the influence of Petrarch, attained a venerated status among Florentine humanists.⁴²² His *On Duties* is divided into three books. The first explains duties based on what is honourable (*honestum*); the second discusses the duties in relation to what is beneficial (*utile*); the third argues that everything honourable is beneficial and that nothing dishonourable can be beneficial.⁴²³ Cicero thus upholds the Stoic doctrine of the identity of the honourable and the beneficial, arguing they can never be in conflict.

In the context of elucidating the honourable in relation to the virtue of justice, Cicero codifies the “laws of war” (*iura belli*).⁴²⁴ Basing himself on the example of their “forefathers,” he prescribes that “once victory has been secured, those who were not cruel or savage in warfare should be spared” (1.35). He emblazons this point by naming all the Italian peoples to whom their ancestors gave citizenship after they defeated them. Another principle he lays down is that once a city or people is conquered the peace should involve no treachery. Their forefathers respected that point so greatly, he says, that the very man who conquered a city became its patron (1.35).

Cicero also discusses the importance of faith (*fides*) as a fundamental part of justice (1.23). He shows its importance by the fact that their ancestors built a shrine to Faith next to the temple of Jupiter, the greatest of the gods (3.104). He also includes faith among the “laws of war,” arguing “it often happens that faith given to an enemy must be

⁴²² Colish, “Cicero’s *De Officiis* and Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” pp. 79-83.

⁴²³ All translations from *On Duties* are from the Cambridge edition. Latin is from the Loeb Edition. An alternative translation, used in the latter, is “morally right” for *honestum* and “expedient” for *utile*.

⁴²⁴ On Cicero’s definition of just war also see pages 102-103 above.

kept” (3.107). As he explains, faith must be kept with just and legitimate enemies, though it need not be kept with those who are an enemy to all, such as pirates (3.107-8).

In his apologia for the Roman empire, Cicero claims it was maintained through beneficence and justice and that Roman magistrates and generals sought praise through “the fair and faithful defence” of Rome’s provinces and allies (2.26).⁴²⁵ He grants that Rome had already begun to depart from her just treatment of others before Sulla took power in Rome but writes that after his rule Rome completely abandoned justice since, having suffered so much injustice at home, nothing seemed unjust toward allies (2.27).

In sum, the moral standards which Cicero attributes to Rome’s forefathers are the fetial laws or rights of war; mercy, friendship and faithfulness towards the defeated; faithfulness toward legitimate enemies, and fairness and faithfulness towards allies. These values serve to restrain collective selfishness and show a concern for a more common good that includes allies and even enemies. Rather than comparing Cicero and Machiavelli on each of these points, we can go to the heart of the matter by comparing their central arguments. While Cicero defends the Stoic identification of the honourable and the beneficial, Machiavelli explodes it, arguing that there are in fact many cases where what is honourable conflicts with what is useful. Although Cicero’s whole book argues against that view, he grants that in particular circumstances what is normally dishonourable is not so. The example he gives is killing: something which is normally a crime, but which is beneficial and honourable when the person killed is a tyrant (3.19).

⁴²⁵ “*aequitate et fide defendissent.*”

Cicero thus allows of exceptions in particular circumstances but rejects the argument that anything dishonourable can be useful (3.18).

The difference between their views is exemplified by the differences between two otherwise very similar passages in *On Duties* and *The Prince*. Cicero writes:

There are two types of conflict: the one proceeds by debate, the other by force. Since the former is the proper concern of a man, but the latter of beasts, one should only resort to the latter if one may not employ the former. (I.34)⁴²⁶

Machiavelli follows Cicero so closely it seems he must have had the text at hand:

Thus, you must know that there are two kinds of combat: one with laws, the other with force. The first is proper to man, the second to beasts; but since the first is often not enough, one must have recourse to the second. (P 18)⁴²⁷

Machiavelli accepts Cicero's point that the use of force is beastly, but rather than prescribing force as a last resort Machiavelli emphasizes that a ruler must often use it. The difference between their views becomes sharper in the next two similar passages. First

Cicero:

There are two ways in which injustice may be done, either through force or through deceit [*fraude*]; and deceit seems to belong to a little fox [*vulpeculae*], force [*vis*] to a lion. Both of them seem most alien to a human being; but deceit deserves a greater hatred. And out of all injustice, nothing deserves punishment more than that of men who, just at the time when they are most betraying trust, act in such a way that they might appear to be good men. (I.41)⁴²⁸

Machiavelli:

⁴²⁶ "Nam cum sint duo genera decertandi, unum per disceptationem, alterum per vim, cumque illud proprium sit hominis, hoc beluarum, confugiendum est ad posterius, si uti non licet superiore."

⁴²⁷ "Dovete adunque sapere come sono dua generazione di combattere, l'uno con le legge, l'altro con la forza: quell primo è proprio dello uomo, quell secondo delle bestie."

⁴²⁸ "Cum autem duobus modis, id est aut vi aut fraude, fiat iniuria, fraus quasi vulpeculae, vis leonis videtur; utrumque homine alienissimum, sed fraus odio digna maiore. Totius autem iniustitiae nulla capitalior quam eorum, qui tum, cum maxime fallunt, id agunt, ut viri boni esse videantur."

Thus, since a prince is compelled of necessity to know well how to use the beast, he should pick the fox and the lion, because the lion does not defend itself from snares and the fox does not defend itself from wolves. So one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten wolves. Those who stay simply with the lion do not understand this. (P 18)⁴²⁹

Cicero accepts that rulers must resort to the way of beasts when others are not willing to settle a dispute through discussion, but Machiavelli puts the powerful lion and the deceitful fox on equal ground. Considering the two passages side by side, Machiavelli's point speaks directly to Cicero: "Those who stay simply with the lion do not understand this." He further contradicts Cicero by insisting not only that a ruler must know how to use deceit but also must know how to dissemble when he does so. Thus what for Cicero is the injustice most deserving of punishment, is for Machiavelli a quality necessary in order to be a good prince. While Machiavelli knew Cicero well, we see that he rejects his Stoicism.

Sallust

Sallust sided with Caesar during the civil war and, after the latter's assassination in 44 BCE, turned to writing. In Sallust's view, the moral decline and civil strife so evident in his time had begun to set in once Rome defeated its chief rival Carthage (in 146 BCE) (C 10-11). His three histories describe the discord of the late Roman republic: *Catiline's Conspiracy*, *The Jugurthine War* and his unfinished, and now fragmentary,

⁴²⁹ "Sendo adunque uno principe necessitato sapere bene usare la bestia, debbe di quelle pigliare la golpe e il liono, perché el liono non si difende da' lacci, la golpe non si difende da' lupi. Bisogna adunque essere golpe a conoscere e' lacci, e liono a sbigottire e' lupi: coloro che stanno semplicemente in sul liono non se ne intendano."

Histories. His popularity during the Renaissance may be gauged by Machiavelli's passing comment: "Everyone has read the conspiracy of Catiline written by Sallust" (*D* 3.6.19). Machiavelli also mentions *The Jugurthine War* in *Discourses* 2.8.1. He accepts Sallust's argument that fear of a foreign enemy helps preserve unity.⁴³⁰ In Machiavelli's own words: "if it [a republic] does not have an enemy outside, it will find one at home, as it appears necessarily happens to all great cities" (*D* 2.19.1). Another of Sallust's ideas shared by many Italian republicans is that virtue flourishes more in a republic than in a monarchy; as he explains, "kings are always more suspicious of good men than wicked men and they fear the virtue they do not have" (*C* 7.1-3). Machiavelli promotes the same idea; for example, he has a conspirator against the duke of Milan say: "republics nourish virtuous men, princes eliminate them" (*FH* 7.33).⁴³¹

How does Sallust portray the Roman view of the relation between expediency and honour? He believed that in his own time honour had succumbed to ambition and avarice. How far they had fallen is shown by the example of their ancestors: "they were fearless in war, and, when peace arrived, they were fair [*aequitas*]" (*C* 9.3). As proof of the latter, he adds: "in peacetime they exercised political power more often with kindness [*beneficium*] than with fear and, when they received an injury, they preferred forgiveness to prosecution" (*C* 9.5). Further, "[i]n their offerings to the gods, they were lavish; at home they were sparing; with friends they were trustworthy [*fidelis*]" (*C* 9.2). Thus according to Sallust the old Romans were fair, kind, forgiving, pious and trustworthy. We get

⁴³⁰ See *C* 10.1, *J* 41.2, *H* 1.12.

⁴³¹ Also see *D* 2.2.1, *AW* 2.293.

another glimpse of the old republic in a speech by Cato the Younger. In a senate meeting in 63 BCE, he is reported to have said:

Do not believe that our ancestors made a small Republic great with military weapons. If that were the case, we would now be in possession of the most beautiful of all states: we have more allies and citizens than they did, more military weapons and horses. No, other things made them great, things which we do not have at all: disciplined energy at home, a just empire abroad, a mind free in deliberation, limited neither by guilt nor craving. (C 52.19-21)

Thus in Cato's view it is not force that makes an empire great but certain moral qualities. Earlier in the work, Sallust expresses a similar view in his own voice, writing that it was work and justice ("*labore atque iustitia*") that increased the Roman republic (C 10.1).

On the other hand, a letter from Sallust's last work, the *Histories*, offers a view of Rome's imperialism from the perspective of its enemy in the Third Mithridatic War (75-65 BCE).⁴³² In the letter, King Mithridates requests an alliance with King Arsaces in order to drive Rome from the east. He warns the Parthian king that Rome will not stop its expansion to the east if he is defeated, and he describes how the Romans used treachery to divide and conquer the east one power at a time. He explodes the claim that Rome attained its empire justly, writing:

don't you know that...since their beginning they have possessed nothing except what they stole: their homes, their wives, their fields, their empire? Once they were immigrants without a country or parents; they have been established as a plague upon the whole world; nothing human or divine prevents them from robbing and exterminating allies and friends, people far away and nearby, the impoverished and the powerful. (4.17)

⁴³² On the question of whether Sallust based his letter on a letter of Mithridates, McGing writes: "There is no direct external evidence for or against the existence of a real letter" (*The Foreign Policy of Mithridates*, p. 155).

Their reason for making war is, he continues, “a profound craving for power and wealth” (4.5). And, according to him, the Romans have attained their empire “by daring and deception [*fallundo*], and by sowing war upon war” (4.20). Since the *Histories* comes down to us in fragments, the text provides no further context for determining Sallust’s intent in relation to the letter. Nonetheless, it is clear that the letter lays out an uncensored and unflattering critique of Roman imperialism. This perspective offers a much different account than the one Sallust attributes to his Roman ancestors in *Catiline’s Conspiracy*. According to the Roman apologia therein, Rome attained its empire by defending itself from unjust neighbours and then by defending its allies (C 6). The truth likely contains aspects of both Rome’s apologia and her enemy’s rhetoric. In the *Discourses* 2.4.1, Machiavelli offers another interpretation of Rome’s rise to power. As he criticizes Athens for making its allies subjects, so he praises Rome for making its allies partners. Not only are subjects hard to keep, but Rome was able to use the “labors and blood” of their partners to conquer provinces outside Italy. Then, when Rome had used them to acquire empire outside Italy, their Italian partners “found themselves in a stroke encircled by Roman subjects and crushed by a very big city, such as Rome was.”⁴³³ Thus according to Machiavelli Rome acquired its empire through “deception.” In short, he does not cite any of the conventional justifications for Roman imperialism (self-defense, defending their allies, spreading Roman laws, justice and peace) but argues their imperium was solidified through the intentional deception of their allies (creating the illusion of an equal

⁴³³ See also *D* 2.13.2.

partnership while actually using them for the sake of their own imperium), a strategy he counsels.

Livy

Livy's history—covering the founding of Rome down to 9 BCE—totaled 142 books. Livy wrote the first book around 27 BCE and continued to add books until his death around 17 CE.⁴³⁴ *Ab urbe condita* (*From the Founding of the City*) became the definitive history of Rome in its own time, though often read in an abridged form.⁴³⁵ Interest in Livy's history waned during the Middle Ages and much of it was lost. In the fourteenth century, Petrarch helped preserve what remained by compiling the extant manuscripts: books 1-10 and 21-40. Later, in 1527, books 41-45 were also recovered.⁴³⁶ In part thanks to Petrarch, Livy again became popular. Petrarch himself used Livy for his epic poem *Africa*; Leonardo Bruni explicitly modeled himself on Livy in his *History of the Florentine People*; Flavio Biondo likewise styled his history of the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire on Livy, and Machiavelli wrote a major commentary on Livy (making it fall into 142 chapters as a further tribute to Livy's work).⁴³⁷ Machiavelli, in his preface to the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, explains: "I have judged it necessary to write on all those books of Titus Livy that have not been intercepted by the malignity of the times whatever I shall judge necessary for their greater understanding."

⁴³⁴ Luce, "Introduction," pp. ix-x; Ogilvie, "Introduction," pp. 12, 14-15.

⁴³⁵ Ogilvie, "Introduction," p. 15.

⁴³⁶ Kleinhenz, *Medieval Italy*, vol. 2, p. 645.

⁴³⁷ Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 38 n. 1; Black, "Humanism," p. 257.

Like the works of Cicero and Sallust, Livy's history shows that the Romans held many moral beliefs which limit self-interest. Livy himself writes in the preface to the first book that his aim in turning to their ancestors is to discover the moral values which had made Rome great before the present moral collapse had set in: "Here are the questions to which I would have every reader give his close attention—what life and morals [*mores*] were like; through what men and by what policies, in peace and in war, empire was established and enlarged." Some of the first values Livy discovers in the old Romans are the importance of justice, treaties and oaths. In book 1, he records that the oldest known treaty was between Rome's third king and the Albans and that all treaties are still made according to the procedure then used. The end of the treaty's oath shows how seriously the ancients took their oaths:

"From these terms, as they have been publicly rehearsed from beginning to end, without fraud [*dolo malo*], from these tablets, or this wax, and as they have been this day clearly understood, the Roman People will not be the first to depart. If it shall first depart from them, by general consent, with malice aforethought [*dolo malo*], then on that day do thou, great Diespiter, so smite the Roman People as I shall here to-day smite this pig: and so much the harder smite them as thy power and thy strength are greater." (I.24)⁴³⁸

As seen here, both sides declare that they make the treaty without fraudulent intentions (*dolo malo*) and that if they do contrive fraud they wish divine retribution upon themselves. A few pages on, when Livy relates how a Roman King defeated a neighbouring city using fraud and trickery (*fraude ac dolo*), he adds that it was an un-

⁴³⁸ English translations from books 1-2 are from *Livy in Fourteen Volumes*. Translations from books 6-10 are from Livy, *Rome and Italy*. The Latin is from *Livy in Fourteen Volumes*.

Roman strategy (1.53). From these examples, we see that treaties, oaths and faith are common goods that limit expediency.

According to Livy's history, Ancus, the fourth Roman king, instituted religious ceremonies for demanding redress. Ancus, he writes, borrowed the laws from the ancient tribe of the Aequi, and they are, Livy adds, the same rituals still used by the Roman fetial priests (1.32). Cicero's condensed outline of just war in *On Duties* is based on these same fetial laws. First, an envoy is sent to the border of the people from whom restitution is sought. The formula recited is:

"Hear, Jupiter; hear, ye boundaries of"—naming whatever nation they belong to;—"let righteousness hear! I am the public herald of the Roman People; I come duly and religiously [*iuste pieque*] commissioned; let my words be credited." Then he recites his demands, after which he takes Jupiter to witness: "If I demand unduly and against religion [*iniuste impieque*] that these men and these things be surrendered to me, then let me never enjoy my native land." (1.32)

The envoy enters the land repeating the formula and allows 33 days for restitution; if it is not forthcoming the envoy declares:

"Hear, Jupiter, and thou, Janus Quirinus, and hear all heavenly gods, and ye, gods of earth, and ye of the lower world; I call you to witness that this people"—naming whatever people it is—"is unjust [*iniustum*], and does not make just reparation. But of these matters we will take counsel of the elders in our country, how we may obtain our right [*ius*]." (1.32)

Having followed this procedure the Romans would then declare a pure and pious war (*puro pioque duello*) (1.32). Scholars have argued that this formula dates to the second century BCE, not the time of the kings as Livy writes,⁴³⁹ but, even if that is the case, it is noteworthy how strictly the Romans formalized war and framed it around the concepts of reparation and justice. Although the Romans could still interpret the matter of reparation

⁴³⁹ Luce, ed., *The Rise of Rome*, p. 345 n. 40.

in their own favour (and back it with the threat of force), their formal demand allows the enemy, at least in theory, to judge whether or not the demand is just and pious and, if not, to retain the envoy.

Another Roman concept constricting expediency is “the law of nations” (*iure gentium*). Early in the first book, Livy writes that violence done to envoys violates the law of nations (1.14). In the second book, when foreign envoys are caught conspiring against the republic with some young Romans, Livy tells us, “The traitors were thrown into prison forthwith. As for the envoys, it was uncertain for a little while what would be done with them, but, notwithstanding they appeared to have deserved no less than to be treated as enemies, the law of nations nevertheless prevailed” (2.4). Showing how much they honoured the law of nations, the Romans decided to punish only the Roman conspirators (who included the sons of Brutus), despite the envoys’ guilt.

As we saw in Livy’s preface, one of the concerns of his history is to highlight the moral virtues of the old Romans. Machiavelli in his writings promotes both the humane Roman virtues and some of the severe ones. The “humane modes” which he wished to promote are succinctly expressed by Fabrizio in the *Art of War*: “To honor and reward the virtues, not to despise poverty, to esteem the modes and orders of military discipline, to constrain the citizens to love one another, to live without sects, to esteem the private less than the public, and other similar things that could easily accompany our times” (1.29, 1.33). In addition to those humane values, Machiavelli was also interested in promoting the salutary effect of Roman severity. One of the most important lessons he draws from Livy’s history is the way the Romans dealt with the allies who rebelled against them. In

book 8, Livy writes that after Camillus defeated the Latins he told the Senate: “you have the power to create a permanent peace for yourselves by exercising either cruelty or forgiveness” (8.13). The Senate decided to treat each Latin city based on its deserts, either granting it citizenship or punishing it harshly. In *On How to Treat the Populace of Valdichiana after Their Rebellion*, Machiavelli argues that the Florentines should have followed Camillus’ advice in their treatment of Arezzo and the towns of the Valdichiana after their rebellion from Florentine rule.⁴⁴⁰ Like the Romans, they should have avoided “any middle way,” either benefiting them to win their loyalty or punishing them in such a way that they cannot rebel again. Thus Machiavelli agrees with Florence’s decision to reconquer the deserving towns with benefits, but he argues that in its punishment of Arezzo it should have followed the Roman example of either destroying the city and bringing its inhabitants to Rome or of sending many new inhabitants to hold it down. In Machiavelli’s view, the punishments Florence chose for Arezzo ruled out their loyalty while failing to remove their ability to rebel at the next opportunity. This example of Florence’s failure to live up to Rome’s severity is so important to Machiavelli that he repeats the argument in *Discourses* 2.23.

Another important example for Machiavelli is the way in which the Romans dealt with a tumult that occurred in Ardea: they executed the heads of the tumult as a way to reunite the city (see Livy 4.10). Commenting on their decision, Machiavelli says that killing the heads of a tumult is the most certain way to unite a divided city, again unfavorably contrasting Florence’s more lenient policies with that of Rome (*D* 3.27.2).

⁴⁴⁰ In *Essential Writings*, pp. 359-64.

While Machiavelli takes from Livy the example of killing the heads of tumults and either benefitting those under one's power or eliminating their ability to harm you, he passes over the occasions on which the Romans followed the most inhumane ancient practice of massacring the men and enslaving the women of a defeated city. To take two such examples from Livy, he writes that after the city of Pometia surrendered: "Their chief men were beheaded, and the rest of the colonists were sold as slaves. The town was razed; its land was sold" (2.17). In a similar manner, the Romans, after defeating the Tarquinii, massacred the populace and sent 358 nobles to Rome to be flogged and beheaded (7.19). Machiavelli's argument that his contemporaries should imitate the Roman example of destroying a city and relocating its rebellious subjects as well as his argument that the ringleaders of tumults should be killed were meant to spur his contemporaries to overcome their humane feelings for the sake of order; however, Machiavelli was himself enough a product of a Christian and Stoic education in *humanitas*, so as not to think of going so far as advocating that moderns should also imitate the completely inhumane example of eliminating or enslaving a populace.

Morality and Security

One point of the previous section was to emphasize that ancient thought was well aware of the conflict between morality and utility. This section will now focus on the relationship between morality and security in particular. The idea that morality may be contravened when it comes to defending the security of the state is sanctioned by two Roman texts on rhetoric written in the late first century BCE: *De inventione* and the

Rhetorica ad Herennium.⁴⁴¹ They became the two most influential texts on rhetoric during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.⁴⁴² Their discussions of morality and politics occur in the context of their elucidation of deliberative oratory, the type of speech dealing with political persuasion. *De inventione* is Cicero's earliest work, written around 91-86 BCE (making him between fifteen and twenty years old).⁴⁴³ The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* was attributed to Cicero during the Middle Ages, but by the fifteenth century his authorship had come to be contested. It is now granted that the author is unknown, though the text itself dates to around 86-82 BCE.⁴⁴⁴ The work appears in the record Machiavelli's father kept of all the books he borrowed, wherein he attributes it to Cicero.⁴⁴⁵

According to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the aim of political action is *utilitas* (advantage or utility), and it has two parts: security (*tutam*) and honour (*honestum*). Under the heading of honour fall the four virtues of wisdom, justice, courage and temperance (3.2.3). The text grants there are cases where one may urge that a virtue be disregarded but adds that the speaker should show he is not abandoning virtue altogether; rather, he should say that the present situation is not a time for being strict about virtue or that what others have said is a virtue is not a virtue in this case (for example, what they have said is justice is in fact cowardice) (3.3.6).

⁴⁴¹ There has recently been an outpouring of literature placing Machiavelli's writing in the context of classical rhetoric. See, for example, Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (1994); Virginia Cox, "Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: Deliberative Rhetoric in *The Prince*" (1997); Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli*, "Chapter 3: The Power of Words" (1998); Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, "Chapter Two: The Power of Words" (2010).

⁴⁴² Viroli, *Machiavelli*, p. 85; *Machiavelli's God*, p. 132 n. 150.

⁴⁴³ *De inventione*, p. xii.

⁴⁴⁴ *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, p. ix. For the dating see page xxvi.

⁴⁴⁵ Viroli, *Machiavelli*, pp. 76, 199 n. 9.

The text advises that if a course of action aims at both security and honour, then both should be mentioned, but if it aims at only one, then only the one should be mentioned (3.4.8). The writer then summarizes the types of arguments that can be used if one wishes to put security first and likewise if one wishes to put honour first:

the speaker who advocates security will use the following topics: Nothing is more useful than safety; no one can make use of his virtues if he has not based his plans upon safety; not even the gods help those who thoughtlessly commit themselves to danger; nothing ought to be deemed honourable which does not produce safety. One who prefers the considerations of honour to security will use the following topics: Virtue ought never to be renounced; either pain, if that is feared, or death, if that is dreaded, is more tolerable than disgrace and infamy; one must consider the shame which will ensue—indeed neither immortality nor a life everlasting is achieved, nor is it proved that, once this peril is avoided, another will not be encountered; virtue finds it noble to go even beyond death; fortune, too, habitually favours the brave; not he who is safe in the present, but he who lives honourably, lives safely—whereas he who lives shamefully cannot be secure for ever. (3.5.9)

While the first four arguments all give priority to security, the second, third and fourth rest their argument for it on an appeal to virtue, religion and honour, respectively. The fourth argument reverses the Stoic position that only what is honourable can be useful; rather, for a speaker in favour of security, only things that produce safety can be deemed honourable. Machiavelli utilizes a similar argument in *The Prince*: “So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone” (ch. 18). Machiavelli states this as a descriptive observation, but he is also asserting, in line with the classical argument, that acts which are conducive to winning or maintaining a state will be deemed honourable. He takes for granted the view that security is the *sine qua non* and even identifies it with honour. When the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* comes to list the arguments that put honour above security, two of them explicitly acknowledge what is at stake: preferring death to dishonour. While that

argument may have its validity in the case of an individual, the problem with it arises, as we will see in both Cicero and Livy, when preferring death to dishonour entails the harm and death of those one should be protecting.

Cicero's *De inventione* also sheds light on the moral framework of ancient thought, and the text's arguments were passed on to the Middle Ages and Renaissance through its popularity as a work on oratory. When Cicero comes to the topic of deliberative oratory, he begins by disagreeing with Aristotle that its essential end is advantage: "I prefer both honour and advantage [*utilitas*]" (2.51.156). His allusion is to Aristotle's argument in the *Rhetoric* that the end of deliberative speech is the expedient. Aristotle backs this conclusion up in his *Rhetoric* by writing: "the deliberative orator, although he often sacrifices everything else, will never admit that he is recommending what is inexpedient or is dissuading from what is useful; but often he is quite indifferent about showing that the enslavement of neighboring peoples, even if they have done no harm, is not an act of injustice" (1.3). Cicero disagrees with Aristotle's rather pessimistic observation about the end to which deliberative oratory is put, giving it a broader foundation based on three ends: the honourable, the advantageous and things that are both. The honourable, he writes, consists of four virtues: wisdom, justice, courage and temperance (2.52-53.157-159). As examples of things that are both honourable and advantageous, he mentions glory, rank, influence and friendship (2.55.166). The advantageous are things such as fields, harbours, money, a fleet, sailors, soldiers, allies—the means by which states preserve their safety and liberty (2.56.168).

When it comes to considerations of honour and advantage, Cicero points out that there are two types of necessity: simple necessity and qualified necessity. Simple necessity refers to necessity in the strict sense (for example, all mortals must die). Qualified necessity refers to acts that are necessary if one desires a certain end, but where there is in fact the possibility of acting in another way (for example, it is necessary to eat, but one “may prefer to die of starvation”). Cicero divides cases of qualified necessity into three types: those that seek honour, those that seek security and those that seek living without inconvenience. He prioritizes them as follows:

The greatest necessity is that of doing what is honourable; next to that is the necessity of security and third and last the necessity of convenience; this can never stand comparison with the other two. It is often necessary to weigh these, one against the other, so that, although honour is superior to security, it may be a question which it is preferable to follow. In this matter it seems possible to give a fixed and universal rule. For one should take thought for security in a case in which though honour is lost for the moment while consulting security, it may be recovered in the future by courage or diligence. If this is not possible, one should take thought for honour. So in a case of this sort, too, when we seem to consult our security, we shall be able to say with truth that we are concerned about honour, since without security we can never attain to honour. (2.58.173-74)

If one will lose one’s honour without being able to recover it, then it is better to die an honourable death than to lose both security and honour; however, if one can save the state and recover the lost honour, then the latter is sacrificed only temporarily for the sake of both. Cicero’s final argument is similar to the one in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* that “no one can make use of his virtues if he has not based his plans upon safety” (3.5.9).

According to this line of thought, the practice of the virtues and the attainment of honour depend upon the precondition of security. Cicero follows the argument that one may act

against what is honourable for the sake of security, if its preservation will thereby allow the recovery of honour in the future.

The same argument occurs in Livy's history of Rome. As Livy records in book 9, the Samnite army managed to trap the Roman army in the Caudine pass. The Samnite general told the envoy sent by the Roman army that if they surrendered they would let them go under the yoke, unarmed and with a single garment each. When the soldiers heard this, one of the foremost men argued that although it would be more glorious to die fighting, without them there would be no one left to protect Rome. Thus he convinces the army to surrender, saying: "You will say that surrender is shameful and ignominious. But our love of the fatherland is so great that we will save it, if need be, by our ignominy as much as by our death" (9.4).⁴⁴⁶ The Roman soldiers would rather die than suffer such ignominy—but they have a greater necessity than their own honour to think of.

One of the most quoted passages from Machiavelli's *Discourses* is a gloss on this text from Livy. The point Machiavelli draws from this Roman example is that "where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed every other concern put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty" (3.41). It is in this context that we can understand the view that it is proper to love one's country more than one's soul. For Machiavelli, the security

⁴⁴⁶ Livy, *Rome and Italy*, p. 220 (translation modified). "'At foeda atque ignominiosa deditio est.' sed ea caritas patriae est ut tam ignominia eam quam morte nostra, si opus sit, servemus." We see a similar argument in book 23.14 where Livy writes that as the final resort of a state close to despair, honour yields to utility ("ad ultimum prope desperatae rei publicae auxilium, cum honesta utilibus cedunt").

and liberty of the fatherland are the two most necessary goods, and they are not to be gambled with for the sake of honour. Machiavelli of course valorizes honour, but when there is a conflict between safety and moral scruples, he argues that one should preserve the material good of the state, even at the cost of ignominy. If the state preserves its liberty, it maintains the basis to “to cancel the ignominy” (3.41). As we saw, this argument is found in both Cicero’s *De inventione* and Livy’s history, and a number of similar arguments are found in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. It is not only Machiavelli who accepts this line of reasoning from the ancients. Similar arguments are deployed in the Florentine *pratiche*.⁴⁴⁷ In a debate of 1498, the humanist Bernardo Rucellai stated: “Faced with a choice between honour and security, one must prefer security, because once one has ensured one’s preservation, honour can be recaptured.”⁴⁴⁸ On May 22, 1501, Antonio Malegonnelle remarked that “a state should always adopt that policy which ensures its safety; this policy will always be considered a wise and honourable one.”⁴⁴⁹ In the latter formulation, we again see that the maintenance of safety can itself be considered a matter of honour (or what twentieth century realists would call a moral duty). Returning to Machiavelli’s formulation of the argument it presupposes that when it is not entirely a matter of the safety of the state, then one ought to enter into consideration of just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious. However, in the latter case it

⁴⁴⁷ In addition to the two following examples another is quoted on pp. 29-30 above.

⁴⁴⁸ “che havendo ad eleggere la dignità o la sicurtà, che più presto sia da eleggere la sicurtà, perché ogni volta che altri si è conservato la dignità può tornare” (*Consulte e pratiche, 1498-1505*, vol. 1, ed. Fachard, p. 39. Cited in Cox, “Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*,” p. 1135 n. 76).

⁴⁴⁹ “una Republica debbe sempre pigliare il partito che la salvi, et questo sempre è iudicato partito savio et honorevole” (*Consulte e pratiche, 1498-1505*, vol. 2, ed. Fachard, p. 657. Cited in Cox, “Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*,” p. 1135 n. 75).

seems to be Machiavelli's view that both alternatives should be open for prudent consideration.

These arguments have a long pedigree and are hard to argue against in cases where life and liberty are truly at risk. However, in less dire cases the Stoic position of Cicero's *On Duties* is the rule. Leonardo Bruni states it clearly in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence*: "this city has always taken pains to give each one his due and in all things to put honor before expediency in all its dealings. Indeed, it has been the case that Florence considers nothing useful that is not at the same time honorable."⁴⁵⁰ Machiavelli makes the exception to that rule—something dishonourable can be useful in the extreme case of avoiding ruin—one of the foci of his thought. However, he also extends the argument's applicability by using "ruin" in a loose sense, that is, not only in cases that truly apply to the life and liberty of the state. Whereas for Cicero what is necessary merely for the sake of convenience does not permit acting against honour, for Machiavelli what is necessary for convenience or well-being contributes to a city's greatness and thus to its security. By focusing on the exception and extending its bounds does Machiavelli forge a new political vision altogether? Do his quantitative changes to a conventional argument add up to a qualitative difference? In my view, as argued throughout, Machiavelli does not aim to overthrow Stoic morality or Christian morality altogether; rather, he aims to show that in affairs of state they need to be interpreted in a more flexible and militant way. That is already a radical step, and, as the next section will

⁴⁵⁰ Kohl and Witt, eds., *The Earthly Republic*, p. 162.

show, another aspect of that radical step is criticizing humanism for stopping short of imitating the inhumane side of ancient politics.

Machiavelli and the Imitation of the Ancients

In order to determine to what extent Machiavelli was a humanist and to what extent he was a critic of humanism, we must first clarify what we mean by humanism. In this regard, the first thing to note is that the word “humanism” is of late origin: it—or rather *Humanismus*—first came into use in Germany in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵¹ Scholars nonetheless continue to use it as a convenient shorthand for the movement associated with what Renaissance writers themselves called the *studia humanitatis*. In Italy, in the latter half of the fifteenth century, a professor of the *studia humanitatis* came to be called a *humanista*, a title modeled on the medieval professorships of *legista*, *jurista*, *cononista* and *artista*.⁴⁵² By the sixteenth century, *humanista* (and its vernacular equivalent in other languages) had come to signify not only professors but also teachers, students and representatives of the *studia humanitatis*.⁴⁵³ If the word *humanista* did not come into use until the second half of the fifteenth century, then it is of course anachronistic to use it for Petrarch and his early successors; nonetheless, scholars commonly use both humanist and humanism as convenient terms to mark the new movement associated with the *studia humanitatis*.

⁴⁵¹ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, p. 22.

⁴⁵² Kristeller, *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁵³ Kristeller, *ibid.*, pp. 22, 99; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains*, p. 121.

Since the expression itself goes back to ancient Rome, we must first turn to the source to get a sense of its meaning. The earliest extant uses of the expression occur in three of Cicero's legal defenses: *Pro Murena* (63 BCE), *Pro Archia* (62 BCE) and *Pro Caelio* (56 BCE).⁴⁵⁴ Since the expression means the "studies of *humanitas*" (*humanitatis* being the genitive of *humanitas*), we should begin with a brief consideration of the meaning of *humanitas*. The origin of the word and concept is often attributed to Panaetius of Rhodes (c. 185-109) and the Scipionic Circle. However, the scarcity of writings from that generation and the following mean there is no extant evidence on which to base such an attribution.⁴⁵⁵ The earliest extant example of *humanitas* occurs in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, an anonymous rhetorical treatise probably written between 86 and 82 BCE.⁴⁵⁶ The following example from that text gives a good sense of the word's meaning: "it is characteristic of a brave man to regard rivals for victory as enemies, but when they have been vanquished to consider them as fellow men, in order that his bravery may avail to put an end to the war, and his humanity [*humanitas*] to advance peace" (4.16.23). Here *humanitas* means considering men, even defeated enemies, as fellow men, in other words, having sympathy for human beings as human beings. The first time Cicero used the word

⁴⁵⁴ Von Martels, "The Kaleidoscope of the Past," p. 93. Von Martels points out that in Cicero's writings it occurs in only three places: *Pro Archia* 1.2, *Pro Caelio* 10.24 and *Pro Murena* 29.61 (p. 95 n. 22).

⁴⁵⁵ On the lack of evidence see Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus*, pp. 302-304. In *Human Rights in Ancient Rome*, Bauman points out several obstacles to such an attribution (pp. 25-26), though he then seems to accept it nonetheless (see p. 27).

⁴⁵⁶ See Bauman *Human Rights in Ancient Rome*, where he also points out the places *humanitas* is used: 2.16.24, 2.7.26, 2.31.50, 4.8.12, 4.16.23 (pp. 25-26). On dating see Caplan, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, xxvi.

was in a defense he delivered on behalf of P. Quinctius in 81 BCE.⁴⁵⁷ Cicero ends his appeal to the judge by saying: “My client begged his adversary to show compassion – if not for the man himself, at least for humanity [*humanitas*]” (*Quinct.* 97). Again we see the same basic meaning of *humanitas*: to have compassion for a human being as a human being. Later, in *Of Duties*, Cicero speaks of “the common body of humanity” (*communitamquam humanitatis corpore*) (3.32).⁴⁵⁸ In this example, *humanitas* simply means humankind, but Cicero’s metaphor again reinforces the idea of the fellowship of humankind. Thus the word can be used to refer to both humankind and the idea that humans should have compassion for other humans on the basis of their shared human nature. As Von Martels suggests, the best English translation of *humanitas* may simply be “humanity.”⁴⁵⁹ Like the Latin word, the English word has both connotations: it can refer to humankind (as when we speak of “crimes against humanity”) as well as to humane feelings (as when we say “he lacks humanity”).

With that understanding of *humanitas* in mind we can return to the meaning of the “*studiis humanitatis*” or “studies of *humanitas*.” Cicero’s *Pro Archia* (62 BCE) is a good place to begin since it influenced the early humanists. The reason they admired it is obvious: *Pro Archia* is not only a defense of the poet Archias—on the legal question of whether or not he was a Roman citizen—but also of the value of literature and poets in general. At the outset of the oration Cicero asks leave of the jury and audience to make what he admits is a somewhat strange digression:

⁴⁵⁷ Bauman, *Human Rights*, p. 25.

⁴⁵⁸ Miller’s translation.

⁴⁵⁹ Von Martels, “Kaleidoscope,” p. 96.

I would ask you to allow me, speaking as I am on behalf of a distinguished poet and a consummate scholar, before a cultivated audience, an enlightened jury, and the praetor whom we see occupying the tribunal, to enlarge upon the studies of humanity and letters [*de studiis humanitatis ac litterarum*], and to employ what is perhaps a novel and unconventional line of defence. (2.3)⁴⁶⁰

In defense of such studies Cicero argues that they enhanced the virtue of some of Rome's greatest men, such as Scipio the Younger. Another of his arguments is that "no mental employment is so humanizing [*humanissimam*] and freeing [*liberalissimam*]" (7.16).⁴⁶¹ The latter argument makes the direct link between the studies of humanity and letters (*studiis humanitatis ac litterarum*) and their humanizing effect (*humanissimam*). Cicero ends his oration by appealing to the very virtue that is a result of such studies; that is, he asks the jury to relieve Archias with their "humanity" (*humanitas*) (12.31).

A brief look at a few of Cicero's other writings will show that although he was intent on promoting the virtue of *humanitas*, he was careful to emphasize that it should not undermine the older Roman virtue of *severitas* (a word which can range in meaning from "discipline" to "severity"). In his oration *Pro Murena*, Cicero defends Murena against a charge of electoral malpractice brought forward by Cato the Younger. Since Catiline was openly threatening Rome with the use of armed force at the time, Cato's prosecution of the newly elected consul showed more concern for moral rectitude than the

⁴⁶⁰ I have replaced Watts' translation of "*de studiis humanitatis ac litterarum*" as "enlightened and cultivated pursuits" with von Martels' more literal translation (*ibid.*, p. 95).

⁴⁶¹ Translation modified. Watts' original translation is "so broadening to the sympathies and so enlightening to the understanding." C. D. Yonge translates it as "a most reasonable and liberal employment of the mind" (*Orations*, p. 115). In *Pro Archia* 1.2, Yonge translates *humanitas* as "civilizing and humanizing" (*ibid.*, p. 109), helping to justify my use of "humanizing." Another sense of *liberalissima* is "befitting a freeman" (Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, p. 1058).

safety of Rome. Cicero thus spends part of his defense ridiculing Cato's too strict adherence to the Stoic ideals that have inspired him to prosecute Murena at such an inopportune time. Cicero justifies introducing a discussion of Greek moral philosophy into the court room by flattering the learning of those who are present and by noting that both he and Cato share a common interest in it: "Seeing, too, that I do not address an ignorant crowd or some gathering of rustics, I shall be a little more venturesome in discussing the humanistic studies [*studiis humanitatis*] which are so familiar and agreeable to us both" (*Pro Murena* 61).⁴⁶² He then goes on to contrast the uncompromising Stoic ethics followed by Cato with the more moderate ethics of Plato and Aristotle, which he says he follows. Cicero points out that Scipio the Younger had a Stoic teacher, Panaetius, but that his teachings made Scipio more gentle, not more harsh. Cicero's point then is to mock only the too rigid interpretation of Stoicism followed by Cato and the way it has made him morally dogmatic and politically impractical. One of Cicero's rebuttals to a strict interpretation of Stoic doctrine makes clear his own view of the purpose to which the *studiis humanitatis* should be turned. To the Stoic doctrine—"Do not be moved by pity!"—Cicero's responds: "Certainly not, if you are going to relax discipline [*severitas*]; but there is some merit in sympathy [*humanitas*]" (*Pro Murena* 65). Here we see that in Cicero's view the *studiis humanitatis* should introduce *humanitas* into one's character—though without undermining *severitas*. Cicero's concern to advocate the virtue of *humanitas* without undermining Roman *severitas* is also evident in one of his letters: "Avidius has such a well-balanced character that it combines the most rigid

⁴⁶² I have replaced MacDonald's "liberal" with "humanistic."

severitas with the highest degree of *humanitas*.”⁴⁶³ *Of Duties* offers a third example of Cicero promoting humane virtues while maintaining the importance of *severitas*: “We must, however, recommend gentleness and forgiveness on the understanding that we may exercise severity [*severitas*] for the sake of the republic; for without that the city cannot be governed” (1.88). When I return to Machiavelli, Cicero’s goal of balancing these two qualities will be contrasted with his emphasis on pursuing one extreme or the other.

The rebirth of the *studia humanitatis* could be said to begin with Petrarch’s discovery of *Pro Archia* in Liège in 1333. He made his own copy from the manuscript and marked the passage, discussed above, where Cicero mentions the “*studiis humanitatis ac litterarum*.” By 1370, Coluccio Salutati also had a copy of *Pro Archia*, and he frequently cited it in his letters.⁴⁶⁴ Thus *Pro Archia* became a particularly important text since it directly mentions the *studiis humanitatis* and since its eulogy of such studies resonated with the first two great humanists.

There is no record of Petrarch himself using the expression *studia humanitatis*; rather he still uses another ancient Roman expression: “the liberal arts” or “liberal studies.”⁴⁶⁵ The earliest known reference to *studia humanitatis* occurs in a letter Salutati wrote in 1369; nonetheless, the generation which succeeded Petrarch saw him as the founder of their new learning.⁴⁶⁶ In a letter Salutati wrote in 1406 he agrees with Poggio Bracciolini that it was Petrarch who “called back into the light” an understanding of

⁴⁶³ Quoted in Bauman, *Human Rights in Ancient Rome*, p. 22, from *Familiar Letters* 12.27.

⁴⁶⁴ Reeve, “Classical Scholarship,” pp. 21-22.

⁴⁶⁵ Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance*, paragraph 13 and paragraph 38.

⁴⁶⁶ Peterson, “The Communication of the Dead,” p. 61.

humane letters.⁴⁶⁷ Likewise, Leonardo Bruni praises Petrarch in his second *Dialogue* (written around 1405) as the one who “restored humanistic studies [*studia humanitatis*], which had been extinguished, and opened the way for us to be able to learn.”⁴⁶⁸ Petrarch set out the direction for this new learning in *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*. Therein he argues that although Aristotle brilliantly defines virtue, his writings fail to make one love virtue; rather, it is the eloquent exhortations of the Latin authors, especially Cicero and Seneca, that impel one’s mind to virtue.⁴⁶⁹ Petrarch’s apologia for his study of Latin authors was simultaneously a critique of scholasticism and its blind idolization of Aristotle. Later humanists such Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, Francesco Barbaro and Erasmus also openly attacked their rival learning—scholasticism.

After Petrarch’s death in 1374, Florence became the leading center of humanism, largely due to the intellectual leadership of its renowned chancellor Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406).⁴⁷⁰ The characteristic trait of the humanists was the desire to study and imitate the ancients. Their main authorities were the Bible, the Church Fathers, the Latin classics and, to a lesser degree, the Greek classics.⁴⁷¹ The central topics pursued by humanists tended to be grammar, rhetoric, history, poetics and moral philosophy. Around 1402, Pier Paolo Vergerio, who had studied in Florence with Salutati, wrote *On Good Manners*, an educational treatise which became influential in defining a humanist

⁴⁶⁷ Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 111.

⁴⁶⁸ Bruni, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, pp. 82-83; Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 89.

⁴⁶⁹ Petrarch, *On His Own Ignorance*, paragraphs 107-109.

⁴⁷⁰ Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, p. 6; Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, p. 288.

⁴⁷¹ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 22, 69-70; Von Martels, “Kaleidoscope,” p. 91.

education. In it he gives the first place to the study of history, second place to moral philosophy and the third place to rhetoric.⁴⁷²

Although the humanists were themselves all Christians, some hostile conservatives charged that their study of pagan literature was dangerous and impious.⁴⁷³ To support the humanist cause, Leonardo Bruni, in 1400, translated St. Basil's *To the Younger Generation on Making Good Use of Greek Literature* from Greek to Latin. As Bruni makes clear in his preface, he translated the essay to show that St Basil, an authoritative fourth-century church father, believed that the study of pagan philosophy and literature aids one's understanding of the Bible.⁴⁷⁴ In 1406, Salutati offered an argument similar to Basil's, writing: "The *studia humanitatis* and the *studia divinitatis* are so interconnected that true and complete knowledge of the one cannot be had without the other."⁴⁷⁵ After Salutati's death in 1406, his Florentine heirs in the first half of the century were largely concerned with secular themes, though still within a Christian framework.⁴⁷⁶ Leonardo Bruni's praise of humanistic studies in his 1428 *Oration for the Funeral of Nanni Strozzi* shows its emphasis on the human being as well as Florence's role in propagating it: "humanistic studies [*studia humanitatis*] themselves, which are the best and most distinguished branches of learning and the most appropriate to humankind,

⁴⁷² Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 90; Kohl and Witt, *The Earthly Republic*, pp. 14-15; Holmes, *The Florentine Enlightenment*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁷³ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, p. 69; Holmes, *The Florentine Enlightenment*, pp. 31-34; Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, pp. 8-12.

⁴⁷⁴ Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, p. 11; Reeve, "Classical scholarship," p. 34.

⁴⁷⁵ Quoted in Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, p. 12. Also quoted by Von Martels in "The Kaleidoscope of the Past," p. 100.

⁴⁷⁶ Kohl and Witt, *Earthly Republic*, pp. 8-9; Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, pp. 401-402, 429.

being essential to private as well as to public life, were embellished by our literary erudition and came, with the support of our city, to spread throughout Italy.”⁴⁷⁷ In the second half of the fifteenth century, the *studia humanitatis* came to influence Italian culture even more broadly. Not only had the study and imitation of the ancients become fashionable, but the fruits of humanist education, research, translation and critical methods began to influence other fields of learning such as law, medicine, mathematics, theology and philosophy.⁴⁷⁸ Scholars of the *studia humanitatis* generally found vocations as teachers at secondary schools and universities, as secretaries of princes and republics, as scribes or as wealthy amateurs.⁴⁷⁹

Machiavelli, born in 1469, was raised in this ethos. Although his father, Bernardo, was of modest means, he loved books and provided his son with a basic education in humanistic studies. Niccolò began his study of Latin grammar at age seven, and at eleven he began to study arithmetic. Justin was the first history that children read, and Bernardo borrowed a copy when Machiavelli was twelve. At the same age, he began doing Latin compositions under a new school teacher. Five year later, Bernardo sent his loose copy of Livy’s *Decades* to the binders, and it was Machiavelli who went to pick up the bound volume.⁴⁸⁰ When Machiavelli was elected secretary of the second chancery in 1498, it was his humanist education which qualified him for the position. His humanist interests

⁴⁷⁷ Bruni, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, p. 126.

⁴⁷⁸ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains*, p. 124; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 29-30, 91-92; Kohl and Witt, *The Earthly Republic*, p. 19.

⁴⁷⁹ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains*, p. 122; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 23, 93; Black, “Humanism,” pp. 251, 253.

⁴⁸⁰ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, pp. 2-4.

remain evident throughout his life, first as secretary and then as a writer. On his legation to France in 1500, he brought along Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*.⁴⁸¹ On a legation to Cesare Borgia in the fall of 1502, he asked a friend to send him a copy of Plutarch's *Lives*.⁴⁸² In 1503, he applied his knowledge of Livy to recent Florentine affairs in his short discourse "On How to Treat the Populace of Valdichiana after Their Rebellion."⁴⁸³ When he left for Germany on a mission to Emperor Maximilian in the winter of 1507, he brought along Tacitus' *Germania*.⁴⁸⁴ In his letter to Vettori describing his life since losing his position as secretary, he says that in the morning he wanders outdoors reading about love in Dante, Petrarch, Tibullus or Ovid and then in the evening enters the courts of ancient men to ask them questions. In *The Prince*'s dedicatory letter, his reference to his continuous reading of the ancients establishes his humanist credentials.⁴⁸⁵ And both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* show his reading of the ancients to be broad and deep. Like other humanists he tends to privilege the ancients of his native soil, though he also borrows from the more historically-minded Greek writers such as Xenophon, Thucydides, Polybius and Plutarch.

While Machiavelli's position as Florentine secretary as well as his interest in studying and imitating the ancients make him an exemplary humanist, his writings challenge certain humanist ideals. Ironically, this challenge to humanism comes from his argument for a more thorough imitation of the ancients. As we saw above, some

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁸² Ibid., pp. 57-58, 270 n. 18.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., pp. 52, 269 n. 25.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

⁴⁸⁵ On this point see Black, "Humanism," p. 252.

Christians criticized the *studia humanitatis* for being too pagan. For Machiavelli, on the other hand, Christian education is still preventing a more thorough and beneficial imitation of the ancients. In his view, humanists themselves have held back from imitating the ancients where it would be most useful. The spirit of his times, as well as his critique of it, is clearly conveyed in the preface to the first book of the *Discourses*:

Considering thus how much honor is awarded to antiquity, and how many times—letting pass infinite other examples—a fragment of an ancient statue has been bought at a high price because someone wants to have it near oneself, to honor his house with it, and to be able to have it imitated by those who delight in that art, and how the latter then strive with all industry to represent it in all their works; and seeing, on the other hand, that the most virtuous works the histories show us, which have been done by ancient kingdoms and republics, by kings, captains, citizens, legislators, and others who have labored for their fatherland, are rather admired than imitated—indeed they are so much shunned by everyone in every least thing that no sign of that ancient virtue remains with us—I can do no other than marvel and grieve.

As we saw, Vergerio's influential treatise on education awarded the most important place to the study of history, and, as Machiavelli acknowledges in the preface, ancient histories are widely read and admired; the problem in his eyes is that "the infinite number who read them take pleasure in hearing the variety of accidents contained in them without thinking of imitating them." He grieves that moderns shy away from imitating the ancients in their political judgements, but he lays only part of the blame for this on Christianity: "This arises, I believe, not so much from the weakness into which the present religion has led the world, or from the evil that an ambitious idleness has done to many Christian provinces and cities, as from not having a true knowledge of histories, through not getting from reading them that sense nor tasting that flavor that they have in themselves." While in his view Christianity has made the world weak, his *Discourses on*

Livy is meant to show the truths that can be learned from ancient history and that should still be imitated. For Machiavelli, this does not mean the rejection of Christianity but that it must be interpreted according to virtue rather than idleness (*D* 2.2.2). As he mourns in the preface, whereas knowledge of classical art, jurisprudence and medicine has been systematized for imitation, ancient judgements in affairs of state remain “rather admired than imitated.” In teaching how affairs of state can likewise be imitated he claims to be taking “a path as yet untrodden by anyone.”⁴⁸⁶ His friend the historian Jacopo Nardi supports this claim to originality in his *Istorie della Città di Firenze* when he describes the *Discourses* as: “a work that certainly deals with a new subject, and of a kind that has never been attempted.”⁴⁸⁷ Machiavelli, by systematizing for the benefit of modern affairs what the ancients discovered through choice, fate and necessity, sets out to teach “new modes and orders.” Likewise, in the *Art of War*, he systematizes what can be learned from the ancients about ordering armies. To support his argument for the feasibility of pushing the imitation of the ancients into political things, he concludes the *Art of War* by writing: “this province seems born to resuscitate dead things, as has been seen in poetry, painting, and sculpture” (7.247). His writings are in large part a polemic against the education of his times mounted through a systematization of ancient knowledge and modern experience.

Turning briefly to Machiavelli’s milieu will show what he means when he says that although moderns read and admire ancient histories, they fail to get their taste.

⁴⁸⁶ On this interpretation of Machiavelli’s untrodden path see Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 158-59.

⁴⁸⁷ Bk. 7, quoted in Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, p. 10.

Humanists adopted from Greek and Roman writers the belief that the past is a valuable guide to the present, and Machiavelli was of course familiar with the way ancient examples were brought up in political discussions. Felix Gilbert—describing Florentine consultative meetings (or *pratiche*), some of which Machiavelli himself minuted—writes: “Speakers in the *pratiche* referred frequently to the lessons which could be drawn from events in Florentine history, but their favorite source was the history of Rome.” Gilbert provides the example of a discussion about whether or not to interrogate Savonarola about his associates after he was arrested. A speaker arguing against such an interrogation pointed out that Caesar, after he defeated Pompey, refused to read Pompey’s letters; another speaker countered that if Caesar had read the letters, he may have prevented his assassination.⁴⁸⁸ Since the Florentines evidently were willing to learn from and imitate ancient examples, Machiavelli’s particular grievance must be that they were not willing to follow ancient examples when they conflicted with their modern education. In the preface to the *Discourses*, he specifies that all those who read ancient histories think that imitating them “is not only difficult but impossible” (*imitazione non solo difficile ma impossibile*). The resistance to imitating the inhumane side of Roman examples is apparent in a *pratica* which occurred on January 28, 1506, on the problem of Arezzo. The city had rebelled from Florentine rule in June of 1502 and was reacquired the following month. Machiavelli’s short oration *On How to Treat the Populace of Valdichiana after Their Rebellion* criticizes the middle path taken by Florence in its punishment of Arezzo. In 1506, the question of how to hold the city was still under discussion. In the *pratica* of

⁴⁸⁸ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 39.

January 28, two speakers put forward arguments very similar to those which Machiavelli proposes in his oration; that is, they argued that the middle way (*el mezo*) is not useful and that what is needed is either to extinguish the Artines, to benefit them or to send in new inhabitants.⁴⁸⁹ Their argument was, however, soundly defeated by the moderate position of Giovanbattista Ridolfi and Piero Guicciardini (the father of Francesco Guicciardini). Speaking against the idea of sending new inhabitants to colonize a conquered town, Piero wrote it off as “a Roman thing” (*cosa de’ Romani*); further, he argued that winning the Aretines with benefits would not be possible. In a collection of his son’s aphorisms compiled twenty-four years later, we see that Francesco Guicciardini shared his father’s distrust of Roman examples: “How wrong it is to cite the Romans at every turn.... In the case of a city with different qualities, the comparison is as much out of order as it would be to expect a jackass to race like a horse.”⁴⁹⁰

In *Discourse* 3.27, Machiavelli provides an example of how the Florentines in their treatment of Pistoia failed to imitate the Romans, explicitly referring back to the aim of the *Discourses* as stated in the preface to the first book: “These are among the errors I told of at the beginning that the princes of our times make who have to judge great things, for they ought to wish to hear how those who have had to judge such cases in antiquity governed themselves.” Machiavelli’s ancient example is based on an event in Livy 4.10: after the city of Ardea became divided by armed conflict, the Romans reunited it by killing the leaders of the tumult. Learning from that example, Machiavelli delineates three

⁴⁸⁹ On this *pratica* and for the following quotation see Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, pp. 106-107, and *Consulte e pratiche 1505–1512*, pp. 76–77.

⁴⁹⁰ *Maxims and Reflections*, series C, maxim 110, p. 69.

ways to deal with such tumults. The best way is to follow the judgement of the Romans and to execute the heads of the tumult. The second way is to remove the heads from the city; the third and “most useless” way is to oblige them not to use violence against one another (3.27.1). Machiavelli then points out that after armed conflict broke out in Pistoia (a city under Florentine control) in 1501, the Florentines followed the third mode. It was only when that measure led to further tumults that the Florentines were constrained to imprison some of the leaders and to remove others from the city. Machiavelli concedes that the later method was effective in ending the tumults, but he argues that the best solution would have been to imitate the Romans from the start. To support this argument he simply claims that such executions “have in them something of the great and the generous” (*il grande ed il generosa*) (3.27.2). In Machiavelli’s view humaneness, when misapplied, leads to suffering, whereas severity can have a beneficial outcome. He acknowledges that the resistance to imitating the Romans arises because their actions are considered too inhumane: modern rulers think that imitating the ancients is “in part inhuman, in part impossible” (*parte inumani, parte impossibili*). However, in Machiavelli’s view, this is due to their “weak education” (*educazione*), “slight knowledge of things” and because they suffer from “certain modern opinions...altogether distant from the true” (3.27.2).

It is clear that for Machiavelli modern *educazione* is in conflict with the truth contained in ancient history. In both 3.27 and the preface of book 1, he complains that his contemporaries believe it is impossible to imitate the ancients in the realm of politics. In both places, he also claims it is the failure to understand the lessons of the ancients that

make moderns weak. As his example of killing the heads of a tumult indicates it is the avoidance of severe or inhumane acts—especially the taking of life—that modern education makes rulers shy away from. Machiavelli uses *educazione* throughout the *Discourses* to refer to the sources of one’s values and character. At the root of *educazione* is hearing “good or bad said of a thing” (3.46.1). In 2.2.2, he refers to Christian ideals as a form of education. He also speaks of nations, cities and families having different educations (*D* 3.43.1, 3.46.1). Religion, nation, city and family all educate one about what is good and what is bad. Religion is at the root of *educazione*, though it cannot be reduced to religion alone. In the preface of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli sets up a striking contrast: he calls Christianity “the present religion” as if to acknowledge its historicity; he then states that, since antiquity, the heaven, the sun, the elements and human beings have not changed. In other words, although religions change, human conditions do not. If something was true in antiquity, it is still true now. Religion must be accommodated to human conditions. Modern education makes leaders see Roman modes as inhuman and impossible. Because modern rulers fail to understand the human condition—“their slight knowledge of things” (3.27.2)—they fail to see that the Romans understood the truth about affairs of state. When Machiavelli argues for the imitation of their more severe practices, his humanistic studies challenge modern *educazione*.

The heart of the issue seems to be inhuman severity and Machiavelli’s principal example killing. As we saw, he argues that executions “have in them something of the great and the generous” (3.27.2). What he means by this is elucidated in an earlier chapter where he also speaks about the effect of executions. After listing several executions that

occurred in the Roman republic he writes: “Because they were excessive and notable, such things made men draw back toward the mark whenever one of them arose; and when they began to be more rare, they also began to give more space to men to corrupt themselves and to behave with greater danger and more tumult” (3.1.3). In Machiavelli’s view, the severe enforcement of justice keeps people good. His argument is framed to make one weigh the benefit of severity against the cost of mercy. He challenges the *educazione* of his readers and even taunts them with the extreme statement that “one should not wish ten years at most to pass from one to another of such executions” (3.1.3). While the end Machiavelli has in view is the conventional one of “religion and justice” (3.1.1), the means he recommends is severity. Machiavelli’s taste for the extreme is also evident in *Discourses* 1.27.2 where he argues that if Giovampagolo had killed the pope and his cardinals the act’s “greatness would have surpassed all infamy.” In his view, men fail to achieve such acts because “when malice has greatness in itself or is generous in some part, they do not know how to enter into it” (*D* 1.27.2). Machiavelli’s argument for severity challenges the modern opinions of our time as much as the modern opinions of his time. In part he was likely challenging the weakness he saw in his time with a rhetorical extreme he did not fully intend—presumably he applied his theory about avoiding the middle way in order to avoid mediocrity as a rhetorical strategy in his own writings. At the same time, it is clear he favoured a more thorough imitation of the Romans, one which contemporary opinion considered to be too inhumane. Guicciardini points to Machiavelli’s extremism in his commentary on the *Discourses* when he writes that Machiavelli “always shows excessive fondness for extraordinary and violent

measures.”⁴⁹¹ However, as Machiavelli says in *Prince* 6, if one has a distant target one must aim above it in order “to achieve their plan.”

Despite Machiavelli’s emphasis on severe measures, he is not averse to the virtue of humanity (*umanità*). What he opposes is taking a middle way between humanity and severity. This is another principle he learns from the Romans: “they always fled from the middle way and turned to extremes” (*D* 2.23.2). For Machiavelli, humanity is only a weakness when it leads to ineffective action. In *Discourses* 3.20.1, he notes that a great example of humanity can sometimes accomplish more than force. However, for Machiavelli it is a matter of acting on one extreme or the other. In *Discourses* 3.21, he compares the humanity of Scipio to the cruelty of Hannibal. The comparison of these two great generals was a common humanist topos, already seen in Petrarch’s *On Famous Men* when he praises the virtue of Scipio over the fury of Hannibal.⁴⁹² When Machiavelli compares the humanity of Scipio to the cruelty of Hannibal, he argues that since both were successful commanders “the mode in which a captain proceeds is not very important” (3.21.4). He acknowledges that Hannibal’s mode was “detestable” and Scipio’s “praiseworthy” but nonetheless endorses both based on their equal effectiveness. He also rules out the possibility of taking a “middle way,” justifying his preference for the extreme by arguing that to the former “our nature does not consent” (3.21.3). In the following chapter, he compares the severity (*severità*) of Manlius and the humanity (*umanità*) of Valerius. He judges that in a republic it is better to imitate Manlius’ severity since it preserves the common good without creating partisans, whereas for a prince it is

⁴⁹¹ *Considerations of the Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, p. 412.

⁴⁹² Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 93.

better to imitate Valerius' humanity since it gives rise to love and obedience (3.22.4-5). Jacopo Nardi, one of Machiavelli's acquaintances from the Orti Oricellari, also discusses Manlius and Valerius in his *Vita di Antonio Giacomini*. He praises Giacomini, a Florentine military commander, for being both feared and loved by combining the qualities of Manlius and Valerius.⁴⁹³ Machiavelli, on the other hand, does not even consider the possibility of such a combination; for him, it is a matter of one extreme or the other. Despite his argument in the *Discourses*, in the *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli shows in passing that the combination of severity and humanity can make a ruler popular. We see this in the case of the Duke of Athens, though once he acquired the lordship of Florence, "the severity and humanity [*severità e umanità*] he had feigned were converted into arrogance and cruelty" (*FH* 2.36). In general, however, Machiavelli rejects the conventional wisdom of the middle way in favor of the extreme. His position is a polemic not only against Aristotle but also against one of the pillars of Florentine foreign policy at his time.⁴⁹⁴ Even a hundred years earlier, Leonardo Bruni, in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, calls the middle way "a proven principle for all things."⁴⁹⁵

As Machiavelli points out in the *Art of War*, another effect of Christian education is that victors now show more humanity toward the conquered than in ancient times. Machiavelli has Fabrizio attribute the neglect of military training in their time to that change:

⁴⁹³ Hörnqvist, "*Perché non si usa allegare i Romani: Machiavelli and the Florentine Militia of 1506*," p. 182 n. 138.

⁴⁹⁴ On the middle way in Florentine policy see Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 34; Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, p. 99.

⁴⁹⁵ Bruni, *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, p. 137.

today's mode of living, on account of the Christian religion, does not impose that necessity to defend oneself that there was in antiquity. For then, men conquered in war were either killed or remained in perpetual slavery, where they led their lives miserably. Their conquered towns were either dissolved or, their goods taken, the inhabitants were driven out and sent dispersed throughout the world. So those overcome in war suffered every last misery. Frightened by this fear, men kept military training alive and honored whoever was excellent in it. But today this fear is for the most part lost. Of the conquered, few of them are killed; no one is kept in prison for long, because they are freed with ease. Even though they have rebelled a thousand times, cities are not demolished and men are left with their goods, so that the greatest evil that is feared is a ransom. So men do not want to submit themselves to military orders and to struggle along beneath them so as to flee those dangers they little fear. (2.59-60)

As in *Discourses 2.2* where Machiavelli also discusses why the ancients loved freedom more than moderns, he finds the main cause in the difference between pagan religion and Christian religion. In *Discourses 2.2.2*, the difference he focuses on is that pagan religion places the highest good in worldly glory, whereas Christianity places the highest good in going to paradise. In the *Art of War* he describes another effect of the difference: Christianity makes people more humane. Because they are more humane, less is at stake when a city loses its freedom. According to Fabrizio, it is the loss of fear for one's city, freedom and life that has led to the neglect of military virtue. Machiavelli clearly regrets the effect of this humanity: the loss of the fundamental importance given to military *virtù*. There is nothing, however, to suggest he regrets the loss of the cause: the practice of killing and enslaving the conquered. As much as Machiavelli struggles against the *educazione* of his times, he is still a product of it, and his call for an imitation of the ancients is at least in part tempered by the role of *humanitas* in that *educazione*.

The humanizing effect of Christian education was also of interest to later writers. Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), writes:

Let us envisage, on the other hand, the continual massacres of the kings and leaders of the Greeks and Romans, and on the other, the destruction of peoples and towns by Tamerlane and Genghis Khan, the very leaders who ravaged Asia, and we shall see that we owe to Christianity both a certain political right in government and a certain right of nations in war, for which human nature can never be sufficiently grateful.

This right of nations, among ourselves, has the result that victory leaves to the vanquished these great things: life, liberty, laws, goods, and always religion (book 24, chapter 3).⁴⁹⁶

Like Machiavelli, Montesquieu attributes the more humane treatment of the vanquished to Christianity. For Montesquieu, this is because Christianity “orders men to love one another” and because the gospel recommends “gentleness” (*la douceur*).⁴⁹⁷ Whereas for Machiavelli the main point is that Christian humaneness has removed the fear of being conquered and thus led to the loss of military virtue, for Montesquieu the main point is the gratitude we owe to Christianity for the humanity it has instilled in Christians.

When we come to Clausewitz in the early eighteenth century, we see him writing against contemporary “historians and theorists” who, in the name of humanity, argue for a type of warfare based on manoeuvre rather than bloodshed. His succinct reply is:

We are not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed. The fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle must make us take war more seriously, but not provide an excuse for gradually blunting our swords in the name of humanity. Sooner or later someone will come along with a sharp sword and hack off our arms (book 4, chapter 11).⁴⁹⁸

While for Montesquieu the humanity of Christian victors is a virtue, Clausewitz warns that feelings of humanity become a vice when they lead people to forget how to defend themselves. In Machiavelli’s view, the Christian teaching that it is better to suffer than to

⁴⁹⁶ On this passage in relation to Machiavelli see Beiner, *Civil Religion*, p. 32 n. 10.

⁴⁹⁷ Bk. 24, chs. 1 and 3.

⁴⁹⁸ Also see Waltz’s comments on this passage in *Man, the State and War*, p. 221.

be strong had already achieved that in his time: "This mode of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men" (2.2.2). In both Machiavelli and Clausewitz we see the warning that feelings of humanity may lead to the loss of military virtue. If an education that places too much emphasis on humanity can inadvertently lead to barbarity, then humanism must remain prudent. But comparing Machiavelli's attempt to inspire military virtues by turning to extremes and Cicero's ideal of balancing humanity (*humanitas*) and discipline (*severitas*), it seems that Cicero offers a more solid ground for avoiding both the extreme of the ancient barbarity shunned by Montesquieu and the extreme of allowing your political community to be prey.

Machiavelli and the Quality of the Times

To conclude I would like to draw together a few reflections on Machiavelli's character and then to draw out some significant differences between his time and ours. Machiavelli's judgements would likely clash with the spirit of any time as he was driven to question conventional pieties, to condemn corruption and to idolize rare virtue. The polemical quality evident in his writings is also confirmed by a contemporary of his who said he loved to play "*advocatus diaboli*."⁴⁹⁹ Guicciardini, in a friendly letter to Machiavelli, points to his well-known character in a diplomatic fashion: "you have always been considered exceedingly extravagant in your opinions by most people, and the inventor of new and outlandish things."⁵⁰⁰ Thus even in his own city and time, his reputation preceded him. Still, Machiavelli's biographers agree that his character also reflects the qualities of his native city; Ridolfi refers to him as "that quintessential Florentine" and Capponi maintains that Machiavelli had "all the traits typical of the Florentines of his day (and even of today): love of contradiction, provocation, and *bella figura*, with a pronounced jocular streak as seasoning."⁵⁰¹

After Machiavelli lost his post as secretary of the second chancery and the Ten of War, he never again attained the high office he so desired. Instead, he turned to writing and, based on those writings, found many who—at different times and for different

⁴⁹⁹ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, p. 164.

⁵⁰⁰ Guicciardini to Machiavelli, May 18, 1521, in *Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 339.

⁵⁰¹ Ridolfi, *Life of Machiavelli*, p. ix; Capponi, *An Unlikely Prince*, p. xi. On how Machiavelli's character is typically Florentine also see *An Unlikely Prince*, pp. xii, 10-14, 31, 35, 290, 296.

reasons—either dishonoured him or defended him. Ernst Cassirer, writing in 1945, warns that our understanding of Machiavelli now suffers from knowing him too well: we may read his private letters, study his career and have his collected works. His life, Cassirer acknowledges, bears witness to “an honest and upright man.” However as a result of fondness for his character may conceal the “flagrant contradiction between Machiavelli’s political doctrine and his personal and moral character.”⁵⁰² For Cassirer, Machiavelli’s character has no bearing on the content of his teachings.

The question remains, if Machiavelli was a good man, how could he counsel evil acts? As we have just seen, it seems Machiavelli himself was the sort of person who took pleasure in such contradictions, and perhaps what allowed him to speak so shockingly was his own confidence in his commitment to the common good. Nietzsche, in his reading of *The Prince*, notes all of the above: its Florentine character, its contrasts, its humour. *The Prince*, he writes, “lets us breathe the subtle dry air of Florence and cannot help presenting the most serious affairs in a boisterous *allegriissimo*: not perhaps without a malicious artist’s sense of the contrast he is risking—thoughts protracted, difficult, hard, dangerous and the tempo of the gallop and the most wanton good humour.”⁵⁰³ And Strauss too confesses that when one understands that “some of the most outrageous statements of the *Prince* are not meant seriously but serve a merely pedagogic function...one sees that they are amusing and meant to amuse.”⁵⁰⁴ Perhaps they are right that for Machiavelli *The Prince* was not meant to be altogether foreign to laughter.

⁵⁰² *The Myth of the State*, pp. 127-28; also see p. 144.

⁵⁰³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 28.

⁵⁰⁴ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 82.

Nonetheless, in the preface to the *Discourses*, Machiavelli himself shows an awareness of the need to justify his writings, saying: “driven by that natural desire that has always been in me to work, without any respect, for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone, I have decided to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone, and if it brings me trouble and difficulty [*fastidio e difficoltà*], it could also bring me reward through those who consider humanely the end of these labors of mine.” This sentiment is echoed in another text he was likely working on at the same time: “Whenever I have had an opportunity of honouring my country, even if this involved me in trouble and danger [*carico e pericolo*], I have done it willingly, for a man is under no greater obligation than to his country.”⁵⁰⁵ Machiavelli recognizes that only those who read his works humanely will praise him; from the others he expects trouble and difficulty. Should we not allow what we know of his character as well as his persistent claim to work for the good to influence how we hear his works? Indeed, it would be cynical and uncharitable to assume he was untruthful when he stated that his aim is to “bring common benefit to everyone.” Such a claim would seem to raise his discourse above Florentine or Italian patriotism to a concern with humanity.

In my view, the problem of mitigating Machiavelli’s radicalism arises not from knowing his character too well but from glossing over what is difficult and dangerous in his writings. Indeed, both apologists and detractors alike may elide, bend and collate his writings to produce the Machiavelli they seek. To let Machiavelli speak for himself, I

⁵⁰⁵ *A Dialogue on Language*, p. 175. Also see his letter of May 17, 1521: “never did I disappoint that republic whenever I was able to help her out—if not with deeds, then with words; if not with words, then with signs” (*Machiavelli and His Friends*, p. 336).

have tried to listen to both his harsh judgements and his considered qualifications. While many of his blunt counsels and amoral analyses were, and still are, shocking, his writings, at the very least, have the merit of provoking thought. To delve further into the question of the value of his counsels, I will conclude by considering how his thought stands in relation to our times and in particular to twentieth-century realism. I will also briefly consider some of Nietzsche's thoughts on external politics since they help to demonstrate that there has been a significant turn away from Machiavelli's assumption that politics and patriotism are the highest ends for human beings.

Machiavelli's Realism and Twentieth-Century Realism

Any ruler who wishes to maintain the state's well-being and to uphold morality will likely, at least on occasion, discover a conflict between the two. Machiavelli belabors this conflict between necessity and morality not only because avoiding it leads to unclear thinking but also to actual danger. His disturbing argument that entering into evil is necessary when not doing so spells ruin became a staple of twentieth-century realism, though couched in less strident terms. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his seminal work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), asks: "An individual may sacrifice his own interests, either without hope of reward or in the hope of an ultimate compensation. But how is an individual, who is responsible for the interests of his group, to justify the sacrifice of interests other than his own?"⁵⁰⁶ While Niebuhr censures the pursuit of unjust interests and points out that it may be prudent for a group to sacrifice immediate interests for

⁵⁰⁶ For this citation and the following see p. 267.

higher mutual interests, he nonetheless concludes that “fewer risks can be taken with community interests than with individual interests.” The main thesis of Niebuhr’s book, evident in its title, is a point Machiavelli insists upon: the morality that applies between individuals cannot simply be transposed into the political realm. Kenneth Waltz, in *Man, the State and War* (1954), the precursor to his neorealist classic, reiterates the dilemma upon which Machiavelli focuses so much energy: “leaders of the state may have to choose between behaving *immorally* in international politics in order to preserve the state, on the one hand, and, on the other, abandoning their *moral* obligation to ensure their state’s survival in order to follow preferred ways of acting in international politics.”⁵⁰⁷

The shocking sting of Machiavelli’s polemical words is absent in Waltz’s balanced framing of the same problem: that in foreign affairs rulers may sometimes face a conflict between two different goods (acting morally and avoiding ruin), and in Waltz’s framing avoiding ruin is itself considered a moral good. His implied argument that the state’s survival is a more fundamental moral obligation than the good of observing commonly accepted moral rules rings with an almost commonsensical air. Hans Morgenthau, in *Politics among Nations*, the textbook of classical twentieth-century realism, gives the problem a pithy formulation: “The individual may say for himself, ‘*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the world perish),’ but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care.”⁵⁰⁸ From the realist point of view, it is uncontroversial, at least in outline, that if contravening morality is necessary to preserve

⁵⁰⁷ *Man, the State and War*, p. 207.

⁵⁰⁸ *Politics among Nations*, p. 12. Hegel makes a similar argument: “*fiat iustitia* should not have *pereat mundus* as its consequence” (*Philosophy of Right*, sec. 130).

the state, and thus the well-being of one's fellow citizens, then such necessity takes precedence over the moral principles that operate under normal circumstances.

Leo Strauss also grants that the independence and survival of a political community justifies acting against what is normally considered just; he is, however, more circumspect about promulgating the argument. In *Natural Right and History* (1950), he points out: "In extreme situations there may be conflicts between what the self-preservation of society requires and the requirements of commutative and distributive justice."⁵⁰⁹ However for Strauss the difficulties that arise from this conflict should be "covered with the veil with which they are justly covered." Like Bernardo del Nero in Guicciardini's *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, Strauss believes such things are not to be discussed publicly.⁵¹⁰ Yet as del Nero is willing to discuss such matters among friends, Strauss is willing to hint at them in his writings (and also, though not in his own name, to elucidate them forcefully).

Unless one is willing to say "let justice be done, even if the world perish," then one accepts at least the heart of Machiavelli's argument. One could argue however, as Strauss does, that such a view should nonetheless be veiled. But Machiavelli, unlike Strauss, clearly felt that the extreme situation reveals a truth too important to veil. In his view Christian idleness held Italy in such a deep slumber that it had become the prey of others and only the urgency and clarity of the extreme situation could awaken it. Nonetheless, Strauss' concern with veiling necessary violations of justice is similar to Machiavelli's concern that princes veil with the appearance of virtue the unjust acts that

⁵⁰⁹ This and the following citation are from *Natural Right and History*, p. 160.

⁵¹⁰ See *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, bk. 2, p. 159.

are necessary to preserve the state (*P* 18). While their arguments arise from a similar concern, Machiavelli puts the stress on religion and Strauss on morality. Machiavelli's argument aims to preserve both the honour of the prince, despite the necessity of acting against moral virtue, and the status of religion (*P* 18; *D* 1.12.1). Strauss nonetheless argues that Machiavelli's "immoral" teaching "is bound to strengthen the forces of moral depravity."⁵¹¹ Machiavelli himself does not seem to think that the argument from necessity will undermine public morality; for him the argument pertains to the art of state, not the civil way of life. His repeated emphasis on the importance of good laws shows that he presupposes the value of moral conduct in the domestic sphere (and also that it has to be enforced).⁵¹² In Machiavelli's view what undermines public morality is undermining religion.⁵¹³ One of my principal reasons for writing on Machiavelli has been to discuss among friends these moral problems that arise so clearly in the extreme situation. My own view is that by acknowledging Machiavelli's core argument that rulers must sometimes act against moral virtue, the even more difficult question of determining when a course of action is a justifiable necessity and which ends excuse which means may be rationally and humanely considered.

Morality and Risk

Machiavelli's justification of the violation of morality is least controversial when he rests it on the argument that the safety of the fatherland overrides any ignominy (*D*

⁵¹¹ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 11-12.

⁵¹² See *P* 12; *D* 1.2.3, 1.3.1-2, 1.10.4, 1.16.5, 1.42.1, 1.45.1-2, 1.55.2, 2 preface, 3.1.3, 3.1.5, 3.3.1.4, 3.46.1.

⁵¹³ See *P* 12; *D* 1.11, 1.12, 1.55.2, 2 preface, 3.1.2; *AW* 1.129, 4.141-46, 6.125.

3.41.1). However, the occasions on which a political community faces the choice between committing an ignominious act and certain ruin are rare. As Michael Walzer points out, realists often use the language of “necessity” in order to mask what are in truth “probabilities and risks.”⁵¹⁴ But just as the argument from necessity masks what are actually risks and probabilities, the argument that moral norms should always be observed often ignores the risks and dangers that may come from doing so. In his own writings, Machiavelli repeatedly points out that what may seem to be the more moral policy may in fact carry great risk. The policy of temporizing rather than turning to force (or the threat of force) may, for example, seem to be a more moral policy, but Machiavelli argues that such a course can be fatal: “when one foresees [troubles] from afar, one can easily find a remedy for them but when you wait until they come close to you, the medicine is not in time because the disease has become incurable” (P 3). A modern example of the principle that it is more prudent to act early than to temporize was voiced by Winston Churchill in 1946 in relation to the threat of Soviet expansionism:

Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by mere waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement. What is needed is a settlement, and the longer this is delayed, the more difficult it will be and the greater our dangers will become.⁵¹⁵

The policy that *prima facie* seems to be more pacific or moral may in fact be the best policy; the point I wish to make here—in the spirit of Machiavelli—is simply that there is good reason to be skeptical of moral positions which fail to acknowledge the risks that come with them.

⁵¹⁴ *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 8.

⁵¹⁵ Quoted in Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 442.

Though Machiavelli uses the word “ruin” in a broad sense, its most extreme case refers to a change of government (and all the consequences that come with it) by force, either from within the state or by a foreign power. While states in Italy at Machiavelli’s time were more vulnerable to “ruin” than states in the West have been since the birth of the modern territorial state, the extreme situation remains something to be guarded against. Walzer discusses a modern example in *Just and Unjust Wars*: from the defeat of France in the summer of 1940 until the summer of 1942, when Hitler’s armies remained everywhere undefeated, Britain faced a “supreme emergency.”⁵¹⁶ Although Walzer accepts that the bombing of German cities was a “crime,” he justifies Britain’s decision to do so since it “was made at a time when victory was not in sight and the specter of defeat ever present.”⁵¹⁷ He argues that after the summer of 1942, the supreme emergency had passed and thus the continued bombing of cities was “without moral (and probably also without military) reason.”⁵¹⁸ According to this argument, in a supreme emergency, a criminal action may have a moral purpose—maintaining the very existence of the state. This reasoning is similar to the reasoning that Machiavelli advocates, though whereas Walzer gives a narrow scope to the criteria of a supreme emergency (a nation’s or a people’s very freedom or existence is threatened and their options are exhausted), Machiavelli grants a wide scope to the meaning of “ruin” and therefore when moral standards can be contravened to prevent it.

⁵¹⁶ This discussion can be found on pp. 251-63.

⁵¹⁷ *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 258.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

The problem is manifold: how to balance concern for the well-being of one's own, concern for the humane treatment of other peoples and concern for moral norms themselves? Since in a contest of goodwill and force, force will prevail, the more faith that is put in goodwill, the more risk is taken. Rulers may accept some risk to their state's own interests in order to respect moral norms, but, at some indeterminate point, the risks may begin to jeopardize the very security of the state. The willingness to assume some risk places hope in the proposition that goodwill and respect for moral norms may favourably influence others' behaviour. Seen in this light, respecting morality means accepting some degree of collective risk for the sake of a good that transcends one's own collective: a common and mutual respect for moral relations.

Alexander Wendt explores how such cooperative relations may grow out of the competitive relations that states find themselves in.⁵¹⁹ The states system, he argues, does not dictate competitive power politics since the type of relations states develop depend upon how they interact with each other. Based on those interactions, they may develop either competitive or cooperative relations; thus he argues that "power politics are socially constructed."⁵²⁰ To transform a competitive system into one based on cooperative interests, a state must gain the trust of others and show that it poses no threat to their security. "The fastest way to do this," he writes, "is to make unilateral initiatives and self-

⁵¹⁹ See "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics" (1992).

⁵²⁰ Ibid., p. 395.

binding commitments.”⁵²¹ He acknowledges, however, that this involves risk: “by themselves such practices cannot transform a competitive security system, since if they are not reciprocated by alter, they will expose ego to a ‘sucker’ payoff and quickly wither on the vine.”⁵²² In other words, if asymmetrical practices are not reciprocated, they may become dangerous to the initiator.

Emmanuel Levinas—likely the twentieth century’s most radical moral philosopher of “the other”—recognizes the relationship between morality and risk whenever he turns his thoughts to Israel. In “The State of Caesar and the State of David” (1971), he proposes that the task of “monotheistic politics” is finding a way between “the methods of the Caesars” and “incautious moralism.”⁵²³ Similarly, in “Politics After!” (1979), he speaks of forging an alternative to both “*Realpolitik*” and “incautious idealism.”⁵²⁴

While the negation of moral freedom through the appeal to necessity should always be questioned, the escape into incautious idealism must also be avoided. Since it is prudent to consider the risks and probabilities of all options, a *cautious moralism* or a *moral realism* is needful, one which aims to avoid creating insecurity by tempting others to use force due to one’s vulnerability but that also strives to avoid heightening insecurity by compelling others into power politics due to fear of one’s strength.

⁵²¹ Ibid., p. 421. This recalls Machiavelli’s point that a state could decrease the fear it causes its neighbours by ordering “a constitution and laws to prohibit it from expanding” (D I.6.4). Machiavelli goes on, however, to reject the feasibility of such a policy.

⁵²² “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” p. 422.

⁵²³ *Levinas Reader*, p. 276.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., p. 283.

The Dawn of the Age of Balance

While Machiavelli advocates the goal of acquiring imperium, he was aware of the concept of balancing power. Describing the period before Charles VIII and his army overran Italy like an unstoppable flood, he writes: “Italy was in balance in a certain mode” (*Italia era in uno certo modo bilanciata*) (P 20). He also recognizes the prudence of balancing power in *Prince* 21. While his main point is that if a small state seeks the aid of a stronger one, the latter would be prudent to join arms with it for the ruin of a third state, he points out that if the power that sought aid “were wise” it would have preserved the other small power. While this counsel shows that he takes for granted the utility of expansion, he nonetheless recognizes that weaker states would be wise to ally against a stronger one. In general, however, Machiavelli’s sights are set on acquisition as not only the norm but as a necessary goal. Acquisition is, he says in *Prince* 3, “very natural and ordinary” (P 3). In the *Discourses*, he writes that since states must “either rise or fall,” necessity dictates that they be ordered to expand (1.6.4). Guicciardini presents a similar picture in his *Dialogue on the Government of Florence* (written in the early 1520s): “The preservation and expansion of the dominion depend on outside factors, that is, the behaviour of the other powers, who continually think of expansion and usurping the territory of others.”⁵²⁵

The ancient and medieval view of imperium as a good was still generally accepted at Machiavelli’s time. The principal moral question about acquisition was only whether it was just or unjust. States could expand in one of four main ways: a prince inheriting

⁵²⁵ *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, bk. 1, p. 58.

territory through marriage, a political community submitting to another for protection, purchasing a state from another power or the use of force. The general acceptance of acquisition as a good rested on the assumption that imperium is the surest means to secure the liberty of one's own state. As M. S. Anderson notes, the Italian states of the Renaissance were locked in an intense competition "for power, for territory, in the last analysis for survival."⁵²⁶ Machiavelli's championing of expansion as a legitimate aim of states is extreme only in that he almost wholly disregards the question of justice. As we have seen, he argues in the *Discourses* that the only way to secure one's state against others is to enlarge one's own: "it is impossible for a republic to succeed in staying quiet and enjoying its freedom and little borders. For if it will not molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and the necessity to acquire" (2.19.1, also see 1.6.4). Thus affairs of state are a perpetual struggle for survival, liberty and imperium.

Although Machiavelli argues that the Roman mode is the true mode of expanding, he recognizes a league of several republics as "the best mode after that of the Romans" (*D* 2.4.2). Leagues, he says, have "two goods": the first is that they do not easily go to war (since it is difficult for them to consult and decide and because they have to share any new acquisitions); the second good is that they are strong enough to hold what they acquire (2.4.2). It is worth pausing to note that Machiavelli considers it a "good" for a state not to take on a war easily. He further argues that leagues have a natural limit in terms of size: "having arrived at a rank that seems to enable them to defend themselves

⁵²⁶ *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, p. 3.

from everyone, they do not seek larger dominion, both because necessity does not constrain them to have more power and because they do not see any usefulness in acquisitions” (2.4.2). Here Machiavelli again points to the underlying reason that states seek dominion: necessity constrains a state to have enough power to defend itself because only then does it live “securely” (2.4.2). Although he does not use the balance metaphor, he clearly recognizes how an alliance may be used to balance power for the sake of security. He ends his discussion of the different modes of expanding by conceding that if the Roman mode is too difficult to imitate, then the present Tuscans should imitate the league of the ancient Tuscans.

While for Machiavelli a balancing league was only the second best mode, some writers at his time began to praise a policy of balance over aggrandizement. The image of scales and the concept of balance first made their appearance in Renaissance painting, medical theory and music theory, and then spread to political discourse in the mid to late quattrocento.⁵²⁷ The first uses of the balance concept are usually attributed to Bernardo Rucellai and Francesco Guicciardini.⁵²⁸ The idea is, however, attested earlier. In 1447, when the Visconti duke died without heir and the Milanese declared their state a republic, its dominion over its subject territories became vulnerable. Responding to this turn of events, Francesco Barbaro, Venice’s leading humanist at the time, wrote a memorandum

⁵²⁷ See Vagts, “The Balance of Power,” p. 89ff.

⁵²⁸ See for example Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 199. Gilbert writes that Rucellai’s book “introduced the term ‘balance of power’ into political literature” (“Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricelleri,” p. 216).

advising that Venice put its security “more in the balance of things than in arms.”⁵²⁹ Venice has a choice, he wrote, “either to enlarge our dominion or to augment common liberty and save the peace of Italy.” He warned, as in fact happened, that if Venice used the weakening of Milan to enlarge its own dominion, then its cooperative relation with Florence would be ruined by “suspicion” and “wars.”⁵³⁰ Rather than pursue aggrandizement, Barbaro envisioned welcoming the new Ambrosian Republic into the republican alliance of Venice, Florence and Genoa.

The political memoir of Marco Parenti shows that some Florentines responded to the situation with a similar vision; favourably reporting an idea discussed at the time, he lays out how a policy of “counterbalancing” (*contrapesando*) could secure peace between a free Florence, Venice and Milan:

since the space between Florence and Venice, and from Venice to Milan, and from Milan to Florence is quasi equidistant in the form of a triangle, in this way on every side, like a point, there would be a powerful city to keep the peace of Italy strong, the third one always counterbalancing the other two if they wished to clash.⁵³¹

This model of a tripartite balance acknowledges that any one part may still be tempted to aggrandize itself but that the other two parts would act as a deterrent, thus maintaining peace. The vision of a balance between friendly republics was, however, quickly shattered, as Venice extended its dominion westward, and Francesco Sforza overthrew the new Milanese republic, making himself duke. Lorenzo de' Medici responded to

⁵²⁹ This quotation and the following may be found in Phillips, *The Memoir of Marco Parenti*, p. 232. I also here draw on Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, pp. 396-99.

⁵³⁰ Quoted in Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, p. 398.

⁵³¹ Quoted in Phillips, *The Memoir of Marco Parenti*, p. 231.

Venice's expansionism by allying first with Milan and then with Naples, a policy for which, as we will see, he was greatly praised.

Rucellai opens his history of the invasion of Charles VIII, *De Bello Italico*, by arguing that Lorenzo de' Medici had preserved peace in Italy by pursuing the principle that "things must be kept in equal balance."⁵³² His portrait of Lorenzo as a wise ruler concerned with balancing the power of Venice became an enduring topos, especially after Guicciardini repeated it in his *History of Italy*.⁵³³ In Guicciardini's much-cited words, Lorenzo "carefully saw to it that the Italian situation should be maintained in a state of balance [*in modo bilanciate*], not leaning more toward one side than the other."⁵³⁴ Although neither Rucellai nor Guicciardini use the expression "the balance of power," it came into common use soon after Guicciardini's work was published posthumously in 1561.⁵³⁵ In the first English translation, which appeared in 1579, the translator begins his dedication to Queen Elizabeth: "God has put into your hands the balance of power and justice."⁵³⁶ Giovanni Botero, in *Reason of State* (1589), supports the idea that Lorenzo de' Medici maintained "Italy at peace for a long time by balancing the powers."⁵³⁷ Likewise, Alberico Gentili in his *De jure belli libri tres* (1598): "This it is which was the constant care of Lorenzo de Medici, that wise man, friend of peace and father of peace, namely

⁵³² Quoted in Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, pp. 114-15. Gilbert argues that Rucellai's work was conceived in 1495 and completed by 1509 ("Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricelleri," pp. 216, 225, 501 n. 50).

⁵³³ Guicciardini finished his *History* by 1540, the year he died. It circulated in manuscript as early as 1546 but was not published until 1561 (Vagts, "The Balance of Power," p. 96).

⁵³⁴ *History of Italy*, bk. 1, pp. 4-7.

⁵³⁵ For other sixteenth century uses of the balance concept see Anderson, *The Balance of Power*, pp. 151-52.

⁵³⁶ Quoted in Vagts, "The Balance of Power," p. 97.

⁵³⁷ Quoted in Sheehan, *The Balance of Power*, p. 33.

that the balance of power should be maintained among the princes of Italy.”⁵³⁸ And

Francis Bacon takes up the idea in his essay “Of Empire” (1612):

there can no general rule be given (the occasions are so variable), save one, which ever holdeth; which is, that princes do keep due sentinel, that none of their neighbours do overgrow so (by increase of territory, by embracing of trade, by approaches, or the like), as they become more able to annoy them than they were. And this is generally the work of standing counsels to foresee and to hinder it. During the triumvirate of kings, King Henry the Eighth of England, Francis the First King of France, and Charles the Fifth Emperor, there was such a watch kept, that none of the three could win a palm of ground, but the other two would straightways balance it, either by confederation, or, if need were, by a war; and would not in any wise take up peace at interest. And the like was done by that league (which Guicciardine saith was the security of Italy) made between Ferdinando King of Naples, Lorenzius medices, and Ludovicus Sforza, potentates, the one of Florence, the other of Milan. Neither is the opinion of some of the schoolmen to be received, that ‘a war cannot be justly made but upon a precedent injury or provocation’. For there is no question but a just fear of an imminent danger, though there be no blow given, is a lawful cause of a war.⁵³⁹

According to the general rule described by Bacon, if a neighbor increases in power—whether through territory, trade or moving forces to the border—a balance needs be reestablished. As he notes this may be done in two ways: by forming a confederation to balance the power or if need be through war. He notes with approval that kings prefer to go to war than to maintain peace when a neighbor grows in power and could later use it against them. He rebuts the scholastic position, represented by a quotation from Aquinas, that for war to be just the neighbour must first wrong one; in Bacon’s view a neighbour’s territorial growth or domination in trade may itself give rise to “a just fear of an imminent danger.” Here one of the difficulties inherent in the concept of the balance of power comes to the surface: the concept, while meant to maintain peace, may justify war.

⁵³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵³⁹ Bacon, *The Major Works*, p. 377. This essay was first published in the second edition of the *Essays* (1612) and enlarged in the third edition (1625).

The idea of balancing power continued to gain ground in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A treaty between France and Denmark in 1645 committed them to maintaining “that old and healthy balance (*ancien et salutaire équilibre*) which has until now served as the foundation of peace and public tranquility.”⁵⁴⁰ The Treaty of Westphalia, which in 1648 marked the end of the Thirty Years’ War, was implicitly based on the balance of power concept.⁵⁴¹ By the latter part of the seventeenth century, the principle achieved general acceptance in Europe.⁵⁴² The Anglo-Spanish Treaty of Utrecht (1713) formally recognized the aim of securing peace through “a just Balance of Power.”⁵⁴³ The crown prince Frederick of Prussia, in *The Refutation of Machiavelli’s Prince* (1739-1740), emphasizes the important changes, including the idea of balance, that have occurred since Machiavelli lived:

But what would Machiavelli himself say if he could see the new form of the European body politic: so many great princes figuring now in the world who didn’t amount to anything then, the power of kings solidly established, the manner in which sovereigns negotiate—those privileged spies maintained reciprocally in all the courts, and the balance of Europe which establishes the alliance of some important princes in order to oppose the ambitious—wisely maintaining equality with no other goal than the tranquility of the world?

All these things have produced such a general and universal change that they render most of Machiavelli’s maxims inapplicable and useless to modern politics.⁵⁴⁴

However, as many have pointed out, and as Frederick himself recognized, once he became king of Prussia he no longer found Machiavelli’s maxims so inapplicable (and in fact

⁵⁴⁰ Quoted in Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, p. 154.

⁵⁴¹ Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany*, p. 362; Sheehan, *The Balance of Power*, p. 37; Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, p. 21.

⁵⁴² Sheehan, *The Balance of Power*, pp. 34-35; Butterfield, *The Balance of Power*, p. 139.

⁵⁴³ Quoted in Wight, *The Balance of Power*, p. 153. Also see Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, p. 164.

⁵⁴⁴ Frederick of Prussia, *The Refutation of Machiavelli’s Prince*, p. 76.

when he became king in 1740 he wrote to Voltaire, his collaborator on the book, asking him to prevent it from going public; it was however too late).⁵⁴⁵ The above quote is of particular interest here insofar as it shows to what extent the balance concept had become part of the discourse and practice in European foreign affairs.

On the one hand, after Machiavelli's time, the continuing role of the struggle over imperium cannot be denied: would-be hegemons, colonial expansion, expansion in the New World, the Second World War, the Cold War and so on. On the other hand, theory and practice in Europe underwent significant changes in the centuries that followed his time. First, the balance-of-power principle was aimed precisely at preventing the emergence of an imperial power. Secondly, whereas at Machiavelli's time the main way to increase power was still to expand in dominion over territory and men, through the ever-quickening march of technology, power could increasingly be developed internally through industry and armaments. Then too borders became more fixed and less fluid.⁵⁴⁶ Thus Machiavelli's advocacy of the imperialistic Roman mode lost his explicit justification for it: that the only two possibilities for a state are expanding or contracting (*D* I.6.4). If there is an alternative that does not risk ruin—balancing power—then expansion is not necessary. What Machiavelli himself called “the true political way of life,” that is, staying within one's boundaries, ordered only for defense, becomes a feasible policy (*D* I.6.4). Nonetheless, two different questions seem to get conflated here: firstly, which is the better way of life, being on the march for conquest or enjoying peace

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14; Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 301.

⁵⁴⁶ For a brief history of this change see Zacher, “The Territorial Integrity Norm,” pp. 216-18.

at home? And, secondly, which is the more secure way of life, pursuing expansion or staying within one's boundaries? While Machiavelli tends to rest his argument for expansion on safety and liberty, his writings are also infused with the view that being on the march is the grander way of life.

At Machiavelli's own time, some writers were beginning to argue for the idea of a balancing league as opposed to expansionism. Likewise, most twentieth-century realists favour balance-of-power politics. According to Morgenthau, the aim of the balance of power is "the preservation of peace and security" as well as "the preservation of the independence of individual states."⁵⁴⁷ Waltz writes that balance-of-power politics is the only alternative to "power-politics" and "probable suicide."⁵⁴⁸ For Waltz, maintaining a balance is itself a normative end: "Where a balance of power does exist, it behooves the state that desires peace as well as safety to become neither too strong nor too weak."⁵⁴⁹ Implicit in the idea of balance as a moral norm is a rejection of the ancient and medieval acceptance of imperialism as a necessary or glorious end.

The two other major alternatives to imperialist discourse and practice are just war theory and international law. However, if "men cannot secure themselves except with power" (*D* I.I.4), then the latter two, to be secure, must rest on a balance of power. While the criteria of just war theory aim to constrain the unjust use of force, one of the major problems with the theory is, as Erasmus points out, that every prince thinks his own cause

⁵⁴⁷ *Politics among Nations*, p. 213; also see p. 181.

⁵⁴⁸ *Man, the State and War*, pp. 205, 222.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

is just.⁵⁵⁰ In regard to restraining the use of force through international agreements, Machiavelli was well aware of the major weakness therein: “among private men laws, writings and agreements make them keep their word; but among princes nothing but arms makes them keep it.”⁵⁵¹ Although I am arguing for balance-of-power politics as a counter to imperialist discourse and as the foundation of a moral realism, this principle also has its problems. For one, it is difficult to measure each state’s power, its changes in power and the combined power of states in their various configurations. Second, as the theory gained acceptance in the seventeenth century, the concern for the balance in Europe spread to colonial territories as well, thus becoming a justification for colonial expansion (and a similar concern fueled proxy wars during the Cold War).⁵⁵² Third, while its aim is to maintain peace, the theory may be used to justify a preemptive war for the sake of maintaining a balance (as we saw, for example, in the quote from Bacon). Fourth, to be an effective deterrent, the states which desire peace must have enough power to balance those with aggressive aims. And, fifth, alliance partners cannot necessarily be relied upon to act in union. Although the balance-of-power principle is far from ideal, it does have a moderating quality, something which stands in stark contrast to the imperialist policy that Machiavelli still took to be the norm and ideal.

Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Spiritedness

⁵⁵⁰ *The Education of a Christian Prince*, ch. 11, p. 251.

⁵⁵¹ “Words to be Spoken on the Law for Appropriating Money,” in *Chief Works*, vol. 3, p. 1442.

⁵⁵² On colonial expansion and the balance of power see Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, pp. 170-72; Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, p. 104.

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama charts the change in spirit and values that occurred during the Enlightenment. His discussion helps to further clarify why some of Machiavelli's views are less relevant in our times than they were in his. One consequence of this change is that Machiavelli's concern with greatness is taken up by Nietzsche in a way that is more pressing for our times. While Machiavelli is concerned with political greatness, Nietzsche is concerned with cultural greatness. Admittedly, Nietzsche's idolization of greatness is anti-egalitarian in spirit; despite being in that way untimely, his writings provide an incisive diagnosis of modernity.

Fukuyama's discussion of *thymos* (spiritedness) and *megalothymia* (a word he coins) explains why Machiavelli and Nietzsche have different conceptions of what constitutes greatness. Fukuyama adopts the concept of *thymos* from Socrates' discussion of the soul in Plato's *Republic*. Therein, Socrates argues that the soul has three parts: a desiring part, a spirited part and a reasoning part.⁵⁵³ The virtue he associates with the spirited part is courage (*andreia*). Fukuyama coins *megalothymia* to signify an abundance of *thymos* and defines it as "the desire to be recognized as superior to other people."⁵⁵⁴ He then considers how different thinkers have addressed the qualities of *thymos* and *megalothymia* and how their conceptions have helped to shape social values. Seen in this light, Fukuyama argues that the history of the West shows "the emergence, growth, and eventual decline of *megalothymia*."⁵⁵⁵ He dates the beginning of the decline to the attack on princely and aristocratic pride initiated by Hobbes, Locke and their successors—

⁵⁵³ *The End of History*, pp. 163-64.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

thinkers who placed a higher moral weight on self-preservation and material well-being than on recognition of superiority.⁵⁵⁶

According to Fukuyama, the spirited quality which Plato calls *thymos* is the same quality that Machiavelli calls desire for glory and that Hobbes calls pride.⁵⁵⁷ He argues that Hobbes, and succeeding liberal thinkers, turned the reasoning and desiring parts of human nature against pride and the desire for glory.⁵⁵⁸ Hobbes' concern with suppressing the *thymotic* part of the soul, and especially its expression in political life, is evident throughout his works. In *De Cive* (1642), he praises monarchy since "anyone who is prepared to live quietly is free of danger, whatever the character of the ruler. Only the ambitious suffer, the rest are protected from being wronged by the powerful."⁵⁵⁹ In *Leviathan* (1651), he explains that the work's title, his name for the sovereign power, alludes to the description of the biblical Leviathan in the last two verses of Job 41: "*There is nothing on earth, to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid. He seeth every high thing below him; and is King of all the children of pride.*"⁵⁶⁰ As in *De Cive*, Hobbes sees it as a virtue of the sovereign power that it can hold down the proud and ambitious. In *Behemoth* (1668), he restricts the expression of fortitude to soldiers and the sovereign: "Fortitude is a royal virtue; and though it be necessary in such private men as shall be soldiers, yet, for other men, the less they dare, the better it is both for the

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 160, 184-85. As Fukuyama acknowledges, his reading is indebted to Strauss' *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 184-85.

⁵⁵⁹ *On the Citizen*, p. 120. Also see Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 251.

⁵⁶⁰ Quoted in *Leviathan*, ch. 29. For Fukuyama on this point see *The End of History*, p. 157.

Commonwealth and for themselves.”⁵⁶¹ “Fortitude” he says in *Leviathan*, chapter 6, is “Magnanimity, in Danger of Death, or Wounds.” Since fortitude is not a virtue for subjects, the courageous or thymotic part of the soul is to be repressed through fear of death and physical harm. The virtue of subjects is “to obey the laws” and “justly and moderately to enrich themselves” (*Behemoth*).⁵⁶² By advocating the oppression of the daring and ambitious men who would wish to oppress, Hobbes envisions a society of equal men, stripped of pride, fearful of violent death, living a life of moderate enrichment. As witnesses to the emergence of the Dutch and English bourgeoisie, Hobbes and Locke were responding to a change already occurring in their society. Locke’s *Second Treatise* (1690) became the locus classicus for the justification of unlimited acquisition (5.46-50). Although separated by a chasm insofar as Hobbes champions absolute government and Locke limited government, both have no place for aristocratic *megalothymia*, instead valorizing just acquisition as a safer channel for *thymos*.

As Fukuyama points out, the ideas propagated by Enlightenment thinkers have been so successful that in modern liberal democracies it is considered unacceptable to exhibit the desire to be recognized as superior to others.⁵⁶³ Likewise, it is now considered unacceptable to pursue recognition in its greatest classical manifestations—conquest and empire. In the dominant discourse of our time, the reversal has been so thorough that conquest and imperialism are now considered immoral rather than glorious. The word “glory” itself rarely occurs at all in contemporary political discourse, and on the few

⁵⁶¹ *Behemoth*, dialogue 1, p. 44. Quoted in Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, p. 120.

⁵⁶² Dialogue 1, p. 44.

⁵⁶³ *The End of History*, p. 190.

occasions it does, it is usually reserved for those who died in a defensive war. Thus an epochal shift has occurred between Machiavelli's time and ours: Enlightenment thinkers were largely successful in their devaluation of aristocratic values, and the honour attributed to political office at Machiavelli's time seems considerably lowered in modern parliamentary politics. Liberal institutions constrain *megalothymia*, yet still offer an outlet for *thymos*.⁵⁶⁴ These changes are likely connected. When most borders are agreed upon and struggles over imperium, that is, both security and conquest, are not at the forefront of political life, there is less at stake in politics and high office is bound to fall in prestige. Political office becomes just one among many outlets for *thymos*.

Liberal thinkers had good reason to tame the aristocratic desire to be recognized as superior: the proud man's contumely, the violence that comes from making good of vaunts, battles for prestige, the glorification of war. It is further a tribute to the Enlightenment critique of military glory that the unabashed assertion of greatness in the form of conquest and empire has tended to lose its lustre. The question is, what has been the cost of repressing the thymotic part of the soul in the name of self-preservation and material well-being? To answer this question, Fukuyama turns to Nietzsche—"the greatest and most articulate champion of *thymos* in modern times."⁵⁶⁵ Following Fukuyama, I will now turn to Nietzsche's writings, not only because he is a champion of *thymos* but also because—as a sign of our times—he sees its greatest outlet in culture rather than politics.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 187-88.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 188.

In an aphorism on “*Conscript armies*” in *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche touches on several of the issues that concern Machiavelli: ambition, the Greeks, the Romans, *patria*, a civilian army. Nietzsche, however, takes a decisive stand against patriotism as mankind’s highest end:

as the Greeks once waded in Greek blood, so Europeans now do in European blood; and it is always the most highly cultivated, those who guarantee a good and abundant posterity, who are sacrificed in relatively the largest numbers: for they stand in the van of the battle as the commanders and on account of their superior ambition expose themselves most to danger. – Now [*jetzt*], when quite different and higher missions than *patria* and *honor* demand to be done, crude Roman patriotism is either something dishonest or a sign of retardedness [*Zurückgebliebenheit*].⁵⁶⁶

Nietzsche marks his discourse with a temporal “now” signifying that Europe has entered a new historical epoch. Although war persists and the ambitious are still willing to risk their lives for honour, society’s highest needs have changed. He sees Europe’s wars as civil wars in which the lives of its most ambitious, cultivated men are wasted. Europe requires the talents of its best minds for a more important task than those of the *patria*; patriotic ends are regressive compared to these “higher missions.” Nietzsche returns to this idea in another aphorism, from the same chapter, entitled “*Grand politics and what they cost*.” Here he explains the greatest cost of war to be that “the most prominent talents are continually sacrificed on the ‘altar of the fatherland’ or the national thirst for honour.” Grand politics channel a nation’s energy into war, leading to “spiritual impoverishment” and “a diminution of the capacity for undertakings demanding great concentration and application.”⁵⁶⁷ The higher missions now needed are concerned with what Nietzsche calls

⁵⁶⁶ *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1, aphorism 442.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, aphorism 481.

the spiritual. Like the Enlightenment philosophers, he no longer sees conquest as a thing of glory. But, further, the Enlightenment inadvertently opened a new spiritual abyss and overcoming that abyss is a higher mission than any patriotic one.

According to Nietzsche, seeking and asserting power atrophies a nation's "spirit." Periods of political weakness, on the other hand, rejuvenate its spirit and culture.⁵⁶⁸ Nietzsche does, however, also see a value in war. He calls war the "hibernation time of culture," a hibernation from which mankind emerges more natural and barbarian.⁵⁶⁹ He expands on this line of thought in an aphorism entitled "*War indispensable.*"⁵⁷⁰ The "barbarism" of war, he argues, revives the "new energy" necessary to maintain a vital culture. While he points out that a society may find "surrogates for war"—the Romans in animal-baiting, gladiatorial combats and persecuting Christians; Englishmen in perilous naval exploration and mountain climbing—they are, he suggests, a sign of its enfeeblement. Tacitus would agree with Nietzsche's assessment that such surrogates are a sign of degeneration: "What remained, except that they should also bare their bodies and take up boxing gloves and perform fights of that type instead of soldiering and weapons?" (*Annals* 14.20). In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the letters of Walton, an English naval explorer, also support Nietzsche's point. Walton, having rejected the bourgeois ideals of comfort and accumulation, explains that he "preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path."⁵⁷¹ While Walton still exhibits ambition for greatness, even at

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., aphorism 465.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., aphorism 444.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., aphorism 477.

⁵⁷¹ *Frankenstein*, p. 17.

the risk of death, it is channeled, as Nietzsche chidingly writes of the British, into exploration.

While Nietzsche valorizes culture's highest achievements, he sees a dangerous dialectic in culture: the more "highly cultivated" it becomes the more "feeble" it becomes.⁵⁷² Thus a highly civilized culture that has "unlearned how to wage war" risks being deprived not only of its culture but of its very existence. Like Nietzsche, Machiavelli also insists that there is no surrogate for knowing how to wage war; he mocks what he considered to be bloodless battles and saw them as a source of Italy's weakness when confronted by foreign armies.⁵⁷³ The difference between the two is the nature of their concern: Machiavelli's is practical, Nietzsche's spiritual. For Nietzsche, the significant point is that the energy released in war "will later under favourable circumstances turn the wheels in the workshop of the spirit." Nietzsche returns to the dialectic between barbarism and high culture in *Beyond Good and Evil* where he writes that because the Germans are "closer to barbarism than the French" they create "stronger, more daring, more severe and more elevated things."⁵⁷⁴ However, even if it were true that the barbarism of war is in some way a catalyst for cultural vitality—a claim he perhaps bases on the particular experience of Athens in the fifth century BCE—to praise war on that ground is to make a gruesome cost-benefit analysis.⁵⁷⁵ Thus while aiming to

⁵⁷² These two quotations, and the following one, are still from *Human, All Too Human*, aphorism 477.

⁵⁷³ *AW* 2.305-308, 7.236-38; *FH* 5.I, 5.33, 6.I.

⁵⁷⁴ *BGE*, aphorism 256.

⁵⁷⁵ Hegel's view is similar to that of Nietzsche: "just as the movement of the winds preserves the sea from stagnation which a lasting calm would produce—a stagnation

faithfully represent Nietzsche's thought, the main point I wish to emphasize here is that his writings show a turn from the privileging of patriotic ends to cultural and spiritual ones.

Nietzsche continues his critique of grand politics in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). As in *Human, All Too Human*, he argues against the "narrowness" of "patriotism" and for "good Europeanism."⁵⁷⁶ Without naming Bismarck or German unification, he expresses disdain for a statesman who would awe the masses with "some monstrosity of power and empire."⁵⁷⁷ He reproaches its "grand politics" since "that nation had hitherto had something better to do and think about and in the depths of its soul still retained a cautious disgust for the restlessness, emptiness and noisy wrangling of those nations which actually do practise politics." Nietzsche does not, however, overly concern himself with the regression of his patria since "when one nation becomes spiritually shallower there is a compensation for it: another becomes deeper." He picks up this same topic in *Twilight of the Idols*, adding: "The moment Germany rises as a great power, France gains a new importance as a *cultural power*. A great deal of current spiritual seriousness and *passion* has already emigrated to Paris."⁵⁷⁸ For Nietzsche, greatness has nothing to do with military power; rather, it must come from spiritual depths and address the cultural abyss at the centre of modernity. Both Machiavelli and Nietzsche are concerned with

which a lasting, not to say perpetual, peace would also produce among nations" (*Philosophy of Right*, sec. 324).

⁵⁷⁶ Quotations from *BGE* aphorism 241; also see aphorism 254. For Machiavelli's praise of the "good European" in *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1, see aphorism 475.

⁵⁷⁷ This citation and the following are from *BGE* aphorism 241.

⁵⁷⁸ This and the following quote are from "What the Germans Lack," aphorism 4 (emphasis in the original).

what the former calls *educazione* and the latter *Cultur*, but whereas Machiavelli's concern with *educazione* bears primarily on how morality and religion affect the art of state, for Nietzsche the very foundations of morality and religion have fallen into question. Since the status of morality is less firmly grounded now than in the Renaissance, morality itself is in need of a grounding.

Nietzsche shows his modernity not only by elevating culture above politics but also through his regard for balance-of-power politics. In *Human, All Too Human*, he argues that balance is the foundation of justice. Since aiming at "preponderance" over neighbours leads to long drawn-out wars, he notes that

the community prefers to bring its power of defence and attack up to precisely the point at which the power possessed by its dangerous neighbour stands and then to give him to understand that the scales are now evenly balanced: why, in that event, should they not be good friends with one another. *Equilibrium* is thus a very important concept for the oldest theory of law and morality; equilibrium is the basis of justice.⁵⁷⁹

Nietzsche attributes this concept of balance to Thucydides, a debt he acknowledges in another aphorism: "Justice (fairness) originates between parties of approximately *equal power*, as Thucydides correctly grasped (in the terrible colloquy between the Athenian and Melian ambassadors)."⁵⁸⁰ The first quotation, relying on the scale metaphor, indicates how a balance of power may provide peace and even friendship. While this is similar to the concept of balance that began to emerge in both theory and practice in quattrocento Italy, Nietzsche, by going back to Thucydides' Athenian ambassadors, also accepts the inverse: that where there is not a balance of power, power, not justice, will prevail. The

⁵⁷⁹ *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 2, part 2, aphorism 22.

⁵⁸⁰ *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1, aphorism 92.

Athenian ambassadors themselves made the argument in order to justify the negative side of the principle. In the modern period, the balance-of-power principle gained currency as a means to provide stability and security, for where there is a balance of power there is more likely to be justice, if not friendship.

Justice

As we have seen, the argument that rulers, for the sake of security, may occasionally have to act against moral norms is uncontroversial for realists. Nonetheless, one of the things that remains troubling about Machiavelli is that in his writings the principle takes on such a broad application, even excusing immoral acts for the sake of expansion. In accord with the dominant spirit of his time, he takes for granted that imperium is one of the greatest goods, but he almost wholly neglects the question of whether imperium is acquired justly. Instead, he focuses on how to acquire prudently, that is, how to acquire in such a way that a city may maintain what it acquires. Thus his concern with justice arises only when it is prudent to be just. His writings fail not only to consider how to achieve justice among nations but even undermine the question, for in his view ambition, avarice and necessity lead to a never ending struggle for imperium. His response to this predicament was, like the Romans, to privilege the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa*.

One must concede to Machiavelli the continuing significance of the struggle for imperium even after his time. It should also be granted to Machiavelli that the common good of a state rests on civic and military virtue. And, as is often pointed out, without

political order, all other human endeavors and values remain precarious. Thus the ethic of the *vita activa* and its commitment to the common good—the just common good, for justice is more wondrous than the evening and morning star—help to fortify political life. Yet at the same time one hears another need arising from the hollow din of postmodern metropolises: the ever-loudening echo of the challenge posed by Zarathustra's alpine cry that the most needful ends are now spiritual ones: art, culture, knowledge and moral revaluation.

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