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Effectual Truth and the Machiavellian Enterprise

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Abstract: The political philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli has often been reduced to the statement that 'the end justifies the means' and understood as an expression of *realpolitik* as a result of his pragmatic, even ruthless, counsel to would-be princes, or political leaders. However, a more nuanced understanding of Machiavelli's reflections on human nature in his writings, especially *The Prince*, reveals that there is a philosophic core within his approach to political success, the acquisition and maintenance of state. But while there is no doubt that Machiavelli openly rejected the idealism of certain ancient and medieval thinkers, whose imagined republics only ever existed in theory, and instead candidly advised princes to seek and wield power, his work reflects not only a profound engagement with the harsh realities of a political landscape dominated by practical necessity but also a project of far-reaching scope. With the concept of "effectual truth" as his guide, Machiavelli proposes radical means to overcome *fortuna* with *virtù* and establish the foundations of power in order to bring about that conquest. The fulfillment of his mission and mandate to those who follow his lead represents the Machiavellian enterprise.

Keywords: *realpolitik*; Machiavelli; political philosophy; *virtù*; *fortuna*; Shakespeare

1. Machiavelli and Politics

Niccolò Machiavelli has a bad reputation. His political philosophy has often been reduced to the statement that 'the end justifies the means' as a result of his pragmatic, sometimes ruthless counsel to would-be princes, or political leaders. However, a more nuanced understanding of his reflections on human nature reveals a philosophic core within his approach to political success, the acquisition and maintenance of state (*lo stato*). Tainted by the term *realpolitik*, a concept that originated in mid-nineteenth century reactions to political realism in international relations, namely the pursuit and use of power untethered from ethical restraints, Machiavelli's writings—and especially his treatise mistitled *The Prince*—have been considered the early modern *locus classicus* for this view of power politics. While there is no doubt that Machiavelli openly rejected the idealism of certain ancient and medieval thinkers, whose imagined republics only ever existed in theory, and instead candidly advised princes to seek and wield power, his writings reflect a profound engagement with the harsh realities of a political landscape dominated by practical necessity.

In such a world, which in many ways Machiavelli inherited already broken, moral considerations fail as a guide to success. Skepticism about traditional virtue and the prospects for "virtue politics" in the world as it is, and not as we might wish it to be, taught Machiavelli to turn his attention toward studying examples and articulating precepts for pursuing and securing political power and stability. In so doing, Machiavelli articulates an approach to statecraft in *The Prince* which places emphasis on adaptability, manipulation, and the use of force as indispensable tools for acquiring and holding dominion. Whether

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Academic Editors: Peter Morgan and Carolyn Brown

Received: 21 November 2024
Revised: 19 February 2025
Accepted: 24 February 2025
Published: 11 March 2025

Citation: Gish, Dustin. 2025. Effectual Truth and the Machiavellian Enterprise. *Literature* 5: 6. https://doi.org/10.3390/literature5010006

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understood as making a radical break with classical and Christian morality, or as advancing beyond the civic humanism of his own times, Machiavelli's argument for embracing "the effectual truth" represented a striking contrast with the writings of his contemporaries, like Baldassare Castiglione, Thomas More, and Desiderius Erasmus, and gave rise to the modern theory of political realism, which influenced the history of political thought from Francesco Guicciardini, Thomas Hobbes, and James Harrington, to Otto von Bismarck and Hans Morgenthau. But the true heirs of the Machiavellian enterprise would be philosophers.[1]

2. Machiavelli's View of Human Nature: The Intellectual Foundation of *Realpolitik*

Machiavelli grounded his political philosophy in a distinctive view of human nature. In his project, he outright rejected the idealism of classical and Christian thinkers who believed in the potential for moral virtue to guide political life. Instead, he perceives human beings as fundamentally self-interested, ambitious, and predisposed to conflict. In *The Prince*, he infamously asserts that people are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, and covetous, and that they will betray their leaders whenever it seems advantageous for them to do so. Princes should beware and act accordingly. Such a cynical view leads Machiavelli to argue that successful rulers cannot rely on the goodwill or the loyalty of subjects but rather must anticipate betrayal and be prepared to use force, deceit, and manipulation to maintain their grip on power; which is to say, that they must be prepared to do whatever is necessary, in order to make people useful to them and to maintain their state (*lo stato*).

Machiavelli's realism about human nature extends beyond the personal to the level of communities and society itself. He argues that political life is inherently conflictual because human desires are limitless, while resources and opportunities are finite. This disparity inevitably creates a perpetual struggle for power, wherein individuals and groups form factions and vie for political dominance. Civil strife cannot be avoided. The harmony or *concordia* that is the aim and end of good regimes, according to classical political philosophy (such as Plato's *Republic* and Cicero's *De re publica*) and the humanists of the Renaissance (such as Leonard Bruni and Francesco Patrizi), Machiavelli knows to be merely an imagined illusion, which he declares in *The Prince* one must "go behind" (*andare drieto*), so as to get hold of "the effectual truth" (*la verità effetuale*).[2]

Leaders of republics and principates alike must not strive for personal virtue, or unity and balance within the state, but contend with factional tumults and seek to manage rather than overcome them. In his *Discourses on Livy* (I.4), Machiavelli attributes the success of the Roman Republic to its ability to harness this competitive spirit by institutionalizing conflict between the nobility (*ottimati*) and the populace (*popolari*). He lauds the example of those who wield oratory techniques and use tactical maneuvers to channel conflicts into productive political action, regardless of their status as moral agents. But Machiavelli does not elevate such action as a moral good in itself, nor does he deny that such action at times will be rightly viewed as morally wrong. Rather, in *The Prince* (XV), he presents it as a pragmatic political solution to the inevitable tendencies of human nature to breed tumults: whoever wishes not to be ruined "among so many who are not good" (*infra tanti che non sono buoni*) has "to learn how to be not good, and how to use it or not use it, according to necessity" (*imparare a potere essere non buono e usarlo e non l'usare secondo la necessità*). This principle of acting in accordance with what is necessary is "the effectual truth" that is at the foundation of Machiavelli's political theory and the Machiavellian enterprise.

Harvey Mansfield and Catherine Zuckert, in their respective examinations of Machiavelli's work, emphasize the radical nature of his break from classical and Christian thought.[3] Mansfield argues that Machiavelli's rejection of traditional morality stems directly from his bleak view of human nature. For classical thinkers like Aristotle, political life

was intended to cultivate virtue and promote the common good. In contrast, Machiavelli believes that human beings are not naturally inclined toward virtue and that political leaders must be prepared to act immorally—that is, to be "not good"—in order to achieve their goals. Mansfield sees Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* as the embodiment of this realism: this defining quality of princes transcends moral virtue in the classical or Christian sense, manifesting instead as a capacity to foresee the changing vicissitudes of fortune, adapting to circumstances or making use of them as necessary, in order to manipulate others and maintain state. In this sense, Machiavellian *virtù* is the quality that enables rulers to navigate the treacherous seas of political life, employing whatever means are necessary to secure their hold on power.

What matters, to be blunt, is effectual truth, which is compelling and urgent, and results in effects that are facts in the world detached from considerations of intention or claims about moral purpose. Armed with Machiavellian *virtù* one seeks rational control of chance and fortune to the greatest degree possible and according to necessity. Morality cannot be abolished for human beings, but Machiavelli means to free human action in the world (and there is only *this* world) from the constraints of an imagined moral goodness and the virtuous politics found in imaginary republics and principates. To this end, Machiavelli professes to have discovered the effectual truth (a phrase he seems to have coined) and is unapologetically willing, if necessary, to be "a teacher of evil" (Strauss 1958, p. 9).[4] But this is not the sum total of his teaching—although there is a long history of reading his writings, especially *The Prince*, in this way, from Shakespeare and Marlowe, to Montesquieu and Nietzsche. At the very least, Zuckert argues, his radical reconceiving of traditional terms, such as 'virtue', 'justice', and 'prudence', and his invention of entirely new terms, such as 'state', 'capital', and 'fact', should be taken as ground-breaking and sufficiently disqualifying to see him as a thinker in the classical or civic humanist tradition.[5]

James Hankins, in his reading of Machiavelli, also recognizes Machiavelli's realism about human nature, while placing greater emphasis on the historical context of Renaissance civic humanism in the shaping of his thought. For Hankins, in his *Virtue Politics*, Machiavelli's analysis of Rome in the *Discourses* reflects a deep engagement with civic humanist traditions, which sought to balance individual ambition with the common good through the framework of republican institutions. But, as Hankins notes, Machiavelli departs from the idealism of civic humanism, focusing instead on the pragmatic realities of power. While humanists such as Francesco Patrizi and Leonardo Bruni, following Cicero, believed in the possibility of cultivating virtuous citizens through education and civic engagement, Machiavelli remained skeptical of the potential for human nature to be reformed in this manner. Instead, he posits that political institutions must be designed to manage and control the destructive impulses of human beings rather than rely on their moral improvement. A recovery of virtue (*virtù*) for his own times had to be rooted in the ancient Roman sense of manly strength and martial courage. Only if compelled by the law of necessity (*di necessità*) would the citizens of Italian republics like Florence, who are otherwise inclined to human weakness despite the sanguine belief of humanists in civic spiritedness, be able to acquire genuine *virtù*, according to Machiavelli. Machiavellian virtue had to be made of sterner stuff (Hankins 2019, pp. 449–75).

Deeply disturbed by the *calamità d'Italia*, a phrase coined by a contemporary to describe the post-1494 unsettling of Italian affairs following the invasion of France and subsequent loss among the city-states of political independence, Machiavelli makes the audacious case for moral ambivalence in his advice to the *principes* of republics and principates.[6] Whereas his humanist predecessors in Florence and beyond, such as Poggio Bracciolini and Pier Candido Decembrio, had winked at the occasional use of treachery, fraud, or dissimulation as the necessary means to compass power and maintain state,

Machiavelli organized his thoughts on the *virtù* of successful leaders into a science of power (Hankins 2019, pp. 140–47; see Masters 1996). For close observers of the times, a realistic concession to the utility of being bad had to be made. A ruler with grave moral defects, like Filippo Maria Visconti for example, could pursue his own personal ends without consideration for what is right, while still managing to accomplish some good for his state (maintaining power against foreign adversaries) as well as for those people living within it. Moral depravity, it could be granted, need not be an obstacle to political success, but the general principle that no one could rule well without possessing moral virtue (*virtus*) would remain the standard humanist counsel for princes.

But what Machiavelli insistently rejected was a traditional distinction between successful tyrants and legitimate rulers. Some of the humanists were willing to tolerate a limited amount of political realism, particularly in foreign affairs, but most continued arguing along the lines of Aristotle's *Ethics* and Cicero's *De officiis* that really being, not seeming, to be morally good was the principal cause of happiness—for rulers and for states. For Machiavelli, the moral principle advocated by most humanists had to be discarded, since adhering to it as a rule would prove ruinous. Humanists, such as Leonardo Bruni and Leon Battista Alberti, may have dabbled in political realism, but Machiavelli chose to advance into that realm completely. Disregarding traditional advice to *principes* to be virtuous, Machiavelli taught rulers moral ambivalence: the decision to be good, or to be not good, to act with cruelty or to show clemency, depended entirely on necessity. *Virtus*, in its traditional form, had to yield to Machiavellian *virtù*.

Machiavelli's realistic assessment of political affairs, that the acquisition and maintenance of state dictated for rulers what had to be done (apart from any moral concern for what *ought* to be done), demanded a new science of power. His radical break not only from Christian but also from classical realism, and the distancing of his thoughts from the humanists who had preceded him, had rendered Machiavelli the founder of a new world, as he himself suggested in the prefaces to his major works: *The Prince*, *Discourses*, *Florentine Histories*, and *The Art of War*. And beneath the surface teaching of his political realism, or Machiavellism, lurk profound reflections on human nature that reveal an abiding attachment to liberty and, in turn, point beyond his political thought to the discovery of "new modes and orders" that render him the founder of modernity (see Alvarez 1999, pp. 134–40; Mansfield 2023, pp. 3–32).

3. Prudence, the Role of Force, and the Meaning of Friendship in Political Affairs

One vital aspect of Machiavelli's political philosophy is his concept of prudence, which he sees as essential for effective rule. Prudence, in Machiavelli's view, is the ability to discern the right course of action in varying circumstances, taking into account the peculiar nature of individuals (both the many and the great), the political environment, and the potential adverse consequences of actions. He emphasizes that a prudent ruler must be both shrewd and adaptable, able to navigate through a complex political landscape where the good cannot always be had. To confront the vicissitudes of fortune to which human affairs are prone, the prince must learn how to fight, and being professed in the art of war—the only art worthy of those who intend to rule—begins with a training in virtue, according to Machiavelli. Exercising the art of war in times of peace even more so than in times of war is the hallmark of the prudent prince.

Fighting with arms is the mode of force, the way that is proper to beasts, according to Machiavelli (Chapter XVIII). To fight with laws is the mode appropriate to human beings. However, one cannot let go of the former and use only the latter; one must know how to use both modes, "because the first often proves to be insufficient, and one must resort to

the second". In general, one has to know how to use the one as well as the other nature, and to recognize that the one without the other is not durable. The principal foundations of all states, all dominions, may be found in good laws and good arms; and yet, "because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there needs must be good laws", one should not marvel if Machiavelli omits reasoning on laws and speaks almost exclusively of arms (Chapter XII). The imperative for the use of force in the Machiavellian enterprise cannot be ignored. Necessity rules over human affairs, and human beings thus need to be armed with the means of force in order to overcome necessity.

To be prepared for war is to be armed, and arms are the means to acquire and maintain state without relying on others or fortune. No one who is unarmed is able to withstand the commands of those who are armed. And what it means to be armed, in this work of Machiavelli, is to possess the art of command that comes from the art of war. So, the prince who is prudent "ought never to lift his thought from the exercise of war". What this exercise entails is determined and disciplined effort, with works and with intellect. The former, beyond simply keeping the means of war well-ordered, requires one "to learn the nature of sites"—for it is knowledge and experience of the nature of sites that is the first requirement of one who would acquire the art and the arms of war (Chapter XIV).

To exercise the art of war in times of peace, the prince, Machiavelli advises, must always be out on the chase learning the nature of sites. But in this endeavor the prudent prince does have friends; namely, those with whom he discusses in times of peace the various modes of engaging in war under every kind of circumstance. But there is ample evidence in *The Prince* (and not only in the lengthy discussion of conspiracy in Chapter XIX) that one should not place much trust in human friendships, or in personal alliances of any sort. Trust in people, who are always self-interested out of necessity, is precarious and leads to betrayal. Loyalty, if it exists at all, will be held by the imposition of force or necessity, and being able to hold people firm in their convictions is the difference between being armed and being unarmed (Chapter VI). In exercising the art of war there are two modes, the first is "with works" (*con le opere*). In this mode, a prince ought to find friends with whom to hunt and to discuss all the contingencies in preparation for wartime, so that when he is engaged in war "there could arise no accident for which he does not have the remedy" (Chapter XIV). And when exercising the art of war through the second mode, "with intellect" (*con la mente*), the prince finds friends in the writings of others with whom he engages in conversation in his study.[7] The ephemeral nature of affection appears to preclude friendship, but Machiavelli advises the prudent prince to make use of them nonetheless, even as he does so himself.

Mansfield recognizes the significance of prudence in Machiavelli's thought, arguing that it constitutes a form of wisdom that transcends mere calculation. In his reading, Machiavelli's prudence requires not only an understanding of human nature but also the ability to balance competing interests and navigate moral ambiguities. Machiavelli's ruler must possess the capacity to recognize when to act decisively and when to exercise restraint, navigating the complex terrain of political relationships (secretaries, ministers, and allies), while remaining focused on acquiring and maintaining power. To the degree that Machiavelli has friends, Mansfield holds them to be the philosophers who have read his work and become captains in the achievement of his enterprise. Hankins, on the contrary, frames Machiavelli's views on prudence and friendship more squarely within the historical context of Renaissance politics and civic humanism. He emphasizes that Machiavelli's skepticism about personal relationships reflects the factional rivalries prevalent in Florence during his own lifetime. In a political environment that is characterized by shifting allegiances and betrayals, Machiavelli's insights become not only theoretical observations but practical

guidelines for survival in a volatile world. This understanding resonates with Machiavelli's broader goal of equipping princes with the tools necessary to navigate the treacherous waters of politics, ultimately prioritizing the securing and preserving of state over any personal loyalties.

The full extent of the Machiavellian enterprise, its ultimate aim and end, at least for Mansfield and those who read Machiavelli as he does, if not also for Hankins, will not, indeed cannot, be achieved in his own lifetime—or in that of his Florentine friends, with whom he discusses arms. Machiavelli means to engage philosophers to come across the centuries, and in this manner his enterprise means to found new modes and orders for modernity. In pursuit of this wholly new founding, the arms of those "captains" (the future philosophers who will travel further along the path that he first blazed) will be Machiavelli's own arms insofar as their work, too, will be governed by "the effectual truth" of his insight that the tyranny of *fortuna* and the sovereignty of necessity must be resisted by force, if human beings are to be liberated from its bonds: "in order that our free will not be extinguished" (Chapter XXV). The project, in other words, of Machiavelli and thus of his followers and friends, extends far beyond the practice of *realpolitik*, a political theory that Machiavelli inaugurated so as to prepare the way for his radical philosophy.

4. Reflections on Human Nature: The Power of *Virtù* over *Fortuna*

"Few works have caused such a stir as the treatise on the prince: it is here that Machiavelli teaches sovereigns to spurn religion, the rules of justice, the inviolability of pacts, and all this is sacred, when it is in one's own interest to do so. The fifteenth and the twenty-fifth chapters could be titled 'circumstances where it is suitable for the prince to be a villain.'" (Diderot 1765, p. 793).

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli's reflections on human nature underwrite his advice on how to acquire and maintain state. He contends that because human beings are fundamentally self-interested and unreliable, a ruler cannot depend on their loyalty. Rather, a ruler must be prepared to act ruthlessly when the situation demands it, utilizing force or deception to win and hold power. Machiavelli famously declares, in Chapter XV (as we have already noted), that princes who want to succeed in a world filled with those who are not all good, must "learn how to be not good, and how to use it or not use it, according to necessity". Once the shocking rejection of both classical and Christian morality as a guide to action has been openly stated, and the turn away from considerations of the best regime ("imagined republics and principates") is completed, Machiavelli quickly proceeds to choose "the effectual truth" with respect to *virtù*.

Machiavelli concludes the chapter with the assertion that the prince cannot hold to what are usually deemed to be virtuous qualities because "human conditions do not allow for it" (*per le condizioni umane che non lo consentano*). If adhering to these virtues would "ruin" the prince, then they must be let go, and he must conform instead to those qualities that may seem to be vice itself but which, adhering to them, would lead to "security and the good being his" (*la securità e il bene essere suo*). With that, the argument also rejects the power of imagination and images to form the soul—a word that Machiavelli never uses in *The Prince*.[8] Virtue will no longer be understood as an excellence of human soul but rather as the effective qualities that permit the prince to acquire and maintain a secure hold on his or her dominion. The surface teaching of *The Prince* is indecent and harsh: final causes cannot suffice to bring about the good "among so many who are not good", so Machiavelli refuses to "profess the good in every respect" (*in tutte le parte professione di buono*) and embraces only efficient causes. But he does refrain from recommending wickedness per se, since he counsels princes to be "prudent" (*è necessario essere tanto prudente*)—to act in

accordance with necessity, and thus to be "not good" when circumstances require. *Virtù* is the effectual truth.

In the following chapters, Machiavelli reflects upon the nature of justice among human beings in light of this reversal of the traditional understanding of virtue. He argues in Chapters XVI–XVIII that vices (parsimony and stinginess) are not only more prudent but also more just than virtues (liberality and generosity); that it is better for a prince to be feared than loved; and that because we find only the vulgar in this world, the effectual means to acquire and maintain state, no matter what actions are necessary, will always be judged honorable and praised. Human nature being what it is and the world being as it is, the prince cannot adhere only to what seems to be virtue or avoid what seems to be vice. The prince's mind (*animo*) must be able to grasp what must be done, not departing from the good, so far as is possible, but knowing how and when to "enter" the bad, when necessary (*non partirsi dal bene*, *potendo*, *ma sapere intrare nel male*, *necessitato*). Machiavelli never says, of course, that the end justifies the means. Only those who believe that the highest ends are possible for human beings in this world would be willing to go to such an extreme. It is the vulgar who look always toward the end or outcome, and they are deceived, judging only by appearance. Machiavelli touches the effectual truth and thus makes his profession that the prince must understand the nature of things and so know how to make use of the beast at times, that is, to use force, in order to secure both "reputation and state" (*la reputazione e lo stato*) among the vulgar.

To illustrate this point, consider Machiavelli's discussion in Chapters VII–VIII of the example of Cesare Borgia, who had "acquired state with the fortune of his father" (*acquistò lo stato con la fortuna del padre*) and "whom the vulgar called Duke Valentino" (*chiamato dal vulgo duca*). While his ruthless consolidation of power over the Romagna is often seen as exemplifying Machiavellian *virtù*, the effectual truth is that Borgia—despite his reputation among the vulgar—failed to maintain the state he had acquired. Machiavelli recommends to a new prince, who acquires through the arms of others and fortune, like Borgia, the "example of his actions" and his securing for himself "great foundations for future power". By means of his tactical use of force, his well-used cruelty, and his deception of enemies and friends, Cesare acquired arms of his own, and in so doing, he should be imitated. Summing up all the actions of the (so-called) Duke, Machiavelli says he "would not know how to find fault with him". His ability to instill fear rather than affection, and to create disorder in order to bring about new orders, especially through violence against his own captains, made him appear to be a model for effective rule, having "ascended to imperium with the arms of others".

The actions of Cesare Borgia seem exemplary of Machiavellian *virtù*. However, appearances can be deceiving, and Machiavelli goes on to accuse Borgia of making a fatal mistake. He did not secure himself against the election of his sworn enemy, Giuliano della Rovere, as Pope Julius II, after the death of his own father, Pope Alexander VI. This error resulted from Cesare's failure to recognize the nature of the great, who cannot be "made to forget old injuries by new benefits"—in this error Borgia had deceived himself, and "this was the cause of his ultimate ruin".[9] Whereas the Duke to whom the vulgar attributed such reputation had understood the things of war (as Machiavelli says in Chapter III of the French), he had failed to "understand the things of state". Machiavellian *virtù* must encompass both. The more interesting example of this consummate art belonged rather to the Pope who had ruined Cesare Borgia and therewith his father's "enterprise" (*impresa*).

Once he acquired the Church, which the French (also failing to understand the things of state) had let come to greatness—by loaning Alexander and Cesare the auxiliary arms by means of which the latter had conquer the Romagna, Pope Julius became the ruin of both. In the conquest of *fortuna*, which the French and Cesare Borgia falsely believed had overcome

them, Julius proved to possess the effectual truth. As the leader of the Church and the only warrior-pope that it has ever known, he adeptly wielded both spiritual and temporal power, leveraging his use of auxiliary arms to rather extraordinary military advantage (Chapter XIII) and succeeding in "all his enterprises". He found the Church great but then through his impetuous nature made the ecclesiastical principate powerful (Chapter XI). Julius, then, and not Cesare, it seems, is the prince who conquered fortune by means of *virtù*—and thus would appear to be worthy of imitation.

But again, appearances are deceiving, as Machiavelli makes perfectly clear. Pope Julius succeeded not despite fortune but rather because of it. His "impetuousness" worked always in his favor, given the circumstances, and thus Julius owed more to *fortuna* than *virtù*. Machiavelli, in reflecting upon human nature, explains in Chapter XXV that because Julius' nature happened to be in accord with the times, he did not learn his ruin: "Julius had conducted then, with his impetuous motion (*sua mossa impetuosa*), that which another pontiff, with all human prudence (*con tutta la umana prudenzia*), would never have conducted". This mode of proceeding, though it may have worked out for Julius, Machiavelli cannot recommend, for *if* the times or circumstances had changed, he would not have been able to deviate from those modes to which his nature inclined him, and so would have learned his ruin. "I conclude, therefore", states Machiavelli, that, "with fortune varying and men standing obstinate in their modes, they are happy when together they are in accord, and, when not in accord, unhappy". But nevertheless, in the absence of prudence, Machiavelli judges (*Io iudico bene questo*) "that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is woman (*la fortuna è donna*) and it is necessary, wishing to hold her down to beat her and control her". The advice to be impetuous as a means to conquer *fortuna, however,* is thus only recommended to those who cannot be prudent, which is the overarching quality of the Machiavellian prince who acts with *virtù*.

5. Fortune, Virtue, and the Science of Power in Machiavelli's *Prince*

Machiavelli, in Chapter XXV of *The Prince*, introduces an even more compelling metaphor of fortune as a river that can either benefit or devastate states, depending upon the preparation and actions of those who are prudent. This metaphor, which opens the penultimate chapter, should be read much more seriously than that of fortune as a woman. For it is by means of ordered virtue that fortune is overcome, or rather that the dangerous effects of fluctuating fortune are contained and mitigated. Here, Machiavelli acknowledges the fickle nature of *fortuna*, and indeed, the tendency of nature itself to behave erratically with respect to human affairs. But the fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves, according to Machiavelli. With prudence, human action and will can overcome the violent effects of the river fortune. Seeing from afar and preparing in advance for adversity, that is, "with industry making capital" (*ma con industria farne capitale*) in times of peace all for the sake of spending it in times of war and resisting the impetuousness of fortune (Chapter XIV), the destructive power of nature may be with *virtù* channeled, controlled, and conquered.

The imagery of fortune as river—unlike the reductive image of fortune as woman—suggests that, like a violent natural force, *fortuna* floods and overflow its embankments, causing the destruction of human conventions and institutions. However, its powerful impetus can be mitigated and even directed through human effort and ingenuity. Machiavelli's understanding of fortune anticipates the principles of modern natural science, where human beings harness knowledge, observation, and planning to control natural forces and thus shape their environment and circumstances to their needs and desires. Just as engineers construct dams to regulate the flow of a river, prudent princes and rulers employ strategy, foresight, and force to conquer fortune and secure their states.

This metaphor aligns with Mansfield's reading of Machiavelli, who sees the conquest of fortune as part of a broader understanding of the interplay between human action and unpredictable natural forces. According to Mansfield, Machiavelli's insights disregard the classical account of prudence, which counsels restraint and moderation, in understanding the power of human reason alone to be limited in its ability to overcome fortune and necessity, and to shape political outcomes to our will. Hankins, while agreeing with Mansfield on the importance of fortune, emphasizes the historical context in which Machiavelli operates. He points to the political instability of Renaissance Italy, marked by foreign invasions and internal strife, as deeply influencing Machiavelli's reflections on the need for adaptability and responsiveness to shifting political landscapes. But the metaphor of fortune as a river is particularly resonant in this context, as it underscores the necessity for prudent rulers and founders to anticipate what must be done and to build embankments that will ultimately, through the skillful practice of the art of war, control powerful forces unleashed by nature.

The metaphor of fortune as river contrasts sharply with the more commonly cited image of fortune as woman, and this duality reflects a tension within Machiavelli's thought: while he acknowledges the capricious nature of fortune, he also implies that it can be tamed and harnessed through action. Machiavelli's emphasis on the interplay between fortune and human agency underscores a critical component of his *realpolitik*. Leaders must recognize the limitations of their control over fortune, while also striving to exert influence where possible. This pragmatism is evident in Machiavelli's counsel to prepare for potential crises and to act decisively when opportunities present themselves. But the power of modern natural science, the project that Machiavelli has set in motion here in Chapter XXV, promises not only to control the adverse effects of *fortuna* in human affairs, but also to conquer nature itself. In so doing, the pragmatic navigation of seemingly uncontrollable forces, like necessity and *fortuna*, through *realpolitik*, no longer represents the full extent of Machiavelli's enterprise, the foundation for which begins with the new ordering of his arms. What is, therefore, being proposed by Machiavelli is a genuinely new way of life for human beings, in a world that is to be dominated by the effectual truth of modern science and based on a radical new understanding of nature as well as politics.

Machiavelli, indeed, has "written a useful thing for one who understands" (*l'intento mio scrivere cosa utile a chi la intende*), that is, as he explains in his Epistle Dedicatory, written for the one who has "diligently considered and read" his "little gift" (*piccolo dono*), and who thereby "will acquire that greatness which fortune and other qualities promise". Those who read Machiavelli diligently, and who understand the promise of his treatise, such as Francis Bacon, see that his work unveils a new science of power and an enterprise that will oppose fortune by establishing a prudent dominion over nature as well as human beings. In the metaphor of fortune as river, we witness the effectual truth of the matter. Contrary to those who have held and still hold the opinion (as Machiavelli says in Chapter XXV) that human prudence is helpless before fortune and God alike, or before either fortune or God, and that there is no remedy for human beings against being "governed by chance", Machiavelli has judged that "fortune may be the arbiter of half our actions", but the rest—which is the decisive majority—may yet be governed by us.

To believe that human affairs are ruled by fortune or God or chance, which Machiavelli cunningly implies for all intents and purposes are the same thing, is to choose to live indolently and be without proper arms—like the petty princes of Italy who lost their kingdom (Chapter XXIV). He declares himself inclined to the judgment that human industry, work, and care ("to sweat much over things") is the only way for human beings to oppose fortune and win back "state" (*lo stato*). Human beings ought not submit slavishly to the rule of natural forces, that is, the violence of flooding rivers, but rather with prudence build embankments to rule over matter, and thus over chance. To believe that human affairs,

that the things of the world, are subject wholly or mostly to chance is to not seek prudent remedies. To hold on to human agency is to reject the rule of fortune and God, which is really only the rule of matter and chance. Matter must be formed by the virtue of the mind (*animo*), rather than human minds being 'governed' by matter.

Instead of giving fortune any jurisdiction over human actions, and thus surrendering to her violent "impetus", Machiavelli means to take away fortune's power, or, if not take it away entirely, to learn to harness her power with prudence and direct it toward ends dictated by human beings. In quiet times, prudent human beings must build embankments and prepare defenses that can save our "state" (*lo stato*); which is to say, human beings, like prudent princes, must resist the violence of fortune with well-ordered arms and *virtù*. For it happens with fortune, Machiavelli sees, that she "demonstrates her power where there is no ordered virtue to resist her, and she turns her impetus where she knows embankments and defenses to hold her have not been built". Virtue must be given a definite order and shape by the founder, and that alone will save human beings from the violence and destructive power of chance, or fortune, or God. The Machiavellian enterprise against the tyranny of belief in a providential God is thus concealed in a metaphor about how the goddess *fortuna* may be opposed, and indeed conquered.

Modernity, the world that Machiavelli founds, is to be governed by human prudence, which always is improving or advancing its science of power. The narrative that defines this new world, the only world amenable to human beings, is a story of the omnicompetence of human beings to deal with the things of this world through prudent actions. If the actions or motions of nature (or fortune or God or chance) are not directed to human ends, the greatest need for human beings is the mastery of these motions—either in a mode that directs these inhuman motions towards more humane ends, or in a mode that protects human beings as much as is possible from the violent and unruly changes that these inhuman motions inevitably inflict, if left otherwise unchecked or unresisted. Necessity, without ordered virtue to resist it, forces human beings to accept their neediness and warrants our desire to acquire. But if human beings are to be successfully defended with virtue from the domination of fortune in this world, and if the liberty and dignity of their "state" is to be regained, the prudent princes of modernity must be persuaded by Machiavelli to turn their full attention, without illusion or fear, toward fighting the war that he has commenced waging under the banner of effectual truth. Temporary resistance to the harsh vicissitudes of fortune is not sufficient. The motto of modernity must be progress, and the science of power must advance. The Machiavellian enterprise demands nothing less than the conquest and subjugation of fortune.

6. Performing the Effectual Truth in Shakespeare's Plays

Critical to understanding the Machiavellian enterprise, and in particular his view of effectual truth, can be a quick study of the apparent reception of his works in the English Renaissance by William Shakespeare. Although the first printed English edition of Machiavelli's *Prince* did not appear until 1640, brought out by Edward Dacres, manuscript editions had been available for over a century. Moreover, the printers of Elizabethan England, like John Wolfe, had avoided the ban on publishing works of Machiavelli by printing Italian editions of *The Prince* and *Discourses* (in 1584) as well as several subsequent volumes of his writings (1587–1588), under a misleading papal imprimatur ostensibly with the date of 1550.[10] Shakespeare thus would have had access to Machiavelli's work, though a dearth of historical information about the dramatist necessarily limits any account of his reflections on Machiavelli to a survey of references or allusions in his dramatic works.

References to philosophy or philosophers are infrequent in Shakespeare's plays. But philosophical activity may be discerned in the thoughtfulness of a few characters in his

dramatic works, such as Prospero (*The Tempest*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*), Duke Vincentio (*Measure for Measure*), and Duke Theseus (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).[11] Each of the characters, in his or her own way, seems to possess unusual capacities of intellect that might be associated with philosophy. Yet even in these cases, it is striking that Shakespeare refrains from having the characters in their respective plays refer to them as philosophers, or as philosophic. Moreover, when a reference to "philosophy" or to a "philosopher" does occur in the plays, often the attribution is intended to be or is interpreted as ironic, insulting, or dismissive. In short, philosophy and philosophers are viewed with suspicion.

Socrates himself, the enigmatic founder of political philosophy, is mentioned only once in all the plays—and then only accidentally as the husband of "the cursest shrew", Xanthippe, who, in turn, is compared with Kate, whom Petruchio desires to acquire in *The Taming of the Shrew* (I.ii.66–77). Petruchio, for his part, however, not at all content to play a hen-pecked husband of a shrewish wife, like Socrates was to his Xanthippe, woos and wives his wild Kate more in a Machiavellian manner, if we are to judge from the "taming school" he is said to have founded (IV.ii.50–60). In a fashion reminiscent of a "Machiavel" indeed, Petruchio refuses to acquiesce to the harsh domination of Kate but instead means to conquer and acquire her as his own. His reign over her, as he claims, is "politicly begun"—an adverb sufficiently rare in Shakespeare for us to pay close attention; for it occurs only twice: in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (III.i.95–96) and in *Henry VI-Part 2* (III.i.331–347). Both instances are used to stress a Machiavellian approach to acquiring what one desires, the former openly referring to the "subtle" policy of a "Machiavel" and the latter used in the context of successful conspiracy.[12] When all is said and done, Petruchio appears to proceed in a mode that is expressly Machiavellian in character, even if appearances (as he and Machiavelli both know well) can be deceiving.[13]

To elaborate further on the evidence for Shakespearean responses to and reflections upon the works of Machiavelli is beyond the scope of this article.[14] One can see aspects of so-called Machiavellian policy in the devious contrivances of many cunning ministers and scheming political practitioners in the plays of Shakespeare, and named in the list of such despicable characters we find those who (like Cesare Borgia) are appealing and compelling, even if repugnant to our moral sensibilities—from Iago (*Othello*) and Edmund (*King Lear*) to Claudius (*Hamlet*), Richard (*Henry VI-Part 3* and *Richard III*), and Macbeth (*Macbeth*). A few are more subtle or well-intentioned in their maneuvers though their means cannot simply be justified without bending the rules of traditional morality to accommodate their actions—from Vincentio, the Duke of Dark Corners (*Measure for Measure*), and Hal, the future King Henry V (*Henry IV-Part 1* and *Henry IV-Part 2*), to Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*), Friar Lawrence (*Romeo and Juliet*), and Prospero (*The Tempest*). Others are treacherous and vile, and their plots distasteful and vicious (like Agathocles, Hannibal, or Remirro de Orca), even or especially if successful—from Don John (*Much Ado About Nothing*) and Aaron the Moor (*Titus Andronicus*), to Oliver Cromwell (*Henry VIII*).

At times, the references are allusive but striking. For example: the cruelty of the Christian Antonio, whose manipulation of the law to bring about a forced conversion of the Jew Shylock makes audiences cringe (in *The Merchant of Venice*), shares much with the "first king of the Christians", Ferdinand of Aragon, the King of Spain, whose "miserable and rare example" of "pious cruelty" towards the Marranos in his kingdom won him fame and glory (*Prince* XXI). Another example is evident in the skill with which someone like Iago, who is otherwise trusted and (seemingly) above reproach, is capable of playing the fox and manipulating appearances in an enterprise that seeks to conquer by deception rather than arms—a talent exhibited most of all by Pope Alexander VI, who, according to Machiavelli, "never thought about anything else but how to deceive men" and always found subjects upon whom to practice (*Prince* XVIII). Other aspiring princes of Shakespeare, such as the

Duke of Gloucester and Lady Macbeth, follow the teaching of Machiavelli in believing that "where there is no judge to whom to appeal, everyone looks to the end", and therefore one who is determined to rise through *virtú* rather than *fortuna* must dare to undertake whatever is necessary in order to acquire and maintain power: "for the vulgar are always taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in this world there is no one but the vulgar" (*Prince* XVIII).

If, in the end, these would-be new princes (to whom and for whom this "little work" on principates was written)[15] failed to attain that greatness which fortune and their other qualities promise (*Prince* Ep. Ded.), Machiavelli warns, let them not accuse fate or fortune but themselves (*Prince* XXIV). Had they learned Machiavelli's lesson regarding "the effectual truth", they would have known how "with industry to make capital in peaceful times" so as to be able to resist and to overcome fortune and her adversities (*Prince* XIV), and learned not only how "to be able to be not good, and to use it or not use it according to necessity" (*Prince* XV), but also how to be prudent and how to conduct themselves in such a mode as to be capable of governing the vicissitudes and violence of *fortuna*, "who demonstrates her power only where there is no ordered *virtù* to resist her" (*Prince* XXV).

7. The Enduring Legacy of the Machiavellian Enterprise

"We must show gratitude to Machiavel and other writers in this mode, who openly and without dissimulation profess what men are wont to do, not what they ought to do".[16]

To conclude, Machiavelli argues that those princes who want to acquire and maintain with virtue, rather than fortune, must be willing to use the necessary means to seek and secure power, even if it means acting contrary to established morality. The true end of human action is not moral virtue, for "it is a thing truly natural and ordinary to desire to acquire" (Chapter III)—human beings, princes and the vulgar alike, struggle to secure what is necessary. It is the effectual truth that to act virtuously for human beings is to act according to necessity. Prudence, to the degree possible, must see from afar what must be done in order to conquer fortune (as the example of the ancient Romans demonstrates in Chapter III); then, the necessary means must be embraced to accomplish it. This is the ordered virtue that seizes—or if necessary, makes—the occasion to introduce form into matter and, leaving nothing to fortune, fulfills the enterprise of the mind (as the examples of the greatest founders reveal in Chapter VI).

This understanding of *virtù* is founded upon the radical departure from traditional morality, which encumbers both prudent and necessary action, and it represents for us the Machiavellian enterprise with respect not only to politics but also to human affairs, which is at the heart of *The Prince*. The interpretation of Machiavelli's treatise by Strauss, Zuckert, Mansfield, and de Alvarez underscores this absolute rejection of moral virtue as a guide to conduct, contending that Machiavelli's realism extends beyond the political realm to human nature itself. For these diligent readers, Machiavelli is a revolutionary thinker who breaks with the classical and Christian tradition and then advocates for a mode of living that is liberated by prudence from necessity. The acquisition and maintenance of state is, for Machiavelli, not merely the aim of politics—*realpolitik* being the vague expression of this concept as a focus on pragmatic and practical success regardless of morality—but also "the effectual truth" that governs human beings in their natural and ordinary desire to acquire and thus to secure themselves against the vicissitudes that leave us in a condition of need. Overcoming *fortuna* with *virtù* is the mandate of the Machiavellian enterprise. Machiavelli, for his part, imitates the greatest examples of ordered *virtù* as the founder of modernity.

While many still view Machiavelli's thought as cynical or amoral, a deeper examination reveals a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of political life and the darker recesses of human nature. By acknowledging that political affairs must be governed by the

effectual truth, and not by professions of the good in imagined republics and principates, Machiavelli equips his princes with the arms to acquire and maintain state, utilizing both laws and force, in accordance with necessity. But ultimately, *The Prince* and Machiavelli's entire body of work serve as a testament to the enduring relevance of his insights beyond the impact of *realpolitik* in modern political affairs. Machiavelli's legacy endures through the Machiavellian enterprise that took as its most potent form in human affairs the project of modern natural science.

The true conquest that is accomplished by armed prudence and Machiavellian *virtù*, then, is not of *fortuna* simply, but a conquest of chance, nature, and necessity itself. Machiavelli denies that there is teleology in the nature of things, and thus there is an indifference (not to say, hostility) to human hopes for happiness. Our human situation reflects a vulnerability in the face of the non-beneficence of nature, from which professions of good alone cannot suffice to save us. So, the task of politics, according to Machiavelli, is to acquire and to maintain power, that is, to establish and to preserve a political order that defends human beings from the destructiveness of chance, or fortune (or God, as is implied in Chapter XXV), none of which cares for human beings. Ordered virtue alone, we are promised, will overcome natural forces and direct them to human ends. This call to arms represents the foundation of modern politics and the pursuit of effectual truth that is the enduring legacy of the Machiavellian enterprise.[17]

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 On Machiavellianism, see the article on "Machiavelisme" written by Denis Diderot for *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raissoné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers* (1765); see also, (Meinecke [1924] 1957). In this article, I do not intend the adjective "Machiavellian" or phrase "the Machiavellian enterprise" to be reduced to mere Machiavellism, but rather to invoke the meaning first proposed by the deliberate examination of what Machiavelli himself promises. See (Alvarez 1999). On Machiavelli's decisive turn and the execution of his enterprise by his captains, see (Mansfield 2023).

2 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV. The phrase *andare drieto* has been translated as "to go directly" but the language implies a more subtle reading of moving beyond or behind. On *concordia* in early Renaissance political thought, see (Skinner 1990; Hankins 2019, 2023). On political tumults, see (Pedullà 2018).

3 See (Mansfield 1996; Mansfield 2023; Zuckert 2017). Both chart their course by following the lead of (Strauss 1958).

4 See (Mansfield 2023, pp. ix–xiv, 3–70). This dark shadow of wickedness was cast over Machiavelli's *Prince* by some of his first readers, as in the treatises of the Neapolitan philosopher Agostino Nifo (*De regnandi peritia*, published 1523) and the English Cardinal Reginald Pole (*Apologia ad Carolum V*, published around 1539), whose polemical reading sought to rebuke the diabolical Machiavellian politics of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell, and the French Huguenot jurist Innocent Gentillet (*Anti-Machiavel*, 1578), whose influential view of the Florentine as a teacher of evil and friend of tyrants quickly spread across the Channel to Christopher Marlowe (*The Jew of Malta*, 1590) and William Shakespeare. Machiavelli's defenders also emerged immediately, from the first Florentine edition of *The Prince*, published by Bernardo Giunti (1532), which called upon Giovanni Gaddi in its dedication to defend the work from its detractors, to Alberico Gentili (*De legationibus*, 1585) and the reputed founder of modern natural science and Lord Chancellor, Francis Bacon (*Advancement of Learning*, 1605). On the reception of Machiavelli in and beyond his own times, see e.g., (Pedullà 2023, pp. 161–210).

5 See (Gish 2013). On Machiavellianism, either as a sickness or as an appealing high-spiritedness, see Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 4.21, and Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aph. 28. On going beyond the surface of Machiavelli, see (Strauss 1958, p. 99; Zuckert 2017, pp. 1–37; Mansfield 2023, pp. 33–70, 127–48).

[6] Francesco Guicciardini, *History of Italy*, I, Prologue. See Machiavelli, Letter 222, in (Atkinson and Sices 1996): "And because these things appall me, I should like to remedy them".

[7] See Machiavelli's Letters to and from Francesco Vettori, in (Atkinson and Sices 1996, pp. 221–70, esp. Letter 224): "When evening comes, I return home and enter my study. . .Fitted out appropriately, I step into the venerable courts of the ancients, where, solicitously received by them, I nourish myself on the food that alone is mine and for which I was born; where I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me".

[8] See (Alvarez 1999, p. 27): "The term *animo* may be translated as mind or spirit. [But] Machiavelli never uses the word for soul, *anima*, in *The Prince*, although he uses it elsewhere".

[9] Neither the death of his father, Pope Alexander VI, nor even his own illness, which Cesare Borgia himself told Machiavelli—"on the day that Julius II was made Pope"—was the only circumstance for which had not found "a remedy", was the effectual truth of the matter: Cesare's self-deception was the cause of his ruin. On the imprudent failures of Cesare Borgia and fortunate impetuosity of Pope Julius II, see (Najemy 2022, pp. 187–57, 158–225).

[10] For the circulation and reception of *The Prince* in Elizabethan England, see (Craig 1944, pp. xiii–xxxii). See also, (Orsini 1937; Raab 1964; Petrina 2009). The works of Machiavelli were placed on the Papal Index and banned from publication in 1550.

[11] See (Gish 2013, p. 215n1). "Philosophy" is mentioned explicitly fourteen times in Shakespeare's plays: three times each in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet* (III.iii.54–60); twice in *Hamlet* (I.v.175–176, II.ii.366–368) and *Julius Caesar* (IV.iii.144–145, V.i.104–111); and once in *As You Like It* (III.ii.21), *King John* (III.iv.50–52), *Love's Labor's Lost* (I.i.31–32), and *Troilus and Cressida* (II.ii.163–167). "Philosopher" occurs eleven times: three times each in *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*; twice in *As You Like It*; and once each in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Henry IV-Part 2*, while "philosophers" and "philosophical" appear once in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, respectively.

[12] Machiavelli's name is explicitly invoked three times in Shakespeare's plays: once each in *Merry Wives*, *Henry VI-Part 1* (V.iv.75, in reference to a seducer, Duke d'Alençon, said to be "that notorious Machiavel"), and *Henry VI-Part 3* (III.ii.195, in reference to another seducer, Duke of Gloucester and future Richard III, who boasts that he will so deceive to get what he wants that it will "set the murderous Machiavel to school).

[13] For an account of Petruchio's taming of Kate by means that appear but are ultimately not Machiavellian, see (Gish 2013). The art that Shakespeare has his Petruchio use to tame Kate is one of words rather than arms and thus shares more with the comedy of the subtle Florentine who authored *La Mandragola* than with that offending and immoral "Machiavel" who was reputed to have penned *The Prince*. Petruchio, in fact, approaches Kate as an impetuous river rather than a woman to be beaten down.

[14] On the influence of Machiavelli in the plays of Shakespeare, see e.g., (Spiekerman 2001; Roe 2002; Hollingshead 2004). The articles and book chapters that approach a reading or an interpretation of Shakespeare's plays from a Machiavellian perspective are too numerous to cite.

[15] Machiavelli, Letter to Francesco Vettori, 10 December 1513: "*E perché Dante dice che non fa scienza sanza lo ritenere lo havere inteso—io ho notato quello di che per la loro conversazione ho fatto capitale, e composto uno opuscolo De principatibus; dove io mi profondo quanto io posso nelle cogitazioni di questo subietto, disputando che cosa è principato, di quale spezie sono, come e' si acquistono, come e' si mantengono, perché e' si perdono*".

[16] Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, II.xxi.9: "*Est quod gratias agamus Machiavello et hujus modi scriptoribus, qui apertè et indissimulanter proferunt quod homines facere soleant, non quod debeant. . .Non recipit stultus verba prudentiæ, nisi ea dixeris quæ, versantur in corde ejus*". The quote continues thus: "For it is not possible to join serpentine wisdom with the columbine innocency, except men know exactly all the conditions of the serpent. . .that is to say, all forms and natures of evil. For without this, virtue lies open and unfenced. Nay, an honest man can do no good upon those that are wicked, to reclaim them, without the help of the knowledge of evil. For men of corrupted minds presuppose that honesty grows out of simplicity of manners, and believing preachers, schoolmasters, and men's exterior language. So as, except that you can make them perceive that you know the utmost reaches of their own corrupt opinions, they despise morality. A fool cannot receive words of wisdom, unless those things which you say dwell within his heart".

[17] See (Alvarez 1999, pp. 125–40). On the Machiavellian enterprise to secure the philosophical life, understood as the "autonomous study of nature," see (Pangle 2023, pp. 137–46, esp. 145–46). On Machiavelli as scientist, and the turn away from the perspective of art and concern for the soul toward effectual truth and modern natural science, see (Singleton 1953, pp. 169–89, esp. 182, 184, and 187–88). Finally, for Machiavelli's adumbration of modern natural science's understanding of nature, see *Discourses* III.39; and on the "novelty" and "magnitude" of Machiavelli's enterprise, see (Strauss 1958, pp. 24, 34–35, 43, 86, 105–106, and 316n47).

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