• ŠTÚDIE A ANALÝZY •

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Machiavelli and Nietzsche on Secularization and the Omnipotence of Human Government

The study deals with Machiavelli's and Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of secularization from a comparative perspective. It sheds light on the differences and similarities in their view. They have had a very distinct understanding of secularization. Although there are four centuries between the two philosophers, the estimation of the nature and consequences of mass secularization is very similar. For both of them, secularization gives rise to secular substitutes for traditional religions, especially political substitutes. But even secularized societies would necessarily remain "religious". This study also shows differences in the analysis of the phenomenon of secularization. Machiavelli relied on his knowledge of politics and the nature of mankind. Nietzsche, on the other hand, focused on the world around him.

Key words: Machiavelli, Nietzsche, secularization, religion, Christianity

Introduction

Although there has been remarkably little scholarly work comparing Machiavelli and Nietzsche,[1] it is generally recognized that they have many striking features in common; their apparent hostility towards Christian morality (at least in the political sphere), their ostentatiously provocative and often wickedly, cynically humorous style of writing, their praise of the strong and ruthless at the expense of the cowardly and weak and the (closely related) neo-pagan stratum in their approach to statecraft, their praise of the magnificent statesmen and warriors of antiquity over the servile or decadent, Christian or post-Christian "moderns." However, these points of comparison might seem relatively superficial, to the extent that they concern literary style and political tastes or preferences, rather than fundamental theoretical questions. This impression seems to be confirmed by the one explicit comment on Machiavelli in Nietzsche's mature pub-

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[1] The only book-length study comparing Machiavelli and Nietzsche in English is Diego A. Von Vacano's *The Art of Power: Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory* (Von Vacano, 2007), a work which suffers from a lack of close reading with respect to both authors, resulting in a comparison which is rather shallow.

lished writings, which praises *The Prince* with respect to "the tempo of its style" (*BGE* 28).[2] One might easily conclude, then, that while Nietzsche recognized in Machiavelli a kindred spirit of sorts, someone whose rhetorical artistry and personal style had a great deal in common with his own, there are few substantive comparisons to be made between the Italian political scientist and the German psychologist and critic of metaphysics.

However, if one looks more closely at Nietzsche's praise of Machiavelli, one notices that although his remarks focus on his predecessor's literary style, he characterizes that style *itself* in a manner that is inseparable from its content. Nietzsche says that in *The Prince*, Machiavelli "cannot help but present the most serious subject matter [*die ernsteste Angelegenheit*] in a boisterous *allegrissimo*, perhaps not without a malicious artistic sense of the contrast he risks – lengthy, difficult, severe, dangerous thoughts and the tempo of the gallop and the very best, most capricious mood" (*BGE* 28). The distinctive brilliance of Machiavelli's style consists, then, in the contrast between its dangerous and profound subject matter and the boisterous gallop of his prose. Accordingly, if the subject matter were changed, this very contrast and along with it the distinctive style would disappear; if mere trivialities were presented in a comparably lively "tempo," the artistry would be rendered insipid and lose its poignant, internally complex *chiaroscuro*. At the same time, Nietzsche thereby suggests that what he regards as "the most serious subject matter" and as "lengthy, difficult, severe, dangerous thoughts" were likewise so regarded by Machiavelli himself, who knowingly "risks" this contrast, and therefore that the comparison between them extends into the deepest layers of their thinking.

In this paper, I focus on a theme which plays an important role in both Machiavelli and Nietzsche, albeit in different ways – the idea that secularization gives rise to secular substitutes for traditional religions, especially political substitutes (I understand "secularization" broadly as the decline of the social power and institutional authority of traditional theistic religion; a more precise definition won't be necessary for the purposes of this paper[3]). This idea has been fairly widespread, especially among conservative political thinkers, since the earliest reactions to the secularism of the French Revolution,[4] although it takes an acutely polemical anti-Enlightenment

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[2]   I will refer to Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* by aphorism number, with the abbreviation *BGE*. I use the Kaufmann translation (Nietzsche, 1966); I will occasionally modify the translation for greater accuracy). Nietzsche also mentions Machiavelli in passing in a passage which focuses on Thucydides in *Twilight of the Idols*: "My recreation, my preference, my *cure* for all Platonism was always *Thucydides*. Thucydides and, perhaps, Machiavelli's *Principe*, are most related to me through the unconditional will not to delude oneself and to see reason in *reality,* – not in 'reason,' still less in 'morality.'" *Twilight of the Idols*, What I Owe the Ancients 2 (Nietzsche, 1889; my translation). It is notable that both here and in *BGE* 28, Nietzsche refers explicitly to *The Prince*, and that he cites its title in Italian, although it seems likely that he read the book only in French translation (Brobjer, 2008, p.104).

[3]   For a recent attempt at a more precise definition, see the three senses of "secular," concerning the social, political and cultural-philosophical ("conditions of belief") dimensions of "secularity," delineated by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Taylor, 2007, p. 1 – 22).

[4]   Already in 1790, Edmund Burke speaks in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of those "who have made a philosophy and a religion of their hostility" to church and monarchy (Burke, 2003, p. 78). Half a century later, in 1856, Alexis de Tocqueville describes in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* the secular fanaticism unleashed by the French Revolution alternatively as "a kind of new religion" ("an incomplete religion, it is true, without God, without ritual, and without a life after death, but one which nevertheless, like Islam, flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs") and as "a new kind of religion" (Tocqueville, 1998, p. 101 and p. 208).

form in Nietzsche, just as it had also done in a very different way for many reactionary religious thinkers, such as Joseph de Maistre and Juan Donoso Cortés.[5] Liberal progressives are more likely to limit its application to totalitarian movements such as communism and fascism, while denying that secularization leads necessarily to the replacement of traditional religions with secular ersatz religions. They are more likely to contend that liberal individualism and tolerant pluralism constitute a viable alternative for individuals and whole societies, even as the populace can often be misled, e.g., by charismatic demagogues who play on the people's fears and insecurities, down dangerous paths leading to the emergence of political religions, which might then seize control of the mechanisms of power.[6] Nietzsche by contrast sees liberal progressivism itself as a collectivist substitute for religion; he believes that while secularization can lead to the emergence of what he calls "free, very free spirits," the latter form an exiguous minority in *any* given social or political order, whether liberal or illiberal. For the most part, secularization gives rise not to freedom of spirit, but to the emergence of "falsely so-called 'free spirits'" (*BGE* 44) who are subject to forms of dogmatism which are if anything more severe than those which prevailed before secularization.

Nothing I have said about Nietzsche in the preceding paragraph is all that controversial; even those Nietzscheans who prefer a more egalitarian reading of their master generally recognize that this requires the excision of many emphatically "elitist" passages. It is far more controversial to maintain that the theme of secularization was at all present, in a conscious way, in Machiavelli. Despite a few prominent exceptions, a majority of scholars today believe that he was a sincere Christian, even if not fervently pious.[7] In my view, he was no less atheistic and irreligious than Nietzsche. However, I do not have space to justify this in detail here.[8] Rather, I want to provide evidence that Machiavelli predicted, with remarkable prescience, the possibility of mass secularization in Europe two or three centuries before it began to happen and at the same time predicted that it would not lead to the emergence of an authentically free-thinking society, emancipated from the rule of irrational dogmas (as quite a few 18th century philosophes, and vast numbers of 19th century utopians and progressives, believed or hoped), but rather to novel secular and political forms of mythology and superstition, no less fantastical than those which had prevailed in the past.

While it would surely have been possible in Machiavelli's time and place for a devoutly Christian thinker of extraordinary prescience to have anticipated the possibility of mass secularization, such a thinker would have looked forward to this possibility with horror and done everything he could to avert such a catastrophe. By contrast, Machiavelli seeks to hasten the advent of secularization – while looking forward to the coming secular society not with the revolutionary pathos

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[5] See de Maistre, 1994 and Cortés, 1879.

[6] See Gentile, 2006, Maier, 2007 and Roberts, 2009. Gentile allows for non-totalitarian, salutary political religions, such as the American civil religion, which are compatible with liberal individualism.

[7] For example, Nederman, 2009, and Viroli, 2012.

[8] For examples of scholars who supply detailed evidence that Machiavelli was an atheist, see Mansfield, 1979, Tarcov, 2014, and Parsons, 2016, all of which draw on the pioneering work of Strauss, 1959. I find the arguments of Strauss, Mansfield, Tarcov and Parsons that Machiavelli was a thoroughly irreligious thinker to be unassailable; the reader can form his or her own judgment.

with which a thinker like Karl Marx looked forward to the arrival of the communist utopia,[9] but rather with a measured and ironic eye, just as Nietzsche says (looking backward, however, and not forward) that "if we could contemplate the oddly painful and equally crude and subtle comedy of European Christianity with the mocking and aloof eyes of an Epicurean god, I think our amazement and laughter would never end" (*BGE* 62). Machiavelli knew that mass secularization wouldn't lead to utopia. He also knew, as Nietzsche himself emphasizes in a handful of rarely-quoted passages, that European civilization owes a great deal to Christianity: "Who could be rich enough in gratitude not to be impoverished in view of all that the 'spiritual men' of Christianity, for example, have so far done for Europe!" (*BGE* 62[10]) However, in response to the political crisis of his time, Machiavelli sought to accelerate the secularization process, while giving advance warning sotto voce that most human beings cannot live without the aid of mythologies of some kind or other.

In this paper, I argue that Nietzsche and Machiavelli had a similar estimation of the nature and consequences of mass secularization, even as Nietzsche analyzes this phenomenon from the historical vantage point of its advanced development, while Machiavelli does so from that of its very inception. Machiavelli's analysis is arguably more impressive, insofar as he subjects to critical analysis a phenomenon which hadn't yet come into being (and which he knew merely a possibility, albeit a real one, as subsequent events have demonstrated), relying on his knowledge of politics and human nature, while Nietzsche's analysis focuses immediately on the world around him. Since our vantage point is far closer to Nietzsche's, I begin with the later thinker, then move back in time to Machiavelli. A complete interpretation of the theme of secularization in either thinker, let alone both, would require an extensive, book-length study. In this paper, I limit myself to the following aims. In the first section, I present an overview of Nietzsche's analysis of secularization as having led to new forms of dogmatism and mythology, especially collectivist political forms, through a close analysis of two important aphorisms in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 44 and 53. In the second, I present a close reading of an important chapter of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, Chapter 21 of Book 2,[11] which in a remarkable way anticipates Nietzsche's criticisms of modernity. In the third, I bring out three questions raised, but unanswered, by my comparative analysis of Machiavelli and Nietzsche in the preceding sections, and propose them as themes for future research.

Nietzsche and the "Fundamental Inclination" of "Falsely So-Called Free Spirits"

BGE 44 concerns the relationship between the "new philosophers," or "philosophers of the future," whose emergence Nietzsche anticipates, and the "free spirits," among whom he includes

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9   See for example the programmatic *Communist Manifesto*, co-written with Engels (Marx and Engels 2002).
10   For Nietzsche's praise of Christianity, see for example *Daybreak* 60, *The Gay Science* 358, *Beyond Good and Evil* 61 and *On the Genealogy of Morals* 1:6.
11   I will refer to the *Discourses on Livy* by book, chapter and paragraph number (I.21.1 = Book 1, chapter 21, paragraph 1) and to *The Prince* by chapter number.

himself (*BGE* 44). Indeed, he speaks frequently of "we free spirits," but never of "we philosophers of the future"; in this aphorism, he claims that the latter will be something "thoroughly different" from the former. But he claims also that he has an obligation to clear up a misunderstanding which has obscured the concept "free spirit" like a "fog," rendering it "opaque":

In all the countries of Europe, and in America, too, there now is something that abuses this name: a very narrow, imprisoned, chained type of spirits who want just about the opposite of what accords with our intentions and instincts… They belong, briefly and sadly, among the *levelers* – these falsely so-called 'free spirits' – being eloquent and prolifically scribbling slaves of the democratic taste and its 'modern ideas'; they are all human beings without solitude, without their own solitude, clumsy good fellows whom one should not deny either courage or respectable decency – only they are unfree and ridiculously superficial, above all in their fundamental inclination to find in the forms of the old society as it has existed so far just about the cause of all human misery and failure – which is a way of standing truth happily upon her head! What they would like to strive for with all their powers is the universal green-pasture happiness of the herd, with security, lack of danger, comfort, and an easier life for everyone; the two songs and doctrines which they repeat most often are 'equality of rights' and 'sympathy for all that suffers' – and suffering itself they take for something that must be abolished. (*BGE* 44)

Nietzsche goes on to explain the very different attitude of the free spirits, "we opposite men," who are "at the other end from all modern ideology and herd desiderata," because they believe that phenomena like "severity," "slavery" and "danger in the alleyway and in the heart" are just as essential (no less, but also no more) than their opposites for the "enhancement" of the human species: "We *are* something different from *'libres-penseurs,' 'liberi pensatori,' 'Freidenker'* and whatever else all these goodly advocates of 'modern ideas' like to call themselves." Nietzsche concludes the aphorism with an elaborate paean to the truly free spirits, made up of a series of pregnant and suggestive formulas which include "full of malice against the lures of dependence that lie hidden in honors, or money, or offices, or enthusiasms of the senses" and "investigators to the point of cruelty" (*BGE* 44).

Nietzsche's most general point is clear: while terms like "free spirit" and "free thinker" have come in the common usage of various European languages (he emphasizes French, Italian and German) to be applied to political egalitarians of various stripes (democrats, liberals, progressives, socialists, anarchists, etc.), whose "freedom" consists in their opposition to traditional religious and hierarchical prejudices ("Throne and Altar"), such human beings are in fact "slaves" to their own democratic "taste," accepting "modern ideas" and "modern ideology" no less unquestioningly (perhaps even more so) than the beleaguered defenders of the *ancien régime* hold onto their convictions. The proposal that egalitarianism really comes down to a matter of taste is particularly cutting because the thinkers whom Nietzsche has in mind regard the superiority of "modern ideas" to traditional prejudices as a judgment of reason and morality (indeed, it is characteristic of frivolous aristocrats to be driven by mere "taste"). The superiority of equal rights to hierarchical social order is for Nietzsche mere a preference, not a self-evident or rationally demonstrable principle.

However, Nietzsche doesn't present "modern ideas" as an arbitrarily grouped collection of prejudices. Rather, he speaks of the "fundamental inclination" (*Grundhang*) of the modern false-

ly so-called free spirits. This fundamental inclination is not exactly towards equality, nor even towards compassion for "all that suffers." Rather, it is the inclination "to find in the forms of the old society as it has existed so far just about the cause of all human misery and failure [*in den Formen der bisherigen alten Gesellschaft ungefähr die Ursache für alles menschliche Elend und Missrathen zu sehn*]." It is "above all" this inclination – a kind of theoretical inclination (*to see* the world in a certain way), not an affective nor a practical one (e.g., to feel compassion for others, or to act in a certain way, e.g., philanthropically) – which makes them "unfree and ridiculously superficial."

Nietzsche views political life from the perspective of a philosopher – as he says later in the book, "the greatest thoughts are the greatest events." (*BGE* 285) How one "sees" the world is of decisive importance, even if it is inseparable from one's affective relationship to the world. In this way, Nietzsche is poles apart from both Marx and Freud, with whom he is often and misleadingly grouped.[12] Nonetheless, Nietzsche speaks complexly not just of a dogma or a "modern idea," but of the affective inclination to view the world through the lens of an idea, namely the idea that "all human misery and failure" are caused by the forms of non-egalitarian society as it has existed "up to now" (*bisher*), i.e., the pre-existing hierarchical social and political arrangements. Modern soi-disant free thinkers distinguish, whether implicitly or explicitly, the conventional forms of society from its natural matter (the individual human beings who make it up, organized in a certain way) and ascribe human misery and failure exclusively to the former. This is a position which, if taken seriously, has radical implications. If I find myself unhappy, this has nothing to do with any natural defects or imbalances in my inherited endowments of body and mind, nor with any such defects in the other men and women with whom I share this earth. Rather, it is exclusively the result of the contingent social and political arrangements imposed on me. If I fail to achieve any goal towards which I might strive, the blame likewise falls squarely on "the forms of society," not on its natural elements. If I'm physically weak and I cannot become a champion wrestler, it's due to the oppressively hierarchical structure and arrangements of the society in which I live, which the government can and should correct, and the missed opportunities and poor environmental conditioning arising from them. If I'm physically unattractive and a beautiful woman has no romantic interest in me, the same cause applies. Ditto if I suffer from mental retardation and I cannot pursue a successful career as a brain surgeon, or if I suffer from gender dysphoria and I cannot transform myself into the opposite sex.[13]

Nietzsche proposes that as soon as one begins to see the world in this way, one inevitably succumbs to utopian revolutionary enthusiasm, even as the latter can take more or less mild or violent, moderate or radical forms. But even when it takes relatively moderate forms, the thought itself is radical, and this will have some effect on the political practice it inspires. If "all human

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[12] The classic reference to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the "masters of suspicion" who belong together occurs in Paul Ricoeur's book on Freud (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 32). More insightfully, albeit more obscurely, Deleuze claimed that Marx and Freud represent "the dawn of our culture," while Nietzsche represents "something entirely different: the dawn of counterculture" (Deleuze, 1977, p. 142).

[13] For an analysis of how "politically correct" language tends to imply the ideological assumption identified by Nietzsche, see Chapter 4 of Zbigniew Janowski's *Homo Americanus: The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy in America*, "American Newspeak" (Janowski 2021, p. 57 – 80).

misery and failure" (Nietzsche's emphasis) are the result of the contingent forms of pre-existing society, there appears to be no reason why they cannot be brought to a definitive end, i.e., no reason why a utopia cannot be constructed, by rearranging society into a novel, non-oppressive (egalitarian) structural arrangement.

I turn now to the shorter aphorism *BGE* 53, which seems to concern religion rather than politics, just as *BGE* 44 seems to focus on politics and not on religion: "Why atheism today? – 'The father' in God has been thoroughly refuted; ditto, 'the judge,' 'the rewarder.' Also his 'free will': he does not hear – and if he heard he still would not know how to help. Worst of all: he seems incapable of clear communication: is he unclear? This is what I found to be causes for the decline of European theism, on the basis of a great many conversations, asking and listening. It seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully – but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion" (*BGE* 53).

Nietzsche presents himself as a kind of Socratic figure, spending his days in conversation, asking many different people questions and listening carefully to their answers. He wants to find out why theism is on the decline. But the causes of mass secularization may not be identical to Nietzsche's own philosophical reasons for rejecting theism himself. Certainly, the reasons he ascribes to Europeans in general, most of whom are not genuine "free spirits," seem rather frivolous. This suspicion is confirmed by the final sentence, in which Nietzsche says, rather cryptically, that Europeans are indeed becoming more atheistic, but not less religious – if anything, they are becoming more religious. What can this paradox mean? Nietzsche clearly implies that "religion" in his understanding is not an exclusively theistic phenomenon. One might think of Buddhism, which is sometimes taken to be non-theistic, at least in some of its variants. Indeed, Nietzsche sees a certain affinity between Buddhism and secularized Europe; he even claims that late modern Europe is "threatened" by the rise of a "new Buddhism" (*BGE* 202). However, it would be an absurd exaggeration to say that most Europeans in the 1880s were embracing some new, Westernized form of Buddhism. What Nietzsche must mean is that the secular replacements for religion which were emerging in Europe were rendering their adherents in some sense more "religious" than their ancestors, i.e., that the new secular forms of dogmatism which play for late modern Europeans a role analogous to that which traditional religion had played for their ancestors are adhered to in a manner that is more "religious," i.e., more dogmatic and unquestioning, more unphilosophical, than the mode of believing characteristic of their pious Christian or Jewish forebears.

BGE 53 doesn't explicitly link Nietzsche's observation that the process of secularization is rendering Europeans at the same time more atheistic and more religious with the "modern ideas" of *BGE* 44. Indeed, *BGE* 53 is wholly silent about which forms of religion are replacing the old ones. However, if we juxtapose these aphorisms, we see an important connection between them. In *BGE* 44, Nietzsche describes a fundamental inclination to view the world in a certain way which results in a proselytizing zeal. In other words, he describes a secular, but quasi-religious phenomenon. He sees modern ideologues as firmly in the grip of a dogmatic way of looking at the world which resembles a religion. Further, Nietzsche surely regards this worldview as a mythological one, despite its secular, this-worldly character. While Nietzsche often emphasizes the importance of natural differences (e.g., between men and women, or philosophers and

non-philosophers) ineradicable by education or social engineering, these soi-disant free thinkers regard natural differences as mere matter to be shaped and reshaped by the contingent and alterable "forms of society," which are implicitly ascribed a kind of omnipotence vis-à-vis its material elements.

But why does Nietzsche regard these "falsely so-called" free spirits as more religious than their ancestors? He offers no explanation for this qualification, so I will venture a hypothesis in the spirit of what he does say. Their fundamental inclination is to see the world in a certain way. But the world they "see," or rather fail to see, misinterpret, is the world around them, not another world. While Christians and Jews believe in supernatural, other-worldly phenomena and in spectacular miracles which took place many centuries ago, such as God parting the Red Sea for Moses or Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, these modern ideologues ascribe mythical powers to the human species itself – in particular, to "the forms of society," i.e., to social arrangements and especially to governmental institutions. For Nietzsche, while Christians and Jews delude themselves in believing in the existence of another world, progressive ideologues delude themselves more radically in their refusal to see the social and political world around them as it is. They ascribe miraculously transformative powers, not to human *individuals* like Moses or Jesus, but to the human community, in particular to the organized political community and its institutions. Just as unjust, hierarchical government has been the source of all misery and failure, so just, egalitarian government is the only thing capable of healing the wound caused by history. They come to see all natural differences (e.g., between the physically strong and the weak, the genius and the mediocrity, the beautiful and the ugly, even the male and the female) as no different in principle from radically alterable differences such as that between the rich and the poor. Just as human government if it afforded sufficient power can redistribute material wealth (although it cannot eliminate overnight, in a stroke, the habits of thought and conduct fostered by wealth or poverty), so it is in principle capable of redistributing everything human, even strength, intelligence and sexual identity. While it is evident that many natural differences are to some extent malleable (some more so than others), and different kinds and qualities of e.g., education, training or diet can develop or constrict an individual's natural potential in different ways, these so-called "free spirits" altogether obliterate the differences between nature, habit, artifice and convention. In short, Nietzsche implies that to refuse to see what is in front of your eyes is an even greater delusion than to believe in something that you cannot see.

Machiavelli and the Dogma of the Omnipotence of Government

Chapter 21 of Book 1 of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* is entitled, "How Much Blame That Prince and That Republic Merit That Lack Their Own Arms." In this chapter, Machiavelli grandly declares, "It is more true than any other truth that if where there are men there are no soldiers, it arises through a defect of the prince and not through any other defect, either of the site or of nature" (*Discourses* I.21.1). The manner in which he introduces this claim conveys the impression that this is a fundamental thesis of Machiavellian thought. One doesn't introduce a trivial observation, however certain one might be of its truth, with the qualification that it is

"more true than any other truth." Leo Strauss observes that Machiavelli implies that this claim is more true than the truth of the Christian religion, which Machiavelli elsewhere says "has shown the truth and the true way," i.e., Christianity points the way towards the truth, but is not itself the truth (Strauss, 1959, p. 178). But the three examples Machiavelli gives to illustrate or demonstrate this fundamental dogma suggest that he was privately skeptical of the new dogma he was proposing.

The first example is drawn from early, one might say mythical Roman history. Machiavelli says that Tullus, the third king of Rome, who succeeded the peaceful and religious king Numa, did not find a single man in all of Rome with any experience of war, since the city had been at peace for 40 years. Nonetheless, Machiavelli says that "so much was his virtue that, at a stroke, under his government, he was able to make very excellent soldiers" (*Discourses* I.21.1). It is appropriate that this example is drawn from early, mythical or legendary Roman history, because Machiavelli ascribes to Tullus almost godlike or supernatural powers. Purely through his virtue, which Machiavelli here identifies with his knowledge, Tullus transformed a multitude of men with no experience of war "at a stroke," overnight as it were, into most excellent soldiers. The absurdity of the suggestion is implicitly emphasized by Machiavelli's incongruous juxtaposition of the formula "at a stroke" (*in un tratto*), which implies instantaneous transformation, with the formula "under his government" (*sotto il suo governo*), which implies a lengthy process of governance, education, establishment of institutions, and gradual transformation of human beings who are subject to these institutions. Furthermore, if it is possible for a prince (or a republic, as Machiavelli adds) to transform an immense multitude of men, who presumably have very different natural endowments of body and mind, into excellent soldiers "at a stroke," there would seem to be no reason why such a prince couldn't transform the same multitude into excellent doctors, farmers, artisans – or anything else, even excellent philosophers – "at a stroke." The matter is altogether irrelevant; what is important is the imposition of the desired form, through the appropriate "government," which somehow works its magic instantaneously.

The second example by contrast is drawn from "the most recent times," as Machiavelli emphasizes (*Discourses* I.21.2). "Everyone," i.e., all of his contemporaries, "knows" that the king of England was able to wage war against France using only his own soldiers, without having to rely on allies or mercenaries, despite the fact that England had been at peace for three decades (*Discourses* I.21.2). However, the explanation which Machiavelli provides is that the king of England had kept his soldiers in continuous, uninterrupted military training for all the decades during which England was at peace, so, although they had no direct experience of war, they were well trained and well prepared for it. While in the first example, drawn from myth, legend or pre-history, Machiavelli proposes an instantaneous transformation, "at a stroke," in the second example, drawn from contemporary experience accessible to "everyone," Machiavelli suggests that the soldiers of England would not have been prepared for war had their training been interrupted for any considerable length of time.

Both examples suggest that the fundamental truth which Machiavelli proposes in this chapter is not really a fundamental truth, but a fundamental dogma – the first example by means of hyperbole and incongruous juxtaposition, the second by giving a prosaic, realistic explanation of what first appears to be an almost miraculous achievement. The dogma which Machiavelli intro-

duces in this chapter has indeed become one of the fundamental dogmas of modernity, which can be seen in a radical form in communism, but in a more subtle form in many versions of liberal progressivism. All political problems, and even social problems and personal problems, are the result of imperfect forms of governance – accordingly, they can be corrected by introducing the right institutions. Nature, and even contingent circumstances, are wholly irrelevant. Matter offers no resistance to the institutional imposition of form, which is ascribed a kind of omnipotence. Machiavelli implies that secular myths of this kind, which are myths not about the gods but about the human species itself, which exaggerate its ability to conquer both nature and chance, will serve the same function in the new, secular society which traditional religious myths served in pre-modern societies, as the basis for a new kind of patriotism. But Machiavelli himself, as a philosopher, remains no less detached in thought from the new myths which he introduces than from the old ones which he seeks to replace. Machiavelli preserves his philosophic freedom even as he proposes that the human species ought to replace one form of mental slavery with another for its own benefit.

The third example occupies a kind of median position between the first and the second examples. Machiavelli writes, "After the Thebans Pelopidas and Epaminondas had freed Thebes and brought it out of the servitude of the Spartan empire, though they found themselves in a city used to servitude and in the midst of effeminate peoples, they did not hesitate – so much was their virtue – to put them under arms, and to go with them to meet the Spartan armies in the field, and to conquer them." (*Discourses* I.21.3) While the first example is drawn from ancient Roman myth or legend and the second is drawn from contemporary experience accessible to "everyone," the third is drawn from ancient Greek political history. Like the first, it is at a distance from the present day – it is ancient, not modern. Like the second, however, it concerns events which we can be sure took place, even if Machiavelli's source (Plutarch's *Pelopidas*) might be embellishing in its details. But the third example, like the second, still falls within the sphere of political history, not myth or legend.

The lesson which Machiavelli draws from the story of Pelopidas and Epaminondas likewise falls somewhere between the lessons of the first two examples. Taken at face value, the story of Tullus illustrates the omnipotence of human government, while that of the King of England serves implicitly to debunk this novel dogma. Pelopidas and Epaminondas demonstrate extraordinary gifts, comparable to those of Tullus, who is invoked once again: "He who writes of it [i.e., Plutarch] says that in a short time [*in brieve tempo*] these two showed that men of war are born not only in Lacedemon but in every other place where men are born, provided that there may be found one who knows how to direct them to the military, as one sees that Tullus knew how to direct the Romans." (*Discourses* I.21.3) This pair of republican leaders made large masses of men who had been habituated to servility and effeminacy into warlike troops in a remarkably short amount of time, unlike the King of England, who knew he had to keep his men in uninterrupted training if he was to keep them ready to fight. However, whereas the legendary king Tullus transformed a population with no experience of war into excellent soldiers "at a stroke," no such hyperbolic formula occurs in this example. Pelopidas and Epaminondas required at least *some* significant length of time to prepare their troops, even if a remarkably short one given the matter they had to work with. We move from "at a stroke" (first example) to "did not interrupt" (second

example) to "in a short time" (third example). The third example is thus somewhat more realistic than the first. On the other hand, the matter with which the Theban leaders had to work seems even less suitable than the Romans who had been habituated to peace under Numa's lengthy reign. In the first example, the condition of the Romans is described in a merely privative way – they had no experience of war. In the third, the condition of the Thebans is described far more harshly – they were "used to serving" and positively "effeminate." This suggests that Pelopidas and Epaminondas were confronted with a more difficult task than was Tullus; they were working with "matter" which is "corrupt," as Machiavelli had described the people of Thebes at the time of these events a little earlier in the book (*Discourses* I.17.3). On the other hand, however, it also implies that political leaders must work with the matter which they are given, even if virtuous leaders are sometimes able to overcome the constraints imposed by circumstances. This again is more realistic than the first example, which suggests that in governing the Roman people, Tullus had merely to deal with a kind of tabula rasa.

Furthermore, the fact that Pelopidas and Epaminondas were a pair of leaders working together, presumably advising one another and correcting each other's mistakes, as opposed to a solitary leader possessed of perfect knowledge and limitless power, serves to demythologize the third example, to render it more prosaic and plausible. If wise human government really were omnipotent, as Machiavelli wants to propose, it would be perfectly fitting that the agent of government be one single wise and virtuous monarch like Tullus. Why would there be a need for two people working together if a single prince with the proper virtue or knowledge is perfectly sufficient to transform the matter into anything he wants it to be? Thus, in chapter 6 of *The Prince*, which concerns the "greatest examples" of those "who have acquired or founded kingdoms," including "Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and the like," Machiavelli writes, "As one examines their actions and lives, one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased." (*Prince* 6) By contrast, a pair of republican leaders working together suggests that neither is an omniscient and omnipotent prince; rather, they are both human beings operating in part by trial and error.[14]

The third example, then, implies that the "effectual truth" of Machiavelli's exaggerations is that exceptionally gifted leaders can exploit circumstances that merely ordinary leaders, even highly capable ones, would not be able to navigate successfully, in order to overcome difficulties and achieve, not the impossible, but the very difficult. This isn't a profound observation, let alone

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[14] An anonymous reviewer objects that "Tullus was able to establish Roman military power *in un tratto* because he had an extraordinary virtue." However, this point is compatible with my reading. Machiavelli states that if men are not soldiers, it is due to the prince's lack of virtue; he cannot excuse his failure to make them soldiers by any fault of "nature" or "the site" (*Discourses* I.21.1). Thus, a prince can transform *any human matter whatsoever*, no matter how virtuous or servile, corrupt or incorrupt, and no matter what the circumstances, into virtuous soldiers, so long as he possesses extraordinary virtue, identified in I.21.1 with the proper *knowledge*. In *Prince* 6, he goes further; a prince of extraordinary virtue can introduce "any form" he pleases into his "matter." The reviewer is correct to note that the second and third examples in I.21.2-3 demonstrate the need for "the interplay of virtue and institutional arrangements," but fails to note that it is precisely in this way that they undermine the hyperbolic claim which Machiavelli makes at the very beginning of the chapter, and which they are supposed to illustrate or demonstrate, as well as the even more hyperbolic claim he makes in *Prince* 6. Both *Discourses* I.21.1 and *Prince* 6 imply that no such "interplay" is necessary, but merely the virtuous imposition of form onto matter.

a novel dogma that could serve as a secular replacement for traditional religious dogmas. On the contrary, it is a judgment of ordinary prudence and common sense – albeit one worth emphasizing in a democratic age inclined to reduce the "exception" to the "rule," as Nietzsche would put it. But its significance in this place in the text is twofold.

First, just as Machiavelli used the second example to debunk the exoteric teaching of the first, he uses the third to illustrate the gap between the exceptional and the miraculous, thereby helping the reader to understand how easily that gap can be blurred, whether by accident or by design. Secondly, this example communicates something about his own enterprise. Pelopidas and Epaminondas call Machiavelli himself to mind. He is also a republican leader confronted with the task of renewing "corrupt matter" and imposing a certain form on it, bringing "new modes and orders" (*Discourses* 1.Preface.1). He characterizes his contemporaries most harshly as corrupt and servile, with little or no experience of free and virtuous republican life (*Discourses* I.Preface.1-3, II.Preface.2-3). He even claims that his native Florence, founded as a dependent colony of the Roman Empire, has never been able to free itself from its servile origins, flourishing to the extent that it has done so far only "by courtesy of the prince," i.e., Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, even 1,500 years later! (*Discourses* I.1.3) In seeking to renew ancient virtue through new modes and orders, Machiavelli faces what may appear to be an impossible task, requiring a miracle, but it is in fact only a very difficult one, the success of which requires his extraordinary virtue as a writer, while also relying to some extent on fortune: "A man, like Machiavelli, who was born in the wrong time, may achieve posthumous success through his writings, but this depends on the survival of his writings, i.e., on something which is essentially exposed to chance." (Strauss, 1959, p. 218) Furthermore, like Pelopidas, Machiavelli requires help from a friend who will assist him in bringing his enterprise to completion: "Although this enterprise may be difficult, nonetheless, aided by those who have encouraged me to accept this burden, I believe I can carry it far enough so that a short road will remain for another to bring it to the destined place." (*Discourses* I.Preface.3)

Machiavelli emphasizes that the third example shows that "men of war" are "born" not only in certain provinces, like Sparta, but in *every* place where men are born "provided that there may be found one who knows how to direct them to the military [*milizia*]." (*Discourses* I.21.3) Harvey Mansfield points out that Machiavelli implies that such a person need not be a political or military leader in the narrow sense. He could also be a writer who knows how to "direct" men to different forms of warfare – including the intellectual or spiritual warfare of propaganda against Christianity – through his writings: "Machiavelli then quotes Virgil in praise of Tullus for moving indolent men to arms, which shows us that it is not only and not chiefly Tullus who 'will move' men but also Virgil and other writers." (Mansfield, 1979, p. 92) This confirms our suspicion that the example of Pelopidas and Epaminondas is meant to call Machiavelli himself to mind, who was able to "direct men to the military" far more effectively, and on a far greater scale, posthumously through his writings than he was ever able to do in his active political role as Secretary of the Chancery of the Florentine Republic.

Unanswered Questions

Juxtaposing Nietzsche with Machiavelli brings out the fascinating relationship between the origins of the dogma of the omnipotence of human government and its triumph in late modernity. With extraordinary prescience, Machiavelli saw that this dogma had the potential to replace traditional religious dogmas as the basis for a new kind of patriotism. The pagan fusion of religion and politics and the Christian distinction between the temporal and spiritual orders, in which the former is in some respects independent from and in others subordinate to the latter, gives way to the transformation of politics itself into a kind of religion. Machiavelli sets forth this dogma in a subtle way which helps us to understand both its potential effectiveness and its inherently mythological character.[15] These aspects are reciprocally supportive, insofar as commonsense insight into the limits of the political cannot satisfy men's religious longings or inspire them to proselytism and self-sacrifice, and in tension, insofar as the hyperbolic character of the dogma exposes it to plausible criticisms.

However, many questions remain. I will address three. First, how did Machiavelli anticipate the mechanisms of secularization? Chapter 5 of Book 2 of the *Discourses* addresses what he calls "the variation of sects": "When a new sect – that is, a new religion – emerges, its first concern is to extinguish the old to give itself reputation." (*Discourses* II.5.1) After brief discussion of the efforts of the Christian religion to "[eliminate] every memory" of "that ancient theology," i.e., pagan polytheism, he claims that "sects vary two or three times in five or six thousand years," implying that the Christian religion may well be on the verge of destruction, by the end of the 17th century, or conversely may well last until roughly 3,000 A.D. (*Discourses* II.5.1).[16] But while he addresses what "sects" do when they have come to power, he doesn't address how they come to power. Prior to Christianity, religions have generally come to power either through violent conquest or top-down imposition, e.g., the conversion of Constantine – although Constantine wouldn't have been able to Christianize the Roman Empire so effectively from above if it hadn't already been Christianized extensively from below (Strauss, 1959, p. 84). Rémi Brague observes, "Christianity did indeed have a political effect to the extent that it created a new type of social organization, the church. With the church there arose, for the first time, a purely religious form of social organization with no national dimension. A society is usually founded on such natural ties as kinship, shared territory, or allegiance to a common sovereign. Here a community appeared in which the unifying principle was not political… With Christianity, the community was founded on faith." (Brague, 2007, p. 66) Machiavelli anticipated that Europe might be secu-

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[15] The same anonymous reviewer objects to the thesis that "Machiavelli was a precursor of secularization" on the grounds that "many passages of Machiavelli's work imply that he regarded religion as an essential aspect of social and political cohesion." I agree with the latter statement, but it is not an objection to my thesis; on the contrary, I argue that Machiavelli indeed regards religion as essential to society, but he believes that secular ersatz religion can serve the same function as pre-modern theistic religion. Indeed, I argue that precisely *because* Machiavelli regards religion as essential to society, he believes it is not just desirable, but *inevitable*, that secularization, if successfully accomplished, will give rise to secular ersatz religions.

[16] See Strauss, 1959, p. 32. Earlier in the *Discourses*, lamenting the corruption into which the Christian religion has come, Machiavelli says, "Whoever might consider its foundations and see how much present usage is different from them might judge, without doubt, that either its ruin or its scourging is near." (*Discourses* I.12.1)

larized through the emergence of a new, secular faith, likewise trans-national in character, in the collective self-perfection of the human species through institutional governance. It is difficult to tell, and remains a question for further research, the precise extent to which Machiavelli believed that he was describing a process which was already beginning or trying to effect it himself through his own writings. Certainly, he must have recognized that the shorter, more readable and more immediately shocking and impious *Prince* had far greater potential to have a widespread and lasting secularizing effect than the much longer and more recondite *Discourses*, even as the latter arguably communicates more to the careful reader about the nature of the revolution he envisages.

Secondly, granting that Machiavelli, like Nietzsche, believed that a secularized society would necessarily remain a "religious" one, did he also believe that such a society would necessarily involve the replacement of myths about the gods with myths about the human species? Could it also have taken different forms in other, e.g., non-European (say, post-Islamic), circumstances – or did he rather believe that there is something unique about the Christian religion which made mass secularization a real possibility, such that it is essentially (not just contingently) a post-Christian phenomenon, albeit one which can then be exported globally? Leo Strauss wrote, "Political atheism is a distinctly modern phenomenon. No pre-modern atheist doubted that social life required belief in, and worship of, God or gods." (Strauss, 1953, p. 169) Machiavelli could be understood as the first truly modern atheist, who recognized that unique characteristics of the Christian religion (e.g., its radical desacralization of nature and its prohibition of divination, as well as its egalitarian aspects), in combination with contingencies such as the corruption of the papacy in late medieval Italy and various political, religious, economic and technological developments, had revealed a possibility that all pre-modern atheists had discounted. On the other hand, as the founder of modernity, Machiavelli could be understood as a pre-modern thinker detached in both time and thought from that which he founds. He could be said to agree with Strauss that social life requires "belief in, and worship of, God or gods"; he would merely understand a secular society as transforming the human species itself into a kind of god (think of Hobbes' description of the state as a "Mortal God"[17]). This would cohere with Nietzsche's proposal that modern "democrats and ideologists of revolution" engage in a divinization of the organized political community: "They are at one, the lot of them, in their faith in the community as the savior, in short, in the herd, in 'themselves.'" (*BGE* 202)

Thirdly, there is an important difference between Machiavelli's presentation of the dogma of the omnipotence of human government and Nietzsche's analysis of the form in which it triumphed four centuries later. Although Machiavelli says that both princes and republics deserve "blame" and "ought to be ashamed of themselves" if they "lack their own soldiers for defense and offense," he says that if men are not soldiers, it arises through a defect of the prince (*Discourses* I.21.1). This applies to republics as well as to principalities. The three examples he gives (Tullus, the King of England, Pelopidas and Epaminondas) all refer either to princes or to republican leaders, whom he frequently refers to as "princes" in other places, e.g., when he speaks in

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[17]   The formula occurs in *Leviathan*, Book 1, Chapter 17, "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth." (Hobbes, 1996, p. 114)

innumerable places of "the princes" of the Roman republic. For Machiavelli, the transformation of the matter of society through the imposition of the desired forms is always an operation carried out by individuals; if the operation proves unsuccessful, it is a result of a "defect" in the prince's own nature. The radical transformation of nature is carried out by an extraordinary individual "who is rare in brain" (*Discourses* I.55.5; see also *Prince* 22). The overcoming of nature is made possible by an irreducible gift of nature or individual "genius," to use the language of a later age. This is a further way Machiavelli indicates the hyperbolic character of his innovation while also pointing to the truth, which we historical heirs of atrocities carried out in the name of social engineering by such unwitting pupils of Machiavelli as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin have been taught well, that the attempt to impose one's desired forms on social matter without any regard for its natural receptivity to these forms is an inevitably violent operation requiring despotic authority. As Machiavelli says a propos of Philip of Macedon: "These modes are very cruel, and enemies to every way of life, not only Christian but human; and any man whatever should flee them and wish to live in private rather than as king with so much ruin to men." (*Discourses* I.26.1).

Nietzsche by contrast ascribes to modern ideologues the belief, not that certain *individuals* can transform human beings as putty in their hands, but rather that the "forms of society" *themselves* have a radical transformative power independently of any identifiable individual. In Nietzsche's presentation, the omnipotence of government is strangely abstracted from the particular agents of government. The organized community *as a whole* is implicitly divided into two aspects, its formal organization and its material elements, and the forms of society are ascribed a kind of omnipotence in relation to the individuals who make it up. In Machiavelli's presentation, there is always at least one identifiable agent doing the work, e.g., Moses or Tullus, or perhaps a pair, e.g., Pelopidas and Epaminondas, or an elite group, e.g., the "wise princes" who governed the Roman Republic. But society as a whole has no ability to govern itself: "In all republics, ordered in whatever mode, never do even forty or fifty citizens reach the ranks of command." (*Discourses* I.16.5) Strictly speaking, the democratic ideal of collective self-government is an illusion. In Nietzsche, however, we find a picture of an entire community transforming itself by collectively imposing its own forms on its own matter and rearranging them, either in a "progressive" direction, e.g., when Obama was elected, or in a "regressive" direction, e.g., when Trump was elected. Machiavelli's picture is an extreme version of the power that credulous peoples have often ascribed to legendary founders or to their own rulers, while Nietzsche's picture resembles rather the Hegelian idea of the human species as collectively self-correcting *Geist* which is simultaneously the subject and the object of historical transformation.

The final question I propose is: What is the significance of this difference between Machiavelli and Nietzsche? I have argued that Machiavelli is just as detached from his novel dogma, which he seems to propose as his own, as Nietzsche is from the "fundamental inclination" of the so-called free spirits which he explicitly attacks. However, Machiavelli's dogma is less abstracted from the "effectual truth." He indicates how radical projects of social transformation will require the exercise of tyrannical authority, "modes" which are "very cruel" and inimical not only to Christian principle, but also to human feeling. One might think of Carl Schmitt's argument that the war to establish permanent peace would be the most brutal of all wars, in which

the foe is seen as the enemy of humanity and thus as deserving not merely defeat but total annihilation (Schmitt, 2007, p. 36 – 37), or the Nine Years War in Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World*, which establishes a despotic regime of technologically controlled hedonism through military tactics that inflict unspeakable suffering on vast masses of people (Huxley, 1950, p. 55 – 60).

Nietzsche also perceived the relationship between social engineering and despotism. He describes socialism as "the visionary younger brother of a decrepit despotism, whose heirs it wants to be," which "desires a wealth of executive power, as only despotism had it." (*Human, All-Too-Human* 473) He claims that socialism "can only hope to exist here and there for short periods of time by means of the most extreme terrorism… therefore, it secretly prepares for reigns of terror." (*Human, All-Too-Human* 473) But he doesn't ascribe secret despotic plans to the free thinkers of *BGE* 44, at least not to the majority of them. Rather, in ascribing an exaggerated power to the forms of society, they silently forget that these forms are imposed by individuals, in contrast to Machiavelli, who characterizes the "state" (*stato*), not as a special kind of metaphysical entity in the manner of Hegel, but as a "dominion" (*dominio*) that some men hold over other men (Machiavelli, 1998, p. 5). Conversely, Nietzsche suggests that collectivism fosters the desire to submit to despotic power and control, as the weak "herd" longs for a powerful individual who offers it guiding authority: "The appearance of one who commands unconditionally strikes these herd-animal Europeans as an immense comfort and salvation from a gradually intolerable pressure, as was attested in a major way by the effect of Napoleon's appearance." (*BGE* 199)

Conclusion

Machiavelli implies that when human beings cease projecting their religious impulses outwards, towards God or the gods, they don't disappear, but turn inward, towards the human species itself. The dogma which he proposed as the truest of all truths gave rise eventually to the "fundamental inclination" which Nietzsche argues is crucial to the political dialectics of secularization. Nietzsche says that this way of looking at the world is "a way of standing the truth happily upon her head" (*BGE* 44; this implies that there are also other ways, e.g., Christianity). Nietzsche implies that it is the material elements of society, the imperfect men and women who make it up, which are at the root of its miseries and failures, while it is the forms of "the old society," i.e., hierarchical and aristocratic society, which produce whatever happiness it might in rare cases achieve (*BGE* 44; see also 188 and 258). However, these forms are not omnipotent, but fragile and limited in their effects. In the words of Kant, arguably the greatest of progressive thinkers, "Out of such crooked timber as the human being is made, nothing perfectly straight can ever be fashioned" (Kant, 1997, p.46; translation modified).

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