

MACHIAVELLI AND THE ANCIENTS: THE GOOD,
THE REPUBLIC, AND THE GREAT MAN

A WORKING PAPER

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Machiavelli has been consistently reckoned to be, by both his critics and his admirers, a prodigious scoundrel. Leo Strauss minces no words, introducing him as a “teacher of evil.”¹ By the same token, Thomas Pangle writes that “few readers have failed to be impressed with the irreverent boldness of Machiavelli,” and Harvey Mansfield reminds that the term “Machiavellian” refers “to a perfected, scheming evil.”² It is just as widely recognized that he is a very *clever* scoundrel, so much so that even the most ruthless aspects of his thought demand an uncomfortable amount of attention from his readers. Herein lies the real danger of Machiavelli, not simply in the “it’s good to be bad” political policies he presents, but in the strength and subtlety of his persuasive powers. Further, these persuasive tactics are employed in selling his audience tantalizing results, real benefits for the whole of the political community – this is not simply a manual for mercenaries. The combined power of this offer of success and the craftiness with which the price is concealed is so great that his audience is often corrupted unawares. Part of this corruption is achieved through quietly redefining traditional concepts. Machiavelli’s readers are lured away from their principles without being forced to consciously reject them. As Pangle phrases it, “Machiavelli clothed his teaching in an extraordinarily sinuous moral rhetoric.” It was under this cloak that he “administered poison to traditionally respectable opinions, one by one as it were,” enabling him to disguise “his overall strategy by claiming, in every case, to be acting for the sake of one of the traditional opinions he was not at the moment exterminating.”³

This paper will attempt a little grave-digging, working to recover at least a few of the traditional corpses that Machiavelli deftly put to rest with his rhetorical talent. If we accept that

¹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9.

² Harvey Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 8.

³ Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1988), 62.

Machiavelli is “the first thinker to break with both the Socratic and Biblical traditions in a thoroughly self-conscious way,” what do we give up when we cede our understanding to his principles?⁴ Though Machiavelli has never been lacking in shock value, I agree with Pangle that “few [readers] have recognized the full depth of [his] break with the past.”⁵ To better understand this break, this paper will explore Machiavelli’s theories of virtue and corruption, the republic, and the nature of the great man; each of these points will be tested against prior classical assumptions, mostly as represented by Cicero and Aristotle. The significant resulting differences, I believe, will reveal much about exactly what Machiavelli swept under the rug in his haste to open the door to modernity.

Machiavelli’s Return to the Past: Pilgrimage or Pillage?

In his preface to the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli mourns over the state of political knowledge among his countrymen. “I can do no other than marvel and grieve,” he writes, that ancient virtue is “shunned by everyone in every least thing” until no sign of it remains in Italy.⁶ While in other fields of human study, such as law and medicine, mankind reaps all the benefits of past precedent and historical experience, Machiavelli bemoans the discontinuity that has occurred in the field of political knowledge. In his time, the great regimes and leaders of antiquity have become a subject of novel fascination, while no attempt has been made to unearth their principles or adopt their patterns of success. Machiavelli claims that this loss is due to a widespread mental error, propagated by the Christian Church, which induces men to act “as if

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*. trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), Preface 2.

heaven, sun, elements, men had varied in motion, order and power from what they were in antiquity.”⁷

The very first sentence of Machiavelli’s preface assumes the exact opposite of the workings of the world, and humanity in particular: he immediately calls attention to “the envious nature of men,” which has “always” been so resistant to foreign modes and discoveries such as those about to be revealed.⁸ He asserts the existence of a human nature as immutable as the physical laws governing the universe, thereby establishing the legitimacy of the lessons which he is about to draw from Roman history.⁹ In both his plea for a return to the histories and his assertion that humanity has a fixed nature which allows men to profit from the past, Machiavelli exactly parallels the object of his work, Titus Livy. Livy starts his own histories, written as the imperial might of Rome was “beginning to work its own ruin,” by lamenting the “dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them.” His solution to this social malady is a foreshadow of Machiavelli’s: for both, “the study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind.”¹⁰

After trumpeting his emphatic praise of ancient states and the power of history in the preface, first impressions might lead one to believe that Machiavelli is zealously advocating a return to the classical teachers and political virtues of the past. Throughout the *Discourses*, he

⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Preface 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Preface 1.

⁹ Eventually, the modern political thought which Machiavelli is here laying the foundation for would turn against this central teaching. Machiavelli sought to make human nature the highest fixed truth of political science; his more ambitious heirs would uphold this, but add the caveat that political science had the power to *alter* human nature, believing that they could shape this highest political truth as they saw fit. In Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, a malleable human nature is posited, one that can be acclimated to see its chains as wreaths of flowers and is capable of being altered so that men learn to “love their slavery.” For Machiavelli and Hobbes, political science became effective when it understood human nature, but for Rousseau the business of political science was to *change* that nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger and Judith Masters, (New York: St. Martin’s, 1964), 36 & 178.

¹⁰ Livy, *The Early History of Rome, Books I-V*. trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London: Penguin Group, 2002), 30.

frequently dons the garb of an innocent guide, pointing to the seemingly undisputable lessons of history that benignly “bring common benefit to everyone.”¹¹ Despite this humble language, Machiavelli is actually undertaking the creation of a *new* synthesis of political wisdom, hinted at in his claim that his thought accounts for both “knowledge of modern and ancient things.”¹² Had Livy’s histories not required the modern insights and interpretative powers of Machiavelli to tap their greatest “utility,” Machiavelli could have simply written a new introductory letter for them and left it at that.¹³ Instead, he brilliantly co-opts the prestige of things old while simultaneously stealing the passion for that which is new in support of an argument which will radically depart from the antiquity which he claims to miss so dearly. In essence, he mixes a powerful new cocktail, but markets it as the same old spring water. Lest we become intoxicated unawares, we need to consciously evaluate this depth and duplicity on the part of Machiavelli. What doors does Machiavelli permanently seal shut that previously led to important destinations in classical thought?

First Things First: Machiavelli & the Ancients on the Good, Virtue, Prudence and Corruption

The first door to be welded shut by Machiavelli is the one which allows for a *summum bonum* higher than man himself. Immediately, this dislodges the keystone of Aristotle’s philosophy. Aristotle’s *Ethics* finds both its origin and its culmination in one question: faced with a myriad of competing lesser goods, what is the *highest* good? He concludes that it must be “that for which the sake of everything else is done.” This “supreme good” is “the most final”

¹¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Preface 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, Preface 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

end – something self-sufficient and entirely worthy for its own sake.¹⁴ This metaphysical principle becomes the foundation for the study of political life. In stark contrast, Machiavelli, who references Aristotle by name only once in the whole of the *Discourses*, though he does not explicitly deny a highest end (a task saved for Thomas Hobbes), he makes a strong case that politics ought to be conducted as if no such thing existed. Instead, for Machiavelli, morality develops as a consequence of society’s development; it was out of the construction of the polity that “arose the knowledge of things honest and good, differing from the pernicious and bad.”¹⁵ Politics is both the creator of the human good and its ultimate place of fulfillment.

Though Machiavelli still retains an almost pagan reverence for the glory of empire, the premises on which he builds his plan for the regaining of such stirring national greatness would later allow for the denigrating of the state itself into a “low but necessary” construct. In his attempt to regain Italy’s former grandeur, Machiavelli must overcome the Christian humility that he perceives to be afflicting Italy, encouraging men to “esteem less the honor of the world” and wishing them “to be more capable of suffering than of doing something strong.”¹⁶ Perhaps, along with the first-century Jews, Machiavelli was not looking for a Messiah who was a suffering servant, but for a conqueror ready to set up his kingdom in the here and now.¹⁷ Because Machiavelli believes that the people become politically passive in their desire “to go to paradise,” he rejects heavenly things out of a fear of “rendering the world weak and [giving] it in prey to criminal men.”¹⁸ His logic, in a sense, is that of the spiritual mercy killer. His intention,

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), I.vii.1.

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.2.3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II.2.2.

¹⁷ c.f. The book of Matthew, chapter 5 (the beatitudes, turn the other cheek, and love your enemies passages) for a peek at the potential elements of political weakness that Machiavelli saw in Christianity, or at least in the current interpretation of Christianity by Rome.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I.2.3.

even in the more openly authoritarian *Prince*, is not to teach men to get away with whatever they want, but to free and empower them to make choices that will benefit everyone in the long run, even if those choices fly in the face of traditional ethics.¹⁹ However, by isolating worldly things from heavenly things, Machiavelli makes the radical empiricism and materialism of Thomas Hobbes possible. “It was Machiavelli,” Strauss writes, “that greater Columbus, who had discovered the continent on which Hobbes could erect his structure.”²⁰ Machiavelli’s words set the stage for the legendary premise of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*: justice does not come from a fixed, objective good, but from *fear* when people realize that “those same injuries” which they commit against others “might be done to them.”²¹ This constitutes the basis for the Machiavellian “good,” which is essentially pragmatic. Thus, the metaphysical horizon is drastically lowered, but Machiavelli promises as a result a corresponding improvement in the immediate political scenery.

In *The Republic*, by contrast, Cicero holds the opposite to be true of the origins of the good: goodness is above the polis and present in nature, civic justice works to approximate that natural standard. He goes so far as to say that “justice is completely non-existent if it is not derived from nature.”²² This idea marks the most fundamental and influential break between Machiavelli and his classical predecessors. On the one hand, we have Machiavelli promising to make earth, well, heavenly, on the condition that belief in an *actual* heaven is rescinded. On the other, Aristotle and Cicero argue that to win earth at the cost of heaven is to render your own

¹⁹ This problem of “necessary evils” has been long wrestled with in Christian thought, and is perhaps best summarized in Thomas Aquinas’ “Treatise on Creation,” Q. 48 and Q.49. The critical difference is that Machiavelli is wiping the slate clean of the concept of “evil” altogether. For example, something like Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s decision to be complicit in an assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler is not a “lesser evil” in his formulation, but a positive good! The effect defines the goodness of the action for Machiavelli in a way that Christian thought utterly prohibits.

²⁰ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 177-178.

²¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.2.3.

²² Cicero, *The Laws and The Republic*, trans. Niall Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I.42-43.

bargain meaningless. Such a sacrifice would result in divorcing man from his ultimate end, taking away all possibility of transcendence or philosophy, and thus leaving him less than human.²³

In the same way, the Machiavellian use of “virtue” distorts and undermines the ancient understanding. For Aristotle, a virtuous man is one who possesses “a characteristic which makes him a good man, and which causes him to perform his own function well.”²⁴ Of course, when Machiavelli tweaked the meaning of the “good,” the rug was pulled out from beneath the classical sense of virtue as well. The implication of this for the ancients is made clear by Cicero, who writes that “every virtue is abolished if nature is not going to support justice.”²⁵ Instead, such a concession of a higher good must necessarily reduce Aristotelian virtue to Machiavellian virtue – the ability to stay “in accord” with fortune, to correctly alter one’s modes so as to always come out on top, no matter what hand one is dealt.²⁶ Fortune cannot be opposed, but it can be seconded; the virtuous man is the one who knows that he can “weave its warp but not break it.”²⁷ If Aristotelian virtue is always right because of its object, a highest good which is above man, Machiavellian virtue is always permissible because it is offered in the service of its object, a political sphere that exists for its own sake.

If virtue “ensures the rightness of the end we aim at, prudence ensures the rightness of the means we adopt to gain it.”²⁸ For Aristotle, this practical wisdom encompasses a faculty called

²³ In II.2.2 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli seems to infer that the religion of the “Gentiles,” or pagans, was purely a function of the state. He oversimplifies, and in doing so, pretends that a new interpretation of Christianity which recognizes that it “permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland,” or a politically useful Christianity, will return us to that blessed state where arms and religion walk hand in hand. The possibility that religion, for the Gentiles as well as for the Christians, could be a *transcendent* force is overlooked.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics*, II.vi.21.

²⁵ Cicero, *The Laws*, I.42-43.

²⁶ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*. trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), XXV.4.

²⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II.29.3.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Ethics*, VI.xii.6.

cleverness. In a strict sense, to be clever is to possess the capacity for “attaining the aim” that is proposed. However, Aristotle is quick to point out that the aim of cleverness could be anything; it is equally capable of helping a man succeed in noble or base things. Prudence, on the other hand, is always allied to virtue; it is concerned with discerning the right means for an already determined right end. How is prudence used by Machiavelli? When commending Romulus for his prudence at the outset of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praises the murders Romulus committed in the founding of the Rome. He writes that when great men commit such acts “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.”²⁹ The *effect* alone determines the rightness of the action.³⁰

Shedding further light on Machiavellian prudence, Mansfield comments that in the *Discourses* the oft-used term prudence “has to do with the defense of one’s life and property” – it is oriented toward survival and acquisition.³¹ Strauss, commenting on Machiavelli’s departure from (and dismissal of) Livy, writes that the falling out is preceded by a rewriting of history by Machiavelli in which it is revealed that “the distinction between clever wickedness and moral worth is not as ‘true’ in Machiavelli’s eyes as it is in Livy.”³² In light of its usage, it would perhaps be unwarranted to say that Machiavellian prudence is mere cleverness, but we must at least admit that it has set up shop in that neighborhood. The difference may be summarized in terms of the force behind prudent action: Aristotelian prudence pulls the prudent man up toward

²⁹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.9.2.

³⁰ Machiavelli does, however, recognize that fortune may turn against even the cleverest of men – and accordingly blames Francisco Sforza for acting foolishly though fortune rendered him successful, and praises Cesare Borgia, though his prudent actions were thwarted by chance (*The Prince*, VII).

³¹ Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 323.

³² Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 125. (The passage on which Strauss is making this distinction is in Book XXIII 2.1-2 of Livy’s histories and Book I.47 of the *Discourses*. It concerns a Capuan magistrate who Livy claims is “wicked but not altogether lost” and whom Machiavelli paints in far more heroic terms).

something higher than himself, while Machiavellian prudence (and that of his philosophical heirs) drives the prudent man from a fear of that which is below (loss of life, property, or status).

How does the above discussion effect virtue's opposite, corruption, the process which Machiavelli is keen to reverse in his own Italy? In both the classical and Machiavellian view, we find that corruption is a form of dysfunction. Given his political orientation of his virtue, corruption for Machiavelli would be a dysfunction in the pursuit of rational goals; it is the inability of a state or a statesman to match "the mode of one's proceeding with the times."³³ The classic case of personal corruption is found in the story of Manlius Capitolinus, referenced six times in the *Discourses*, in whose life Machiavelli shows us "how much virtue of spirit and body, how many good works done in favor of the fatherland, an ugly greed for rule later cancels out."³⁴ After delivering Rome from the Gauls and thus being lauded as Rome's great savior, only two years later envy "blinded" Manlius, who then attempted a grab for tyrannical power. Machiavelli reports that the corruption of Manlius occurred through the blindness which caused him to act "in discord with the times."³⁵ Strikingly, it is not in the condition of his soul or in any inherent evil in the deed itself that Machiavelli spies corruption, but in the inappropriateness of Manlius' actions to obtain their desired results. Contrast this with Cicero's understanding, in which the individual's rejection of good traditions results in the corrosion of the soul. In Cicero's assessment of the Roman republic's own process of corruption, he writes that such a fall was precipitated "not by some accident – no, it is because of *our own moral failings* that we are left with the name of a republic, having long since lost its substance." It was on "ancient customs" that "Rome stood firm" and it was due to the neglect of these customs that the Roman

³³ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III. 9.1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, III.8.1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III.8.1-2.

Republic fell.³⁶ For Cicero, corruption marked something more than habitual poor calculation in attaining a desired result, it revealed a moral straying from the proper ends of man.

The Republic: its End, Education, & Citizens

In sum, goodness, virtue, and virtue's opposite, corruption, are all of a purely political nature in Machiavelli's formulation. In consciously limiting his scope to the practical realm and rejecting higher considerations as a hindrance to success in everyday politics, a critical question arises. In doing so, does Machiavelli change the nature of politics itself? Though classical (and Christian) thinkers were also aware that prudential politics would always be a necessity when dealing with men, is the realm of politics altered in some way when we cut it off entirely from the consideration of higher things? What happens to the republic after Machiavelli severs it from the spheres?

The Ends of the Republic

In our search for a thoughtful answer, let us first consider the ends of the republic according to Machiavelli and Cicero. For Machiavelli, the republic's place as the ideal regime is self-evident. He writes that "it is an easy thing to know whence arises among peoples this affection for the free way of life, for it is seen through experience that cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom."³⁷ Dominion and riches! A republic's "goodness" is, as we would expect by now, relative to its political utility. Liberty's great boon is that it leads to the kind of stability that makes empire possible. Consequently, for Machiavelli, when it is feasible to achieve, a republic is the most advantageous regime type. It

³⁶ Cicero, *Republic*, V.2. (emphasis my own)

³⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II.2.1.

possesses “greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality, for it can accommodate itself better than one prince can to the diversity of the times.”³⁸ Why is it that a republic accommodates fortune better than a prince or an aristocracy? The reason, once again, Machiavelli writes, is “easy to understand”:

it is not the particular good but the common good that makes cities great. And without a doubt this common good is not observed if not in republics, since all that is for that purpose is executed, and although it may turn out to harm this or that private individual, those for whom the aforesaid does good are so many that they can go ahead with it against the disposition of the few crushed by it.³⁹

Machiavelli here describes the wonder of the republic: the good of the collectivity is uniquely fused to the decision-making power of the state! We see that just as a prince seeks to stockpile spoils and stay in power, so “a city that lives free has two ends—one to acquire, the other to maintain itself free.”⁴⁰ The critical difference is that the Prince may achieve these goals by utterly disregarding the rights of the people, while Machiavelli assumes that in a republic the collectivity could not sacrifice their own gain or freedom. Such a thing would be absurd.⁴¹

How does this compare to the classical understanding of political life and its object?

Aristotle pithily answers this in book three of *The Politics*, where he explores “what it is for the sake of which the city is established.”⁴² Speaking broadly of the reasons for forming any political partnership, he writes that men “strive to live together even when they have no need of assistance from one another, though it is also the case that the common advantage brings them together.”⁴³

Prosperity and protection do fall under the ends of any state, and further, “those regimes which

³⁸ Ibid., III.9.2.

³⁹ Ibid., II.2.1.

⁴⁰ Ibid., I.29.3.

⁴¹ Machiavelli does warn that the people can err, however, by loving either gain or freedom so much that it upsets the balance and topples the state. Suspicion can also cause the people to spurn punishments or great men who are really leading them to their advantage. However, Machiavelli claims that both the vice of ingratitude and that of suspicion are more common in princes than in peoples, leading to the superior stability of the republic (*Discourses*, I.29.3).

⁴² Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1278b115.

⁴³ Ibid., 1278b120-23.

look to the common advantage are correct regimes according to what is unqualifiedly just, while those that look only to the advantage of the rulers are errant.”⁴⁴ Thus far, we have perfect agreement between the ancient Greeks and our upstart Florentine. But Aristotle isn’t finished; he goes on to say that men also seek something beyond protection and comfort, and even the political justice the state provides. All of the above are the conditions that make the good life possible, but their sum is not the good life itself. The highest purpose of a free city is that it allows for transcendence *beyond* the city – for philosophy!⁴⁵

If “happiness is the actualization and complete practice of virtue,” Aristotle writes, the best regime is that which is “happy most of all” – that is, one which allows for the pursuit of virtue *and* best shapes men toward achieving that end.⁴⁶ Cicero illustrates how this relationship in a republic, a political system which allows for virtue *and* naturally inculcates virtue, occurs. For him, the crowning of the philosopher’s “moral excellence” is when he wisely chooses to enter political life, recognizing that it was that which allowed him the freedom to learn to “govern himself beautifully.” He observes that “our country did not give us life and nurture unconditionally, without expecting to receive in return...some maintenance from us, nor did it engage simply to serve our convenience, providing a safe haven for our leisure.”⁴⁷ The philosophic man, more than any other, will recognize the depth of his debt to the state, and his corresponding duty to protect it. Further, once a man has learned to govern himself well, he cannot abide to be ruled over by wicked and lesser men; Cicero writes that

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1279a17-20.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Ethics*, X.viii.7. Here Aristotle finds the answer to his quest for the good life: “It follows that the activity of God, which is transcendent in blessedness, is the activity of contemplation; and therefore among human activities that which is most akin to the divine activity of contemplation will be the greatest source of happiness.” This sharply contrasts with Machiavelli’s civic humanism, in which the highest realm of fulfillment is achieved through *action*.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1332a7-9.

⁴⁷ Cicero, *Republic*, I.8.

good, brave, and high-minded men could not have any stronger reason for entering politics than the determination not to give in to the wicked, and not to allow the state to be torn apart by such people where they themselves would be powerless to help even if they wish to do so.⁴⁸

Thus, the good men of a republic are driven to maintain both their own virtue and that of their state – each “refreshes” and holds to account the other.

Education: The Republican “Way of Life”

What are the implications for education, and specifically republican education, according to these two accounts of the republic’s ends? Machiavelli has much to say on this topic, referring to a people’s “way of life” or “mode of life” nearly sixty times in the *Discourses*. This important concept encompasses the beliefs, habits, expectations, and character of a people – what Alexis de Tocqueville would later label as “mores”. Education can be thought of as the transmittance of that common way of living. If a people’s way of life is not proportionate to the realities of political power that exist within a given state, the result is instability and debilitating weakness. What kind of education keeps a regime and its people in harmony?

As Aristotle observes, “the virtue of the citizen must necessarily be with a view to the regime.”⁴⁹ Machiavelli is well aware of this, and in the *Discourses* he is particularly concerned with how to make republican citizens. Republics require the most virtuous citizens, as the city depends on their existence rather than being threatened by them as a monarchy or an aristocracy would be. Machiavelli continues to agree with Aristotle in the formulation expressed in the *Politics* that, “the virtue of the excellent citizen must exist in all, for it is necessarily in this way that the city is excellent.” Further, such citizens are best formed among “those who are similar in

⁴⁸ Ibid., I.9.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1276b25-30.

stock and free.”⁵⁰ Recognizing this, Machiavelli advises founders that it is “without doubt” better to make a republic “among mountain men, where there is no civilization, than among those who are used to living in cities, where civilization is corrupt.”⁵¹ Mixing a little poetry with his politics, Machiavelli explains that “a sculptor will get a beautiful statue more easily from coarse marble than from one badly blocked out by another.”⁵² In pre-existing states, the former political elites and their favored classes riddle society with inequality, the memory and expectation of which is not easily stamped out. It would take something along the order of Plato’s wise legislator endowed with the powers of a tyrant to alter a society so profoundly.⁵³

However, Machiavelli’s thought is ambitious – he is interested in equipping just such a daring political entrepreneur. His intent is never simply to chronicle the workings of the political world, but to turn those observations into a manual of political transformation designed for those brave enough to implement its truths. He is well aware that most statesmen will be faced with the re-ordering of “badly blocked” societies rather than the founding of untouched, pure ones. It’s even possible that he witnessed Michelangelo’s bold effort in sculpting the *David* from just such a second-hand block. Machiavelli is ready to make his own masterpiece (theoretically, at least), by tackling the ultimate challenge of statesmanship: what is to be done with states that are corrupt, or are in the process of being corrupted? By what means can such states be “purified”? As in the case of the *David*, the answer lies in the superior insight and skill of the sculptor.

Before a great statesman can apply his hand to correcting corrupt matter, he must first understand the nature of the problem that he is confronting. What does it mean for a people’s way of life to be corrupted? We have already seen that republics require goodness, and “where

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1276b30-1277a5; 1277b5.

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.2.3.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 710e.

there is not this goodness, nothing good can be hoped for.” Machiavelli is also quick to divulge that his homeland is just such a poor bet, claiming that Italy sits at the top of this list of hopelessly corrupt states.⁵⁴ He further contends that the utter baseness of the peoples of France, Spain and Italy – “which nations together are the corruption of the world” – would be even more evident if they were not united by the steadying orders of a virtuous king.⁵⁵ Without the interference of a kingly hand or a tyrannical boot, the people’s servile habits would spill over into anarchy. The obvious question is how did the heart of the legendary Roman Republic become a divided conglomeration of weak, subjugated states?

Machiavelli treats this pivotal question through a counterexample, pointing to the uncorrupt peoples of Germany and demonstrating how they managed to remain incorruptible. He asserts that they are still “full of religion” and “ancient goodness,” as exhibited in the integrity with which they keep their oaths. How has Germany managed to retain its goodness, while Italy decays? At the height of the Roman Empire the Germanic peoples were widely viewed as barbarians, unfit for civilization of any sort—why the dramatic change in fortune in Machiavelli’s time? In large part, Machiavelli asserts that Germany’s isolation has protected it from corrupting influences. Geographically, it has been protected by lack of exposure, having had very little intercourse with what Machiavelli believes to be its corrupt neighbors to the south. While this explains why the Germans have not caught the contagion, it does not go so far as to explain what caused the illness to begin with. The German people have not seen corruption crop up from within their own midst because “they maintain among themselves an even equality”

⁵⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.55.2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

which makes a “political and uncorrupt way of life” possible.⁵⁶ In this, Machiavelli is an almost exact echo of Cicero, who earlier affirmed these two sources of corruption, noting that

The moral character of coastal cities is prone to corruption and decay...foreign customs are imported along with foreign merchandise; and so none of their ancestral institutions can remain unaffected. The inhabitants of those cities do not stay at home. They are always dashing off to foreign parts, full of airy hopes and designs. And even when, physically, they stay put, they wander abroad in their imaginations.⁵⁷

Such an environment, Cicero further affirms, creates a taste for luxury and indulgence in a people. These tastes and fancies are the precursor to social and political inequality, which we have already seen is the home-grown form of corruption that Machiavelli warns us of. For both, corruption encompasses a flawed way of living, daily habits which make it impossible for a free way of life to be sustained. The poor education behind such servile living is the function of a failure of religion and of the laws to hold people in check when necessity no longer forces them to. In the final analysis, however, Machiavelli reminds us that a good state must be a fully functioning state, one that has a monopoly on force. “The foundation of all good states is a good military,” he writes, and “where this does not exist there can be neither good laws nor any other good thing.”⁵⁸

Forming a Republic

Machiavelli’s use of the word “matter” indicates that the collectivity is inherently something to be shaped; it is by definition incapable of being a creative agent. Any discussion of corrupt or uncorrupt matter therefore presupposes an intervening force – the great man, the bold

⁵⁶ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.55.3.

⁵⁷ Cicero, *Republic*, II.7.

⁵⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.31.4.

sculptor of society.⁵⁹ Machiavelli writes that “if princes are superior to peoples in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and orders” – all of the *active* components of statehood – “the peoples are so much superior in *maintaining things ordered* that without a doubt they attain the glory of those who order them.”⁶⁰ While matter can be more or less malleable depending on its properties, it *always* requires great men to escape being at the mercy of fortune. Where does this hot commodity come from? These great citizens which color the public sense of virtue “arise from good education, good education from good laws, and good laws from those tumults that many inconsiderately damn.”⁶¹ Machiavelli is here referring to the Roman Republic at its height, in which we would expect good men to be produced. But what about states that need such men the most, those who are without the political equality and accountability that the tumults represent, those without good laws and a free way of life? It is in precisely these states that great men can exercise the most influence – “for where men have little virtue, fortune shows its power very much” – and paradoxically, where they are the least likely to surface.⁶² Plato writes that when such men do come along they “are a gift of the gods,” but Machiavelli would probably be more prone to credit fortune, or better yet, conquest by the most virtuous and robust states.⁶³ One of his charges against the Christian Church is that it “has not been powerful enough to seize Italy, nor permitted another to seize it” and has thus left it in such “disunion” and “weakness” that it has become “the prey of not only the barbarian powers, but whoever assaults

⁵⁹ Ibid., III.29: The responsibility of the founder is so great that Machiavelli explicitly blames the prince for any sins that are in the people, they are his creation and therefore he must be judged for their flaws. In a republic, which has many “princes” who are also citizens, the implications for this are less clear. Must a free people take responsibility for their own sins? Machiavelli does not say, but the amount of creative power that he gives to elites would seem to suggest that matter is *always* matter, republican or not.

⁶⁰ Ibid., I.58.3. (emphasis my own).

⁶¹ Ibid., I.4.1.

⁶² Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II.31.5.

⁶³ Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, trans. Thomas and Grace West in *Four Texts on Socrates* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 31a.

it.”⁶⁴ To find someone willing to undergo “many dangers and much blood” in forcing the rebirth of such a state is not easy – but perhaps the *Discourses* is intended as a helpful nudge to those with the skills and resources to do so.⁶⁵

The Principle of Proportion: Matching Education to Regime

Addressing such hearty souls, Machiavelli cautions his aspiring great men that if a free way of life is instilled in an enslaved people, or vice-versa, the founder will “produce a thing without proportion and hardly lasting.”⁶⁶ He provides an example of this principle by recounting the disparate approaches of two Roman generals in the handling of their armies, the harsh Manlius Torquatus and the kind Valerius Corvinus. He ascribes their mutual success to the Machiavellian virtue exercised by both generals; each rightly responding to different fortunes. He informs his readers that excellent commanders are those who “make a comparison between their qualities and those of whoever has to obey, and when they see proportion there, then they may command; when disproportion, they abstain from it.”⁶⁷ For Machiavelli, a “proportion from whoever is forcing to that which is forced” is best achieved in a republic, where the force is behind the common good of the people.⁶⁸ It is following this discussion that the possibility of a “perpetual republic” is raised—one which is constantly returning to its correct proportion and thus unable to be broken.⁶⁹ Over time, society would attune to this proportion through the example of great men and the effects of their constant refinement of the laws.

⁶⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.12.2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, I.17.3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, I.55.6; c.f. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, III.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I.22.1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, III.22.2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, III.22.3.

Cicero also invokes this principle of proportionality: the statesmen who legislate well do so “by adjusting the proportions between the highest, lowest, and intermediate classes, as if they were musical notes, [and] achieves harmony.”⁷⁰ He criticizes pure democracy as being skewed, a dangerous regime because of its instability. He writes that those in favor of this corrupted form of republicanism claim that “when the people, in a spirit of unity, judge everything in the light of their own security and freedom, nothing, they say, is less liable to change or collapse.”⁷¹ “Harmony,” these defenders of democracy claim, “is readily maintained in a state where everyone has the same interests.” Cicero regards this as unstable, arguing that “in communities and individuals alike, excessive freedom topples over into excessive slavery.” He instead advocates a “mixed regime” as the most harmonious.⁷² Pure democracy has no way to express itself except through the tempers of the mob or leaders drawn by lot, while in an aristocracy class is the automatic qualifier for political leadership. In a republic, the rulers are chosen not by birth or by random chance, but elected according to their *virtue*. Cicero writes that the cyclic and crisis prone realm of politics is filled with an astounding array of challenges and waves of public feeling. He asserts that “It is the business of the intelligent man to be aware of them; but to see them coming, to modify their effects, and to keep control of their course while governing the state—that calls for a great citizen and a man of almost superhuman powers.”⁷³ A republic combines democracy (the rule of the plebs) with its antidote, aristocracy (the rule of the patricians) in such a way as to make room for these great, almost divine, men to safely rule.

Cicero likens the rule of such a man to an image from his travels to Africa, he is one who “sits on an enormous wild beast, controlling it and directing it wherever he wishes and turning

⁷⁰ Cicero, *Republic*, II.69.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I.49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, I.68.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I.45.

the great brute this way and that by a gentle touch or word of command.” Cicero writes of such a master, “now *he* is a man of good sense.”⁷⁴ In such an arrangement, the ruler operates according to the established modes of the people, no “extraordinary modes” or force is necessary. The people also have been trained to recognize and trust the great man’s leading—a wild elephant would not be able to heed the directions of any rider, wise or unwise, without the compulsion of force. Machiavelli provides us with a picture of just such a corrupt and bewildered people, who, even when seeking freedom, do not have the ability to receive it:

That people is nothing other than a brute animal that, although of a ferocious and feral nature, has always been nourished in prison and in servitude. Then, if it is left free in a field to its fate, it becomes the prey of the first one who seeks to rechain it, not being used to feed itself and not knowing places where it may have to take refuge.⁷⁵

This illustration not only captures the double-bind of a corrupt people, it also reveals the perennial danger that great men pose to the state: tyranny! At the initial moment of founding, this line between political hero and relentless tyrant is especially fine, but even in an established republic the public servant can overnight become a demagogue. Witness Spurius Manlius, buying his popularity through gifts of grain to the Roman people until a dictator was appointed to execute him as a threat to the state. “A republic without reputed citizens cannot stand, nor can it be governed well in any mode,” Machiavelli writes; yet “on the other side, the reputation of citizens is the cause of the tyranny of republics.”⁷⁶ How to vault over such an impasse? The secret is within the republican system itself: the best republics are those in which “the citizens are reputed for a reputation that helps and does not hurt the city and its freedom.”⁷⁷ This structural incentive to gain honor through upholding the system rather than rivaling it is the key to republican governance. Because the education of a people cannot be stamped out overnight

⁷⁴ Ibid., II.67.

⁷⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.16.1.

⁷⁶ Ibid., III.28.1.

⁷⁷ Ibid., III.28.1.

(whether it be a servile or liberal education), the city which has this expectation of its leaders is relatively protected—it would take a prolonged effort to accustom a free people to tyranny. Thus, as Machiavelli writes, a republic could be “led to disorder” only “little by little and from generation to generation.”⁷⁸ However, the great hope of republicanism is that it creates a society of great men, each one jealous of their freedom and anxious to protect that freedom from all tyrannizing schemes.

The Great Man’s Soul (Or Lack Thereof)

The necessity of the great man in politics, both in the maintaining of a republic and in the transformation of a corrupt state, is well-evidenced in both Machiavelli and in ancient thought. The functions of a great man are again clear and similar: he is prudent, effective, and able to order laws and encourage religion in such a manner that the way of life of the people and their regime are in harmony with one another. But where does the great man come from? What is the source and nature of his greatness?

The Home of the Great Man

For Machiavelli, the conscious choice to consider man apart from an eternal end, coupled with the belief that the effect of all actions excuses the deed, creates a radical new paradigm within which the ancient idea of the great man must attempt to accommodate itself. Machiavelli completely circumscribes greatness to the civic realm, the *only* realm in Machiavelli’s thought. The great man’s “greatness” must therefore shrink to fit this much smaller sphere for glory. To be a great man means, entirely, to be a great statesman. However, if we look closely, we see that even what it means to be exemplary in civic life has been reduced in stature. As discussed

⁷⁸ Ibid., III.8.2.

earlier, because the correct actions bring the greatest happiness and stability to both the people and the rulers, regardless of the motive behind those actions or the character of the one who commits them, the difference between the good man and the bad man in the classical sense is eliminated. The only remaining question is whether he is a *smart* (i.e. Machiavellian) man or not. This makes the great statesman simply the sum of his skills: it is someone who plays Machiavelli's game by Machiavelli's rules. Accordingly, it is only within the civic sphere that the Machiavellian great man can be "great"—it is only there that he can be at home.

Where is the great man truly at home for the ancients? In the last book of Cicero's *Republic*, Scipio tells of a dream in which he is snatched up into the heavens, where "everything seemed glorious and wonderful" beyond imagining.⁷⁹ Peering back through the nine spheres of the universe toward an infinitesimally small earth, Scipio is met by his ancestor, Africanus. Africanus reminds him that his soul is eternal, having come from the everlasting fires of this region. Thus, he informs Scipio, this lofty place truly is his "dwelling place and home." It is here where his mind came from and where it is meant to return. He continues his lesson by explaining that out of the "generosity of the gods," man too has been rendered god-like in the gift of his mind, and ought therefore to invest himself in "the best kinds of activity." While remaining on earth, Africanus deems the "best concerns" to be "for the safety of one's country." This service is rendered not for temporal glory, which ebbs and flows and is forgotten in less than a generation, but springs from an understanding that "to that supreme god who rules the universe nothing (or at least nothing that happens on earth) is more welcome than those companies and communities of people linked together by justice that are called states."⁸⁰

Statesmanship ennobles the mind, preparing it to swiftly return to the highest things. In this way,

⁷⁹ Cicero, *Republic*, VI.16.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, VI.13.

the soul which contemplates things of divine importance and devotes its earthly toil to them succeeds in “opening up a way back to this place, as have others who, in their life on earth, have applied their outstanding intellect to heavenly subjects.”⁸¹

The existence (or at least the possibility) of a starry realm beyond the state opens up a space within which a good man can exist independently of the good statesman. Cicero clearly saw this distinction between the good man and the capable statesman and the difference was considered so critical that much of *The Republic* is devoted to trying to persuade the latter to become the former. In defending the value of the philosopher and attempting to make politics appealing to men of leisure, Cicero makes a case that Machiavelli would have never entertained: he asserts that politics is valuable in its approximation to divinity, writing that there is not “any occupation which brings human excellence closer to divine power than the founding of new states and preserving of those already founded.”⁸² In his histories, Livy also includes the myths of the divine origins of Romulus, not as a fact to “affirm or refute” but as an appropriate parallel to the glory associated with such a thing as founding a great state.⁸³ Political life is intertwined with cosmic purpose. In the same way that Cicero talked about a “harmony” existing among the people of well-ordered polis, so here he refers to a great harmony of the spheres, creating a grand symphony which could be heard on earth if we weren’t so accustomed to its constant presence.⁸⁴ The statesman’s duty therefore springs from a very compelling source: his actions are linked to the great plan of the universe as a whole.⁸⁵ His motivation and accountability come from far above him. This is the polar opposite of the Machiavellian prince, who is convinced to rule well

⁸¹ Ibid., VI.18.

⁸² Ibid., I.12.

⁸³ Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, I.1.

⁸⁴ Cicero, *Republic*, VI.18

⁸⁵ Ibid., VI.15-17; After explaining to Scipio that his soul is eternal, he urges him to therefore “respect justice and do [his] duty.”

because of the fame, stability, and prosperity it will accrue to him. Africanus tells Scipio that for those who “gaze upon the eternal home and habitation” no such small inducements as the “masses gossip” or fleeting moments of fame can imbibe meaning to his task. Instead, “Goodness herself must draw you on by her own enticements to your true glory.”⁸⁶ This final good, the aim at which all other goods point, and the first door to be closed in Machiavelli’s thought, is the lifeblood of the ancient great man.

Through Scipio’s dream, Cicero is affirming that the *character* of an individual’s mind is of extreme importance – in fact, of *eternal* importance. As we have seen, Machiavelli’s great men are valued for their *actions*. The body reigns supreme in a strictly temporal universe. Thus, for Machiavelli, the individual virtue of the soul is not a prerequisite for true civic virtue as it is for Cicero. Individual virtue requires *transcendence*, something beyond the body – it implies a soul. Machiavelli’s thought is wary of the soul, as transcendence opens the door for humility and the possibility for a heavenly standard of greatness that may thwart earthly success, the very problem that Machiavelli is trying to correct through his *Discourses*. In true “Machiavellian” fashion, he solves this dilemma cunningly rather than candidly. He does not campaign against the soul’s existence; instead, he does something far craftier. He robs the idea of the soul of all importance by thoroughly ignoring it; he renders it meaningless by assigning it no meaning. However, in his attempt to free humans to reach their highest potential, unfettered by any eternal considerations, he necessarily excludes the possibility that humanity’s end is something outside of itself. More plainly, in rejecting humility out of disgust for its weakness, he also relinquishes its potential strength. Machiavelli’s great man can be driven to greatness by a full understanding

⁸⁶ Ibid., VI.25; and VI.20: “If it seems small to you (as indeed it is) make sure to keep your mind on these higher regions and to think little of the human scene down there. For what fame can you achieve, what glory worth pursuing that consists merely of people’s talk?”

of his own rational interest, but unlike Scipio, he can never be drawn by a good and bound by a duty that is at once above and at the core of human existence. Such a man is filled not simply with interest, but with true purpose. Machiavelli's thought would never be capable of sustaining a great man on the order of Scipio. It would drag him down from the heavens, condemning his soul to forever hovering "close to the earth."⁸⁷

Cicero judges that the wise man attains virtue not through "the guarantee of civil law, but by the universal law of nature."⁸⁸ Though the civic sphere is dwarfed in relation to heavenly things, its very smallness makes room for a greater virtue, and this greater virtue makes a true civic virtue possible. Throughout his dream, Scipio's foray into the splendors of the heavens is not enough to make him forget the dwelling place of his fellow men. Instead, it inspires him: he is "all the more keen" to serve his state well. His service is not the mere function of a desire to imitate his fathers or uphold tradition for its own sake, but will be chosen because the action itself is inherently good and worthy. Scipio, suspended amid the stars, recounts to his companions that "the earth itself seemed so small to me that I felt ashamed of our empire, whose extent was no more than a dot on its surface."⁸⁹ As we have seen, at great cost, Machiavelli's goal is *to make that tiny dot the entire universe* – no stargazers or mystics allowed.

⁸⁷ Ibid., VI.29.

⁸⁸ Ibid., I.27.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

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