

The Value of Patriotism

The problem of dirty hands centers on how military and political leaders must often transgress clear, paramount moral principles and are rightly required to do so by the demands of their positions. The paradox of being morally required by the special duties grounded in personal relationships to violate moral standards arising from impersonal morality seems irresolvable and deeply unsatisfying. Identifying Machiavelli's highest value is critical to understanding the role of his rulers and statesmen, and constitutes the first clue in piecing together the evidence about the relationship between what such rulers and statesmen must do in fulfilling their political duties and how those actions register, if at all, changes in their souls or characters.

In my view, Machiavelli's highest value is patriotism. On several occasions he testifies that he loves his city more than his soul or that he admires those who do likewise:

I love my native city more than my own soul. (Ltr. 331: 4/16/27)

[So] much more did those citizens than [Florentines who united other regions and waged the War of the Eight Saints against Pope Gregory XI and his oppressive legate circa 1375] esteem their fatherland than their souls. (FH III 7)

I am very certain that he [Cosimo Rucellai] would cheerfully have sacrificed all he had in the world, and even life itself, for his friends and that there was no enterprise, however difficult and dangerous, which he would not have undertaken for the good of his country. (AW I 7)

Machiavelli's commitment to public service, his ardor for his country, his conviction that political activity animated his soul, and his willingness to sacrifice for the public good resonate throughout his life and saturate his private correspondence:

There is my desire that these Medici princes should begin to engage my services, even if they should start out by having me roll along a stone. . . . Whoever has been honest and faithful [especially in public service] . . . as I have, is unable to change his nature. (Ltr. 224: 12/10/13)

Never did I disappoint that republic [Florence] whenever I was able to help her out—if not with deeds, then with words; if not with words, then with signs—I have no intention of disappointing her now. (Ltr. 270: 5/17/21)

The Final Chapter

Beyond his testimony that he loves his city more than his soul, the final chapter of *The Prince* provides Machiavelli's most eloquent expression of patriotism. He crafts the first twenty-five chapters of *The Prince* straightforwardly. Machiavelli's prose is lean, concise, and articulate, but without rhetorical flourish. He derives his conclusions supposedly from historical examples and his diplomatic experiences. He does not mourn over the supposed baseness of human beings or the series of zero-sum contests that presumably constitute international affairs. He accepts the world as it is and hopes to compile a manual for successful rule in that world. Machiavelli is understated and matter-of-fact throughout the bulk of the work.

But in the final chapter of *The Prince*, "Exhortation to Seize Italy and Free Her from the Barbarians," Machiavelli shifts rhetorical gears abruptly. He trumpets passionately that the time is ripe for a prince to unite regional forces and evict foreign dominators out of Italy once and forever. Citing the historical examples of Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus, Machiavelli points out that Italy is more enslaved than the Hebrews, more oppressed than the Persians, and more defenseless than the Athenians. Italy lacks leadership. But within grave adversity lies glorious opportunity. Once before a prince (Cesare Borgia? Pope Alexander VI? Francesco Sforza of Milan? Pope Julius II? Machiavelli himself?) had emerged who might serve as the instrument for Italian

redemption, but *Fortuna* cruelly cast him aside. But now Divinity and the Church favor the Medici family: “God has already shown his hand. The sea has been divided; a cloud has escorted you on your journey; water has flowed out of the rock; manna has fallen from on high. Everything has conspired to make you great” (P 26).

Others have failed through inadequate methods and strategies, but the Medici can succeed. New methods and means are available. (Translated: Machiavelli has sketched the way and is, of course, currently between jobs and available for hire.) Italians have proved themselves cleverer, stronger, and quicker than foreigners in individual duels. Their armies have disappointed only because of inadequate leadership: too many self-styled chiefs, too few disciplined followers. No leader bearing *grandezza d'animo* [noble soul] has manifested the blessed union of *Fortuna* and *virtù* within his spirit. But now opportunity must not be permitted to evaporate. Italy awaits a redeemer: “No words can describe the appetite for revenge, the resolute determination, the spirit of self-sacrifice, the tears of emotion that would greet him. . . . What Italian would refuse to pledge him allegiance? Everyone is sick of being pushed around by the barbarians. Your family must commit itself to this enterprise” (P 26).

Unquestionably, the emotional final chapter of *The Prince* diverges sharply with the prose and texture of the rest of the text. This and other interpretive riddles are thought by some scholars to be resolved by understanding Machiavelli as a fervent Italian patriot who aspires to unveil a blueprint for Italian unification. This reading of Machiavelli gained momentum in the mid- to late nineteenth century, during and after the period of the Italian *Risorgimento*. In that vein, Pasquale Villari (1827–1917) wrote: “Machiavelli proceeds to draw his conclusions, then at last the practical side and real aim of [*The Prince*] are clearly seen. It is a question of achieving the unity of his Italian motherland and of delivering it from foreign rule. This was certainly the holiest of objects.”¹ Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883) adds: “Let us therefore be proud of our Machiavelli . . . the bells are ringing throughout the land announcing the entry of the Italians into Rome. The temporal power is falling. The shout arises, ‘Long live Italian unity!’ ‘Glory to Machiavelli.’”²

On this view, *The Prince* is precisely what it presents itself to be: a manual for princely success. But that success is qualified. The new ruler should use his power to reform a corrupt, weak state as preparation for the emergence or return of a healthy, expansionist republic. The manipulative, conniving, forceful measures of the

prince—exercising the subtle wiles of the fox and the frightening domination of the lion—are the prerequisites for the vigorous republic Machiavelli mythologizes in *The Discourses* and his other writings. Moreover, the prince's overarching goal is to make himself, or at least render the scope of his authority, obsolete. *The Prince*, then, is the beginning but not the end of Machiavelli's heroic account of political triumph.

According to the Machiavelli-as-patriot interpretation, *The Prince* is a manual for unification in an unsettled context. Once the monarch attains national unity, promotes the common good, and nurtures a strong national character, his power should be dispersed. Once the conditions required for a sound republic are in the place, the advice of *The Discourses* should prevail. Many supposed differences between *The Prince* and *The Discourses* can be reconciled once we understand that *The Prince* was written as a battle plan for one situation, reforming a corrupt state and unifying Italy, while *The Discourses* was a general account of Machiavelli's political philosophy and showed his appreciation for popular forms of government in those countries enjoying favorable conditions.

In Machiavelli's judgment, the five loose-knit regions of Italy were in a dire predicament in the early sixteenth century. They could either remain disunified and provide easy targets for invading barbarians, or they could follow the leadership of a strong man, rise above factional bickering, and unite for the greater good: Either continued victimization or unification. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that the regionalized people of Italy were generally corrupt—they lacked civic *virtù*—so the monarch would sometimes be forced to use fraud and coercion to unify the nation, invigorate citizens, and fend off external aggressors.

Sounds peculiar, does it not? The cure for corruptness is fraud and coercion? What Machiavelli meant was that the prince, while governing, should not always abide by the standards of conventional private morality. If certain inherently evil practices had to be used, they should be thought of as “evil well-used” because they flow from necessity: external forces, antecedent events, and compelling circumstances. Necessity will often compel rulers to commit deeds that violate paramount principles of impersonal morality: cruelty, deceit, and promise-breaking are often preferable, politically, to liberality, mercy, honesty, and promise-keeping. The purpose, though, of the prince's strategies is unequivocal: He maximizes his prospects of earning enduring glory by imposing order and security, and beginning the reformation of his corrupt citizens and subjects.

Machiavelli was convinced that only an absolute monarch can transform a corrupt society. In his judgment, civic *virtù* in Italy had disintegrated, which made a popular republic impossible. *Virtù* could only be spawned through proper laws, training, and education. The corrupt, fragmented state cannot rehabilitate itself. Instead, a powerful political officer must mold it by crafting a pure social foundation based on strong arms and sound laws. The strong nation-state prevents foreign intrusions, and eventually helps citizens rise above selfish individualism, establishes communal bonds, increases the material and spiritual quality of life, and thereby cultivates personal and national *virtù*.

In *The Discourses* and in his other writings, Machiavelli praises republicanism. Only the supreme importance of achieving national unity underwrites the prince and his actions. Once this goal is attained and the nation solidified, the scope of the prince's power are contracted and a mixed government arises. Having guided the newly created nation-state from conditions of weakness to a condition of strength, the prince has made autocracy obsolete. *Virtù* is then best secured through republicanism. A Machiavellian republic has a system of checks and balances much like those that existed among the consuls, senate, and plebeians in the ancient Roman republic.

This interpretation can muster considerable textual support. First, Machiavelli consistently argues, beyond what he says in *The Prince*, that the military and political *virtù* of a single leader is crucial for founding a new regime or reforming a corrupt state (D I 9, 17, 18; D III 1). Machiavelli recurrently affirms his conviction that an autocratic leader, who often employs force and fraud to secure his ends, is a critical stage in the development of a healthy state. Romulus seizes power through aggression, but thereafter cedes authority to the people and the senate in order to facilitate republican rule.

Second, this interpretation makes sense of the emotional final chapter of *The Prince*. The stirring call to arms is nothing more than a summary of the main point of the work: to rally support for the unification and redemption of Italy. The earlier chapters of the book were the methods required to begin reforming a corrupt, newly conquered territory. The final chapter passionately expresses the overarching purpose of that yearning.

Third, this view reconciles Machiavelli's fascination with the principalities in *The Prince* with his undeniable preference for republicanism elsewhere. *The Prince* is a necessary stage of development for new or corrupt territories not yet prepared for self-government. Moreover,

advocates of this view can point to textual support in *The Discourses* for Machiavelli's position that although republican rule is generally best, not all states have the prerequisites in place for self-government (D I 55).

Fourth, this interpretation underscores why a republic should, when propitious, replace a principality. Republics are more flexible than principalities, more able to adapt to changing circumstances, better equipped to conquer new territories, and, thus, more likely to endure (D I 29; D II 2, 4, 6, 9, 21; D III 9, 28). Given Machiavelli's overall political philosophy, concluding that a principality is sometimes a required stage in the process of building a forceful republic is reasonable.

Fifth, this view can account for Machiavelli's desire to seek employment with the Medici even though he was part of the former republican government of Florence. After that regime was ousted, he was suspected of participating in an anti-Medici conspiracy and was tortured thereafter. Machiavelli's job search is not crass opportunism; instead, he sought political office in order to help a new prince sow the cultural seeds that would eventually be reaped as the prerequisites for a return to republicanism. Hopefully, Italian liberation would also result. Machiavelli, then, writes *The Prince* as one more instance of his relentless public service and devotion to his country.

Sixth, in addition to the final chapter of *The Prince*, advocates of this interpretation can point to textual evidence in *The Discourses* that Machiavelli aspired to a united Italy. There he indicts the Roman Catholic Church as the perpetrator which has thwarted Italian solidarity: "No geographical region has ever been unified or happy if it has not been brought under the political control of a single republic or ruler, as has happened in France and Spain. And the only reason why Italy has not been unified as they have been, the only reason why she does not have a republic or a prince who has been able to acquire control of the whole territory, is the existence of the church" (D I 12).

The Machiavelli-as-patriot interpretation of *The Prince*, though, faces several significant objections. The most daunting is the problem of the transition. Surely Machiavelli did not suppose that a prince, after acquiring new territories and painstakingly crafting the civic *virtù* of the populace through strong arms, sound laws, and robust religion, would quietly release his power in deference to republican rule? The more reasonable dynamic is that such a prince would luxuriate in his power and privilege and, if anything, would strive for more of the same. The prince's quest, after all, begins in private ambition coupled

with the recognition that tyranny does not issue in enduring glory. He must facilitate the common good and promote civic *virtù* in order to develop a healthy, expansionist regime able to compete vigorously in international military and political affairs. If he efficiently and effectively advanced these goals, would he not reason that he deserved to be honored and obeyed, not shunted aside for an experiment in self-government?

One response by advocates of the Machiavelli-as-patriot interpretation is that Machiavelli did expect the transition to go smoothly and cited history in support of that possibility. For example, he praises Romulus for establishing a senate and yielding most of his power to it, reserving only the authority to command the army after war had been declared and of convening the senate itself (D I 9). Here Machiavelli expresses his preference for a powerful prince to cede absolute control in deference to the common good. Still, for a powerful prince who gains power through force and guile, and thereby rises to prominence to willingly yield that power is highly unlikely. Why would Machiavelli entertain even the possibility of such a transition? One possibility is that he is convinced that this is what is required for a unified Italy that endures and his patriotism clouds his reasoning into hoping that Romulus types will be more common than we might suspect. Machiavelli, despite his reputation in some circles, is not a dispassionate, clear-headed realist. Instead, his patriotism often trumps his vision of reality and of the possible. This response is plausible as it underscores Machiavelli's romanticism.

If so, Machiavelli would be neither the first nor final thinker to yearn for one great man to accomplish so much or to fantasize about a smooth transition from one type of state to another radically different one. For example, in *The Statesman*, Plato describes ruling as a directive science, the ability to weave the elements of the state into a just proportion. These exemplars should rule based on their ability to nurture the souls of citizens. An ideal statesman is above the law because his wisdom is superior to the justice arising from best crafted laws. Laws are general and impersonal and will often disappoint in particular cases because they cannot adequately take into account variations of character and circumstance. The ideal statesman has only one absolute imperative: do what is wise and virtuous. Thus, he should be able to ignore or alter the law as appropriate. As always, Plato insists that the uninformed mass of people in a democracy cannot attain the expertise required for wise rule (S 292e). But the number of genuine statesmen possessing such a talent is meager,

perhaps only one or two in the world (S 293a-e). Even in his most realistic rendering of politics, Plato does not entirely cast aside his longing for one great man to redeem a state.

In addition, well after Machiavelli wrote, Marxists scripted a political transition beginning with the overthrow of capitalism to a relatively strong central government to the withering away of the state under communism. They, too, brushed aside the conventional wisdom that power tends to solidify and expand rather than relinquish its own prerogatives.

Perhaps a better response on the problem of the transition from monarchy to republicanism is available to Machiavelli: For a corrupt, impotent territory to blossom into a robust state with the prerequisites for a successful, expansionist republic would take a generation or more. All princes are mortal. The bane of good government has been hereditary rule. History attests that the death of an exemplary leader is too often followed by the inept bungling of his vainglorious, feckless son (D I 2, 19). A ruler who seizes power violently should rule prudently and virtuously thereafter, and transfer authority to the masses as soon as practicable instead of retaining authority and later bequeathing it to his heirs.

Accordingly, the transition from autocratic princely control to a self-governing republic might be gradual in certain situations. Throughout the prince's lifetime the prerequisites of republican rule are nurtured through strong arms, sound laws, robust religion, and promotion of civic *virtù*. Near or at the prince's death, transfer of power from the executive office to the senate and the people should take place proportionate to the state's readiness for self-government. The process could continue until a full-fledged republic is in place. The animating impulse for the transition, as always, is self-interest. The glory of the prince is amplified by the process, and a republic is more flexible, more likely to expand, and more enduring than a principality. Both the people and the prince thereby gain by an orderly transition. The prince, especially, should understand all this given the cornerstone of his endeavors is securing power to attain enduring glory. Near death, his earthly power is about to vanish, but his quest for lasting glory is still negotiable.

My response on behalf of the Machiavelli-as-patriot interpretation offers a plausible chance that the transition from principality to republic can occur. Ancient Rome, Machiavelli's favorite historical launching pad, made the transition. Why not sixteenth-century Florence or Rome? Machiavelli does, however, place enormous importance on the

value military and political leaders bestow on their historical legacies. Is the quest for enduring glory—which certainly animates Machiavelli’s labors—truly paramount for men who embody military and political *virtù*?

For Machiavelli, the answer is a resounding “yes.” He places little or no stock in an afterlife and the promise of eternal bliss. Men embodying *grandezza d’animo* understand that crafting a legacy of deserved, enduring glory is the only certain way of denying the Grim Reaper total victory. By lingering in the hearts and souls of future generations, by inspiring those who follow to grander deeds than they might otherwise aspire to, and to thereby continue to serve the highest values of patriotism and political excellence, the greatest among us can extend their biographical lives honorably. No human can overcome biological mortality, but some military and political exemplars—as well as founders of salutary religions, estimable literary figures, and those who register excellence in their chosen fields—can transcend their deaths. Future generations will celebrate their accomplishments, seek to emulate their methods, and benefit from their examples. Death must extinguish all human beings, but it cannot always quash the most important values or the ongoing influence of the greatest among us. If personal immortality is unavailable to us, as Machiavelli strongly suspects, then our last best hope is to craft our lives and sculpt our souls in ways that maximize our prospects for attaining deserved, enduring glory. If Machiavelli is correct, this must be enough, for this is all finite human beings can realize.

Nevertheless, a critic might raise a second objection: the problem of the transition is secondary to the difficulty of unification. The entrenched tradition of preserving the independent power of individual regions in Italy was too strong to sustain even a dream of permanent unification. The self-interest of regional power brokers and the self-image of vested aristocrats depended on their influence within their domains. Italian unification entailed that regional prerogatives would yield to national priorities. Suppose Machiavelli himself had to choose between either a united Italy headed by, say, Rome or the status quo with a strong, independent Florence? Would “his country” not be deemed Florence?

Conversely, the trajectory of Machiavellian politics is toward a united Italy. Suppose Florence or Rome, through the Medici power connection, became strong enough to begin acquiring new territories. Every robust principality or republic has expansionist aspirations, according to Machiavelli (P 3; D II 2, 4, 6, 9; D II 21). Where are the

most likely prospects for expansion? Where did the Ancient Romans first expand? Not in South Africa, China, or the East Indies. Not in France or Spain, at least not in the beginning. The vital expansionist state would, almost necessarily, start in Italy by bringing less powerful regions under its domain. Perhaps after initial successes brought larger, stronger armies with more experience and confidence, even those ubiquitous Spaniards could be dislodged from the Kingdom of Naples.

Granted, huge differences separate (1) the regions of Italy uniting voluntarily and freely in common cause, and forming a nation-state once and forever from (2) one strong region emerging and conquering the other areas. In both cases the peninsula would be under one centralized government, but the tone and tempo would be much different.

My point, though, is that the debate about what type of unified Italy, if any, Machiavelli imagined should be informed by his general political principles. From his vantage point the most glorious climax would be a united Italy, led by Florence with Machiavelli as chief *consigliere*, which could begin expanding beyond Italy. The next best choice would be a united Italy, led by Rome with Machiavelli as chief *consigliere*. In any case, with or without Florence, Rome, or Machiavelli, the logic of Machiavelli's political principles implied that a united Italy was the natural result of the emergence of a strong principality or republic on the peninsula. Contemporary political conditions, regional traditions, and a hostile Church protective of its own privileges notwithstanding, a version of Italian unification would eventually transpire. That the blessed event would not occur until more than 340 years after Machiavelli's death attests to the might of *Fortuna*, the power of regional identification, and the recalcitrance of the Church.

My view, then, is that Machiavelli is committed to a transition from princely to republican rule because the bulk of his writings—virtually everything other than *The Prince* celebrates republicanism as the superior form of government. Those who conclude otherwise must take *The Prince* as Machiavelli's foundational text and his other writings as either pure dissimilitude or expressing views other than his own. In addition, I am convinced Machiavelli harbored vague but genuine hopes for Italian unification. In retrospect those aspirations seem unrealistic, but I do not perceive Machiavelli as a hard-headed realist. Also, the notion that Machiavelli wrote even *The Prince* only in order to celebrate the ongoing power of a self-serving ruler lacks

merit. Even in that book Machiavelli distinguishes evil well-used from evil ill-used; castigates certain rulers for their excesses; advises leaders on how to attain the enduring glory of a heroic, political exemplar as opposed to the infamy of a tyrant; and calls on a champion to unite Italy for the good of all.

In any case, readers need not subscribe to my analyses of the interpretive problems surrounding Machiavelli's writings to agree that Machiavelli's highest value is patriotism, which is the point I wish to establish in this chapter. The objections I raised against and tried to answer on behalf of the Machiavelli-as-patriot interpretation of *The Prince* center on whether Machiavelli's apparent account of the transition from a monarchy to a republic is plausible, whether Italian unification was possible in the historical context within which Machiavelli wrote, and whether the quest for enduring glory was sufficient motivation for a prince to prefigure republicanism. If readers conclude that the problem of transition was not insurmountable and that unification was possible at the time that Machiavelli wrote, then they will judge that Machiavelli was a patriot who rendered timely advice in *The Prince*. If readers conclude that the problem of transition was insuperable or that the possibilities of unification were nil, then they will conclude that either Machiavelli did write the work as an expression of patriotic zeal but he was deluded, or that he wrote *The Prince* for reasons other than to ignite nationalistic fervor.

Only those in this final group raise a problem for the major theses about Machiavellian leaders and the condition of their souls that follow in this work. But the problem is minor and easily quarantined. Those readers of Machiavelli who (wrongly in my view) take *The Prince* to be the foundational work that expresses the Florentine's deepest preferences for monarchy, who deny that Machiavelli would urge a transition from a monarchy to a republic, who reject the proposition that princes would be motivated by a quest for enduring glory, and who insist that a Machiavellian prince secures power only or primarily for purposes of self-aggrandizement that conflict with nurturing the common good can consider what I say about the soul of Machiavellian statesmen to pertain only to republican leaders and not to Machiavellian princes as these critics conceive them to be.

But I am not aware of any scholar who calls Machiavelli's own patriotism into question. Thus, one could deny that the Machiavelli-as-patriot interpretation of *The Prince* is persuasive, but accept the conventional view that Machiavelli was a fervent patriot.

The fundamental question, then, is why Machiavelli embraced patriotism as his highest value. My answer is that Machiavelli concluded that patriotism was both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable because of the need to develop civic *virtù*, the nature of the world, the requirements of personal identity, the importance of personal security, and the nature of the quest for deserved glory.

The Need to Develop Civic *Virtù*

According to Machiavelli, human beings are naturally evil and will follow wicked impulses whenever possible (D I 3, 4, 5, 29; D II 13, D III 6). Some men can conceal their nature for a specified time, but their wantonness will eventually emerge. Only necessity—in the form of sound laws, good habits, and external conditions—makes men good. Necessity forces human beings to respond intelligently to external conditions and to rise above their inherent selfishness. Machiavelli consistently judged that human nature was so inclined toward evil that people were turned to the good only by necessity (D I 3). Also, necessity often demands action that reason would oppose (D I 6).

Machiavelli does not stray from his cold portrayal of unchanging human nature. The only hope for civilized arrangements is coercion, either explicit or subtle: by external conditions; the force of strong arms, which is the prerequisite for good laws; the reinforcing powers of religion and education; and the internalization of values that are first viewed as impositions, then accepted as legitimate boundaries of action. All these mechanisms lead to good habits where actions conducive to a healthy republic become, literally, a second nature. Only in this fashion, through discipline grounded ultimately in military might, does depraved human nature blossom into a national character embodying civic *virtù*.

For any such transformation to happen, human beings must have capabilities for altruism or, at least, enlightened self-interest. Machiavelli never highlights those capabilities. Surely, they are not created *ex nihilo*. But instead of seeing human beings as complex organisms of diverse potentials, some good and some bad, Machiavelli insists that fundamentally we are wicked. This jaundiced view of human nature fuels his corollary belief that the overall amounts of good and bad, and *virtù* and corruption in the world are constant; only their

distributions in particular countries and peoples change (D II pref.). Together with the inherent scarcity of natural resources, these two convictions lead Machiavelli to the dreary conclusion that international affairs are a series of zero-sum contests: my country's advance is made at your country's expense.

The rule that men act appropriately only from necessity has a few exceptions: those with glistening military and political *virtù*—such as founders or reformers of territories—embody the resources of will, passion, and ambition required to pursue magnificent military and political enterprises. They are able to distinguish pursuing power for narrow ambition from striving for enduring glory. Such men, graced with *grandezza d'animo*, become, with a measure of compatible *fortuna*, legends (D I 9).

Founders and reformers introduce new policies, laws, and social patterns. Most important, they transform citizens through a necessity whose ballast is strong arms, compelling laws, and vigorous religion. In this manner, men of political and military *virtù* bend evilly inclined human beings toward the common good. Founders and reformers, with their unwavering eye on enduring glory, aspire to create a political order that endures beyond their lifetimes and that energizes civic *virtù* among the people. Unlike tyrannies that neither transform citizens in salutary ways nor endure for a significant period, praiseworthy principalities and republics are self-consciously redemptive (P 8; D I 10). Paradoxically, the quest for enduring glory and national salvation blends uneasily with the brutal, ruthless measures Machiavelli warmly endorses. Moreover, men graced with moral *virtù* do not typically resort to the cruelties required to found and reform worthy social orders; nor do they yearn to be political saviors. Evil men, on the other hand, are unlikely to covert corruption into civic *virtù* (D I 18, 26). From the outset, the emergence of an ideal Machiavellian statesman is problematic.

The rare founder or reformer Machiavelli venerates is a good, strong man with exceptional charisma. He must inspire his subjects by the manner in which he lives and the aplomb with which he wields military and political authority (D III 1). Most strikingly, he must brandish evil well even though he is not initially inclined to do so. He must knowingly dirty his hands in service to his own enduring glory and the common good. That several of Machiavelli's exemplars are mythological figures should not surprise.

The Role of *Virtù*

Few words in a political text have generated as much controversy as Machiavelli's use of the term "*virtù*." Typically translators caution readers not to associate the term with moral virtue. That warning, though, is misleading because at times Machiavelli does speak of moral *virtù*. This, however, is not the primary way he uses the term. *Virtù* has been, more or less accurately, translated as efficiency, skill, strength, excellence, discipline, manliness, admirable qualities, ability, virtue, effectiveness, will power, exceptional qualities, vigor, greatness, courage, intelligence, and a host of related attributes.

Machiavelli's rendering of *virtù* is complicated because he readily includes three sometimes conflicting qualities into the general understanding of that term: (1) discharging excellently one's functions, whatever they may be; (2) demonstrating virility through exercising power, autonomy, and resoluteness; and (3) practicing moral rectitude as understood by conventional morality grounded in Christianity. Accordingly, those who seek to interpret *virtù* univocally foster ambiguity and confusion. To remedy that potential problem, I prefer to discuss five senses of the term that reflect to varying degrees the three qualities contained in the general understanding of it: military *virtù*, political *virtù*, civic *virtù*, moral *virtù*, and artistic *virtù*.

Consider the English word "good." We are familiar with good people, good books, good knives, good cooks, good sex, good cars, good presentations, good times, good athletes, good singers, good teachers, and the like. "Good" sometimes but not always connotes "moral rectitude." At other times, "good" describes a person, event, or object that performs its function well. The word "excellent" does the same. In ordinary discourse we are rarely confused because context determines the meaning of such words. For example, we do not scratch our heads in puzzlement over how a car can manifest moral goodness. We understand, instead, that a good car is a vehicle that rarely breaks down, runs smoothly, and is easy to maintain.

A critic might object: "If Machiavelli intended *virtù* to connote different qualities for politicians, militarists, artists, and the like, why did he not use a different term for each or at least different modifiers to highlight such differences?" My response is how could *virtù* not connote different qualities in different contexts? The most general meaning of the term is virtue, understood as excellence in discharging one's functions. Are not the virtues of an excellent artist different from those of an excellent politician, an excellent teacher, an excellent

warrior, and the like? But why did he not use different modifiers to distinguish civic *virtù* from military *virtù* from artistic *virtù*, and so on? Classical writers were rarely that precise. For example, most of the Socratic paradoxes arise from Plato's use of the same term ("knowledge") in different senses or contexts: deep theoretical understanding of the Forms; truths generated from philosophical dialectic; wisdom arising from divine inspiration; and knowing-that and knowing-how gained from worldly experiences. Machiavelli recognizes various types of excellences appropriate to different roles and uses the same general term for them. This is typical of classical writers who were much less precise than contemporary analytic philosophers. (That Machiavelli was often imprecise in this sense is also attested to by the dozens of radically different interpretations of the meaning of his work that have emerged throughout the centuries. For an example of how loosely Machiavelli used the term *virtù*, review what he says about Agathocles of Sicily in *The Prince*.)

Accordingly, for Machiavelli, *virtù* connotes an excellence relevant to a person's function. Human beings inhabit a world of scarce resources and keen competition that coalesces uncomfortably with our bottomless ambitions and passions. Worse, we are susceptible to the whims of *Fortuna*, which often conspire against our best-devised stratagems. Only people embodying *virtù* are able to cope with *Fortuna*, confront adversity with renewed purpose, imagine and pursue grand deeds, and maintain their resolve and passion in a relentlessly competitive world.

Fortuna always affects human actions by limiting possibilities and foiling the most assiduous calculations. But human free will and *virtù* retain vibrancy and permit us the agency to conceive and assess our deeds regardless of the constraints of necessity and the machinations of *Fortuna*. Still, the presence of necessity and *Fortuna*, along with the behavior of other human beings and the nature of the world, often render strict compliance with morality impossible. At most, however, the presence of necessity and *Fortuna* generate only partial excuses for human action. We remain largely responsible for our deeds. As such, *virtù* and necessity are codependent. Where necessity constrains possibilities and thereby narrows the range of human choice, *virtù* becomes paramount in making the proper decision and choosing the best alternative. The power of necessity, then, tills the fertile soil for the testing of human *virtù*.

Specifically, Machiavelli refers to military *virtù*, political *virtù*, civic *virtù*, moral *virtù*, and artistic *virtù* (P 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 19, 21,

25, 26).³ The qualities of excellence defining each type will differ. Military commanders require discipline, bravery, single-mindedness, drive, skill, energy, knowledge, and the boldness to ignore conventional morality when necessary. Political leaders need many of the same qualities, but also a special shrewdness and prudence in dealing with foreign threats and internal plots. The attributes of the lion, in order to frighten wolves, and the fox, in order to evade traps, are crucial (P 18). Civic *virtù* is the hallmark of a sound republic. Citizens, initially motivated by self-interest and personal aggrandizement, are shaped by good laws, strong arms, and sound education into serving the common good of an expansionist state. By moral *virtù*, Machiavelli means exercising the values of conventional, impersonal morality. Artistic *virtù* defines excellence in literature and the arts. The greatest men—those able to found, reform, preserve, and expand healthy political units—must exude military and political *virtù*. Such leaders must effectively measure the prevailing situation; reflect on the available choices, priorities, and probable consequences; and act decisively and successfully. Citizens in a healthy political unit must exhibit civic and moral *virtù* if the unit is to continue to flourish.

Clearly for Machiavelli the most important forms are military and political *virtù*. A sound political unit, grounded in good laws and strong arms, is a prerequisite for the rigorous education needed to promote civic and moral *virtù*. The opposite of *virtù* is corruption. Corruption for Machiavelli is weakness: *ozio* [sloth or idleness], civic and moral decay, lack of discipline, softness, timidity, muted will, resignation, inability to compete, hesitancy, indecisiveness, an *animo effeminato* [effeminate soul].

Much ink has been exhausted discussing Machiavelli's description of the notorious Agathocles of Sicily, King of Syracuse. Within the space of a few sentences, Machiavelli seems to contradict his own words:

One ought not, of course, to call it *virtù* to massacre one's fellow citizens, to betray one's friends, to break one's word, to be without mercy and without religion. By such means one can acquire power but not glory. If one considers the *virtù* Agathocles demonstrated in braving and facing down danger, and the strength of character he showed . . . then there seems to be no reason why he should be judged less admirable than any of the finest generals. But on the other hand, his inhuman cruelty and brutality . . . mean it would

be wrong to praise him as one of the finest of men . . . one can attribute neither to fortune nor to *virtù* his accomplishments, which owed nothing to either. (P 8)

At first blush, the paragraph seems rife with contradictions. Did Agathocles embody and exercise *virtù* or not? But these contradictions can be dissolved by distinguishing the various types of *virtù* Machiavelli invokes. I interpret the passage as attributing military *virtù* to Agathocles, in response to his undeniable courage and resolve in rising up through the military ranks and seizing power. He lacked, however, political *virtù* because he misused power and meted out gratuitous cruelties. Also, he was without civic and moral *virtù*. Agathocles exercised military *virtù* through which he seized power, but we should not attribute his transient success to luck or to political *virtù* or to moral *virtù*. As an aside, Machiavelli claims that the “finest of men” are not inhumanely cruel and that acquiring power is not enough to merit glory. He preserves a distinction between tyrants and princes. A concern for enduring glory should inform a ruler’s deeds. Such glory must be deserved and cannot be grounded in misuse of authority or needless cruelties. Enduring, deserved glory embodies a normative dimension that distinguishes it from mere notoriety:

And though able, to their perpetual honor, to set up a republic or a kingdom, [infamous and detestable men] turn to a tyranny. Nor do they realize how much fame, how much glory, how much honor, security, quiet, along with satisfaction of mind, they abandon by this decision and into what great infamy, censure, blame, peril, and disquiet they run. . . .

Truly if a prince is seeking glory in the world, he should wish to possess a corrupt city, not to ruin it wholly like Caesar but to reform it like Romulus. Truly the heavens cannot give a great opportunity for glory, nor can men desire a greater. (D I 10)

In contrast to my interpretation of Machiavelli on Agathocles, Harvey Mansfield argues that “Agathocles has *virtù* but cannot be said to have *virtù*. It is not enough to say that [Machiavelli] uses the word in different ‘senses’; he uses it in two contradictory senses as to whether it includes or excludes evil deeds. What could be more clear, more essential, and more inconsistent than that?”⁴

Mansfield's outrage misses the mark. Surely moral *virtù* almost always excludes evil deeds (although extreme cases require choices between degrees of evil or demand evil well-used). Just as surely, military and political *virtù* include "evil well-used" (P 8). At times, military and political leaders must transgress categorical moral principles in order to advance their highest goals: founding, reforming, preserving, and expanding a worthy state. In the following chapters these distinctions become clearer. That one form of *virtù* aspires to exclude evil deeds but other forms of *virtù* include evil well-used is no more a contradiction than saying that while a good knife cuts sharply a good doctor heals cuts is a contradiction.

The more troubling aspect of the chapter arrives later when Machiavelli, after earlier stigmatizing the excessiveness of Agathocles's methods, includes Agathocles among those who used evil well: "Those who use cruelty well may indeed find both God and their subjects are prepared to let bygones be bygones, as was the case with Agathocles" (P 8). One possibility is that Machiavelli takes Agathocles to have used evil well in military matters, but to have used evil wrongly in political matters. Beginning from humble origins, Agathocles rose to military power and displayed *virtù* in so doing, which required evil well-used. His political career, however, was marred by excesses, cruelties, and betrayals that Machiavelli derides. In short, Agathocles was a political destroyer of his city, a tyrant. That Agathocles was ruthless in obtaining military power does not faze Machiavelli; that Agathocles was excessively cruel once he had political power—that he acted as a tyrant instead of a Machiavellian ruler—merits condemnation. Agathocles, lacking prudence, represents ravenous ambition untempered by an understanding of what constitutes enduring glory.

The question arises whether the freedom and well-being of the citizens in a republic are merely means to the fundamental purposes of the state: the enduring glory of military and political leaders, and the historical grandeur of the nation. Because the common good and individual liberty are requirements for the enduring glory of leaders and the lasting stature of the nation, I conclude their relationship is tighter than that between an end and a means. Part of the definition of the enduring glory of leaders and national grandeur is the extent to which they facilitate the common good and nurture civic *virtù*. This is the case regardless of the conscious intentions upon which the leaders acted. Political leaders must renounce the selfish motivations of tyrants and act from enlightened self-interest, which benefits their citizens and subjects.

The ends of the state are the personal glory of the prince and the enhanced well-being of the citizens (P 26). Machiavelli is clear in *The Prince* and even more emphatically in *The Discourses* that these ends require territorial expansion (P 3, 7; D II 2, 4, 6, 9, 21). Numerous commentators have concluded that the well-being of citizens is only a means to the glory of the ruler, which is paramount; that the personal power of the prince, not the good of the state or the people, is the only true goal of a Machiavellian ruler.⁵

Such a reading is unfair. Rulers earn glory because they have founded, reformed, preserved, or expanded healthy states. A healthy state has strong arms, sound laws, and rigorous education. The state must expand because on Machiavelli's uncompromising worldview the only other choice is enslavement. True, rulers burn with *ambizione* [ambition] and unabashedly aspire to enduring glory, but such glory can be attained only by invigorating the state and enlarging the common good.

Does it follow that the well-being of citizens is only a regrettable, but required, means to what rulers really want? The connection between attaining glory and benefiting the people is too tight to separate neatly. The ruler's deepest aspiration springs, true enough, from self-interest. But he comes to understand that what is in his self-interest cannot be gained selfishly. If selfishness is ignoring the interests of others when one should not, then the ruler must shun it in order to satisfy his self-interest in enduring glory. That one cannot, in Machiavelli's view, attain glory selfishly speaks volumes. Achieving personal glory and advancing the common good are inextricably connected. From the standpoint of the people, the pursuit of glory by the statesman is inseparable from attaining the common good. None of this assumes that the leader has purely altruistic motives or even that his heart necessarily aches for the plight of his people. But a Machiavellian ruler must rise above selfishness, must recognize the inexorable connection between advancing the well-being of the people and attaining personal glory, and must, accordingly, cast aside all inclinations toward tyranny. Accordingly, the well-being of citizens is part of the *definition* of personal glory, rather than merely a means of attaining it.

Those who are tyrants come to power having already lost their souls. Concerned only with their own aggrandizement, tyrants ignore the common good and "do not even realize how much reputation, glory, honor, security, peace of mind, and satisfaction of spirit they are giving up" (D I 10). Tyrants mistakenly take one-person rule

to be an end in itself instead of a means to facilitate collective well-being.

Machiavelli's invocation of glory strikes me as presupposing the audience of history. The masses are too easily fooled by results; they judge only by the outcomes of actions, much of which can hinge on the whims of *Fortuna*. Thus, the approbation of the masses is an unreliable measure of greatness. But the judgments of history, as defined by the more sophisticated evaluations of the learned that are detached from the immediacy of the moment, are more trustworthy. A more refined analysis than that offered by the impressionable masses is required to identify those exemplars who deserve enduring glory.

However, even the honorable pursuit of glory by those of *grandezza d'animo* is secondary to the value of patriotism: "When it is absolutely a question of the safety of one's country, there must be no consideration of just or unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praiseworthy or disgraceful; instead, setting aside every scruple, one must follow to the utmost any plan that will save her life and keep her liberty" (D III 41).

No political community, however, endures forever (D III 5). Decline and corruption are inevitable as nations become victims of their own success and fall prey to corruption. The lack of vigorous enemies, the seductive comforts of *ozio*, the caprices of *Fortuna*, and annoying class strife will conspire against permanent domination (D III 1). Nations, like all living organisms, are born to suffer and perish. But within the process lie possibilities for the only prize worth striving for: enduring glory, the recognition that certain individuals and political communities are more than a cut above the others. This, again, is the reward Machiavelli offers to those who heed his advice.

The Nature of the World

Machiavelli envisioned international affairs as grounded in a zero-sum context. He is convinced that the world is always in the same overall condition: the total amount of *virtù* and total amount of corruption is constant. What changes is the distribution of *virtù* and corruption in individual territories. He explains reallocations that have occurred throughout history and concludes that contemporary Italians and Greeks who admire the past and decry the present have a point. Their past was more glorious than their present. The masses generally lack civic *virtù* as they disrespect religion, law, and military service. Political leaders are even worse. They expect to be honored as