



Portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli by Santi di Tito

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## MACHIAVELLI'S ENTERPRISE

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

Harvey Mansfield

Part 2 of 2

If the world is not intelligible in the way of classical philosophy, according to Machiavelli, then how rational is it? Certainly it can be known, but how? The world is not chaotic, but it is tumultuous, open to change and discord as to its meaning, as for example in the diverse “humors” of princes and peoples. The world has its necessities not in intelligible definitions or essences but in patterns of behavior; in this example princes and peoples are in a rather strange relationship, those few who desire to command in relation to those many who desire not to be commanded. Here is the classical political division between the few and the many to be found in Plato and Aristotle, but Machiavelli sees it differently. The few and

the many are not presented in a manner to bring them together in a whole of quality and quantity. Instead, princes and peoples are at odds, the former insisting on what the latter insist must not be. Each temper has its necessity, but the two necessities are contrary to each other, and the result is not a harmonious whole but a whole in which the necessary humor of princes can be accomplished only by deceiving or manipulating the necessary humor of peoples. The one necessity (desiring to command) includes the denial of that necessity by the other necessity (desiring not to be commanded), and princes, if they are to know the world, must understand that peoples as such do not understand the world; princes must see the necessity of deceit. Here we have in sharp focus the kind of analysis of necessities that our social science, unconsciously imitating Machiavelli but very far from matching his acuity, retails with clumsy jargon and false precision.

The deceit of the princes is expressed in what Machiavelli, borrowing from the Averroists (Aristotelians opposed to the Scholastic Aristotelians) that were a force in his day, calls the sect. All sects (or religions) obey the necessities of human nature that require the people to be reassured they do not live under the necessity of being commanded, but that justice is possible. Yet some sects are more in keeping with human necessities than others, and the “Christian sect”—so Machiavelli has the face to call it—under which he lived, with its provisions for the interference of the next world in the honor of this world, overlooked the necessity of the human desire to command, of human ambition. To repeat, necessities are not necessarily recognized; in fact they necessarily will not be recognized by peoples as opposed to princes. Knowledge of the world’s necessities includes the necessary ignorance of most human beings regarding those necessities.

These are the necessities Machiavelli has in mind when he says, to return to the crucial paragraph, that it is “necessary to a prince . . . to learn to be able not to be good, and to use it and not use it according to necessity.” One might think that it is unnecessary to give advice to act “according to necessity,” as if necessity were a choice one could make or not make. But Machiavelli expands the instinctual necessities that dictate the actions of subhuman animals. When he says that a prince must of necessity use a fox and a lion to defeat a wolf, that is, use both fraud and force, he implies that a human can choose his nature rather than be enslaved by it, but that his choice must still follow what he knows to be his necessity. We cannot help noting that human necessity is put to us by Machiavelli in terms of animal necessities, though with their different ways, which is after all a kind of enslavement. Our unique human faculty

of choice is set to the task of calculating, not the transcendence, but the greater efficiency through human versatility of subhuman instincts. Does this not describe the general method of social science today in its various findings of the “determination” of our lives?

Machiavelli, however, has a deeper understanding of necessity because he is much more aware of the alternatives to it in classical philosophy and Christianity. For him the world has its necessities in polemical contrast to those alternatives. He knows he has to defend “the world,” truly his world, against them. The world he defends is grounded in the earth (*terra*) so as to give it resistance to, leverage against, the attractions of heaven as set forth diversely by Socrates with his successors and by Christianity. For him republics and sects are preserved not by aiming at an end, still less by gaining it. Human institutions become corrupt if they do not return to their beginnings rather than pursue the satisfaction of gaining their ends. At the beginning of human institutions there is fear; so returning to the beginning requires reproducing original fears. Worldly philosophy abandons ends for beginnings.

To preserve either a republic or a principality one must take it back to or toward its beginning, and this means that an appeal to patriotism will not suffice. One must revive the original fear that precedes and is the basis for any later patriotism. Machiavelli was a patriot, to be sure—though for Florence or for Italy? And of course he says in a letter that he loves his patria more than his own soul. As a philosopher he might have said that his enterprise is grander than the defense of his patria—unless his *patria* is something even grander than Florence and Italy. His *patria* is the world of which he is a knower, sometimes presented as the earth. The universal beginning is a first principle, but with a home—and the home is defined against what is foreign to the earth and above it.

The polemical stance in Machiavelli’s thought of “the world” against the other world might make one think that angry spiritedness (in Plato’s term *thumos*) has come to prevail in it. He does allow for defensiveness in the fear he endorses and the spiritedness (*animo*) that he wants to release. But he doesn’t allow *animo* to dominate human behavior; he transforms the spiritedness of self-defense into eagerness to acquire. For what is necessity overall? “And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire,” is Machiavelli’s answer in *The Prince*. In the *Discourses*, he says, in a fine example of his sarcastic humor: “[I]n ordering a republic there is need to think of the honorable part and to order it so that if indeed necessity brings it to expand, it can conserve what it has seized.” The “honorable part” is the “honor of the world”

that he criticized the Christians for ignoring, but Machiavelli has transformed it. No longer does honor come with a claim to justice, as with Plato; in appraising Rome's aggrandizement, Machiavelli ignores its injustice and decides in favor of what he claims that necessity requires. His instruction calls up both fear and glory, two seeming opposites that when set loose bring drama to the human soul. Still, the combination of necessity and desire that he initiates came later to be called, in a more regular mode of his fundamental notion, the "self-interest" of liberalism and bourgeois society. Honor can be brought together with necessity if it can be made clear that the honor of the world compels us to insist on recognizing and acting on human necessities over divine commands. In this way, Machiavelli shows, we do as we wish, as we ought, and as honor demands.

To reform contemplative philosophy, Machiavelli moved to assert the necessities of the world against the intelligibility of the heavenly cosmos and the supra-heavenly whole. His nature, as opposed to that of Plato and Aristotle, lacked the lasting or eternal intelligibles of nature as they conceived it. To assert the claim of nature against theology Machiavelli changes nature into the world, or, more precisely, because the world is not an intelligible whole, into "worldly things." This world is the world of sense. In replacing the world of intelligible nature with the world of sense, he discovered the world of fact underneath the reason of things. In doing so he laid the foundation for modern philosophy, which is modern epistemology (as it came to be called) and its two modes, modern empiricism and modern rationalism. To see how Machiavelli discovered "fact," we may return to his "effectual truth of the thing" in the paragraph of *The Prince* being featured. That notion was contrasted to the imagination of the thing that led to making a profession of good, from which he drew a moral lesson for the prince or indeed for man as such: You will come to ruin if you base yourself on what should be done rather than on what is done.

For example, Machiavelli speaks of the dissensions in Rome between the nobles and the plebs, prior to him condemned by "many" as having ruined the republic. For him, these were the cause not of Rome's ruin but of its strength and freedom. This historical thesis at the start of the *Discourses* begins his attack on Plato's imaginary republic, an attack—though he does not use the word—by fact on imagination. Plato knew very well that all actual cities are full of dissension, and there is no disagreement with Machiavelli on this point. But Plato went on to imagine a city of harmonious justice without dissension in order to see what justice fully required. "Justice" is a word in common use, but by most people ignorantly and

incoherently. The real, or strict, meaning of a word is what the thing it describes is in its completion and perfection: real justice as opposed to alleged justice. Plato's dialogues are devoted to developing the truth out of what people commonly and inadvertently assert through reasoning and imagination. That proceeding reason uses imagination to see (with the eye of the mind) what is the justice one would wish for and pray for. For Socrates, imagination is an aid to reason. The human faculty of imagining permits one to make an image of what one sees and to reason out what is necessary or natural in it and what is accidental to it. With imagination, one can rise above justice as observed to justice as it might be at its best and most complete—from fact to definition or form. Imagination fixes on the visible shape or form of things in order to make an image from which one can make an invisible form or definition. This is how Socrates could think, contrary to Machiavelli and his modern successors, that the invisible is more real than the visible.

For Machiavelli, reason does not cooperate with imagination to see the perfection of a thing. The very virtues constituting the perfection of the soul according to Plato and Aristotle must not be understood as perfect or part of perfection. They are "qualities," a neutral term, that bring "either blame or praise," to be appreciated as they appear to others only as effects. Their effectual truth is quite different from the truth one imagines when they are merely thought out without regard to their effect. When looked at from the standpoint of effectual truth, the virtues that Socrates induced from his companions because they were true or real virtue turn out to be apparent virtue quite opposed to effectual virtue, now said to be real virtue. Machiavelli reverses the upward course of Socratic argumentation and brings it "down to earth." The effect, and not the intent understood as intent toward perfection, is the locus of good, and when judging the intent from the standpoint of the effect, vice, or some combination of vice and virtue, is more powerful than virtue alone, and blame is more effectual than praise.

Machiavelli questions the primacy of the good and dethrones it as the object of human action. Men do not have a natural preference for real or true good as opposed to what is merely apparent, as was the basis of Socrates's arguments. They are satisfied ("satisfied and stupefied") with the apparent good they see in "good effects," especially if they are impressive or sensational. Good effects are what they appear to be; they are deeds, *faits accomplis*. The accomplished facts of Machiavelli are the origin of the modern notion of fact. Fact is what everyone sees, including the vulgar, indeed principally the vulgar, because the vulgar many reveal the effectual truth of the few wise. Wisdom is in its effect on the un-

wise. It is not that the wise disappear or are no longer needed but that their wisdom is effectual, and in that sense is as it appears to the many of their audience. Fact is what can gain common assent, typically by being opposed to our intent or wish: Facts are stubborn or brute, standing in one's way and demanding acceptance.

Imagination does not disappear in Machiavelli, but from its status in Plato as an aid to reason toward knowledge it is demoted to a deviation of reason away from "what is done." Clearly Machiavelli, like Plato, has a perfect republic in his imagination, one that may even last forever. But it is not the one imagined to be what perfect justice would require, as in Plato's Republic, but one imagined from reasoning with the necessities that face actual republics and finding remedies for their imperfect prudence. This "perpetual republic," if it could exist, would also be, like Plato's, under a philosopher-king, or prince. The difference is that Plato has in mind not Socrates personally but someone like him—whereas Machiavelli thinks of himself. Basing his republic on the facts of actual republics, he introduces the modern notion that practice follows directly from theory, so that knowledge ("firm science" he calls it) is perfected with practice: Knowledge is power. What Machiavelli knows is effectual; it makes him the prince not just in principle but in fact.


Machiavelli, we have seen, substitutes the world with its necessities for two rival but related notions. The first is the other world of Christianity and the second is the cosmos of classical rationalism with its intelligible and intelligent beings. Both notions set the highest virtue in contemplation, and by means of that virtue hover over this world to criticize it from their very different standpoints, the godliness of Christianity and the nobility of Socratic philosophy. Machiavelli believed that the two notions were related in their high-mindedness, the Christian God being the effectual truth of the good or the idea of the good of the philosopher, for men in their spiritedness would want to personify the good in a being that would guarantee its possession for them. They would want a Providence to take care of them. Therefore, to defend this world Machiavelli decided that he would have to go beyond the equivocal compromises with Christianity made by the humanists and attack it directly and openly, rather than combine it, and thus compare it with classical rationalism as they did. He would have to "depart from the orders of others" and leave the ancients behind, much as he loved them. He would have to forsake the Renaissance. For the sake of philosophy and of humanity he would alter the character of philosophy, uniting it with practice, with the result that it recommended a very different sort of humanity. No longer are we to imi-

tate Socrates and Jesus; our models now are Severus and Cesare Borgia, installing the new primacy of evil. Evil is of course somehow good, but good folk, if they want to be reasonable, have to admit this.

One other phrase from our single paragraph in *The Prince* needs to be examined. Machiavelli says that it appears to him more fitting to “go directly” (*andare dritto*) to the effectual truth, bypassing the profession of good. To look at the effect or the outcome of an event means to consider it in the light of the necessity, that is the various necessities, of its participants, and thereby to ignore their opposing intentions regarding its goodness. Goodness is complicated, which is why it requires a “profession of good in all regards.” Necessity simplifies by “going directly” to the effect without regard to opposing claims and doubtful or contradictory reasonings. Machiavelli recommends acting first and reasoning—rationalizing—afterwards. An example of what he wants to avoid can be seen at the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, rival of Florence, in the Sala della Pace and its famous frescoes of Good and Bad Government, done by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in 1338–40. These frescoes show the “effects” of good and bad government on opposite walls, the virtues of the one and vices of the other. The effects imply the possibility of choice between virtue and vice. They are connected by a wall that amounts to a depiction of the sort of profession of good to which Machiavelli refers. It displays both theological virtues and moral virtues and “justice” appears twice, once under the theological virtues (featuring capital punishment) and once under “wisdom,” which leads to “concord” with a cord connecting all citizens to a man who represents the Sienese community. Here is confusion, or let us say complication, arising from the typical problems of classical political philosophy mixed with Christianity: The relationships between intellectual and moral virtue, theology and philosophy, morality and political concord. In this painting the political effects, good and bad, emerge from an articulation of the good; in Machiavelli, the effects result from an imputed necessity that deliberately ignores what people say and thinkers think. Our social science today believes in what it calls the fact/value distinction, meaning that fact is science and value is not. In so behaving, it ignores, as much as it can, the profession of good that accompanies every human action and follows Machiavelli’s effectual truth unconsciously and with brusque, unjustified confidence in its own independence.

To sum up this compressed view of Machiavelli’s enterprise: It is new and recommends what is new; It shows that the use of dirty tricks is for our good; It reveals the philosopher as prince; It calls

for the effectual versus the imagined truth; It finds that truth in the world, which is the world of necessity and the world of sense; It uncovers and explains what would later be called “fact”; It solves problems by simplifying them in the manner of modern natural and social science.

A difficulty remains, however, in the notion of effectual truth: Is all truth effectual truth? Is philosophy now to have an agenda for changing the world, rendering it rational, and leaving behind the former philosophy that wished merely to understand, and not to understand for the sake of power to effect change? Machiavelli promises that the effectual truth will work; it will save us from ruin among so many who are not good. But is it true that it works? Have we not seen in the twentieth century that atheist regimes can be as harmful to humanity, indeed far more harmful, than the religious ones that Machiavelli and Hobbes and all the other modern philosophers feared and despised and attempted to replace? The truth of effectual truth has to be judged by its promises, its professions of good. This truth would be plain truth, not effectual or tendentious truth. It is very difficult of access because of the very success of Machiavelli’s enterprise, which covers over its beginning. The modern philosophy Machiavelli founded, like the modern science founded by his successors, has the character of progress, each stage going further than the preceding and, if not erasing it, rendering it obsolete. Machiavelli’s ancient and Biblical adversaries—and even Machiavelli himself—seem simplistic and irrelevant to us today. We are altogether too much impressed by “effectual truth.” 

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*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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Is published weekly for its members by the

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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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