Principe e patria: The Two Faces of Machiavelli's Political Ethics

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Perché, dove si dilibera al tutto della salute della patria, non vi debbe cadere alcuna considerazione né di giusto né d'ingiusto, né di piatoso né di crudele, né di laudabile né d'ignominioso; anzi, proposto ogni altro rispetto, seguire al tutto quel partito che le salvi la vita, e mantenghile la libertà.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.41.5.

Introduction

Few works in the history of political thought have evoked as many varying interpretations as those by Niccolò Machiavelli, the Florentine citizen and man-of-letters who is reputed to be the advocate of ruthless self-interest in politics. Not only has Machiavelli's most famous work, the little book "*de principatibus*" which is better known to us as *The Prince*, been the subject of contradictory explanations, but the matter is complicated even further when one accounts for the wide variety of writings in which Machiavelli expresses his philosophical, political, and historical sentiments. The precise import of the Machiavellian message therefore remains unsettled, even after five centuries.

Yet, the study of this key thinker remains indispensable for understanding the development of modern political philosophy. Leo Strauss, the influential scholar of political philosophy famous for positing a break between 'classical' and 'modern' political philosophy, has stated that Machiavelli stands at the genesis of philosophical modernity.[1] In his view, the likes of Descartes and Spinoza in metaphysics and Hobbes in politics are only the logical continuations of a path first embarked upon by Machiavelli – a path that consciously and deliberately rejects the idealistic tradition of Plato and Aristotle. Understanding the essential characteristics of modernity therefore requires us to understand the nature of this break – the *querelle des anciens et modernes* – and to evaluate where and how the rupture occurred. This is precisely where the study of Machiavelli reveals its importance to us.

The essence of this view is that Machiavelli was the first to "lower the standards" of human political behaviour, viewing the pursuit of virtue as an unrealistic goal and instead opting to work with the inclinations of human beings as they naturally present themselves. The classics had elaborated a theory of virtue ethics in which the ordering of the human soul and the cultivation of moral behaviour would result in a well-ordered society where each is allotted his due in accordance with justice (the famous principle of *suum cuique tribuere*).[2] Machiavelli, Strauss contends, is the first philosopher who openly and in his own name contests this ideal by declaring that "there is such a separation between how people ought to live and how they do live, that someone who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather

[1] Strauss 1952 (1936), pp. xv-xvi: "Hobbes appeared to me as the originator of modern political philosophy. This was an error: not Hobbes, but Machiavelli, deserves this honor." This view is shared by many of Strauss's disciples, who themselves became influential interpreters of the great political philosophers. For instance, Mansfield 1996, p. 109 states that "Machiavelli (…) began a project, later picked up and developed by other modern philosophers, for a permanent, irreversible improvement in human affairs establishing a new political regime. The project is often called 'modernity.'"

[2] E.g. Plato, *Republic* 4.433e; Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 5.67; Justinian, *Institutiones* 1,1,3-4. See also Skinner 1990, p. 131-132.

than his preservation."[3] Hence, the moral end of politics is removed, and one is left with political survival as the sole standard for the statesman. From there, it is only a small step to the individualized 'right to self-preservation' elaborated by Hobbes and Locke, both of whom are already unmistakably modern.

But is this all there is to the story? After all, Machiavelli wrote more than just the infamous fifteenth chapter of *The Prince*, and there are many reasons to suspect that he had a genuine concern for the well-being of the political community as a whole – not in the least from his own career in politics. To evaluate Machiavelli's relation to 'classical' political philosophy is, no doubt, too sizeable a subject for a single master's thesis – but clarity might be gained by investigating this relation from one specific angle. For that purpose, the notion of the 'common good' seems to me to be a particularly promising one. After all, the *bonum commune* is a central concern of political philosophy in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, demanding of the rulers that they subordinate their own interests and desires to the good of the whole.[4] Machiavelli, it is commonly thought, disregards any notion of a 'common good' and instead advises rulers on how to gain and maintain power for themselves most effectively. But if it is true that Machiavelli shows at least some concern for extra-political ends, then the real place of the traditional 'common good' in Machiavelli's philosophy is bound to be more complicated.

It is my intent here to investigate what that place is. The question guiding my research will be the following: how does the common good in Machiavelli's *Prince* and *Discourses* compare to the common good of classical political philosophy? I limit myself to these two works for two reasons. First, they are widely regarded as the most important works of political theory written by Machiavelli, in which we can suppose the most important tenets of his thought to have been stated explicitly.[5] Among his other writings, two sizeable ones stand out as also dealing with matters of state: the *Florentine Histories* and the dialogue *On the Art of War*. Both are left out of my analysis to prevent the complicated task of distilling political statements from writings that have something other than political theory as their aim. This applies *a fortiori* to Machiavelli's other writings, such as his plays and his poems. Second, considerations of time and space have made it necessary to concentrate my research efforts, requiring me to make a selection of material that would still be representative for Machiavelli's thought as a whole. Opting for these two works seemed therefore to be the most natural choice.

My contention will be that Machiavelli's political ethics change depending on whether he deals with principalities or republics. With principalities, he is congenial to the immoralism traditionally ascribed to him. But with republics he shows continuity with an earlier tradition of republican thought – albeit from a distinctly 'Machiavellian' point of view. To argue this, I will proceed as follows. First, I will address some methodological issues of interpretation that are necessary for a systematic reading of Machiavelli's works – to the degree, of course, that they *can* be read systematically. Next, to establish the point of comparison vis-à-vis the 'classical' political philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, and others, I will outline how that tradition

[3] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 15.5: "*Elli è tanto discosto da come si vive a come si doverrebbe vivere, che colui che lascia quello che si fa per quello che si doverrebbe fare, impara più presto la ruina che la preservazione sua*." See also Strauss 1975, pp. 84-89; Strauss 1965, pp. 177-180; Strauss 1958, pp. 9-14.
[4] Plato, *Republic* 4.419a-421c; Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1279a17-20.
[5] Gilbert 1965, p. 153 states: "Machiavelli's comedies, his history, and his book on warfare would hardly attract as much attention as still they do today, if the author of these works had not been the author of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. These two treatises signify the beginning of a new stage – one might say, of the modern stage – in the development of political thought."

conceives of the common good, focusing on the themes I wish to compare. Using the classical notion of the common good as a point of departure, I will then provide a close reading of some relevant passages in *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* with a view to a common good. A comparison can then be made between the classical ideal and the Machiavellian conception(s) of statesmanship, allowing us to perceive more clearly where Machiavelli continues the classical 'common good' and where he departs from it.

One more word regarding my method of close reading. When analysing vast quantities of text, as I do, one inevitably faces a choice. One can either paint in broad strokes by paraphrasing many passages at once, or engage in a detailed study of individual *loci*. Both are to some degree indispensable for an interpretive study, and I have therefore tried to employ the first method to systematise the main tenets of arguments I discuss, while I have made a selection of (in my view) representative passages to illustrate the author's point in his own words. In Machiavelli's case, especially, where every word has meaning, a close reading is one that pays off, since the philosophically laden terminology which is difficult to catch from translations – think of *virtù*, *mantenere lo stato*, *ordine*, and similar concepts – makes it necessary to closely examine the *volgare* Italian. All translations are therefore from my own hand, and I have accentuated relevant concepts by bracketing the Italian terms in my main text. And while focusing on specific passages necessarily brings with it problems of selection, I believe that the reader will find – *giudicando le cose dal fine* – that these choices are justified in the context of the arguments for which they are adduced.

1. Reading and interpreting Machiavelli

1.1 Machiavelli: a philosopher?

One might wonder – indeed, some have wondered – whether it is even fruitful to study Machiavelli as a philosopher. After all, his works only rarely address metaphysical issues, and even within his narrow domain of ethics and politics he seems to write rather unsystematically, often drawing from specific historical events and sometimes outright contradicting his own conclusions. These features have led some to dismiss Machiavelli as falling short of the title of 'philosopher'. Hence, Ernst Cassirer has stated that "Machiavelli was no philosopher in the classical or medieval sense of the term. He had no speculative system, not even a system of politics." (Although Cassirer immediately nuances this statement by acknowledging that "nevertheless, his book had a very strong indirect influence upon the general development of modern philosophical thought.")[6] Felix Gilbert, too, simply denied that Machiavelli was a

[6] Cassirer 1946, p. 135. Cassirer's remark that "in our textbooks of modern philosophy we find no chapter on Machiavelli" could obviously not have anticipated Strauss's and Cropsey's *History of Political Philosophy* (1987), in which Machiavelli features prominently.

philosopher, declaring that "he intended neither to outline a philosophical system nor to introduce new philosophical terms."[7]

Contrary to this view, however, are those scholars who argue that he did in fact set out to effect a philosophical revolution. I have already mentioned Strauss, whose *Thoughts on Machiavelli* boils down to the thesis that Machiavelli launches a frontal attack on the tenets of traditional, Christian morality, aiming to substitute for it a pagan world view.[8] Similarly, Harvey Mansfield has argued that Machiavelli first and foremost conceived of himself as a kind of 'prince' – a philosophical prince, who aims to institute new intellectual 'modes and orders' and to rule the world through his thoughts.[9]

Finally, there are those who have drawn attention to Machiavelli's method, and who have argued on that basis that he has much in common with the Socratic understanding of the philosopher. Faisal Baluch, for instance, points out that Machiavelli – like Socrates – is mainly in dialogue with received traditions (the old), but addresses himself mainly to a next generation of aspiring rulers (the young), and that his habit of 'debunking' the established opinions shows much resemblance to the Socratic activity of moving from *doxa* to truth.[10] Moreover, Machiavelli also tries to answer – in his own way – the "what is X?" question with regard to the most important human virtues.[11] In addition, Erica Benner has argued that Machiavelli's (sometimes indirect) relationship to the Hellenic sources accounts for much of his philosophic character, and that – again, like Socrates – his method of reflective reasoning (*ragionare*) about concrete political examples results in "very clear and distinctive ethical commitments."[12] According to her, justice and the rule of law are central concerns for Machiavelli, and his particular preoccupation with the degeneration of a virtuous political order into corruption and lawlessness is due not only to his reception of the Roman authors, but also the likes of Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch.[13] Just because Machiavelli did not style himself a philosopher, it does not follow that he had nothing philosophic to say.[14]

It seems to me that Machiavelli's admittedly unsystematic and sometimes disharmonious elaboration of his views in no way precludes their philosophical profundity and the relevance of the issues discussed. By any meaningful definition of the term 'political philosopher' – and we attribute this title to many thinkers who fail to elaborate a complete metaphysical or epistemological system – Machiavelli must be accounted one, as someone who discourses at

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[7] Gilbert 1965, p. 193. On Cassirer's and Gilbert's views, see also Baluch 2018, pp. 297-298 (and Benner 2009, p. 10, which pointedly remarks: "Gilbert's definition of philosophy here is unduly narrow. If these were its definitive features, the entire tradition of Socratic philosophy discussed in chap. 1 must be considered as non-philosophy.")

[8] Strauss 1958, pp. 143-144: "His praise of ancient Rome is an essential element of his wholly new teaching, but it is also, and even chiefly, a mere engine of subversion or of what one might call his immanent criticism of the Biblical tradition. Admiration for ancient Rome was the only publicly defensible base from which he could attack the Biblical religion."

[9] Mansfield 1996, pp. 3-5.

[10] Baluch 2018, pp. 292-295.

[11] Baluch 2018, p. 294, which refers especially to chapters 15-18 of *The Prince*. See also Gilbert 1965, pp. 164-165.

[12] Benner 2009, p. 6.

[13] Benner 2009, pp. 6-9.

[14] Benner 2009, p. 10: "The picture of humanist thinking about the relationship between politics and philosophy stands in urgent need of reappraisal. I further question the assumption that since Machiavelli does not call himself a philosopher, and did not write scholastic treatises that explicitly distinguish philosophical subject-matter from historical and political themes, he must have had little interest in anything that would have been recognized in his times as philosophy – especially Greek philosophy."

length about how he thinks that societies ought to be governed. His political advice, even when it is (or seems to be) devoid of morals, pretends to normative force, and is more often than not stated in general terms rather than for a specific 16th century situation.[15] The mere fact that Machiavelli often discusses or adduces historical examples cannot in itself mean that there is no philosophical relevance to his writing. Therefore, we can justifiably regard *The Prince* and the *Discourses* as more than mere 'tracts for the times'.

Moreover, there are clear ethical arguments underlying Machiavelli's prescriptions for statecraft and policy. For instance, the advice in chapters XV-XVIII of *The Prince* on how to employ the virtues is evidently based on his rejection of idealistic political theory (the "imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth"), a clear instance of dialogue with the broader philosophical tradition (Plato and St. Augustine, specifically). Finally, the centuries-long reception of Machiavelli by fellow philosophers – many of whom admitted to interpreting his works as philosophic texts – seems to confirm that these intuitions have been continuously and widely shared, making it more plausible than not that Machiavelli has something philosophical to say in his texts.[16]

1.2 The 'Machiavellian question': relating *The Prince* to the *Discourses*

Homeric scholarship has long been preoccupied with the so-called 'Homeric question', the endeavour to establish how the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* occurred and whether both works are the product of a single author. In like fashion, ever since Machiavelli's major works were published, readers and interpreters of the texts have been vexed by the struggle to reconcile *The Prince* and the *Discourses* as products of the same mind – a struggle we might call the 'Machiavellian question'. How can the author of the *Discourses*, who seems so preoccupied with maintaining freedom (*libertà*) and a civic community (*vivere civile*) in the form of a republic, be the same person to provide monarchs with such unscrupulous recommendations in *The Prince*?[17]

Ultimately, this is a question of hermeneutics. How are we to interpret two works of political philosophy which often seem at odds with one another? And what is the right balance between looking at the texts themselves and taking into account the circumstances of composition and the person of the author? Waldemar Hanasz expresses the dilemma well by saying:

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[15] Gilbert 1965, p. 170. One notable exception to this occurs in chapter 26 of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli exhorts his addressee, Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, to "liberate Italy from the barbarians." In the entirety of the *Discourses*, however, there is not a single instance of a chapter written to persuade one of his contemporaries to a specific course of action. This observation must be qualified, of course, by the fact that Machiavelli's advice is by necessity contextually embedded, as Gilbert 1965, p. 155 observes: "Although in the *Discourses* Machiavelli wrote about republics in general terms, he took up specific issues which mirrored the political experiences of the Florentines during the republic."

[16] Benner 2009, p. 2 mentions Alberico Gentili, Francis Bacon, and Henry Nevile as three of those recipients, the last of whom described Machiavelli as "the best and most honest of political thinkers, who, like the "divine Plato" before him, wrote as a philosophical "physician" seeking to treat mankind's recurrent moral and political disorders."

[17] Gilbert 1965, p. 188: "A great deal of discussion has centred on the question of how it was possible for the author of the *Prince*, "a handbook for tyrants," to write also the *Discourses*, the theme of which is the idealization of a free republic." Cf. Baron 1988, p. 101: "How could the faithful secretary of the Florentine republic, the author of the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, also be the author of *The Prince*?"

> It is always a serious methodological question how much textual evidence is needed to legitimately interpret a historical work. On the one hand , a strictly literary reading easily falls out of historical context and loses its full meaning. On the other hand, there is always a danger that a refined connotative interpretation can go too far and express more the views of an interpreter than an insightful comprehension of the original material.[18]

In the case of Machiavelli, too, manifold solutions have been chosen to relate *The Prince* to the *Discourses*, either through purely textual means or through contextual settings. Strauss believes to have deduced a unity of purpose on Machiavelli's part from the dedicatory letters. In both works, Machiavelli claims to teach all that he knows: in the epistle dedicatory to *The Prince* he speaks of "the actions of great men, learned from a long experience of modern and a continuous reading of ancient things", which in the epistle appended to the *Discourses* becomes "as much as I know and have learned from long practice and continuous reading of the things of the world."[19] Therefore, each book must contain a comprehensive philosophical stance – and both books, having been written by the same Machiavelli, must contain the same stance.[20]

But how do we then explain the difference between the apparently monarchical *Prince* and the apparently republican *Discourses*? According to Strauss, the difference is merely one of presentation. *The Prince*, being dedicated to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, is addressed to an actual prince; the *Discourses*, however, is dedicated to Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai – two regular Florentine citizens, who are merely *potential* princes. Hence, Strauss draws the conclusion that "Machiavelli presents in each of his two books substantially the same teaching from two different points of view, which may be described provisionally as the point of view of the actual prince and of potential princes."[21] The underlying philosophy therefore remains the same. Friedrich von Meinecke holds a similar hermeneutic view, although he does so on other grounds: he focuses mainly on the central role of great leaders in Machiavelli's conception of *virtù* and argues that it is the key to uncovering the hidden connection between monarchism and republicanism in Machiavelli's works.[22] Therefore, both the *Prince* and the *Discourses* essentially teach the same lessons about leadership and reason of state, but do so in different constitutional settings.

Strauss and Meinecke can be considered typical of a unitary reading of Machiavelli. Directly opposed to them are scholars who take a more developmental or evolutionary approach to Machiavelli's works. Hans Baron's reading, for instance, far from trying to reconcile *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, insists instead on their incompatibility. Baron mainly relies on (external) arguments about the chronology of composition and (internal) textual evidence. Responding to Federico Chabod's and Gennaro Sasso's hypothesis that Machiavelli at some point 'interrupted' his work on the *Discourses* out of pessimism to write *The Prince*, returning afterward to his

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[18] Hanasz 2010, p. 58.
[19] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Epistle Dedicatory: "*Le azioni delle uomini grandi, imparata con una lunga esperienzia delle cose moderne et una continua lezione delle antique.*" Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Epistle Dedicatory: "*Quanto io so e quanto io ho imparato per una lunga pratica e continua lezione delle cose del mondo*."
[20] Strauss 1958, pp. 15-29.
[21] Strauss 1958, p. 29.
[22] Meinecke 1960 (1924), p. 50: "Der Gegensatz zwischen dem monarchisch gerichteten *Principe* und den republikanisch gerfarbten *Discorsi* ist nur scheinbar. Das Maß von *virtù*, das in einem Volke lebte, entschied darüber, ob die Monarchie oder die Republik am Platze war."

original purpose, Baron believes it to be more likely that Machiavelli first composed *The Prince*, and only started writing the *Discourses* at a later stage, after a change of heart. Consequently, *The Prince* and the *Discourses* ought to be read separately and must interpreted as heralds of different messages – although there inevitably remains some overlap in certain themes, such as the ideal of a strong leader.[23]

Yet otherwise is the hermeneutical approach adopted by Quentin Skinner in his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Rather than discussing Machiavelli's books as the products of a single author, Skinner makes it a point of method to analyse strains of thought and socio-political contexts rather than individuals.[24] This causes his discussion of Machiavelli's ideas to be dispersed across two chapters – one dealing with mirror-for-princes advice books in a monarchical age, and another dealing with republican thought after the early *quattrocento* humanists.[25] This contextual approach makes Skinner less reliant on specialist knowledge about the composition, but perhaps unduly emphasizes the character of historical epochs at the expense of an author's internal coherence.

As for me, it follows from my focus on philosophical ideas that I will limit myself to internal textual arguments, and not give too much attention to Machiavelli's historical setting. While I recognise that in order to fully grasp an author it is necessary to take biographical and contextual data into account, I am mainly concerned here with Machiavelli as an exponent of certain ideas – not with getting to know Machiavelli 'the man' or reconstructing the development of his thought. I will therefore take the texts as they present themselves, and attempt only to reconcile statements made within the same work – unless the author explicitly refers us elsewhere, as he sometimes does.[26] By focusing on the internal consistency of each text, it becomes possible to compare both to the classical ideal of the common good on their own merits – without reading prejudicially or transporting the ideas of one work to another as if they have equal weight. For all intents and purposes, therefore, I adopt a dualistic reading of the texts – without, however, committing myself to it on biographical grounds or employing it as a mere means to study Machiavelli's intellectual context.

1.3 Machiavelli and the common good: previous scholarship

The question regarding the common good has always lingered in the background of Machiavelli interpretations. While the political adage that 'the ends justify the means' is popularly attributed to him, the question still remains *what* this 'end' is, precisely, and how it can justify what at first glance appears to be unjustifiable under any circumstances. The answers commonly suggested fall into two broad categories: purely political justifications, or 'republican' justifications of some sort.

In the first category we might place all those readings that see in Machiavelli the harbinger of an amoral political science – one concerned only with political self-preservation and 'winning the game' by any means necessary. Benedetto Croce has probably been the most influential

[23] Baron 1988 (1961), pp. 117-151.
[24] Skinner 1978, pp. x-xi; Geuna 2006, pp. 55-56.
[25] Skinner 1978, pp. 113-138 and pp. 139-187.
[26] E.g. *Discourses* 3.42.8, where Machiavelli informs the reader that the breaking of promises "has already been discussed at length by us in the treatise *On the Prince*, for which reason I will remain silent about it now" (*largamente è disputato da noi nel nostro trattato* De principe*, però al presente lo tacereno*).

proponent of the thesis that Machiavelli first and foremost envisaged a strict separation of politics and morality.[27] According to Croce, Machiavelli "discovered the necessity and the autonomy of politics, politics which is beyond good and bad morals, which has its own laws against which it is futile to rebel, which cannot be exorcised and banished from the world with holy water."[28]

If one believes Machiavelli to have been concerned with little more than political survival, the implications for his relation to the common good are not hard to draw. The common good is simply non-existent in such a world view: it is most likely an obstacle to the achievement of the ruler's aims, or at best a mere tool for the ruler to employ rhetorically for the purpose of gaining and maintaining power. These readings are likely to draw evidence mainly from *The Prince*, since that work is admittedly most concerned with the ruler's own position. Jack Hexter, for instance, has argued extensively (and persuasively) that the use of the term *lo stato* in Machiavelli's *Prince* points to an "exploitative relationship" between the prince and his domains: *lo stato* refers to the prince's political dominance over others, which can increase or decrease according to the prince's fortune and abilities. An abstract conception of 'the state', which endures apart from the prince and has its own legitimate interests, does not seem to enter into consideration here. Consequently, Hexter concludes that Machiavelli – in *The Prince*, at least – had no regard at all for the common good.[29]

The latter decades of the twentieth century, however, saw a resurgence in so-called 'republican' interpretations of Machiavelli. Under the influence of scholars such as John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, other aspects of Machiavelli's thought – such as his concern with republican liberty and his preference for democracy over oligarchy – have been emphasized.[30] In such a reading, the common good is more likely to gain attention, since the justification for political behaviour must be sought in the degree to which it preserves a republican system. These thinkers also emphasize that there is more continuity between classical political philosophy and Machiavelli than is usually recognised. For instance, Viroli has argued that there is much residue Aristotelianism in Machiavelli's language of the city, and Skinner has established an even further genealogical connection to the *ars dictaminis* tradition of political advice books in the middle ages.[31]

Both lines of interpretations, however, are only about the common good in an indirect sense, as an outgrowth of a broader reading of Machiavelli as a thinker. Studies dealing explicitly with Machiavelli's 'common good' are comparatively rare. Waldemar Hanasz has insightfully analysed phrases such as *bene comune*, *commune utilità*, and *utilità publica* in Machiavelli's works and the contexts within which they are employed. The first noteworthy observation is that they are relatively scarce: *bene commune* and its other variants appear just about fifty times in all of Machiavelli's works – compared to terms such as *virtù* and *libertà*, which appear over three hundred times.[32] Hanasz's conclusion is that Machiavelli is so silent about the common good because it is, ultimately, not a very important notion to him – a 'common' good being too

[27] Cochrane 1961, pp. 115-116.
[28] Croce 1960 (1925), p. 13.
[29] Hexter 1957, in particular pp. 117-126; 129-131; 133-134.
[30] Pocock 1975; Skinner 1978 and 1990; Viroli 1990. Skinner 1978, p. 157 even states explicitly that "the basic value of the *Discourses* is that of liberty: it is this ideal, not that of mere security, which Machiavelli now wishes us to place above all other considerations, including the dictates of conventional morality.
[31] Viroli 1990, pp. 145-161; Skinner 1990, pp. 123-141."
[32] Hanasz 2010, p. 62.

intricate and difficult for a political theorist who deals mostly with power conflicts among selfish humans.[33]

However, it seems to me that there are several reasons to take a different view. First, quantity itself, although perhaps to some extent indicative, can by no means be a decisive reason to judge about the importance of a concept for a thinker. If a term is used scarcely, but in crucial passages, we might get the wrong impression by counting occurrences. Second, Hanasz in my view unduly restricts the category of 'common good' to a small set of terms, excluding other (presumably common) goods such as security in the city or republican liberty.[34] It seems to me that one ought to start from the more fundamental 'good' in Machiavelli's conception of politics, and look at the 'goals' or 'ends' of the state in the broadest possible sense. Hence, in the next three chapters, I intend to analyse the common good in the Classics and Machiavelli along three axes: the 'good' of the state (in a teleological sense), the role of liberty, and the personal ethics of the statesman.

2. The common good in the classical tradition

2.1 The good: virtue and external goods

What is the 'classical' conception of the common good? To answer this question, it is important to remember that, for the Classics, politics is essentially an extension of ethics. Aristotle puts this most clearly in his transition from the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the *Politics*, where he states that, since arguments alone will almost certainly not suffice to make men good and virtuous, the law is necessary as a supplement to ensure justice.[35] These remarks betray a continuity between virtue ethics and the role of the state. Hence, it is necessary for a proper understanding of the political good in general and the 'common' good in particular to start from the ethical foundations of the classical tradition.[36]

Plato is the undisputed origin of that tradition. In many political dialogues he makes it clear that human striving ultimately ought to be for virtue (ἀρετή).[37] Most illustratively, in the first book of the *Republic* he records a discussion between Socrates and Thrasymachus, in which the virtue (or 'excellence') of the true ruler is explored. Whereas Thrasymachus holds that rulership amounts to injustice and taking for oneself what one wishes ("the advantage of the stronger"), Socrates expounds a theory in which the true good of the ruler (and his virtue) turns out to

[33] Hanasz 2010, pp. 73-82; 84-85.
[34] Hanasz 2010, pp.61-62: "The common good cannot be identified with a republic or a city as a political entity. (…) Every time he writes about the good of the republic (*bene della republica*) or the good of the city (*bene della città*) his phrases refer to a quite specific goal, namely the stability and security of the city jeopardized by tumults and disturbances. Obviously, peace and safety are important elements of the common good of any political body, but they cannot be identified with it. The republican concept of 'free and civil life' (*vivere libero e civile*) has also been loosely identified with the common good. (…) Machiavelli makes it clear that "the common good (*utilità publica*) … is drawn from a free way of life (*vivere libero*)", but is not identical with it."
[35] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1179a33-1181b23.
[36] Mansfield 1996, pp. 12-22 also takes Aristotle's virtue ethics as a comparative point of departure.
[37] E.g. the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias* and the *Laws*.

consist in serving those over whom he is appointed.[38] Hence, rather than exploiting his subjects, the ruler "in the strict sense of the word" (ἀκριβεῖ λογῷ) – that is to say, *in essence* – strives for the good of his subjects, like a good doctor aims at the health of his patients.[39]

This conclusion about rulership follows from the centrality of justice as a human pursuit.[40] According to Plato, justice is a result of the presence of the three other cardinal virtues – wisdom, fortitude, and temperance – in proper measure.[41] This applies equally to the individual soul and the state as a whole.[42] Hence, in a properly ordered political system (πολιτεία), the individual soul is ordered correctly through education (παιδεία), and society is structured in accordance with the demands of justice – those who are most fit to rule ruling, and those who are most fit to obey obeying.[43] In such a state, each is given what is due to him, and no one exceeds the bounds of his position. Even the rulers are bound to their own station in life: rather than enjoying the worldly goods commonly associated with domination, they are expected to live soberly and devote themselves entirely to their task of serving the state.[44]

Aristotle picks up many of the themes first elaborated by Plato. According to Aristotle, the human good also consists in the cultivation of virtue. Only through the constant activity (ἐνεργεία) of living a virtuous life can true happiness (εὐδαιμονία) be achieved.[45] Politics, being the domain of 'active' (as opposed to 'speculative') virtue, consists in enabling man to flourish by giving him the opportunity to live in a society and perform virtuous deeds for the benefit of his fellow citizens.[46] It follows from man's social nature that he is embedded in a community, and that action for the sake of the community is a greater good than action for the sake of the mere individual.

> It is evident that all [associations] are embarked upon for the sake of some good, and that, most of all, the most valuable of all goods is pursued by the most important partnership of all, the one that includes all others: and this is the one that is called a 'state' and 'the political association.'[47]

The function of this state is a double one. On the one hand, it is a human 'safety mechanism' to secure the possibility of even living at all (τὸ ζῆν). But that is not sufficient to speak of a genuine state, which also requires a shared conception of the *good* life (τὸ εὖ ζῆν).[48] Given this second demand, there is a central connection between the friendship (φιλία) that exists between private individuals and the concord (ὁμονοία) between citizens: like friends and family members share a common interest in their common endeavours, so too the citizens of a state ought to be in

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[38] Plato, *Republic* 1.340c-342e.
[39] Plato, *Republic* 1.341b.
[40] E.g. Plato, *Republic* 1.353e-354a, where Socrates argues that justice is the 'excellence' (ἀρετή) of the human soul and therefore most conducive to its happiness (εὐδαιμονία).
[41] Plato, *Republic* 4.441c-444a.
[42] Plato, *Republic* 2.368e-369a, where it is posited that the soul and the city are analogous to each other.
[43] E.g. Plato, *Republic* 3.414b-415d.
[44] Plato, *Republic* 4.419a-421c.
[45] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1102a16-18.
[46] Arisotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1178a9-1178b2.
[47] Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1252a3-7: "δῆλον ὡς πᾶσαι [sc. κοινωνίαι] μὲν ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς στοχάζονται μάλιστα δέ, καὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου πάντων, ἡ πασῶν κυριωτάτη καὶ πάσας περιέχουσα τὰς ἄλλας · αὕτη δ' ἐστὶν ἡ καλουμένη πόλις καὶ ἡ κοινωνία ἡ πολιτική."
[48] Arisotle, *Politics* 1.1252b28-30; 3.1278b23-30; 3.1280a31-1281a10.

broad agreement about which moral values to pursue and which customs to uphold.[49] The law of the state therefore also has it as its function to make men virtuous in accordance with the common opinion.[50] As such, the political common good emanates from and is connected to that which is right or virtuous 'by nature' (φύσει), but is always modified by the particular circumstances of the regime in question – a tension to which we shall return later.[51]

So far, we have considered the role of the state in making men virtuous. But the Classics were not entirely oblivious to the fact that there are also other goods worth pursuing in a political community. What about wealth, power, territory, and things of the sort? Aristotle makes it clear in the *Politics* that a wise law-giver ought to have *some* concern for the size of the state: if it is too small, it will be conquered by its neighbours and lose its freedom.[52] Therefore, the state ought to have enough land and wealth to be able to live in relative self-sufficiency (αὐταρκεία).[53] However, the acquisition of power should not become a goal in itself: since war is waged for the sake of peace (and not the other way around), imperialism as a policy goal is to be rejected, and the constitution of the state is to be designed primarily for the sake of *all* virtues, not just the war-like ones.[54] We can therefore conclude that, in classical political philosophy, educating the citizens to virtue is the prime consideration of the state – and that the common good consists for the most part in enabling its citizens to live good and moral lives in a secure state.

2.2 Liberty and tyranny

From the Classics' concern with justice as a central virtue for both the individual and society, and from their definition of justice as allotting to each what is due to him, the question as to who is entitled rule over whom naturally arises. The quest for the best regime is consequently one of the central concerns of classical political philosophy, and although it can be (and has been) answered in many ways, there seems to be at least a basic consensus among the most significant philosophers of antiquity that the ideal is some form of mixed constitution.[55]

Plato provides two blueprints for his 'best regime'. In the *Republic*, he famously argues for the rule by all-wise, specifically bred and educated 'philosopher kings', who possess arcane knowledge of the grounds of being and take it upon themselves to rule society in accordance with the true 'Form of the Good'.[56] Understandably, this view has often elicited the critique – even in Antiquity itself – that it puts forth an unrealistic standard for rulership.[57] Accordingly, even though government by a virtuous and enlightened ruler remains the ideal, Plato himself recognized that a more feasible form of government was necessary as a 'second best'. Such a system is described by him in the *Laws*, where the Athenian stranger – possibly a stand-in for Socrates – essentially gives an account of a mixed government under the rule of law, arguing

[49] Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1280a31-1281a10. See also Smith 1999, pp. 628-634.
[50] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1103b2-5; 10.1179a33-1181b23. Compare also the Thomistic position in Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II Q. 95 art. II (on the law being ordered towards the common good).
[51] Strauss 1965, pp. 152-162.
[52] Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1267a17-37.
[53] Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1252b27-1253a1; 2.121261b10-14; 3.1280b30-1281a2.
[54] Aristotle, *Politics* 7.1324a35-1325a15. Compare also Plato, *Laws* 1.625c-628e.
[55] Strauss 1965, pp. 138-143.
[56] Plato, *Republic* 5.471c-474c.
[57] E.g. Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1261a10-1264b25.

that the benefits of monarchy and democracy ought to be combined to prevent the excesses in each.[58]

Aristotle made a similar constitutional analysis. He divided the forms of government into six regime types, which can again be divided into two groups: three good ones, and three 'degenerations' of the pure forms. A state can be ruled either by one man, by few, or by the many – and this can happen either in the general interest, or in the interest of the ruling party. Good rule by one man is a monarchy, its degenerate counterpart being a tyranny; good rule by a few eminent citizens is an aristocracy, its degeneration being an oligarchy; and good rule by the many is what Aristotle tends to entitle a 'polity' (πολιτεία), its degeneration being a democracy.[59]

However, Aristotle does not seem to be entirely consistent in his conceptual division of regimes, occasionally also referring to 'polity' as the mixture of democracy and oligarchy rather than as a regime type of its own.[60] This is because, according to Aristotle, there always exists great tension between the interests of the wealthy few and the poor many.[61] To strike a balance between the two and to sustain a sizeable 'middle class' (οἱ μέσοι) are the only ways to prevent one faction from dominating and exploiting the other.[62] Hence, according to Aristotle, a mixed form of government (πολιτεία μεμιγμένη) is one about which "one can perfectly well believe that both [democracy and oligarchy] are present, and yet also neither."[63] This is the ideal balance for which a prudent legislator or statesman should strive.

The later tradition has picked up and adapted the Aristotelian ideal of mixed government. Polybius – who is closely followed by Cicero (and Machiavelli) – presents the natural evolution of government as a 'succession of regimes' (πολιτείων ἀνακύκλωσις), following a predetermined and therefore predictable course from despotism to monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, 'ochlocracy', and despotism again.[64] Polybius claims that the genius of the Roman Republic lay in its combining monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements in the constitution, making it possible to at least delay the devolution of the state into one of the regime types characterized by excess.[65]

In each of these analyses, popular self-rule (whether democratic or aristocratic) is contrasted with the looming spectre of tyranny. Indeed, Aristotle has it as a recurring theme in the *Politics* that the state ought to be governed in the interest of *all* rather than in the partial interest of one person or faction.[66] When the rulers govern to their own benefit rather than for the common good, the regime has degenerated into its bad form – the worst of these being one-man rule in the interests of one man, which is tyranny.[67] The Roman republican tradition best exemplified by Cicero also has this tyranny of one as its central concern, upholding that liberty "consists

[58] Plato, *Laws* 3.690d-702e.
[59] Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1279a22-b10.
[60] Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1294a30-1294b41.
[61] E.g. Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1289b26-1292a38.
[62] Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1295b34-1296b12.
[63] Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1294b35-36: "καλῶς ἀμφότερα δοκεῖν εἶναι καὶ μηδέτερον."
[64] Polybius, *Histories* 6.3-10. Compare also Cicero, *De re publica* 1.65-71 (a text Machiavelli could not have known, since it was only rediscovered by Angelo Mai in 1820) and Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.2, where he presents his own theory of *anacyclosis* (discussed below in chapter 4.2).
[65] Polybius, *Histories* 6.11-18.
[66] Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1279a22-b10.
[67] Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1295a1-1295a24.

not in being governed by a just master, but in not being governed by any master at all."[68] In the analysis of the classical philosophers, therefore, the most important danger to be guarded against is the imposition of a tyranny and an end to republican self-government.[69]

To that end, two things are required: a virtuous citizenry, and virtuous governors. We have seen earlier that the pursuit of virtue is a substantive end for the classical political community. However, virtue is not merely the end itself, but also a means to the end of preserving political liberty. According to Aristotle, citizens should be educated "in the spirit of the regime" to protect it against encroachments or excesses which threaten its existence.[70] Hence, a virtuous citizenry is required for the maintenance of the regime. This virtue of the good citizen consists in both being able to rule and being able to tolerate the rule of others – citizens ruling each other "in turn" (ἐν μέρει).[71] The key is that self-government requires the capacities of more than just one individual or group: the citizenry as a whole should be able to command or obey as the situation dictates, requiring both prudence and moderation in all the citizens.[72]

2.3 The ethics of statesmanship

The other concern in preserving political liberty, according to the Classics, is the virtue of the rulers. We have already seen that Plato regards justice and, as a prerequisite for that, wisdom as the defining characteristics of a good ruling class. Similarly, Aristotle claims that the distinguishing virtue of the citizens who (temporarily) guide and manage the state is 'practical wisdom' (φρόνησις), while all other virtues ought to be held in common by both rulers and subjects.[73] Likewise, from Polybius's remarks on the 'good' forms of government as compared to the 'bad', we can deduce how central the ability to rule justly and prudently is to whatever kind of rulership exists in a state, lest it degenerate into a (form of) tyranny.

These views on the common good of the citizenry, the various virtues required for both rulers and citizens, and the preservation of liberty in a political regime naturally lead one to an ideal of rulership that is itself imbued with an ethics of virtue. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Cicero's *De officiis*, widely considered to be a standard work on political ethics in the Latin West up until the early modern period. There, Cicero defends the famous thesis that the 'advantageous' (*utile*) and the 'honourable' or 'just' (*honestum*) are essentially and necessarily the same, and that whatever appears to be useful while it is unjust can ultimately never be advantageous – and vice versa.[74] Consequently, the ruler always and in every circumstance ought to prefer morally upright conduct to trickery and cruelty.[75] In the end, then, the common good of the republic – which is tied to the realisation of justice, itself a quintessentially human value – is identical to the good of the ruler himself.[76]

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[68] Cicero, *De re publica* 2.43: "*... libertas, quae non in eo est, ut iusto utamur domino, sed ut nullo*."
[69] Compare also Wirszubski 1950, pp. 95-96. Wirszubski's study as a whole is invaluable to the study of *libertas* as a political concept in Roman thought, specifically.
[70] Aristotle, *Politics* 8.1337a10-33.
[71] Aristotle, *Politics* 6.1317b2; 7.1332b10-1333a1. See also Strauss 1965, p. 142.
[72] Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1276b15-1277b32.
[73] Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1277b25-30.
[74] Cicero, *De officiis* 2.10, 3.11-13, 3.34-36.
[75] Cicero, *De officiis* 3.33, 3.82.
[76] Cicero, *De officiis* 3.26-28.

Very practical advice for everyday politics follows from this ideal. For instance, a ruler ought to be generous (or 'liberal', in the older sense of the word), but not to the extent that it harms someone in order to be liberal to someone else: there is no 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' in Cicero's financial ethics.[77] Likewise, a ruler ought to be brave and great-souled, but only to the extent that justice is discernible in his actions: there is no bravery in criminal behaviour.[78] Hence, there are some values that are always moral constraints to his actions – some things being simply unacceptable, "even when done for the sake of preserving the fatherland" (*ne conservandae quidem patriae causa*).[79]

This explains why Cicero regards it as an evident truth that the laws of war among civilized peoples ought to be respected, even going so far as declaring that the promises made to one's enemies are binding under regular circumstances.[80] Fraud and violence – the metaphorical characteristics of the fox and the lion, respectively – are to be avoided by human beings, who have a higher, moral, more rational calling to deal with conflict peacefully and fairly.[81] The ruler should also prefer to be respected and beloved rather than feared, for true political rule consists in a harmonious cohabitation with one's equals who are benevolent out of free choice.[82] Finally, in an (apparent) conflict between the virtuous course of action and expediency, the good statesman should always give preference to moral uprightness – to the extent that he should even be willing to suffer a wrong rather than commit one.[83]

Most of these counsels on statecraft, derived from the classical authors, have been restated countless times in the broader tradition of political writings that emanated from them. Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli have documented extensively the degree to which not only Scholastic philosophy, but also the *ars dictaminis* tradition of rhetorical training and humanist mirror-for-princes books consistently centred their politics around the ideals of virtue, civic concord, and rule by a morally upright *vir virtutis*.[84] It is therefore against the background of this political discourse, of which I have tried to sketch the contours, that we shall turn to the works of Machiavelli and attempt to find out the degree to which he stands in continuity with this tradition. I shall discuss *The Prince* and the *Discourses* in turn, focusing my attention on the same broad themes I have outlined in my discussion of the Classics: the political good in relation to virtue, political liberty (and tyranny) in the regime, and the personal ethics of the ideal statesman.

[77] Cicero, *De officiis* 1.43-45.
[78] Cicero, *De officiis* 1.62-65
[79] Cicero, *De officiis* 1.159
[80] Cicero, *De officiis* 1.34-40.
[81] Cicero, *De officiis* 1.41.
[82] Cicero, *De officiis* 2.22-27.
[83] Cicero, *De officiis* 3.28-31.
[84] Skinner 1990 and Viroli 1990.

3. The common good in Machiavelli's *The Prince*

3.1 The good: *acquistare* and *mantenere*

Machiavelli is notoriously unexplicit about what he regards to be the ultimate aim of politics.[85] If this is the case even in the *Discourses* – as we shall soon see in our discussion below – the same problem must apply even more with regard to *The Prince*, which is much shorter and (ostensibly) much more limited in the scope of its arguments. Nevertheless, any reader of *The Prince* will immediately notice that the text's preoccupation is with acquiring (*acquistare*) and holding on to power (*mantenere lo stato*). We must consider closely the principal parts of *The Prince* and try to distill from it to what extent these two terms cover the entirety of the doctrine.

The focus on acquisition becomes evident even before the text actually begins, in the heading to the first chapter – which reads not just "How many types of principalities there are" (*quot sint genera principatuum*), but also "and how they are acquired" (*et quibus modis acquirantur*).[86] The typology unfolded in the first chapter also points to the all-dominating importance of acquisition: all the distinctions made between different principalities are based on how the ruler came to power. The first distinction is between a 'hereditary' (*ereditario*) and a 'new' (*nuovo*) prince. The third is between one who acquired "by the arms of others or by his own arms" (*o con l'arme d'altri o con le proprie*), and the fourth and final distinction is based on whether he did so by fortune (*fortuna*) or virtue (*virtù*). Only the second distinction, which is between states that were previously "used to being free" (*usi a essere liberi*) and those that were already "accustomed to living under a prince" (*consueti a vivere sotto uno principe*), at first sight escapes the focus on acquisition. But in reality, this distinction between (formerly) free states and long-established principalities is only relevant with a view to how the new prince ought to govern each of them.[87] The conclusion is therefore justified that acquisition is a primary theme of *The Prince*.

The subdivision into modes of acquisition, however, can only account for 11 out of the 26 chapters in the work.[88] There must therefore be a further theme to Machiavelli's princely advice – and we can logically suspect that theme to be the maintenance of power after one has acquired it. Our suspicion is confirmed by the fact that the discussion of military affairs which takes place in chapters 12-14 seems centred around the defence of a realm already acquired. Machiavelli opens chapter 12 by mentioning in the same breath the "acquiring and holding" (*acquistare e tenere*) of states.[89] Later on, he refers to the different types of soldiers as "the arms by which a prince defends his position" (*le armi con le quale uno principe difende el suo*

[85] Cotkin 2017, p. 113.
[86] The importance of the headings being in Latin has been noted, *inter alios*, by Mansfield in the introduction to his own translation of *The Prince* (1985).
[87] See especially *Prince* 5.6, where Machiavelli advises the new prince that "he who becomes master of a city accustomed to living freely and does not destroy her, can expect himself to be undone by her" (*chi diviene patrone di una città consueta a vivere libera e non la disfacci, aspetti di essere disfatto da quella*), citing the Roman destructions of Capua, Carthage, and Numantia in justification.
[88] Strauss 1958, p. 55, who subdivides the prince into the chapter groupings 1-11 (the various kinds of principalities), 12-14 (the prince and his enemies), 15-23 (the prince and his subjects or friends), and 24-26 (prudence and chance).
[89] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 12.1.

stato).[90] After discoursing at length about the dangers of mercenary captains and the unreliability of auxiliary troops sent by one's allies, Machiavelli concludes that "without having one's own arms, no principality is secure" (*senza avere arme proprie, nessuno principato è sicuro*).[91] The main concern of national defence in *The Prince* is therefore the maintenance of the position of the prince at the head of his state.

Likewise, Machiavelli's discussion of the prince's personal conduct in chapters 15-23 occurs solely in the context of ensuring that he retains his throne. In chapter 15's most infamous statement, where Machiavelli compares the "effective truth" (*verità effettuale*) of "how one lives" (*quello che si fa*) with the "imagination" (*immaginazione*) of "how one ought to live" (*quello che si doverebbe fare*), he contrasts the prince's ruin or downfall (*ruina*) with his preservation (*preservazione*) as the guiding consideration in opting for the first.[92] He makes it explicit that a prince "who wishes to maintain himself" (*volendosi mantenere*) should learn to be able not to be good.[93] Finally, Machiavelli concludes the chapter by stating that without some vices, a prince can only "vouchsafe his position with great difficulty" (*difficilmente salvare lo stato*), and that

> if one will consider all this well, he will find that some things will seem like virtue (*virtù*) which in pursuing them would only amount to one's ruin, while other things will seem like vice which in pursuing them will result in one's own security and well-being (*la securtà e il bene essere suo*).[94]

Machiavelli's discussion of the individual virtues and vices – to which we shall return more extensively in chapter 3.3 – is also marked by the concern with self-preservation. Liberality, he argues, is the only virtue which diminishes its own capacity to be exercised – and ought, therefore, as a rule not to be exercised using one's own funds, which would only place one in a vulnerable position.[95] The infamous advice "to be feared rather than loved" (*essere temuto che amato*) is likewise given with a view to what is "safer" (*più sicuro*) from the prince's point of view.[96] Chapter 19, which discusses how to avoid hatred and contempt using the examples of Roman emperors from Marcus Aurelius to Maximinus Thrax, frames the question as one of how to avoid a "miserable end" (*tristo fine*), and in one breath even equates the maintenance of one's position (the *mantenere lo stato*) with the maintenance of *oneself* (*mantenerti*).[97] But the most explicit formulation occurs at the closing of chapter 18, where Machiavelli bluntly states that political survival is the only criterion by which posterity will judge a prince:

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[90] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 12.4.
[91] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 13.26.
[92] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 15.3-5. On the import of the phrase "effectual truth," see Mansfield 1996, p. 19.
[93] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 15.6.
[94] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 15.12: "*Se si considerrà bene tutto, si troverrà qualche cosa che parrà virtù e, seguendola, sarebbe la ruina sua, e qualcuna altra che parrà vizio e, seguendola, ne riesce la securtà e il bene essere suo*."
[95] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 16.5
[96] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 17.9.
[97] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 19.34 and 19.37-38.

> Let a prince therefore take care that he is victorious and that he maintains his position: the means will always be judged honourable and will be praised by everyone.[98]

In all of this, Machiavelli's silence on the promotion of human flourishing as a legitimate end of statecraft is a damning one.[99] As far as he is concerned in *The Prince*, it is non-existent, focusing exclusively on the power of the prince that seems to be pursued for its own sake. Is there, then, no extra-political goal to which this all refers? Chapters 24 and (especially) 26 give some indication that a larger purpose than power for power's sake might be at work. Machiavelli there presents a political vision for 'the liberation of Italy from the barbarians,' which has been cited as an argument for the proposition that *The Prince*'s supreme value is political patriotism and reason of state.[100] Suddenly, Machiavelli refers to justice as a valid consideration on no less than four occasions (*impresa iusta*; *iustizia grande*; *iustum bellum*; *imprese iuste*), and compares the would-be redeemer of Italy to Moses leading his people out of the desert.[101] Is there then a common good to be pursued after all?

There are two reasons why I find this implausible. First, Machiavelli's stated purpose in what is arguably the most programmatic part of the book (chapter 15) is to write something that is useful "to whomever understands it" (*a chi la intende*), which implies a universality that goes well beyond a particular exhortation to a particular prince. Second, there appears to be a certain disconnect between the argumentation presented previously and the sudden preoccupation with the liberation of Italy: Machiavelli's political advice could stand equally well on its own footing if chapter 26 were removed entirely. Hence, I agree with the conclusion drawn by Leo Strauss that the final chapter essentially serves as a smoke screen to cover with a veneer of legitimacy what is in reality an expression of cynical power politics:

> He thus creates the impression that all terrible rules and counsels given throughout the work were given exclusively for the sake of the common good. The last chapter suggests then a tolerable interpretation of the shocking teaching of the bulk of the work. But the first twenty-five chapters had observed complete silence regarding the common good.[102]

3.2 Tyranny and the *principe nuovo*

Another striking omission from *The Prince* is the concept of tyranny. The main distinctions between different types of principalities, as we have seen, is based purely on the means and modes of acquisition. The Aristotelian criterion of good and bad regime types is dropped: instead of government by the one, the few, and the many, there is only the one, and this rule by one is differentiated only by the foundations of his power. The implicit judgment about how a government 'should be', which is still present in Aristotle, also comes to be replaced by the criterion of mere political success, as we have just seen.

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[98] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 18.18: "*Facci dunque uno principe di vincere e mantenere lo stato: e' mezzi sempre saranno iudicati onorevoli e da ciascuno laudati*."
[99] On damning silences in Machiavelli, see Strauss 1958, pp. 30-31.
[100] Strauss 1958, pp. 74-84; Viroli 2014, pp. 3-20.
[101] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 26.2; 26.9-10; 26.29.
[102] Strauss 1958, p. 79.

Hence, it is no surprise that Machiavelli in *The Prince* sometimes refers to notorious tyrants as examples to be imitated, without regard to the detrimental character of their rule to the freedom of the state. In chapter 9, for instance, he commends the actions of Nabis, the "prince of the Spartans" (*principe delli Spartani*), who by trusting the people rather than the nobles was able to resist Roman attempts to conquer him.[103] Nabis, however, was widely regarded to be a tyrant, and Machiavelli twice refers to him as such in the *Discourses*.[104] Similarly, when comparing the methods of Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus – the first of whom is an archetype of the 'good emperor' and the second of whom is known for his cruelty – Machiavelli with seeming impartiality recommends the new prince to borrow from both, and to

> take from Severus those elements that are necessary for establishing his position, and from Marcus those that are glorious and advantageous for safeguarding a position already established and firm.[105]

Furthermore, Machiavelli has two chapters on types of principalities which do not correspond to the outline he had initially provided at the beginning of the book. The reason given for this departure is that these two do not entirely fit the distinction between principalities based on *fortuna* or *virtù* – but both are concerned with what one may call, in some measure, a tyranny.[106] Chapter 8 is entitled "On those who by their crimes came to be princes" (*De his qui per scelera ad principatum pervenere*), and deals mostly with military leaders who seize power by treachery and violence. Chief among these is Agathocles of Sicily, of whom it is suggested on multiple instances that his criminal deeds (*sceleratezze*) are accompanied by a great deal of "virtue of spirit and body" (*virtù d'animo e di corpo*).[107] The issue is not whether one commits tyrannical cruelties – which Machiavelli verbally, though unconvincingly, condemns[108] – but whether those cruelties serve the purpose of maintaining one's position. Hence, the famous distinction between cruelty "well used" and "badly used."

> Those cruelties can be called 'well used' (*bene usate*) – if it is allowed to speak well of evil – which are committed in one stroke because of the necessity to secure oneself, and which are afterwards not continued, but are converted into as much utility for the subjects as possible. Badly used (*male usate*) are those which, though they be few in the beginning, only increase rather than diminish with time.[109]

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[103] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 9.19.
[104] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.10.10; 1.40.38.
[105] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 19.69: "*Debbe pigliare da Severo quelle parti che per fondare el suo stato sono necessarie e da Marco quelle che sono convenienti e gloriose a conservare uno stato che sia già stabilito e fermo*."
[106] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 8.1.
[107] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 8.5; 8.10-11. Machiavelli uses the same combination of terms when speaking of Oliverotto da Fermo, who had regarded Paolo Vitelli as "the teacher of his virtue and criminal deeds" (*maestro delle virtù e sceleratezze sua*). About the significance of *animo* and *corpo* in the specification of virtue, see Mansfield 1996, pp. 40-45.
[108] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 8.11.
[109] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 8.24-25: "*Bene usate si possono chiamare quelle, se del male è licito dire bene, che si fanno a un tratto per necessità dello assicurarsi, e dipoi non vi si insiste dentro, ma si convertiscono in più utilità de' sudditi che si può. Male usate sono quelle le quali, ancora che nel principio sieno poche, piuttosto col tempo crescono che le si spenghino*." One should not be fooled by the criterion of the utility for one's subjects as a selfless concern for the common good: the aim is clearly the *assicurarsi* of the prince. Most likely, Machiavelli is thinking of cruelties like the execution by Cesare Borgia of messer Rimirro de Orco, whose (spectacular) death kept the population calm and brought stability to the newly conquered region of Romagna (described in 7.22-28).

Finally, the ninth chapter on 'civil principalities' amounts to a manual on how attain a princely position when one is a mere private citizen (*private cittadino*) – in other words, how to overthrow a republic and consolidate power for oneself. Machiavelli here subdivides the state into two 'humours' (*umori*), which are the people (*il populo*) and the nobles (*i grandi*). The first desire only not to be oppressed; the second actively wish to dominate. Hence, both lend themselves to be abused by an ambitious citizen who wishes to exploit the tension to his own advantage.[110] Machiavelli's advice is to rely on the people rather than the nobles, since a dependence on subjects is far safer than a dependence on one's equals: once the nobles are out of the way, there will be no one left to oppose him.[111]

Most importantly, however, Machiavelli makes it explicit that from the tension between *populo* and *grandi*, three situations could emerge: "either a principate, or liberty, or license" (*o principato, o libertà, o licenzia*).[112] Machiavelli's recommended strategy of using the people to take out the nobles essentially entails a move from liberty to principate – the establishment of a tyranny. But he goes even further: civil principalities are unsafe, he argues, because the authority of the new prince is still dependent on magistrates, who can desert him in difficult times. His rule is not absolute yet. Hence, it is imperative for the new prince to "rise from a civil order to an absolute one" (*salire dall'ordine civile allo assoluto*) as soon as possible.[113] This can be achieved by making the subjects' dependence on him so complete, that they "always and in every circumstance have need of his position and of him" (*sempre e in ogni qualità di tempo abbino bisogno dello stato e di lui*).[114] In a few paragraphs' time, the reader has been instructed how private citizens of a republic can ascend to absolute monarchy – and not a word in defence of political liberty or the rule of law has been uttered.

3.3. The selfish prince and his *virtù*

We have seen in our discussion of the classical tradition that the political good of the state and the concern to preserve its liberty give rise to a certain personal ethic for the ruler, which is characterized by virtue. In Machiavelli's *Prince*, the good of the state is reduced to the good of its prince, and the only concern for liberty is how to extinguish it as quickly as possible. Hence, we can expect a completely different ethic of rulership to emerge, and this ethic can be summarized in Machiavelli's use of the term *virtù* in *The Prince*.

Perhaps no topic is more hotly debated in the philosophical interpretation of Machiavelli than his use of *virtù* and the extent to which it corresponds with a more conventional use of the word 'virtue.' That they are not identical is obvious; how far they stand apart is what is in question. What, then, does this enigmatic word mean? Perhaps we ought to proceed from the way in which it is used and especially from the contrasts that are made against it to determine its meaning more precisely.

The classical concept of 'virtue' is opposed to its contrary, 'vice.' Besides one such usage in Machiavelli's listing of the conventional virtues, *virtù* usually knows no such contrast. . Instead,

[110] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 9.2-3.
[111] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 9.4-5.
[112] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 9.2.
[113] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 9.23.
[114] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 9.27.

it becomes clear from the typology of states in chapter one and the main argument presented in chapter 25 – which is about the power of *fortuna* in human affairs – that *virtù* is primarily to be opposed to *fortuna*. Meinecke has accordingly characterised the Machiavellian philosophy as: "*Drüben* fortuna*, hüben* virtù."[115] Mansfield, largely following Strauss, argues that *virtù* is ultimately grounded on two things: the necessity of acquisition – which makes it an exclusively political virtue, autonomous from 'moral' virtue in the conventional sense – and its opposition to *fortuna*.[116] Cotkin, in his detailed study of the concept, identifies four elements that are persistently present in Machiavellian accounts of *virtù*: a military overtone, self-reliance, political success, and the display of a quality. Hence, he arrives at his definition of *virtù* as "having military prowess, relying on one's self and one's own troops, which contributes to but does not guarantee success, and needs to be displayed through actions or outward signs in order for it to be effective."[117] Finally, Gilbert gives a more general definition of *virtù* by branding it "the fundamental quality of man which enables him to achieve great works and deeds."[118]

What all these definitions have in common is that *virtù* somehow has to do with the capacity of a political man to realise his aims by himself. Since political longevity is the prime criterion for Machavelli in *The Prince*, it follows that whatever promotes this end must be *virtuoso*, and that whatever causes one's demise – including the external circumstances of *fortuna* – must be interpreted as a lack of *virtù*. This analysis is confirmed many times throughout the work. For instance, in chapter 7, Machiavelli casts Cesare Borgia's reign as the exemplar of *virtù* which every new prince should strive to emulate: he did as much as was in his power to transform his fortuitous rise to power into a self-sufficient position.[119] Agathocles, too, is eventually included among the virtuous. Despite Machiavelli's remark that "it cannot be called virtue to kill one's own citizens, to betray one's friends, to be without good faith, without piety, without religion – modes which can make one acquire power, but not glory" (*non si può ancora chiamare virtù amazzare li sua cittadini, tradire li amici, essere sanza fede, sanza pietà, sanza relligione, e' quali modi possono fare acquistare imperio, ma non gloria*), the very next sentence refers to "the virtue of Agathocles" (*la virtù di Agatocle*).[120] Finally, in chapter 24, Machiavelli notes that fortune "demonstrates its power where there is no ordered virtue to resist her" (*dimostra la sua potenza dove non è ordinate virtù a resisterle*), implying that it is the task of *virtù* to mould and shape external circumstances so as to build a 'dyke' against the streams of fortune.[121]

The shocking aspects of Machiavelli's morality – and its contrast to the Aristotelian-Ciceronian view of the statesman – can be explained from the underpinnings of *virtù*. Machiavelli's counsels in *The Prince* deliberately and systematically oppose those of Cicero in *De officiis* because he believes that goodness is not sufficient to ensure one's political survival. Hence, the advice to be considered stingy rather than generous, to be feared rather than loved, and to break your word if it suits you politically.[122] In Machiavelli's own words: a prince's *virtù* is the capacity "to know how not to be good, and to use it or not use it according to necessity."[123]

[115] Meinecke 1960 (1924), p. 42.
[116] Mansfield 1996, pp. 6-52.
[117] Cotkin 2017, pp. 113-117.
[118] Gilbert 1965, p. 179.
[119] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 7.
[120] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 8.10-11.
[121] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 25.5-7. See also Strauss 1975 pp. 84-89.
[122] Machiavelli, *The Prince* chapters 16, 17, and 18, respectively.
[123] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 15.6: "*Potere essere non buono e usarlo o non usarlo secondo la necessità.*"

4. The common good in Machiavelli's *Discourses*

4.1 The good and republican *virtù*

We have seen that Machiavelli's *principe nuovo* in *The Prince* is concerned only with two things: gaining power (*acquistare*) and maintaining his position (*mantenere lo stato*). The *Discourses*, of course, are about republics. Republics in the classical conception, as we have also seen, are primarily occupied with the pursuit of virtue and the good life. What about Machiavelli's ideal republic? Is it more in line with classical republicanism or with the 'realist' conception of politics in *The Prince*?

I would submit that we can see a mixture between the classical republicanism of ancient writers and a distinctively 'Machiavellian' – one might say, modern – focus on acquisition. On the few occasions that Machiavelli makes it explicit what he regards as the goal of republican statecraft, he mentions two things: territorial expansion and the preservation of liberty, of which the first can be said to constitute a form of *acquistare* and the second of *mantenere lo stato*. One passage in *Discourse* 1.29 illustrates this particularly well, echoing even the verbiage familiar from *The Prince*.

> For, since a city that lives in freedom has two goals, of which the first is expanding (*acquistare*) and the second keeping itself free (*mantenersi libera*), it happens that it errs in either of these goals on account of too much love.[124]

Why is acquisition a goal of the republican state? Because, according to Machiavelli, necessity (*necessità*) compels a state that wishes to retain its independence to pursue a policy of growth, lest it be overpowered by a neighbouring state that grows more. Machiavelli regards the world of politics as a world in motion, where change is the only possibility and a stable maintenance of the *status quo* is not feasible. While some republics have attempted to preserve a stable balance – Sparta and Venice among them – Machiavelli ultimately concludes that they, too, will be forced to expand by necessity, or must otherwise come to ruin.

> And I believe without any doubt that, if matters could be balanced in such a way, it would be the true political way of life (*il vero vivere politico*) and the true repose (*la vera quiete*) of a city. But since all human affairs are in motion and are unable to remain fixed, it happens that they either ascend or descend, and that you are induced by necessity to do many things to which reason would not induce you. Hence, if you have ordered a republic to make it apt for its own maintenance (*atta a mantenersi*) and not for growth (*ampliarsi*), and necessity were to drive

[124] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.29.15: "*Perché, avendo una città che vive libera, duoi fini, l'uno lo acquistare, l'altro il mantenersi libera, conviene che nell'una cosa e nell'altra per troppo amore erri*." The love (*amore*) spoken of here refers to an overemphasis on either goal, which should be pursued in balance.

> her to growth, you would see her take away her own foundations, and come to ruin rather quickly.[125]

Acquistare and *mantenere lo stato* are, of course, the Machiavellian tropes we remember from *The Prince*. At the same time, however, there is a broader, more all-encompassing goal to Machiavelli's republicanism in *The Discourses*, and that is the pursuit of greatness (*grandezza*).[126] Machiavelli makes it clear in the prefaces to books 1 and 2 and in the first chapter of book 3 that, more than any political aim for a particular republic, he wishes to restore the greatness of the ancients and revive their forms of statecraft, which he regards as exalted above all others.[127] Machiavelli's 'ancients' here are always the Romans, and the Roman republic is his guiding light to political philosophy – which explains why the *Discourses* broadly follow the narrative of Livy, the greatest political historian about republican Rome.[128]

This greatness of the ancients is captured by a new notion of *virtù*, which diverges significantly from both the ancient ἀρετή or *virtus* and the self-interested *virtù* that we have encountered in *The Prince*. Machiavelli's main theme in the *Discourses* is the restoration of this "ancient virtue" (*antica virtù*), which he believes to have been lost since the fall of the Roman republic.[129] It seems to me that he locates this virtue in three places: in republican institutions, in an 'uncorrupted' people which lives and breathes the spirit of those institutions, and in particular individuals who excel in their devotion to the republic by some patriotic gesture or feat-of-arms. I shall discuss each in turn.

Machiavelli constantly refers to "modes and orders" (*modi ed ordini*) to describe the way in which states are ordered.[130] For Machiavelli, given the necessity of expansion described above, good modes and orders are those that make expansion possible. Hence, a virtuous republic is one whose constitution will provide an incentive to grow ever more powerful. Machiavelli is famous for having emphasized the importance of class conflict and competition among citizens instead of civic concord, which was the traditional (Aristotelian-Ciceronian) ideal of the harmonious republic.[131] His argument proceeds as follows. It would seem that the crises in the early Roman republic and the turbulent conflicts between patricians and plebeians are indications that the state is badly organised. At the same time, however, these conflicts gave rise to two salutary effects: on the one hand a body of laws intent on regulating that conflict and balancing the state against itself, and on the other hand a fierce competition among the leading figures of both parties, which resulted in a large number of individuals willing and able to display *virtù*. Machiavelli summarizes this view in the following passage from *Discourse* 1.4:

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[125] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.6.34: "*E sanza dubbio credo, che, potendosi tenere la cosa bilanciata in questo modo, che e' sarebbe il vero vivere politico e la vera qiuete d'una città. Ma sendo tutte le cose degli uomini in moto, en non potendo stare salde, conviene che salghino o che le scendino; e a molte cose che la ragione non t'induce, t'induce la necessità: talmente che, avendo ordinata una republica atta a mantenersi, non ampliando, e la necessità la conducesse ad ampliare, si verrebbe tôr via i fondamenti suoi, ed a farla rovinare più tosto.*" See also 3.2.9.

[126] Skinner 1990, p. 137.

[127] For instance, in the preface to book 1, he laments the fact that the deeds of the ancients are "admired rather than imitated" (*più presto ammirate che imitate*) and that "of this ancient virtue not a single trace has remained" (*di quella virtù non ci è rimasto alcun segno*).

[128] Strauss 1958, pp. 88-91; Mansfield 1996, p. 9. See also Coby 1999.

[129] Strauss 1958, p. 20: "The theme of the *Discourses* is the possibility and desirability of reviving ancient virtue."

[130] E.g. Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.Preface.

[131] Gilbert 1965, pp. 186-188; Skinner 1978, pp. 181-183; Pedullà 2018.

> And one cannot at all reasonably call a republic disorganised where so many examples of virtue (*virtù*) are present: for good examples arise out of a good education; good education out of good laws; and good laws from those tumults which many people inconsiderately condemn.[132]

A further reason these institutions were salutary is that they enabled Rome's population to grow rapidly. Since only a large population can provide the manpower required for expansion, Rome's incorporation of new citizens and allied peoples should be the model for emergent republics. Machiavelli contrasts this approach with the republics in Sparta and Venice, which were less keen on admitting outsiders and relying on the common people for waging war. While this approach increased their stability and social cohesion, Machiavelli argues that it undermined their capacity for expansion and was ultimately detrimental to their political situation:

> Therefore, if someone wishes to order a republic anew, he would have to examine whether he wants it to grow in dominance and power (*dominio e potenza*), like Rome, or whether he wants to confine it to small borders. In the first case, it is necessary to order it like Rome, and to allow room for tumults and universal dissensions to the largest degree possible; for without a large number of men who are well-armed, a republic could never grow (*crescere*), or, even if it were to grow, could never maintain itself (*mantenersi*).[133]

Second, in addition to institutions that can manage civic conflict, the people themselves are generative of *virtù* if their spirit is "uncorrupted" (*non corrotto*). Machiavelli first discusses this question in *Discourses* 1.16-20 with reference to the transition from monarchy to republic. Rome was founded as a kingdom and only acquired its republican liberty after it had driven out the last Tarquinian king. Machiavelli notes how difficult it is for peoples who have just cast off one-man rule to establish lasting republican institutions.[134] Some seem to succeed, whereas most do not. The explanation for this, according to Machiavelli, is the difference in collective virtue: some peoples have a strong love of liberty, which allows them to remain free, whereas others somehow retain (or regain) their servile attitude, which makes them vulnerable to a restoration or novel forms of tyranny. Hence, Rome's evolution from monarchy to republic and eventually back into a principate can be explained by a deterioration in the moral quality of the people.

> Nor does such a difference in outcome within the self-same city arise from anything other than the fact that, at the time of Tarquinius, the

[132] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.4.7: "*Né si può chiamare in alcun modo, con ragione, una republica inordinata, dove siano tanti esempli di virtù; perché li buoni esempli nascono dalla buona educazione; la buona educazione, dalle buone leggi; e le buone leggi, da quelli tumulti che molti inconsideratamente dannano.*"
[133] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.6.24-25: "*Se alcuno volesse, per tanto, ordinare una republica di nuovo, arebbe a esaminare se volesse che ampliasse, come Roma, di dominio e di potenza, ovvero che la stesse dentro a brevi termini. Nel primo caso, è necessario ordinarla come Roma, e dare luogo a' tumulti e alle dissensioni universali, il meglio che si può; perché, sanza gran numero di uomini, e bene armati, mai una republica potrà crescere, o, se la crescerà, mantenersi.*"
[134] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.16.1.

> Roman people was not yet corrupt, whereas in these last times it was extremely corrupt (*corrottissimo*).[135]

Machiavelli is rather fatalistic about the possibility of regular institutions resolving the moral corruption of the people. He likens the people to "matter" (*materia*), and, in an astounding admission of his political metaphysics, seems to believe that the matter is more constitutive and fundamental than the 'form' of laws and institutions.

> And the following conclusion can be drawn: that, where the matter (*materia*) is not corrupt, the tumults and other scandals do not arise; but where it is corrupt, those well-ordered laws do not help, if they are not instituted by one person (*uno*) who, with an extreme degree of force (*una estrema forza*), sees to it that they are observed, in order to restore the matter to its goodness (*tanto che la materia diventi buona*).[136]

Finally, *virtù* is often found in the actions of individual citizens, who display their attachment to the republic in some extraordinary action and so further the common good. The third book of the *Discourses*, in particular, is devoted to "the actions of particular men" (*le azioni degli uomini particulari*).[137] Especially military commanders are praised in that regard, since their military *virtù* concretely expanded the state and augmented its glory. Machiavelli mentions by name, among others, Horatius Cocles, Mucius Scaevola, Fabricius, the Decii, and Atilius Regulus.[138] But virtuous non-military citizens, too, are praised for their devotion to the common good of the republic. For instance, the Brutus who drove out the Tarquinii is cast as an exemplar of patriotism for having executed his own sons when they conspired to overthrow the state and restore the monarchy.[139]

4.2 Liberty and the rule of law

We have encountered several times the importance of liberty in constituting the civic *virtù* required to further the common good. We must first come to terms with Machiavelli's concept of liberty, and then see how it applies to the above-stated theory that republican statecraft is about *acquistare* and *mantenere lo stato*.

Cotkin's illuminating study of Machiavellian *virtù* in republics distinguishes two aspects of liberty which are present in Machiavelli's writings. The first he calls 'corporate liberty', which refers to the independence of a state (as a distinct 'body') from foreign rule. The second is so-called 'republican' liberty, which signifies the liberty of citizens to participate in self-

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[135] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.17.6-7: "*Né tanta diversità di evento in una medesima città nacque da altro, se non da non essere ne' tempi de' Tarquinii il popolo romano ancora corrotto, ed in questi ultimi tempi essere corrottissimo.*"

[136] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.17.13: "*E si può fare questa conclusione, che, dove la materia non è corrotta, i tumulti ed altri scandoli non nuocono; dove la è corrotta, le leggi bene ordinate non giovano, se già le non sono mosse da uno che con una estrema forza le faccia osservare, tanto che la materia diventi buona*." Machiavelli's belief that it is sometimes necessary for *uno* to restore the state with *estrema forza* will be discussed below, in paragraph 4.3.

[137] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.41.

[138] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.28. See also 3.9 and 3.49, where the prudence of Fabius Maximus is praised; 3.20-21 where Camillus and Scipio are applauded for their 'humanity'; and 3.22, where the leadership styles of Manlius Toruqatus and Valerius Corvinus are examined and recommended for different circumstances.

[139] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.3.

government. Corporate liberty can be threatened by foreign powers seeking to conquer the state; republican liberty is at risk when one individual or a party seeks to overthrow the republic and enact regime change. *Mantenere lo stato*, in this context, refers to ability of the dominating faction to keep the current institutions in place and not be displaced by the opposing humour.[140]

The distinction is well-chosen, because it reveals that a republic's liberty not only has an external dimension, but that it should also be guarded against internal threats. Machiavelli's account throughout book 1 of the *Discourses* can be read as a vindication of the Roman republic as the ideal system to protect republican liberty against faction and tyranny.

Machiavelli's concern with republican liberty first emerges in *Discourse* 1.2. Here, he endorses Polybius's theory of the 'succession of regimes' (πολιτείων ἀνακύκλωσις, which Machiavelli also refers to as a *cerchio*), and agrees with both Polybius and Aristotle that there are six basic regime types – the three bad forms being corruptions of the good ones.[141] He also shares with the classics the ideal of a 'mixed regime' containing each of the three 'good' elements in a balanced and stable whole. Contrary to the classics, however, he claims that even the 'good' regime types must be regarded as mischievous (*pestiferi*), since they have the tendency to quickly degenerate into their opposites. Machiavelli's concern with political longevity of the regime – the result of *mantenere lo stato* – here becomes the foundation of his theory of the mixed regime as the means to preserve its liberty.[142]

As I have briefly indicated above, Machiavelli saw the 'tumults' between patricians and plebeians as conducive to the liberty of the state. This is true not only with regard to the external, 'corporative' liberty, but also when it comes to its own institutions. The origins of the state are important here. Machiavelli distinguishes two possibilities: either a single law-giver has instituted virtuous institutions which are capable of preserving liberty (such as the laws of Lycurgus), or a state can slowly evolve towards the "perfection" (*perfezione*) of its constitution. Rome is the paradigm example of the second case, despite its having being founded as a monarchy.[143] After the expulsion of the last king, Machiavelli claims, the monarchical element was preserved in the form of consuls, while the aristocratic element became predominant in the rule of the senate.[144] Hence, Machiavelli concludes that Rome's evolution towards becoming a "perfect republic" (*republica perfetta*) now only required the addition of a democratic element, which according to him was the essence of the tumults.[145]

Once this order of perfection was achieved, it had to be maintained. For Machiavelli, the single most important feature of republican liberty is the rule of law. Only when citizens are subjected to rules and norms that apply to everyone equally (without exception), and only when the most ambitious citizens acquiesce in this state of affairs, can a republic persist. This already becomes clear in *Discourses* 1.7 and 1.8, where Machiavelli argues for the possibility of citizens to initiate legal prosecutions, but also submits that slander should be outlawed and rigorously combatted. His reasoning is that legal proceedings provide an institutionalised means of settling disputes among citizens, while malicious rumours and political slander create the conditions for party conflict and civil war. Machiavelli cites the popular discontent with Coriolanus, who only

[140] Cotkin 2017, pp. 117-132.
[141] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.2.10-24.
[142] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.2.26-27.
[143] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.2.31.
[144] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.2.33.
[145] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.2.34-36. See also Pedullà 2018 and Viroli 1990, p. 167.

narrowly escaped lynching because the tribunes were able to prosecute him by legal means, as a case in point.

> As to corroborating this opinion with examples, let that of Coriolanus suffice among the ancients. About it, everyone ought to consider how much evil would have resulted for the Roman republic if he had died tumultuously (*tumultuariamente*). Because then there would have emerged an offence of private citizens against private citizens, which is an offence that generates fear; fear seeks out defence; to obtain defence one procures partisans; from partisans there emerge factions (*parti*) in cities; and from factions those cities come to ruin. But if this business were to be handled by a person who has authority (*autorità*), one could take away all these evils that could spring up if it were handled by someone with private authority (*autorità privata*).[146]

However, good laws alone cannot resolve every social problem. As with expansion, the maintenance of freedom in a state is dependent on the *virtù* of its citizens. An aspect of Machiavelli's thought one could easily miss is the distinction he makes between a temporary constellation of laws, and the underlying 'spirit of the laws' as a function of the people's inner constitution, which is presumed to be a more stable disposition in the state.

> For just as good custom (*costume*) stands in need of laws to be maintained, so also laws, in order to be observed, stand in need of custom. (…) And whereas laws vary in a city according to accidental circumstances, its orders (*ordini*) never or only rarely change. This means that new laws will not be sufficient, since the orders which are stable will corrupt them.[147]

Machiavelli names two examples of institutions which by themselves would have been salutary, had the people not lost its original *virtù* and become corrupted. First, the selection of magistrates. Elections, Machiavelli contends, initially ensured a meritocratic selection of officials – the best of the best being chosen to temporarily govern the people. But when corruption set in and private interests became more important than the common good, these elections only became the means for powerful oligarchs to obtain more power for themselves.[148] Second, regarding the right to initiate legislation, Machiavelli recounts a similar story of how private gain and oligarchic schemes replaced an honest deliberation for the country's good.

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[146] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.7.10: "*E quanto a corroborare questa opinione con gli esempli, voglio che degli antiqui mi basti quello di Coriolano; sopra il quale ciascuno consideri, quanto male saria risultato alla republica romana, se tumultuariamente ei fusse stato morto: perché ne nasceva offesa da privati a privati, la quale offesa genera paura; la paura cerca difesa; per la difesa si procacciano partigiani; da' partigiani nascono le parti nelle cittadi; dalle parti la rovina di quelle. Ma sendosi governata la cosa mediante chi ne aveva autorità, si vennero a tôr via tutti quelli mali che ne potevano nascere governandola con autorità privata.*"

[147] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.18.5-7: "*Perché, così come gli buoni costumi, per mantenersi, hanno bisogno delle leggi; così le leggi, per osservarsi, hanno bisogno de' buoni costumi.* (…) *E se le leggi secondo gli accidenti in una città variano, non variano mai, o rade volte, gli ordini suoi: il che fa che le nuove leggi non bastano, perché gli ordini, che stanno saldi, le corrompono*."

[148] Machiavelli, like Sallust (*De coniuratione Catilinae* 10-12), blames leisure (*otium/ozio*) and opulence (*luxuria/delizie*) for the corruption of republics (*Discourses* 1.17; 1.19) . See also Gilbert 1965, pp. 175-176; Skinner 1990, p. 163.

> This constitutional provision (*ordine*) was good so long as its citizens were good. For it was always a good thing that everyone who understood some common interest (*uno bene per il publico*) could propose it, and it is good that everyone can give his opinion on the matter, in order to allow the people, after hearing everyone, to choose what is best. But once the citizens had become malicious (*cattivi*), this provision became very detrimental (*pessimo*). Because only the powerful proposed laws, not in the interests of general liberty (*la commune libertà*), but for their own power. And against these laws, no one dared to speak out of fear for those few. Hence, the people found itself either deceived or forced to deliberate its own ruin.[149]

At first sight, this analysis poses a serious challenge to political agency. If the corruption of a people is so corrosive for the entire constitution that even new laws cannot change this vicious trajectory, then what remedy can possibly remain to cure a state of its corruption? This is where Machiavelli introduces his novel theory of periodic revolution or 'renovation', which is accompanied by a highly unusual – though recognisably Machiavellian – political ethic for the statesman. This will be the subject of the next chapter, with which we conclude our close reading of the *Discourses*.

4.3 Extraordinary measures: renovation and the *fondatore dello stato*

Following Strauss, it is possible to distinguish two possible states of affairs in civil society: a 'normal case' and an 'extreme case'.[150] The normal case refers to politics conducted under calm circumstances, where the existence of the state can be presupposed and the goal to be pursued is the good life of the citizens. However, there are also extreme cases where the very existence of the state is at risk: necessity takes over, the normal rules of politics are suspended, and the public safety becomes the highest law. Strauss's view is that Machiavelli "believes that the extreme case is more revealing of the roots of civil society and therefore of its true character than the normal case."[151]

I believe that this analysis is correct, and that we see it manifested in the two-tier view of statesmanship implicit in Machiavelli's *Discourses*. On the one hand, he seems to endorse regular statesmanship under the rule of law on various occasions, asking citizens to humble themselves before the institutions of the state and to place the common good before their own interests.[152] But if the state has become corrupted, and republican liberty itself threatens to

[149] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.18.20-21: "*Era questo ordine buono, quando i cittadini erano buoni; perché sempre fu bene che ciascuno che intende uno bene per il publico lo possa preporre; ed è bene che ciascuno sopra quello possa dire l'opinione sua, acciocché il popolo, inteso ciascuno, possa poi eligere il meglio. Ma diventati i cittadini cattivi, diventò tale ordine pessimo; perché solo i potenti proponevano leggi, non per la comune libertà, ma per la potenza loro; e contro a quelle non poteva parlare alcuno, per paura di quelli: talché il popolo veniva o ingannato o sforzato a diliberare la sua rovina.*"
[150] Strauss 1965, pp. 160-162; 178-179.
[151] Strauss 1965, p. 179.
[152] Examples of this can be found in *Discourses* 1.24, 1.36, 1.45, and 1.46.

collapse, the state enters a period of extraordinary circumstances, in which extraordinary measures are justified to salvage its foundations.[153]

Machiavelli most extensively expounds this theory in the third book. *Discourse* 3.1 opens with the observation that all created things have a limit to their life (*il termina della vita loro*).[154] Corruption and degeneration are facts of life. However, it is possible to take active measures to prevent such degeneration; to rejuvenate or 'renovate' something. In the case of 'mixed bodies' (*corpi misti*), with which Machiavelli means political associations in the broadest sense of the term – forms of government, but also religions – the way to such a renovation is to bring it back to its 'beginnings' or 'founding principles' (*ridurre inverso i principii*).[155] The intuition is that all political communities that ever rose to dominance must have had "some good" (*qualche bontà*) in them initially, but that this good, like all things in the world, has degenerated into something wicked.[156] Therefore, some impulse is necessary to purge the wickedness and bring the body back to its goodness, which can take the form of either an "external accident" (*accidente estrinseco*) or "internal prudence" (*prudenza intrinseca*).[157]

The external category is fulfilled if some calamity hits the state, like the Gallic sack of Rome in 390 B.C. constituted the supreme crisis of the early Roman republic. Its trauma stimulated the citizens to once again uphold religion, justice, a right esteem for honourable citizens, and to care more about *virtù* than about their own interests (*commodi*).[158] But much more desirable (and interesting) are the remedies from the inside. In republics, Machiavelli ascribes the same effect that a national trauma would have to two sources of renovation: it can happen "either through the virtue of one man, or through the virtue of an order" (*o per virtù d'un uomo o per virtù d'uno ordine*).[159]

The 'virtue' in question comes down to either "excessive and noteworthy things" (*cose eccessive e notabili*), which in practice means the elimination of enemies of the regime to sow fear among its opponents, or an extraordinary example of military heroism, which inspires the citizens to emulate this virtue.[160] Such rejuvenating events ought to take place rather frequently: Machiavelli gives an interval of ten years as a maximum, even quoting a saying of the Medici(!) that it is necessary "to found the state anew every five years" (*ripigliare ogni cinque anni lo stato*).[161] We see, then, a curious mixture of the carrot and the stick: both terror of the law and aspirations to virtue are to be the foundations of a republic, which itself is continuously being founded and re-founded through periodic 'renovations'.

It is in the context of these ideas that Machiavelli gives advice similar to the counsels in *The Prince*. To safeguard the state, renovations are necessary. But these renovations can only

[153] There are, of course, also extraordinary measures for threats from the outside. Machiavelli discusses the Roman institution of dictatorship (and its risks) in *Discourses* 1.33- 38. However, given that a dictatorship is still an intra-legal and therefore institutionally foreseeable crisis measure, I will centre my discussion around the institutionally *unforeseeable* figure of the 'reformer' or 'new founder' of the state. For the distinction ordinary/extraordinary in Machiavelli, see Benner 2009, pp. 367-406.
[154] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.1.
[155] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.3. See also Gilbert 1965, pp. 184-185; Parel 1991, pp. 328-334.
[156] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.7-9.
[157] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.10.
[158] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.15.
[159] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.19.
[160] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.22-23; 3.1.27-30.
[161] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.1.25.

succeed if the renovator – the new 'founder of the state' (*fondatore dello stato*) – has enough freedom of movement to implement rigorous measures. Such freedom of movement can only be achieved by one-man rule, which means that the aspiring renovator should concentrate power in his own hands as much as possible and then redesign the state as he sees fit, giving it better modes and orders.

In *Discourse* 1.9, Machiavelli mentions Cleomenes of Sparta and especially Romulus as examples of how to proceed with such a reform. Romulus, he says, gained absolute power by first murdering his brother, and then acquiescing in the death of Titus Tatius, his Sabine co-king.[162] Normally, he admits, this would constitute wicked behaviour; but one needs to consider the intended aim (*fine*) and the result (*lo effetto*), which "if it is good, like that of Romulus, will always excuse the crime' (*quando sia buono, come quello di Romolo, sempre lo scuserà*).[163] For Romulus realised that he needed absolute power to reform the state:

> And one should posit this as a general rule: that it never or only rarely occurs that a republic or kingdom is well-ordered from the beginning, or that it is entirely reformed outside its old orders, if it is not ordered by one person (*uno*). (…) Therefore, a wise designer (*prudente ordinatore*) of a republic who has the disposition to benefit not himself but the common good (*non a se ma al bene commune*) and not his own succession but the communal fatherland should strive to hold power by himself (*avere l'autorità solo*); and no insightful mind (*ingegno savio*) will reprehend someone for an extraordinary action if he has used it to order a kingdom or constitute a republic.[164]

At first sight, this appears to be the same advice provided in chapter 9 of *The Prince*: gain absolute authority to become the undisputed master of the state. But I take the view that the *fondatore dello stato* is an entirely different figure from the *principe nuovo*.[165] The reason for this is that the *fondatore* takes a much broader view and has a genuine higher end to his dubious methods. Machiavelli immediately qualifies his endorsement of absolute power by emphasizing that it is a short-term remedy, only to be applied one time in an extraordinary circumstance. The risks of continuous autocracy are too high: the successor might be incompetent or corrupt. Hence, the *fondatore* should ensure that regular republican institutions are in place immediately after he dies or relinquishes power:

> He should be wise and virtuous (*virtuoso*) enough not to hereditarily bequeath to another the authority he has seized for himself: for, since human beings are more prone to evil than to good, his successor could

[162] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.9.3. Livy himself, however, is more ambiguous about Romulus's motivations, leaving open the possibility that Romulus acted in good faith when he failed to retaliate (*Ab urbe condita* 1.14).
[163] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.9.4 and 1.9.7.
[164] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.9.5-6: "*E debbesi pigliare questo per una regola generale: che mai o rado occorre che alcuna republica o regno sia, da principio, ordinato bene, o al tutto di nuovo, fuora degli ordini vecchi, riformato, se non è ordinato da uno.* (…) *Però, uno prudente ordinatore d'una republica, e che abbia questo animo, di volere giovare non a sé ma al bene comune, non alla sua propria successione ma alla comune patria, debbe ingegnarsi di avere l'autorità, solo; né mai uno ingegno savio riprenderà alcuno di alcuna azione straordinaria, che, per ordinare un regno o constituire una republica, usasse.*"
[165] Contrary to Viroli 2014, who interprets *The Prince* as a call for a *principe nuovo* to appear as a quasi-messianic 'redeemer' of Italy.

> use in an ambitious manner (*ambiziosamente*) what was used by himself in a virtuous manner (*virtuosamente*).[166]

Furthermore, Machiavelli consistently prefers the *virtù* of the people as a whole to the *virtù* of a single ruler or party – for instance, when he declares that the people are better custodians of liberty, more grateful, and more prudent electors.[167] The entire reason for his preference for republics is that a 'broad government' (*governo largo*), reliant on the capacities of many individuals, is more likely to generate virtuous citizens and great deeds than the small pool of talent in an oligarchy or monarchy.[168] Hence, Machiavelli concludes the following:

> Other than this, whereas one person (*uno*) is appropriate for designing an order (*ordinare*), the ordered thing will not last long if it remains on the shoulders of one man. But it will go well if it can remain an object of care for many (*alla cura di molti*) and if it is up to many to maintain it.[169]

It should come as no surprise, then, that Machiavelli's founder is not to be considered a tyrant – even though the methods used by both may come extremely, uncomfortably close at times. The unequivocal condemnation of tyranny in the next chapter, where Machiavelli ranks tyrants as the lowest in praise (*laude*) among human beings, is a natural result of the difference in self-interest and common benefit in the considerations of a statesman. Whereas the tyrant is a usurper, intent only on his own power and survival, the founder or reformer is a 'necessary evil' in the Machiavellian state to prevent the degeneration of its *virtù*, which is itself a noble end. Hence, Machiavelli's judgment could hardly be made more explicit.

> Nevertheless, in the end, almost all men, deceived by a false good (*falso bene*) and a false glory (*falsa gloria*), either voluntarily or ignorantly allow themselves to stoop to the level of those who merit more blame than praise (*più biasimo che laude*). For while they could, to their own everlasting glory, create a kingdom or a republic, they turn to tyranny (*si volgono alla tirannide*). Nor do they realize how much repute, how much glory, how much honour, security, and calmness, with satisfaction of spirit, they escape by taking this path; and how much infamy, vituperation, blame, danger, and disquietude they incur.[170]

Machiavelli accordingly concludes that what is good for tyrants only hurts the state, even if it means territorial expansion.[171] The criterion for good statesmanship in the *Discourses* remains

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[166] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.9.8: "*Debbi bene in tanto essere prudente e virtuoso, che quella autorità che si ha presa non la lasci ereditaria a un altro: perché, sendo gli uomini più proni al male che al bene, potrebbe il suo successore usare ambiziosamente quello che virtuosamente da lui fosse stato usato.*"
[167] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.5, 1.29, and 1.58, respectively.
[168] Skinner 1978, pp. 159-162.
[169] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.9.9: "*Oltre a di questo, se uno è atto a ordinare, non è la cosa ordinata per durare molto, quando la rimanga sopra le spalle d'uno; ma sì bene, quando la rimane alla cura di molti e che a molti stia il mantenerla.*"
[170] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.10.9: "*Nientedimeno, dipoi, quasi tutti, ingannati da uno falso bene e da una falsa gloria, si lasciono andare, o voluntariamente o ignorantemente, nei gradi di coloro che meritano più biasimo che laude; e potendo fare, con perpetuo loro onore, o una republica o uno regno, si volgono alla tirannide; né si avveggono per questo partito quanta fama, quanta gloria, quanto onore, sicurtà, quiete, con sodisfazione d'animo, ei fuggono; e in quanta infamia, vituperio, biasimo, pericolo e inquietudine, incorrono.*"
[171] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 2.2.17-18.

the common good (*bene comune*), which can only be achieved well in a republic.[172] Far from establishing a tyranny for himself, therefore, the reformer only contributes to the common good by safeguarding the existence of republican government.

[172] Machiavelli, *Discourses* 2.2.12-15, where Machiavelli states that the common interest "is only served in republics" (*non è osservato se non nelle republiche*).

5. *The Prince* and the *Discourses* in light of the classical tradition

5.1 *The Prince*

Compared to the classical ideal of politics as the art of the city, *The Prince* constitutes a radical break. Whereas virtue is the most important aim of politics in the Platonic-Aristotelian conception, any attempt at promoting virtue in the classical sense is conspicuously absent from *The Prince*. Instead, the aim of politics is reduced to the double notion of *acquistare* and *mantenere lo stato*: the new prince who has just seized power is instructed to increase this power by all possible means in order to maintain his position. The political good is in no respect 'common', but solely that of the prince himself: the state, to the extent that it even exists as an abstract consideration, is in effect nothing more than the raw resource for the new prince to exploit in his quest for an ever more secure position.

Likewise, liberty merits no other consideration than how to extirpate it as quickly as possible. Whereas the classics had the mixed regime as their ideal to prevent the potential excesses of all regime types, Machiavelli unambiguously teaches a new prince in a civil principality – which used to have a form of liberty – to eliminate his political competition and gain absolute authority. Furthermore, whereas Aristotle and others after him had identified forms of 'good' and 'bad' one-man rule based on the criterion of governance in the common interest, Machiavelli here seems to have abolished all distinctions between monarchy and tyranny. He cites the most ruthless tyrants, like Nabis of Sparta or Septimius Severus, as examples to be imitated. Nor does he recognise any moral limit to the methods of a prince, provided he ultimately emerge victorious in his enterprises.

Finally, with regard to the new prince himself, the traditional notion of the *vir virtutis*, who remains wise and good under all circumstances, is replaced by the *virtù* of a more than flexible morality. The most important thing, Machiavelli emphasizes, is to keep up the appearance of the conventional virtues, while in reality the prince should be prepared to act in beastly fashion if the circumstances require it. Fox and lion, beast and beast – not man and god – are to be his metaphors.[173] Political virtue turns out not to be prudence, but shrewdness.

These are surely not shocking conclusions: that Machiavelli's *Prince* is a highly problematic book from the standpoint of ethics has been known for centuries.[174] Nevertheless, seen from the angle of the common good, oft-repeated truisms about 'the murderous Machiavel' are both nuanced and provided with deeper foundations. Whereas it is often said that, in Machiavelli's *Prince*, "the ends justify the means," it has now become clear what the ends of those means are – and why the means are not merely problematic in their own right, but perhaps even more so as instruments to the most perfect tyranny in the classical sense of the term: autocratic rule by one man not in the general interest, but in his own.

[173] Machiavelli, *The Prince* 15.18.2-7. See also Mansfield 1996, p. 38. Regarding the hypocrisy of Machiavelli's prince, there is perhaps no better contrast than with Plato's treatment of 'being' versus 'appearing' good in *Republic* 1.360e-361d and 365b-d, even mentioning the fox as an image of duplicity in the latter passage.

[174] The first anti-Machiavellian treatises by Giovanni Botero (1544-1617) and Innocent Gentillet (1535-1588) already appeared in the same century.

5.2 The *Discourses*

The more interesting case is obviously that of the *Discourses*. Whereas the political outlook of *The Prince* is easily contrasted with the classics, that of the *Discourses* reveals much more continuity with a genuine tradition of republicanism and requires a more intricate analysis.

Just like in principalities, *acquistare* and *mantenere lo stato* remain important goals for a republic according to the *Discourses.* But contrary to the narrative in *The Prince*, they are not the only or even the primary goals of the state: greatness (*grandezza*), to be accomplished by displays of virtue (*virtù*) in peace and war, is more fundamental. The emulation of the Ancients and particularly the Romans is the highest ambition for modern republics, for which they need functioning institutions, a people that loves liberty, and capable individuals who can serve as commanders or patriotic citizens. The *virtù* that supposedly resides in such a republic is therefore of a different kind than that of the *principe nuovo* in *The Prince*: whereas the latter serves as an instrument to selfish ends, the former is both intrinsically valuable for its greatness as well as conducive to the common good of a republic.

Second, whereas in *The Prince* liberty is to be combatted and subdued, in the *Discourses* it is to be fostered and jealously protected. Like Plato, Aristotle, Polybius and Cicero – and unlike the Machiavelli of *The Prince* – the Machiavelli of the *Discourses* subscribes to the classical theory of regime types, and favours a mixed regime as the most stable and durable. However, contrary to his classical forebears, he dismisses civic concord as an ideal, and instead points out that tensions between the common people and the patriciate class are generative of the internal dynamism required for both expansion of the state and the maintenance of republican liberty. Machiavelli here also believes in the rule of law: strict norms of behaviour are to be enforced on all citizens, and citizens are in turn expected to respect the boundaries of the law and not engage in extra-legal methods of political competition. No citizen is above the law.

However, the rule of law only applies if the laws themselves have not been corrupted – which Machiavelli regards as a real possibility. This follows naturally from his conception of republican *virtù*: if *virtù* means the degree to which a people is willing and able to defend its liberty both at home and abroad, then a lack of such *virtù* opens the door to dangerous demagoguery and, in the final stage, tyranny.[175] Such regime change poses an existential danger to the republic and has to be vigorously opposed.

This leads to the third and final component analysed, which is the role of the statesman in general and of the republican reformer (or 'founder') in particular. For Machiavelli, as for Thomas Jefferson, "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."[176] If moral corruption goes far enough to threaten the constitutional order (*ordine*) itself – as it inevitably must, given the corruptibility and finite lifespan of all human things – then the laws will no longer be capable of remedying their own insufficiencies. In such a crisis, only a strong individual can save the state from its demise by bringing it back to its founding principles (*principii*), its pristine state. This must be done by harsh measures, often not unlike those of the aspiring tyrant in *The Prince*. However, once the constitution has been restored, the autocracy must be abolished, and republican governance can be resumed.

[175] This is a dynamic not unlike the one described by Plato in *Republic* 8.562a-566d, which describes the degeneration of a democracy into a tyranny from the inability of the people to bear its own liberty.
[176] From Jefferson's letter to William Smith (November 13th 1787).

The theory of periodic 'renovation' and its accompanying ethics of reform are probably where Machiavelli's morality in the *Discourses* most sharply diverges from that of the Classics. But still, we must remember that their dispute here is one of means, not of ends: both the moderate and prudent statesman of Aristotle and the vigorous reformer of Machiavelli's *Discourses* intend to benefit the republic and to contribute to the maintenance of liberty under a mixed regime. But whereas for the Classics some methods are so immoral that they are not even warranted for a patriotic purpose – *ne conservandae quidem patriae causa*, as Cicero has it – to Machiavelli, all means are honourable so long as they protect the state, the people, and its liberty.

Conclusion

I started this thesis from the question regarding Machiavelli's modernity: is it true that his teaching entails a wholesale departure from the Classics, or is there more to the story? In an attempt to clarify that question, I focused my research on one specific aspect of political thought, namely the 'common good.' From close readings of *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* in light of the classical, broadly Platonic-Aristotelian theory of politics, I focused on three elements crucial to a philosophy of the common good: the good (or 'goal' or 'end') of the state, liberty in relation to tyranny, and the personal ethics of statesmanship. Based on how those elements feature in both works, I have concluded that, whereas *The Prince* constitutes a genuine break with traditional political ethics, the case of the *Discourses* is much more ambiguous, since it shows a unique mixture of classical and 'Machiavellian' ideas and themes.

There are – inevitably – limitations to my analysis which are worth to point out. First, for my own exegesis, I have selected only those passages from *The Prince* and the *Discourses* which I thought relevant to the question of the common good – and even among those, only a small portion has been cited and analysed in detail. Doubtless an inclusion of more material would have enriched my discussion – but the reader will find, I believe, that I have in no way departed from Machiavelli's spirit. Second, many key terms – like *virtù* and *fortuna*, to mention just one famous pair – could, would, and indeed have merited full studies of their own. My interpretation of them has therefore necessarily been less thorough than it would have been in a more lengthy treatment of them. Finally, with regard to the secondary literature, there was simply too much to take it all into account. I often felt not unlike Livy, who, in the process of writing *Ab urbe condita*, described his experience as that of walking into the sea, which only increases its expanse the further one treads.[177] Hence, it was impossible for me to consider all possible positions on scholarly questions. Nevertheless, my hope is to have at least done justice to those long-standing debates with this *opuscolo*, and to have contributed to a further understanding of this fascinating thinker.

[177] Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 31.1.

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