# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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**Portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli by Santi di Tito**

## MACHIAVELLI'S ENTERPRISE

*Machiavelli's philosophical musings on truth are just as important as his work on politics.*


**Harvey Mansfield**


Part 1 of 2

Five hundred years ago, on December 10, 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a letter to a friend in Rome describing one day in his life as an exile from Florence and remarked casually that he had just completed writing *The Prince*. This momentous book, together with its companion, the *Discourses on Livy*, neither published until after his death, announces an enterprise affecting all human beings today: the creation of the modern world.

Machiavelli is famous for his infamy, for being "Machiavellian," but his importance is almost universally underestimated. The extent of his consequence is not appreciated and the size of his ambition is little known. He makes it possible, even easy, to suppose

that his ambition is confined to place-hunting with Lorenzo de' Medici and service as drill-master of the Florentine republic—as if his thought was bounded by his employment opportunities. Of course everyone senses his greatness as a writer, a master of Italian prose with a gift for an acute phrase, often worth citing for effect but almost never actually avowed for use. "I am a Machiavellian" is something one doesn't hear. But in addition to his insights, which in truth are deliberately exaggerated, he does not receive much respect as a guide to the future. But a guide with foresight is just what Machiavelli is, if one adds that he made the future to which he guides us.

To see how important Machiavelli was one must first examine how important he meant to be. In the Discourses he says he has a "natural desire" to "work for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone." A natural desire is in human nature, not just in the humans of Machiavelli's time, and the beneficiaries will be everyone, all humanity—not just his native country or city. He goes on to say that he has "decided to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone." He will benefit everyone by taking a new path; he is not just imitating the ancients or contributing to the Renaissance, that rebirth of the ancients, though obviously his new path makes use of the them. In the middle of *The Prince* he declares: "I depart from the orders of others," also emphasizing his originality. One soon learns that he departs from the tradition of thought that begins with Greek, or Socratic, philosophy, as well as from the Bible. All this he refers to elsewhere as "my enterprise."

There is an uneducated view of Machiavelli responsible for his evil reputation as "Machiavellian," held by people who have not read a word of his but would instinctively recoil if they did at the practice of dirty tricks that he repeatedly recommends. Then there is an educated view of Machiavelli scholars who have read his books—a view that is primarily devoted to refuting and repudiating the uneducated view. To do this, the scholars latch on to one of Machiavelli's own excuses, such as that the murder of your inconvenient brother may be for the common good, or they excuse him by taking an objective stance from outside his words. From the standpoint of science it is said that he was only trying to understand, not to judge, or from the outlook of history that he was only reflecting his times, not facing permanent problems. All these excuses diminish his importance and result in a very great underestimation of Machiavelli. They reduce him from something extraordinary, recognized in the uneducated view, to someone who is ordinary in his context, which was the Italy of his day—its disunity, its corrupt popes, and its humanist and other authors, who provided him with

intellectual equipment. I shall set forth the idea that Machiavelli was not caused by his context, but was the cause of a context, our context.

To create the modern world Machiavelli initiated a two-fold transformation of politics and philosophy that would bring them together: politics with the elevation of philosophy and philosophy brought down to earth. These two motions come together in the prince, now understood not merely as a ruler but also as a thinker devoted to improving the prospects of princes and incidentally, or not incidentally, their peoples—so that princes become knowers of "the world." It was necessary for Machiavelli to reverse the meaning of modern and create a new meaning of world. "Modern" would no longer signify the weakness taught by Christianity but would acquire new vigor from obeying human necessities rather than divine commands. "The world" would be this world as opposed to the next world of Christianity and to the high-minded morality of classical philosophy.

Is Machiavelli a philosopher? He does not say that he is. He uses the word very sparingly and does not openly address those he calls "philosophers." He seems to confine himself to politics, but politics he refers to expansively as "worldly things" (*cose del mondo*). And yet he indicates that he is a philosopher, and repeatedly, insistently, in several ways. To expand politics to include the world implies that the world governs politics or politics governs the world or both. In his day the notion of the "world" immediately raised the question of which world, this one or the next? Here religion and philosophy dispute the question of which world governs the other and whether politics can manage or God must provide for human fortunes—Fortuna being, as everyone knows, a prominent theme of Machiavelli's.

Machiavelli sets forth the dispute in two separate places that the reader must make the effort to put together. Casually, as it seems, to justify not omitting something, he says in a clause in the Discourses: "since it is good to reason about everything . . . "; whereas in *The Prince* he says, again in a clause, "although one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God . . . " He does not expressly argue, for and against, the question of whether faith sets limits to reason, as a philosopher who wanted to make himself obvious might do, but leaves a contradiction that is blatant when exposed. Now why should one not reason about Moses? Moses is a figure in the Bible, the Book of God that commands reverence and is revered. To reason about Moses is to question the reverence in which he is held

and to challenge the belief that holds him in reverence. To reason about everything is the work of a philosopher, who as such challenges belief merely by asking questions; to believe is to hold the answers the philosopher questions. Thus we have a distinction between the philosopher, who questions, and the believer, or non-philosopher, who has answers.

It is good to reason about everything and also good not to reason about everything. The latter must mean that it is good, having reasoned or while reasoning about everything, not to appear to reason about everything. Machiavelli does not call himself a philosopher or say that he is bringing a new mode of philosophy, but leaves these things to be inferred from hints or allusions or incomplete, solitary statements surrounded with innocent, apparently non-philosophic context. In the letter mentioned above he left a memorable picture of the life of the philosopher and of himself as philosopher: the one who, after noisy, contentious card-playing in the inn he frequents, sits down in the evening with his books to the quiet conversation of his mind, imagining himself clothed in regal and courtly garments so as to "enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for." Yet, despite this beautiful description of philosophizing, he still does not call himself "philosopher."

After Machiavelli, with Bacon and Descartes, modern philosophy became established as an institution and thrived on public recognition to the point that in the eighteenth century the philosophes could claim to be a ruling force and be so regarded. Machiavelli was a philosopher who founded modernity but not modern philosophy. He left that task to his successors. But he laid the foundation for them in a single paragraph, one could almost say in a single phrase, in *The Prince*.

The paragraph is the first one in Chapter 15, already quoted from, in which Machiavelli says: "I depart from the orders of others." The phrase is "effectual truth" (*verità effettuale*), with which he explains why it is necessary to do evil. In this paragraph he moves from morality to politics to truth, or what is today called epistemology. By following closely what he says in this small space, we shall see how Machiavelli's politics is elevated to truth and his philosophy lowered to what is visible in the world. To begin with, morality is not separable from politics as it was in Aristotle, who wrote two books on Ethics and Politics. Morality must be judged from what happens if you practice it, which means judged from the standpoint of the prince. Even among friends and relations, to say nothing of fellow citizens or subjects, "a man who wants to make a

profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good." A "man" must have the outlook of a prince, a wary prince.

Why is "a profession of good in all regards" relevant? Those who do good rely on others not to take advantage of them, indeed to return that good in gratitude so that do-gooders will not "come to ruin." The many who do not write or read but merely live by moral principle implicitly rely on the argument of philosophy or religion to show convincingly that they can afford to be moral. Good deeds must be accompanied with an explanation, a "profession of good." And because a deed that appears good may be done with evil intent, the doer needs to profess the good he does as well as perform it. But also because evil may appear good, no visible evidence will suffice to prove the intent of the doer and his profession must appeal to some invisible principle or realm; it must rely on imagination to guarantee its existence. In sum, for Machiavelli the foundation for morality, what makes it reliable, what justifies taking the risk of coming to ruin by doing a moral deed, is a "profession"—a pretense of philosophy or religion. A profession of good "in all regards" would have to be the good society as a whole, not merely isolated good actions taken by themselves. So Machiavelli says that many rely on "imagined republics and principalities that have never been known to exist in truth." He does not give examples, but it is easy to supply them. An imagined republic might be Plato's Republic of philosopher-kings, based on the "idea of the good," and an imagined principality might be St. Augustine's City of God, promising salvation in the next world.

Machiavelli rejects these two kinds of imagined truth for his own "effectual truth." He concentrates the power of this phrase by using it just this once in all his writings. Indeed, Machiavelli scholars have been unable to find any other use of the term in the Italian Renaissance among humanist authors, and I am not aware of any earlier use of it. In the Bible the truth of Revelation is to be brought to all by God's ministers, as Paul said "according to the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working [*energeia*] of his power" (Ephesians 3:7, King James Version). Marsilius of Padua (an author known to Machiavelli), quoting Aristotle, speaks of false belief as a hindrance to truth, an obstacle to its becoming effectual. In neither case is the truth itself effectual; rather it is that divine or human aid can make it effectual or not. What then does Machiavelli mean by the phrase he first formulated, "the effectual truth of a thing" as opposed to its imagination?

To understand it, we must return to "the world" that a prince, or a

philosopher-prince, can know. In *The Prince* and the *Discourses* Machiavelli never refers to the next world, thus not to the distinction between this world and the next. But he does speak frequently, if never at length, of "the world" in his two main books, leaving to his readers, as always, the task of reasoning out the sum of his references. It appears, first, that the world is a whole, "the whole world." Neither Plato nor the Christians would have admitted that the world, with all its imperfections, can be a whole; because of its imperfections the world has to be supplemented by supra-mundane or superhuman intelligence and power. Machiavelli presumes it is possible to know the world, and he criticizes the Florentines, the Venetians, and a pope for not knowing the world. Above all, he claims for himself that in the *Discourses* he has expressed "as much as I know and have learned though a long practice and continual reading in worldly things." Both practice and reading are required: the school of books and the School of Hard Knocks.

"Worldly things" have a limit to their life and are variable. Deceit is an aspect of the world; in the "actions of the world" men ordinarily understand little, especially not what is extraordinary. Yet "in the world there is no one but the vulgar," meaning that the truth must eventually come out so as to be appreciated by ordinary men, though what they appreciate as true may not be true. In Machiavelli's "effectual truth," the truth is not forever hidden but shown in its effects. Effectual truth means not only that the truth will have an effect, a consequence, but also that its effect will show. Those who try to live by a profession of good will fail and be shown to fail. Although Machiavelli speaks frequently of nature and the natural, he never defines them and he indicates that human nature can be changed and that what may appear to be permanent nature is actually mere longtime custom. The world does not have the permanence and the formal structure of nature, as previously understood by philosophers.

The whole world, for Machiavelli, can be characterized by "weakness" because of the influence of Christianity or by "corruption" because of French, Spanish, or Italian customs. Yet it can be "full of peace and justice" (under the good Roman emperors between Nerva and Marcus), when one saw "the world in triumph," golden times "when each can hold and defend the opinion he wishes." Here would seem to be a John Stuart Mill paradise, with glory and security for princes and peoples and freedom for philosophers. These emperors include "the philosopher Marcus," as he is called in *The Prince* in the one instance of that word there. But the philosopher-emperor is not presented as presiding over Mill's paradise; he is plucked out of the triumph of the world and paired with

the emperor Severus, who is called a criminal in the *Discourses*, to provide a model for a prince, Severus for founding it and Marcus for maintaining it. So "the world" seems not be bereft of morality, as one might suppose from the adjective "Machiavellian," but to maintain a certain, worldly morality of a new kind in which the philosopher, namely Machiavelli, has a new role. Instead of soothing moral anger and opposing moral contradiction in the tradition of Socrates, the philosopher (Marcus) allies with criminality (Severus) rather than morality. Or, better to say, he allies both with criminality and with moral indignation against criminality. Both are allowed to be expressed or purged because both are natural, not in the sense of intelligible in the light of higher principles, as with the Socratics, but as spontaneous eruptions that can be managed but not suppressed.

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