

Voegelin and Machiavelli vs. “Machiavellianism”

In today’s day and age, Machiavelli has been popularized “as the inventor or advocate of a “double morality” for private and public conduct[.]”¹ In public, a good prince “should appear all mercy, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion.”² Yet it is necessary for a “prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.”³ The practice of this alleged “double morality,” particularly of the immoral private side of it, has been termed “Machiavellianism.” Eric Voegelin describes this “Machiavellianism” as a “materialistic, nihilistic theory of politics.”⁴ Voegelin rejects this interpretation of Machiavelli, however. Instead, he argues that we should see in Machiavelli a “reversion to a pagan myth of nature” that “finds its fulfillment in the flowering of *virtù* into the order of the commonwealth.”⁵ It is not a double standard on morality that creates in most readers a sense of unease, but this paganism in the face of Christian spirituality and morality. The purpose of this essay will be to explicate this interpretation of Machiavelli.

Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is entirely concerned with practical politics. He does not attempt to discover any idealistic best regime as so many political philosophers before him had done. “[M]any have imagined republics and principalities that have never been

¹ Eric Voegelin, “The Order of Power: Machiavelli,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 22, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. IV, *Renaissance and Reformation*, eds., David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 83.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), Ch. XVIII, p. 70.

³ *Ibid.*, Ch. XV, p. 61.

⁴ Voegelin, p. 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.”⁶ He seeks only to explicate how politics *is*, not how it should be. To that end, Machiavelli demonstrates how best to acquire, maintain, and expand political power. But this is a rather ahistorical account thus far. It is necessary to put Machiavelli into historical context.

The era leading up to Machiavelli was characterized by the “medieval *Christianitas*...falling apart into the church and the national states.” This era was marked by the disintegration of imperial Christianity. It was the end of the feudal age and the consolidation of power into monarchical heads.

The decay of Christianity was of particularly immediate importance in Italy. This decay was caused by the degeneration of the papacy. It was the meddling of the popes that contributed to “prevent[ing] the rise to supremacy of one of the Italian powers, thus preventing the unification of Italy; and it [the papacy] even called in the barbarians to aid against the Italians.”⁷ It is for this reason that Italy was unable to resist what Voegelin describes as the trauma of 1494. The shifting yet fairly stable alliances that made up the balance of power between Milan, Venice, Florence, Naples, and the church-state was disrupted when Ludovico Sforza appealed to France to aid in the plundering of Milan. This resulted in the subsequent invasion of Italy by French, Spanish, and German invaders. “[T]he reduction of the Italian states to political impotence was an event without sense beyond the sphere of naked power,” the superior political and military organization of the Western monarchies.

⁶ Machiavelli, Ch. XV, p. 61.

⁷ Voegelin, p. 68.

It is at least partly in this light that we must understand Machiavelli's focus on power in politics. The decay of Christianity affected Italy in other deleterious ways as well, however. "The luxury and corruption of the papal court, second, is the cause of the moral corruption and irreligiousness of the Italian people; the church, thus, has destroyed the indispensable foundation of a healthy national republic."⁸ Not only the papacy, but Machiavelli doubted the value of Christianity itself. Christianity's otherworldly focus on transcendence "lowers our esteem for the honor of the world (*l'onore del mondo*). For the pagans, that honor was the highest good; and that is why they were more ferocious."⁹ In contrast to the pagan's placing value in greatness of soul and strength of body, the Christian is "to show his strength in suffering rather than in doing strong deeds."¹⁰ Thus did the ancients seem to Machiavelli to have a stronger love of freedom than his contemporaries (and perhaps ours as well). Whether this is the fault of Christianity, or a villainous interpretation of it, as Voegelin suggests, is not within the scope of this paper to explore.

At least two other factors played an important role in setting the background for Machiavelli's political thought. One is the humanistic historiography of the age, whose purpose it was "impress governments abroad and increase the prestige of the state."¹¹ The choice of the humanists to use Livy as their model had...

...certain consequences insofar as the treatment of history had to concentrate on such exciting events as wars and revolutions to the exclusion of the permanent factors and the long-range developments that determine the texture of history. Moreover, in the interest of rhetorical and dramatic effectiveness, the individual had to become the center of action to such a degree that again the permanent determinants that in fact leave

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 41.

not so much room for heroic freedom were obscured. The Roman model had, furthermore, the effect of a radical secularization of political problems. The humanistic concentration on the history of the republic in the Roman manner entailed the break with the Christian view of history. The rigidly closed stream of secular state history did not admit a divine Providence governing a universal history.¹²

“History is written from the point of view of the territorial state; the criterion for judging political action is the advantage of the country; what is implied in this restriction is in fact a theory of national sovereignty independent of empire.”¹³

The other important factor is the Asiatic background that influenced Western civilization. The westward pressure over the course of recorded history of Asiatic civilizations resulted in the Great Migration of the Germanic tribes, but more importantly for our purposes, also resulted in invasions by the Mongols and the Turks. The figure of Timur (also known as Tamerlane), particularly as he is presented in the humanistic literature, is echoed in Machiavelli’s ideal prince, his tension between *virtù* and *fortuna*, and in his table of values. The ideal prince should, like Timur, rise from a lowly birth by acquiring power with his own *virtù* and using it to establish order.¹⁴

Even if *fortuna* deterministically governs human affairs, Machiavelli prefers, “so that our free will not be eliminated,”¹⁵ to maintain that it governs only half of our actions. The other half of our actions, determined by *virtù*, can bend *fortuna* to our will. Machiavelli describes *fortuna* as a woman, with whom it is better to act impetuously than cautiously in order to succeed. A man with *virtù* can seize the opportunities provided him by changing circumstances.

¹² Ibid., pp. 41-42.

¹³ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 52; Machiavelli, Ch. VI.

¹⁵ Ibid., Ch. XXV, p. 98.

In *The Discourses* Machiavelli adopts Polybius' classification of government into six types and his cycle of civilizations.¹⁶ Three are bad, and the three that are good are nevertheless flawed due to their inherent tendency to degenerate into the bad forms. Machiavelli adopts a mixed form of government, the republic – in which elements of principality, aristocracy, and democracy are balanced – as the most stable. A prince with great *virtù* is required to found a strong, well-ordered, and lasting republic, however. But even a well-founded republic will eventually decline, eventually requiring another strong prince to restore order. Thus we have in *The Prince* Machiavelli exhorting a new prince to arise, unify Italy, and liberate her from the barbarians.¹⁷

We are now able to understand Machiavelli's ethics as a "reversion to a pagan myth of nature" that "finds its fulfillment in the flowering of *virtù* into the order of the commonwealth."¹⁸ He does not advocate the acquisition and use of power for one's own sake, as is evidenced by his treatment on the criminal Agathocles. Power is only the means to an end, a certain value, that of a well-ordered commonwealth. It is for this end that Machiavelli advocates that a prince must learn how and when not to be good. This is the fundamental paradox of well-intentioned politics. To achieve a supposed good, it is sometimes necessary to be bad. Leaving aside the quarrelsome yet traditional notion that there is a necessary conflict between the moral and the practical, the apparent hypocrisy of Machiavelli's ethics in light of Christianity is revealed as having pagan spiritual

¹⁶ Nicolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), I.2.

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. XXVI.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

implications. “For Machiavelli, the expediency and immorality of action do not affect the destiny of the soul; his is holy, and has found its destiny, when it manifests its *virtù* in the world.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Voegelin, p. 84.