

The Ethical Dimensions of Machiavellian Statecraft: A Critical Analysis of Princely Governance

Aritra Banerjee

Department of English and Literary Studies at Brainware University, Barasat, India.

Email: aab.hu@brainwareuniversity.ac.in

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Abstract

Niccolò Machiavelli's political theories in *The Prince (Il Principe)* and *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* extend beyond politics and ethics, resonating in the fields of society, culture, and anthropology. Renowned for its brutal and pragmatic political strategies, *The Prince* has significantly influenced discussions on diplomacy, history, and strategic warfare. Machiavelli's philosophy has permeated republican ideologies throughout the Atlantic world and impacted the American constitution, with his thoughts on autocratic rule influencing figures from Benito Mussolini to Antonio Gramsci. The central debates concerning his political stance and ethical perspectives remain unresolved. Contrary to views that *The Prince* is merely a satire on fifteenth-century Italian politics, it is a pivotal work that has guided individuals in their pursuit of societal advancement. Machiavelli's shift from individual ethical concerns to the state's interests marks a key development in Renaissance political theory. His conception of the state as an entity distinct from individual morality introduced a new dimension of political reasoning and anthropological insight into successful princely qualities. Machiavelli's unique brand of political realism, shaped by Florentine diplomacy and debates on liberty and national security, prefigures the modern nation-state. Critics argue that his separation of politics from ethics established an autonomy of politics, leading to 'pure politics'. This paper examines Machiavelli's advocacy for effective action over moral action in governance, investigates contemporary influences on his work, and explores ongoing ethical inquiries in political thought.

Keywords: Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, political realism, ethical governance, Renaissance political theory, republican ideology, state vs. individual, Florentine diplomacy, autonomy of politics, effective action.

“Many Princes, both in antiquity and in modern times, have wanted nothing more than to be feared and have believed that nothing is more useful than fear and cruelty in maintaining their power ... In fact, nothing is farther from the truth than these opinions; rather it is much more

advantageous to be loved than to be feared ...”¹

Petrarch, *Rules for the Successful Ruler* (c. 1350)

“If you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved. For it is a good

¹ Francesco Petrarca, “How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State” (c. 1350), trans. Benjamin G. Kohl in *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government*

and *Society*, Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt eds. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 35

general rule about men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain."²

Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1513)

I

Niccolo Machiavelli's political contentions in *The Prince* (*Il Principe*) and *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* have found resonance in specific problems not just related to politics and ethics, but also in the study of society, culture and anthropology. A revolutionary tract renowned for its radically brutal and ruthless politics, *The Prince* has notably contributed to discourses on diplomacy, history and principles of strategic warfare. In the history of political thought, Machiavelli's philosophy has infiltrated republican ideology throughout the Atlantic world and has also manifested itself in the American constitution.³ His commentary on the political significance of one-man rule has further influenced thinkers ranging from Benito Mussolini to Antonio Gramsci. The central issues, however, pertaining to the nature of his political attitude and his overall ethical outlook are still under consideration and yet to be completely resolved, even though the possibility of arriving at such a conclusion seems unlikely. It would be unfair to suggest that Machiavelli was ambiguous in regard to his political reasoning, or, for that matter, to conclude, as some have, that, *The Prince* is nothing more than a satire on the society and politics of fifteenth-century Italy.⁴ *The Prince* is an endearing work dealing with a particular set of political circumstances based on which individuals throughout history have acted upon, albeit differently, in order to advance their position in

society, with either satisfactory or contradictory results.

In his concern for the 'state' (*Res publica*), Machiavelli marks a departure from the tradition of an individual's concern with ethical ends and personal morality to a prince's concern for his state. This is the fundamental political renovation ushered in by renaissance political theory – a decisive shift in emphasis from the 'individual' to the 'state'. The state, for Machiavelli, becomes a new entity outwardly lacking an ethical dimension, and whose interests are different from that of the individual. The ethics of princely rule, therefore, is concerned not just with theorizing a new brand of political reasoning, but also encompasses an anthropological insight into the very qualities deemed to have been maintained by historically successful rulers who were able to effectively and efficiently manage their state or principedom. These qualities are further, indispensable for those who wish to partake in similar success.

Machiavelli's vision of ancient history and his endorsements of the lessons of history is estimated to have conceptualised not the first, but probably his unique brand of political realism. His concern with Florentine diplomacy at the turn of the fifteenth-century along with the more thoughtful debates on the subjects of liberty, ancient privileges, and the security of his country contributed to his vision of articulating a political entity similar to the modern nation-state. Additionally, his concern with how an individual who wishes to achieve a certain set of political ends should act in order to attain them effectively, has led critics to claim that he stimulated a radical

² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, edited and trans. Robert M. Adams (Norton Critical Edition) (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), p. 46. All further references to the text of *The Prince* are from this edition.

³ See J.G.A. Pocock, 'Introduction' in *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought*

and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) pp. viii-ix

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "The Question of Machiavelli", in *The Prince* (Norton Critical Edition) edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005) pp. 206-208.

separation of the realms of the 'political' and the 'ethical', thereby instituting an 'autonomy of politics', which in turn leads to the formation of 'pure politics', or 'politics shorn of ethics', as noted by Benedetto Croce.⁵

The concern of this paper is to deal with 'effective' action as against 'moral' action which is proposed by Machiavelli as a necessity when negotiating with the problem of good governance as against ethical governance. My intention is to investigate contemporary traditions of thought which may have affected the composition of the text and to investigate the text itself in order to determine Machiavelli's views on the subject of correct 'political' action in terms of 'necessity'. Finally, the paper will close with a discussion of the types of ethical inquiry still being worked on in the subject and possibly deliberate a neutral compromise.

II

It is necessary at the outset to recognize the form of *The Prince* as a political treatise, in order to ascertain what it seeks to achieve. In the dedicatory letter to Lorenzo de Medici, Machiavelli mentions that "I have not found among my belongings anything I prize so much or value so highly as my knowledge of the actions of great men, acquired through long experience of contemporary affairs and extended reading in antiquity".⁶ He goes on to

say that "I have condensed my thoughts into [this] little volume ... since I could give no greater gift than this, which will enable you to grasp in short order everything I have learned over many years and come to understand through my trials and troubles."⁷ Furthermore, he intends to distinguish his work from similar treatises in that "it is absolutely plain, or at least distinguished only by the variety of the examples and the importance of the subject."⁸

The proem emphasizes a number of issues concerning the political circumstances surrounding the composition of the text and Machiavelli's passionate justification of its contents. After serving in the Florentine chancery, when the city was a republic and later being removed⁹, on suspicion of having plotted against Cardinal Giuliano de Medici¹⁰, Machiavelli was condemned and incarcerated for around nine months from February to November, 1513.¹¹ A change in the administrative structure of Florence and a sense of political uncertainty was brewing over Italy during these months. On 23rd March, Louis XII of France had arranged a truce with Venice and on 1 April with Spain, "which left him free to repair his fortunes in Italy."¹² This gave rise to a flurry of opinions in Italy regarding the intentions of rulers like Ferdinand V of Castile, Maximilian (the Holy Roman Empire) and others who "intend to divide up our poor Italy."¹³ Following the Battle of

⁵ See Susan A. Ashley, "Machiavelli: The Revolutionary" in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman eds (Leiden: Brill and Hotei Publishing, 2007), pp. 308-310

⁶ *The Prince*, pg. 3

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, "An Introduction to *The Prince* Edited and Translated from the French by Gerald Seaman" in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman eds (Leiden: Brill and Hotei Publishing, 2007) p. 21

¹⁰ Giuliano de Medici (1453-78) was killed in the Pazzi conspiracy and should not be confused with Giuliano, Duke of Nemours (1479-1516) to whom *The Prince* was first dedicated before being dedicated later to Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino after Giuliano's death.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² J.R.Hale, "The Setting of the Prince: 1513-1514" in Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, edited and trans. Robert M. Adams (Norton Critical Edition) (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), p. 139 hereafter referred to as 'Hale, 2005'

¹³ Vettori's letter to Machiavelli on 19 April, 1513: See Hale, 2005, p. 139. Also see English translation from *Machiavelli and his Friends: Their Personal*

Novara on 6th June¹⁴, a victory for the Pope and the anti-French forces, the political correspondences between Machiavelli and Francesco Vettori point to a number of political concessions regarding which kingdom should have which city in Italy and thus be satisfied,¹⁵ thereby affecting a sort of 'peace'. The correspondences as J.R. Hale points out, are replete with terms like 'your peace' and 'my peace'.¹⁶ The political protagonists though apart from the Pope Julius II, were seen with a form of viciousness: "We have a Pope who is wise, prudent and respected; an unstable and fickle emperor, a haughty and timid king of France, a king of Spain who is miserly and close-fisted, a king of England who is rich, wrathful and thirsty for glory; the Swiss – brutal, victorious, and insolent, and we Italians – poor, ambitious and craven"¹⁷ Hale shows that *The Prince* or *De Principatibus* (On Princely Government) is a 'natural outcome of Machiavelli's interest in external affairs, and in a sense is a continuation of the "peace" correspondence in treatise form.'¹⁸ Although he was filled with republican sentiments, the example of Cesare Borgia in whom 'he had seen an enthralling attempt to knock a new state together', seemed to mark a decisive shift in his mind to note the necessity of a single person to take control and thereby rid the nation of its constant fighting, a reclamation of the *signori* as it were. During the composition of *De Principatibus* or *De Principe* as it is referred to in the *Discourses*¹⁹, the Medici had not as of then, exerted the amount of influence which they later did. Charles Tarlton writes that "Machiavelli, however, for all his

familiarity with the world of violent men, was himself much gentler—a poet, a dramatist, a writer. The world of imagination promised the best way for him to seek deliverance from his agony. How better to achieve that than by writing a pithy, eccentric, and highly personal treatise on politics, at the centre of which he could situate an imaginary and upstart political innovator who thrusts himself destructively into the middle of Italian politics? Such a vehicle could serve, moreover, as a setting in which he might dream a highly symbolic drama in which the ironies that plagued his days could be re-staged, assaulted, and overcome. Poetry might let him invent just the cast of surrogates (men and actions) in terms of which he might relive and improve his political life.²⁰

The proem is conditioned on real experiences and therefore the 'history' it speaks of is both that of antiquity and of contemporary affairs. With the worsening condition of the Italian city-states, as marked in chapter XXVI of *The Prince*, Machiavelli apprehended that a fundamental change is necessary for thinking about politics and political practice as a whole. *The Prince* and *Discourses* contribute to understanding the crucial difference between different forms of government and their requirements – republican and princely. His subsequent recommendations at first were seen as the source of his ruthlessness and marked him as a "teacher of evil, wiles deliberately inciting men to fraud and cruelty of every kind"²¹, but later, they were admired for their ingenuity and necessity.

Correspondence. Trans. and ed. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996)

¹⁴ See Hale, 2005, pg. 140

¹⁵ See Hale, 2005, pg. 140

¹⁶ Ibid, pg. 140-142

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 142

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 142

¹⁹ There is a debate as Hale points out, regarding whether *De Principatibus* and *De Principe* are actually the same work. The presence of a number of textual editions makes this problem more acute. As I am here,

not concerned with textual history, I consider them both to be the same work with possible revisions in titles.

²⁰ Charles D. Tarlton, "Machiavelli's Burden: The Prince as Literary Text" in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman eds (Leiden: Brill and Hotei Publishing, 2007) p. 44

²¹ G.H.R. Parkinson, "Ethics and Politics in Machiavelli" in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 18 (Jan., 1955), pp. 37-38 from

Machiavelli seeks to distance himself from treatises which are 'stuffed with pompous phrases', 'elaborate, magnificent words' and 'extrinsic rhetorical embroidery'. Well versed in rule books and advice books for princes, commonly classed as *de regimine principum* ('on princely rule'), Machiavelli was not interested in preserving the ethics of leadership based on a predominantly Christian rhetoric as was common practice. In *The Education of the Christian Prince* (1516), Erasmus writes that those who would go on to train princes, i.e., their 'educators' should be of 'gentle disposition' and have 'unimpeachable morals', so that they may train the new leaders to be expressive of exceptional moral goodness. Quentin Skinner notes that this type of mirror for magistrates literature tended to enumerate the four cardinal virtues reckoned to be necessary in a leader: 'prudence', 'magnanimity', 'temperance' and 'justice'; and that the leader most of all, must 'fear God and honour the Church.'²² With the emergence of humanism, and the subsequent emphasis on the *auctores* over the *artes*, writers of manuals began incorporating ideas from classical writers who seemed to exemplify such Christian virtue (like Cicero and Virgil). John of Viterbo for instance in *The Government of Cities*, refers to a dilemma faced by Machiavelli himself. He reasons that 'those who want to be feared' argue that 'with severity and cruelty' they 'are able to keep a city more readily in peace and tranquility, while 'those who want much more to be loved' reply that 'it is nothing but a vileness of the soul' to insist that clemency should always be ruled out and yet, emphatically concludes to the effect that 'those who want to be feared for excessive cruelty are utterly in the wrong', for 'cruelty is a vice', and 'is

therefore a sin' which cannot possibly have any place in good government.²³

For Machiavelli, such a line of reasoning is irrelevant in that it does not help individuals to maintain power - "Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence, a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires."²⁴ The question of necessity is significant as it helps to validate and justify actions that are immoral and yet essential in securing, advancing and ensuring the survival of the state. The entire structure of the education for the prince was built on a Christian rhetoric and its ends were seemingly unattainable. Therefore, there needed to be a fundamental change in the system itself as Berlin points out. Machiavelli realized that in order to deal with the new 'abstraction' of the 'state', there must be a multiplicity of ethical codes which may in cases be incompatible. Therefore, the shift in ethical desire from 'salvation' to 'maintenance of power' marks the birth of a new morality, an ontological problem which Machiavelli has noticed. Consequently, Machiavelli in dealing with problems of liberty and sovereignty disregarded the earlier emphasis on aesthetic education and demanded that "a prince, therefore, should have no other object, no other thought, no other subject of study, than war, its rules and disciplines; this is the only art for a man who commands ..."²⁵ More prominently, he justifies the nature of his practical beliefs in that "a great many men have imagined states and principdoms such as nobody ever saw or knew in the real world, and there's such a difference between the way we really live and the way we

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2217044>> Accessed: 02/11/2013 10:14

²² Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 33-35

²³ The discussion of the early influence of advice books and their arguments can be found in Skinner, 2002, pp. 33-35. I am greatly indebted to Skinner's discussion on this subject.

²⁴ *The Prince*, xv, p. 42

²⁵ *The Prince*, xiv, p. 40

ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation."²⁶

III

The Prince begins by differentiating between different kinds of states: republics and principalities (Chapter I). Princely states are further of three types: 'hereditary', 'mixed' and what Machiavelli calls 'new'. He explains in Chapters II and III that new principalities are those that have just been created and their leaders are not hereditary. Mixed principalities are like those of the Pope or the sultan, he explains, for they have been established for a long time (like a hereditary principality), but the leadership does not pass from father to son (like a new principality). It may be interesting to question whether there is a possibility of looking at the state as a 'father' and the subject as a 'son', in which case one might in terms of the Abrahamic religions, have the authority to reprimand children to maintain their obedience and loyalty towards the father, an idea which surely Machiavelli was hinting at. Next, Machiavelli explains how to rule the different principalities and what challenges are presented to the ruler in each case. He says that hereditary leaders have an easier time than new princes because the people are already accustomed to their hereditary leaders and accept their power, but a new prince has to work hard to be accepted by his people. Machiavelli then goes into detail how to acquire more land for principalities: "It is perfectly natural and ordinary that men should want to acquire things; and always when men do what they can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when something is beyond them and they try to get it anyhow, they are in error and deserve blame."²⁷ Yet, he tries to reason a necessarily brutal form of silencing opponents which turns out to be an ethical dilemma but a politically sound judgment: "it should be remarked

that men ought either to be caressed or destroyed, since they will seek revenge for minor hurts but will not be able to revenge major ones. Any harm you do to a man should be done in such a way that you need not fear his revenge."²⁸

There are four ways that he discusses to acquire more land: 1) 'your own arms and virtue', 2) 'fortune', 3) 'others' arms', and 4) 'inequity'. The first is the best way in his opinion because land acquired that way is the easiest to hold on to after it has been conquered and because one will still possess his loyal militia, not mercenaries, and his own virtues to rule the principality wisely.

It is essential to note the usage of the terms, 'fortune' and 'virtue' in their specific contexts to grasp the effect Machiavelli seeks to impart in using the terms. Machiavelli often uses these terms in conjunction when describing two distinct ways in which a prince comes into power. While 'virtue' refers to individual talent among other things, 'fortune' implies chance or luck. As noted previously, 'virtue' is not Christian virtue but more consistent with the Ciceronian concept of 'virtu' or 'vertu' – an idea which developed in Florence at the turn of the fifteenth century.

The political conflict between Florence and Milan in the early fifteenth century as traced in Hans Baron's influential essay, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* is most frequently cited when attempting to outline the immediate cause for the birth of a new form of social and political inquiry that culminated in the development of the 'vir virtutis'. Baron's theses ushered in a new way of understanding civic consciousness in terms of what he calls 'civic humanism', which is rooted in a new philosophy of political engagement and the 'active life'.²⁹ It was Petrarch's rediscovery of the Ciceronian goals of proper education through the

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *The Prince*, iii, pg. 10

²⁸ *The Prince*, iii, pg. 7

²⁹ Skinner, 2002, pg. 71

Tusculan Disputations which set the target of education to create a man "capable of attaining all the virtues and right-minded states"³⁰ Cicero maintained that it was from the word 'man' (vir) from which the word 'virtue' (virtus) was derived and therefore the aim of education would be to cultivate the vir virtutis or the 'manly man' (the man of virtue). The Florentines developed this concept in the context of civic humanism so that individuals would be trained in the art of letter writing and be well versed in the *studia humanitatis*, a set of disciplines which served as a liberal and literary education.³¹ Further, they understood it to be a requisite for such men to practically use their skills even in the art of war and thereby serve as exemplary soldiers of state. Machiavelli's usage of the term *virtu* is in this case more reminiscent of the latter case. He further uses the term distinctly to mean 'strength', 'character', one's own 'arms and energy', 'merit', 'talent', 'capability' (*virtuoso*), 'skill', 'strength of character' (*per vie virtuose*), 'ability', 'effort', 'courage' and 'virtue' itself in a modern sense. Machiavelli is therefore concerned not with the classical sense of virtue in its educative sense but in terms of efficaciousness. Virtues are not good in themselves so long as they don't have the desired results.

Machiavelli's concern with 'fortune' on the other hand, is drawn from a Christian tradition centred on the medieval author, Boethius who spoke specifically of fortune and its elements in *De Consolatio Philosophiae* (c.534 A. D). Machiavelli speaks at length about fortune in Chapter XXV of *The Prince* and refers to fortune as "govern[ing] half of our actions, but that even so she leaves the other half more or less in our power to control"³². He defines fortune in terms of the Roman goddess, *Fortuna* and compares her "to one of those

torrential streams which, when they overflow, flood the plains, rip up the trees and tear down buildings, wash the land away here and deposit it there; everyone flees before them, everyone yields to their onslaught, unable to stand up to them in any way."³³ Yet, this does not mean that the problems of fortune or its damages cannot be avoided, for "this does not mean that men cannot take countermeasures while the weather is still fine, shoring up dikes and dams, so that when the waters rise again, they are either carried off in a channel or confined where they do no harm."³⁴ Therefore, the best way to battle fortune or at least control its effects is through intelligence and capability which commonly translates as virtue. Fortune is for Machiavelli, the element in which we live in the most natural way. It is both slippery and unstable. It is the unfolding of events in time and there can only be anticipation with a kind of pragmatism.

Therefore, while the power of virtue is internal and significant in a prince, it is used to counterbalance the external force – fortune. Most importantly, the exercise of virtue has nothing to do with morality as was previously understood, for an individual would do his best to use his ability to advance his position and not keep his abilities suppressed. If this involves a king silencing his subjects, for Machiavelli, the exercise of virtue to maintain his position is justified for it makes him a greater king and a more feared ruler. The man of virtue must engage fortune keeping his best interests in mind. Thus, the Petrarchan re-visitation of the Boethian usage of fortune as predetermining and predestining the human condition, was overturned by Machiavelli in a starkly contrasting way, for he provided a means of engaging with fortune which was then understood only as a supernatural force. Gramsci notes that Machiavelli understood fortune not to be a historical force only but also a trans-

³⁰ Ibid, pg. 87

³¹ See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanistic Strains*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), pg. 9

³² *The Prince*, xxv, pg. 67

³³ ibid

³⁴ ibid

social force. There are given circumstances in history through and which human intervention works and fortune is understood in these terms.

Machiavelli writes that principalities that are acquired by fortune, either through money or as a gift, are the hardest to hold, because the new prince is not necessarily stable enough to rule: "When simple good luck raises private citizens to the rank of prince, they have little trouble in rising, but plenty in holding onto their positions ... These are the people who get control of a state either by buying it, or as a gift from someone."³⁵ Machiavelli also advocates the use of evil to acquire a principality. He gives the example of Agathocles of Syracuse as proof that this method is sufficient and will enable one to rule the land peacefully through fear.³⁶ In speaking of cruelty Machiavelli notes that "Cruelty can be described as well used (if it is permissible to say good words about something evil in itself) when it is performed all at once, for reasons of self-preservation; and when the acts are not repeated after that, but rather are turned as much as possible to the advantage of the subjects. Cruelty is badly used, when it is infrequent at first, but increases with time instead of diminishing."³⁷ He goes on to assert that in the event a prince needs to injure others in a new state, he should first, 'calculate the sum of all the injuries he will have to do' and 'do them all at once' so as not to have to repeat them 'every day' and in turn reassure people by 'win[ning] them over to his side with benefits'.³⁸

Machiavelli was aware of the Aristotelian conception of viewing politics as a science and understanding the ends of politics to culminate in the "good life". What he further seems to conclude from Aristotle is that politics is related to a certain spatial construct which is necessarily anthropomorphic. This is to suggest that political

society is not God gifted, but a human invention and will require practical 'human' modes of management, not based on any divinely ordained precepts. In keeping with this, Machiavelli is concerned not with the ultimate end of Aristotelian society, which is to achieve the "good life", but to maintain power and stability. This is Machiavelli's fundamental deviation from the Greek and by extension, the scholastic conception of the conjoined ends of ethics and politics. This is further justified by the fact that times have changed from the period of the Greek world and newer developments in warfare have slowly taken over. So, for Aristotle, the polis is constituted of individuals who wish to possess the 'good life' (*eudaimonia*) and as a good life is a virtuous life, the state which is composed of individuals should be virtuous itself. A ruler to Aristotle is a servant to his people, one who has to protect the diversity of goods for the common good of all. Machiavelli however, does not see such rulers to ordinarily exist. For a ruler who seeks to attain power and maintain it, he "must always harm those over whom he assumes authority, both with his soldiers and with a thousand other hardships that are entailed in a new conquest."³⁹ Therefore, "you have as enemies all those you have harmed in seizing power, and you cannot stay friends with those who put you in power, because you can never satisfy them as expected."⁴⁰ We may suggest that Aristotle was probably speaking of hereditary rulers and the issue of maintaining lasting peace, but Machiavelli has to contend with the political situation of Italy which is far different from the Greece of Antiquity and where principedoms exchange hands almost momentarily. The advice is intended for those who come into power and wish to maintain it.

³⁵ *The Prince*, pg. 18

³⁶ *The Prince*, pg. 27

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ *The Prince*, iii, pg. 5

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

IV

The topic which Machiavelli and other commentators are most interested in and which forms the basis of their ethical arguments is the question regarding the qualities deemed to be necessary in a prince so that he can maintain the best control. Machiavelli discusses military knowledge, liberality and parsimony, to be loved or to be feared, trustworthiness, good and bad reputations. About the necessity of evil qualities, he writes that there are many qualities which are deemed to be virtuous like being humane, faithful, modest, straightforward, gentle and religious; while those deemed to be vices include being greedy, cruel, sly, treacherous, feeble, fierce, proud, harsh, serious and sceptical. Yet, if one looks carefully, "you will see that something resembling virtue, if you follow it, may be your ruin, while something else resembling vice will lead if you follow it, to your security and well-being."⁴¹

Ernst Cassirer in his reading of the text notes that 'the whole argument of Machiavelli is clear and coherent' and that 'if we accept his premises, we cannot avoid his conclusions' which means that 'the desired end is attained' and 'the state has won its full autonomy'. However, Cassirer's isolationist theory of the state as being 'alone in an empty space', devoid of its connection with 'religion or metaphysics', seems to misrepresent some of Machiavelli's core insights. It is not that Cassirer is mistaken but he fails to take into account the main reason for Machiavelli's composing *The Prince* in the first place – to save Italy from external invasions and all for peace. Cassirer represents Machiavelli as impassionate by logically reasoning that "Machiavelli's *Prince* contains the most

immoral things and that Machiavelli has no scruples about recommending to the ruler all sorts of deceptions, of perfidy, and cruelty is incontestable", but fails to appreciate Machiavelli's concern for his 'Italy' in the final chapter. He ultimately concludes that – "To regard Machiavelli's *Prince* as a kind of ethical treatise or a manual of political virtues is impossible".⁴² Yet, Cassirer is not wrong to read the work as a purely technical manual – a book in which we "do not seek for ethical conduct, of good and evil. It is enough if we are told what is useful or useless."⁴³

Both Cassirer and Berlin⁴⁴ refer to Kantian thought and the concept of hypothetical imperatives with which Machiavelli seems to be concerned with. For Kant, "there is no question whether the end is rational and good, but only what one must do in order to attain it. The precepts for the physician to make his patient thoroughly healthy, and for a poisoner to ensure certain death, are of equal value in this respect, that each serves to effect its purpose perfectly"⁴⁵ Therefore, the hypothetical imperative takes the form of – in order to achieve 'x', one must do 'y', irrespective of other external or internal forces. Berlin adds to Cassirer's arguments by noting that Machiavelli questions the very idea of the existence of a universal human ideal. For Berlin, who advocates a form of Spinozan ethics, there appears to be no overlap between the two ethical codes - of personal morality and public organization. They are completely incompatible. If one, chooses to follow one code, he must give up the hope of the other. If one chooses personal morality, he should give up the hope of a stable, and glorious society, where men can flourish. Similarly, if one takes up the code of politics, he would not be able to quench his personal anxiety.

⁴¹ *The Prince*, xv, pg. 43

⁴² Ernst Cassirer, "New Theory of State" in Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, edited and trans. Robert M. Adams (Norton Critical Edition) (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), pg. 155

⁴³ *Ibid*, pg. 166

⁴⁴ See Berlin's essay, pg. 213

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. T.K. Abbott in *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics* (New York: Longman's, Green and Co., 1927), pg. 32 as quoted in Cassirer's essay.

Berlin shows that even if the ultimate goal is identical, entire sets of values can contradict without any possible rational solution. Berlin refers to the commentary of Benedetto Croce who writes that "Machiavelli discovered the necessity and autonomy of politics, which is beyond moral good and evil, which has its own laws against which it is useless to rebel, which cannot be exorcised and made to vanish by holy water."⁴⁶

Berlin questions whether within such an interpretation of the 'art of colonization' and it is possible to enumerate similar laws against which it appears useless to rebel. Gramsci was particularly invested in these principles, specifically in Croce's comments, when developing his theory of state.⁴⁷ In formulating his theory of 'hegemony', Gramsci did not relate to the state in terms of the slender essence of Government but divided it into schemas such as political society (which includes the police), the army, and the legal systems. Gramsci claims that the capitalist state rules through force and consent (somewhat manufactured). It is divided into political society, which lies in the realm of force, and civil society, which lies in the realm of consent. Drawing from Machiavelli, he equates the 'modern Prince' with the 'revolutionary party', which is the force that would allow the working class to develop organic intellectuals and an alternate hegemony within civil society. Davidson also points to Gramsci's collected notes on the Florentine as asserting a primarily historicist methodology of interpretation.⁴⁸ For Gramsci, this methodology would involve considering Machiavelli to have asked the prince to not abandon ethics, but to sacrifice personal values to fulfil a higher moral

duty. Mussolini, on the other hand, suggested that the moral imperative meant strengthening the state to discipline the people, a position Gramsci was at odds with, in that he was concerned with 'drawing out their insurrectionary potential to achieve revolutionary change.'⁴⁹

The question then arises as to whether Machiavelli's political philosophy and recommendations on how a Prince should *effectively* act also represent Machiavelli's idea of right and wrong, and how a Prince should *morally* act. Thus, when he says: "Let a prince, therefore, win victories and uphold his state; his methods will always be considered worthy, and everyone will praise them because the masses are always impressed ... by the outcome of an enterprise."⁵⁰ He further notes that a prince may not have all the 'admirable qualities' he is supposed to, for if he exercises them all at a time, then they would be 'harmful' and only if he 'seems' to have them i.e., acts as possessing good virtues, then he may use it to his advantage. Therefore, it is far better to 'appear' merciful, truthful, humane, sincere and religious and good to be so in reality. Yet, "you must keep your mind so disposed that, in case of need, you can turn to the exact contrary."⁵¹

Yet, Machiavelli does not only advocate an instrumental use of reason which advocates that the most effective means to given ends should be acquired regardless of moral precepts, but he also puts forward a set of moral goods (the ends of self-maintenance, power, etc.) that the prince should hold. This is highlighted particularly in chapter VIII of *The Prince* when Machiavelli discusses the issue of those princes who assume

⁴⁶ As quoted by Berlin in 'The Question of Machiavelli'

⁴⁷ See Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pg. 7

⁴⁸ See A.B. Davidson, "Gramsci and Reading Machiavelli" in *Science and Society*, Vol. 37, No. 1

(Spring, 1973), p. 56. Stable url:

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40401692>>

⁴⁹ Susan A. Ashley, "Machiavelli: The Revolutionary" in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman eds (Leiden: Brill and Hotei Publishing, 2007), pg. 318

⁵⁰ *The Prince*, xviii, pg. 49

⁵¹ *The Prince*, xviii, pg.48

power through crime. There seems to be an innate revulsion in his observations when he speaks of Agathocles and how he brutally murdered his fellows and took 'violent possession' of 'what had already been freely granted to him'. Machiavelli, in quite a contrasting strain, writes, "it certainly cannot be called 'virtue' to murder his fellow citizens, betray his friends, to be devoid of truth, pity or religion".⁵² He agrees that "a man may get power by means like these, but not glory." Finally, "if we consider simply the courage of Agathocles in facing and escaping from dangers, and the greatness of his soul in sustaining and overcoming adversity, it is hard to see why he should be considered inferior to the greatest of captains. Nonetheless, his fearful cruelty and inhumanity, along with his innumerable crimes, prevent us from placing him among the really excellent men. For we can scarcely attribute to either fortune or virtue a conquest which he owed to neither."⁵³ These remarks are essential when we deal with the question of Machiavelli's morals. Even though he advocates a form of moral relativism, in that the ethics of a prince are different from that of a common man, the actions of a prince cannot be bestial. Machiavelli reminds us that for humans to conquer the realm of the *humanitas*, they must have an element of both *divinitas* and *feritas* within them – elements of virtue and bestiality. Therefore, complete disregard of the art of warfare and the *vir-virtutis* would not allow one to qualify for glory. The prince must, therefore, be worthy of his position and not a complete trickster or deceiver.

There is also the view that Machiavelli's ethics are strictly consequential. This is to suggest that correct moral conduct, behaviour or reasoning is determined solely by an analysis and ultimate benefit of an action's consequences – in brief, to suggest that the ends are sufficient to justify the

means. The quotation from Chapter VIII will serve as a counterbalance to this judgment of strict consequentialism in that for Machiavelli, it seems to lack what makes a person 'human' above all else. Therefore, Machiavelli also exemplifies the humanist stance in an unprecedented way.

V

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli speaks at length of human nature as accustomed to the changing times: "I have often reflected that the causes of the success or failure of men depend upon their manner of suiting their conduct to the times" and that "he errs least and will be most favoured by fortune who suits his proceedings to the times ... and always follows the impulses of his nature."⁵⁴ Machiavelli's discussions in *The Discourses* seem to compliment his vision in *The Prince*, for one, he suggests that one who desires to change the government of a republic must consider its existing circumstances and that "to usurp supreme and absolute authority, then, in a free state, and subject it to tyranny, the people must already have become corrupt by gradual steps from generation to generation."⁵⁵ Historically speaking, Machiavelli is probably referring to the political transformation brought into the republics following the development of the new middle class – the *popolani*, whose rise paralleled a brutal civil war within the cities amongst the aristocratic magnate families who possessed power and the new *popolani* who demanded recognition. The compromise to this faction fighting was to accept the strong rule of a single *signore* who was elected with a view to attaining greater civic peace. Nevertheless, Machiavelli's thoughts are not incoherent, and we seem to get an ethical justification for tyranny – to reign in through force, all men who are deceivers and tricksters.

⁵² *The Prince*, viii, pg. 25

⁵³ *ibid*

⁵⁴ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* in *The Prince*, edited and trans.

Robert M. Adams (Norton Critical Edition) (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), Book III, Chap. ix, pg. 116

⁵⁵ *Discourses*, Book III, Chap. viii, pg. 116

Yet, as the *Discourses* further suggest, Machiavelli believes that cunning is of immense necessity to improve one's fortune and in this case the moral rejection of Agathocles in *The Prince* is overturned, and he is seen as a glorious example for "force alone will never be found to suffice, whilst it will often be the case that cunning alone serves the purpose."⁵⁶

Machiavelli also writes about whether it is better to be loved or feared, concluding that is best to be both, but given a choice, one should express only one of those qualities, and to be feared is for him, the natural choice. Machiavelli defends his judgment writing, that "no prince should mind being called cruel for what he does to keep his subjects united and loyal; he may make examples of a very few, but he will be more merciful in reality than those who, in their tender-heartedness, allow disorder to occur, with their attendant murders and lootings. Such turbulence brings harm to an entire community, while the executions ordered by a prince affect only one individual at a time."⁵⁷ Speaking of Cesare Borgia, he writes that he, "was considered cruel; nonetheless, that cruelty of his had fixed up Romagna, united it, reduced it to peace and reliability. Which, if were to be well considered, would be seen to have been much more merciful than the Florentine people, which, in order to escape the name of cruelty, let Pistoia be destroyed."⁵⁸ Robert M. Adams here indicates that Machiavelli is referring to a civil war which broke out between rival 'Panciatichi' and 'Cancellieri' factions in the city of Pistoria (then under control of Florence) in 1501-02. Eventually, the Florentines did not intervene resulting in the factions hacking the townspeople to death.

The final chapter is the most significant when analysing *The Prince* and gives us a vision regarding Machiavelli's proposal for a united Italy. He calls upon 'a new prince', an 'able' leader who would bring honour 'to him and benefits to all men' and that "all things now appear favourable to a new prince, so much so that I cannot think of any time more suitable than the present."⁵⁹

Spinoza had notes in the *Tractus Politicus* (Chapter 5, Section 7) that "the means which a prince who is led solely by the desire of domination should use to found and conserve a principality, the most acute Machiavelli has shown at length; but to what end he wrote, does not seem to be sufficiently established."⁶⁰ The problem which Parkinson notes, has caused a great deal of bewilderment is Machiavelli's cold assumption regarding the fact that the safety of the state or at least its government, 'cannot always be secured without the performance of actions that are usually considered morally wrong'. This view as has been shown in the paper, is systematically denied and so one may go on to question like Parkinson does as to whether Machiavelli seems to be pointing to right action as expressive of a *useful* end. In this case, his thoughts are similar to the Utilitarian's. Yet, this too is not the case. Then one might consider a conflict between the ideals of morals and politics as the best way to understanding Machiavellian core concepts. Here too, we recall Berlin who points out that Machiavelli is not concerned with the division of politics and ethics in the strictest sense for the idea is "uncovering the possibility of more than one system of values, with no criterion common to the systems whereby a rational choice can be made between them."⁶¹ The idea simply does not involve a rejection of the principles of Christianity in favour of paganism as Machiavelli's acceptance of the *antiqua virtus* over Christian ethics would tend

⁵⁶ *Discourses*, Book II, Chap. xiii, pg. 112

⁵⁷ *The Prince*, xvii, pg. 45

⁵⁸ *ibid*

⁵⁹ *The Prince*, xxvi, pg. 69-70

⁶⁰ As quoted in G.H.R. Parkinson, "The Ethics and Politics of Machiavelli" in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 18 (Jan., 1955), pg. 37.

⁶¹ Berlin, "The Question of Machiavelli", pg. 229

to suggest, but involves in one case, "the setting of them side by side with the implicit invitation to men to choose either a good, virtuous private life or a good, successful social existence, but not both."⁶² While one may, in theory, accept the benefits of the Christian Commonwealth, he cannot reject the worth of the Roman Republic. Yet, the politics of choice governs him to accept any one position at a moment in time for both are incompatible.

Going beyond the Eurocentric influences, the Renaissance era was a period of profound intellectual and cultural revival, where the rediscovery and dissemination of classical texts played a pivotal role in shaping modern thought. Among the plethora of classical works, those attributed to Aristotle held significant sway. However, the journey of these texts to Italian scholars was not straightforward, and many were mediated through Arabic translations before making their way to Europe. This transmission process highlights the intricate web of cultural and intellectual exchanges that defined the medieval and early modern periods.

One such example is the *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār*⁶³ (The Book of the Secret of Secrets), a text that purportedly took the form of a letter from Aristotle to his pupil, Alexander the Great. Despite its Aristotelian guise, this work was actually of Syrian origin and not authored by Aristotle. This misattribution raises critical questions about the authenticity and impact of the texts that influenced Renaissance thinkers like Machiavelli.

The *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār* serves as a compelling case study in the recontextualization and repurposing of texts across cultures. Originally authored in Arabic,

this work encompasses a broad spectrum of subjects, including political philosophy, ethics, and counsel for rulers. Its translation into Latin and subsequent dissemination in Renaissance Italy exemplify the profound influence exerted by Arabic intellectual traditions on European thought. Arabic scholars, who preserved and expanded upon Greek philosophy, played a crucial intermediary role, ensuring that this knowledge not only survived but thrived throughout the Middle Ages.

For Niccolò Machiavelli, a figure often hailed as a quintessential Renaissance thinker, the impact of such texts is significant. The *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār*, with its pragmatic and at times cynical guidance for rulers, resonates with themes present in Machiavelli's works, notably *The Prince*. Machiavelli's frequent references to Alexander the Great suggest a direct or indirect familiarity with this pseudo-Aristotelian text. This influence highlights the blending of authentic classical wisdom with later interpolations and adaptations, which shaped the political theories of the Renaissance.⁶⁴ Critically, the reliance on texts like the *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār* illustrates the complexities and potential pitfalls of Renaissance humanism. Scholars of the era endeavoured to revive the wisdom of antiquity, yet the sources they accessed were often filtered through multiple layers of translation and interpretation, potentially leading to significant distortions and misrepresentations.⁶⁵ The pseudo-Aristotelian nature of the *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār* attests to this phenomenon, demonstrating how Renaissance thinkers occasionally built their ideas on foundations that were not as genuinely classical as they believed.

The transmission of Aristotelian works to Italian scholars during the Renaissance, primarily via

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār* (The Book of the Secret of Secrets). Translated by Martin Plessner, edited by Manfred Ullmann, Clarendon Press, 1974

⁶⁴ Burnett, C. (1996). *The Introduction of Arabic Learning into England*. E.J. Brill.

⁶⁵ Kraye, J. (1996). *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts: Volume 2, Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.

Arabic translations, exemplifies the interconnectedness of medieval intellectual traditions. The case of the *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār* underscores the complex nature of these exchanges and the potential for misattribution and reinterpretation. Machiavelli's potential engagement with this text reveals the deep and sometimes problematic influences that shaped Renaissance thought, reminding us that the quest for knowledge often involves navigating a labyrinth of cultural and historical transformations.⁶⁶

Machiavelli's systematizing, defending and formulating codes of conduct based on political ends helps to develop new strategies in the field of normative and descriptive ethics in that dealing with the practical means of determining a moral course of action. Machiavelli's discussion also is significant when we think of applied ethics and the possibility of using rules in the business workspace as has been suggested by Rose Anna Mueller.⁶⁷ His analysis of political scenarios, facts and ideas including their values make his political thought almost impossible to refute.

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⁶⁶ Gutas, D. (1998). *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)*. Routledge.

⁶⁷ See Rose Anna Mueller, "Machiavelli in the Modern World" in *Seeking Real Truths: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Machiavelli*, Patricia Vilches and Gerald Seaman eds. (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2007) pg. 421-41

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Contributor

Aritra Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Literary Studies at Brainware University, Barasat, India.