



*Niccolò Machiavelli*  
DISCOURSES ON LIVY

*Translated by*

HARVEY C. MANSFIELD  
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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AW</i>	Machiavelli, <i>The Art of War</i>
<i>D</i>	Machiavelli, <i>Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy</i>
<i>FH</i>	Machiavelli, <i>Florentine Histories</i>
<i>Livy</i>	Titus Livy, <i>Ab urbe condita</i>
<i>NM</i>	Niccolò Machiavelli
<i>P</i>	Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i>



## INTRODUCTION

In this introduction we offer a quick tour through Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. We shall mark the four-star attractions that tourists will want to visit repeatedly and wish to remember. The great Machiavellian themes of politics, morality, fortune, necessity, and religion will be set forth, together with the controversies they have touched off. For Machiavelli, to say the least, did not write in such a mode as to prevent dispute about what he said. We consider the fact that Machiavelli wrote at the same time two very different books on the whole of politics, *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. We provide a brief appraisal of the latter's scholarly reputation today as the first source of classic republicanism, as the recollection of ancient liberty that calls us to venture from the settled and secure realm of property and self-interest. And we present Machiavelli himself, not a disengaged philosopher but the instigator in the schemes he advised, an actor in his own enterprise of bringing "new modes and orders . . . for [the] common benefit of everyone" (*D I pr.1*). As befits an introduction, we try to speak with both modesty and authority.

### MACHIAVELLI AND THE RENAISSANCE

Machiavelli lived in the Renaissance, and the Renaissance lived in Machiavelli; the communication between the man and the time seems complete. Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth-century historian who established our idea of "the Renaissance" and who despite new discoveries still reigns over it, gave Machiavelli the greatest prominence in that period and allowed him to define its politics in the section of his famous book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* titled "The State as a Work of Art."

The Renaissance is a rebirth, *the* rebirth of the classical times of ancient Greece and Rome. The times had already been reborn, one could say, with the rediscovery of Aristotle in the twelfth century and his adoption by the Christian church, after initial rejections, through the immense achievements and good offices of Thomas Aquinas. It is not customary to consider the work of the scholastics as the renaissance, however, because the distinction between human reason and divine law, required for the adoption of the pagan Aristotle into Christian learning, did not liberate human beings from the tutelage of the church. Even more wayward souls such as Dante or Marsilius of Padua in the early fourteenth century did not take this step; they remained within the broad ambit of scholasticism and stayed true to Aristotle. In Italy later in the fourteenth century Petrarch led a change in the direction toward greater freedom from the church, which now seemed to require greater freedom from Aristotle. Petrarch criticized those who thought every problem could be solved by pronouncing the five syllables in Aristotle's name (so it is in Latin) and declared himself an admirer of Cicero.<sup>1</sup> Cicero became, as it has been said, the principal figure of the Renaissance. Cicero's rhetoric, as well as his philosophy, came to receive the attention of the learned, and the goal of Renaissance rhetoric became the promotion of a morality of Roman manliness (*virtus*) that Cicero had glowingly described.

This movement, led by Petrarch in Italy and including such illustrious names as Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Marsilio Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola, was pronounced to be *the* Renaissance. Part of it is also known as humanism because it concentrated on humane studies, or the "humanities" rather than physics, metaphysics, and theology, and it was the immediate intellectual inheritance for anyone born in Machiavelli's time. But Machiavelli refused it almost totally and made his own way against his time. In the *Discourses* he refers to only three modern authors—Dante, Lorenzo de' Medici, and Flavio Biondo—in contrast to nineteen ancient ones. Although the notion of rebirth

implies in itself dissatisfaction with current ways, Machiavelli was profoundly dissatisfied with the Renaissance he saw underway. At the beginning of the *Discourses* he complains that those of his time are content to honor antiquity by buying fragments of ancient statues for their homes and having them imitated rather than by imitating the “ancient virtue” in politics, of which no sign remains (*D I pr*). To remedy their political ills, he continues, they go to the ancient jurists, not to the *examples* set by ancient princes, republics, and captains.

Thus Machiavelli accepts the necessity of returning to the ancients because they were superior to the moderns, but, waving aside the marvelous works of art created in his own lifetime and even in his own city of Florence under his very eyes, he calls for imitating the *deeds* of the ancients. He shares the new esteem for Rome but carries it to the point of preferring Rome to Greece and adopting the imperial Roman republic, and not the Greek polis, as his model. Together with his six references to “ancient virtue” in the *Discourses* are four to *Roman* virtue but none to Greek. Ancient virtue is to be found mainly with the Romans, and especially in the Roman historian Titus Livy, who narrates the deeds of the republican Romans. Because deeds take precedence over words, Rome has primacy over Greece and the historians over the philosophers. Machiavelli’s complaint against the Renaissance can be seen in his low opinion of Cicero, not a hero for him. Cicero used rhetoric to advance the cause of philosophy, a Greek discovery, in a Rome suspicious of the influence of Greek softness. Machiavelli accuses both rhetoric and philosophy of attempting to rule deeds with words, and he shows sympathy for Cato’s desire to rid Rome of foreign philosophy that corrupts the virtue of doers (*D III 1.3; FH 1*). He too objects to softness, the idleness or leisure (*ozio*) of contemplators, both philosophic and religious, who look down on doers.

Despite its literal meaning as the “rebirth” of something old, the Renaissance is better known as the beginning of something new that has come to be called modernity. It is doubtful that the Renaissance would have that meaning were it not for Machiavelli. For modernity is not merely something new but also a new idea that favors innovation in principle and constantly promotes new ideas and institutions—a change that wants to be receptive to further change. Whatever is modern does not stay the same but keeps becoming more modern. Such are Machiavelli’s “new modes and orders” in the *Discourses* and his new prince in *The Prince*. Nothing like Machiavelli’s encouragement of innovation as such, topped off with the proud advertisement of his own originality, can be found in other writers of his time or before. If they were original, they disguised it by claiming merely to return to the true origins of a institution or an idea in the past before the present rot set in—as, for example, Marsilius of Padua claimed to be restoring original Christianity in his criticism of the church.

Machiavelli’s claim of ancient virtue appears to have this character only at first glance. He praises ancient virtue in order to improve on it. He wants to free it from inhibitions placed on it by writers such as those who inconsiderately blamed Hannibal’s cruelty when in fact it was one of his infinite virtues (*P 18; D III 21.4, 40.1*). This is what he means when in the first preface to the *Discourses* he speaks of the “true knowledge of the histories” that is lacking in his time and is responsible for the failure of moderns to have recourse to ancient examples (*D I pr.2*). Ancient virtue, it turns out, needs Machiavellian interpretation to ensure that it is reported correctly. Even Livy, who is not the type to enthuse and philosophize about ancient virtue, and who is treated with such reverence by Machiavelli, needs at least occasionally, and perhaps generally, to be set right. Among other things, Livy did not properly appreciate the need for innovation; he did not see that the ancient virtue of actual Romans brought opportunity to new men to enter upon new enterprises and make new conquests. When examined, ancient virtue turns out to show little respect for things ancient. Those with virtue, like Machiavelli himself, characteristically act without any respect (*sanza alcuno rispetto*, one of his favorite phrases).

The Machiavellian interpretation transforms ancient virtue into virtue proper, Machiavellian virtue



At the same time it changes the Renaissance from a rebirth of the ancient into the dawn of the new, the modern. When Machiavelli speaks of the “moderns,” it is always with disrespect, as of the weak. He does not openly claim that the moderns can be stronger than the ancients, as Francis Bacon was to do. But he offers remedies for modern weakness that will have the effect of making the moderns stronger than the ancients. “Modernity” is the opinion that the moderns are, or can become, stronger than the ancients—that the moderns can benefit from an irreversible progress in their favor. Because of Machiavelli’s contribution to the transformation of the Renaissance into modernity, one can say with faithfulness to both him and his time that he did as much for the Renaissance as it did for him.

### THE *DISCOURSES ON LIVY* AND *THE PRINCE*

When we begin to examine Machiavelli’s remedies for modern weakness, we come upon an obvious difficulty that has been much discussed. Machiavelli is most famous today as the author of *The Prince*, a witty and attractive, proudly original, short and apparently easy, but wicked and dangerous book that advises princes on how to “seize absolute authority” (*P* 9) and to learn how not to be good to their subjects and friends—in short, to be criminally wicked tyrants. But Machiavelli has also been famous among devotees of republics as the author of the *Discourses*, which by contrast is a long, forbidding, apparently nostalgic, obviously difficult, but decent and useful book that advises citizen leaders, reformers, and founders of republics on how to order them to preserve their liberty and avoid corruption. The relation between the two books is notoriously obscure. How could two such books be written by the same man, apparently at more or less the same time?

*The Prince* appears from its first two chapters to be a dispassionate analysis of all kinds of principalities that does not include reasoning on republics only because its author has reasoned on them at length another time—that is, in the *Discourses*. But the reader soon perceives that its author recommends the imitation especially of what he calls “new princes,” private individuals who become princes of new states that they found. He emphasizes the most excellent and glorious examples of founders, such as Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus, but he does not seem to distinguish them much from ordinary tyrants, such as Hiero of Syracuse, or even from infamous and criminal tyrants such as Agathocles of Syracuse. Accordingly, he advises their imitators to come to power and rule by force and fraud.

In contrast, the *Discourses* not only includes reasoning about republics but recommends them over principalities. Machiavelli writes a chapter entitled “The Multitude Is Wiser and More Constant Than a Prince” in which he proclaims that peoples are more stable and have better judgment than princes and that their governments are better, and that the people are superior in goodness and glory (*D* I 58.3). He adds that republics keep their word better than princes and therefore can be trusted more than princes (*D* I 59). He also argues that the common good is observed only in republics, whereas usually what suits a prince hurts the city and what suits the city hurts him (*D* II 2.1). So he concludes that “a republic has greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality” (*D* III 9.2). The *Discourses* praises republican founders and their peoples for their goodness and virtue and their love of liberty, the fatherland, and the common good (*D* I 9.2, 58.3–4; II 2).

In perhaps the most famous passage in *The Prince*, with professed timidity but transparent pride, Machiavelli proclaims the work’s radical originality as he promises to go to the effectual truth and to ignore imaginary states. He attacks “the writers” whose inconsistent moralism allows them to admire great deeds but not the cruel acts necessary to accomplish them. He rejects the republics and principalities of the writers as imaginary because they recommend a kind of goodness and virtue that leads to ruin and they condemn virtues necessary for preservation, such as stinginess, cruelty, and faithlessness. Based on his acceptance of the “very natural and ordinary desire to acquire” as “necessity,” and the consequent “natural and ordinary necessity” to offend those whom or from whom

one acquires (*P* 3), Machiavelli in *The Prince* abandons the moral teachings of the classical and biblical traditions for a new conception of virtue as the willingness and ability to do whatever it takes to acquire and maintain what one has acquired.

Again, in contrast to the spirit of self-conscious innovation in *The Prince*, the *Discourses* is a sort of commentary on the first decade, or 10 books, of Livy's history of Rome (of which most of the other 132 books are lost and available to us only in summary form). Machiavelli says at the beginning that he writes only what he judges to be necessary for readers' greater understanding, as if he were merely an auxiliary to Livy and his book merely a supplement to Livy's (*D* I pr.2). In a spirit of apparent nostalgic antiquarianism, Machiavelli seems at first deferential toward ancient writers and content with trying to stimulate love and imitation of "the most virtuous works the histories show us, which have been done by ancient kingdoms and republics" (*D* I pr.2), so that the spirits of youths who may read his writings can flee their times and prepare themselves to imitate the times of the ancient Romans (*D* II pr.3).

The common opinion that *The Prince* is an innovative but wicked and tyrannical book, whereas the *Discourses* is an antiquarian and virtuous republican book, leaves us shocked and puzzled as to why Machiavelli should have written two such opposite books. Nonetheless, the view that the two books are opposed to each other, although based on obvious features of each of them, represents only part and not the whole of Machiavelli's intention. Neither book is as opposed to the other as first appears.

*The Prince* is not simply about princes or tyrants, and it does not endorse principalities or tyrannies over republics in the way that the *Discourses* recommends republics over principalities or tyrannies. Indeed, republican political philosophers such as Spinoza and Rousseau understood *The Prince* to be a secretly republican book.<sup>2</sup> What basis is there for such a judgment? Although Machiavelli says early in *The Prince* that he will not discuss republics, he soon puts forward, and later confirms, the Roman republic as the model for wise princes (*P* 2–5). Romulus, the founder and first king of Rome, is cited among the most excellent and glorious of new princes (*P* 6), but although a king, he is praised in the *Discourses* for laws establishing a free and civil way of life—for being the founder of a republic or protorepublic (*D* I 9.2, 18.5, 49.1; II 2.1; III 1.2). Moreover, since the new prince will want to maintain his state and his glory for a long life and even after his death, he will find that founding a republic is the best way to do so. He might first think of establishing a hereditary principality, which he would be succeeded by others of his bloodline. But enemies may eliminate not only him but also his bloodline, precisely so that they will not be menaced by the memory of his name. Republics do the same thing, and for good measure they also wipe out all hereditary nobility as hostile to the republic. But they revere their own founders. "In republics there is greater life, greater hatred, more desire for revenge; the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest" (*P* 5). Therefore, to avoid the pitfalls clearly brought into view, *The Prince* implicitly advises princes to found republics to perpetuate their states and their glory.

Just as *The Prince* is more republican than it first appears and than it is reputed to be according to the common opinion that the two books are opposed, so the *Discourses* is more princely or even tyrannical than it first appears and is reputed to be.

First of all, we should note that the *Discourses* is not addressed to peoples. It is addressed "above all" (that is to say, not only) to Machiavelli's friends Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai; and Machiavelli's dedicatory letter to the *Discourses* contrasts this choice of addressee with "the common usage of those who write, who are accustomed [the first word of the dedicatory letter to *The Prince*] always to address their works to some prince" and to flatter him. So as not to run into this error Machiavelli chooses to address "not those who are princes but those who for their infinite good part deserve to be." Thus Machiavelli seems in the dedicatory letter to the *Discourses* to attack *The Prince* or at least the dedicatory letter to *The Prince* addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici, or at least the view that

*The Prince* is simply dedicated or addressed to Lorenzo. Speaking to “those who know,” he seems in the mode of the classical political philosophers to prefer knowers to rulers and to regard the knowers as deserving to be rulers. But contrary to the classical mode, he addresses not mere knowers who deserve to be princes but knowers who may actually rise like Hiero to become prince and replace such incompetent rulers as Perseus or possibly Lorenzo. And Hiero, we should recall, is placed by Machiavelli in *The Prince* with the greatest examples of the founders Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus (P 6).

One of the early discourses is entitled “That It Is Necessary to Be Alone If One Wishes to Order a Republic Anew or to Reform It Altogether outside Its Ancient Orders” (D I 9). By “being alone” Machiavelli means that it is necessary for any ordering to depend on a single mind. In consequence he excuses the extraordinary actions of a founder or reformer, such as Romulus’s murder of his brother as necessary to achieve sole authority. Thus Machiavelli insists that precisely so as to order a republic it is necessary to have recourse to violent, one-man rule; too bad if others call it tyranny. He indeed warns that such a founder should take care not to leave his sole authority as an inheritance to another to whom it might be a bad example. His republic will last long only “if it remains in the care of many and its maintenance stays with many” (D I 9.2). Thus even and precisely one who is concerned with his own ambition should seek to perpetuate his state and his glory not through inheritance by single heirs who rule alone as he does but through a republic entrusted to the care of the many: one to order many to maintain. Republics need to be founded by something like tyrants to be well ordered; tyrants need to found something like republics to maintain their states and names.

The need of republics for something like tyranny is clarified later in book I when Machiavelli makes clear that his special interest is not in founding a new people but in liberating and keeping free a corrupt people. Such is the task relevant to his own historical situation, in which a new prince must remake, rather than make, everything anew. Part of the problem of perpetuating republics is that they have as partisan enemies those who benefit from tyranny but they do not have partisan friends (D I 16.3). The reasons are, first, that free republics give honors and rewards for merit, but those who receive what they deserve feel no obligation to those who reward them. And, second, the benefits of free life do not give rise to any sense of obligation: “For no one ever confesses that he has a obligation to one who does not offend him.” Neither those eager for rewards nor those desiring to be left alone will be partisan friends of a republic.

The problem with republics, in short, is that they are just. People do not appreciate being treated justly because that is something they think they deserve. The solution—and there is a solution—is for republics to behave less justly, more tyrannically, so that the benefits they confer and the security they provide will be more appreciated and better defended. In particular, to maintain its freedom, a new free people must “kill the sons of Brutus”—that is, engage in acts of violence that make examples of the enemies of freedom. Ensuring that the violence sets an example is more important than doing legally. Indeed, illegal violence is all the more impressive. Machiavelli informs us of the tyrannical character of this solution in the digression immediately following, in which he gives similar advice to “princes who have become tyrants of their fatherlands” (D I 16.5).

Machiavelli knows that readers like ourselves who believe in justice will find this advice difficult to accept. He sometimes prepares us to accept the ordinarily unacceptable means he recommends by saying that a desired goal is impossible, then that it is very difficult, and finally that this is the means to achieve it. So he says, “One should presuppose as a thing very true that a corrupt city that lives under a prince, can never be turned into a free one, even if that prince is eliminated along with all his line” (D I 17.1). Almost immediately he adds, “unless indeed the goodness of one individual, together with virtue, keeps it free,” only apparently to retract that offer by warning that such freedom will last only as long as the life of that individual. It would be impossible to have “one man of such long life

to have enough time to inure to good a city that has been inured to bad for a long time.” Yet Machiavelli again opens up a way to the cure of corruption arising from inequality. That is to create equality by using “the greatest extraordinary means, which few know how or wish to use.”

Finally, in the next chapter, Machiavelli explains that it is very difficult to maintain a free state in corrupt cities and “almost impossible to give a rule for it” (*D I 18.1*). Even Rome eventually succumbed to corruption because once the Romans had subdued their enemies, the Roman people no longer had regard for virtue. To have maintained Rome free it would have been necessary to change not only its laws but its orders—that is, its fundamental institutions or constitution. Such fundamental reordering, Machiavelli says, is “almost impossible.” It must be done “little by little” by “someone prudent” before the problem is recognized by everyone, in which case he will never be able to persuade anyone else of what he understands. Or it must be done “at a stroke,” when the problem is easily recognized but difficult to correct. For to do this, Machiavelli argues, it is not enough to use ordinary or legal means, “since the ordinary modes are bad; but it is necessary to go to the extraordinary, such as violence and arms, and before everything else become prince of that city, able to dispose it in one’s own mode” (*D I 18.4*). This is difficult or impossible, and Machiavelli tells us why with wonderful clarity:

Because the reordering of a city for a political way of life presupposes a good man, and becoming prince of a republic by violence presupposes a bad man, one will find that it very rarely happens that someone good wishes to become prince by bad ways, even though his end be good, and that someone wicked, having become prince, wishes to work well, and that it will ever occur to his mind to use well the authority that he has acquired badly.

No one could put better the moral contradiction at the heart of Machiavelli’s marriage of tyranny and republicanism. Nonetheless, he concludes that to create or maintain a republic in a corrupt city, it is necessary to turn it more toward a kingly state than toward a popular one.

The discussion in the *Discourses* of ordering and maintaining liberty in a corrupt city (*D I 16–18*) makes clear the dependence of republican ends on tyrannical means. It also reveals Machiavelli’s apparent indifference to whether these good ends achieved through bad means result from good men willing to use bad means or from bad men willing to seek good ends, as if there were no effectual difference between them. It indicates that the need for such means and for such men arises not only once at the founding or beginning but repeatedly for maintaining, reforming, or refounding. Machiavelli takes the point further when he argues that in Rome new causes cropped up *every day* for which it had to make new orders or new provisions to maintain freedom (*D I 49.1*; *III 49.1*).

In a famous chapter, he says that if a republic is to be maintained, it must often be led back toward its beginnings (*D III 1*). Leading it back toward the beginnings, Machiavelli explains, means restoring esteem for virtue through some terrifying external danger, through the virtue of a citizen who carries out “excessive and notable” executions that remind men of punishment and renew fear in their spirits, or alternatively through “the simple virtue of one man” who acts outside the law. Nor is it only at the beginning that one man may need to be alone; recall that Machiavelli earlier declared that it is necessary to be alone if one wants either “to order a republic anew or to reform it altogether outside its ancient orders” (*D I 9 T*). For one citizen to be alone it is necessary first to eliminate the envy of those who might get in his way (*D III 30*). This can be done either through some “strong and difficult accident” that makes everyone run voluntarily to cooperate—that is, obey—or through the deaths of the envious. The one citizen may be so lucky as to have the envious die naturally, or he may have to think of a way of removing them. And Machiavelli adds that whoever reads the Bible judiciously will see that Moses took the latter option: he “was forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans” (*D III 30.1*). The need for continual refounding involves republics in a continual dependence on princely or tyrannical men and princely or tyrannical means.

Machiavelli’s mixture of republicanism and tyranny in the *Discourses* refutes the decer-



republican opinion that the *Discourses* is a decent, republican book as opposed to the wicked, tyrannical *Prince*. On the contrary, Machiavelli's critique of classical and biblical morality and religion appears in the *Discourses* as well as in *The Prince*, and it is meant to liberate not only the rulers of principalities but also republics or their leaders, whom Machiavelli frequently and disconcertingly refers to as princes.

Even Machiavelli's endorsement of republics over principalities in the *Discourses* reveals the princely or tyrannical elements in his republicanism. While he declares that two virtuous princes in succession are sufficient to acquire the world, he adds that a republic should do more, since it has through election not only two but infinite virtuous princes who succeed one another (*D I 20*). The advantage of a republic is not that it takes government out of the hands of princes but precisely that election provides "infinite most virtuous princes." And in the place where Machiavelli says that a republic has greater life and more lasting good fortune than a principality, he claims that this is because republics can accommodate themselves to the times by choosing which of those citizens they employ as princely leaders (*D II 9*). Where he says that "a people is more prudent, more stable, and has better judgment than a prince," he also refers to republics as "cities where peoples are princes" and ends up repeating the formula of one to order, many to maintain (*D I 58.3*). In the chapter in which he explains the affection of peoples for the free or republican way of life, he relies on the fact that "it is seen through experience that cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom" (*D II 2.1*). And the argument there that the "common good is not observed if not in republics" depends on the view that the common good is the good of the many, which may "turn out to harm this or that private individual" and go "against the disposition of the few crushed by it." The common good of republics is not the "common benefit to everyone" (*D I pr.1*) to which Machiavelli himself claims to be devoted. In the same discourse we learn that an important part of the reason why people love republics more than principalities is that all those who dwell in them can believe that their children can grow up to be princes through their virtue.

In sum, just as *The Prince* is more republican than it seems, so the *Discourses* is more princely, and through its mixture of tyranny and republicanism it is also more critical of classical and biblical morality and thereby more original than it seems.

## REPUBLICANISM ANCIENT AND MODERN

The tyranny in Machiavelli's republicanism gives it an original character and new features that catch the eye of every reader. The change in character comes out in a comparison with the classic republican of the ancient philosophers, of whom we may choose Aristotle as a representative. Aristotle was the dominant figure—in either the foreground or the background—of the political science of Machiavelli's time. His notions are behind the humanist republicanism of Machiavelli's predecessors in the office of Florentine secretary, Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni, whose works set the republican norm for the Italian Renaissance. But the contrast will be more clear if we look at Aristotle himself.

Aristotle's republic is the *politeia*, a word that can also be translated "constitution" or "regime." The regime is the rule of the whole city (*polis*) by a part, and it can be by one, few, or many (though rule by one is hardly a fixed regime). Thus there are several regimes but typically two that are always in competition: those of the few and of the many. These parts rule or want to rule on the basis of claims they advance or professions they avow about contributions they make to the whole—for example, the outstanding competence of the few versus the freedom and collective judgment of the many. Aristotle as political scientist judges these claims and finds them only partially true, hence a partisan. He sets up a discussion between the parties (especially in books III and IV of his *Politics*), and the intended or hoped for result is a mixed regime that combines the partisan virtues and

persuades each party to recognize that it gains from the other. Although the argument refers to power and self-interest, it consists essentially in persuading political men to act their best. Hence Aristotle's mixed regime is very unlikely or impossible; it exists so as to be realized only in part or by degree and to serve as a model for the end and manner of reform or progress in politics. Since the true nonpartisan mixed regime does not exist and cannot be brought into being, every actual regime remains partisan and retains a measure of tyranny.

In Aristotle, the tyrannical element in a republic stands for its lapses from perfection, but Machiavelli, tyranny is used precisely to the contrary—to make a republic perfect. Machiavelli praises the Roman republic for being among those republics that, although not perfectly ordered at the beginning, had a good enough beginning so that through the occurrence of accidents they might become “perfect” (*D I 2.1*). These eventually perfect republics—numerous enough that the Roman example appears to be only one example—are contrasted with others, such as the Spartan, whose laws and orders are given all at once, “at a stroke,” by one alone. Machiavelli speaks freely of perfection not so much, perhaps, to make it seem common as to make it seem attainable. And in giving preference to Rome's accidental perfection because it is more flexible than that of Sparta's one-time classic legislator Lycurgus, he shows again that tyranny—the rule of *uno solo*—works well, or best, in the context of a republic.

Machiavelli, like Aristotle, begins from the few and the many, but he treats them very differently. For him they are not two parties making characteristically contrasting claims to rule (oligarchy versus democracy) but “two diverse humors,” also called “desires,” that are not sufficiently rational to be called claims or opinions (*D I 4–5*). The great or the nobles have a “great desire to dominate,” and the people or the ignoble have “only desire not to be dominated” (*D I 5.2*). In reinterpreting the popular claim to rule as the desire not to be dominated, Machiavelli prepares the way for democracy and even republicanism to become liberal. “Don't tread on me!” is the theme of popular feeling that Machiavelli underscores. From this description we see that for Machiavelli, contrary to Aristotle, only one side wants to rule. Each side sees only its own necessity—to rule or not to be ruled—and does not understand, respectively, those who do not care to rule or those whose natures insist on it. Those who want glory despise those who want security, and the latter fear and hate the former.

Because of their fundamental difference of desire and inevitable mutual misunderstanding, conflict between the two humors cannot be mediated by words. The clash between them is “tumult,” a word Machiavelli uses repeatedly to underscore the irrational noisiness of politics (*D I 4–6*). The first of the new features of Machiavelli's political science is his rejection of the traditional condemnation of the tumults between the nobles and the plebs in Rome (a tradition that included Livy, Machiavelli's supposed mentor in things Roman). Those who condemn that disunion blame the very thing that was the first cause of keeping Rome free (*D I 4.1*). Machiavelli was the first political philosopher to endorse party conflict as useful and good, even if partisan tactics are often not respectable. In doing so he accepts both the “tyrannical” desire to dominate and the “republican” desire not to be dominated and shows how they can be made to cooperate.

Machiavelli approves of the Roman law on “accusation,” another novelty of his political science (*D I 7–8*). That law permitted any citizen to accuse another of ambition and the accused to defend himself, with both accusation and defense to be made before the people. The advantage of such a law or “order,” is in allowing the people to vent the ill humor it harbors toward the whole government or toward the class of nobles against one individual, whose punishment satisfies the people and excuses everyone else. Machiavelli does not worry about the possible injustice of the procedure, as did Aristotle in his qualified defense of ostracism, the democratic practice in his day of exiling outstanding, and possibly dangerous, individuals from the city. Machiavelli will cheerfully sacrifice one of the princely types in order to save the rest. He does not waste time deploring the personal abu-

characteristic of popular government at its worst; he turns it to account. The business of republics is not so much positive legislation to benefit the people as the negative exchange of accusations that entertains the people. While making use of ambitious princes, republics must take care to appease the popular fear and dislike of ambition.

A principal use of princely types by republics is as dictators in emergencies (*D I 33.1*). Still, Machiavelli approves of the Roman practice of giving power to one man to act in such situations without consultation and without appeal. His endorsement contrasts sharply with the discomfort of ancient writers, who regard it as an embarrassment to the Roman republic and who play it down (Livy), assimilate it to kingship (Cicero), denounce it as deceit of the Senate against the people (Dionysius of Halicarnassus), or pass it over in silence (Polybius).<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli thus begins the willing acceptance of dictatorship that is shared by later modern philosophers such as Jean Bodin and Karl Marx, not to mention the republican Rousseau. He does not oppose the dictators to the democracies, as was done in democratic rhetoric during the Second World War, but regards them as compatible and mutually useful, provided that the dictatorship is limited in tenure (*D I 34*). The dictator answers to the defects in whatever is customary or “ordinary” in useful republican procedures; he serves as a reminder of both the danger and the necessity of “extraordinary modes.” When unforeseen accidents occur, republics need a regular way to act irregularly. The dictatorship allows the republic to benefit from “this kingly power” without having a king. Or is the dictator a tyrant? Machiavelli struggles to sustain the difference between dictator and tyrant, but it is not clear that he succeeds or even wants to succeed (*D I 34*).

The need for tyranny in republics brings Machiavelli to question the value and viability of constitutions. Constitutions give visible order to political arrangements so as to make clear what is done in public as distinct from private activities. For a prince who dominates his state, public and private are virtually the same; but for a republic, the distinction is crucial. If the people are to govern or at least control the government, they must be able to see, through formal and regular institutions, what the government is doing in their name. So, as Machiavelli indicates, founding a republic centers on its *ordering* (*D I 2, 9*). But he also stresses that political orders are not enough and do not last. Orders must be accompanied by “modes” of political activity that give effect to the orders, interpret them, manipulate them. The *Discourses* is full of examples to illustrate how institutions (as we may speak of Machiavelli’s “orders”) are actually made use of; one of the best is the story of Pacuvius’ manipulation of the people (*D I 47.2*). The book is far from a treatise on the constitutional structure of republics, since such a work would easily acquire a normative character and would come to resemble the study of an imaginary republic (*P 15*). Machiavelli promises to bring “new modes and orders” in the plural (*D I pr.1*), not a single new “constitution.” Although he occasionally uses the word *costituzione*, his use is not in a comprehensive sense; in the *Discourses* he does not use the word *regime*, which would call to mind *politeia*, the Greek word for “constitution” that was extensively defined by Aristotle.

Here again Machiavelli is hostile to Aristotle’s republicanism, and he also seems to offer a challenge to liberal constitutionalism, to the regime of modern liberty as opposed to ancient virtue with which we live today. In his complex presentation he says that the regular orders of a republic, which give rise to “ordinary modes” of behavior, need to be distinguished from “extraordinary modes” that go beyond ordinary bounds, lest the republic succumb to a tyrant. Yet at the same time, because of unforeseen accidents or the motion of human things (*D I 6.4*), as we have seen, the orders need to be revived by extraordinary modes—above all, by sensational executions. What is ordinary is defined against the extraordinary and yet depends on it. And this is simply to restate the paradox, for Machiavelli, that a republic must be both opposed and receptive to tyranny. To preserve its liberty it must stand by its laws and its constitution; to survive, it must be willing to forego them. Thus the

distinctions between ordinary and extraordinary, public and private, republic and tyranny, must be simultaneously defended and surrendered.

The chief of the extraordinary modes is, as noted, the sensational execution. The law must be visibly, and therefore impressively, executed. An impressive execution is not necessarily a legal one. In fact, an execution draws more attention if it is illegal, and illegality also shows more spirit in the one who executes. For Machiavelli specifies that executions should be seen to be done by one individual, as opposed to Aristotle's preference for a committee that would dissipate the responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli's emphasis on execution—in the double sense of “carrying out” and “punishing capitally”—could be said to make him the author of modern executive power. A strong executive is a vital feature of modern republics today, distinguishing them from ancient republics, in which such a power would have been considered too monarchical. The toleration for so much one-man rule in regimes so proud to be democracies may owe something to Machiavelli's argument in the *Discourses*, however far it may seem from us.

Another new element in Machiavelli's political science is his recommendation of fraud and conspiracy. His chapter on conspiracy (*D* III 6), by far the longest in the *Discourses* and a veritable book within the book, is a definite four-star attraction. For the first time in the history of political philosophy, one finds a discussion not of the *justice* of conspiracy but of the *ways and means*. Instead of disputing whether it is just to conspire against a tyrant, Machiavelli shows how to conduct conspiracy against either a republic or a tyranny; and, as if this were not enough, he shows governments how to conspire against peoples. Conspiracy, of course, requires fraud, and Machiavelli is not embarrassed to praise those who excel in fraud and to promote them as models for republics as well as princes (*D* II 13; III 41). The necessity of fraud, one can see, is contained in Machiavelli's description of the two humors in all states, one desiring to dominate and the other not to be dominated. Since government is domination, those who do not desire it must necessarily be fooled into accepting it—which is fraud. Election is one principal method: while the people are choosing who is to govern them, they forget their desire not to be governed at all; for injuries one chooses for oneself hurt less than those imposed by someone else (*D* I 34.4).

The last item deserving notice in our survey of Machiavelli's republicanism is the discussion of corruption that runs through the *Discourses*. He seems to praise traditional republican virtue by noting that when public spirit is absent, republics become corrupt and fall victim to tyrants. That conclusion would imply a connection between moral virtue and political success. It would suggest that republican peoples will be rewarded for their self-sacrifice by the survival and prosperity of their republics (*D* 55) and that the most efficacious means to success is education in virtue. But in fact, when examined closely, Machiavelli's discussion of corruption proves to be another novelty of his political science and not in accord with the fond hope of moral people that morality brings success.

A quick look at what Machiavelli has to say about Julius Caesar, the tyrant who put an end to the Roman republic, will make the point. It will also illustrate the turns of Machiavelli's rhetoric and the necessity of finding his opinion by comparing all his statements rather than accepting just one following only one tendency of his argument. We first encounter Caesar in a chapter that contrasts the founders of a republic or kingdom, who are praiseworthy, with the blameworthy founders of a tyranny (*D* I 10). In that contrast there is said to be a “choice between the two qualities of men”: the detestable Caesar, who desired to possess a corrupt city in order to spoil it, and Romulus, who founded a republic and reordered it. Then Machiavelli establishes that the Rome of the early republic, even of the Tarquins, was not corrupt, although it was very corrupt under Caesar (*D* I 17.1). But in a discussion of ingratitude in a republic, he says that Caesar “took for himself by force what ingratitude denied him,” implying that Caesar's services deserved to be rewarded by tyranny and that the Roman people in the corruption denied it to him (*D* I 29.3)! Caesar is pronounced to be the “first tyrant in Rome” (*D*



37.2), and in the chapter on conspiracies he is cited as one who conspired against his fatherland (*D I* 6.18–19). At last, however, in a chapter on how Rome made itself a slave by prolonging military commands, Caesar is presented as a beneficiary of a chain of necessary consequences (*D III* 24). As Rome expanded, its armies went further afield and its captains needed a longer tenure of command which gave them the opportunity of gaining the army over to themselves. Such an opportunity bound to be seized, sooner or later, by an ambitious prince. And we have already learned that the Roman republic had no choice but to expand, because the motion of human things requires that a state either expand or decline (*D I* 6.4). A Caesar waits in the future of every successful republic.

Thus, corruption is not a moral failing but, in a people, the necessary consequence of republican virtue and, in a prince, the necessity of his nature. Machiavelli reiterates that one must judge politics and morals “according to the times.” He inaugurates what is today called “situational ethics” as a mode of moral judgment more convenient than his high-minded speech of “corruption” first promises. If this quick study of Caesar is not the whole view of Machiavelli on corruption, it is at least a part often unremarked, and the reverse of what one expects from a republican partisan. It is surely not a whole view of Machiavelli’s Caesar, the man who both furthered Rome and brought it to an end.

Machiavelli’s treatment of corruption is of a piece with the other disturbing novelties of his republicanism—the praise and promotion of tumult, imperialism, dictatorship, fear, fraud, and conspiracy. His talk of “corruption” is more an excuse for tyranny than an accusation against it, and signifies rather a surrender to necessity than moral resistance to its apparent dictates. Machiavelli does not abandon moral language; he speaks confidently of both “virtue” and “corruption.” Characteristically, he does not depart from the common speech of political actors; he does not try to teach us new terms—such as “power,” “legitimacy,” and “decision making”—with a scientific or neutral, amoral content. To this extent he stays with the method of Aristotle and with the ancient philosophers of ancient virtue. But he interprets common speech in a new way and uses the good old words in disconcerting and thought-provoking ways of his own. He tries to show that to understand political situations correctly, one must not listen to the intent of the words people use but rather look at the necessities they face. The prince must adjust his words to his deeds, not the other way around. Most people do not or cannot accept that necessity—a failing that is *their* necessity. They will continue in their moralizing habits because they are too weak to face a world in which necessity decides. Machiavelli’s use of “corruption” reflects both the permanence of the moral attitude he rejects and his way of getting around it.

### MACHIAVELLI’S CRITICISM OF CHRISTIANITY

What moved Machiavelli to take the grave step of recommending the mutual accommodation of tyranny and republics, thus changing both republican morality and republican politics? The answer lies in Machiavelli’s view of his own time: the moderns are weak, the ancients were strong. The moderns are so called by Machiavelli because they are formed by Christianity—just the opposite of our usage for which modernity is a departure from, or at least a secular modification of, Christianity. But Machiavelli is not ready to praise modernity until it is ready to follow him. At the beginning of the *Discourses* he criticizes “the weakness into which the present religion has led the world” and the evil that “ambitious idleness” has done to Christian countries (*D I* pr.2). Somehow the Christian church and religion stand in the way of the recovery of ancient virtue and ancient republicanism, but it is unclear why their presence compels the comprehensive innovations we have noted in the *Discourses* as opposed to a mere reassertion of the ancient ways in the manner of the humanists, a since the Renaissance. What precisely are the evils of Christianity, and what is Machiavelli’s remedy?

The amazingly bold criticisms of Christianity in three of the *Discourses* (*D I* 12; II 2.2; III 1.1) surely count among the sites in this work not to be missed by the conscientious tourist. The criticism

do not seem to be made from a single point of view, however, and despite their boldness they are difficult to interpret as the more hidden treasures of the *Discourses*. At first it appears that Machiavelli's objection is only to the church, because it has kept Italy weak and disunited (*D I 12*). The church is not strong enough by itself to unify Italy, but it is too strong to let any other power do so (see also *FH I 9*). If one combines this passage with Machiavelli's ferocious suggestion to kill the pope and "all the cardinals" (*D I 27*), he seems to be an anticlerical critic aiming at a kind of Protestant reform, or possibly even a partisan of original Christianity. His objection applies in Italy, not in France or Spain, where unified states have been attained despite the church.

The picture changes when we encounter a direct attack on Christianity, not just on corruption in the church. "Our religion" is said to esteem less the honor of the world than does the religion of the Gentiles; it glorifies humble and contemplative men more than active ones, an attitude that has made the world "effeminate" and "disarmed" heaven (*D II 2*). Returning to the possibility of reform, Machiavelli concludes by saying that the present religion needs to be interpreted according to virtue, not idleness, but the preceding discussion has made clear that Machiavelli's preferred kinds of worldly glory and virtue were incompatible with Christianity, however interpreted.

In the third passage on Christianity, Machiavelli considers it as a "sect," a collectivity made by human beings that needs to be renewed periodically by being drawn back toward its beginning, as was done by Saint Francis and Saint Dominick (*D III 1.4*). Here original Christianity is apparently accepted by Machiavelli as the true Christianity but still found wanting because it becomes corrupt over time and needs renewal. Elsewhere Machiavelli, speaking explicitly of the "Christian sect," gives it a variable life span of between 1666 and 3000 years and attributes to it a human rather than a heavenly origin; and he adopts the opinion of the philosophers, opposed by the Bible, that the world is eternal (*D II 5.1*). But to understand Christianity as a sect like any other sect is to deny its divinity, together with that of the other sects, so here Machiavelli comes out an atheist. If one looks also at his discourses on the religion of the Romans, Machiavelli shows an appreciation for the political utility, not the truth, of the pagan religion. He allows that the orderers of religions are praised above founders of states (*D I 9.1, 10.1, 11.2*), and he says that after Romulus founded Rome, the heavens inspired Numa Pompilius to make it religious (*D I 12.1*). Religion enabled the Senate to manipulate the people in carrying out its enterprises, a function implying that the nobles or princes who manipulate religion do not believe, unlike the people who are manipulated (*D I 14*). Nor does Machiavelli express a consistent opinion on the importance of religion. After praising Numa's religion as "altogether necessary" for keeping Rome quiet and civilized (*D I 11.1*), he soon after drastically demotes both Numa and religion, saying that Numa himself was "quiet and religious" while lacking in virtue dependent on that of his predecessor Romulus (*D I 19.1*).

However all this adds up, we should note that Machiavelli's view of Christianity is not so negative as the boldness of his criticism suggests. After all, the supposedly strong ancients were spiritually overcome by the supposedly weak moderns. He certainly says, despite his apparent atheism, that Christianity shows "the truth and the true way" (*D II 2.2*). But Christianity might *show* the truth without being itself that truth. By imitating the life of Christ, Christian priests gain credit with the people and, says Machiavelli in memorable words, "give them to understand that it is evil to say evil of evil" (*D III 1.4*). So priests do evil and "do not fear the punishment that they do not see and do not believe." But there seems to be admiration in this denunciation. Machiavelli, who does not blink at Romulus's act of killing his brother in order to be alone, can hardly be objecting to the rule of priests as the rule of evil. Precisely if Machiavelli, like the priests, does not fear punishment in the afterlife, he must have been interested in the modes of manipulating those who do fear it, or who believe they do. It is no accident that the mode of renewing republics by the sensational execution (*D III 1.3*) bears a strange resemblance to the central mystery of the "Christian sect."

And this is perhaps not the only mode of political maneuver that Machiavelli learned from the priests and the church as exemplars of spiritual warfare. Machiavelli quotes the Bible only once in the *Discourses* (*D* I 26), and when he does, he makes a manifest blunder (see *D* III 48), attributing to David an action of God's (thus also mistaking a very familiar passage from the New Testament for one from the Old). It was God, not David, "who filled the poor with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53), the action of a new prince who makes everything anew in his state. It is God, then, who in this instance serves as Machiavelli's model of a new prince, or of what authors call a "tyrant" (*D* I 25), who may also be the founder of a tyrannical republic, or the bringer of the new modes and orders that make such republics possible. Just when Machiavelli by implication calls the Christian God a tyrant, he also indicates that he is paying his greatest compliment. His blasphemous disclosure discloses his appreciation, for it amounts to an appropriation of Christianity to the benefit of mankind.

To answer the question of why Machiavelli felt it necessary to change ancient virtue, we return to the criticism of Christianity in which he blames it for creating "ambitious idleness" (*D* I pr.2) and for being interpreted according to leisure and not virtue (*D* II 2.2). Idleness, or leisure (as *ozio* can also be translated), is the contrary of virtue in Machiavelli's view. For Aristotle, leisure (*scholē*) was the very condition of the virtuous. Machiavelli directs his venomous criticism of idleness against not only the priests but also the gentlemen (*D* I 55.4), who were the bearers of worldly honor according to the ancients. Thus, it is not enough to recover the honor of this world against Christian humility if honor is still to be found in high-minded leisure. Leisure makes republics either effeminate or divided, both (*D* I 6.4; II 20, 25.1); the idle or the leisurely are included among the enemies of the human race (*D* I 10.1). Machiavelli puts *necessity* over leisure as the concern of the legislator (*D* I 1.4–5). He wants men to seek that worldly honor—or, better to say, glory—that is consistent with vigorous devotion to answering one's necessities. However much ancient virtue and Christian virtue are divided over worldly honor, they are together in their high-minded rejection of motives arising from necessity and, in general, of the acquisitive life. Both find the highest type—philosopher or saint—in one who puts the contemplative life over politics and who thus could not be described as a "new prince." Machiavelli's highest type.

To conclude the point: in order to oppose Christian weakness, Machiavelli felt he had to transform ancient virtue. His studious concentration on necessity compelled him to turn his back on classical nobility because it was involved with, and perhaps inevitably gave way to, its apparent opposite—Christian humility. After human excellence has been elevated to divine perfection, honoring the best is easily translated into humbling oneself before the divine. From his rejection of nobility follow both the democratic and the manipulative policies Machiavelli recommends to republics. Since he opposes both nobles and noble scruples, he can indulge popular resentment against gentlemen, and he can do so with fraudulent strategems.

### MACHIAVELLI THE PHILOSOPHER?

Machiavelli does not appear to be a philosopher, and there are some scholars bold enough to assure us that he was not. His books are devoted to "worldly things"—that is, human things—and they do not sustain philosophic themes, if "philosophic" is understood to mean supraworldly interests. Machiavelli speaks explicitly of philosophers only three times in the *Discourses* (*D* I 56; II 5.1; II 12.1), and he mentions Plato and Aristotle only once each (*D* III 6.16, 26.2). Among philosophers he prefers the more political. He speaks much more often of "writers" and "historians," and in the *Discourses*, next to Livy, he mentions Xenophon the most often. At the beginning of the *Discourses* he blames the weakness of the modern world not on bad philosophy but on "not having a true knowledge of histories" (*D* I pr.2).

Nonetheless—to borrow Machiavelli's frequent expression for turning back on his argument—

philosophy lurks everywhere in his work behind the scenes in which politics plays out its lesson. Although Machiavelli may look like a disorderly essayist, he gained the attention of the greatest modern philosophers from Bacon on. They recognized that a philosopher cannot reflect on the highest themes without thinking about the conditions of his thought, which are, broadly speaking, political. So it is not unphilosophical for a philosopher to take note of the politics of his time and therewith the politics of any time, the *nature* of politics. Political philosophy is a necessary, not an accidental interest of the philosopher. At times of grave emergency, his interest in politics might have to become a preoccupation. In such circumstances he might have to narrow his focus from the nonhuman to the human, particularly if the emergency consists in too much concern for the superhuman. Philosophy, this picture of Machiavelli's view, might then with reason cease to be the theme of the philosopher. For Machiavelli, the philosophy of his time—whether it was lingering medieval Aristotelianism or Renaissance Platonism—was on more or less friendly terms with Christianity, and it was so involved in compromise with a difficult partner that it could not keep the distance necessary for attack or for reform.

Yet if philosophers are preoccupied with politics, they must also of course be concerned with what is beyond politics. This is all the more true with a thinker such as Machiavelli, who expects such great results from the “remedies” he proposes. In the same place at the beginning of the *Discourses* where he criticizes the lack of true knowledge of histories, he says that people judge it impossible to imitate the ancients, as if heaven, the sun, the elements, and men themselves had changed from what they were in antiquity (*D I* pr.2). But according to the Bible, human beings and their relation to heaven *were* changed by the coming of God into the world. The natural world is subject to supernatural supervision and intervention: such was the dominant opinion in Machiavelli's time, which he had to confront. The authority of Christianity stood in the way of his political project of reviving ancient virtue. So, like every philosopher, but in his own way and with fierce determination, he found it necessary to reassert the integrity of nature against those who provide authoritative opinions reassuring to the people and convenient for their own domination. “It is good to reason about everything,” Machiavelli says inconspicuously in a dependent clause (*D I* 18.1). But reasoning about everything is the mark of a philosopher.

For Machiavelli, the assertion of nature required the defense of this world against the claims of the next world. His defense in turn required a rediscovery of nature, a reformulation of the classical view. Despite his concentration on politics, he was led after all into the themes of nature, fortune, and necessity for which he is famous. These are the nonpolitical considerations necessary to his politics because they concern the limits of what politics can attain. They also represent the humanly and politically relevant aspect of what is nonhuman in appearance or origin. Machiavelli is not so much interested in nature itself as in how “nature” appears to most people; similarly, he cares little for God but much for religion, the human view of God. The reason for his politicized treatment is not difficult to find. Machiavelli attempts to show that human beings can control what previous philosophers thought uncontrollable and what religion leaves in the hands of God.

The question of the limits of politics comes up in the very first chapter, in which Machiavelli debates how much a legislator can choose and how much is determined by necessity. The answer proves to be that the legislator can expand his choice by choosing what he will sooner or later find to be necessary; he must *anticipate* necessity. Any other policy leaves him dependent on good fortune which he cannot count on. Then Machiavelli turns to the cycle of regimes, a theme of classical but not of modern political science (*D I* 2.2–4). Here is another much-visited site in the *Discourses*. According to the classical cycle of regimes, they do not develop progressively (as is assumed in what we call “political development”) but rather revolve in a circle in which bad regimes succeed good, and good succeed bad. The cycle implies that politics cannot achieve any permanent or irreversible

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