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Machiavelli on the Primacy of the Political*

This essay examines whether – or the extent to which – Machiavelli's presentation of theoretical questions is dependent on his practical goals in *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* (e.g., gaining employment with Lorenzo de Medici with *The Prince*, or conversely, as Spinoza suggests, disillusioning the subjects of princes by instructing them about what they can expect from their princes in *The Prince*, while advising citizens of republics how best to order their regimes in the *Discourses*) or conversely, his practical goals are dependent on theoretical assumptions. The essay argues that Machiavelli's practical goals are ultimately in the service of his theoretical assumptions; on the one hand, Machiavelli assigns a primacy to the political, including many things, such as morality, religion, and even our collective shared humanity, to the sphere of the political, but on the other, he intends for his best readers to transcend the political through their philosophical insight *into* the primacy of the political. Paradoxically, one transcends the political only through insight into its primacy. This involves an ironic amoralism, which satirizes moralism but also the claim that one might transcend it altogether. Machiavelli's humour is rooted in this self-referential paradox.

Keywords: Machiavelli, theory and practice, primacy of the political, immoralism

Introduction

In this essay, my purpose is to examine the relationship between theory and practice in Machiavelli, especially but not exclusively in his two major works, *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. In particular, I am interested in the question of whether – or the extent to which – Machiavelli's presentation of theoretical questions is dependent on his practical goals in these books (e.g., gaining employment with Lorenzo de Medici with *The Prince*, or conversely, as

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Spinoza suggests, disillusioning the subjects of princes by instructing them about what they can expect from their princes in *The Prince*, while advising citizens of republics how best to order their regimes in the *Discourses*) or conversely, his practical goals are dependent on theoretical assumptions. I argue that Machiavelli's practical goals are ultimately in the service of his theoretical or philosophical assumptions. To anticipate, I argue that, on the one hand, Machiavelli assigns a certain primacy to the political, including many things, such as morality, religion, and even our collective shared humanity, to the sphere of the political, but on the other, he intends for his best readers to transcend the political, in a qualified fashion, precisely through their philosophical insight *into* the primacy of the political. Paradoxically, one transcends the political only through insight into its primacy.[1] This involves an ironic amoralism, which satirizes moralism, but also satirizes the claim that one might transcend it altogether. Machiavelli's humour, I argue, is rooted in this self-referential paradox.

It is common to say that Machiavelli advocated the primacy of the political; however, whether this is plausible depends on what exactly one *means* by this primacy. It is often claimed that for Machiavelli, this primacy consists in the fact that political considerations *should* be completely independent of moral considerations; not that moral considerations are false, but rather that they belong to a certain (moral) sphere from which the political has autonomy.[2] This assertion involves a confusion about the nature of morality. If morality is understood as "deontological," i.e. making normative claims about right and wrong actions which admit of no exceptions, then it is false to say that a certain moral claim, e.g. "murder is wrong" or "adultery is wrong," is true but inapplicable to the political sphere. Rather, if such a claim can be suspended when politically expedient, it is false to begin with, i.e. it is false to maintain "murder is wrong" because this means "murder is *always* wrong" (murder not being identical with homicide as such). If by contrast morality is understood as "consequentialist," i.e. making no normative claims about right and wrong actions but only about their effects, then to say that sometimes it is right to suspend moral claims about exceptionless norms in order to achieve more effective results for a larger number of people is really to say that sometimes it is *moral* to prioritize the good of the many who are benefited by a certain political action over the good of the few or the one who are harmed by it. It is not accurate to describe this attitude as the view that the moral ought to be suspended and the political ought to be autonomous; rather, the view in question is that sometimes the *moral* action is not that which is demanded by deontological morality. Either way, affirming the autonomy of the political while maintaining that moral claims *are* true "in their own sphere" evinces a certain confusion.

However, this is not what I mean by the primacy of the political in the sense in which I attribute it to Machiavelli. Rather, by attributing to Machiavelli the primacy of the political, I do not mean that sometimes political considerations override moral ones without the latter being challenged or revised in their own sphere, but that not just manifestly political realities, e.g. the city or the nation, but *all* the concepts we use to communicate with each other, including that of humanity itself, are *also* political, because they distort and conceal, to a greater or lesser extent,

[1] I have largely abstracted from the question of whether Machiavelli's paradoxical enterprise is itself philosophically coherent and justifiable; this would be an interesting theme for a different inquiry.

[2] For example, Isaiah Berlin's "The Originality of Machiavelli" (Berlin, 1997).

the natural realities which they presuppose. The primacy of the political in the sense in which Machiavelli sees it does not "suspend" the moral sphere, but regards the latter as constituted by illusions; for this reason, it completely undermines it *theoretically*. Nevertheless, Machiavelli implies (or so I argue) that moral illusions are *necessary* for human existence as a *practical* matter. Machiavelli simultaneously implies that morality is an illusion and that it is necessary illusion. Accordingly, he implies that the very attempt to dispense with morality altogether, as an illusion which it is possible to overcome and leave behind, is self-deluded and renders the individual subject to this delusion *more* susceptible to morality than the individual who regards morality as a *necessary* illusion. As I argue, the plebeian leader in the Ciompi revolt illustrates this phenomenon as Machiavelli understands it; we have seen examples of this "moralistic anti--moralism" on both the radical right and the radical left in the 20th and 21st centuries. Machiavelli would not have been surprised by this development.

Thus the primacy of the political in Machiavelli's sense presupposes that one has transcended the political, even if in a qualified sense. To grasp the primacy of the political one must observe the political from a philosophical perspective which necessarily transcends it. Machiavelli affirms two claims which have a certain tension: on the one hand, that far more is political than we normally assume, and on the other hand, that *the political as such does not exist*, because it is constituted by illusions. However, even if the referents of the illusions do not exist, the illusions themselves do. For example, if one denies the existence of universals, *belief in these universals* exists and possesses reality. Thus, even if political life *as it understands itself* does not exist, life constituted by political self-understanding *does* exist – and the primacy of the political means that far more than we normally assume falls into this category.

In the first section of the essay, I proceed by starting from Machiavelli's statements of intent in the dedicatory letters with which *The Prince* and the *Discourses* are prefaced and then analyse relevant passages from both of these books and also from the *Florentine Histories*. In the second section, I discuss Spinoza's interpretation of the relationship between these two books, which I argue is ultimately incorrect, but useful to consider. In the third section, discuss Machiavelli's famous treatment of imaginary republics and principalities in chapter 15 of *The Prince*, and argue that, while he indeed considers polities such as Plato's *kallipolis* or Augustine's city of God as imaginary, more importantly, he considers *all* political entities as in one sense imaginary, entities which exist by convention (*nomoi*) rather by nature (*phusei*), as ancient philosophers would have said, or (in Benedict Anderson's celebrated formula) "imagined communities" that conceal their natural basis in human beings and their environment.[3] In this context, I discuss the

[3] One might object that it is anachronistic to claim there is a similarity between Machiavelli's claim that *all* political entities are "imagined" (if I am correct in the interpretation defended here, that the claim that "many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth" applies to *all* political entities, and not just to e.g. Plato's *kallipolis* or Augustine's city of God) and Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" because Anderson assumes the existence of mass printing, which did not exist in Machiavelli's time. However, although Anderson indeed claims that mass printing enabled the spread of nationalistic ideology among vast masses of people, he does not claim that communities were naturally existing entities until mass printing made them imaginary. Rather, he claims that they were *always* imaginary, even if mass printing contributed to the spread of nationalistic ideology. Furthermore, it is commonly recognized that Machiavelli's own writing contributed to the spread of nationalism, e.g., Easley (2012).

intimations of death and "being-towards-death," as Heidegger would call it, in the dedicatory letter to the *Discourses* and in the quotation from Petrarch with which *The Prince* ends (section 3).[4] I argue that they allude to Socrates' famous account of philosophy itself as "the practice of death" in the *Phaedo* (64a). In the fourth section, I discuss the relationship between the political and the philosophical as Machiavelli understands it. In the concluding remarks, I sum up my reading of Machiavelli and suggest that the most sophisticated amoralism might be found in earlier thinkers, such as Nietzsche as well as Machiavelli himself, rather than in the twentieth-century forms with which we are familiar.

Machiavelli's Statements of Intent in The Prince and the Discourses on Livy

Machiavelli's theoretical intention in *The Prince* and in the *Discourses* is ambiguous, if one takes each book separately and begins from what his dedicatory letters, their explicit statements of intent, and their declared addressees tell us, or if one approaches them together with the working assumption that they are consistent.[5] From the dedicatory letter to the shorter book, we gather that Machiavelli promises it will contain three kinds of knowledge. First, he promises his "knowledge of the actions of great men," reduced "to one small volume." Secondly, he promises "to discuss and to give rules for the governments of princes." Thirdly, he claims to provide knowledge of "the nature of princes" (*Prince* Dedicatory Letter). One would expect the third kind of knowledge to be unambiguously theoretical, concerned with the characteristics proper to a specific human type. Contrawise, one would expect the second kind of knowledge to be unambiguously practical, though perhaps inseparable from the third: one must know the nature of princes to give rules for their government. The first kind of knowledge as Machiavelli describes it here does not appear to be unambiguously practical or theoretical; in fact, it seems to suggest a theory *of* practice, a detached and theoretical account of the actions or practice of "great men," whatever he means by greatness here.

At the same time, Machiavelli's political intention is ambiguous. It is clear that his intention is not simply theoretical but also political (to the extent that *The Prince* seems to be written for the immediate practical purpose of gaining employment with Lorenzo de Medici, its addressee,

[4] It could be argued that it is anachronistic to claim there is a similarity between Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death" (*Sein zum Tode*) and Machiavelli's concept of the best way of life because Machiavelli accepted the humanistic ideal of *gloria* whereas Heidegger did not. However, I do not mean "being-toward-death" in a specifically Heideggerian sense, although the formulation originates with him (*Sein zum Tode*); I mean it simply in the sense of "one's relation to death," which can be understood in myriad ways. I use it because it indicates concisely that Machiavelli is concerned with the ways in which one's relation to death permeates one's character and determines one's entire way of life, as it does for Heidegger. Furthermore, "being-toward-death" for Heidegger takes many different forms, mostly "inauthentic." Love of glory would one of those forms. To be sure, Heidegger would maintain that love of glory is a way of avoiding the fact that we will die; it is not authentic resoluteness. But if my argument is correct, then Machiavelli too is aware of the limitations of *gloria*, as reflected in his ironic treatment of death; his highest ideal is that of the philosophical way of life.

[5] I refer to the *Discourses on Livy* by book, chapter and paragraph number (2.1.3 = Book 2, chapter 1, paragraph 3), to *The Prince* by chapter number and to the *Florentine Histories* by book and section number. The translations I use are indicated in the bibliography.

it would seem to be political in the crudest of senses). This comes across most clearly in the final chapter of *The Prince*, which is a highly rhetorical, impassioned (or at least *faux* impassioned) call for Lorenzo to unify Italy through the precepts and according to the guidelines which Machiavelli himself has already suggested. The time, it seems, was perfectly right, and although Machiavelli's prophecy did not come to pass, he certainly gives the impression that the book's composition is motivated, not so much by detached theoretical concern, nor even by self-interested desire for employment, but rather by a patriotic concern for the good of his fatherland and the impatient worry that the opportunity for its redemption could be lost:

> Having considered everything discussed above [i.e., apparently everything in the entire book thus far], and thinking to myself whether in Italy at present the times have been tending to the honour of a new prince, and whether there is matter to give opportunity to someone prudent and virtuous to introduce a form that would bring honour to him and good to the community of men there, it appears to me that so many things are tending to the benefit of a new prince that I do not know what time has ever been more apt for it. (*Prince* 26)

The *Discourses* by contrast is not addressed to a prince who rules over Machiavelli and might be in a position to employ him, but rather to two of his friends, Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai. Now, Cosimo died in 1519 – because the *Discourses* is dedicated to these two individuals, it is assumed that the composition of the book must have been finished before Cosimo died, in 1519 at the latest (Gilbert 1953, p. 138). However, this assumption is based on circular reasoning. We do not have independent evidence that the book was finished by 1519; rather, the *only* evidence we have is that the book was dedicated to Cosimo, who died in 1519 (and also that the book mentions the Emperor Maximilian, who also died in 1519, as if he were living). However, given that there is no external evidence that the *Discourses* was finished by 1519, this internal evidence may be interpreted in a different way; Machiavelli comically dedicates the book to two people one of whom is dead at the time of composition. This coheres with Machiavelli's black humour, evidenced throughout his writing, and, as we shall see, with the importance of death in his thought, suggesting that he wants to make a point through this deliberate incongruity – and also that he is writing above all with posthumous addressees in mind, not only to please his friends and contemporaries. At the very least, this interpretation is certainly possible, and not *prima facie* more unlikely than the view that the *Discourses* must have been finished before 1519 because Cosimo died in this year. Furthermore, the fact that Machiavelli did not remove the dedication to Cosimo after he died in 1519, and prepared the book for posthumous publication, is evidence that he *wanted* the book to be dedicated to two people one of whom was already dead at the time of composition. Felix Gilbert (1953, p. 139) claims that, "There is no reference to any event which took place after 1517." But Leo Strauss says, when discussing Luther's break with the Roman Catholic Church (which he takes to be alluded to in the *Discourses*): "Machiavelli's silence about the Reformation need not be due to ignorance; the fact (if it is a fact) that 1517 is the date of the latest event to which he refers in the *Discourses* does not prove that the *Discourses* as we have the book was completed prior to Machiavelli's having become aware of Luther's epoch-making action." (Strauss 1958, p. 170-171). First, Strauss suggests that

Gilbert's claim is questionable. Secondly, Strauss suggests that Machiavelli may well have continued to revise and augment the *Discourses* beyond 1517, and suggests that there is no evidence that he had ceased doing this by 1519 or even later; we do not know when Machiavelli completed the *Discourses* in the form in which we possess it today, and the facts that the *Discourses* was dedicated to Cosimo (in conjunction with Zanobi) and that Cosimo died in 1519 does not prove that the book was complete by 1519.

The dedicatory letter to the *Discourses* suggests a comprehensive theoretical intent, for its author tells us that "in it I have expressed as much as I know and have learned." (*Discourses* Dedicatory Letter) This might simply be Machiavelli's shorthand for the three kinds of knowledge promised in the dedicatory letter to *The Prince*. On the other hand, it may be that Machiavelli is in possession of additional knowledge that falls outside the threefold division suggested in that letter. Certainly, a great many things are explicitly discussed in the *Discourses* which are not discussed at all, or merely touched upon, in *The Prince*. Furthermore, Machiavelli notes that the addressees of this letter are *not* princes. A prince like Lorenzo, occupied with the business of ruling, will have less time for reading than private citizens like Zanobi and Cosimo. The reading he does have time for is likely to focus less on the leisurely pursuit of knowledge and more on its immediate applicability. One might suggest that Machiavelli saves the more complete presentation of his teaching from those sufficiently free from daily cares and responsibilities to profit from it fully. However, Machiavelli suggests elsewhere, in the *Florentine Histories*, that leisurely pursuit of knowledge is a form of pernicious idleness that ought not to be encouraged:

> The strength of well-armed spirits cannot be corrupted by a more honourable leisure than that of letters, nor can leisure enter into well-instituted cities with a greater and more dangerous deceit than this one. This was best understood by Cato when the philosophers Diogenes and Carneades, sent by Athens and spokesmen to the Senate, came to Rome. When he saw how the Roman youth was beginning to follow them about with admiration, and since he recognized the evil that could result to his fatherland from this honourable leisure, he saw to it that no philosopher could be accepted in Rome. (*Histories* 5:1)

It would seem that Machiavelli would not have a high opinion of his two addressees if he viewed them as nothing more than a latter-day, Florentine equivalent of the pair Diogenes and Carneades. This is particularly true given that he does not note merely that they are *not* princes, but also that they *deserve* to be. Yet what entitles them to be princes in Machiavelli's eyes is *knowledge*: "Men wishing to judge rightly have to esteem... those who know, not those who can govern a kingdom without knowing." (*Discourses* Dedicatory Letter) What kind of knowledge does Machiavelli have in mind and how is it related to the knowledge he hopes to communicate through the *Discourses*? Because if they already know everything Machiavelli knows, what use to them would be his long book? Machiavelli dealt with a similar difficulty in *The Prince*. There he contrasted himself, as a man of the people, with Lorenzo, as a prince, and suggested that "to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people." (*Prince* Dedicatory Letter) Perhaps Machiavelli is encouraging *them* to seize an opportunity, no less than Lorenzo in *The Prince*. For if there is a difference in

nature between peoples and princes from which it follows that each must learn about *themselves* from the generosity of the *other* type in sharing their uniquely detached perspective, there is a certain parallel with the difference, not in nature, but in circumstance, of the young and the old, which might mean there are certain things that the young can learn *only* from the older and more experienced, and certain things the young can achieve on the basis of this knowledge which the old can achieve only through counselling the young rather than accomplishing it directly themselves.

If Machiavelli has picked Zanobi and Cosimo (forgetting for the moment, as Machiavelli himself arguably pretends to, that Cosimo is already dead, in contrast to the "ancient valour in Italian hearts," which is not *yet* dead – *Prince* 26) because of their unique fitness to rule, this fitness may lie not only in their knowledge, in which he may excel them, but in their youth, in which he can no longer hope to compete with them. It may be that he hopes to make them aware of opportunities that, despite their fitness, they might be insufficiently experienced to notice, even if they are sufficiently intelligent, audacious, and impetuous to grasp them once a man of Machiavelli's experience has *made* them noticeable. Machiavelli's opportunities for the exercise of political power may be gone, but there is no reason why he should not benefit his fatherland as best he can, "driven by that natural desire that has always been in me to work, without any respect [or 'hesitation,' *rispetto*], for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone." (*Discourses* 1 Preface 1) While the statements of intent in the dedicatory letters to Machiavelli's two major books, being themselves ambiguous, do not resolve the ambiguities of his theoretical and political intentions and the relations between them, they at least point toward the outline of a possible resolution.

But if we turn to the main body of the texts, this possibility appears to collapse unceremoniously. In contrast to many more recent authors in the history of political thought, Machiavelli's deepest intentions are a mystery to most of his readers and most likely always will be, as Isaiah Berlin famously noted (see Berlin, 1997). They are separated from us, not only by five centuries of intellectual and cultural upheaval, but also by Machiavelli's maddeningly ambiguous rhetoric and his frustrating combination of an apparently systematic intent and form with a procedure that is highly unsystematic, digressive and formally inconsistent. To mention only one particularly egregious but representative instance, after presenting an apparently exclusive disjunction between principalities and republics at the very beginning of *The Prince* and (apparently) as the foundation of his political science, in the *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli refers to "the Venetians" as a republic *and* a principality in the same sentence. (*Histories* 1:28) If we attempt simply to piece together Machiavelli's "system," we will run into difficulties of an entirely different order to those that face us when we discover inconsistencies in the theoretical writings of, say, Kant, Hegel, or Rawls.

We are faced, then, with two basic possibilities. It could be that, despite several indications of an apparently systematic intent, Machiavelli is simply inconsistent, and the attempt to find a coherent political science wedded to a particular political program (or two such goals, one for each of his major works), let alone a consistent *philosophical* position which might provide it with a final theoretical underpinning, is misguided, at least beyond the initial effort that enables us to see that this is the case. Alternatively, Machiavelli's explicit systematic inconsistencies

could be *deliberately* guided and ordered by an ironic intention that is itself *as* consistent as one could reasonably expect from any competent author (in ascribing such consistency to, say, Kant or Rawls, one need not defend the thesis that he has superhuman, godlike powers), or at least far more internally consistent than the surface taken at face value would suggest. This approach was developed by Leo Strauss, but Harvey Mansfield has more directly articulated its implications with respect to this methodological question:

> Nowadays 'systematic' is often said loosely to describe an author who looks consistent. But looks consistent to whom? To the casual or to the careful reader? An author can be consistent without being systematic when his distortions, his apparent errors and inconsistencies, are made deliberately with an eye to his audience... This author is subtler and more difficult than the systematic author because his purpose must be discerned through his rhetoric. (Mansfield 1998, p. 60)

Whenever one is faced with a formal inconsistency in Machiavelli, if one can at the same time discern an ironic intent in its presentation, one must look to the teaching communicated *by* the trace left of this intent and judge the author on the consistency of *this* teaching.

In either case, however, it is impossible to prove uncontroversially a given interpretation of the coherence of Machiavelli's intention, whether one understands by this a subjectively coherent *psychological* account of how he came to produce such confused and confusing writings, or an objectively coherent *philosophical* account of the teaching both concealed and revealed in the quasi-systematic surface of his writings by Machiavelli's irony which would explain the pedagogic need for this indirect form of presentation. However, the latter still implies a certain psychological account of Machiavelli, namely that he intended such objectivity. The difficulty with Mansfield's suggestion (and the general "Straussian" approach) is that it is not empirically falsifiable by any generally accepted hermeneutic method. But this is also true of any alternative hypothesis as to the unconscious (perhaps historically determined) reasons behind Machiavelli's inconsistencies or, more to the point, the bizarre discrepancies between his apparently systematic theoretical intent and his maddeningly unsystematic execution. However, it seems to me that if we adopt Mansfield's suggestion as a working hypothesis, it illuminates the ambiguities between the theoretical and practical aspects of Machiavelli's intention, ambiguities that are clearly *in some way* present in his mind, as we have seen from looking at the dedicatory letters. I do not mean to propose a particular political program as the hidden governing intention of Machiavelli's writing, which would then make sense of these ambiguities. Rather, I would like to suggest that they stem from a particular conception of the relationship between philosophy and politics as such, which assigns a certain primacy to the political.

Spinoza's Interpretation of *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*

Working on the assumption that Machiavelli does not *intend* to proceed systematically in the formal sense, but rather dialectically and ironically, I return to the surface ambiguities with which I began, and begin anew by considering Spinoza's interpretation of the relation between

The Prince and the *Discourses*, which provides a useful stepping-stone between conventional contemporary scholarly approaches to the texts[6] and the approach of Strauss or Mansfield. I shall develop an interpretation that, I believe, is in harmony with Strauss' approach, and attempt to show how it makes sense of many of the ambiguities surrounding Machiavelli's intention which undeniably are present.

It is certainly the case that, at first sight, Machiavelli presents himself not as a philosopher concerned with the universal nature of politics, let alone any lofty metaphysical themes, but as a man of affairs offering counsel learned from his "long practice and continual reading in worldly things." (*Discourses* Dedicatory Letter) He alludes in the dedicatory letters to *The Prince* and the *Discourses* to the fifteen years he spent as secretary of the Florentine Republic. It is in this capacity that he earned the respect of Spinoza,[7] that hard-headed student of political affairs who taught that justice exists only where just men reign: "Statesmen have written about political matters much more effectively than philosophers. For since experience has been their guide, there is nothing they have taught that is remote from practice." (*Political Treatise* 1:1)

Spinoza's programmatic utterance would seem to be the key to reconciling the theoretical and practical in Machiavelli, because considerations like these did not persuade Spinoza, or indeed Machiavelli himself, that the world of letters is wholly foreign to the statesman. They both published books of political science, and Machiavelli calls as witness to his competence not only his long practice but also his *continual reading*: "While theory is believed to be at variance with practice in all practical sciences, this is particularly so in the case of political theory, and no men are regarded as less fit for governing a state than theoreticians or philosophers." (*Political Treatise* 1:1) Recording this prejudice while only partially endorsing it, Spinoza accuses theoreticians of having failed to work out "a political theory that can have practical application" and sets out to accomplish it himself. Accordingly, he descends swiftly from abstract reflections on the general nature of political entities to practical suggestions concerning how to order monarchies, aristocracies and democracies, notwithstanding his preference for democracies, because even if the nature of every political entity can be comprehended as such by the detached theoretician, appropriate practical advice varies according to the situation.

As the reflective but practical statesman admired by Spinoza, Machiavelli shares this "relativism." One cannot answer the question – "What is the purpose of politics?" on Machiavelli's behalf without considering the further question: "Who's asking?" Naturally, the advice he offers the actual prince to which *The Prince* is dedicated and the private citizens, subjects, or potential princes to which the *Discourses* is dedicated is not always the same. Scholars tend to assume that the implicit endorsement of absolute or tyrannical princely rule in *The Prince* contradicts the "very sound advice" (*Political Treatise* 5:7) concerning the establishment and maintenance of republican freedom offered in the *Discourses*. They also tend to assume that Machiavelli is

[6] For example, John P. McCormick (2018) and Quentin Skinner (2019). Nathan Tarcov presents a persuasive Straussian critique of Skinner's approach, focusing however on the reading of Machiavelli in Skinner's earlier *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (see Tarcov, 1982).

[7] I refer to Spinoza's unfinished, posthumously published *Political Treatise* by chapter and paragraph. I use the translation in the bibliography.

not in any significant sense a philosopher, even if some of his more general reflections inevitably touch on philosophical issues (whatever one makes of the general tenor of his two major books, the praise of Cato as demanding that the philosophes be expelled from Rome in the *Florentine Histories* would seem to clinch the matter[8]).

If one assumes the most extreme version of both views, there can be no contradiction between the two books. A man who offers equally effective counsel to criminal tyrants and to responsible statesmen may be amazingly unscrupulous, but he no more *contradicts* himself than does a physicist who travels between peaceful democracies and belligerent despotisms helping all his customers develop nuclear weapons. But such a man nonetheless presents a puzzle: Doesn't he risk alienating at least some of his patrons? What are his intentions? It is little disputed that Machiavelli succeeds in puzzling us, even if the means or even the possibility of solving the puzzle are controversial. Perhaps, like Socrates, Machiavelli wants us to be puzzled, so that in finding our way out of the puzzle we thereby deepen our knowledge. If so, among the means he employs to puzzle us are his apparent politician's contempt for detached philosophical reflection and the apparent contempt for moral consistency in his political advice.

I took my departure from Spinoza's reading of Machiavelli because, although there are good reasons to suggest it is a misreading, if so, it is a misreading that Machiavelli himself encourages, and one will not be able to correct it if one does not begin by taking it seriously. But while Spinoza anticipates the mainstream of later scholarship in distinguishing Machiavelli the political man from the utopian philosophers of the classical tradition, he is cautious enough to allow himself to be puzzled by Machiavelli's intention: "In the case of a prince whose sole motive is lust for power, the means he must employ to strengthen and preserve his state have been described at some length by that keen observer, Machiavelli, but with what purpose appears uncertain." (*Political Treatise* 5:7) He resolves the puzzle, not by inquiring after a philosophic reason for the formal discrepancy, but by taking the *Discourses* at face value as a republican book of practical advice and reading *The Prince* ironically as a satire of princely rule (although I note in passing that there is the further question, which I leave unaddressed here, of Spinoza's own irony, which may – or may not – qualify this interpretation of Machiavelli). The intention of the latter, then, would also be practical, but in an indirect manner; implicitly addressed to republicans (as the *Discourses* is more obviously), through the book Machiavelli would then aim to expose, in the poker-faced guise of a gleeful flatterer, the "effectual truth" (*Prince* 15) of all princely rule as tyranny.

It does not seem to me that Spinoza is altogether wrong in his reading of *The Prince*. However, I will show how the "republican" irony descried by Spinoza conceals a deeper irony, motivated not by the political intent of the satirist, but by the pedagogical intent of the philosopher. For Machiavelli, the purpose of politics is in fact irreconcilably twofold – not republican and princely (nor even republican and tyrannical), but vulgar and philosophical – and how the philosopher

[8] For an argument that Machiavelli denigrates the philosophical in favour of the political life, see Rasoul Namazi's "Machiavelli's Critique of Classical Philosophy and His Case for The Political Life" (Namazi 2021). For a contrary argument that, while Namazi picks up on a certain important strain in Machiavelli's rhetoric, the deeper strain privileges the philosophical life, see William Wood's "Machiavelli on the Intention and Utility of *The Prince*" (Wood 2025).

would then manipulate the primacy of the political for his own ends. Machiavelli's *political* sympathies are indeed republican, but I suggest that for him the entire sphere of politics itself is circumscribed and rendered farcical by the perspective of philosophy, a fact that he deliberately conceals, but ironically implies. Because of this privileging of the philosophical, even if his political sympathies are for republics over principalities, he does not simply or unambiguously favour republics even *at* the political level, as would a true republican. Rather, his preference is itself relative, not unambiguous or absolute. It is a *preference*, even if one based partly on rational analysis, but not a principle.

Imagined (Political) Communities

In three places in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli describes *The Prince* as a universal "treatise" on principalities. (*Discourses* 2:1:3, 3:19:1 and 3:42:1) But as we have seen, *The Prince* is addressed to a particular prince, with whom Machiavelli hopes to gain employment (or, at least, he feigns such a hope; this posture, whether real or itself merely ironic, is an essential part of his rhetoric) and to whom he promises knowledge of "the nature of princes" as well as rules for princely government. Machiavelli promises both knowledge of human nature and practical counsel concerning political affairs, while leaving unclear whether these two kinds of knowledge are interdependent or how they are otherwise related. The first chapter begins: "All states, all dominions that have held and do hold empire over men have been and are either republics or principalities." (*Prince* 1) Rather than practical counsel on the governance of principalities or knowledge concerning the alleged difference in nature between princes and men of the people, we find what appears to be a universal theoretical claim concerning political entities. In this unqualified thesis, the principality is presented as one of two distinct species comprising all political entities, the other being the republic. Machiavelli appears to assume that political science permits of an exactitude that Aristotle had explicitly denied it (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1904b). He makes no attempt to justify either this assumption or the particular division he offers. He seems to assume that, "ontologically," political entities such as Rome or Venice are numerically distinct and self-identical beings, while "phenomenologically" the division of all political entities into these two species is simply self-evident.

It would be incautious to assume Machiavelli makes this assumption. It would be more prudent to explore the possibility that he knows that, taken unqualifiedly, this thesis is unsustainable. Machiavelli tells us in chapter 15 that "many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth" and promises contrawise "to go directly to the effectual truth." (*Prince* 15) Following Spinoza's (and still earlier, Guicciardini's; Guicciardini, 1994, 1) lead, this is generally taken as a rejection of the utopianism of classical political philosophy (Plato's *kallipolis* or Aristotle's best regime) and the Christian "city of God" alike. But what if Machiavelli's deepest point here is philosophical rather than political in the narrow sense? Could he be suggesting that *all* republics and principalities (i.e., all political entities *tout court*) are imaginary? For there is a sense in which political entities such as "the kingdom of Naples" do not strictly speaking exist. Whereas the king of Naples or any one of his subjects are

all singular, indivisible entities – at least within the unity of their experience from birth to death, whatever the cause (material or otherwise) of this unity might be – a name such as "Naples" does not indicate an entity but rather serves as shorthand not, to be sure, for the complete experience in this life of every human being who has concourse with such an "entity," but rather for a certain dimension of their experience: the *political* dimension understood in a precise sense. But strictly speaking, such political entities are, in Benedict Anderson's celebrated formula, "imagined communities" (see Anderson 2016).

The unity which is the ultimate referent of a proper name belonging to a given human individual such as "Niccolò Machiavelli" is a natural unity (at least at the level of experience), but the unity indicated by a name such as "Naples" is an artificial unity (a unity at the level of *self--misinterpretation* of experience, but a misinterpretation which belongs to the experience itself), an abstract or generalised sum total of political experience belonging to a countless (Machiavelli would say "infinite") number of singular and distinct human beings. Although this political experience is certainly real, if we were precise, rather than speaking of "Naples" or "Rome" as though they were singular entities, one would have to find infinite proper names for everything one wanted to say, as did the title character of Jorge Luis Borges' "Funes, the Memorious":

> We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho. These recollections were not simple; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc. He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his fancies. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day. (Borges 1962, p. 112)

A side-alley in Rome exists not for every inhabitant or visitor, but only for those who have walked down it, heard descriptions, or seen photographs, and for each of these it exists in a different way. Such a dizzying perspectivism – and its profoundly sceptical implications – will not do for the purposes of everyday communication.[9] But if it is true that one cannot employ political language without submitting one's thoughts to a certain confusion, it is also true that human experience is so constructed that one cannot think at all without employing imprecise conceptual structures. If "the Florentine republic" has never "been *seen* or *known* to exist in truth," its being is sustained by the imagination. Reason, Machiavelli implies, is to a great extent

[9] See Jon Stewart's discussion of Borges' story (Stewart 1996). However, for Stewart, Borges' story is a *reductio* of nominalism; I believe, rather, it is a *reductio* of the possibility of achieving perfect consciousness of the truth of nominalism, assuming however that nominalism is true. Stewart writes: "The character of Funes… demonstrates the chaos of manifold perceptions in the absence of abstract universal categories and… ironically shows the loss of detail or particularity that is necessary for all thinking… In order to think universal terms, one must necessarily sacrifice precision in perception since one must overlook and ignore certain perceptual differences in order to think abstractly. Thus, all knowing ironically requires a kind of ignorance or forgetfulness of perceptual particularity." (Stewart 1996, pp. 83-44) However, Borges does not necessarily imply that reality itself is not radically particular; rather, his point is that there a necessary discrepancy *between* reality and the requirements of thinking. This point is also Machiavelli's.

dependent upon the imagination, a fact manifest in the language we employ, but which is not itself a merely linguistic fact. In his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, Seth Benardete notes that Machiavelli's "strictures" apply not merely to "imaginary republics" such as *kallipolis*, but to everyday, ordinary speech:

> An analysis of soul, if done imprecisely, leads to a proliferation of ideas, for it takes its bearings by language. Speech, because it admits of a greater precision than fact, produces greater imprecision about facts. Political philosophy too would seem to be caught in this paradox, and its imaginary republics rightly subject to Machiavelli's strictures. (Benardete 1989, p. 96)

Thus, whereas there is a sense in which political entities do exist and a sense in which they do not, there is no sense in which natural entities do not exist. If Machiavelli no longer exists except in the imaginary "republic" constituted posthumously through his writings and reputation, while he lived there was never a sense in which *he* did not exist. However, his mortality or "being-towards-death," as Heidegger would call it, the then-present fact that there would come a time when he would die, *was* present to his consciousness. This quasi-exception to that general rule is significant, because only beings whose self-awareness forces them to be conscious of their own mortality are also forced to live in "imaginary republics" that cause them (us) not merely to use imprecise and inherently confused speech, but also to forget their (our) own individuality from the moment they (we) gain the use of reason.

The fear of death is thus potentially the beginning of wisdom (symbolized, for Machiavelli, in mighty and mythical founders who were exposed to danger and the possibility of death virtually from the moment of their birth, such as Moses or Romulus), to the extent that it forces us to recognise our own singularity and thus the illusory nature of those forces to which we often subordinate ourselves in single acts and entire lifetimes of passionate, self-sacrificing patriotism, religious devotion or subservient awe. Of course, it can also lead us to take refuge in such forces. This dual effect of mortality, which Heidegger powerfully if ponderously systematized in famous passages of *Being and Time* (see Heidegger 1962, p. 279 - 311), is gracefully suggested by this characteristically Machiavellian line of thought. On the one hand, if one of the addressees to the *Discourses* is, it would seem, *already* dead when Machiavelli addresses it to him, this would suggest not only that Machiavelli's true audience is an indefinite posterity of readers (it would not take too much ingenuity to figure that out from the book itself), but also that there is some sense in which the reader whose interest in knowledge is purely theoretical, rather than for the purpose of practical application, is to that extent "dead," or that philosophy, as Socrates famously suggests in Plato's *Phaedo*, consists in learning how to die (*Phaedo* 64a). On the other hand, *The Prince* ends with a citation of patriotic Italian poetry (Petrarch's), through which the patriots in Machiavelli's audience are roused by the thought that the valour in Italian hearts is not *yet* dead. The true patriot, rather, would suggest that Italian (or some other) valour will *never* die; Theodor Herzl wrote, "I don't know when I will die, but Zionism will never die." (Herzl 1920, p. 10; my translation) Of course, Zionism, like Italian valour, or any other patriotic faith that survives only so long as people believe in it, and ultimately all earthly, political concerns, has a limited time-span, because the human beings who sustain it are mortal.

Machiavelli's ironically deadpan qualification ("yet," *ancor*) reminds the careful reader of this fact, to which he cannot draw attention too loudly if he does not want to spoil the rousing effect of his rhetoric. Yet his rhetoric is not completely or merely ironic. I suggest there is a deliberate parallel with the irony of addressing the *Discourses* to two friends, a living friend and a dead friend. This contrast encapsulates the tension between the philosophical and the political. For if the philosophical life is "learning to die," viewing human existence from the perspective of mortality, *sub specie aeternitatis* as Spinoza would say, then this form of "death" must nonetheless be made liveable. The philosopher does not so much transcend the political as become a citizen of the human cosmos, itself viewed as a city, ultimately as transient as any other. This parallelism highlights a contrast that permeates, as an undertone, much of the texture of Machiavelli's work and lends it a peculiar irony. Strauss writes:

> There is a striking contrast between the dry, not to say scholastic, beginning and the highly rhetorical last chapter which ends in a quotation from a patriotic poem in Italian. Could Machiavelli have had the ambition of combining the virtues of scholasticism with those of patriotic poetry? Is such a combination required for the understanding of political things? (Strauss 1958, p. 56)

Machiavelli, then, ascribes both more and less primacy to politics than is customary. On the one hand, he understands many things as political that we would typically place beyond the merely political realm, such as religions ("the Christian republic"; *Discourses* 1:12:1) or even our common humanity (at one point in the *Discourses*, the human race is described as a "mixed body," i.e., a political entity comparable in that respect to any other; *Discourses* 2:5:2); in short, any multiplicity which appears as a unity and thereby brings us under its spell. On the other hand, his understanding of political entities themselves is radically reductionistic; "politics" in the deepest sense would be equivalent to human experience to the precise extent that it is constituted through the enslavement of our reason to our imagination. It is for this reason that Strauss suggests that Machiavelli writes in an indirect and deliberately misleading manner (Strauss 1958, p. 174). The reader must first attempt to see everything within a political horizon before he can successfully transcend it (although, as we shall see, Machiavelli strongly qualifies the possible extent of this "transcendence").

Machiavelli's pedagogy therefore operates with a double irony. Concerned as he is *above all* not with politics in the everyday sense but with questions about nature, reason and the imagination (of course, he is also concerned with politics in the everyday sense as an important although secondary concern, secondary either in the sense of preliminary or subordinate to philosophic discovery), his indirect treatment of these questions through explicit discussion of crudely political matters is ironic because it feigns a vulgar contempt for philosophy that he in fact rejects. If this line of inquiry is fruitful, then the inconsistencies on the surface of Machiavelli's political science must be organised consistently so as to indicate between the lines an elaboration of a philosophic teaching that is both "naturalistic" and "existentialist," that distinguishes but does not abstract theoretical and practical questions from one another.

The Relation between the Political and the Philosophical

If this interpretation of Machiavelli's intentions is correct, his irony would then consist not only in the distance between the political appearance and the philosophical substance of his writing, but also in the relation between them. Through his insight into the primacy of politics, the philosopher does not liberate himself from it immediately. Rather, through becoming aware of his own dependence, he is able to operate within it more clear-sightedly. But this dependence on the imaginary or the political cannot be made to disappear; it is precisely awareness of the inherent limitations of human nature and knowledge that constitutes this clarity, not absolute freedom from them. For Machiavelli, what is the *genuine* primacy of the political, not the vulgar primacy of the political advocated by men such as Cato? For *all* men, political entities – imaginary (from a Machiavellian standpoint) beings such as "the Roman republic," "the body of Christ," or "human rights" – shape their self-understanding as well as their way of life. This does not simply cease to be true for the philosopher. Machiavelli's theoretical critique of such entities does not – *cannot* – lead to a practical amoralism, because morality is constitutive of human nature even if it follows no divine or cosmic paradigm. Thus after listing (some of) the traditional virtues, Machiavelli says, quite explicitly, "*everyone* will confess that it would be a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince all of the above-mentioned qualities that are held good." (*Prince* 15; my emphasis) Even if this is an exaggeration, as is indicated by the ruthless advice that follows immediately after this claim, it certainly has a good deal more than a grain of truth, as does the claim that "victories are never so clear that the winner does not have to have some respect, especially for justice." (*Prince* 21) Or perhaps one could say that even those people who sometimes reject moral virtues do at least one some other occasions affirm them as good; nobody is a perfectly consistent immoralist, and the immoralist who is conscious of this fact manages to be *less* governed by moral evaluations than the immoralist who fantasizes that he is *never* governed by moral evaluations.

Machiavelli's preservation of morality might be hemmed in ironically from all sides by pragmatic qualifications, but the deeper irony is the suggestion that, as soon as the amoralist begins to mock the moral, he cannot help but mock himself as well, and insofar as he believes himself to have transcended morality completely, he becomes the butt of the joke still more acutely even than the conventional moralists, who lack such a pretension. Nonetheless, one's moral or political commitments (whether to one's family, one's friends, one's nation or one's religion) take on a different quality if one begins to think that one can neither accept that they have any rational basis nor live one's life without them. It is this *inevitable* moral inconsistency or irrationality, whether one tries to be consistently moral or amoral, or if one tries to pretend that one *could* do otherwise than try vainly to be consistent, and not simply a puerile delight in praising evil and shocking "the virtuous," that guides such characteristically Machiavellian rhetoric as that displayed in his deliberately humorous appraisal of Agathocles, in which he calls Agathocles virtuous in the very sentence after he has said that one cannot do so:

> One cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory. For, if one considers

> the virtue of Agathocles in entering into and escaping from dangers... one does not see why he has to be judged inferior to any most excellent captain. (*Prince* 8)

In this sense, the primacy of the political is indeed absolute for Machiavelli. Just as everyone, even Machiavelli, will praise the good, so in an absolute sense "there is no-one in the world but the vulgar." (*Prince* 18) Nonetheless, for Machiavelli, it is the theoretical recognition *of* this truth and the self-conscious adaptation of one's life to its implications that differentiates the philosopher from the vulgar in the stricter sense.

Machiavelli's literary persona is at the same time a gateway into his philosophical intention, a satire of the impossibility of translating that consistency perfectly into practice, and a kind of propaganda or ideological weaponry which as such requires only rhetorical consistency. It has even been argued that through his rhetorical strategy he first conceived of the Enlightenment as a political program.[10] Certainly, many of its conflicting strains are anticipated in his writings. To mention one particularly striking example, in Machiavelli initiates (while remaining artfully detached from) a certain kind of militant leftism which often takes the form of an angry resistance to political injustice and immorality based on a supposed recognition of the delusory or anthropomorphic provenance of justice, morality and all similar notions, while being untroubled by this inconsistency. We see this in the peculiar mixture of genuine indignation and moral pride on the one hand, and cynicism and ruthlessness on the other, characteristic of Machiavelli's plebeian leader, a remarkably prescient creation in whom we recognize many revolutionary moralists and demagogues from the centuries that followed, but whom we have no license simply to identify with Machiavelli himself, for his detachment from the plebeian leader is tangible in the tragic tones and plaintive exaggeration he assigns to his creation:

> It *pains me much* when I hear that out of conscience many of you repent the deeds that have been done and that you wish to abstain from new deeds... We ought not to take conscience into account, for where there is, as with us, fear of hunger and prison, there *cannot and should not be* fear of hell. (*Histories* 3:13; my emphases)

Certainly, the plebeian leader echoes Machiavelli's own speech in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. His claim that "those who win, in whatever mode they win, never receive shame from it" recalls Machiavelli's dictum that when men desire to acquire "who can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when they cannot, and wish to do it anyway, here lies the error and the blame." (*Prince* 3) He is quite explicit about insights concerning which Machiavelli himself is not quite so frank, but which might be taken as implied in his general approach to politics and in many of his particular maxims: "All men, having had the same beginning, are equally ancient and have been made by nature in one mode." (*Histories* 3:13) But the leader's purpose in presenting them is *purely* political, to rouse the plebeians into an effective force because the opportunity has presented itself to do so. Machiavelli too presents Lorenzo, Zanobi and Cosimo with theoretical insights that have a practical purpose, and he urges them, explicitly in Lorenzo's case, more

[10] See the essays collected by Paul Rahe (2010).

understatedly in that of his friends, to seize the opportunities before them. In Lorenzo's case, it is Machiavelli who seizes opportunity to gain employment from Lorenzo, whom he must flatter into believing that Machiavelli believes *him* to be virtuous when, inauspiciously, the only "quality" of Lorenzo's he mentions is his "fortune." (*Prince* Dedicatory Letter) In the letter to the *Discourses*, he criticizes the custom with which he complies in the letter to *The Prince* – "the common usage of those who write, who are accustomed always to address their works to some prince and, blinded by ambition and avarice, praise him for all virtuous qualities when they should blame him for every part worthy of reproach." (*Discourses* Dedicatory Letter)

Observations such as these render Spinoza's reading of *The Prince* as a republican or patriotic satire of tyranny persuasive as far as it goes. But what separates Machiavelli's ironic understanding of politics from Spinoza's, and even more so from the militant leftism it anticipates, is not the tension between detached theorising and its application to political action (visible, as we began by noting, in the dedicatory letter to *The Prince* and more subtly in the dedicatory letter to the *Discourses*) but the conflict within the soul of the philosopher between attachment to and detachment from "political" commitments, "the political" being ascribed unique primacy. This accounts for Machiavelli's willingness to seek employment with tyrants even as he satirizes them for the sake of those citizens who, he says, "deserve" to be princes (but if he regards princes as not radically distinguishable from tyrants, does this mean that according to him some private citizens "deserve" to be tyrants?), for no *political* judgment can be unqualifiedly superior to any other if there is a fundamental tension, albeit one partially reconcilable in practical life, between the purpose of philosophy and all political ends as such: "Machiavelli's apparent neutrality in the conflict between republics and tyrants is defensible if the common good as intended by republics is not the common good strictly speaking: the only good which is unqualifiedly the common good for all men is the truth." (Strauss 1958, p. 283) Strauss' meaning is both more sober and more disquieting than might appear at first glance. He does not mean that the truth is universally good, but only that the truth, to whatever extent it may be a good for men (and even the philosopher needs illusions to live, in some respects less than other men, but in other respects no less than them), is the only good that is truly *universal* or "objective." Strauss' amoralism, while far more polite than Machiavelli's (or Nietzsche's, to use the most famous, late modern example of flamboyant amoralism), but deliberately at odds with the taste of advanced modernity as represented by the Western twentieth century professoriate (just as Machiavelli's taste is contrived to be at odds with his own time, in which Christianity is the recognized ruling *nomos* even if it is frequently violated, while appealing to an elite, *not* an aristocratic elite, but an intellectual elite), is no less uncompromising.

Concluding Remarks

Machiavelli plays a peculiar double game. On the one hand, he affirms the primacy of the political in a radical sense that most Christians *and* most secular liberals would reject; even phenomena which are not typically treated as political, such as morality, religion, and even the collective existence of the human race, *are* political in his estimation, because they disguise na-

ture in ultimately the same way as uncontroversially political entities such as Rome or Naples, and should therefore be viewed through a political lens, as entities which exist by convention (*nomoi*) and not by nature (*phusei*). On the other hand, there is also a sense in which Machiavelli affirms that, in the sense in which we usually accept it, *political life does not exist* – it is relativized from the amoral perspective of the philosopher. Yet the philosopher qua philosopher cannot simply embrace an amoral way of life putatively beyond the political, and the thinker who believes he has succeeded in doing this will inevitably be *more* subject to moral assumptions (albeit not specifically Christian ones) than the philosopher who recognizes this is impossible. We see this in late modernity, when self-described radical amoralists are often liberal democrats, Marxist-Leninists or some combination thereof (one sees this phenomenon especially in twentieth-century French and Italian thought). We see this in so-called "postmodernists," who claim to have a radical scepticism towards all truth claims and moral values, and then utter the most banal moralistic trivialities, such as Jacques Derrida's claim that "justice… is not deconstructible."[11] (Derrida 1992, p. 14-15) Too quick a rejection of the political sphere means that one will be all the more unreflectively political. Machiavelli's fictional plebeian leader the Ciompi revolt in the *Florentine Histories* anticipates, with amazing prescience, what will happen to Machiavellian immoralism when it is made into a political ideology, how it will degenerate and be transformed. Machiavelli himself, however, believes that the philosopher can only ever partially incorporate the amoral insight of philosophical reflection into the primacy of the political; his transcendence of the moral is inevitably incomplete and always ongoing. Machiavelli's humour implicitly expresses this claim. Machiavelli, then, undertakes what Nietzsche calls "the self-overcoming [*Selbstüberwindung*] of morality," rather than its straightforward overcoming (Nietzsche 1966, p. 45, aphorism 32). Nietzsche describes this as "that long secret work which has been saved up for the most sophisticated and honest, also the most malicious, consciences of today, as living touchstones of the soul." (Nietzsche 1966, p. 45, aphorism 32; translation modified) Machiavelli shows that it also belonged to the sophisticated and malicious consciences of the past.

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[11] Derrida (1992, p. 14-15) also claims that law is subject to deconstruction, but justice is not. This is simply the old philosophical thesis that positive law (*nomos* or *lex*) is changeable, while natural justice (*dike* or *iustitia*) is not. This is either a reversion to an old, "metaphysical" thesis, rendering "deconstruction" otiose and superfluous, or else merely nonsensical. Perhaps it is both.

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