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Machiavelli (1469–1527)

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Introduction

Machiavelli is a pivotal figure in the history of political thought. His views of human nature, society and government mark a break with medieval philosophy and sixteenth-century political theory based on teleological assumptions about God's purposes for man. Machiavelli divorced politics from higher purposes, from Christian morality, from theology and from religion. He conceived the state as functioning solely for human purposes and constructed rules of conduct that were not moral rules, but which were informed by a realistic and practical view of the world gleaned from observation of events and examples drawn from history. Machiavelli radically secularised political thought and initiated new ways of looking at man and society. It is with Machiavelli, that modern social and political theory begins.

Machiavelli is best known for his two major political writings, *The Prince*, and *The Discourses on The First Ten Books of Titus Livy*. Although the *Art of War*, *The Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* are relevant to his political thinking, it is the two former works and the relationship between them, which form the core of Machiavelli studies. Throughout all his political writings, Machiavelli claimed to have one fundamental purpose – to discover how to establish and maintain an independent state in corrupt Renaissance Italy. To do this, he intended to break with ancient and medieval thought with its theological and metaphysical underpinnings and to campaign against illusions about politics rooted in the Christian or the idealistic thought of his predecessors. He aimed to blaze a new trail of political analysis in order to reach the truth of practical politics.

Machiavelli saw himself as an innovator. In *The Prince* (hereafter *P*; see A. Gilbert, 1965), he announces that he is departing from 'the methods of

others' in order to 'write something useful for him who comprehends it'. The novelty of Machiavelli's new method lay in his claim to be concerned with the 'truth of the matter as facts show rather than with any fanciful notion' (P. XV). *The Prince* was intended as a practical advice document in the genre of treatises dealing with the problem of princely rule. In the princely literature from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, political moralists had compiled a list of cardinal and princely virtues it was the duty of a good prince to acquire. Machiavelli complained that such advice only applied to perfect princes in perfect states. He intended to discuss facts drawn from history and from his own political experience as a civil servant and diplomat in the government of Florence, in order to bring about what was typical and general in political conduct and so to establish rules and define maxims for successful political action.

Machiavelli took it as given that the ends of politics were the acquiring and keeping of power, the stability of the state, the preservation of order and general prosperity. Therefore, in order to provide useful advice, Machiavelli was concerned to establish from historical example and factual evidence the kinds of qualities rulers must have and the actions they must take in order to achieve political success. These qualities were psychological and social, rather than moral; these actions were governed by prudential rules rather than moral rules. Consequently, he overturns the idealised conception of the virtues found in the works of his predecessors. He exhorts the prince to act according to conventional virtues when he can. But the prince must be adaptable and 'have a mind to turn in any direction as Fortune's winds and the variety of affairs require ... he holds to what is right when he can and knows how to do wrong when he must' (P. XV11).

The prince must cultivate, not traditional virtue, but Machiavellian *virtù*. He must be bold, resolute, flexible, prepared to break promises and act against charity, truth, religion and humanity. The prince must combine the cunning of the fox with the strength of the lion and be devious, ruthless, violent or cruel as the situation demands. Political necessity frequently demands that the prince learns how not to be good. When the occasion requires it, the prince must adopt any means necessary. If princes succeed in conquest and in preserving states, they will be honoured and praised regardless of the means used since 'as to the actions of all men and especially those of princes ... everyone looks to their result' (P. XV111). Machiavelli's focus in *The Prince* was on monarchies and princely behaviour. In *The Discourses* (hereafter *D*; see A. Gilbert, 1965) he is mainly concerned with republican government. Here, he aimed to explain how the Roman republic managed to achieve greatness. As in *The Prince*, he applies his method using historical studies and his own experience to draw practical

conclusions. He again emphasises that in times of political necessity, means must be adapted to circumstances. Actions, which display *virtù* rather than traditional moral virtues, are required to withstand the blows of Fortune. If a republic is to survive, rulers and citizens alike must possess *virtù*. Just as a ruler should not shrink from evil deeds, neither should citizens when the survival of the republic is at stake:

because 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. 111, 41)

Similarly, success excuses the deed because a prudent intellect will never 'censure anyone for any unlawful action used in organising a kingdom or setting up a republic – though the deed accuses him, the result should excuse him' (D. 111, 2).

In *The Discourses*, however, Machiavelli advances the view that though a single ruler is necessary to found and reform states, a republican government is better at maintaining them once they have been established (D. 111, 9). Their subsequent fortunes depend not on the virtue of one man, but on the civic virtue of citizens prepared to advance collective interests over their own private or sectional interests. Here, he claims that 'governments by the people are better than those by princes' (D. 1, 58) and that it is 'not individual good but common good that makes cities great. Yet without doubt this common good is thought important only in republics' (D. 11, 2).

Problems and Issues

Interpretations of Machiavelli are legion. No other political author has provoked either the same volume of critical responses or caused such sharp disagreement about his purposes. There are a bewildering array of conflicting interpretations about his political views which have continued to grow unabated from his own time to the present evidenced in Fiore's (1990) 600 page bibliography of modern Machiavelli scholarship.

In the interpretive literature Machiavelli is variously described as the Galileo of politics, the first political scientist, an anti-metaphysical empiricist, a positivist, a realist, a pragmatist, a cynic. Conversely, he is seen as lacking a scientific mind and a historical sense, more artistic and intuitive than scientific. Or, he is the founder of metapolitics, of *raison d'état*, an advocate of *realpolitik*, a cold technician of political life. He is condemned

as an evil ideologue, a despot, an absolutist, a teacher of evil, an atheist, a pagan and an anti-Christian. He is hailed as heir to, a rebel against, and a representative of, Renaissance humanism. He is an anguished humanist, a radical critical humanist. He is admired as a moralist, a passionate patriot, the father of Italian Nationalism, a giant of the Enlightenment, a committed republican, and a proto-revolutionary.

In order to forge a way through the impenetrable mass of diverse opinions, the significant areas of dispute can be categorised, firstly into debates about Machiavelli's method and the scientific status of his work. Secondly, into conflicting interpretations about the relationship between politics and morality and, within this, debates about the meaning and significance of Machiavelli's political vocabulary. Thirdly, mirroring and related to the ethics–politics debate, into the rival view of the relationship between the advice given to the absolute ruler in *The Prince* and the apparent republican sentiments in *The Discourses*.

Why Conflicting Interpretations?

Few political writers have suffered from such polarised judgements as Machiavelli. A partial explanation for this lies in the textual status of his works. There are no original autographed manuscripts of the chief works. Translations and edited versions inevitably involve critical interpretation and they differ in tone, vocabulary and syntax, opening up possibilities for different readings. The lack of definitive texts also poses chronological puzzles, difficulties in accurately dating the major works and explaining their genesis and place in Machiavelli's thought. In the received texts difficulties in discerning Machiavelli's meaning are exacerbated by his own lack of rigour, by aspects of his prose style and by his limited political vocabulary. Machiavelli was not a systematic, analytic political theorist. He does not give any formal exposition of the features of his method nor explain their importance for understanding his doctrines. He does not define the principles underpinning his maxims nor sustain a case for why one type of government is better than another. As a vehicle for conveying his ideas, his prose style and his political concepts are problematic. Features of Machiavelli's prose ensure maximum impact, they startle and shock and they excite controversy. Machiavelli's key concepts such as *virtù* and *fortuna*, but also *ambizione*, *bontà*, *politica*, *stato*, *ordini*, *libertà*, *gloria* are used in a wide variety of contexts. They convey a plurality of meanings, undermining precise definition, making it difficult to establish his intentions. Moreover tensions, contradictions and ambiguities within and

between the texts make them vulnerable to different readings, stubbornly resisting a definitive interpretation.

Different attitudes towards Machiavelli, however, are also a consequence of biased political and historical opinion. His early reputation as a diabolic advisor to princes, the appropriation of his name as a byword for cunning and duplicitous behaviour, his reinterpretations as republican patriot in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reflect either the limited information available to commentators or their own political and moral preoccupations. The range of modern critical viewpoints still encompasses ancient accusations and positive appraisals of Machiavelli's ideas. Though these debates were re-focused by the new interpretations of Croce, Meinecke and Chabod in the 1920s, they have done little to stem disparate views about Machiavelli's relationship to politics and morality, his republicanism or his methods of analysis. More is now known about the details of Machiavelli's life and work and this has inspired a plethora of conjectures about the roots, development and meaning of Machiavelli's thought. Machiavelli has been dissected by theologians, moralists, philosophers, political scientist, linguists, literary critics and historians. These focus variously on his life and career, his maxims, his assumptions, his basic concepts, his method and conclusions, his style and use of language, his reading of classical authors, his understanding and use of history, his relationships with his predecessors and contemporaries, his experience as a statesman, his Chancery writings, his association with Renaissance humanists, the conditions in sixteenth-century Italy – the political, intellectual and cultural environment in which he lived. Different interpretations reflect the variety of disciplinary and methodological interests of the interpreters. They disagree because they impose different explanatory frameworks on Machiavelli's thought in an attempt to systematise his ideas and because they emphasise one aspect of his thought or a particular context over another.

Conflicting Interpretations

Political Method

A common modern interpretation of Machiavelli popular with scholars of a positivist persuasion and concurring with his own self-proclaimed novelty, champions Machiavelli as a pioneer of empiricism and the inductive method, and hails him as the founder of modern political science. Burnham (1943) for instance claims that Machiavelli shared the methods of Galileo and applied these to politics. His method consisted of describing and correlating

facts drawn from observation or political literature in order to discover constant patterns in history and on the basis of these, define rules or maxims for successful political behaviour. For Cassirer (1946), Olschki (1945), Renaudet (1942) and Hancock (1935), Machiavelli is an objective technician of politics. Their thesis about the scientific character of Machiavelli's thought also incorporates claims about his ethical neutrality. According to Cassirer, Machiavelli 'studied political actions in the same way a chemist studies chemical reactions ... he never blames or praises political actions: he simply gives a descriptive analysis of them' (Cassirer, 1946, p. 154). Renaudet describes his methods as 'purely positivist'. Olschki also sees in Machiavelli a 'refined scientific instinct' who transformed history into an empirical science and made of politics 'a system of universal rules' based on the assumption 'that political as well as natural phenomena are ruled by an inductive method of thinking' (Olschki, 1945, p. 22, p. 25, p. 29).

The notion of Machiavelli as a political scientist comes up against the challenge that Machiavelli was a man of passion who lacked the emotional detachment of a neutral impartial scientist, a challenge that resurfaces in the politics–morality and realism–idealism debates (Chabod, 1958; Sasso, 1958). Others who question Machiavelli's status as a scientist, complain that Machiavelli did not use or apply a scientific or inductive method. He did not objectively examine historical data in order to draw practical lessons or to formulate general laws. Rather he used historical sources as examples of laws he had already formulated (Butterfield, 1940; Scaglione, 1956). According to Hulliung 'Machiavelli unified theory and practice by ideology rather than science' using his own 'Machiavellian' reading of history (Hulliung, 1983, p. 166). But it is Anglo (1969) who most savagely attacks Machiavelli's methods to expose a number of fallacies. He demonstrates that Machiavelli's technique as he applied it is at best a shoddy induction in that his adherence to classical authors and use of recent history is selective, his sources are uncollated and not used comparatively, and his general theory is based on a few dubious examples. At worst, Machiavelli's technique does not constitute a method at all and his induction is a spurious procedure. The essence of induction is that a conclusion should emerge from a sifting through sources, but Machiavelli imposes conclusions on evidence, fails to take account of completing theories and examples which would invalidate his theory and misinterprets or even falsifies sources when they do not fit his preconceptions. Anglo concludes that Machiavelli is not a scientist, but an artist whose perceptions and disturbing insights were intuitive rather than the result of the application of any scientific method. His method 'was not fundamental to his political observation; but was, rather, an elaborate and irrelevant superstructure' (Anglo, 1969, p. 243).

*Politics and Morality**Immoral or Amoral?*

Machiavelli has been castigated as a man inspired by the devil, as an immoral writer, an anti-Christian, an evil ideologue and an advocate of tyranny. This was the view of most of the Elizabethan dramatists influenced by Gentillet and supported by the early denunciations of Cardinal Pole, Bodin and Frederick the Great. In recent times Maritain (1942) and Strauss (1958) restate this 'old fashioned and simple opinion that Machiavelli was indifferent to right and wrong and a knowing and a deliberate teacher of evil'. Strauss argues that Machiavelli sought 'a complete revolution in thinking about right and wrong' by leading the prince to accept the 'repulsive doctrine' that 'the end justifies the means' (Strauss, 1958: p. 14, p. 67). It is in this sense that popular culture understands 'Machiavellianism' as an immoral doctrine that licences the abandoning of all moral scruples in the quest for political power. Machiavelli's doctrines have also been seen as the recognition of the necessities and realities of political life and thus as amoral, objective or descriptive, rather than immoral. The most widely discussed thesis is that put forward by Croce in 1925. For Croce and his followers the association of Machiavelli with immorality is inappropriate. Machiavelli was an anguished humanist who did not deny the validity of Christian morality, but revealed the fundamental incompatibility between moral means and political ends. His greatest contribution to the philosophy of politics was his recognition of the 'autonomy of politics' a sphere of action with its own logic and laws 'beyond good and evil', exempt from moral considerations (Croce, 1925, pp. 60–5). Chabod agrees that Machiavelli 'divorces politics and ethics' and that he 'swept aside every criterion of action not suggested by *raison d'état*' (Chabod, 1958, p. 195). Meinecke (1957) also claims that Machiavelli was the first person to recognise the true nature of *raison d'état*, the element of necessity in political conduct. 'The striving for security and self-preservation at any price is behind all conduct according to *raison d'état*' (Meinecke, 1957, p. 265). *Raison d'état* refers to what a statesman must do, what it is logical and rational to do to preserve the interests of the state. Meinecke calls Machiavelli the forefather of modern politics and the pathbreaker of modern history, seen in the actual practice of the pursuit of power by any means.

Challenges to the Originality of Machiavelli's Realism

There are those who argue that Machiavelli is not as original as Meinecke claims. He was not the first to recognise the element of expediency in successful political action. This had been acknowledged at least since the

time of Aristotle and was raised more explicitly in the princely literature of the fifteenth-century Italian humanists who were forerunners to Machiavelli (A. Gilbert, 1938; F. Gilbert, 1939). Moreover as Post (1964) has shown, the concept of *raison d'état* was familiar in the late Middle Ages and inherent in the practice of fifteenth-century politics. Political realism was reflected in the internal and external affairs of the medieval state and this had not escaped the attention of theologians and legal theorists who frequently used the notion 'necessity has no laws' to justify extraordinary means through force of circumstance (see also Anglo, 1969, chapter 7).

Descriptive or Ethically Neutral

Other commentators see Machiavelli's political realism as objective or descriptive without committing themselves to the view of the autonomy of politics. Herder, Ranke, Macaulay, Burd and, in recent times, Sasso (1958) argue that Machiavelli simply tells the truth about politics accurately describing the political relationships and strategies that are used to maintain and legitimise power. Others hail him as the first example of a value-free scientist rather than simply descriptive (Cassirer, 1946; Renaudet, 1942; Olschki, 1945; Hancock, 1935). According to this view, Machiavelli's doctrines are not immoral or amoral and he did not judge from a standpoint beyond good and evil. Rather, he provided a technical imperative of skill of the form 'if you want to achieve x, do y'. The ends themselves are neither rational nor good, the means to achieve them are neither praised nor blamed. They are advocated only to achieve the end in question. Machiavelli is ethically neutral and politically uncommitted.

A Different Morality

Others maintain that there is nothing immoral, amoral or ethically neutral about Machiavelli. He provides a justification for moral principles appropriate to political actions which is different from traditional or private moral values, but which is nonetheless moral. For instance, Berlin argues that it is a false antithesis to say that Machiavelli divorced politics and morality. Rather, he distinguishes two incompatible ways of life and therefore two moralities. Machiavelli contrasts the morality of the Graeco-Roman world where ultimate values are political, communal and social, with Judeo-Christian morality in which values are private and individual. According to Berlin, Machiavelli is a moral pluralist, announcing the need to choose between incompatible, but equally moral sets of ends 'either a good, virtuous private life, or a good, successful social existence, but not both' (Berlin, 1972, pp. 197–8). Germino (1966) proposes that Machiavelli can be seen as

a proponent of what Weber called (in *Politik als Beruf*) ‘the ethics of responsibility’ as opposed to ‘the ethics of intention’. Machiavelli endorses an ‘ethic of responsibility’ or ‘consequences’ in which it is irresponsible in politics to act out of pure motives of individual conscience without weighing the consequences that actually result.

Virtù and Fortuna

Virtù and *fortuna* are terms pivotal to Machiavelli’s thought since together they comprise the polarities of, and the framework for, all human experience. His belief that *fortuna* controls half our lives and the need to display *virtù* as a countervailing force has important political and moral implications. It raises questions about political virtue – the kind of behaviour necessary for political success and about what kind of government best sustains *virtù* and vice versa. However, of all the basic concepts and contrasts in Machiavelli’s political thought, *fortuna* and *virtù* are notoriously problematic and scholars have struggled to assess their precise meaning and significance. According to some interpreters, *fortuna* is a survival of a pre-logical description of the world and represents a breakdown of reasoning in Machiavelli’s thinking. When he could not explain events, he attributed them to the quasi-superstitious workings of fortune. Cassirer claims that Machiavelli resorted to *fortuna* as a half mythical power when he could not explain events in terms of reason (Cassirer, 1946, p. 157). Chabod largely shares the opinion that *fortuna* is at least half mythical and is regarded by Machiavelli as a mysterious, transcendent grouping of events whose incoherence is unintelligible to the human mind (Chabod, 1958, pp. 67–70).

Against these views of *fortuna* as mysterious or transcendental, Sasso (1952, p. 205) claims that fortune is simply the limitation of human nature which denies men control of certain historical situations. Olschki goes further. *Fortuna* is not a mythical or illogical concept, but an abstract, secular concept representing ‘the passive conditions for political success’ and ‘*virtù* is its active counterpart’. (Olschki, 1945, p. 378) Consistent with his interpretation of Machiavelli as a political scientist, Olschki argues that *virtù* and *fortuna* are ‘technical terms of a rational system of political thought’. They are building blocks of a scientific analysis of human behaviour comparable to gravity and inertia in Newtonian physics. For Villari, Machiavelli ‘always used the word *virtù* in the sense of courage or energy for both good and evil’ (Villari, n.d., p. 92). Later scholars agreed but went further in distinguishing the senses in which Machiavelli used the term or in emphasising some senses over others. Wood (1967) prioritises the militaristic aspects of

virtù and claims that Machiavelli transfers to politics the behaviour of soldiers in battle. Hannaford (1972) argues for a more political and less militaristic understanding of *virtù*, denying the equation between politics and war, which Wood found in Machiavelli. Instead, he highlights the connection between *virtù* and public, political purposes. Plamenatz (1972) distinguishes heroic and civic *virtù*, the former a quality of rulers, founders and restorers of states, the latter a corporate quality of citizens. Pitkin (1984) draws attention to Machiavelli's misogyny and to *virtù* as a masculine concept, denoting energy, effectiveness, virtuosity, force combined with ability. The antithesis of *virtù* is *fortuna*, explicitly a woman favouring young bold men, who to keep her in order must 'cuff and maul her' (*P.* XXV). Price (1973), however, shows *virtù* to be a much more extensive concept conveying a wider range of meanings than the above analyses allow. He argues that *virtù* is a complex cluster concept, one which included traditional, Christian moral virtue, purely militaristic virtue, purely political virtue, a combination of politico-military virtue, an instrumental virtue and a cultural virtue as well as ancient and modern virtue. It is perhaps this combination of meanings which led Whitfield to state that 'there is no doctrine of *virtù* in Machiavelli' (Whitfield, 1947, p. 95).

The Relationship of The Prince to The Discourses

Explaining away the Differences

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to reconciling Machiavelli's advice in *The Prince* with the republican ideas expressed in *The Discourses*. Eighteenth-century interpretations of Machiavelli as patriot, democrat and teacher of freedom explained away *The Prince* as a satire on princes, a warning against tyrants (Spinoza and Rousseau). A more historical relativist attitude in the early nineteenth century explained *The Prince* as a piece of special pleading written at a moment when only a saviour prince could free Italy from foreign domination, preserve her independence and begin her regeneration (Herder, Hegel, Fichte, Ranke). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was Machiavelli's political realism that explained the differences. Meinecke argued that Machiavelli was a republican by ideal and inclination, but his political realism meant that his republican ideals had to give way to princely *realpolitik*. Therefore the contrast between his monarchical and republican attitudes was specious (Meinecke, 1957, p. 32f). Concentrating on the objectivity of Machiavelli's scientific method, other interpretations followed, claiming that Machiavelli's teaching fits a single harmonious pattern. Renaudet (1942) and Cassirer (1946)

argued that Machiavelli was indifferent to the choice between absolute monarchy and republican liberty. He was merely interested in the techniques of politics.

The Genetic Approach

Chabod and Italian scholars agreed that there is a unity between the works, but not one attributable to unity of method. They objected to the conception of Machiavelli as a detached scientist applying his ideas in succession to two different subjects, principalities and republics. For Chabod, Machiavelli was a man of passion, whose ideas came from his experience as a politician. Chabod (1958) and Sasso (1958) adopted a 'genetic approach' tracing Machiavelli's development by studying the genesis of his ideas and their connection with his public experience and the events and ideas at the time of writing. Chabod's claim that *The Prince* and *The Discourses* were inter-related and inter-dependent aspects of an organically unified outlook was linked to his thesis about the dating of the two works. According to Chabod, the first half of the first book of *The Discourses* was written in 1513. It displays a strong republican confidence, which in chapters 16–18 gives way to an interest in the personal success of the prince, and the mood in which *The Prince* was composed. Given that at the time of writing restoring a republic was unrealistic and only a prince could restore a state, Chabod suggests that Machiavelli abandoned *The Discourses* after the eighteenth chapter to write *The Prince* between August and December 1513. Machiavelli then returned to work on *The Discourses* and finished in 1517 according to the original spirit of the work (Chabod, 1958, p. 21, pp. 36–41). These speculations about dating were supported by epistolary evidence, comparison with other writings, analysis of prefaces and dedications, references to historical events and the final chapter in *The Prince* and in particular cross-referencing between the works. Together these indicated that the second and third book of *The Discourses* must have been written after *The Prince* and the first book must be older than *The Prince*.

Machiavelli's Evolution as a Republican

Chabod's arguments were widely accepted by a number of scholars, notably Prezzolini (1967) and Ridolfi (1963). Among the minority who did not share this view was Baron (1961). He argued that the two works were not indissolubly joined, but had different messages. Machiavelli did not move from republican idealism to princely realism, but *The Prince* was an earlier phase in his evolution as a republican. He demonstrates the improbability of the first book of *The Discourses* being written before *The Prince*. He argues that

the political realism of *The Prince* was not a moment or second step in Machiavelli's thought, but the result of fifteen years of practical politics in service of the republic, a synthesis of which he intended to offer the Medici prince. Baron stresses Machiavelli's subsequent enforced leisure after the restoration of the Medici and his dismissal from public office; his close contact with republicans and literati who he met for conversations in the Oricellari Gardens as well as the undisguised values of a republican citizen found in *The Discourses*. He concludes that although in *The Discourses* the central problem for Machiavelli is still the winning and defence of political power 'the sources are no longer sought in diplomatic craftsmanship exclusively, but in a social and constitutional fabric that allowed civic energies and a spirit of political devotion and sacrifice to develop in all classes of people' (Baron, 1961, p. 249). A revived and strengthened republicanism helped Machiavelli arrive at more profound answers to earlier questions. Skinner (1981) builds on Baron as well as F. Gilbert (1965) and Pocock (1975) seeking to understand Machiavelli by reconstructing both the intellectual context of civic humanism and the political context of Italian city-states. He claims that *The Prince* and *The Discourses* have different intentions. Machiavelli, in *The Prince* intended readers to focus on Florence at the time, but like Pocock he argues that Machiavelli's thought was consistently republican at both a practical and ideological level. The arguments of *The Discourses* resemble the early tradition of Italian republicanism, linking liberty, civic glory and greatness and the traditional belief in the common good. Viroli (1990) agrees that Machiavelli had as his goal the republican ideal of politics as the art of instituting and preserving community based on judgements about the common good. This possibility, however, depended on a truly political man capable of using the force of necessity and it was Machiavelli's purpose in *The Prince* to advise such a man.

Evaluation

Looking first at disputes over his method, Machiavelli was not a philosopher, nor a systematiser who carefully defined, distinguished and justified his ideas, and this militates against any definitive understanding of his intentions and any agreement about his status. Doubts about Machiavelli as a political scientist are partly attributable to his failure to engage in serious political analysis and strict logical argument. Consequently, those who draw attention to the fallacies and flaws in his method can challenge the 'scientific' interpretation by demonstrating that he did not actually use or apply what is now known as the inductive method, a process of inferring

generalisations from observation of particular instances. Features of his prose style further undermine Machiavelli's scientific credentials. These are his sequential mode of presenting an argument; constructions which begin 'therefore', 'thus', 'because', 'hence'; his fondness for aphorisms; his pithy sentences, juxtapositions, dramatic statements, violent contrasts, disjunctive techniques presenting either/or formulations, and the use of antithesis. These features make Machiavelli's argument vivid, bold and arresting. They also function to plaster over the gaps, inaccuracies and inconsistencies in his argument and make it easy for interpreters to conclude that Machiavelli is an artist striving for effects rather than a serious political analyst. The opposing views of scientist or intuitive artist could only be resolved if it could be agreed that Machiavelli was not a methodical or analytic thinker. It is an exaggeration to describe Machiavelli as a political scientist because he was interested in facts rather than ideals or because he claims to support his conclusions with observation and experience. His methodology was not systematic or coherent enough to be called scientific in the manner of Galileo. But it would not be seriously misleading to see in Machiavelli the suggestion of more modern forms of political investigation. By maintaining that facts about political life and people's behaviour patterns were the only valid data on which to base political conclusions he created the basis for a transition to a more pragmatic approach to politics that rested on observable reality rather than Christian derived precepts, abstraction, speculation or utopian thinking.

On the perennial question of Machiavelli's attitude towards morality, his controversial reputation was first established through readers responding to the limited information that was historically available to them. Interpreters reading into the texts their own preoccupations or using them for their own ideological purposes compounded this. Early interpretations of Machiavelli as an advocate of tyranny and a teacher of evil tended to base their interpretation on readings of *The Prince* alone. Soon after publication in 1532 it became the subject of fierce political invective and moral condemnation. *The Prince*, like all Machiavelli's works, was placed on the Papal Index of Proscribed books in 1559 where it remained until 1890. In approximately 1539, Cardinal Pole denounced *The Prince* as 'a diabolic handbook for sinners'. The sixteenth-century political polemicist, Gentillet, whose book attacking Machiavelli spread his ideas throughout Europe, reinforced this view. Drawing on Gentillet, the murderous Machiavelli of the Elizabethan dramatists popularised Machiavelli's name as a byword for astute, cunning, unscrupulous political behaviour. The words 'Machiavellian' and 'Machiavellianism' entered and remain in the language as terms of reproach and dishonour. Interpretations of Machiavelli, both

negative and positive, reflect the issues of the age and the agendas of commentators. The anti-Machiavellianism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was motivated by a desire to defend religious values against the rise of the secular state in the Reformation and Counter Reformation. During the Enlightenment the availability of *The Discourses* led to the reinvention of Machiavelli as patriot, democrat and crypto-republican satirist. In the nineteenth century the nationalist projections of the Risorgimento resulted in the celebration of Machiavelli as patriotic hero, prophet and founder of Italian unity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century appropriation of Machiavellianism as an amoral doctrine became a weapon that political realists and the modern state could use to defend power politics, the power state and the rationality of the politics of interests. Many of these responses are recognised now as misconceptions, misrepresentations, deformed and biased readings, but modern commentators on the morality–politics debate still respond in disparate ways. These different interpretations might be explained in terms of commentators' own efforts to wrestle with the moral dilemmas that politics brings, and this may account for their attempts to variously condemn Machiavelli's advice or to legitimise it as rational and realistic, to neutralise it as explanatory or descriptive or to defend it by dismissing the relevance of morality to politics.

A further complication is that even though different readings of the relationship between politics and morality can be attributed to interpreters' own pre-occupations, there still remain tensions and ambiguities in the texts, which make different judgements possible. In *The Prince* XV111 and *The Discourses* 1, 9 Machiavelli says that in politics actions are judged by their success. If this is taken to mean that any political end *justifies* any means and the emphasis is placed on *success* however it is to be achieved, then it is not difficult to see why Machiavelli's advice has been considered immoral. If the message in these passages is taken to mean that political success *requires* immoral means and the emphasis is on *necessity*, then Machiavellianism can be interpreted as a recognition of the realities of political life. Consequently, it is not surprising that interpreters have claimed that Machiavelli's advice is amoral, descriptive or ethically neutral. Within the texts, there is also evidence that suggests a latent moral perspective. When Machiavelli discusses the qualities that bring praise or blame he does not just say that conventional vice may bring political success and conventional virtue may result in political ruin. In chapters XV–XV11 of *The Prince* he illustrates the point that morally good actions can lead to evil results and vice versa. For example, in relation to cruelty and mercy, he writes:

A wise prince then, who is not troubled about a reproach for cruelty is more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, let evils continue

and which result in murder or plunder because the latter commonly harm the whole group, but those executions that come from princes harm individuals only. (*P.* XV111)

Implicit in these arguments is the notion that failure to commit a moral wrong is often the greater of two evils. Meanness, cruelty and violence are not just more politically efficacious than the practice of conventional virtues, but can be more preserving of them in the long run. Those who argue that Machiavelli is the author of the doctrine 'the end justifies the means' overlook the fact that his prescriptions were not formulated in that terminology. He never employs the concept of justification in the sense that the ends make the means right or that political success vindicates the crime. Rather, he illustrates the consequences of not acting immorally if the occasion demands it. But to conclude from this that he was a scientist or a technician of political life, describing means to ends, unconcerned whether the end was rational or good, is to go too far. Machiavelli advocated ruthless strategies not to secure and preserve power in a vacuum or to achieve political success *per se*. The point was to create and maintain a strong state, the moral purpose of which was to secure the good of the whole community. If Machiavelli described the world as it is, he did not accept it. The point was to change it for the better. He called for a regeneration of his own society and advocated a republican order where civic virtue, liberty, personal security and co-operation for the common good could be realised.

Those who say Machiavelli divorced politics and ethics similarly overstate the case. Machiavelli's contrast between political and moral means is not simply a contrast between expediency and moral principle but a contrast between one type of morality and another. But Berlin's claim that Machiavelli was showing the incompatibility between pagan and Christian morality is simplistic and his attempt to turn Machiavelli into a liberal who recognises the plurality of competing values is implausible. Machiavelli implied that morality in politics must be consequentialist and he could be seen as an embryonic Utilitarian who demonstrated the incompatibility of consequentialist ethics with all other forms. Consequentialist ethics clash with Christian and traditional ethics, any kind of moral absolutism or idealism, any ethic that has as its source and criterion of value the word of God, eternal reason or the dictates of conscience, with ethics that stress intention, personal integrity or that embody abstract conceptions of justice, fairness or individual rights. Machiavelli's main concern was to call for the replacement of the one over all others.

Turning to the question of the meaning of *virtù* and *fortuna*, just as Machiavelli's lack of rigour and prose style leads to difficulties in interpretation, the limitations of his political vocabulary create further problems in

discerning the precise meaning of his key terms. Disagreement about the meaning and place of *virtù* and *fortuna* in Machiavelli's thought are due to their overuse, to ambiguities in their use and in the relationship between them. *Fortuna* has been understood in different ways because *fortuna* is portrayed in different ways in the text. *Fortuna* is sometimes a mythical image and sometimes an abstract and elemental force, a flood that might be partly controlled (P. XXV). She is both a fickle goddess with a personality and purpose of her own who 'blinds the minds of men when she does not wish them to resist her power' (D. 11, 28); and a woman to be pummelled into obedience by audacious young men (P. XXV). *Fortuna* is also simply the unexpected and unforeseen, used to describe whatever is inexplicable in human affairs. *Virtù* can also be made to bear the multiple meanings interpreters have found in the word or conversely can collapse beneath their weight. This is because Machiavelli used one word for several different qualities and because there are ambiguities and confusions in its use. For instance, in one of the most widely discussed passages in chapter VI of *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that really wicked men – like Agathocles, the tyrant of Syracuse – who achieve their ambitions cannot be called virtuous. This is inconsistent with his general practice of attributing *virtù* to those who achieve their ends by evil means as well as good. Both Hannibal and Scipio had *virtù* even though they achieved success by different means. Scipio was loved for his 'mercy, loyalty and piety' and Hannibal feared for his 'cruelty, treachery and lack of religion' (P. XV11; D. 111, 21). Cesare Borgia is admired for his *virtù*, though his actions were no less ruthless, cruel or treacherous than the deeds of Agathocles. There are also confusions in the relation of *fortuna* to *virtù*. On the one hand, Machiavelli often urges *virtù* to stand up to *fortuna* and suggests that men of *virtù* can overwhelm her or win her favour. On the other hand, he pessimistically counsels that *fortuna* can have the last word. His admired men of *virtù* – Borgia, Hannibal and Scipio – are all in the end defeated by unpredictable circumstances suggesting that even men of extreme *virtù* cannot defeat her. *Virtù* and *fortuna* then, are radically unstable concepts and it is not surprising that scholars differ in their assessment of Machiavelli's attempt to organise his subject matter around these two polarities. However, it is not impossible to discern some coherent thread running through Machiavelli's usage of these terms. *Fortuna* usually represents contingency, chance, accident, the unpredictable. Observation and experience reveal, however, that there is sufficient correlation between behaviour and events to discover recurrent patterns and to see that the exercise of *virtù* can lead to favourable outcomes. Moreover it is clear that *virtù* is a consistent concept in so far as it embodies different qualities at different times, given what is necessary to

attain goals in particular circumstances. Princely *virtù* embraces those qualities, capacities and dispositions necessary for a prince to establish, restore or maintain the security of the state. The *virtù* which survived in ancient Rome was the civic virtue of the masses and consisted of those qualities which helped to make the state strong, in particular, devotion to community, public spirit and respect for law. The core of *virtù* is pure efficacy, any quality that is politically effective, and this has devastating consequences for traditional morality as well as implications for who should rule. Republics are preferable to principalities because though it takes one man of *virtù* to found, preserve or restore a state, kingdoms depending on the *virtù* of one man are not lasting. Republics offer a wider range of people to adapt to changing circumstances and enjoy good fortune for a longer time (*D.* 11, 2).

In considering the relationship between *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, based upon a dating of the texts, any interpretation of the major works or the relationship between them comes up against the immediate problem of accessing the 'original' Machiavelli. There are no complete autographed manuscripts of *The Prince*, *The Discourses*, or *The Florentine Histories* so readers only have access to problematic contemporary manuscripts or else to translations or editions of them. Moreover, there is some evidence from surviving copies and earliest printed versions of *The Discourses* that the chapters are not in their original order of composition nor in the sequence finally agreed by Machiavelli (Anglo, 1969, p. 75). Cross-referencing between *The Prince* and *The Discourses* poses chronological puzzles and differences of opinion about the dating, conception and purpose of each. Nothing short of acquiring the original texts would suffice to resolve problems from variations in manuscripts, from editorial modernisations and discrepancies and from some of the difficulties arising from the order of composition. However, even if the question of dating could be settled, this would not establish the validity of the conclusions regarding the place and purpose of either work in Machiavelli's thought. If it could be proved that *The Discourses* were begun first, this alone is not evidence for Machiavelli moving from some kind of republican idealism to princely realism. By the same token, if we knew that *The Discourses* followed *The Prince* this alone would not demonstrate his progression from political expediency to republicanism because Machiavelli's intentions would still remain obscure.

Looking at the context or Machiavelli's method might help us understand *The Prince/Discourses* relationship. Yet contextual arguments alone are unable to resolve this matter because different interpretations result from conjectures which give emphasis to particular contexts and draw unwarranted conclusions from them. The view that Machiavelli moved from republican idealism to princely *realpolitik* depends on thinking that the

immediate conditions in Italy at the time of *The Prince's* composition are the most relevant factor in the explanation. The view that Machiavelli moved from a narrow view of political expediency and evolved as a republican depends on foregrounding the context of civic republicanism. Depending on the context highlighted a case is made for the unity, disunity or progression in Machiavelli's thought.

Similarly, if Machiavelli's method and objectivity rather than the context of his ideas are stressed, then a case can be made for the unity between the two works. Machiavelli can then be viewed as being concerned with the techniques of politics and the question of principalities or republics is subordinate to the unifying theme of the winning and defence of political power.

However, there is a kernel of agreement between the interpretations. They all accept that *The Prince* was the result of the frustration of Machiavelli's republican sympathies, of his desire for employment in the Medici regime, of his belief that founding a republic at that moment was unrealistic, of his hope in the founder of a new state and of his willingness to support any government that would preserve Florentine independence. This agreement underpins historical relativist, political realist and genetic explanations as well as Baron's evolutionary thesis. And even Baron, who insists on the differences between the works and Machiavelli's republicanism, agrees with those who see unity (both those who see Machiavelli as neutral and objective and the 'geneticists') to the extent that he concedes Machiavelli's overriding concern was the problem of acquiring and maintaining power in a hostile world. Harmony between these disparate interpretations could be produced in the sense that all have similar analyses of *The Prince* as a work of political realism and all recognise the application to republics the methods and conceptions of 'Machiavellianism' and the preoccupation with power in all his works. Recognising this, however, is not incompatible with maintaining that Machiavelli was fundamentally a republican in political outlook. Those who see *The Discourses* as a dispassionate analysis of republican rule, as simply another answer to the problem of government, overstate the case. They equate Machiavelli's wavering between different forms of government which different circumstances allow or prohibit, with their own hypothesis that he was neutral and impartial. In concentrating on his technical application of rules to politics, they give no weight to aspects of Machiavelli's thought, which others have shown to be consistently republican.

To conclude: almost every conflicting interpretation of Machiavelli's life and work still has its adherents and Machiavelli's ideas have proven to be resistant to confident categorisation, neat formulation or to a single definitive interpretation. The fundamental reason why Machiavelli can be interpreted

in so many ways is because contradictions and oppositions within and between the texts support different readings of them. Machiavelli speaks in many voices. Threading their way through the texts are the voices of Machiavelli the career diplomat, the flattering courtier, the experienced and pragmatic politician, the methodological innovator, the messianic warrior, the radical critic of Christian and traditional morality, the admirer of ancient republics, the humanist and classical scholar, the political analyst and historian, the orator and rhetorical mystifier.

Responding to these voices are critics from a variety of disciplines each situating Machiavelli in a particular intellectual, theoretical, historical, political, cultural or literary context. Their interpretations pull in different directions depending on the context they emphasise, the generalisations they impose, the voices they privilege or the strands of argument they identify as significant. Exaggerating aspects of Machiavelli's life and thought in order to systematise or synthesise it, they further fragment it, concentrating on one facet of his thought or another as constituting the 'real' Machiavelli. When the part is mistaken for the whole, it becomes even more apparent that Machiavelli does not fit into any single category. Bridges could be built between interpretations if different aspects of Machiavelli's thought could be brought together without contradiction. We could see in Machiavelli a relatively new mode of political praxis and enquiry while at the same time recognising that the persuasive force of his argument is strengthened by rhetoric rather than logic; that his originality lies not in discovering the element of necessity in political action but in normalising it and in putting the case for political expediency in its starkest, most electrifying form. We could acknowledge that Machiavelli gives immoral, realistic and technical advice since these descriptions are not mutually exclusive and at the same time reconcile this with the glimmering of an ethic where actions are justified in terms of their consequences for the common good. We could accept that Machiavelli's realism is not the ideological antithesis of his idealism and that the texts' refusal to provide a universal rationale for one form of government another is not inconsistent with his republican preferences. Even if these matters could be resolved, however, or some other synthesis found, different interpretations of Machiavelli will not be quelled. Part of his appeal is due to the dynamic way he expressed his ideas, overstating his case to achieve an effect. It is this which excites comment beyond the text. But it is the case itself, his demonstration of the collision between the demands of traditional morality and the requirement of power politics that will continue to stir passion and to provoke disparate judgements. Machiavelli will be damned, praised, revised, legitimised, excused and rescued as long as the relationship between means and ends in politics is

thought to be a crucial and perennial problem in politics. Machiavelli's enduring contribution to political thought, policy and practice is the remarkably resilient idea that politics involves or even requires the transcendence or violation of ordinary moral principles, that politics presents dilemmas of dirty hands. As long as we retain the idea that there is something special and different about the political sphere that makes it difficult to apply conventional moral standards, the problem of Machiavelli will not be closed. In this sense Machiavellianism, if not Machiavelli himself, will remain a puzzle characterised by Croce (1949) as 'an enigma that perhaps will never be resolved'.