

Machiavelli's Morals

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In all of Niccolò Machiavelli's works, there is no passage more "Machiavellian" than the speech in the third book of his *Florentine Histories* by an anonymous leader of the popular revolt of 1378. The leader attempts to persuade his followers that after all the violence they have already committed—arson, looting, and the pillaging of churches—it would be a grave error to stop now. If they want their old evils to be forgiven, he tells them, they ought to commit new ones. "When many err," he explains, "no one is punished, and though small faults are punished, great and grave ones are rewarded." This is followed by a passage worth quoting at length:

It pains me much when I hear that out of conscience many of you repent the deeds that have been done and that you wish to abstain from new deeds; and certainly, if this is true, you are not the men I believed you to be, for neither conscience nor infamy should dismay you, because those who win, in whatever mode they win, never receive shame from it.... But if you will take note of the mode of proceeding of men, you will see that all those who come to great riches and great power have obtained them either by fraud or by force; and afterwards, to hide the ugliness of acquisition, they make it decent by applying the false title of earnings to things they have usurped by deceit or by violence. And those who, out of either little

prudence or too much foolishness, shun these modes always suffocate in servitude or poverty. For faithful servants are always servants, and good men are always poor; nor do they ever rise out of servitude unless they are unfaithful and bold, nor out of poverty unless they are rapacious and fraudulent. For God and nature have put all the fortunes of men in their midst, where they are exposed more to rapine than to industry and more to wicked than to good arts, from which it arises that men devour one another and that those who can do less are always the worst off. Therefore, one should use force whenever the occasion for it is given to us... I confess this course is bold and dangerous, but when necessity presses, boldness is judged prudence; and spirited men never take account of the danger in great things, for those enterprises that are begun with danger always end with reward, and one never escapes a danger without danger.¹

This speech may not encapsulate the entirety of Machiavelli's political thought, but it is vintage Machiavelli. In its tone and content, it is especially reminiscent of *The Prince*.² Here, as in *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that life presents instances in which an overriding danger and urgency dictate resolute, extreme, and even savage actions necessary for defense, survival, and the improvement of our lot. When such conditions arise, pangs of conscience or concessions to morality are self-defeating.

The view expressed in this speech claims the dignity of a general theory. The clearest example of this is the assertion that appears throughout Machiavelli's writings to the effect that power and wealth can be achieved only by force or fraud, or both. This is presented in the speech as an axiom of political life: "God and nature" arranged it thus. One may, of course, decline to take part in the struggle for power and wealth, but one cannot escape the consequences of such a choice. The good and the meek may be assured that the strong will prey upon them, and the world will remain the same as before: Power-driven, restless, and remorseless.

Such convictions seem to lend weight to the popular belief according to which Machiavelli held a dualistic conception of politics and morality. To the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce, for example,

Machiavelli's originality lay in his discovery that politics is an autonomous enterprise divorced from ethics.³ Other scholars have disagreed with this. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, held that Machiavelli did not differentiate between politics and ethics, but rather between two different kinds of ethics.⁴ Nevertheless, his popular image as a cynical thinker is due to Machiavelli's pronouncements concerning the relationship between politics and morality.⁵ Indeed, as early as 1532, the year it appeared in print, *The Prince* was referred to sarcastically as "the golden book of morality."⁶

Time would only confirm Machiavelli's status as the enemy of decent people. In Elizabethan drama he is regularly invoked to play the part of evil personified; Shakespeare refers to him as "the murderous Machiavel";⁷ and in the nineteenth century, he appears as a protagonist in Maurice Joly's *The Dialogue in Hell Between Montesquieu and Machiavelli* (which later gave inspiration to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*), where he is made to maintain that politics and morality are poles apart.⁸

In contrast to this portrayal of Machiavelli, it is my intention here to show that he in fact believed morality to be a central component in political life. Machiavelli, it will be argued, understood morality and politics to be closely linked—but in a very subtle way that challenges, or even contravenes, common assumptions about their relationship. In Machiavelli's view of the nature of man, it is a grave error to attempt to force politics to conform to the dictates of ethical theory; when politics strives to be moral, it achieves the destruction of the very conditions necessary for moral existence. In all that we do to regulate public life and provide for security and welfare in human society, it is immoral to be moral. Such is the irony of politics. The tragedy of politics, however, is that the alternative is no less dangerous. Little good can result when the art of politics forsakes morality entirely.

It is a terrible paradox, then, that the moral existence of a society can be secured only by political foundations whose creation requires the very means that undermine common morality: Force, cruelty, and deceit.

But this paradox is not the familiar claim about the need to employ evil means for good ends. For one thing, there is hardly any good as

such in Machiavelli's world, and his ends, certainly from a modern liberal perspective, are often as dirty as the means.⁹ For another, the business of laying solid political foundations on which moral existence can repose is not a one-time task. Given human nature, it involves unending maintenance, from which it follows that the threat to morality is as continuous as the threat to survival. In this predicament, man has no universal, foolproof rules of conduct to guide either his political deliberations or his moral choices. In this view, not only politics, but morality too is in a perpetual crisis, engulfed in uncertainty and constrained by necessity. And yet, although ours is not a good world, temporary islands of stability can be created in it, and reasonable levels of security and prosperity can be achieved—and these are the circumstances in which morality can thrive. In light of the nature of man and his world, even a partial success is a resounding one. And the fact that such success might contain within it the seeds of ultimate failure is no reason to despair.

II

Machiavelli's approach to the relationship between politics and morality comes into sharp relief in his critique of Christianity. For more than a thousand years before he wrote, Christianity had largely defined the domain and content of Western morality. It is not surprising, therefore, that a significant departure from the prevailing attitudes about politics and morality contained within it also a bold attack on Christianity.

But Machiavelli was not a typical anti-cleric. He did not indulge in the polemics fashionable in the Middle Ages, which usually centered on the materialism of the institution and its clergy, or the gulf between theory and practice, ideals and reality. His argument was more radical and fundamental.¹⁰ In comparing it to paganism, for instance, he discovered that Christianity

leads us to ascribe less esteem to worldly honor. Hence the Gentiles, who held it in high esteem and looked upon it as their highest good, displayed in their actions more ferocity than we do.... Besides, the old religion did not beatify men unless they were replete with worldly glory, army commanders, for instance, and rulers of republics. Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action. It has assigned as man's highest good humility, abnegation, and contempt for mundane things, whereas the other identifies it with magnanimity, bodily strength, and everything else that tends to make men very bold. No, if our religion demands that in you there be strength, what it asks for is strength to suffer rather than strength to do bold things.¹¹

This is Machiavelli's most direct attack on the religion in which he was baptized. Significantly, it is not an attack on the Church's attempt to subjugate politics to ethics, but on the distinction the Church made between the two. The Church's withdrawal from, and contempt towards, this world in the name of a pure spirituality is seen by Machiavelli as a prescription for defeat—and a central cause for the world's relative decline since antiquity. A morality that averts our gaze from the city of man and directs it upwards to the city of God, which denigrates the meaning of earthly travail, has only itself to blame when reality falls short of ideals. Morality of this sort is the problem, not the solution. To Machiavelli, the Church's distinction between politics and morality may be itself immoral—immoral because it is politically deleterious.

This understanding of Machiavelli's aims, according to which he, on the one hand, saw Christian morality as ill-suited to this world, but did not disassociate morality from politics, on the other, was pivotal to Isaiah Berlin's seminal 1972 article on "The Originality of Machiavelli."¹² According to Berlin, the claim that Machiavelli divorced ethics from politics is based on the false premise that ethics is the realm of absolute, ultimate values, whereas politics is the technical art of adapting means to ends.¹³ But Berlin maintains that there exists another kind of ethics, embodied in the *polis* or Greek city-state, of which Aristotle provides the most

comprehensive and authoritative account. Berlin explains that in the *polis*, politics is not an instrument for attaining a different, higher end, but a supreme value in itself. It defines man as a rational being, and leads to a fuller and happier life. Accordingly, man and politics—that is, the private good and the public good—are in essence meant for each other.¹⁴ “We [Athenians] alone,” declared Pericles in a famous speech, “regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as a harmless, but as a useless character.”¹⁵ The *polis* is the source of man’s identity, and it is from this political commonwealth that he derives his ultimate values. In this political tradition, there is no room for the disassociation of the spiritual from the mundane, let alone a distinction between politics and morality.

If we accept Berlin’s argument that Machiavelli considers the existence of another, pre-Christian ethics to be self-evident, then the distinction he makes is not between politics and ethics, but between two different moral approaches: Pagan morality, which exalts the values of “courage, vigor, fortitude in adversity, public achievement, order, discipline, happiness, strength, justice, above all the assertion of one’s proper claims”; and Christian morality, which idealizes “charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value....”¹⁶ In Berlin’s reading, Machiavelli thinks that those who adopt Christian ethics are unfit for the construction of a society that is best suited to human beings. Machiavelli, in this reading, does not judge one way of life to be intrinsically more desirable than another, but rather insists only that the two kinds of ethics cannot coexist. A choice must be made between them.¹⁷

But while Berlin goes some distance toward identifying the source of tension in Machiavelli’s political thought, he fails to follow the long trail of Machiavelli’s argument to its end, and as a result fails to appreciate the depths of Machiavelli’s originality.¹⁸ Machiavelli is not satisfied with a “liberal” presentation of two equally good but contradictory ethics, each of which is legitimate in its own right. Neither is he satisfied with demonstrating the incompatibility of Christian ethics with the real world. Machiavelli

is in fact engaged in a bitter critique of Christianity, which he holds solely responsible for the world's maladies in his time.¹⁹

Nor, as we will see, is it correct to say that Machiavelli really embraced the ethics of the *polis*. After all, if he considered the existence of a separate, pagan ethics to be self-evident and compelling, it seems unlikely that he would describe as “evil”—a term he uses frequently and without hesitation—the political means that pagan ethics demands.²⁰ Moreover, although Machiavelli views ancient Rome as the paragon of political organization, he does not show the same degree of admiration for classical moral and political philosophy. He holds, for instance, the historian Livy in far greater esteem than he does Plato and Aristotle,²¹ and goes to great lengths to emphasize his contempt for Cicero. In many cases Machiavelli is every bit as critical of classical political thought as he is of Christian idealism. Indeed, he dedicates major efforts to undermining the foundations of both.²²

III

A more accurate assessment of Machiavelli's assault on both the Christian and classical value systems centers on his concept of *virtù*, which translates, albeit poorly, as “virtue.” An examination of what exactly he meant by this term takes us into the heart of his approach to morality and politics.

A fundamental concept of Western culture, virtue is a complex notion comprising layers of meaning that have accumulated and intermingled over many centuries. According to classical Roman thought, virtue is a synthesis of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Over time, other traits considered particularly desirable in a leader also came to be associated with the concept, including magnanimity, generosity, and honesty. In his *De Officiis*, which enjoyed canonical status during Machiavelli's time,

Cicero deemed honesty the only means of achieving the higher objectives of honor and glory.²³ The central argument of *De Officiis* is that there is no clash between moral rectitude and self-interest, for one who follows the principles of virtue will end up being successful as well.²⁴

Christianity inherited from the Romans the doctrine of four cardinal virtues, but their assimilation into Christianity was neither easy nor without significant modification. The Christian notion of virtue was aimed at the attainment of happiness in the next world, not glory in this one. Even the ruler, despite his responsibility in this world, was not exempt. This is most evident in the “mirrors of princes” (*specula principis*), advice books for rulers commonplace in Machiavelli’s day. They called, as a matter of course, upon rulers to eschew earthly power, riches, and honor, and instead to adopt those attributes best suited to functioning as intermediary between God and man.²⁵ Goodness had now won its independence from expediency; there was no longer a need to value it in worldly currency.

Renaissance humanists, however, reclaimed some of *virtù*’s original, Roman meanings. Once again, we see evidence of this evolution most clearly in the “mirrors of princes” genre, whose emphasis on virtue became even stronger over time, and shifted back to the world of man: Unlike the rulers of the Middle Ages, who cultivated virtue as a means of ensuring their place in heaven, Renaissance rulers were counseled to guarantee themselves glory on earth as well. The prince was accordingly required to display “secular” virtues. A dimension of realism was thus added to the recommendations of the *specula principis* in the form of an acknowledgment that rulers could not always refrain from taking measures generally considered to be manifestations of vice.²⁶ Nonetheless, such measures were considered a deviation from the norm, and should thus be confined to exceptional circumstances. Despite all the intellectual changes that occurred during the Renaissance, then, the image of the ruler cast by *virtù* remained essentially idealistic; he was still chained to conventional morality, as binding on him as on his subjects.²⁷ The humanists’ admiration for the texts they inherited from ancient Rome did not make them pagans; they remained good Christians.²⁸

Machiavelli, however, rejected Christian humanism outright, and *The Prince*—which ironically purports to belong to the genre of “mirrors of princes”—is largely dedicated to a swinging attack on that tradition. Here it would be useful to address some of the more prominent aspects of Machiavelli’s rhetorical strategy in his most famous work.

In the notorious chapters 15-18, Machiavelli discusses the virtues a prince ought to have, and systematically refutes the main tenets held by authors of the *specula principis*.²⁹ They had high regard for liberality, for example, as a necessary virtue for a ruler; Machiavelli, however, considered it a vice: The ruler, once he has spent all his money, will be forced to increase the burden of taxation on the people, which will in turn engender hatred and lead to his downfall. They claimed, furthermore, that the virtue of mercy was preferable to heavy-handed policy, severity, and cruelty; Machiavelli insists that “each prince should desire to be held merciful and not cruel; nonetheless he should take care not to use this mercy badly.”³⁰

He takes as his example Duke Cesare Borgia, who was a skillful user of cruelty; and his brutal deeds achieved results that are difficult to write off as immoral. To demonstrate this, Machiavelli draws a comparison between Borgia’s policies and those of the Florentines: “Borgia was held to be cruel; nonetheless his cruelty restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and to faith.”³¹ Anxious not to appear inhumane, the Florentines did nothing to check the violence between opposing factions in Pistoia, a city then under their rule. A quick body count, says Machiavelli, reveals that Borgia was in fact more “merciful” than the Florentines: Borgia’s cruelty preserved the social order, whereas the Florentines’ mercy brought about its collapse.

Machiavelli’s point is not that cruelty is invariably a good thing, but that it is impossible to determine *a priori* whether it is good or evil. Of course, mindless cruelty is bad; but wickedness can be “honorable.”³² Machiavelli accepts the ordinary senses of moral terms and employs conventional value judgments. He does not sanitize violence and deceit: Cruel acts are for him cruel acts whatever the circumstances or benefits.³³ But this is precisely what

enables him to question their meaning as they enter the political field of vision. He reveals the interdependence of good and evil. “Good” and “evil” exist, Machiavelli in effect says, but they are not absolute categories, and in fact they are frequently bound up together.³⁴

This transvaluation of values culminates in chapter 18 of *The Prince*, entitled, “In What Mode Faith Should Be Kept by Princes.” The writers of “mirrors of princes” believed that craftiness is a vice unbecoming a ruler.³⁵ Machiavelli concedes that it is a negative trait, but is quick to add that “nonetheless one sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men’s brains with their astuteness; and in the end they have overcome those who have founded themselves on loyalty.”³⁶ But not content with offering an empirical observation, Machiavelli also advises rulers to act contrary to conventional morality. This chapter thus provides the clearest example of how Machiavelli reappraises the relationship between politics and ethics.

The attack on the traditional understanding of morality and politics occurs simultaneously on two fronts: Against the Christian humanist writers of the *specula principis*; and against Cicero, the pagan hero of the humanists. Though Machiavelli does not mention Cicero by name in this chapter, it is manifestly clear that he and his heirs are the target of his polemic. Quoting almost verbatim from *De Officiis*, Machiavelli notes that “there are two ways of fighting, one with laws and the other with force. The first is the way of men, the second is the style of beasts.” Cicero went on to explain that there are also two ways to do evil: By force, the way of the lion; or by fraud, the way of the fox. Neither of them is becoming of men, but fraud is by far the more despicable. Machiavelli appropriates these same terms in order to say something altogether different. Unlike Cicero, who justified the use of force only in exceptional circumstances—when discussion and negotiation become futile, for instance—Machiavelli claims that the methods becoming of men are often ineffective, and therefore one must also be familiar with, and prepared to use, the methods of the beasts. “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.”³⁷ The combination of fraud and force is a winning formula; if, however, one must choose between the two, the fraud of the fox is preferable to the brute force of the lion. By granting legitimacy to the methods of the beasts, Machiavelli stood Cicero’s Stoic morality on its head, and with it some of Christianity’s most cherished principles.³⁸

In his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, Machiavelli discusses Cicero’s political actions during the Roman civil war, the fateful results of which were the very opposite of what he had intended to achieve. Instead of weakening Mark Antony, Cicero’s actions served only to strengthen him; instead of leading the senate to victory, they brought about its defeat.³⁹ In other words, Cicero epitomizes for Machiavelli the difference between intentions and results, theory and practice, and the dangerous ease with which men are tempted into ignoring the distinction. While Cicero preached honesty, human fraternity, peaceful settlement of disputes, his Rome practiced force and deceit to create an empire.

Machiavelli does not condemn the Romans for going the way of force and fraud. On the contrary, he declares this choice a reason for their success. Had Rome acted according to Cicero’s precepts, he suggests, it would not have conquered the known world. Rather, Rome owes its glory to the fact that its policies betrayed its own moral principles.⁴⁰ To fulfill its aspirations it deceived whenever it could, and when it could not, it resorted to force. Unlike the intellectuals of the Roman republic, Machiavelli does not see the source of its power in its high ideals, but in its actions in contravention of those ideals. Nor does Machiavelli take issue with Rome’s hypocrisy; on the contrary, he recommends that all states adopt precisely the same combination of force and fraud, lion and fox: First, do what needs to be done to conquer, and only then take care that your actions enjoy the veneer of legitimacy. Such is the conclusion we must draw from the speech delivered by the anonymous leader of the popular revolt in Florence: We must behave

like Romans; some Cicero will always cover our tracks. Machiavelli's view of the relationship between politics and morality is based on this distinction between "good" theory and "evil" practice. He provides a dramatic statement of this distinction in chapter 15 of *The Prince*:

Since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to do directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives 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.⁴¹

This quotation could well serve as the credo of political realism. It represents a complete rejection of the belief in an idealized good, either that of classical political philosophy or that of the Christian faith, both of which provided man with a lofty ideal toward which to aspire. From the point of view of classical philosophy, the fulfillment of human potential is possible only by means of an active participation in political life; from the Christian perspective, man may gain redemption only by following in the way of Jesus, who both idealized and embodied the qualities of meekness, humility, and contempt for worldly things. Machiavelli, however, starts with the actual, not the ideal. So great is the difference between the two, in his opinion, that contemplating the ideal is not only futile but downright suicidal. Hence "a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under a necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion. And so he need... not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity."⁴²

For Machiavelli, the problem of the relationship between politics and morality is first and foremost a political one. It exists because men frequently, if not principally, judge politics from an ethical point of view. Machiavelli was fully aware of people's moral sensitivities and of the

importance they have for politics in general and the regime in particular. Just a few lines after he absolves the ruler of the need to honor agreements and keep promises, Machiavelli stresses that he nevertheless must appear “merciful, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so.”⁴³ If he fails to do this, and is then tainted by an association with the opposite traits, his days as a ruler are numbered.

Whether it is possible for a ruler to succeed in being so regarded without actually being so is a question that may be left open for now.⁴⁴ For our discussion, it is important only that Machiavelli acknowledges the fact that people expect their leaders to act in accordance with an accepted moral code. To Machiavelli it is of no consequence that these expectations are largely self-righteous and impractical.⁴⁵ What matters is the existence of such public moral expectations, which Machiavelli relates to as he would to any objective factor that a ruler must take into consideration if he hopes to survive. He does not suggest, as have others, that men are motivated solely by rational calculations of advantage and self-interest; rather, he insists that feelings, beliefs, perceptions, and even misconceptions are no less powerful than intellectual considerations. Therefore, he attaches considerable importance to the fact that people attach great importance to morality in politics.⁴⁶

Machiavelli accepts that politics cannot solve the problem that this human proclivity creates, but he nonetheless demands that politics face up to it. In his discussions of *virtù* he affirms that rulers do not, and cannot, act in accordance with conventional morality. The end of a ruler who does so will be as bad as his intentions were good. “A certain contemporary ruler,”⁴⁷ Machiavelli writes at the end of chapter 18 of *The Prince*, “never preaches anything but peace and faith, and is very hostile to both. If he had observed both, he would have had either his reputation or his state taken from him many times.”⁴⁸

The arguments made in the dizzying central chapters of *The Prince* reveal two central pillars of Machiavelli’s political thought. First, if we view

his advice to “not depart from good, when possible” in the context of the chapter in which it appears, it is impossible to ignore the fact that it is given because it is politically expedient, and not because it is morally correct. Acting in conformity with this counsel will make the ruler appear moral and help him survive. Machiavelli examines the relationship between politics and morality from the point of view of one whose objectives are political; he instrumentalizes morality. But this does not mean that Machiavelli divorces politics from morality: Had he not believed in an intimate connection between the two, it would be impossible to attribute to him the claim that political interest is the highest consideration as well as the measure of morality.

Moreover, the maxims given in chapters 15-18 are based entirely on the assumption that, since a distinction between politics and ethics is unacceptable to the public, a ruler must concern himself with conventional moral principles. If the preservation of power were an end that justified any means—and indeed, it is the highest end toward which the advice in these chapters is directed—there would be no need either to question conventional morality or to speak of “evil” when describing the actions of rulers. In this sense, Machiavelli did not entirely repudiate the moral legacy of Christianity. For had he disregarded it entirely, he would have undermined the realism that is so fundamental to his political thought. On the other hand, his admiration for ancient Rome did not prevent him from rejecting classical political philosophy, nor did it lead him to seek the solution to the problem of the relationship between politics and morality in an alleged pagan ethic which demands the sacrifice of the individual for the good of the commonwealth.

Thus it is impossible to ignore morality, but it is equally impossible to ignore the threat it poses to politics and the political order. This dynamic makes for a subtle, complicated game that is played over the chasm separating rulers from the ruled. The only way to bridge the gap between expectations and the imperative not to fulfill them is by the intelligent use

of hypocrisy, deception, and intimidation. A ruler must be sometimes a lion and always a fox, a “great pretender and dissembler.”⁴⁹ This advice is not intended only, or even mainly, to reinforce one or another ruler’s grip on power; for any regime faces the same quandary. Thus while Machiavelli’s instructions may be of use to one or another particular ruler, good or evil, they are above all intended to serve the good of the state as such, and of political order in general.⁵⁰

IV

Ultimately, Machiavelli’s approach to the relationship between politics and morality puts us face to face with the question of why, exactly, governments must resort to immorality in order to survive—especially if their subjects expect them to be moral. Machiavelli provides the answer in the same chapters of *The Prince* in which he advises the ruler to violate moral principles while pretending to personify them. Immediately after stating that the ruler must emulate the fox and the lion, Machiavelli contends that all this would not be necessary or even advisable “if all men were good.”⁵¹ But this is not the case. Machiavelli attributes to subjects the same traits he recommends to their ruler: They, too, are “pretenders and dissemblers” (but not “great”). And because they “do not observe faith to you, you also do not have to observe it with them.”⁵² In Machiavelli’s view, a ruler is not being immoral when he preempts his would-be betrayer by betraying him first. Man’s nature makes him prone to betraying his fellow; his only true loyalty is to himself. The problem of betrayal is therefore a general one, not confined merely to the relationship between ruler and ruled. Machiavelli’s position is therefore infinitely pessimistic: “For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are

not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good....”⁵³

Politics derives from the nature of man as he is, not as he ought to be. The real problem, then, is not with politics, but with its objects.⁵⁴ There are, unquestionably, good men, but not enough to refute Machiavelli’s political calculus. “For one can say this generally of men: That they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood, property, lives, and children... when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt. And that prince who has founded himself entirely on their words, stripped of other preparation, is ruined.”⁵⁵ Machiavelli’s political writings, literary works, and correspondence leave no doubt as to the depth and centrality of his anthropological pessimism.⁵⁶

It should be added here that when Machiavelli uses the word “evil” and equivalent expressions to describe human nature, he does not have in mind some pathological need to hurt others. The wickedness about which he speaks consists, rather, of selfishness, ambition, envy, fear, and avarice. But men tire not only of evil; good, too, quickly becomes dull and irritating. Men worry when things are bad and are bored when they are good, and both these sentiments lead to the same result: When men are not compelled to fight, they fight out of ambition—a hunger that can never be satiated. “Nature has so constituted men that, though all things are objects of desire, not all things are attainable.”⁵⁷ Hence men are always malcontent, subject to the tension between limited resources and unbounded ambition.

This view of human nature informs Machiavelli’s entire political teaching. Since men are by their nature both ambitious and selfish, it is impossible for them to build a society based on goodwill and genuine mutual recognition. Machiavelli’s views differ markedly in this regard from those of the ancient philosophers. According to Aristotle, for example, man is a social animal who fulfills himself through active involvement in the political commonwealth to which he belongs. To Machiavelli, however,

man is essentially a beast, and the rational faculty he possesses is geared to attaining his own ends. Accordingly, virtue is a means and not an end. Man's needs, desires, appetites, and fears are his main incentives to action, and not the conditions of the society in which he lives.⁵⁸

Human solidarity and world peace are on this account no more than utopian concepts that endanger those naïve enough to believe in them. Successful politics may at best create domestic harmony in a given society,⁵⁹ although such harmony almost always comes at the expense of another society. Though it is impossible to eliminate the evil in a society, this evil can at least be channeled toward other societies. "Ambition uses against foreign peoples that violence which neither the law nor the king permits her to use at home (wherefore home-born trouble almost always ceases)."⁶⁰ The Roman republic, for instance, owed its greatness in part to the ability to channel outward the energies that otherwise would have created internal friction.⁶¹ It is the nature of the world, concludes Machiavelli, that men cannot ensure their security except by force.⁶²

In such a world, moreover, no human society is truly secure, for there are always internal and external enemies that lie in wait. These dangers are not happenstance, but spring from the nature of man. Indeed, men themselves are the main reason for the instability of their world, and for the danger that constantly threatens their social order. Every society, every state, is ultimately doomed to decline. Nor are failure and weakness the only causes of a society's demise. Prosperity, too, can lead to ruin, for it produces the illusion of security, which is always false. Such societies unfailingly lapse into the complacency and arrogance that lead in turn to a decline in personal discipline, a reduced willingness to obey laws, the abandonment of the general good, and, finally, a bitter end.⁶³

The primary cause of this atrophy cannot be eliminated, since human nature cannot be changed. It is nonetheless possible to forestall the inevitable and extend the life of a society. The way to do this—to revive a society that has fallen into the depths of political impotence—is to bring it back to

its first principles: To the fear and the need for security that once prevailed among its citizens. Thus Machiavelli estimates that about once in ten years, harsh measures must be taken against those who pose a threat to the state, thereby sowing fear in the hearts of men and curbing their desire to give vent to their passions.

The struggle for survival is pitiless, and even the most impressive success cannot endure forever.⁶⁴ But the alternative is worse. Consequently, politics must address the ingrained human urges that threaten to demolish the social order from without and to subvert it from within. Thus, if for Aristotle, the objective of the state was to enable men to realize their human potential, for Machiavelli it is to prevent them from doing so.

V

The state, then, is a means to an end, not an ultimate value. For if it were a supreme end in itself, Machiavelli would not, as we have shown, have described as “evil” the means required to preserve it.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, if a prince “wins and maintains his state, the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone. For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar; the few have a place there when the many have somewhere to lean on.”⁶⁶ That is to say, the masses that expect a ruler to behave morally are the very same masses that will applaud immoral behavior if it results in political success. Thus we see that moral principles do not reign supreme. A hierarchy of values, with politics at the top, is a necessary consequence of the fact that morality presupposes politics.

Machiavelli maintained that the distinction between good and evil originated with the coming together of men in a political association.⁶⁷

Politics is the necessary foundation of morality.⁶⁸ If there is a tragic dimension to the relationship between the two, it is to be found precisely here: On the one hand, politics without moral sanction is liable to deteriorate into a destructive tool for the advancement of private interests that have nothing to do with the general good. Politics of this sort will create precisely the kind of situation that it was meant to avoid. On the other hand, giving the demands of ethics pride of place endangers the political order that safeguards morality.⁶⁹

The real Machiavellian distinction, then, is not between politics and morality, but rather between a moral politics—that is, a politics that is subservient to moral codes and is therefore itself a threat to the very conditions which allow morality to exist—and political morality, which is to say, a morality that makes room for Machiavellian *virtù*. Machiavelli is not an enemy of morality as such. More than once he expresses his wish that men behave according to conventional moral norms; that is, that they be honest and decent.⁷⁰ Yet he is undoubtedly an enemy of those ethical principles that are likely to thwart fundamental political objectives, and in so doing to destroy the essential basis for moral, civilized behavior. It is a deeply human paradox that politics has often to behave as if the morality that depends on it is neither a relevant consideration nor a significant goal.

For this reason, political morality of the type envisaged by Machiavelli is not a stable system. There are no universally applicable rules of conduct. And if one has to judge anew in every situation whether it is necessary to violate the conventional moral laws, then moral behavior is, in effect, a matter of expedience. Moreover, the nature of politics makes these situations fluid, and the dilemmas they present even more complicated: The instability and uncertainty that are characteristic of politics renders behavior that does not conform to a recognized moral code nothing unusual; it is frequently not easy to draw a clear distinction between “ordinary” political situations—in which people behave in an acceptable and predictable fashion—and

“extraordinary” political situations that necessitate unusual measures. To Machiavelli, the life of a political community is indeed in a permanent state of crisis.⁷¹ The relevant distinction is not between security and danger, but between a present danger and a latent one. There will therefore always be a need to resort to “immoral” means in order to survive. It thus follows that the threat to ethics posed by politics is a permanent feature of human life. It is a rare thing when a society achieves extended periods of security and stability; then it may transpire that morality will take over. Yet, as Machiavelli points out, history shows that such situations are not just exceptional, but rife with dangers of their own.⁷²

Machiavelli’s conclusion is clear enough, and is presented in moral terms: In a dangerous world filled with people keen to exploit the weakness of others, it is impossible to base morality on morality. In such a world, conscience invites abuse just as weakness invites aggression.⁷³ Without the willingness to use what conventional morality would consider wrongful means, it is impossible to guarantee its survival. “I would like to find one who will teach them the way to go to the devil,” Machiavelli wrote on his mission to recruit a preacher for the Florentines, “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.”⁷⁴

Evil can never be eliminated, so one must know it in order to deal with it properly. Machiavelli does not—indeed cannot—draw a clear line between the moral and the immoral.⁷⁵ He is well aware of the peril inherent in the fact that in the life of a state it is impossible to achieve good results without recourse to “evil” means. As he explained in the *Discourses*, a state whose political spirit has wilted, whose institutions have ossified, can be saved only by extraordinary and cruel means. It is difficult, however, to find a good man willing to use such means. Rather, it takes an evil man to succeed in that enterprise, but then it is difficult to believe that such a man, after he has imposed order, will suddenly begin working toward the common good.⁷⁶

If Machiavelli's is a morality without a stable foundation, that is because it is grounded in politics itself, which is in constant flux.⁷⁷ It is a morality without definite rules, without a transcendent moral underpinning; it has neither an Archimedean point nor an unbending framework. Our only guide is politics, and the imitation of the lion and the fox.

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Notes

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Brandel and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton: Princeton, 1988), III 13, p. 123.
2. For a comprehensive interpretation of this passage see Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), vol. ii, pp. 312-330. [Italian]
3. Benedetto Croce, *Politics and Morals*, trans. Salvatore J. Castiglione (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), pp. 59-60. See also Norberto Bobbio, "Ethics and Politics," in *Praise of Meekness: Essays on Ethics and Politics*, trans. Teresa Chataway (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 39-71.
4. Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Hogarth, 1979), p. 45.
5. In this context it is worth noting that Leo Strauss defended the popular conception. See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), p. 10.
6. Brian Richardson, "'The Prince' and Its Early Italian Readers," in *Niccolò Machiavelli's 'The Prince': New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (Manchester: Manchester, 1995), p. 35.
7. William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, Part 3, Act III, Scene 2.

8. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1967), p. 74. See also Daniel A. Doneson's review of *The Dialogue in Hell* later in this issue.

9. Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton, 1983), pp. ix-x, 219-256.

10. See Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Church and Religion in Machiavelli* (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998), especially pp. 183-184, 201-252. [Italian] See also Irving Kristol, "Machiavelli and the Profanation of Politics," in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 151-164.

11. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses* II 2.

12. Berlin, "Originality of Machiavelli," pp. 25-79.

13. Berlin, "Originality of Machiavelli," pp. 52-53.

14. See Vittorio Hösle, *Morals and Politics: Foundations of the Political Ethic for the Twenty-First Century* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997), p. 41. [German] See also Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), pp. 17-54.

15. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Prometheus, 1998), p. 129.

16. Berlin, "Originality of Machiavelli," p. 45.

17. A similar position is taken by Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton, 1965), p. 197.

18. For criticism of Berlin, see Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, pp. 8, 250-254. For another angle, see Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. i, pp. 464-465, 473-477.

19. According to Hulliung, Machiavelli's hope was that the Christian world-view would be crushed and replaced by another. Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, p. 245.

20. Compare with Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. i, pp. 475-476. See also George H.R. Parkinson, "Ethics and Politics in Machiavelli," *Philosophical Quarterly* 5:18 (1955), pp. 37-44.

21. On Machiavelli's anti-Aristotelian approach, see below. Compare with Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, pp. 262-263; Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), passim; M. Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," *Review of Politics* 59 (1997), p. 798.

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22. For precisely this reason it is also difficult to agree with Berlin, "Originality of Machiavelli," p. 45, that Machiavelli was one of the Renaissance humanists, looking for a "middle way" and trying to integrate Christianity with classical culture. On this, see Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*.
23. Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 36.
24. See, for example, Cicero, *De Officiis*, III.iii. 19-22, III.xviii. 75-xxii. 87; Cicero, *On Duties*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1997).
25. Felix Gilbert, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince and the 'Prince' of Machiavelli," *Journal of Modern History* 11 (1939), pp. 449-483. Reprinted in Felix Gilbert, *History: Choice and Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1977), p. 97.
26. Allan H. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's 'Prince' and Its Forerunners: 'The Prince' as a Typical Book de Regimine Principum* (Durham, N.C.: Duke, 1938), pp. 126-127.
27. Gilbert, "Humanist Concept of the Prince," pp. 99-103; Skinner, *Machiavelli*, pp. 42-43.
28. Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), for example, one of the most illustrious of the Italian humanists, stressed that the objective of Christian virtue was not itself or tangible reward; it was a step towards the next world: J. Kraye, "Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1988), pp. 303-386.
29. Giorgio Inglese, "The Prince (De principatibus)," in *Italian Literature from Its Origins to 1500*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), vol. i, p. 927. [Italian]
30. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), p. 65.
31. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 65.
32. See Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 27.
33. See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 21, for a condemnation of King Ferdinand of Aragon's "pious cruelty" coupled with praise for his political effectiveness.
34. See Machiavelli, *Discourses* III 37.
35. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's 'Prince'*, p. 119.
36. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 69.
37. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 69.
38. Cicero, *De Officiis*, I.xi. 34, I.xiii. 41; Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, pp. 212-214; Inglese, "Il Principe," p. 928; Gennaro Sasso, "Centaur, Lions, and

Foxes: On Some Sources of the Eighteenth Chapter of "The Prince," in *Machiavelli, the Ancients and Other Essays* (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1987-1997), vol. iv, pp. 153-188 [Italian]; E. Raimondi, "The Politician and the Centaur," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, eds. Albert R. Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca: Cornell, 1993), pp. 145-60. See also Machiavelli, *Discourses* II 13.

39. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 52.

40. Compare with what Leo Strauss said concerning the United States: "Machiavelli would argue that America owes her greatness not only to her habitual adherence to the principles of freedom and justice, but also to her occasional deviation from them. He would not hesitate to suggest a mischievous interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase, and of the fate of the Red Indians. He would conclude that facts of this kind are an additional proof for his contention that there cannot be a great and glorious society without the equivalent of the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus." Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 14. See also Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, pp. 181-182.

41. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 61.

42. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 70.

43. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 70.

44. In chapter 18, Machiavelli assumes that a balance can be struck between the need to break the moral code and the need to appear moral. Michel de Montaigne was critical of Machiavelli on this score, arguing that the profit from deceit is short-lived and that it does not pay in the long term. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), p. 492. Machiavelli himself was aware of the problem, as seen in Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, April 16, 1514: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, ed. C. Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1997-1999), vol. ii, p. 318. [Italian]

45. In his comedies, which are about private life, people do not behave differently in any essential way from how they do in public. Physical force is not used within the family, but deceit is a central element of the plot. See M. Fleischer, "Trust and Deceit in Machiavelli's Comedies," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27:3 (1966), pp. 365-380.

46. The title of chapter 15 of *The Prince* (which opens with a resounding statement of political realism) is testimony of this: "Of Those Things for Which Men and Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed."

47. The reference is to Ferdinand II, king of Aragon.

48. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 71.

49. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 70.

50. Compare with Baruch Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p. 533: "And even if piety and religion are taken into account, we shall still see that no one who holds the reins of government can, without doing wrong, abide by his promises to the harm of his country. For he cannot keep whatever promise he sees likely to be detrimental to his country without violating his pledge to his subjects, a pledge by which he is most firmly bound, and whose fulfillment usually involves the most solemn promises."

51. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 69.

52. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 69.

53. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 61.

54. See Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. i, pp. 448, 460.

55. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 66.

56. For a discussion of Machiavelli's anthropological pessimism, see Stelio Zeppi, "The Anthropological Pessimism in Machiavelli Before the 'Discourses,'" *Political Philosophy* 6 (1992), pp. 193-242. [Italian] Another interpretation, according to which Machiavelli did not consider the source of evil to be in human nature, can be found in Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, vol. i, pp. 455-468. See also Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Introduction to Machiavelli* (Rome: Laterza, 1999), p. 68. [Italian]

57. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 37. Compare with *Discourses* III 21. See also Machiavelli in a letter to Giovan Batista Soderini, September 13-21, 1506.

58. Paul A. Rahe, "Situating Machiavelli," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), pp. 270-309; Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," pp. 808-810; Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, pp. 28-54, 261-267; Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton, 1989), pp. 269-270, 296. See also Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), pp. 226-227.

59. Niccolò Machiavelli, "Speech to a Magistrate," in Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. i, pp. 713-715 [Italian]. Compare with J.A. Parel, "Machiavelli's Notions of Justice: Text and Analysis," *Political Theory* 18:4 (1990), pp. 528-544. See also Machiavelli *Discourses* II Pr.

60. Machiavelli, *On Ambition*, lines 97-99; *Discourses* II 19. See also *Discourses* II Pr., III 16. Compare Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," p. 827.

61. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 2, 4, 6.

62. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 1; "Words to say to her over the provision of the money, after some poetry and apologies," *Opere*, vol. i, p. 13: "Without strength, the cities do not keep alive, but come to their end." [Italian].

63. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, v 1. See also VII 28; *The Ass* V 63; *Discourses* I 6, 18, III 16. Compare Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," pp. 821-822. Compare Churchill: "As in the Roman state, when there are no more worlds to conquer and no rivals to destroy, nations exchange the desire for power for the love of art, and so by a gradual, yet continual, enervation and decline turn from the vigorous beauties of the nude to the more subtle allurements of the draped, and then sink to actual eroticism and ultimate decay." Quoted by Paul A. Rahe, "The River War: Nature's Provision, Man's Desire to Prevail, and the Prospects for Peace," in *Churchill as Peacemaker*, ed. James W. Muller (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), p. 91.

64. Machiavelli, *Discourses* III 1.

65. A distinction must be made between preserving the state and the regime on the one hand, and the fatherland on the other, the latter being, for Machiavelli, the supreme value. See Machiavelli, *Discourses* III 41.

66. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 71.

67. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 2.

68. Compare Herfried Münkler, *Machiavelli: The Rise of Modern Political Thought Since the Crisis of the Florentine Republic* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsgesellschaft-Fischer, 1982), p. 266. [German]

69. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 226.

70. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 62: "I know that everyone will confess that it would be a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince all of the above-mentioned qualities that are held good"; pp. 68-69: "How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his faith, and to live with honesty and not by astuteness, everyone understands".

71. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 91: "Nor should any state ever believe that it can always adopt safe courses; on the contrary, it should think it has to take them all as doubtful. For in the order of things it is found that one never seeks to avoid one inconvenience without running into another."

72. Rahe, "Situating Machiavelli," p. 305; Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," pp. 808-810; Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, pp. 261-267, 542-548; de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, pp. 269-271, 296. See also Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, pp. 226-227.

73. Machiavelli, *Discourses* II 14. See also Machiavelli's warning to the government of Florence in "Words to Be Spoken on the Law for Appropriating Money,

After Giving a Little Introduction and Excuse,” in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ed. Allan Gilbert (Durham, N.C.: Duke, 1989), vol. iii, p. 1442: “Among private men laws, writings and agreements make them keep their word; but among princes nothing but arms makes them keep it.”

74. Machiavelli to Francesco Guicciardini, May 17, 1521 in *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, trans. and eds. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (De Kalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University, 1996), p. 336.

75. Machiavelli, *Discourses* III 37; *The Ass* V, lines 103-105.

76. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 18.

77. Machiavelli, *Discourses* I 6; II Pr.