

RETHINKING PLATO'S PLACE IN MACHIAVELLI'S THOUGHT:
PHILOSOPHY AND CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE MACHIAVELLIAN CORPUS

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May 2018

Major Subject: Political Science

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation re-examines the relationship between Machiavellian and Platonic political philosophies. Machiavelli scholars have argued for years that Machiavelli is so completely hostile and dismissive of Plato that it precludes the need for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the two thinkers' political philosophies, without taking into consideration whether or not we ought to factor in the unavoidable presence of Christian Neoplatonism around Machiavelli in our assessment of his situation vis-à-vis Platonism.

In line with the very recent work of scholars such as Miguel Vatter and Giovanni Giorgini, I argue that what is considered to be Machiavelli's hostility to Plato is in fact opposition to the Neoplatonist interpretations of Plato that circulated in Florence in the XV and XVI centuries. Comparing the two authors after filtering out Neoplatonism highlights not only unprecedented areas of agreement, but also deepens our understanding of the role of aesthetics and philosophy for Machiavellian political education.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Claire Bogiaris, a tireless lover of knowledge and my greatest supporter throughout this academic journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe gratitude first and foremost to my dissertation co-chairs, Drs. Cary Nederman and Diego von Vacano. Dr. Nederman has been more than an advisor throughout the years. His support, both academic and personal, has often been an island of solace in an ocean of difficulty. Without it I surely would not have succeeded in this journey, and he deserves a great share of credit for any merit this thesis may have. I know that at times my stubbornness and our intellectual differences have tested Dr. Nederman's patience, and he deserves immense gratitude for the generosity and graciousness he has shown during my graduate years at A&M. Dr. Nederman's phenomenal intuition for career timing and professional development deserves special praise. He has demonstrated more times than I can count he knew better than I where I was in my academic growth and what I should be doing, especially at times when he believed in my potential and the value of my work more than I did myself.

Dr. Diego von Vacano also has my unending gratitude. Dr. von Vacano's brand of mentorship helped a great deal in the development of my academic autonomy. I am especially thankful for all the opportunities he created for me to meet preeminent scholars in the field, develop new skills, and further ameliorate my writing and research skills. Throughout my tenure at A&M Dr. von Vacano was a tough but fair advisor, and – thankfully – was always there to remind me during difficult times that disagreement among academics was normal and healthy.

In particular, Dr. von Vacano made possible our conference “Machiavelli Between Past and Future” during my first year of doctoral studies. Most of the top Machiavelli scholars in the world attended the conference. Over its course I had the incredible opportunity to present a paper alongside them, and to benefit from their knowledge. Thanks to Thomas Pangle, Maurizio Viroli, Harvey Mansfield, Nathan Tarcov, Erica Benner, Jarrett Carty, William Parsons, and Steven Smith for their participation and their contributions to “Machiavelli Between Past and Future”, where the idea for my dissertation was born.

For their guidance and feedback on the later and more developed iterations of that dissertation, I wish to thank Dr. Judith Baer and Dr. Craig Kallendorf.

Thanks also to Dr. Miguel Vatter and Dr. Benedetto Fontana, who generously shared with me some of their works in progress and allowed me to reference them in this dissertation.

Thanks also to Dr. Karen Bollerman for her thoughtful advice, both personal and academic. Dr. Bollerman always has a word (or a dinner!) of support for struggling graduate students, and thanks to her cheerful positive reinforcement my time here was greatly facilitated.

Over the five years of my doctoral studies at A&M I have had the amazing chance to have outstanding colleagues who turned into good friends. I grew to admire Thiago Silva, Benjamin Peterson, Josiah Barrett, Blake Garcia, Clayton Webb, David Switzer, Mallory Compton, Angel Luis Molina, Megan Dyer, Bradley Goodine, Austin McCrea and Matt Wester. To all, I am immensely grateful for your friendship and for the chance

I had to learn from you. I especially want to thank the one and only David Boller, one of my few Texan friends outside the academy, for making College Station feel like a home.

I also wish to thank some faculty members at Texas A&M who were not directly involved in my dissertation work. Observing Dr. Bill Clarke taught me immensely valuable lessons about leadership. Thanks to Dr. Dwight Roblyer and Dr. Joe Ura for the plethora of invaluable lessons they taught me about, well, teaching. I have become a better political scientist and student of the politics of race, ethnicity and gender under the tutelage of Dr. Michelle Taylor-Robinson. I would also like to thank Dr. Taylor-Robinson for her ever-enthusiastic support, kindness, availability, professional mentorship, and all the opportunities she created for me. *Grazie mille* to Dr. Federica Ciccolella of Texas A&M's International Studies Department for helping me perfect my Greek and Italian. Finally, without the help of Dr. Alexander Pacek and his particular brand of graduate directorship during my first couple of years, I would have almost certainly never completed the program.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my two best friends, Alex Gagnon and Alex Caron, for their support and loyalty. Our decades-long friendship has made me tougher, smarter, more resilient, more perseverant, and overall better than I could have ever hoped to become had you guys not been around. I will never be able to repay all you did for me since I moved to Texas, let alone since we met. *Merci les gars*.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of co-chairs Professor Cary J Nederman and Professor Diego A von Vacano as well as Professor Judith Baer of the Department of Political Science, and Professor Craig Kallendorf of the Department of English.

Dr. Miguel Vatter and Dr. Benedetto Fontana have graciously accepted to share with me works in progress and let me use them extensively over the four main chapters of this dissertation.

The author completed independently all other work conducted for the dissertation.

This work was made possible in part by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), under the SSHRC's Doctoral Fellowship. It was also made possible by the Graduate Research Fellowship of Texas A&M's Melburn G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research. The author also wishes to acknowledge the support of the Glasscock Center's Small Conference Grant, the Political Theory Convocation of Texas A&M's Department of Political Science (now the Ethics and Political Science Workshop) and the Joe Long Chair in Democratic Studies at TU-Austin, all of which made possible the advent of our conference "Machiavelli Between Past and Future" in February 2013.

The contents of this dissertation are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of the SSHRC, Texas A&M's Glasscock

Center for Humanities Research, Texas A&M's Department of Political Science Ethics and Political Science Workshop, and/or the Joe Long Chair in Democratic Studies at TU-Austin.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION¹

The impetus for this project is a realization I had six years ago, shortly before writing my application for admission to the political science PhD program at Texas A&M. Reading Machiavelli's praise of Numa (the second king of early Rome, who came right after Romulus himself), who pretended to be intimate with a nymph, alongside Plato's myth of the metals, I noticed certain interesting core similarities. Namely, Machiavelli's discussion of Numa is prompted by a political problem (that is however only mentioned *post-facto*): what is one to do (especially when the one in question is a legislator or political leader) when he or she possesses a truth that does not contain in itself the necessary requirements to persuade people of its truthfulness through simple exposition?²

That particular question implies a series of interesting notions commonly absent from treatments of Machiavelli's philosophy. First, Machiavelli seems to posit that there are truths that one can possess, or know. This alone is controversial: Machiavelli is not known, in the secondary literature or otherwise, to dabble with concepts such as true knowledge (versus opinion) and its acquisition. Furthermore, this question implies that human intellectual potential (or at least that of Numa's constituents) is such that being exposed to something that is true may not be sufficient to recognize it as such, and therefore the legislator may have to resort to alternate modes of persuasion. This is not

¹ This dissertation follows the style of the *Review of Politics*.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 34.

so controversial: Machiavelli is clear about the potential for human learning in the *Prince*, as he divides people into three categories according to their potential for knowledge acquisition, of the ‘three kinds of brains.’

The three-brains theory of classification is a hierarchical one. The simplest brain understands nothing (and it is ‘useless’), the second has the potential to understand what is explained to ‘it’,³ and the third can understand good and evil by itself, and has ‘inventiveness,’ i.e., creative capabilities.⁴ Machiavelli expresses a clear preference for the (third) creative brain. If we apply that theory when thinking about Numa’s constituents, this seems to imply that polities (or political masses) are overwhelmingly composed of people with the first (lesser) kind of brain. If the proportion of the second and third kind of brains, added together, surpassed that of the first kind of brain in numbers, then allegedly there would be no truths that do not possess in themselves the necessary elements to persuade people. It would suffice to explain the reasons behind this truth to the people for a majority of it to understand said truth and recognize it as truthful. It may also imply that there are truths that can only be grasped intuitively or emotionally, as opposed to rationally. In both cases, however, it speaks to a more fundamental problem of politics implied by Machiavelli’s philosophy: good policies may not be recognized by the people over whom they are to be implemented, and as such the people’s lack of cognitive refinement (not to say idiocy) may hinder policy implementation, even if said policies would benefit them.

³ I use ‘it’ here because there is no indication that Machiavelli thought difference in gender implied ownership of one of the kinds of brains or another.

⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 92.

How did Numa circumvent that problem? He pretended to have supra-natural knowledge of politics as a result of having been with a Nymph. Supernatural beings such as Nymphs were essentially considered demigods, and thus in possession of knowledge about human affairs that exceeded the maximal human potential. Accordingly, their knowledge was taken to be systematically superior to any form of human opinion. Numa was able to manipulate popular superstition into making his subjects believe in the quality of his policy. He did so through a lie about access to a kind of political knowledge he knew his subjects were going to receive as not only above his and their own, but also *de facto* correct by virtue of its divine essence.

In light of this, we have a right to wonder if Machiavelli thought lying and manipulation were the only ways out of the political conundrum created by low mass intelligence. Matters quickly become more complex as we realize that he clearly did not think so. Such ignorance and confusion in a city leads, of course, to conflicts and prevents the implementation of good modes and orders. But “for as many are not capable of ordering a thing because they do not know its good, which is because of the diverse opinions among them, so when they have come to know it, they do not agree to abandon it.”⁵ Once a certain good policy is implemented, then, it seems that time (and we can assume positive effect) will eventually convince the people of its quality. Furthermore, Machiavelli often repeats that the triumvirate of “good laws, good arms and good

⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 29.

education” is the hallmark of all great polities and that “good examples arise from good education, good education from good laws.”⁶

From that Machiavellian statement emerges the driving force behind my project. Machiavelli thought that we learned (and achieved political greatness) through the study of the great examples of the past, in part because they can inform us on how to best act in a given political situation. This is because history was, if not cyclical, at least repetitive. And so through the ‘similarity of accidents’ we can recognize situations that may have been dealt with well or badly by humans of the past, and act accordingly so as to bring the desired result (or at the very least avoid a similar failure). But this also means that if laws are ordered well, then education can give rise to the kind of individual we may want to emulate in the future. This means that some relevant number of individuals may be educable, and that the classification of brains may not be completely static. Or if it is, then the second and third tiers need at least to be exposed to good examples in order to rise to excellence. That kind of exposition, we can surmise, would constitute (if only partially) what we could call proper Machiavellian education.

Therefore, the question that remains to be answered is: how do we learn and what should we learn, according to Machiavelli? My answer is: a mixture of the political history of antiquity as well as ancient political philosophy. The first one because of the essentially repetitive nature of history and the second because it grants individuals the perspective only political philosophers (such as Machiavelli) can have.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

Why ancient philosophy? It appears – surprisingly - that we have an agreement in principle between Machiavelli and Plato with regard to a few matters. It will happen that a leader will possess a policy or set of policies that he knows to be beneficial but also knows risks becoming unacceptable to the people he rules. That is shown by Socrates, and Adeimantus’, agreements about the necessity of ‘lies in speech’ that will lead to the crafting of the noble lie at the end of *Republic* II. Machiavelli and Plato share a deep skepticism about the maximal potential intelligence of the masses. Because they recognize that it may be harmful to bringing about a desirable state within the polity (although it is worth noting that they do not seem to agree on what that state is, but more on that later), they propose lying as an alternative method of political persuasion.

But not just any kind of lying will do. They both propose a type of lie that is predicated on the pretense of possession of supernatural knowledge otherwise inaccessible to the masses and irrefutable by virtue of coming from an intellectually superior source. In the case of Socrates and Adeimantus this takes the form of myth-creating, i.e., pretending to know a fundamental truth about human origins and human nature that has implications about how society should be ordered to reflect human essence. In the case of Numa it is simple deception about access to supernatural knowledge that allows him to pass legislation unimpeded by opposition from potential dissenters who lack a superior authority to appeal to. Nevertheless, Machiavelli praises both the deceptive technique and the orders Numa decided to implement (despite omitting their exact nature).

Machiavelli's philosophy and the myth of the metals share another similarity. Like Machiavelli's classification of human beings as possessing one of three kinds of brains, the myth of the metals divides human beings into three distinct categories: the 'bronze' and 'iron' souls, who are destined to be craftsmen (the lowest class); the 'silver' souls, destined to be soldiers (the intermediate class); and the 'gold' souls, destined to be leaders, and who are also philosophers. Like Machiavelli, Plato seemed to suppose the highest member of the political hierarchy was a philosophical type, whom he also thought distinguished him or herself by the capacity not only to understand but also to create political orders. And what is Socrates, the essential philosopher, doing in the *Republic*, but creating myths in order to suggest the nature of the correct political order?

The state of the literature

As Diego von Vacano rightly argued,⁷ Machiavelli's enterprise is heavily indebted thematically to the concept of appearance, or aesthetics. Machiavelli evidently conceived of himself as someone who sought to bring political philosophy back toward reality, the 'effectual truth' of things.⁸ He thought that the difference between what political actors appeared to be and what they were (as well as the common man's general inability to tell one from the other) was essential to the art of political ruling. He repeatedly encourages aspiring leaders to appear to be someone that the general populace would neither hate nor comprehend. But he also recognized the possibility for images and aesthetics to be harmful. His famous injunction to depart from "imaginary

⁷ Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

⁸ Machiavelli, *Prince*, 61.

republics and principalities that have never been known to exist”⁹ is a good example of one of those instances where he acknowledges the harm done by inventions (made by others).

So did Plato. The *Republic* is filled with references to the (potentially harmful) power that images, imagination, and incorrect representations of the Good have on the human mind and therefore on politics (especially if we consider myths and myth-making a creative exercise in aesthetics). The well-known ‘allegory of the cave’ is a clear example of this. The essential ignorance of the cave-dwellers consists in the fact that they labor under the illusion that projections (the famed shadows) of representations of actual concepts and things constitute reality. It is the conviction that these projections are real that became known as the Socratic concept of ‘double ignorance’ (not knowing that one does not know the nature of a thing). These shadows are the result of more or less durable representations of reality (puppets) being projected onto the cave-wall by an approximation of the light of the sun (which symbolizes the Good), i.e., a small fire. Both the fire and the puppets are the creations of politicians, artists and craftsmen (the three classes of people Socrates investigates, since they are the ones who pretend to hold knowledge of human nature and society, as per *The Apology*), according to Socrates. It is not surprising that from there, Socrates goes on to question the validity and social worth of the values communicated through myths such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

Certainly, Machiavelli’s injunction to depart from the ‘imaginary principalities and republics that have never been known to exist’ can easily be interpreted as a quip

⁹ Machiavelli, *Prince*, 62.

directed at *Kallipolis*, the imaginary ideal regime invented by Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Republic*. From there it is not too hard to jump to the conclusion that there is a deep intellectual hostility on the part of Machiavelli that is directed at Platonic tenets. This is what scholars in the field have assumed until now. Those influenced by Leo Strauss, like Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, point to Machiavelli's conspicuous silence about fundamental aspects of Platonic philosophy. They also argue that his criticism of Renaissance Platonism testifies to his rejection of Plato¹⁰ and suggests sympathy to Xenophon's political philosophy instead. Readers of Strauss have adequately characterized his argument when they wrote that he thought Machiavelli "sought to destroy the Christian-Platonic tradition that maintained that contemplative life was the best form of human existence."¹¹

My work asks, however, about the part of the Platonic tradition that is not Christian. Is it possible that, if we do the work of distancing Plato from the Neo-Platonists with whom Machiavelli was unarguably in disagreement, we could still say his philosophy aims to 'destroy' the Platonic tradition? My answer, in short, is no. Themes such as education, knowledge of the good, virtue, and good laws are central to the philosophy of both Machiavelli and Plato. Moreover, Plato's philosophy, either

¹⁰ Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, "Introduction," in Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xx.

¹¹ Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 9.

though manuscripts, translations,¹² or its general influence on Medieval and Renaissance thought, was an inescapable part of Machiavelli's intellectual world.¹³

The general stance of the literature is to assume a *de facto* irreconcilable antagonism between Machiavelli and Plato. Strauss brushes away the possibility of agreement between them,¹⁴ and Tarcov/Mansfield take it so categorically for granted that they only picture Machiavelli to be in dialogue with Aristotle, of all ancient philosophers.¹⁵ Catherine Zuckert, in her recent book *Machiavelli's Politics*, develops that same stance to a larger extent than her predecessors. In Zuckert's view, Machiavelli's primary challenge to ancient philosophy is that it fails to show how it can improve the lives of the people in actuality.¹⁶ Although her position is somewhat mediated later, she argues that it is the overly theoretical nature of Platonic philosophy that ultimately led Machiavelli to criticize it. Machiavelli's achievement was to propose a view of politics where he, the philosopher, showed "the ambitious how to organize the lives of their people so that they live more safely and prosperously."¹⁷ Other scholars in the field, such as Paul Rasmussen,¹⁸ when thinking about Machiavelli's relation to other ancient authors, always go straight from Plato to Xenophon. Granted, Xenophon was not

¹² James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol. I (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 298.

¹³ Mansfield and Tarcov, "Introduction," in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, xxxvii.

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

¹⁶ Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ Paul J. Rasmussen, *Excellence Unleashed* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

‘Christianized’ by Renaissance philosophers as Aristotle and Plato were, and Machiavelli mentions Xenophon more often than both Plato and Aristotle.

Another way to approach Machiavelli’s relationship to ancient philosophy is by way of the authors he liked. His affection for *De Rerum Natura*, the famous poem of Epicurean cosmology by Lucretius, has been widely and convincingly documented. One can say that engaging Epicureanism is to engage Platonism by the *via negativa*, since the two schools of thought were famously pitted against each other.¹⁹ Machiavelli himself said that when it is impossible to denigrate one view, a covert way to do so is to praise one’s enemy’s enemy. As such it would be dishonest not to treat his affection for Epicureanism as an expression, at least in part, of some manner of skepticism towards Platonism.

Machiavelli’s Lucretian proclivities may not have been imputable to some sympathy of his for Epicurean moral philosophy. Thanks to Ada Palmer’s meticulous scholarship we know that Machiavelli’s primary interest in the poem may have been the implications of atomism, and not its Epicurean ethical content. Palmer writes

It may seem surprising, then, that Machiavelli does not annotate the sections of the *De Rerum Natura* that focus on Epicurean moral philosophy, which 59 percent of readers market. This indicates that Machiavelli was not particularly interested in the Epicurean views on love, virtue, and vice, which were, though radical by Christian standards of his day, considerably less radical than the consequentialist ethics Machiavelli was himself in the process of developing. Rather, Machiavelli the Radical Moral Philosopher is present in his exceptional interest in Epicurean cosmology, whose materialism and functionless gods enable one to divorce moral philosophy from divine concerns. He

¹⁹ Jill Kraye, “The Revival of Hellenistic Philosophies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, edited by James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 103.

demonstrated particular interests in the arguments against deterministic providence, and in the swerve, centering on the question of how to make room for human free will in a materialistic universe.²⁰

Palmer seems in a sense to be reading back into the marginalia she interprets from the starting point of notions she already held about the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. Her argument suggests Machiavelli to have been a reader looking to *De Rerum Natura* in order to consolidate a series of philosophical conclusions that Palmer tacitly extrapolates that Machiavelli had already clearly formulated and intellectually committed to. Palmer's Machiavelli is not a devoted disciple of Lucretian Epicureanism, but rather a lonely innovator looking for intellectual support in the writings of fellow philosophers.

Alison Brown, in her book *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*,²¹ traces the various Lucretian influences on and around Machiavelli. She paints a picture of him as a thinker whose ideas subtly bear the mark of Lucretius' thought. She argues, for example, that Machiavelli's famous skepticism about the mortality of the soul (a deeply anti-Platonic stance) is in part due to his Lucretian sympathies.²² To Brown, Machiavelli's use of images and imagination is a tool of political analysis aimed at discerning truth, an idea not coincidentally similar to Lucretius' idea that people get to the nature of things when adversity rips away the protective layer of appearances men wrap around themselves. In Brown's view, Machiavelli's plays convey the Lucretian

²⁰ Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 85.

²¹ Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²² *Ibid.*, 82.

notion that “life itself is spectacle like a theater, to be viewed as a spectator with the same imagination or fantasia with which we view theatrical representations.”²³

According to her argument, it seems that most things of import in Machiavelli’s thought can be traced back in whole or in part to Lucretius. Chiron the centaur and the animals of *L’Asino* reflect Lucretian attachment to savage primitivism. In accordance with Lucretius’ thought, Machiavelli thought animals are better suited to survival than humans. And “Machiavelli’s utilitarian account of the origins of justice [...] can be traced back to Lucretius and Epicurus [...]”²⁴ In the end, all of these Lucretian moments in Machiavelli’s thought mean to Brown that he was trying to convey the idea “that religion was based on fear and should be used in the service of politics and not as [the master of animals and humans].”²⁵ While this much is certainly true, Brown seems to ignore an important part of the picture. My discussion of Numa, the central figure of this debate about the importance of religious manipulation in the *Prince*,²⁶ will attempt to develop what Brown misses.

Three years earlier than Brown, Paul A. Rahe had laid the grounds for her argument in a very significant article. It takes an even more uncompromising stance on Machiavelli’s relationship to Ancient Greek thought and Epicureanism. Rahe starts off strong:

If there was any classical author to whom Machiavelli was profoundly beholden, it cannot, then, have been Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon,

²³ Ibid., 83.

²⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

²⁵ Ibid., 87.

²⁶ See also Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli : Storia del suo pensiero politico* (Bologna : Il Mulino, 1980), 511-513.

Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle or Polybius. Nor can it have been Cicero, Sallust, Seneca, Tacitus, Suetonius or even Titus Livy – for, though the Florentine read and profited from them all, he rejected the premise of differential moral and political rationality on which their thinking was grounded, and he drew conclusions concerning the ends of government diametrically opposed to theirs.²⁷

For all the intensity and uncompromising confidence of his thesis, Rahe's work here is at best mildly persuasive. That Machiavelli had Epicurean influences and Epicurean sympathies is established convincingly. But Rahe does very little argumentative work to support the part of his position that excludes influence from all the other thinkers listed above that were not Lucretius and Epicurus. Rahe regularly gestures throughout his article toward passages that he thinks reflect Epicurean principles entrenched by Machiavelli in his works, but he offers very little exegesis to support these assertions. He sometimes wrongly assumes that certain so-called 'Epicurean' elements of Machiavelli's thought imply incompatibility with other Greek thinkers. For example, he interprets Machiavelli's description of the masses of commoners, the *vulgus*, as "a common crowd of men beset by superstition and care,"²⁸ to be an exclusively Lucretian concept. We have every reason to doubt that this is a strictly 'Lucretian' or 'Epicurean' concept. One of the few things generally known about Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon outside academic circles is how skeptical they were about the average human's intellectual potential, and how likely lowly-educated, non-philosophical types were to fall prey to incorrect opinions. This is an idea Machiavelli

²⁷Paul A. Rahe, "In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli's Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 28, no 1 (Spring 2007): 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

also shared. Rahe constantly mentions how “hard to distinguish” Machiavelli’s discussion of key concepts like necessity and fortune are from the universe of *De Rerum Natura*, but he never cares to engage in the textual analysis that would be needed to convince his readers of the veracity of such a statement.²⁹

Rahe’s case that Machiavelli eventually breaks with Epicureanism in spite of his intellectual debt to it is equally unconvincing. He argues that Machiavelli ultimately took issue with Epicureanism on account of the following precept: the best life can only be led outside of the public sphere.³⁰ Rahe argues that to Machiavelli, there is no distinction between the personal, moral and political spheres and that consequently there is no reason for his interpreters to think that the garden of Epicurus is any less of an imaginary republic or principality than, say, Plato’s *Kallipolis* or the New Testament’s Kingdom of Heaven. In the end, the only really palatable proposition forwarded in this article is that *l’Asino* may be one of Machiavelli’s most thoroughly Epicurean work.³¹ This is the idea Brown seems to build on in her later book.

Note what my argument is not saying: that Machiavelli was fundamentally sympathetic to the Platonic philosophical enterprise broadly understood. Erica Benner has recently defended a version of this thesis. Benner argues that Machiavelli’s “manner and matter of writing are deeply indebted to Greek ethics,” and thus that he is much closer to his contemporary humanists than had previously been assumed.³² Benner’s book failed to have a great impact on the field and garnered little critical acclaim. Even

²⁹ Ibid., 48.

³⁰ Ibid., 52.

³¹ Ibid., 43.

³² Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

counting Benner's efforts, treatment of a philosophical debate between the two authors remains practically absent from the literature. I intend to argue that the conceptual relationship between Machiavelli's and Plato's respective philosophies is not as antagonistic as is currently assumed by scholars in the field. However, this does not necessarily mean that Machiavelli directly intended to communicate some sympathy for Platonic thought to his readers.

Since I began this project several years ago, some further work has been done on the subject, work that thankfully makes mine seem less controversial and isolated in a sea of disagreeing voices (voices that belong to far more experienced scholars than I). Miguel Vatter argues in a forthcoming paper titled "Of Asses and Nymphs: Machiavelli, Platonic Theology and Epicureanism in Florence"³³ that Machiavelli's philosophical poem *L'Asino* exemplifies a turn towards Platonic animalism. Giovanni Giorgini, in an essay in the recently published collection *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*,³⁴ aligns Plato and Machiavelli in two ways. According to him, Plato's philosophical project, like Machiavelli's, is predicated on the notion that the ruler will have to use evil means to achieve the good. Furthermore, Plato also identified the "central problem that would consume Machiavelli," namely, the problematic relationship between the ruler's virtue

³³ Miguel Vatter, "Of Asses and Nymphs: Machiavelli, Platonic Theology and Epicureanism in Florence," *Forthcoming*.

³⁴ Giovanni Giorgini, "Machiavelli on Good and Evil: The Problem of Dirty Hands Revisited," in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, eds. David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati and Camila Vergara (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017).

and chance, i.e., that no matter how virtuous or capable, political actors were doomed to forever be at the mercy of *fortuna* to some extent.³⁵

Let me clarify that there still is no doubt in my mind that the most idealistic elements of Platonic philosophy, especially those having to do with the possibility or desirability of a class of ruler dedicated to the contemplative life, have no place in Machiavellian thought and are treated with contempt and dismissed by Machiavelli. But that angle of Plato's thought was mostly the one promoted by the Neo-Platonists. I want to suggest that the elements of Platonic thought closer to *realpolitik*, so to speak, e.g., the necessity of deception in policy implementation, or the importance of keeping poetry and literature under the tutelage of philosophy to avoid the intellectual corruption of the people, are echoed in Machiavelli's works. Incidentally, these notions are the ones that Machiavelli's Neo-Platonist contemporaries seem to have intentionally ignored.

The Florentine Neo-Platonist agenda regarding ancient philosophy mostly consisted of inscribing Plato within the tradition of Christian thought. The Neo-Platonists completed this task with varying degrees of persuasiveness. There are signs that Ficino, in his commentary on the *Republic*, smoothed over the less 'Christian friendly' parts. At the very least he seems vested in assuring the continued circulation of Plato's work (meaning avoiding its condemnation by the Vatican) in the Western world. As such, I will argue that it is easy to reach the conclusion that Machiavelli is hostile to Platonic thought if we forget that he may be talking about the very particular picture of Plato that the Neo-Platonists presented to the world. In short, Machiavelli is generally

³⁵ Ibid., 66-67.

critical of Christianity, and the Neo-Platonists tried very hard to dress Plato in Christian garb. From this perspective, of course, Machiavelli is hostile to Plato's thought.

This is because the aspects summoned in justification of Machiavelli's hostility to Platonic philosophy are always the same ones Neo-Platonists focused on when they developed 'Platonic Theology' (to put it in the words of James Hankins). Let us consider in more depth the example of Ficino and the influence he may have had on what is understood as Machiavelli's aversion to "Platonism" for the sake of this introductory survey.

Ficino offers a series of conclusions about Plato rather than an argument, and a close reading of his work reveals many telling things about how he conceived of Platonic philosophy in general. Throughout his commentary, Ficino gives us enough material to be able to answer substantially the following question: what did Ficino think of the import and meaning of the *Republic*? It seems that he understood it as a work meant to be a practical book of political philosophy, but one where human understanding strives to grasp divinity. Ficino is almost entirely dismissive of the importance of education in the *Republic*. While it is commonly interpreted today as being a book about education, Ficino seems to think that it is a book about God. To Ficino, *logos*, understanding and rationality, bring Plato closer to divinity.

Ficino's Platonism was strictly other-worldly. The Florentine Neo-Platonists never treated Plato as serious philosopher of politics, nor did they care about the topic. According to Arthur Field, "After Cosimo de Medici had supported or caused every material, political, diplomatic, and artistic success imaginable, and while the orators

were pronouncing him father of his country and the greatest private citizen of the world, Marsilio Ficino convinced him that the ‘things of the world’ were really of little importance.”³⁶ It is not at all difficult to imagine a Machiavelli, the Machiavelli who conceived of himself as the philosopher of the ‘effectual truth’ of the world,³⁷ who was fundamentally hostile to such a philosophical approach.

Contrary to the Neo-Platonists who came before him, Machiavelli may be argued to be the first ‘realist’ of the history of political thought. This is the aspect of his philosophy that plays a major role in justifications of his place as the ‘first modern thinker’ or ‘inventor of political science.’ But he modifies his histories and stories all the time. Given Machiavelli’s alleged realism, what does it mean when Machiavelli imagines speeches and modifies biographical stories? This issue is extremely problematic since Machiavelli often repeats that the truth comes from history: much of his self-perception as a thinker turning toward facts rather than imagined republics and principalities appears to rest on this. Refusing to accept J.H. Whitfield’s³⁸ assertion that simply because Machiavelli claims to have achieved something does not mean he actually did, I aim to offer an explanation of how we can reconcile Machiavelli’s claim to focus on the *verità effettuale* (something about which I agree with Harvey Mansfield is central to his thought) with Machiavelli’s invented stories.

Machiavelli’s “lies” and inventions point to the fact that although philosophy is not the best life for the individual, philosophical knowledge is indispensable to well-

³⁶ Arthur Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 177.

³⁷ Machiavelli, *Prince*, 61.

³⁸ John H. Whitfield, *Machiavelli* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), 95.

conducted politics, whether the ruler himself possesses it or his entourage does. Machiavelli suggests this in his criticism of the Socratic tenet according to which a life dedicated to contemplative philosophy is best, and by linking the knowledge of history to the knowledge of human nature, thus pointing to the importance of philosophical training for a prince. But this also means that through his invention and modification, Machiavelli may have perceived himself as a type of Numa-like character, i.e., that he is manipulating truth for the better, and at the same time warning us about over-reliance on the ‘empirical’ data of historical examples, something we can avoid doing if we are well-trained (i.e., philosophically educated).

Peter Godman once wrote that:

[...] the problem raised at chapter 15 of *Il Principe* was the same as that being discussed by Marcello Virgilio, but Machiavelli’s solution was contrary to that of his former colleague. The distinction between how men should live and how they do; the flight to an imaginary realm of ethics; the dissolution of a concrete discourse about human conduct into speculative theories and general rules – all subjects on which the humanist, in his lectures, was attempting to lay down the law – were rejected on the grounds that the distinction between perception and reality should be dismissed as meaningless.³⁹

He could not have been more wrong. The distinction between reality and perception is the single most meaningful element of both Machiavelli’s and Plato’s philosophies. When one departs from Platonic philosophy as exposed by the Florentine Neo-Platonists, it becomes easy to see that Plato and Machiavelli are equally concerned with the distinction between perception and reality. In order to do this, however, we must turn

³⁹ Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 279-280.

to Plato's text rather than to the Neo-Platonist reinterpretations, something that is still lacking in the literature when put in relation to Machiavelli's ideas. In fact, the ability to realize that what we take for political knowledge is in fact representation and myth is the first step to political knowledge in Machiavelli's and Plato's thoughts alike. Both authors were highly skeptical of received truths, both were simultaneously optimistic about the potential and wary of the power of storytelling and mythmaking, and both thought that the most capable political leaders would rise above common conceptions of virtue and justice in order to govern well. To them, the distinction between perception and reality is far from meaningless: the ability to distinguish between them was the hallmark of (properly educated) exceptional leaders and citizens.

This is not to say that Machiavelli and Plato are thinkers we can put in the same 'box'. In his reinterpretation of the myth of Gyges, Plato tells us the story of a man who finds an invisibility ring.⁴⁰ Armed with this new power, Gyges quickly rises to political prominence, sleeps with the queen, and murders the king. To Plato, that myth exemplifies the notion that in the absence of exposure and accountability, undeserving agents can quickly rise to places of power. Machiavelli, I think, would have readily agreed with the idea that if no one can effectively see you, no one can stop you, and then you have great potential (for good or bad). But to Machiavelli 'seeing' is allegorical. He thought that it was sufficient to be invisible in the sense that nobody saw you for you who are, and that you appeared to be a leader in line with your constituents' moral commitments and desires. To Plato that game of dissimulation (and its manipulative

⁴⁰ Alan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 414d-359a-360d.

power) was an undeniably bad thing that political education was meant to transcend. But in a sense, if everyone could be educated properly as per Machiavelli's prescriptions, then perhaps that game of simulation and dissimulation would not be needed.

Overview of the work

My dissertation has the potential to change the way we understand Machiavelli's relationship to Ancient Philosophy, as well as to contribute to discussions of the place of religion, images, imagination, aesthetics and political education in his work. In Chapter One, I explore how Machiavelli co-opted the methods and ideas of humanists who were sympathetic to Plato, but ideologically and politically pitted against Ficino. Machiavelli's famous historical determinism was a result of following in the footsteps of humanists who were competing with Ficino for Medici attention, and of co-opting their methods and ideas. (Benedetto Croce called it the oriental idea of circular historical repetition that dominated the work of all the Renaissance historians, especially Machiavelli.)⁴¹ In Chapter Two, I argue that in the gaps and errors of Ficino's treatment of Plato's political philosophy, we find the substantial elements that bring Machiavelli and Plato closer together than has previously been assumed: they both used the act of myth-making to point to philosophy's importance in political education. While it can be said that Plato saw no benefit to poetry and the arts and sought to ban them, and that

⁴¹ *E torna l'idea antica, anzi orientale, del circolo delle cose humane, che domina in tutti gli storici del Rinascimento, e nel Machiavelli a capo di tutti [...]*. The paraphrased translation is mine. Benedetto Croce, *Teoria et storia della storiographia* (Milan : Adelphi Edizioni, 1989), 262; see also Eugenio Garin, *Machiavelli fra politica e storia* (Torino : Giulio Einaudi editore, 1993), 12-13.

Machiavelli thought that they were indispensable pedagogical tools, I argue that Plato and Machiavelli are in fact in agreement regarding the idea that the arts should be used as vehicles for philosophical knowledge. In Chapter Three I discuss how Machiavelli's own use of invention and myth-making points to philosophy's importance in political education, such as his praise for Numa as noble liar and his postulation of a tripartite hierarchy of brains. This leads into an analysis of Machiavelli's use of natural and artistic metaphors to symbolize political knowledge and learning. Chapter Four is devoted to an examination of Machiavelli's own use of invention and myth-making to point to philosophy's importance in political education as communicated through natural metaphors and allusions to Xenophon.

The case I try to make by what might seem to be a disjointed series of chapters is as follows. First, Ficino's Platonism is entirely apolitical, and unsurprisingly that leads him to understand Socrates' condemnation of the poets as a strict moratorium on literature and visual arts in the political sphere. Ficino is not alone in that interpretation. It is often said that Plato subscribes to the view that there is a perennial quarrel between philosophy and the arts, whereas Machiavelli offers a lot of his thoughts on politics from the perspective of literature, rhetoric and poetry. A first hint that the two authors may be irreconcilable begins there. But that interpretation is incorrect; Plato only sees a quarrel between philosophy and the arts that are philosophically averse to it. He otherwise accepts the arts that were developed under the tutelage of philosophy: the famous noble lie, the myth of the metals, is precisely that.

In the second chapter I contend that Machiavelli, too, was a proponent of the philosophically informed arts. Looking at the historical data, we discover that Machiavelli co-opted the methods and arguments of the Florentine Humanists who were competing with Ficino and the Neo-Platonists. I argue that his unique (and famous) brand of historical determinism, as well as his use of philosophically loaded fictions in the tradition of the Renaissance *fabulae*, can be traced back to educational treatises, arguments and disputes between Neo-Platonists and Humanists in the decades immediately preceding Machiavelli's writing. This creates an invitation to examine Machiavelli's use of aesthetic and literary metaphors and myths as well as his treatment of leaders who use them effectively, like Numa.

The third chapter of this work considers how Ficino was the first to insert Numa into a conversation about religion and rule in Plato's work. Therefore, Machiavelli's own discussion of Numa may be interpreted as a re-appropriation, be it intentional or incidental. What comes out of in-depth analysis of Numa's significance to Machiavellian political philosophy is the importance of myth-making in the political sphere and the dangers associated with the fact that the efficiency of myth-making may be imputed to low mass intelligence (a problem that has been mostly ignored by Machiavelli scholars up until now), for better or for worse. In fact, for both better and worse: low mass intelligence leads at times to popular opposition to healthy policies, but also allows for the kind of myth-making that enables smart rulers to circumvent that opposition. Unfortunately, it also means that people are not intellectually well equipped enough to realize when these myths go stale and stop serving their purpose of fostering security

and well-being (like fifteenth and sixteenth century Christianity, in Machiavelli's view). That is why Machiavelli covertly encourages the prince to study philosophy, so as to develop the tools necessary to be able to adapt and transcend myths. He does so by way of the metaphor of hunting.

I see this to be perfectly consistent with traditional accounts of princely virtue. It means that the prince, who is described by Machiavelli as one of the very few who needs to transcend the predictability and determined nature of human behavior to be able to lead effectively, must do so intellectually as well as physically and politically. The philosophical component is a vital part of the virtuous prince's training.

Following the thread of the metaphor of hunting leads the attentive reader straight to Xenophon, specifically to a reference to Xenophon's *Cyrus*, another instance of a well-crafted myth made under the tutelage of philosophy. A careful reading of Xenophon's account of the education of *Cyrus* reveals the importance of philosophy in Machiavellian political education. The argument of that chapter is that Machiavelli points to *Cyrus* to cement further the importance of a leader's ability to transcend conventional morality with the help of philosophical training. The chapter is dedicated to a demonstration of how the education of Xenophon's *Cyrus*, a character who displays an early propensity for philosophy and a penetrating intellect, mirrors the development of some the *Prince's* central lessons (literally the lessons offered in the central chapters of the book). Machiavelli gestures toward the *Education of Cyrus* to signify to his readers

how the *Prince* (and therefore princely education) is about the importance of philosophical education.

While my argument is dense and covers a lot of ground, I believe that its contributions are many. Over the course of this work, I address discussions of Machiavelli and his relationship to Platonism, Xenophonic and Socratic philosophy, princely virtue, Christianity, the nature of peoples, aesthetic philosophy, and the problems implicit in the relationship between rulers and their people. I assert that to turn to the substance of Platonic thought - rather than simply to dismiss Plato as someone with whom Machiavelli never agreed on anything on account of the lack of realism on the part of the former - reveals that the two thinkers are less at odds than previously assumed. As such, my project is not to show fundamental agreement between the two philosophers, but rather to nuance our position with regard to their intellectual relationship. Does this mean Machiavelli is less of the ‘first modern thinker’ or ‘father of political science?’ Not at all. I wish to do better justice to the complexity of his thought.

What emerges from this dissertation is a picture of Machiavelli as a philosopher who wove in traditionally philosophical topics into a broader political theory. My argument is not incompatible with the bodies of literature arguing that Machiavelli should be read as a statesman-slash-political scientist and another that contends we should see him as more of a rhetorician. However the picture of Machiavelli that emerges from this work is that of a thinker who offers an original state-of-nature theory (inspired by Ciceronian thought), a theory of human epistemology and perception,

creates a new philosophy of history and progress, contributes to the field of theoretical ethics in a way that anticipates Nietzsche all the while drawing heavily from Xenophon, and paints a cohesive portrait of human nature.

Notes on methodology and translation

I have used for reference throughout this work the following editions of the primary sources central to my argument. The translations of Machiavelli's chief works I have used are: Harvey Mansfield's translation of the *Prince*, and his co-translated works (with Nathan Tarcov) of the *Discourses on Livy* and of the *Florentine Histories* (with Laura Banfield). Although I am partial to the consistency and precision of Mansfield *et al.* translations, I have also used Gilbert's collection of Machiavelli's work for cross-referencing purposes.

For the primary sources of most of the Florentine Neo-Platonist and Florentine Humanists I have used the bilingual editions of Harvard's recent *I Tatti Renaissance Library Collection*, translated by various scholars of stellar repute under the directorship of James Hankins. There is one exception: for Ficino's commentary on the *Republic* and the *Laws* of Plato, I have used Arthur Farndell's translation, which is to my knowledge the only recent edition available.

The primary references for Greek works of Plato in this dissertation come from the Hackett *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, with two exceptions: I have used Thomas Pangle's translation of the *Laws*, and most of the references to the

Republic are drawn from Allan Bloom's translation. All references to the central works of Xenophon (*Anabasis of Cyrus*, *Education of Cyrus*, *Memorabilia*) are drawn from the Agora Editions series published by Cornell University Press, which is under the editorship of Thomas Pangle. For Xenophon's lesser treatises not yet published in the Agora series, I have used multiple translations and compared them to the original Greek. These editions are in my judgment superior to the others available because, once again, devoted textual scholars like Harvey Mansfield, Thomas Pangle, and their colleagues and students display a consistency, assiduity and attention to detail and precision in their translations that is simply absent from most other translations.

To avoid drawing ire over my choice of translation, I should mention here that I have been trained in Italian, ancient Greek and Latin, and that the moments in my argument where the potential credence of my point relies heavily on a particular choice in the translation of certain words are always clearly indicated. When it is relevant to my argument, the original texts and the words on which the argument relies are made clear and referenced in the original language.

Regarding interpretation. For decades now, there has been something of an intellectual tug-of-war at play between 'textualists' (most of them being followers and/or former students of Leo Strauss) and 'contextualists' (commonly associated with Quentin Skinner and his intellectual sympathizers), to borrow Dr. Michelle T. Clarke's vocabulary.⁴² The expressions of enmity between these factions have ranged over time

⁴² Michelle T. Clarke, "The Mythologies of Contextualism: Method and Judgment in Skinner's *Visions of Politics*," *Political Studies* 61, no 4 (2013): 767.

from profound, well-articulated and thought-provoking arguments to thinly veiled slander, name-calling and almost everything in between.⁴³

I am generally sympathetic to the argument Dr. Clarke made in her *Political Studies* paper cited above,⁴⁴ and ‘textualist’ sympathies will not fail to shine through my own interpretive and argumentative methods as well as my choice of translations and secondary sources, if they have not already. But I also want to underline that I have something of a ‘mixed’ intellectual heritage regarding these matters. Over the course of my almost-decade-long career as an aspiring Machiavelli scholar, I have studied great books and political science under the tutelage of professors and mentors from all intellectual walks of life, so to speak. Some identified with milieus Clarke would describe as textualist, others with contextualist ones, and a third group came from schools that emphasize normative analytical political theory. This last group exists somewhat outside of this area of contention, since it is mostly active among historians of political thought.

As I – uncomfortably - attempt to situate myself within this debate, I cannot help but recall the view of a former professor on this issue, one to which I find myself still

⁴³ See Clarke on Skinner, in Clarke, “Mythologies of Contextualism,” 768.

⁴⁴ Clarke’s very persuasive argument is reminiscent of Leo Strauss’s points against what he calls ‘historicism’ in the early pages of his famous book *Natural Rights and History*, although her paper mostly considers arguments put forth in publications of Skinner’s that only came out after Strauss died. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Rights and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 9-34. Clarke self-labels as a textualist and calls her intellectual counterparts “contextualists.” There is no doubt in my mind that the “contextualists” she identifies would argue they are in fact the real textualists. For the purpose of clarity here I have co-opted Clarke’s language but do not wish to weigh in on the (in my opinion fruitless) debate regarding who are the so-called “actual” textualists and vice-versa.

sympathetic almost a decade since I heard it. Clarke's textualists are at their very best when they astutely unpack metaphors, unravel the meaning of images and figures of speech and make sense of the often complex progression of the dense, rich canonical texts that it is our job to demystify and explain. But ideas do not exist in a vacuum, and contextual methods are indispensable to us as we try to deepen our understanding of those same texts. Without firmly established historical knowledge, we risk missing so much of the substance of these works that we strive to decipher. It is hard to argue that knowledge of literary currents, intellectual movements and historical events is almost indispensable if we desire to discover how and what is being copied, co-opted, promoted, subverted, distorted, argued and hidden by the philosophers we study. Therefore any approach that is exclusively exegetical risks missing too much and being guilty of historical speculation and anachronistic readings.

This dissertation and the methods I used to build it are a reflection of this position and heritage. As such, its chapters alternate between contextualist and textualist approaches. The first two chapters rely heavily on the intellectual and literary climate of the authors studied in them to make their arguments. The third and fourth chapters, where more of the weight of my argument and contributions lie, are heavily indebted to textualist methods and research. Given the animosity and polarization between the two schools of thought, I am painfully aware that in doing so I risk committing a sin of *argumentum ad temperantiam* and thereby alienating everyone rather than pleasing the majority in some minimal respect. To this, I can only offer (a) my hope that a senior scholar (who shall remain anonymous) was correct when he said to me, over the course

of a recent conversation, that my generation of scholars would be the last to experience such deep and intellectually deleterious enmity between Clarke's textualists and contextualists, and (b) that my work will be evaluated on the basis of its merits alone, rather than its intellectual kinship to all the scholars I admire and whom my readers may or may not like.

CHAPTER II

NOT-SO-NEW MODES AND ORDERS:

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL EDUCATION IN FLORENTINE THOUGHT LEADING TO MACHIAVELLI

“The belief that history and historical examples were the best source of political wisdom was a commonplace in Florentine culture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.”

-Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*¹

Political theorists generally ignore figures like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1464-1494), Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), Aneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405-1464), Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494), Pier Paolo Vergerio (1498-1565), Marcello Adriani² (1464-1521) and Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), although they tend to be studied by historians and scholars of Italian literature. There seem to be two principal reasons for this. First, these figures were not, nor did they consider themselves to be, theorists of politics or politicians. Although all of them dabbled in philosophy in one way or another, they were priests, historians, poets and writers. Second, the sheer philosophical density and intellectual impact that Machiavelli's work has exercised on the history of political thought may have eclipsed most of the thinkers around him from the scholarly spotlight of political

¹ Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 125.

² Marcello Adriani, humanist intellectual whose full name was Marcello di Messer Virgilio di Andrea di Berto Adriani, is referred to by Godman as Marcello Virgilio. For the sake of consistency with references to Godman's work on which this chapter relies heavily, I will do the same. See Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 144.

theory. As a result, their thought, but most importantly their intellectual impact, has been understudied.

Yet a quick examination of their works and the historical scholarship around it reveals that ideas traditionally attributed to Machiavelli seemed to have been circulating within Renaissance Florence for some time before Machiavelli integrated some of them into his work.³ More importantly for our purposes, it seems that Machiavelli integrated ideas mostly held by poets and thinkers who were engaged in an intellectual tug-of-war with Marsilio Ficino and the Florentine Neo-Platonists.

We can see the tension between competing sources of knowledge in Machiavelli's philosophy largely reflected in debates that happened between different factions of Medician *protégés*. On the one hand, Ficino and the Florentine Neo-Platonists emphasized theoretical models of learning aimed at eternal salvation and inspired by Plato. On the other hand, Angelo Poliziano,⁴ Marcello Virgilio and Girolamo Savanarola emphasized history's primacy over philosophy as an object of study. Machiavelli aimed to depart from the traditional humanistic education. In doing so, he

³ The authors listed here are by no means intended to be an exhaustive list of contemporary or near-contemporary authors Machiavelli drew inspiration from. As Cary Nederman rightly noted in a recent article, Machiavelli's habit of reinterpreting texts and concepts received differently by his contemporaries extends to a variety of sources and topics. It seems, for example, that the idea of theorizing from history was in part co-opted from Polybius' *Histories* VI. But Machiavelli also apparently reinterpreted Polybius VI as a republican text instead of one expressing monarchist sympathies. Furthermore, it seems Machiavelli's account of the origins of societies, one that was clearly derived from Cicero (for more on that see chapter 3 of this dissertation), may have also had some "Polybian" roots. See Cary Nederman, "Polybius as Monarchist? Receptions of *Histories* VI before Machiavelli, c. 1410-c. 1515," *History of Political Thought* 37, no 3 (Autumn 2016): 462; 465; 478; Eugenio Garin, *Machiavelli fra politica e storia* (Torino : Giulio Einaudi editore), 1-28.

⁴ See also Andrea Guidi, *Un Segretario militante* (Bologna: IL Mulino, 2009), 129-135.

ended up as an advocate of the idea that political education should include both historical knowledge (because history seemed to have a predictive force) and the theoretical learning of philosophy.

The content of this chapter is rather straightforward. In spite of all the historical scholarship done in and around Machiavelli's life and thought, none of it mentions the sources that actually began the work of paving Machiavelli's so-called 'new' path. Machiavelli certainly did something new, and I count myself among those who see in him the herald of a modernity that is profoundly at odds with the important tenets of Ancient Greek, Roman and Medieval philosophy. But many of Machiavelli's intellectual convictions and his expository style seem not to have been entirely original. The primacy of history as a source of knowledge and his famous criticism regarding the correct object of study, for example, were arguments made by a number of predecessors and close contemporaries, such as Savonarola, Angelo Poliziano and Marcello Virgilio. And while Savonarola himself figures in Machiavelli's writings, his intellectual influence on Machiavelli, like that of Poliziano and Virgilio, often goes unmentioned. As I hope to show, the similarities between Machiavelli's arguments and theirs are simply too great to be strictly coincidental, especially once their chronological, physical and social proximity are taken into consideration.

In this mostly historical chapter, I trace the early incarnations of tendencies and philosophical conclusions generally attributed to Machiavelli in the works of Savonarola and Poliziano, and I sketch the pre-Machiavellian humanist views of political education. In doing so, I hope to lay the groundwork for (a) the future discussion of Machiavelli's

position within these debates, and (b) the distinction between Machiavelli's antagonism to Ficino's Platonism and his relationship to 'unfiltered' Platonic tenets. The aim of this chapter is to trace the debates between the Florentine Neo-Platonists and the Florentine poets and see how their disagreements eventually led Machiavelli to take the middle way between the two camps. While Machiavelli cannot be said to have been sympathetic to the contemplative life promoted by Ficino in his *Platonic Theology*, his political thought would agree with Platonic precepts as fundamental to both princely education and policymaking (about which more will be said in the following chapter).

It appears extremely likely, however, that Machiavelli was largely convinced, first by Savonarola's argument that literature and poetry needed the tutelage of philosophy, and then by Angelo Poliziano's⁵ idea that history was the only true source of knowledge regarding human affairs. In their view, history becomes a sort of repository of data from which we can learn about efficient and inefficient responses to certain situations, as well as human nature. Thus, Poliziano thought history to be entirely superior to philosophy insofar as the lessons we learned from it could be approached in a manner akin to the results of modern experimental science. So did Machiavelli, but it did not lead him to completely repudiate the merits of philosophy. In order to understand Machiavelli's particular standing vis-à-vis Plato and political knowledge, we must start with influences on his thought that have unfortunately been too often ignored.

⁵ Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (London : Routledge, 2013), 143.

Savonarola on choosing the correct ancient sources

Machiavelli's particular love-hate relationship with ancient sources can be traced back to the essence of Girolamo Savonarola's quarrel with late *quattrocento* humanists. Much has been made of the priest's influence on Machiavelli's philosophy, and rightly so. Machiavelli, in turn, treats Savonarola as an aspiring prince/unarmed prophet, a lesson in leadership and failure, and an example of the merits and dangers of using religion (perhaps in this case honestly) in order to achieve political ends. But an important element of Savonarola's influence on Machiavelli happens behind the scenes, so to speak, outside of what Machiavelli wrote on him in his books.

In his book *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, Peter Godman masterfully traces the evolution of the Renaissance Humanists' relationship to classical philosophy. His account of the beginning of the change starts with Savonarola. The priest anticipates Machiavelli's famous criticism – made through the metaphor of the fragmented Greek statue – that his contemporaries are looking at the wrong ancient sources.⁶ Being a friend of ancient philosophy did not prevent Savonarola from being highly critical of his contemporaries. Through Godman's analysis, one gets the clear impression that Savonarola criticized his intellectual peers not on account of their reverence for Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, but rather for their inability to build on their legacy:

We too, like the ancients, can add words and subtract them... for who today employs the archaic forms that were current in their times? Yet there are some who have so fettered themselves, who have enslaved their own intellects in the prison of antiquity so completely that they are

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

even reluctant to diverge from its usage and wish to say nothing the ancient have not said.⁷

Too busy imitating the ancients, Savonarola's targets forgot to learn from them. Worse, they prioritized poetry over philosophy and theology. Critics of misplaced intellectual focus before their time, Savonarola and his associate Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, thought that simple imitation of antiquity was futile. Machiavelli decried the emphasis of form over content by mocking unnamed contemporaries fawning over fragments of an ancient statue; Savonarola and Pico did the same by reasserting the importance of philosophy over the study of poetry and rhetoric. Not that these endeavors were completely without merit, but they had to be pursued, to borrow Godman's words, "under the tutelage of philosophy."⁸

According to Savonarola, then, philosophy and letters are really only valuable insofar as they act as a vehicle for deeper philosophical truths. We must be careful not to let our reverence for our great philosophical forbears limit our own capacity for intellectual innovation. It is hard not to see how this has been completely internalized by Machiavelli. Most scholars who approached it have treated his own attempt at poetry,

⁷ Possumus ergo et addere et minuere sicut illi potuerunt, nam et multa iam mutata sunt. Quis enim hodie dicit vostras et volt et intellegere et alia multa, quae apud antiquos erant usitata? Quidem enim adeo perstrinxerunt se et carceri antiquorum intellectum proprium adeo manciparunt, ut nedum contra eorum consuetudinem aliquid proferre nolit, sed ne velint quidem dicere quid illi non dixerunt.

Girolamo Savonarola, "Apologeticus de Ratione Poeticae Artis: Liber Quartus," in *Scritti Filisofici*, Vol. I, ed. Giancarlo Garfagnigni and Eugenio Garin (Rome: Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1982), 250. Translation by Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 31-31n1.

⁸ Ibid., 37.

L'Asino (or *The Golden Ass*), like a typical Renaissance *fabulae*⁹. The *de facto* position of the literature is to assume it to be so. As I discussed above in the introduction to the general work academics do systematically see the *Asino* as a prime example of poetry 'under the tutelage of philosophy.'

L'Asino recounts the story of a man, who is also the narrator, who had a strange affliction as a child: he was addicted to running. Several attempts to cure him only result in temporary suspensions of his "addiction," and the child eventually completely relapses. Later in life, the narrator stumbles into strange woods where he meets a herdsman in the service of Circe,¹⁰ whom we are told migrated to the woods in question after being displaced from her original domain by Juno. After they become intimate, the herdsman shows the narrator a gallery of beasts. He is told that all of them were formerly human, and that their animal form reflects a quality they displayed during their human lives. Finally, the narrator is given the opportunity to converse with a hog, who confesses that he is much happier and better satisfied as a pig that he ever was as a man, contrasting his satiety with little to the futility of human desires and the misery created by human flaws such as greed, cruelty, pride, erotic desire for beauty and knowledge, and so on.¹¹

Evidently loaded with metaphors and double-meanings, *L'Asino* remains nonetheless puzzlingly hard to interpret. The poem has elements of both *anabasis* (ascent) and *katabasis* (descent). The narrator does descend into dark woods where

⁹ A philosophically loaded poem.

¹⁰ Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 2013), 180.

¹¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 750-772.

humans are changed into pigs, but there he finds said humans to be happier than they previously were, and is even elevated to some degree by the knowledge they impart onto him. Not to mention the pleasure and wisdom he acquires as a result of his contact with Circe's herdsman. Furthermore, the narrator's relapse into the running addiction is accompanied by his cry that "Christ can't keep [him] here."¹² While it is tempting to interpret this as a not-so-subtle image of intentional departure from Christianity into a realm where Greco-Roman gods exist and change men's lives, the fact is that these gods are changing men into animals, regardless how good the changed feel post-transformation.

Ed King sees in *L'Asino* a parable ("a poetic confessional") about Machiavelli's own life aimed to expiate the past faults that led to his exile while also symbolically reaffirming his commitment to serving Florence, this time by way of his philosophical and historical works.¹³ Diego von Vacano comes at the poem from another angle and follows, by his own account, Hannah Pitkin and Wendy Brown in his argument that the poem is a philosophically 'superabundant' text.¹⁴ The text is emblematic of Machiavelli's view of man's relationship with politics, one that is laden with despair and agony, but nonetheless irresistible. The poem becomes a vehicle for Machiavelli's view about the human condition, inextricably tied, for better or for worse, to political life.

Miguel Vatter argues that it conveys 'soft primitivism,' i.e., that the transformation of animal to man in the poem symbolizes a pattern of rebirth and

¹² Machiavelli, *The Golden Ass*, 752.

¹³ Ed King, "Machiavelli's *L'Asino*: Troubled Centaur into Conscious Ass," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41, no 2 (June 2008): 279-301.

¹⁴ Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 13.

renovation that brings the meaning of Machiavelli's poem closer to a Platonic philosophy that was still different from that of Ficino and the Florentine Neo-Platonists.¹⁵ Vatter's work on the *Golden Ass* argues that Machiavelli co-opts a 'Platonic mocking tone.' He does this in order to symbolize the transformation into animals and back into human beings (or not) as the Platonic ascent towards the truth and its corresponding descent. In this account the truth is refashioned as a 'noble lie' to make philosophical truth accessible to un-philosophical multitudes.¹⁶ That, in turn, is echoed in Plutarch's *Life of Numa* and then in Machiavelli's account of Numa's life later in the *Discourses*.

Let us return to the similarity with which Machiavelli and Savonarola approach the value of past sources. Machiavelli's philosophical enterprise also had to do with correcting his contemporaries' (and, to some extent, our) misplaced focus in terms of political education. Twice in the *Discourses*, in the prefaces to books one and two, Machiavelli warns his readers about the dangers of partial and misplaced interpretations:

Considering thus how much honor is awarded to antiquity, and how many times – letting pass infinite other examples – a fragment of an ancient statue has been bought at a high price because someone wants to have it near oneself, to honor his house with it, and to be able to have it imitated by those who delight in that art, and how the latter then strive with all industry to represent it in all their works; and seeing, on the other hand, that the most virtuous works the histories show us, which have been done

¹⁵ Regarding the topic of Machiavelli's religiosity as it is expressed in the poem: Robert Black, in an earlier book, has written that the *Golden Ass*'s mention of God's impotence suggests Machiavelli had moved from simple anticlericalism to atheism. Black also thinks the poem implies a firm rejection of the neo-Platonist "Hermetic notion of Man's divinity." See Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 2013), 184-185.

¹⁶ Miguel Vatter, "Of Asses and Nymphs: Machiavelli, Platonic Theology and Epicureanism in Florence," *forthcoming*.

by ancient kingdoms and republics, by kings, captains, citizens, legislators, and others who have labored for their fatherland, are rather admired than imitated – indeed they are so much shunned by everyone in every least thing that no sign of that ancient virtue remains with us – I can do no other than marvel and grieve.¹⁷

On the one hand, this passage underlines that Machiavelli seems to think that, while it is not completely bad, this penchant for ancient art illustrates a tendency to misplace the focus one should have on antiquity. Machiavelli's contemporaries do not look to the ancients for what they really have to offer. The reference to an "ancient statue" suggests that this attention is merely on art. On the other hand, this passage also tells us that Machiavelli perceives this focus to be doubly incomplete; after all, it is only a fragment of a work of art that is recovered. Furthermore, the large amount of labor invested in getting such an artifact seems to be excessive. A hundred pages later, Machiavelli reminds us that men praise ancient times, although sometimes unreasonably. And this time around, he retroactively clarifies the initial metaphor: he is definitely not talking about the arts, but about politics and ethics.¹⁸ On these topics, the truth of ancient things is not wholly understood.¹⁹ Similarly, Savonarola decries the intellectual prison in which other would-be Renaissance intellectuals have locked themselves.

Nevertheless, Savonarola's emphasis on philosophical over literary and historical knowledge, while echoed in future Renaissance writers, also sets him apart from the course Renaissance philosophy was to take. Savonarola's faith entailed strong skepticism about the capacity of the humanities to effect change in the world, and even

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

stronger skepticism regarding our capacity to predict future events and prepare for them. As such, Savonarola did not share the view that history had a predictive force that Poliziano, Virgilio and, finally, Machiavelli would articulate over the next fifty years. Only the Bible, its content unpacked by Christian exegesis, could help us foresee what was to come. According to Savonarola, authors like Livy, who, ironically, would become crucially important to Machiavelli, only really described the past. In Savonarola's view, past examples are useless since the meaning of political actions such as war changes over time. New meanings and the new significations that actions take make it impossible for us to know if the future will unfold according to our wishes and prevent us from correctly estimating our odds of success. Knowledge of what is yet to come is the province of God only.²⁰ To borrow from the Kuhnian vocabulary, the paradigm was about to shift very shortly.

The importance of historical knowledge

Savonarola was not alone in challenging Ciceronian and Aristotelian assumptions. Angelo Poliziano, during the same time as Savonarola (in fact Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola, Savonarola's associate, were close friends), made a rather unorthodox argument in his crusade against Latin purists, one about the superiority of

²⁰“Non è così delle altre scritture: vedi Livio che non scrisse perché quella scrittura significassi cose future, ma solo le passate; non lo può fare ancora uomo nessuno questo. Tu, se tu fai una guerra, non puoi designare che quella guerra significhi el futuro, primo perché non conosci le cose future, secondo non lo puoi fare perché non sai se la ti riuscirà; e non sai etiam se il futuro ti riuscirà a tuo modo: questo appartiene solo a Dio.” Savonarola, Girolamo, “Predica III: Il Terzo Di Di Quaresima,” in *Prediche Sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, Vol. I, ed. Paolo Ghiglieri (Rome: Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1971), 74. Translation by Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 138-139; 139n36.

history over philosophy and poetry. Unlike Savonarola, who thought history to be a mere description of the past that was useless to scholars, since only God could know the future, Poliziano saw in ancient historical sources a repository of data from which humanists could learn. For him, it was not simply, as it was for Savonarola, that poetry needed the tutelage of philosophy. For it to have any claim to truthfulness, it had to resemble history. As he followed in Lorenzo Valla's footsteps, Poliziano argued that the only poetry that was worth serious intellectual attention is that which conforms to history.

Poliziano's argument goes on to articulate one of Machiavelli's most famous positions on political education *avant la lettre*: Greek, Roman and medieval philosophy cannot measure up against history as a reliable source of knowledge. According to Poliziano, this is because of the quasi-axiomatic evidence of the fact that teaching by way of concrete examples (anchored in reality) is more effective than instruction from general precepts, "so the human race could more readily renounce philosophy than history."²¹ Not all histories are created equal, however. As expressed in his *Prefatio in Suetonium*, Poliziano felt that the 'universal' histories of authors like Polybius were too general, and he favored what he perceived to be the more particular histories of

²¹ "Ne ipsa quidem philosophia, inquam, sine historiae adminiculo suum cursum tenebit unquam ... utqui valentius, efficaciusque docendi genus per exempla quam praecepta esse nemo non feteatur, ita prolixius humanum genus historia quam philosophia demeretur." Angelo Poliziano, *Angeli Politiani Opera*, vol. 3 (Offizin: Lyons, 1533), 125. Trans Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 53-53n119.

Thucydides, Plutarch, and Herodotus – authors we know to have been dear to Machiavelli – on account of the methodical precision of their work.²²

That argument was to be taken further by another one of Machiavelli's predecessors, Marcello Virgilio, in 1494, the year of Poliziano's death. Virgilio saw the humanities as competitors to moral philosophy. They, too, could lay claim to taking care of minds. This was due in part to the fact that history did not need the tutelage of philosophy, but also, contra Savonarola, that the examples it contained could be used to diagnose contemporary situations and offer effective solutions to problems (at best) or at the very least behavior to avoid (at worst). History thus became, in Virgilio's view, a predictive tool that could announce problems and movements to come as well as isolate society's current ills. It is worth quoting Godman at length here:

History – even ancient history – did have a predictive force, contrary to the third sermon on Amos; the *studia humanitatis* were not turned to the past, but served to fathom the crisis of contemporary society. The Ciceronian theory of history as teaching by example (a humanist cliché) thus gained a fresh relevance: the writings of the ancients, for Marcello Virgilio, were not like the perfumes that lose their scent with the passing of time, nor were they incompatible with dogmas of the Christian faith.²³

Although he was not so concerned with its compatibility with the Christian faith, this belief that history was a relevant tool to understand and predict political events was almost entirely co-opted by Machiavelli.

²² Ibid., 54.

²³ Ibid., 166.

Machiavelli and history

In line with Poliziano and Virgilio, Machiavelli quite clearly thought that history could be treated as a repository of hard data from which he could draw in order to decide on courses of actions and analyze political situations. He thought that to know about history was so important in politics that he advised princes to divide their time equally between learning about it and hunting (something to which I will return in chapter 2).²⁴ Furthermore, without historical knowledge, the prince cannot be a true virtuoso. Machiavelli wrote in the *Discourses* that “every history is full of examples” and that “time, which they say is the father of every truth, exposes [the hidden causes of malignity].”²⁵

Time is not only the father of every truth because it gives us enough insight to examine all the consequences of political actions. It also allows us to see for ourselves whether or not the result excused the deed, something that is nevertheless doubtlessly true for Machiavelli. To him, history also gives us the proper tools needed to reveal the initial intentions of political actors (the “hidden malignity”). To borrow the words of Cary Nederman, “human action has a constant and predictable pattern” that is “relatively insusceptible to variation or erasure.”²⁶ Thanks to this characteristic of human behavior, we can use the data provided to us by historical records of past events and actions to predict how current events might unfold, provided that we observe a certain similarity of

²⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 59.

²⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 15.

²⁶ Cary Nederman, "Machiavelli and Moral Character: Principality, Republic and the Psychology of *Virtù*," *History of Political Thought* 21, no. 3 (2000): 350; 355.

characteristics between both past and current events, as well as the men and women embroiled in them.²⁷

Harvey Mansfield wrote that Machiavelli took “a long step in the direction of scientific determinism.”²⁸ Mansfield is right in to note that Machiavelli did not completely surrender to it. He retains the idea that human life is still under the influence of an otherwise chaotic component, *fortuna*, the impersonal goddess of chance. Although once can brace against it, no amount of historical (or other) knowledge can help us predict how and when *fortuna* will manifest herself. In spite of his otherwise profound agreement with arguments started by Poliziano and Virgilio, Machiavelli’s philosophy leaves a place for this unknowable and unpredictable element of human existence. It is equally important, however, not to confuse this with a profession of piety.²⁹ In a sense,

²⁷ Dr. Nederman goes on to argue that this inflexibility of character draws Machiavelli closer to Christian moralists whom Machiavelli is usually thought to have firmly opposed. Over the course of this argument he concludes that this inflexibility of character ultimately implies that princes (and probably men, too, since we have no reason to believe Machiavelli thought laypeople to be more flexible in character) are powerless to respond to the changes and unforeseeable events they find themselves subjected to by fortune. In chapter IV and V of this dissertation I will make the case for my disagreement with Dr. Nederman’s conclusions. Machiavelli suggests, I will argue, that philosophical and historical education can help the prince break this pattern of inflexibility and prepare him to better predict where the river of fortune may lead him.

²⁸ Harvey C. Mansfield, “Machiavelli on Necessity,” in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, eds. David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati and Camila Vergara (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 43.

²⁹ Did Renaissance-era people have the mental equipment to be atheists in the same manner as we understand atheistic attitudes today? Denis J.-J. Robichaud attempts to answer this question in the “Renaissance and Reformation” chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Robichaud convincingly argues that it is impossible for us to know this with certainty given the fact that Renaissance atheism is never clearly and comprehensively distinguished from religious heterodoxy, general impiety and the actual conviction that God or gods truly do not exist. In the Renaissance, “the semantic field of atheism does unmistakably encompass unbelief in [doctrines such as God’s existence] as

well as the impious behavior that such unbelief was thought to engender.” As such, it is impossible for us to affirm with certainty the sincerity of Machiavelli’s belief in God. We may however, as I will argue in the remainder of this dissertation, propose credibly that Machiavelli wasn’t very pious from the standpoint of a recent and commonplace understanding of Christian doctrine.

But is that the way Machiavelli himself understood Christianity? Maurizio Viroli argued in his book *Machiavelli’s God* that Machiavelli was a sincere Christian. Viroli’s argument hinges not on a reinterpretation of Machiavelli’s thought *per se* but rather on a particular picture of what he thought Machiavelli understood to be true Christianity. In Viroli’s view, Machiavelli’s Christianity is a religion centered on the love of freedom and compatible with the ancient virtues he so clearly admired. Viroli nonetheless admits that Machiavelli was in a very clear sense impious, that he “scoffed at the idea of Hell” and “not interested in indulgences, predestination, divine grace, free will, or the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.” Machiavelli’s Christianity may have been sincere, but it was also particular, as Viroli himself concedes. This argument aligns with the conclusion reached by Robichaud. The charges of impiety and atheism often leveled at Machiavelli may well be directed at his heterodoxy and not indicative of genuine disbelief, and therefore to characterize Machiavelli as an atheist is to jump to conclusions on the basis of inconclusive evidence.

Machiavelli’s heterodoxy, in Viroli’s analysis, does pit him against certain Renaissance conceptions of Christianity. The difference between Viroli’s argument and that of scholars who traditionally read Machiavelli to be hostile to Christianity is that Viroli reads Machiavelli as the intellectual adversary of a conception of the Christian faith. This type of Christianity is incompatible with Machiavelli’s because it is anathema to political liberty and a flourishing Florentine Republic. Machiavelli’s famous jabs at Christianity therefore should not be interpreted as a condemnation of the Faith as a whole. They are a condemnation of an “interpretation” of Christianity, and Viroli argues that if we are able to distinguish the “version” of Christianity Machiavelli thought compatible with his political thought from that which he thought was weak, Machiavelli reveals himself to be quite the passionate Christian. As such Viroli’s argument fleshes out what he thought this Machiavellian Christianity was like, and does not advance that Machiavelli’s antipathy to some interpretation of the Faith is inexistent. Therefore, Viroli’s argument is not incompatible with mine. If Viroli is indeed right, then it is simply an interpretation of Christianity that Machiavelli condemns by way of Numa and the *pularrii* (more on that in chapter 4) and not Christianity itself. I concede that both are plausible, and that in light of Robichaud’s argument a positive proof that Machiavelli’s “mental equipment” allowed for atheism in the sense we understand it today may be forever out of our reach.

More credibly, Sebastian de Grazia (whom, if the introduction of *Machiavelli’s God* is to be believed, somewhat inspired Viroli to write his interpretation of Machiavellian religious conviction) argued in chapter 5 of his seminal book *Machiavelli in Hell* that Machiavelli was more of a “reform clerical” than an “anti-clerical” thinker. *Pace* De Grazia, Machiavelli certainly believed Christianity to be the true faith, although

Machiavelli agrees with Savonarola's point that history ultimately is not sufficient to know everything about the future, that its predictive force is limited. That is not to say Machiavelli believed that a higher-powered being, or an alternative source of knowledge - the Bible, for example - could help us solve or at the very least go around the problem of *fortuna's* impenetrable and random arbitrariness.³⁰

History is not only useful insofar as it has a predictive power; it is also a tool of moral education. The careful study of history gives scholars and princes additional insight into actions. Complete knowledge of a situation can only be gleaned from the

his at times critical, at times approving stance towards the Roman Church and its popes suggest he would have preferred the Church to act more often in the best interests of Italy. This is something that doesn't discredit the possibility of sincere faith. De Grazia's account is highly plausible, not the least of which because it allows room for Machiavelli's variable level of piousness, but also relies less on an account of Machiavelli's personal psychology, unlike Viroli's.

See Denis J.-J. Robichaud, "Renaissance and Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 179-194; Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 27-88; Sebastian De Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Random House, 1994), 89-92.

³⁰ This is only one reading among many on this topic. Among the dissenting voices that would rise against this interpretation the most preeminent is certainly Cary Nederman's. In his 1999 paper "Amazing Grace: Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," Nederman argues that Machiavelli in fact does not reject the Christian stance, and that fortune can be interpreted as part of an inscrutable but real plan for the course of human affairs. According to Nederman, Machiavelli's treatment of especially successful individuals, and their relationship with fortune, suggests they were spared the more destructive side of its influence and specifically chosen by her to be presented with great opportunities. Nederman interprets the vocabulary of deliberate agency attributed to fortune's agency to mean there is a supernatural, or divine, plan behind the apparently arbitrary and chaotic progression of human affairs.

See Cary J Nederman, "Amazing Grace: God, Fortune and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no 4 (October 1999): 627-633; Cary J Nederman, *Machiavelli: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Books, 2009), 28-49; Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 296; Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre de Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 302; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 98-101.

meditative return afforded by historical musings; witnesses and contemporaries, by association, therefore only get a partial picture of what is happening, and as such their judgment risks error. Note that time is said to be the father of truth, not simply a clarifying factor. This is in itself important for our study of Machiavelli's relationship to Neo-Platonism: at least in this respect, Machiavelli differs from Plato, Ficino, and Savonarola, in that there is no finite number of eternal truths to be discovered. New truths are also begotten by time and human action, their appearance only revealed as we look back through historical studies.

According to Raphael Major, "Machiavelli shares the view that human beings have been and always will be fundamentally the same."³¹ Indeed, Machiavelli suggests that men, like every other component of our world, do not change, when he writes, in a mocking tone, "as if heaven, sun, elements, men had varied in motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity."³² Machiavelli obviously believed that under similar circumstances and provided they have received a similar education, men will act in similar ways, given their unchanging nature, and that true virtue therefore exists in itself, unchanging. Isaiah Berlin, reflecting on this passage, goes so far as to imply that Machiavelli might think that what was virtue for the ancients might still be so for Machiavelli: "men are much the same everywhere, and at all times and what has served well for the ancients – their rules of medicine, or warfare, or statecraft – will surely also

³¹ Rafael Major, "A New Argument for Morality: Machiavelli and the Ancients," *Political Research Quarterly* 60, no 2 (June 2007): 174.

³² Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 19.

work for the moderns.”³³ By association, all that has led states to rise, endure, and fall will have the same effects in our day. Yet imitation cannot be enough. Otherwise Machiavelli would not need to go down what he himself calls a new path. Machiavelli’s political thought consists of an attempt to use the past to create a state that can outlast the republics of antiquity – to use the past in order to deal with the present. The consequence that this has for Machiavelli’s thought, however, is crucial. It tells us something very important about the greatest uses of the knowledge that the prince must acquire:

Whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic and to take the remedies for them that were used by the ancients, or, if they do not find any that were used, to think up new ones through the similarity of accidents.³⁴

The essence of Machiavelli’s enterprise and his injunction to future princes, i.e., using the past creatively to shape the present, derives from his view of history. Part of what makes this possible, Machiavelli acknowledges, is that there is such a thing as human nature, which we can know about if we study history. Machiavelli’s descriptions of what men *are*, such as the mention of the three kinds of brains (the best one being, interestingly, the one that understands by itself, that has *inventiveness*)³⁵ and the assertion that men are “never so indecent” as to crush losers with ingratitude,³⁶ testify to

³³ Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current: Essays on the History of Ideas* (Hogarth Press: London 1998), 38.

³⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 83-84.

³⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

this. So does his complaint that the pitiful state of the politics of his age arises from the same “not having a true knowledge of the histories.”³⁷

Furthermore, this suggests something very important regarding Machiavelli’s relationship to the thinkers who preceded him. Since human nature is the same as it was in antiquity, the fact that Machiavelli needs to add a book to the long line of political treatises already written is proof that no matter how much surface agreement there may be between Machiavelli and his predecessors, he still fundamentally regards their thought as incomplete, if not completely wrong.

In other words, Machiavelli did not think that human nature was in flux.³⁸ Men will behave in similar ways when they face similar situations.³⁹ Hence, political virtue,

³⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 6.

³⁸ Eugenio Garin, *Machiavelli fra politica e storia* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore), 17.

³⁹ There is one notable exception to men’s general tendency to act similarly given similar conditions across time and space: the prince. Machiavelli treats the importance of historical knowledge so extensively because of the fact that we can count on circumstances to repeat themselves, and on men to always act the same in these circumstances. The prince can use historical knowledge to break this cycle. Machiavelli’s prince needs to study history because doing so should give him the ability to recognize when situations are repeating themselves and when they are not. Therefore, a talented prince can know in advance what courses of action will or will not work if he has a recollection of what his predecessors did before him when they found themselves in similar predicaments, and what the consequences were. Additionally, the prince’s political creativity is dependent on that historical knowledge. Certainly, there are maxims of politics that possess some truthfulness constantly across time. The necessity to always be self-sufficient and the associated advice never to rely on mercenaries or the resources of more powerful allies come to mind. But there may come a day when the prince finds himself in a predicament that bears only a vague resemblance to one or more past situations. In that case the prince needs to aggregate and synthesize his historical knowledge to find a new way out. Machiavelli tells us that the great flexibility and adaptability of the good prince, which is perhaps the most important yet most vaguely defined element of princely virtue, is that the prince needs to be able to hold to a “third mode” whenever he cannot exactly emulate past actions. It is that particular adaptability that led Althusius to describe the prince as a “skillful sailor” who adjusts his

which is contingent on the ruler's (or ruling entity) ability to deal with human behavior, must also be a fixed, unchanging thing.⁴⁰ Giovanni Giorgini says as much in a recent book chapter, where he writes that:

Machiavelli belongs with full title to that long tradition of political thinkers who put their hopes of political renewal in the education of a new, and different, kind of statesmen – a tradition that starts with Plato and includes such thinkers as Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine [...].⁴¹

Giorgini interprets Machiavelli's famous assertion that his thought is the product of a knowledge of ancient things as well as an experience of modern ones to mean that the coming together of the knowledge accrued during his political career added to his humanistic literary education. Nevertheless, in Giorgini's reading Machiavelli is anxious to distance himself from Plato and Augustine (the dreamers of imaginary republics and principalities) and eager to appear closer to Xenophon, Cicero and Plutarch – an

behavior according to the behavior of the wind and the sea, and Quentin Skinner to say of the prince that he is an “astonishingly creative force.” Machiavelli's prince is a sailor on the seas of history: most times it behaves in a way he knows about, and in those moments, he can rely on his training to sail smoothly. At other times it behaves in a completely new and unforeseen way. Those are the most dangerous times for the prince, when he must draw on his accumulated knowledge and experience to emerge alive and victorious. Then he uses his knowledge of the past creatively to shape the present, and if he emerges unscathed from peril, he adds to the wealth of great examples he himself studied in order now to become one more example.

See Machiavelli, *Prince*, 94; Johannes Althusius, *Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, translated by F.S. Carney (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 150; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Vol.I: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), 125.

⁴⁰ See also Roberto Esposito, *Ordine e conflitto : Machiavelli e la letteratura politica del Rinascimento italiano* (Napoli : Liguori Editore, 1984), 30-31.

⁴¹ Giovanni Giorgini, “Machiavelli on Good and Evil: The Problem of Dirty Hands Revisited,” in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, eds. David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati and Camila Vergara (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 59.

argument that furthers the development of Florentine historical determinism⁴² traced above. Giorgini's argument aligns with Mansfield's and mine, and anticipates the trajectory of this dissertation quite well. It deserves to be quoted at length:

The importance of the examples of the past, the exemplarity of "great men," has a central role in Machiavelli's political vision: since human nature is in his view fixed, and since history therefore tends to repeat itself, the possibility to imitate the example of the great statesmen of the past is actual and real. Moreover, if we read such educational biographies as Xenophon's *Ciropaedia* and Plutarch's *Lives*, we realize that the great statesmen of the past did exactly this: they chose eminent men as models to imitate.⁴³

Giorgini also gestures in the direction of the problem of dirty hands, and of *fortuna* as the force acting against the advance given to us by historical knowledge. Interestingly, in the middle of an essay otherwise entirely devoted to Machiavelli, he attributes to Plato the introduction of these two central 'Machiavellian' tenets to the landscape of Western thought. Plato, he argues, was well aware of the import of chance on human affairs. He had already introduced the notion of using evil means to do an

⁴² In his book *Writing from History*, Timothy Hampton, as Nederman did in his article cited above, highlights the tension between Machiavelli's theory of historical repetition and his skepticism about the real possibility of successful imitation. It is true, as both Nederman and Hampton have noted, that the early chapters of the *Prince* urge Lorenzo to imitate great men, while the middle chapters challenge the possibility that such imitation is actually possible, and also that the final chapter of the *Prince* and the bulk of the *Discourses* return to exhortations for princes to imitate great men (so as to liberate Italy) and sometimes whole peoples (such as the Romans). In Hampton's reading, Machiavelli is indeed skeptical of the possibility of such imitations, but not entirely. Unlike Nederman's fatalistic Machiavelli, Hampton's Machiavelli attempts to resolve the very tension between his own injunctions to imitation of past great men and his skepticism about its possibility by encouraging his contemporaries to imitate the great men of the past. Hampton's Machiavelli seeks to cure himself of his own skepticism through his hope that he will find an audience receptive to his message and able to succeed. See Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 62-80.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 61.

important good via the introduction of the noble lie. Subsequently, Giorgini draws on the *Republic*, specifically Socrates' mention that philosophers can only successfully enter politics thanks to "divine chance" and that human matters are "ultimately all matters of chance," to argue that Machiavelli's central concerns were also those of Plato. Therefore, Plato's intellectual enterprise was an educational one aimed at helping the citizenry distinguish the philosopher-king from the tyrant.⁴⁴ Although it would not be accurate to describe Machiavelli's preferred leader as a philosopher-king, Giorgini is exactly right to bring the two thinkers together. Machiavelli's own introduction of 'noble lies,' those uttered by Numa (and which he nevertheless very much liked), in conjunction with the usually low level of mass intelligence (more of that in the following chapter), also made Machiavelli acutely aware of the 'tyrant vs. philosopher-king' problem, although it may be more accurate here to talk of a 'tyrant vs. good prince' problem. Machiavelli's answer will also be in the form of an educational project, one in which historical knowledge and the advantages it gives play a big role, to return to the topic at hand.

Finally, an implication of my argument is that Machiavelli must have considered his *Florentine Histories* to be a work whose purpose is to reveal certain truths about the other works of his corpus. The *Histories* themselves, although they have begun to resurface in Machiavelli scholarship during the past five years or so, were relatively understudied before the early 2010s. Yet if histories tell us objective truths about humans (princes and peoples), then perhaps it is not extravagant to take this as a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

metaphorical invitation to assume that the *Florentine Histories* can help to confirm or invalidate interpretations of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, which are about princes and peoples. As such we would not be remiss to treat the *Florentine Histories* as a philosophical work, or assume that Machiavelli meant it to have at least some manner of philosophical import. Let us now move to the second part of this chapter and trace the development of educational and pedagogical thought before Machiavelli.

Education in the context of the Renaissance: Vergerio

Considering Renaissance educational treatises in a project tracing Machiavelli's intellectual influences and his relationship to Neo-Platonism may seem odd. What is important to take from them is the place of philosophy in Renaissance education, particularly Platonic philosophy, so as to be able to later delineate clearly exactly where Machiavelli departs (or does not) from these views of the interaction between political and social education and philosophical learning. The relationship that Machiavelli's pedagogy entertains with Renaissance educational literature is akin to that of the *Prince* and the mirror-of-princes genre. By this I mean that there are superficial similarities, but that Machiavelli is more concerned with the practical aspect of education than his humanist peers. Like his humanist predecessors, Machiavelli seems to think that glory and virtue will follow from proper education, but he disagrees about the importance and meaning of most aspects of humanist education. Stated summarily, Machiavelli thinks that the goals and methods of humanist education are generally correct, but not for the

reasons outlined by humanist educators. This part of the chapter is dedicated to an exposition of these humanist views.

The humanist educators in general subscribed to the Platonic notion that good princes would also be good philosophers.⁴⁵ They profoundly believed that nurture was more important than nature, but also that the most seemingly insignificant actions could have tremendous repercussions in child development. For example, Skinner notes how several books in Guevara's treatise on the upbringing of rulers are dedicated to the minutiae of breastfeeding.⁴⁶ Humanists also emphasized the importance of a liberal arts education in a princely upbringing. Without an appreciation for the humanities, princes could never become the enlightened rulers that humanists hoped they would be. Despite their efforts to distance themselves from Ficino's school of Neo-Platonists, these humanists were still deeply committed to a Platonic view of the state and of human excellence, and therefore philosophy also plays a central role in political education for them. Machiavelli in a sense subverts that advice. Philosophy is critical to princely education – but not because we need a philosopher-king or, more accurately, philosopher-prince. Politics demands that rulers get their hands dirty, which in turn requires a type of mental fortitude built on an understanding of morality and knowledge that only philosophical training can provide.

In line with a centuries-old humanist style, Pier Paolo Vergerio articulates his pedagogy by means of the metaphor of the 'mirror' to underline the importance of self-

⁴⁵ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Volume 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997), 242-243.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

awareness as well as that of imitation. Vergerio in particular traces this back to Socrates.⁴⁷ The idea behind the ‘mirror’ imagery is that princes and free-born youths would look at themselves and aim either to preserve of their pleasant appearance by not ruining it with a bad character or to improve their unpleasant features by striving for greatness. In other words, Vergerio thinks that according to Socrates’ advice, to look at one’s own reflections would foster virtue insofar as it would inspire good-looking people to avoid ruining their beauty by being dislikeable and bad-looking people to improve on their ugliness by being of good character.

Vergerio builds on the mirror metaphor and extends it to self-awareness and imitation over shallow “Socratic” self-improvement. The action of looking at oneself in the mirror is meant to convey a broader message about the importance of self-awareness that Vergerio will go on to argue that only the liberal arts can provide.

It is interesting that Vergerio approaches pedagogical theory by way of the senses. The guiding image used to illustrate knowledge is that of seeing. The youth first develops his attitude vis-à-vis knowledge and virtue as a function of his or her looks. How he or she appears has an impact on the perspective from which the motivation to acquire knowledge will stem. But also seeing one’s own reflection becomes an image for the philosophical development of self-awareness. The deep knowledge of one’s self, the examination of one’s life without which said life is not worth living, is conveyed metaphorically via the image of self-contemplation in a mirror.

⁴⁷ Pier Paolo Vergerio, “The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth,” in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, trans. Craig Kallendorf (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 13.

Machiavelli, too, would pick up on the image of knowledge acquisition as a function of sight. In the famous dedicatory letter of the *Prince*, Lorenzo is told that the knowledge of politics is acquired through sight. Lorenzo can see the people, and therefore can know about them, but Machiavelli sees him as a prince and can therefore tell him about himself insofar as his political role is concerned. Sight, however, is insufficient for Machiavelli, as it can be deceptive. Another sense, touch, needs to be added to our collective of knowledge-acquisitive tools, because seeing only catches what is projected, while touch holds the power, in Machiavelli's imagery, to get to the essence of the object investigated.

Well-educated youths should also pick "living mirrors," excellent men of "high character," to emulate. There the 'mirror' metaphor is meant to convey a need for 'mirroring actions' and not reflection. Vergerio mentions Publius Scipio's assertion that was inspired by images of famous men (without mentioning his example, Xenophon's Cyrus) and Julius Ceasar's admiration for Alexander the Great. As we will see later, images, imitation, and even these two precise examples will be very important to Machiavelli's discussion of princely education, yet he will go beyond mere imitation and invite us to ponder the role of philosophy in political development, which will in turn lead to some serious doubts about the political viability and usefulness of common sense morality. The humanist pedagogues were not inclined to question the viability or truth-value of Christianity. In a gesture that we have every reason to believe sincere, Vergerio

is quick to remind us that none of his educational precepts are worth anything in the absence of religious education.⁴⁸

In doing so, however, Vergerio reveals another goal of education, until then just implied: respectfulness. While we have grounds to believe that Vergerio took for granted the objective truth of the Christian faith, his justification for religious education is not strictly moral. Youths should practice religion because no one will respect those who are contemptuous of the divine. It is important for leaders to be respected, and in a world where the existence of God is an accepted fact, denying it is stupidity, and stupidity breeds disrespect.

Next comes the topic of physical fitness. Education is also necessarily military education, and consequently being fit is important. Taking a page from the ancients, Vergerio draws inspiration from the Spartans and Cretans, who not only raised their children outdoors, but made them engage in hunting. To Vergerio, however, the benefits of hunting are limited almost strictly to the physical: it teaches youths to run faster, jump higher, and endure thirst, hunger, cold and heat, which later translates into self-control.⁴⁹ In addition hunting makes hunters bold and therefore more likely to act bravely in war, which is good not because it is more conducive to victory, but because Vergerio does not seem to think that life is an intrinsic good. Readers are told to avoid aiming to live too long a life, on account of the effort it demands, the substantial resources it necessitates, and the virtue from which it distracts.⁵⁰ Unlike Machiavelli's, these specific

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71.

prescriptions lacks emphasis on the ‘this-worldly’; prolongation of life is neither a goal nor a good. One gets a sense that it is in bad taste, since Heaven awaits the virtuous.

Leonardo Bruni

It is easy to imagine that when Machiavelli deplored the pitiable condition of scholars around him who were attempting to learn from fragments of ancient artworks and ignoring the truly important complete military histories, he was thinking of Leonardo Bruni. Bruni’s entire educational agenda concerns the study of literature. His audience is a woman, and consequently we must remember that Bruni’s prescriptions are not the same as they would be if his addressee could have contemplated the possibility of public service. When he gets to the meat of his argument, an appeal to the careful study of ancient epic poetry by people of all classes and occupations, it becomes obvious that Bruni is discussing education at large and not strictly the education of well-born Renaissance women.⁵¹ In Bruni’s view, history is useful to inform our practical judgments, in that if we know the outcome of events that remind us of a situation we find ourselves in (or have to counsel someone about), then knowledge of history can nudge us toward a decision or another.⁵² Ultimately, though, it is pleasurable to acquire knowledge of history since it is full of impressive, grand and dramatic moments we can use to entertain conversation.

⁵¹ Leonardo Bruni, “The Study of Literature,” in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, trans. Craig Kallendorf (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 113.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 109.

Literature, on the other hand, is the true repository of wisdom. He argues that their poems contain useful maxims for all occupations. According to Bruni, the lessons of Homer and Vergil are to be directly lifted from the text. Hector tells Aeneas to be prudent and not reckless in the exercise of his generalship; Iris scolds Agamemnon for sleeping while so many depend on him and his leadership. Bruni urges his addressee to read for precepts and take them at face value. The point seems to be that the reader should record them as commonplaces, and as such they can be used to direct one's own behavior.

Bruni justifies the utility and necessity of poetical knowledge on the grounds that its universal appeal must signify universal worth. By this Bruni means that texts written in meter and recited rhythmically never fail to generate some manner of reaction that refocuses the audience on the contents of the piece. Bruni assumes that everyone feels lifted up by hearing these works performed or recited, but on the grounds of these assumptions he establishes that they possess universal worth.⁵³

Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini

Piccolomini's educational treatise takes the form of a letter addressed to Ladislav of Hungary titled "The Education of Boys." In it Piccolomini more or less establishes the importance of the liberal arts traditionally associated with medieval education. Before that he briefly establishes two tenets on which a proper education is based. First, princes and future rulers should balance (not in equal proportion) their scholarly pursuits with

⁵³ Ibid., 117.

exercise (not in equal proportion), because they will inevitably end up in one war or another, and fighting requires some amount of physical fitness.⁵⁴ Also, the chosen teacher has to be someone the pupil loves no less than his studies. Although this could be interpreted cynically (young boys do not always approach scholarly pursuits with enthusiasm), it is quite clear that Piccolomini thinks teachers should try to be loved by their students; the student should consider them on par with their parents, insofar as teachers are parents of the mind.⁵⁵

Piccolomini considered philosophy to be a specific discipline in which princes should be educated as well as the umbrella term designating the cumulative study of the seven liberal arts. In that sense someone who is studying grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy is acquiring wisdom and thus in a sense being philosophical (and presumably enjoying it). But philosophy (as the discipline which has ethics for its subject of study) must be practiced/learned in parallel with these seven subjects.

Piccolomini's arguments for the study of each of the seven liberal arts are rather pragmatic and instrumental: one should study rhetoric and logic (in more than one language) because graceful speech charms the peoples ruled and multilingualism ensures the prince is not dependent on any translator and can understand his subjects more directly.⁵⁶ One should study grammar because it is a gateway to rhetoric and logic.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, "The Education of Boys," in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, trans. Craig Kallendorf (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

Knowledge of music is good because it relaxes the mind and makes rulers better resistant to hardship.⁵⁸ Geometry “sharpens the intellect.”⁵⁹ Astronomy is good because scientific knowledge guards one against the dangers of superstition. Piccolomini retells the story of Pericles, who avoided a general uncontrolled retreat by his soldiers frightened at an eclipse by explaining to them the phenomenon⁶⁰ and thereby preventing panic.⁶¹

The real substance of education to Piccolomini is philosophy understood as the study of ethics and morality. He has already been careful to add history and literature to the seven traditional liberal arts. History is useful to a young prince because it allows him to “[follow] the example of others” and distinguish useful from harmful actions. One must be careful, however, not to offer histories written in bad style and written by ignorant people for fear of corrupting young minds (Piccolomini mentions the works of Hungarians and Bohemians and “similar accounts”). Only experienced minds can learn from bad books; the young should only be exposed to good books.⁶² Literature doubles as practice in ethics and written/oral expression, because the ancient writers and poets often stumbled on truths amidst otherwise (mostly) harmlessly false works (“roses

⁵⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 248-9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 251.

⁶⁰ One wonders, not without amusement, how Pericles managed not only to restore an entire army to calm but also patiently *lecture* them out of their fright.

⁶¹ Ibid., 253.

⁶² Ibid., 225.

amongst thorns” in Piccolomini’s language) and because reading them provides countless examples of what great writing looks like.⁶³

To Piccolomini these disciplines are all subordinate to the real love of wisdom, which is Christian doctrine. It seems that Piccolomini thinks that the liberal arts naturally lead to the realization of the truth of Christian doctrine and also that the knowledge it brings with it can be brought in support of Christianity. It is not simply that we know the cardinal sins to be bad and moderation, charity, and modesty to be good: thanks to Socrates and Plato, we also have logical, rational demonstrative arguments that validate this. The seven liberal arts are philosophical in the sense that they constitute a part of wisdom and that the student of philosophy loves all wisdom. But “moral philosophy” has to be taught in parallel with the liberal arts, apparently because the natural conclusion of the liberal arts education (good Christian behavior) appears self-evident from the beginning. But since the teacher already knows how it all comes together, he can afford (since it is all true anyway) to teach them side by side.⁶⁴

For Piccolomini, education, which is philosophy, is ultimately about the care of the soul. We learn divine worship as well from Plato as we do from the scriptures.⁶⁵ Done well, the ultimate worth of that education (apart from salvation, of course) is “a refuge against the attacks of a stepmotherly fortune.”⁶⁶ (This prefigures Machiavelli’s own view about how education can help us in the occasional fight against fortune.) And so for all his apparent pragmatism, Piccolomini’s pedagogical goals are mostly about the

⁶³ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 257.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 161

⁶⁶ Ibid., 159.

otherworldly; it is not a question of mastering fortune as much as it is about how to learn to bide our time, and to tolerate or minimize the impact of fortune's blows.

CHAPTER III

FICINO'S APOLITICAL PLATONISM

One of the major difficulties with trying to separate the two 'Platonisms' to which Machiavelli's thought is contrasted in this project is that Ficino, unlike Machiavelli and Plato, was not a philosopher of politics. Neither did he treat Plato as one, even when he was writing about the more emphatically political dialogues, like the *Republic* or the *Laws*. Insofar as we can say Machiavelli was not particularly enamored with Christianity,¹ then, we can say that any Platonism that was transmitted to him by way of Ficino's commentaries would have been received with skepticism, if not hostility. Therefore, part of the work needed to elucidate the actual relationship between Platonism and 'Machiavellianism' (if there is such a thing) needs to be accomplished by setting their works side-by-side and eliminating the so-called 'middleman' that Neo-Platonism represents in this case.

Yet Ficino's interpretation of Plato has implications that touch on key elements of Machiavelli's thought. Sometimes these are strictly in line with Plato's dialogues;

¹ Gennaro Sasso notes, in the midst of a discussion of the instrumentality of religion in Machiavelli's thought, that it is difficult to think that Machiavelli had believed in the God of Christianity [*Senza che perciò dovesse credere nel Dio del Christianismo, nel quale è difficile pensare che [Machiavelli] credesse ...*]. My translation. Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli: Storia del suo pensiero politico* (Bologna : Il Mulino, 1980), 512. See also Claude Lefort, who said, regarding Strauss' view of Machiavelli's hostility to Christianity, that Strauss deployed "unparalleled ingenuity to find buried in the depths of the text what is visible on its surface [*Strauss déploie une ingéniosité inégalée à découvrir enfoui dans les profondeurs du texte ce qui est visible à sa surface*]." My translation. Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre de Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 302.

other times they are Christian extrapolations related more or less loosely to the substance of the text Ficino is discussing. We find in his *Platonic Theology* a hierarchy of human intellects, a theory about the relationship of art and representation to nature and reality, a theory of knowledge acquisition and its relationship to sensory data, a cosmology, a view of history and its nature, and so forth. As such it can be said that without being political, Ficino's work on Plato has political implications. Most times, however, his work seems very loosely related to the content he claims to examine.

For example, Ficino, like his humanist contemporaries and Machiavelli himself, has a theory of art, representation, and knowledge: "the relationship of art to nature is the same as that of nature to God."² Ficino asks 'what is a work of art?' He promptly concludes that human art is "the mind of the artists in disjunct matter" while a work of nature is "the mind of nature in conjunct matter."³ Far from Machiavelli's later invitation to conceive of both nature and art as imperfect representations of the chaos of human life and what we can know about it, Ficino posits nature and art to be rational, ordered representations of God's work. Human art is imperfect (on account of humanity's imperfection) and natural art superior (it is more directly related to God's agency). In Machiavelli's world, which shows little interest in God, art and nature come together as representations of our political lives. *Fortunà*, the chaotic and supernatural representation of fortune, is a river (more on that later). In Ficino's divinely ordained world, art is a rational, although more or less imperfect, expression of divinity.

² Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. J.B. Allen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 139.

³ *Ibid.*, 255.

There is nothing particularly political in Ficino's view of art and representation. In fact, the only point that the discussion about art accomplishes in Ficino's theology is to reaffirm the centrality of God. Art is not to nature what nature is to God because it represents nature and in turn nature represents God. 'Nature' here is meant as the medium, in essence the formal cause, of the artistic product. So the longevity of a piece of art is a direct function of the durability of its medium, in the same way that the components of the natural world's lifespan are a function of how long God preserves them through his influence. *Platonic Theology* is full of striking moments like this where Ficino touches on some distinctively Platonic theme and proceeds to ignore completely everything Plato says about it. There is more direct mention of Epicurus and his disciples' - toward whom Ficino exhibits a profound antipathy – than of Plato himself.

Similarly, Ficino's cosmology is oddly unrelated to Plato's and is definitely alien to that of Machiavelli.⁴ To Ficino the movement of human history, and that of the world and stars, is unsurprisingly the direct result of God's agency. Ironically Ficino relies on materialistic metaphors to explain God's effect on the universe. He summons the example of a sinew allegedly located in the necks of small animals that, when tugged, moves all the limbs of their bodies.⁵ Or the image of a German cabinet he recently saw, in which a series of representations of many animals were all connected and held in

⁴ If Cary Nederman is right, however, Machiavellian cosmology would be closer to Ficino's. See Cary J. Nederman, *Machiavelli: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Books, 2009), 28-49 and Cary J. Nederman, "Amazing Grace: God, Fortune and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no 4 (October 1999): 627-633.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

balance by a single ball, so that any motion of the ball affected them all.⁶ So while we can say that to Machiavelli, all human history can be represented as a series of scenes repeated over and over with different backgrounds and settings (so that the differences are really only superficial), to Ficino human history is linear. God acts as the great puppeteer who propels the heavens and human society forward.

To Ficino the physical and political movements of society are simultaneously divinely ordained, free, and unpredictable. For him all motion is motion towards God, yet the God-influenced motion is always made in accordance with each of our own individual natures. Spheres and planets in the universe complete circuits because their roundness compels them to revolve. God persuades more than He commands.⁷

The interesting thing about this idea is how it fits within the framework of the *Republic*; which Ficino cites as he exposes his theory of motion. In line with Machiavelli and Plato, it seems that he, too, thinks that human beings have natures and will act according to them. But if we go back to Plato's theory of human nature as articulated in the myth of the metals, we realize that our so-called 'natural' behavior, which means here acting in accordance to our essences, is in no way automatic. In fact, the great difficulty of the task that faces the law-makers of *Kallipolis* is to identify the nature of each, persuade them of said nature, and then organize society hierarchically in such a manner that every group of citizens finds themselves in a position suited to their essence. Only then can the city be in harmony. Ficino's representation of Plato is that of a thinker whose cosmology is depicted as a world where everything is in its right place and

⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁷ Ibid., 209.

behaves according to its nature. Ficino ignores the fact that Plato posited that the *polis* needed philosopher-rulers specifically because that was not the case. It should come as no surprise after such a realization that any form of Platonism presented through that lens would have been received with stark disagreement by a thinker such as Machiavelli.

Now that the tone has been set, so to speak, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a sketch of the implications of Ficino's "apolitical" Platonism, a sketch drawn as the analysis combs through Ficino's commentary on Plato. I hope to delineate exactly where Ficino's thought, expressed though his commentary, touches on themes dear to Machiavelli, and how they differ from each other, before the subsequent chapters move on to rapprochements between Machiavelli's thought and that of Plato's unfiltered. I will argue below that Ficino's commentary on Plato is at times dramatically incorrect and/or unfaithful to the text itself. Interestingly, if we pay attention to Ficino's errors and go back to Plato's original work, then it seems that while the "Ficinian" interpretation clashes with Machiavelli's thought, the actual passage seems to be in line with it.

The commentary on the *Republic*

Under the guise of producing a summary of Plato's *Republic*, Ficino wrote what he himself finally admits (at the very end of the book) to be an interpretive essay on the book. His understanding of the *Republic* reveals itself to be strongly determined by his faith. While it is commonly interpreted today to be a book about education, Ficino seems to think that it is a book about God. He understands Plato as someone whose philosophy is not really at odds with Christianity. Part of this, however, is dependent on Ficino's

omission of certain passages of the *Republic*. It is unclear whether these omissions are deliberate⁸ or simply circumstantial, in the sense that a line-by-line commentary on the *Republic* would be nearly impossibly long and generally ill-suited to any coherent argument. Ficino's commentary, however, is different from modern scholarship in the sense that it is not driven by a central thesis; Ficino waltzes through the *Republic*, picking up on passages he finds interesting or useful, then briefly qualifying and explaining them.

We get a general sense of Ficino's view of Plato in a short preamble to his discussion of the first book of the *Republic*. Plato is not a thinker or theoretical philosopher:

[...] our Plato surpasses all other founders of States and lawgivers in this respect at least, that while all others, as human beings, have organized the state mainly for action, Plato, as if divine, guides the entire activity – both public and private – of the State mainly towards contemplation [...].⁹

Plato is, first and foremost, a founder of states and a lawgiver. There is no profound difference between Plato, Solon, Lycurgus and other founders, except that Plato's ideas were better. To Ficino, Plato's project is just as real (and serious) as what we would now call 'practical' politicians. Contra later Italian thinkers - and by this I mean Machiavelli specifically - Ficino does not think that there is anything 'imagined' about Plato's ideal regime. Certainly it is an idea: *Kallipolis* (Plato's ideal city in the *Republic*) is taken -

⁸ For more on the questionable sincerity of the Florentine Platonists' Platonism, see James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol. I (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 30-101.

⁹ Arthur Farndell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule: Ficino on Plato's Republic, Laws, and Epinomis* (London: Sheapheard –Walwyn, 2009), 3.

perhaps wrongly, as forms are supposed to be concepts and not merely images - by Ficino to be a form. And thus it has a stronger connection to reality than what we merely perceive. Comprehension, after all, is superior to sense perception, and this allows Ficino to put Plato alongside actual lawmakers and founders rather than merely with theoreticians of the state. Ficino sees *Kallipolis* as the earthly representation of the heavenly Jerusalem.¹⁰

This is problematic. Ficino thinks that the centrality of the contemplative life to *Kallipolis* means that citizens who contemplate the truth of God and act accordingly, i.e., justly, will eventually constitute it alone and by themselves. It is easy to see how Ficino can perceive his argument to be logical: *Kallipolis* is about justice (it *is* the just place); justice requires contemplation and comes from God; therefore, *Kallipolis* is where people contemplate divinity. However, this conclusion does not entirely do justice to what seems to be happening in the text. Plato is very clear about who can attain that state and how they can do it. The myth of the metals¹¹ establishes that there is a clear distinction between three different kinds of people. There is a hierarchy of natures within human society that implies a difference in intellectual capacity, and therefore political potential. (As we will see in the following chapter, this is an idea shared by Machiavelli.)

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Alan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 414d-415a.

At the end of his discussion of the third book of the *Republic*, Ficino mentions the myth of the metals.¹² He omits both the context and the nature of it. To him, it is simply a way to assert that people in general should practice that for which they are naturally talented.¹³ But to do this is to forgo the importance that the myth has for *Kallipolis* and what it implies about human nature. Only the best and highest of these three kinds have in themselves the necessary material to have the potential to reach that state of contemplation. And as the allegory of the cave suggests,¹⁴ the path to the outside of the cave (where one can contemplate the truth) is long and arduous; it is unclear if anyone, let alone everyone, can ever make it out. Although *Kallipolis* is definitely a place determined by the possibility of contemplative knowledge (part of the reason why it is such a just place is that we suppose that lawmakers will be philosophers), it is an overstatement to say that its goal is to allow everyone to adopt the contemplative way of life. It may be better, but it is definitely not accessible to all. In fact, *Kallipolis* is predicated on the idea that its inherent justice entails the fact that not everyone can live the contemplative life and consequently deals with that in an appropriate (just) manner.

Ficino also completely glosses over the role of myths and myth-making, i.e., lies, in the *Republic*. Socrates and Adeimantus imagine *Kallipolis* after a common realization about the dual nature of falsehood. There are actual falsehoods, i.e., those which are complete and utter lies, and another kind, “falsehoods in words.”¹⁵ Socrates differentiates the two kinds of falsehood. He says that the former is in the soul, i.e., that

¹² Farndell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule*, 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ Bloom, trans., *Republic of Plato*, 514a.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 382a-c.

its inner core, its entirety, is untrue, while the latter one is false in its manifestation but intrinsically true. This falsehood points to the truth about ancient, godly things.¹⁶ To Socrates and Adeimantus, the fact that most (or all) of us do not have access to such a truth is problematic. Fortunately, the falsehood in speech, which is superficially false but substantially true, can help us. Because of its substantial truthfulness, it can point towards the truth and help us approximate it. *Kallipolis* is one such falsehood.

Yet the myth has several implications that directly bear on Ficino's attempt to postulate that Platonic philosophy and Christianity are seldom or never at odds. The difference between the golden souls and the other types is that only the best kind of men can really know the Good, and therefore rule. In other words, divine knowledge is not accessible to everyone, not because of a lack of personal effort on behalf of various individuals, but rather because some people (the majority, we should underline) simply are not born with the potential to access it. More importantly, the fact that the best regime has to be predicated on a myth that its founders (Socrates and Adeimantus) know for a fact to be (superficially) untrue suggest that politics cannot really be based on truth. If everybody could access truth and recognize it as such, then there would be no fundamental disagreements on how the state should be ordered. So truth and justice perhaps cannot be explained or comprehended, and it is better (and easier, and more effective) to make up a story about how things are simply the way they are because of some supernatural force whose will is arbitrary and unconscionable. A careful reader of

¹⁶ Ibid., 382d.

Plato may ask if politics and lawmaking predicated on the existence of God and our interpretation of His will may not be one such foundational myth.

This becomes even more puzzling in Ficino's discussion of the theme of the fourth book. So far Ficino seems to have more or less discounted the importance of education in the *Republic*. He seems once again to overestimate the human potential for virtue. Ficino understands Plato's view of lawmaking in the *Republic* as being useless because "level headed good men will be the living laws."¹⁷ Yet Plato suggests many times that without some form of lawmaking, no political society can exist. Famously, in his retelling of the myth of Gyges (which Ficino completely overlooks), Plato presents us with an unsettling aspect of human behavior. Gyges finds a ring that renders him invisible, kills the king and marries the newly widowed queen of his realm, and thereby promptly seizes power.

Plato's alteration of the original story suggests that under the cover of absolute anonymity and without the fear of consequences that comes with visibility, human beings have disturbingly tyrannical tendencies. Furthermore, that level-headed good men are laws in themselves is not exactly what Socrates says in the corresponding passage of the *Republic*, at 427b. Rather, he says that corrective lawmaking is useless because the internal harmony of the state depends on the citizens having internalized the norms implies by the way of life established through the noble lie:

[...] the true lawgiver oughn't to bother with [corrective lawmaking], either in a badly governed city or in a well-governed one – in the former, because it's useless and accomplishes nothing; in the latter, because

¹⁷ Farndell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule*, 16.

anyone could discover some of these things, while others follow automatically from the ways of life we established.¹⁸

More importantly, Ficino completely eludes the myth's implication with respect to the importance of the senses' role in the political sphere as well as the importance of coercion to back the laws. The myth of Gyges strongly implies that visibility is of the utmost importance in the political sphere. Without the possibility of being seen, and therefore of being caught, Gyges immediately dismisses his previous commitment to the societal order under which he lived. His invisibility precludes the possibility of capture and conviction, and therefore it completely dissolves his respect for the rule of law.

The lessons of the myth of Gyges are profoundly Machiavellian. The importance of sensory data for Machiavelli insofar as it concerned our knowledge of politics scarcely needs to be argued for anymore. As we know from *Prince* 18, visual data plays a crucial role in politics. The prince must endeavor to appear to share the qualities his subjects value so as to avoid infamy. Men, writes Machiavelli, judge by their eyes rather than by their hands.¹⁹ This point actually encompasses many Machiavellian lessons. First, to be seen, which is inevitable, is to be politically vulnerable. But the prince can turn that vulnerability into advantage if he is a master of deception. Images can be manipulated, and therefore the potential vulnerability that comes with exposure can become an asset. If he were not seen, the ruler could behave in any fashion without risk:

¹⁸ Bloom, trans., *Republic of Plato*, 427b.

¹⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 71.

Gyges' example confirms Plato's agreement with this supposedly 'original' axiom of Machiavellian philosophy.

It is also worth mentioning that Machiavelli establishes a distinction between sight and touch. While seeing only delivers superficial data, the image of touch is used by Machiavelli to communicate substantial understanding. This seems to be a clear jab directed at Ficino himself: in the beginning of his commentary on the *Republic*, Ficino had written that it is clear that "the eye surpasses the hand."²⁰ Everyone can access the superficial layers of a thing, but very few can get to its substance. It is difficult here not to see an obvious parallel between the superficial and substantial layers of truth that Socrates and Adeimantus discuss at the onset of the *Republic*. For both Plato and Machiavelli, there is a clear difference in intellectual potential in humanity at large, and that difference implies a need for deception, but also a need to educate about the nature (and necessity) of that deception.

Gyges' example also shows how Machiavelli and Plato understood the symbiotic relationship between coercion and the rule of law. In the absence of the possibility of chastisement, Gyges gives full rein to his worst impulses. The potency of the rule of law, to both Machiavelli and Plato, is dependent on the states' ability to enforce it, to borrow Catherine Zuckert's vocabulary.²¹

²⁰ Fardell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule*, 3.

²¹ Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press 2017), 247.

Poetry under the tutelage of philosophy

Ficino completely overlooks the political aspect of the *Republic*. As he does so, he omits the importance of images and imagination in the dialogue, and thus paints a picture of Platonic philosophy where aesthetic creation is useless to philosophical education. As such, Ficino's Plato is, philosophically speaking, distant from a Machiavelli who constantly uses aesthetic metaphors, but who is also heavily reliant on poetry and literature to further his intellectual agenda. It is well-known that Machiavelli was strongly influenced by Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. He was also a writer of philosophically-loaded poems and plays himself, in the tradition of the humanists discussed in the previous chapter. Ficino, unsurprisingly, is entirely sympathetic to Socrates' proposed censorship of poets and artists guilty of impiety. Poets indeed propagate harmful lies about the gods and about human nature.²² What is really of interest here is that Ficino seems to miss Plato's point entirely. In fact, Plato here is in fact closest to Machiavelli and Savonarola in that he thought poetry is useful, but should be under the tutelage of philosophy.

On the surface, Machiavelli and Plato seem to disagree about this for the following reasons. First, Plato openly appeals for the censorship of poets in Books II and III of the *Republic* (something that is often wrongly interpreted as a ban on arts altogether); second, the *Republic* is centered on *Kallipolis*, an imaginary polis entirely made up by Socrates, Adeimantus and Glaucon as a tool throughout their inquiry about the nature of justice; third, Plato's works are often cast in terms of a verbal and

²² Farndell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule*, 11.

intellectual confrontation between Socrates and various sophists, rhetoricians and artists. Among the most famous examples of this are Socrates' argument against the sophist/rhetorician²³ Thrasymachus in the first books of the *Republic* and Socrates' encomium proposed as a correction of those made by his drinking companions (most famously Agathon, a dramatic playwright, and Aristophanes, a comedic playwright) near the end of the *Symposium*. While Machiavelli thought that artistic creation, literature, poetry, rhetoric and history informed political theory, Plato apparently thought that they undermined it. However counter-intuitive my argument may seem at this point, it is actually not.

To ask what place art, poetry and rhetoric occupy in Machiavelli and Plato's thought is to ask indirectly what role images, imagination and representation play in their work. The consideration of (literary) invention as a rhetorical technique in both authors' works is indispensable to answer this question. And although the two thinkers differ widely on this topic, their work can be reconciled in at least one respect. To both of them, myth, literature, allegories and images are valuable pedagogical tools that can be used to educate an audience about philosophy and politics. This is not that say that Machiavelli and Plato agree on the substance and goals of that education, or what the goal of politics was. But Plato's problem with the arts is one of content and not form. In order to argue this successfully I need to depart momentarily from the *Republic* and focus on Homer's *Odyssey* and Plato's *Symposium*.

²³ See David D Corey, *The Sophists in Plato's Dialogues* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).

Plato's literary environment and his use of myth

The casual modern reader might easily suppose at first that Plato is contrasting Socrates' rigor with the carelessness of the ordinary Athenian; but as the pattern recurs again and again, another interpretation suggests itself, namely that Plato is pointing to a general state of incoherence in the state of evaluative language in Athenian culture. [...] part of his strategy is to expel the Homeric inheritance from the city state.²⁴

Plato's problem with myths and literature derives from the fact that the artistic world in which he lived very much conveyed the following idea: that which is 'Godly,' the superior realms of intellection and knowledge, are not for man to seek and any attempt to do so will end badly. That which is Godly is partly characterized by the fickle, arbitrary exercise of a will (or wills) that men should not and cannot understand. Plato disagreed with this and crafted his own myths as a response.

One of the most salient examples of this is Plato's insertion of that very message (about the dangers of human ascension, or *Ἀνάβασις*, *anabasis*) into the mouth of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. The comedian tells us that human beings were originally attached to each other. Some men were attached to men, some women to women, and some men to women, composing the three original genders: male, female, and androgynous. These beings were 'whole' in the sense that they were completely self-sufficient and possessed great strength. We can also assume that they were immortal, since the mechanisms for reproduction were only introduced to human anatomy, according to Aristophanes, after humans tried to capitalize on their benefits (by

²⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 131.

challenging the gods). These benefits, however, led them to commit an act of hubris: realizing their own potential, they ascended to the heavens in an attempt to displace the gods.²⁵ The gods, needing them for sacrifices and attention, resolved to have Zeus split them in half, with the added threat that they would be re-split if ever they attempted something similar. As a result of this, human beings now spend the rest of their lives looking for their other half, the person with whom they are meant to be.

The ‘wholeness’ that human beings currently pursue by looking for their ‘other half’ unfortunately seems to pale in comparison with the one that was once ours, according to Aristophanes’ myth. While finding that special person who constitutes the other half of our being does seem desirable, it does not come with all of the added benefits of the original wholeness of the circle-men: we still need to eat and procreate because we are not immortal, and we certainly do not regain the spectacular strength Aristophanes tells us that the circle-men possessed just by being introduced to and spending time with our ‘soulmates.’ Aristophanes is very clear about what prevents human beings from committing another act of hubris comparable to the original one, after we meet our other halves: Zeus’ threat has been internalized, as the final remarks of his encomium show. We must refrain from more attempts at ascension and encourage our friends and neighbors to worship the Gods and to give them the attention they desire, since it is the only thing standing between us and further punishment.²⁶ Aristophanes’ encomium foreshadows one of the first, most powerful things that the sophist and

²⁵ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (New York: Penguin, 1999), 190c.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193a-b.

priestess Diotima will tell Socrates:²⁷ “God with man does not mix.”²⁸ Socrates’ correction of Aristophanes’ encomium will challenge that view.

My argument now requires that we take a detour through Homer’s *Odyssey* to further my point about divinity in Plato’s literary landscape. A message similar to that of Aristophanes’ explained above is also very present in Homer’s *Odyssey*, an inescapable part of Plato’s literary environment. The *Odyssey* acts as a warning about the consequences of disobeying the arbitrary will of the divine as well as an injunction for men to bend their spirits in order to appease the gods. Among other things, the *Odyssey* pits Odysseus against Poseidon, the latter furious with the former for having blinded his son, the Cyclops Polyphemos. Everyone interacting with Poseidon, who²⁹ “has put ill-will in his *thumos* against [Odysseus],”³⁰ including Odysseus himself, is associated with *thumos* (*θυμός*), or spirit/spiritedness, and not reason/understanding, *logos* (*λόγος*). And everyone except Poseidon has to compromise away the *thumotic* part of their soul or suffer dire consequences.

Polyphemos is described as the possessor of a cruel or pitiless *thumos*.³¹ He is little more than an animal (he does not respect the rules of guest-friendship, eats his

²⁷ “*θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μίγνυται.*” My translation.

²⁸ Plato, *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*, trans. W.R.M Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 203a.

²⁹ “*ὃ τοι κότον ἔνθετο θυμῷ χῳόμενος.*” My translation.

³⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, Ph.D. in two volumes* (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1919), Accessed August 19 2017, <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0135%3Abook%3D11%3Acard%3D97>>

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.287

guests, gets drunk, sleeps with his sheep and goats, and vomits in his sleep),³² yet he fancies himself superior to Zeus. When Odysseus asks for his hospitality in the name of the king of the Gods, Polyphemos quickly replies that the Cyclops do not care about him or any other god, for they are much better than them.³³ The rest is history: Polyphemos is blinded by Odysseus and conveniently remembers that he does need the gods after all: he successfully invokes his father to curse Odysseus on his journey. Only when Polyphemos acknowledges his status of inferiority vis-à-vis the gods (something made manifest by his request for Poseidon’s help) does he accomplish his goal.³⁴

Something very similar will happen to Odysseus himself. In *Odyssey* XI.105, Tiresias (the famous Theban seer) warns Odysseus that he will only come home if he manages to “curb his *thumos* and that of his companions.”³⁵ We must recall that it is Odysseus’ arrogance toward Polyphemos, despite knowing exactly what kind of being he was,³⁶ that led him to be cursed in the first place. And so Tiresias’ injunction sounds very similar to what Polyphemos previously did himself: an acknowledgement of dependence on divine will. Darrell Dobbs, in his article “Reckless Rationalism and Heroic Reverence in Homer’s *Odyssey*,”³⁷ takes this point farther. According to Dobbs, Odysseus learns this lesson on the island of Helios and “tempers his reason with respect for the sacred,” while his companions make a rational decision to commit an irrational

³² Ibid., 9.370-74

³³ Ibid., 9.275-80.

³⁴ Ibid., 9.530-35

³⁵ “*αἶ κ’ ἐθέλης σὸν θυμὸν ἐρκακέειν καὶ ἐταίρων.*” My translation.

³⁶ Ibid., 9.502-5.

³⁷ Darrell Dobbs, “Reckless Rationalism and Heroic Reverence in Homer’s *Odyssey*,” *The American Political Science Review* 81, no 2 (June 1987), 491.

action, namely, to transgress the will of Helios and slaughter his cattle to avoid deathly starvation. For Dobbs, this is partly a political message: Odysseus' rational submissiveness to divine will ultimately save his household and his regime as well as himself.

This point becomes even more salient when we consider Alkinoos, king of the Phaiakians, alongside Odysseus and his companions. Foretold by his ancestor that Poseidon would eventually smite him and his people for being too helpful to strangers, Alkinoos nevertheless helps Odysseus in his journey back home. His helpfulness results in his ship being turned into stone and his kingdom piled under a mountain by an angry Poseidon.³⁸ In sum, Homer paints a world in which the divine has the potential to be either an enemy of or an ally to man. Human life in that particular world is difficult because divine will is apparently arbitrary, certainly fickle, and most of all often completely unknowable to man. But as we will see below, Plato will propose an allegory of his own to counter that point.

Plato tells us that myth-making in itself is not bad – to the contrary. As discussed above, there are two kinds of falsehood, one of which is not necessarily bad. Falsehoods in speech, which are superficially false but substantially true, can help us. Because of their substantial truthfulness, they can point toward the truth and help us approximate it. Socrates makes it very clear that it is not poetry itself that he dislikes, but rather absolute lies about the Gods.³⁹ To Socrates, that which is divine, or superhuman, cannot lie. By virtue of its divinity, the god cannot lie, or produce incorrect or false images, and

³⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, XIII.125-184.

³⁹ Bloom, trans., *Republic of Plato*, 382e.

therefore cannot deceive.⁴⁰ This is why, in Socrates' view, we can praise certain things in Homer but not some others, such as, for example, Zeus deceiving Agamemnon.⁴¹

In a similar fashion, Socrates' encomium in the *Symposium* seems to correct that of Aristophanes. Socrates' encomium is partly constituted by another myth, one about the origins of *Eros*, and directly contradicts Aristophanes' final warning. To Socrates (and Diotima), *Eros* (Love) is the child of Need and Resource. Love, therefore, is something that makes human beings both needy and resourceful; it makes us desperately desire something and, as a result, creatively craftier in order to get it. But Socrates also tells us that Love ultimately comes with the desire of wholeness that Aristophanes accurately identified earlier. Yet that wholeness is not to be found in another person – the lover will start with loving beautiful bodies and gradually move on to love beauty itself, and then knowledge and wisdom (which is virtue) for its own sake.⁴² Socrates' encomium contradicts Aristophanes': it tells us that human beings will *still* desire to ascend beyond their situation as a result of being in love and seeking wholeness. Human beings, as result of the move from love of things to love of concepts and wisdom, will come to seek the immortality that once belonged to the circle men, although that immortality will come in a different form.⁴³ Subsequently, humans will attempt to ascend the ladder of knowledge in order to contemplate reality as it is. Contra Aristophanes, Socrates suggests that our desire for elevation (in this case philosophy) is neither dangerous nor forbidden.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 382d.

⁴¹ Ibid., 383a.

⁴² Plato, *Symposium*, 211d.

⁴³ Ibid., 209d.

Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' makes a similar point. The inhabitants of the cave, Socrates tells Glaucon, are like us. They are like us not only in the basic sense that they are human, but also in the sense that we, too, are mistaken about the nature of things that we see and hear. The cave itself, then, is the world in which we live. While certain things about the cave may change over time, there are always people chained and forced to look at shadows on a wall, always a fire, puppeteers and their many puppets and always a way upward and out. We must assume that it will always be long, rough and steep.⁴⁴

Most people in the cave are constrained in a way that they look at shadows projected on a wall for all of their life. Other people, however, are a little farther up. They project the shadows for those below to see. We must assume that it is also their efforts that keep the fire burning behind them, on their level. The puppets are also theirs and were perhaps made by them as well. The light of the fire, without a doubt, is an imitation of the light of the sun. Imitating the way the sun illuminates the nature of things outside the cave, the fire projects shadows of the imitation of things on a wall. The sun being the idea of the good, the fire is the closest imitation of the good that the puppeteers can make. Whether they themselves have seen the good is not clear.

What is clear, though, is that they possess puppets that represent various concepts. We, as readers, must understand these puppets to be representations of ideas of all things material and immaterial. Some of these puppets last longer than others: some wear out very slowly, some very fast; they are made of different materials (stone, wood, and every kind of metal). This makes the puppeteers responsible for everything the cave-

⁴⁴ Bloom, trans., *Republic of Plato*, 515a-515e.

dwellers think is true and real about their world. Since they feed the fire and make the representations of things that they project (some might be better at it than others, given the different quality of the puppets), it is not far-fetched to think of them as the people to whom Socrates first turned for knowledge.⁴⁵ Poets, politicians and artisans (and very possibly sophists) of the past made puppets still used today; poets, politicians and artisans of the present feed the fire, move the puppets and utter certain sounds. The chained cave-dwellers are then twice removed from things as they are; they see only a shadow of an imitation of a thing. The puppeteers have the privilege of being closer to actual things. Here exists the possibility that they believe their puppets are things in themselves and that the fire is the only source of light there is. It is also possible that the puppeteers are fully conscious of what they are doing and know about the world outside of the cave and the nature of the cave itself.

The necessary existence of the puppeteers brings us to consider another kind of man discussed in the allegory: the man who will be able to move inside (and potentially outside) the cave. For the puppeteers to be there, a number of people will be unchained. It can also mean that certain people may come from outside. Socrates first invites us to think of those who will move upwards. It is unclear whether the people who dwell in the cave need somebody to unshackle them or if it is possible that a few among them also possess the capability to free themselves. What is certain, however, is that no part of this process is pleasant. The bonds hurt the body; it takes time for them to heal. The newly

⁴⁵ See *The Apology of Socrates*, 21b-22e.

freed individual will pester and argue that the shadows are truer than the light he now sees.

Once the newly-freed cave-dweller has made it outside, he must gradually habituate his eyes to the sight of things as they truly are. He does this first by looking at their shadows, and then at their reflection in the water. There is no more mention of the man who freed him, yet our cave-dweller is not alone outside; he sees other people's shadows and reflections in the water. From there he will be able to habituate himself to the moon and the stars and finally look up to the idea of the good itself (the sun) and contemplate it.⁴⁶ There he will realize that the idea of the good sheds light on the nature of everything that is.

Doubtlessly this process of education is irreversible. One cannot possibly go back to the double ignorance of the cave-dwellers. Two elements of Plato's teaching help us to make out the only available options for philosopher if he is to go return:

- (1) The philosopher has contemplated the idea of good and all things material and immaterial *as they are*.
- (2) Plato tells us through this allegory and through *The Apology of Socrates* that the philosopher faces certain death at the hands of the shackled cave-dwellers.

Contra the *Odyssey* and his own fictional Aristophanes, then, Plato tells us a story of his own that not only states that the divine and man can mix, but that they should. The real threat, when one seeks to know the divine, is not (again, contra the *Odyssey*) the divine itself, but rather other men who are content not to seek knowledge or think that

⁴⁶ Ibid., 516a.

doing so poses a danger to the community. The journey outside the cave leads to enlightenment, and the ultimate punishment is at the hands of man, not the gods. It is the natural, not the supernatural, that is the biggest danger. Plato's stories tell us that the divine and man can mix, through philosophy. It is important to note that the above examples are just a few among many instances of Plato offering a myth of his own as a replacement for a placeholder work or theme of Greek literature. Two more are worth mention here.

Plato's myth of Er, in Book 10 the *Republic*, offers a vision of the afterlife that contrasts sharply with that of Homer in *Odyssey* 11. Instead of the bleak world of Hades depicted as terrible by all of Odysseus' interlocutors (including but not limited to Tiresias, Ajax and Achilles), Plato offers a view of the afterlife where the immortal soul has a chance to return to the world and thus to attempt to live more virtuously, if it had not been done so previously. Plato mentions that many Homeric heroes (most notably Odysseus) chose quieter lives and renounced honor in this story.⁴⁷ This suggests that Plato thought Homer's depictions of both (a) honor as the highest good and of (b) the afterlife to be incorrect. This had already been suggested in *Republic* 386c-387b, where Socrates and Adeimantus agree that Homer's depiction of Hades risks making men cowardly because they may fear slavery more than this (very bleak) afterlife.

Plato also re-appropriates the myth of Gyges from Herodotus' *Histories*.⁴⁸ According to Herodotus, Gyges was a member of the royal guard and close friend of the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 620c-d.

⁴⁸ Herodotus, *Histories with an English translation by A. D. Godley* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920). Accessed August 19 2017,

king, Candaules. Candaules thought his wife was so beautiful that he incessantly bragged about it to Gyges. It came to the point where he asked that Gyges come with him and spy on her while she was undressing so that Gyges could acknowledge and confirm Candaules' pride and infatuation. After many unsuccessful attempts to convince him to agree to the plan, Candaules finally orders Gyges to comply. The Queen surprises Gyges while he is looking at her and, since she feels violated, asks of Gyges that he kill Candaules. Gyges eventually obliges and proceeds to become king in Candaules' stead. After Candaules' relatives attempt to reclaim the throne, the oracle of Delphi makes two announcements: Gyges shall remain king, but his descendants will be punished down to the fifth generation. This exemplifies the concept of ancestral guilt in Ancient Greek culture.⁴⁹

Plato re-appropriates this myth through Socrates in *Republic* Book II.⁵⁰ As we saw above, Plato's Gyges is different in that he finds an invisibility ring that allows him to commit crimes with impunity. So rather than being convinced to kill the King, he does so by himself because he does not fear retribution. Two points are worth mentioning here in our discussion of Plato's use of this myth. This retelling of Herodotus by Socrates is used as a way into the broader conversation about justice in the *Republic* that will ultimately lead to the conclusion that actions are just or unjust in themselves, independently of consequence, and that therefore the just man would not act differently

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D11%3Asection%3D1>>

⁴⁹ Gabriel Danzig, "Rhetoric and the Ring: Herodotus and Plato on the Story of Gyges as a Politically Expedient Tale," *Greece & Rome* 55, no 2 (2008), 176.

⁵⁰ Bloom, trans., *Republic of Plato*, 359c.

with the ring of Gyges than without it. In his article “Rhetoric and the Ring: Herodotus and Plato on the Story of Gyges as a Politically Expedient Tale,” Gabriel Danzig argues that Plato’s modified myth serves as a cautionary tale against the politicians who can make their crimes invisible through rhetoric:

In order to answer these questions we need to consider more closely the role that the story plays in Plato’s narrative. It is often said that the story of Gyges functions as a thought experiment and concerns an unrealistic hypothesis. But it is not perhaps so unrealistic after all. Socrates has been asked to defend the life of justice in the face of the challenges set by sophists such as Thrasymachus and others who claimed to be able to prepare young people for successful careers in public life. Some of these teachers taught that acting contrary to justice could be useful in achieving worldly success. But their teaching also focused on practical skills such as rhetoric, which are useful for attaining these aims. In this context, the ring of invisibility represents more than a thought experiment concerning the willingness to act unjustly. It also represents a very real option that young men in Athens had to consider, namely to make one’s crimes ‘invisible’ by means of the power of rhetoric.⁵¹

Plato’s ‘ancient quarrel between philosophy and the arts’ is not about the arts as arts, but rather about their content. Plato himself is quick to admit the power of myth and storytelling. As we have seen, he often uses these very tools in order to promote his thought over against the messages communicated by fictional mouthpieces for Athenian poets (such as the fictional Aristophanes of the *Symposium*) or historical ones, such as Homer or Herodotus. But Plato’s own myths and stories, as is to be expected, further his philosophical agenda. A substantial part of this agenda was, as is well known, the importance of philosophical knowledge for political education. Machiavelli, too, will use well-crafted myths and images to make that same point, as we will see in the next two chapters.

⁵¹ Danzig, “Rhetoric and the Ring,” 187.

CHAPTER IV

MACHIAVELLI ON THE VALUE OF PHILOSOPHY IN A TRUTHLESS WORLD

Machiavelli's political thought is in large part concerned with the art of governance. As such he spends considerable time addressing the many potential hurdles rulers will face in their attempts to govern properly. Perhaps the most famous and well documented of all such hurdles is that of the tension between the nobles and the people. The nobles desire to oppress, writes Machiavelli, while the people desire not to be oppressed. The interplay between those two political humors, in his opinion, accounts for the difficulties in governing a polity, but also for a politically productive balance of power created by the perpetual movement of the internal conflict.

This particular problem has been thoroughly addressed in the literature,¹ despite only being one of many. Certainly, the emphasis and repetition placed by Machiavelli on this particular form of class struggle justifies the extensive treatment it has warranted. This project seeks to shed light on another great problem of governance in the Machiavellian corpus, one that I contend is just as important but generally glossed over until now: the problem of the legislative and executive chaos generated by competing political and moral allegiances in a world where true knowledge is either unobtainable

¹ See Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); John P. McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy: Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism," *American Political Science Review* 95, no 2 (2001): 297-313; John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Joseph V. Femia, *Machiavelli Revisited* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2004).

by most (for lack of intellectual acumen) or simply non-existent. In such a world, where a multiplicity of opinions regarding the good is paired with the relative impossibility of political persuasion, the lasting modes and orders Machiavelli sees as the hallmark of competent leadership are incredibly difficult to establish, let alone to sustain.

In this chapter I propose first to identify, delineate and argue for the importance of that political problem in Machiavelli's thought, in spite of it having been, to my knowledge, largely ignored by scholars or treated only tangentially. Therefore, I examine additional questions raised by the existence of this problem. Is the acquisition of true knowledge possible or even politically relevant in the eyes of Machiavelli? In essence, does truth matter to politics? My argument starts from the fact that Machiavelli's answer is a resounding no. But in that case, what kind of knowledge (if any) is important for political leadership and good governance? Machiavelli forces us to think about the value of knowledge and the relevance of debates between competing moral political claims where there is high probability that none of them can objectively be described as 'true' or 'Good.' It is a world where, as I intend to show, philosophy nonetheless retains vital importance.

It is very well known that Machiavelli valued historical and philosophical knowledge on a personal level, and his political treatises include recommendations for the education of leaders, so evidently some manner of knowledge is philosophically and politically relevant to him. For example, he famously (and repeatedly) underlines the importance of the mutually reinforcing triumvirate of good arms, good laws and good education in his *Discourses*. And his work is full of injunctions to learn from histories

and past examples, as well as encouragements for leaders to learn about geography, philosophy, or the art of hunting (among many other things). Yet his work lacks a clear account of how humans learn, as well as of what kind of education is necessary to sustain (or create) good arms and good laws.

I argue that, first, through natural metaphors, and then by directing us to Xenophon's *Cyrus*, Machiavelli not only tells us that very few highly intelligent, highly mature individuals can truly learn. He also tries to teach us the most important lesson of all: that what we hold to be good, bad, evil and/or just is a strictly instrumental human invention that we must now learn to transcend. Note what the argument does not say: Machiavelli is not covertly enjoining us (or future leaders and their counselors) to abandon politics in favor of a life of contemplation. Rather, he contends that in order to gain crucial insights into both human nature and the arbitrary nature of common-sense morality, we need to study certain philosophical authors and as such engage in at least a minimal level of philosophical inquiry.

Therefore, the foci of this chapter are two interrelated puzzles of Machiavelli's philosophy with regards to political knowledge and its acquisition. The first is the apparent devaluation of philosophy and theoretical knowledge implied by Machiavelli's clear preference for historical knowledge and teaching by example (a tradition started by Poliziano). The second is the threat of political paralysis that results from the combination of low mass intelligence and general disagreement about the good. While these two might seem to be only loosely connected at this point, I hope it will become clear in my analysis that they are in fact closely interconnected. Despite Machiavelli's

attachment to practical education, his ruler's education is dependent on his ability to process philosophical insights that Machiavelli gleaned from Xenophon (or at least finds himself in perfect agreement with) in order to solve the problem of the mass' moral confusion.

Machiavelli, with the help of carefully manipulated historical examples, images, metaphors, and calculated references to ancient political thought, enjoins his readers to abandon a fruitless philosophical search for the good in order to solve this problem. Rather, Machiavelli suggests that political leaders circumvent the problem of popular idiocy and ethical confusion by harnessing the power of the images and myths that make up religion and common-sense morality (when they are healthy, i.e., conducive to survival and growth) without entertaining any illusion as to their truthfulness in order to implement good modes and orders. While Machiavelli is obviously hostile to the life of philosophical contemplation for its own sake, philosophical abilities and philosophical knowledge have a crucial role to play in his political philosophy. Like Coluccio and Giovanni Pontano before him,² Machiavelli shuns contemplative philosophy and embraces a more practical philosophy meant to be useful for civic leadership, as has been aptly noted by Victoria Kahn.³

Since Machiavelli clearly directs his readers toward Xenophon as he poses these puzzles, these next chapters are as much about the book Machiavelli encourages us to

² Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) was an Italian humanist and chancellor of Florence. Giovanni Pontano (1429-1503) was also a humanist, and secretary to Alfonso I of Naples and after conducted diplomacy for Alfonso's son, Ferdinand. See Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 55-88.

³ *Ibid.*, 58.

read (Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus*) as about the takeaway I argue he wants us to get from it. It takes a philosopher to make a prince, but that philosopher can teach indirectly through books (like Xenophon does to us) or directly (like Aristotle did Alexander). In that sense, the educational purpose of philosophy can be fulfilled if the prince reads philosophical works or if he has a philosopher-teacher adept at the manipulation of myths and stories, like Machiavelli himself.

Machiavelli did not think that everyone could learn and as such be properly educated. In fact, it seems that, at the very least, a whole third (a conservative estimate) of the human population lies beyond the scope of even the best teachers. I venture this proportion because we can surmise that the group of 'un-educables' is large enough to create the problem of low mass intelligence Machiavelli describes. The text suggests that a large portion of the population belongs to the lowest intellectual tier, while the top two represent very few citizens. Secondly, not unlike Plato, Machiavelli thinks that philosophical training is indispensable to the other two groups of citizens if they want to be properly trained in politics. Without philosophy, it is impossible to study correctly the histories and ancient examples that Machiavelli says we need to acquaint ourselves with and to emulate to achieve political greatness.

In order to make my case, I will first expose what I take to be the reason education is so important a concept to understand in Machiavelli's philosophy, i.e., that bad education and low mass intelligence create a problem of governance that can only be solved by myth-making in the public sphere. I have spent some time unpacking other Renaissance theories of education so as to give a sense of where Machiavelli follows a

Humanist tradition and where he departs from it, which helps to highlight some key differences between him and his predecessors and contemporaries, such as the role and meaning of hunting in education. Here I return to the importance of good education in Machiavelli's philosophy and begin to sketch its contents, which leads into the next section of this thesis, the study of philosophy as a key component of proper Machiavellian political education. I argue that Machiavelli invites the study of some specific works of the history of philosophy in order to reacquaint us with the idea that common sense morality belongs to the public myths necessary for governance, and that we must learn to abandon these myths when they have outlasted their usefulness.

As it takes up the topic of political knowledge, learning and persuasion in the manner detailed above, this project contributes to a number of on-going discussions in the literature, such as Machiavelli's relationship with Christianity and state-sanctioned religions and discussions about Machiavelli's relationship to the ancient Greek Socratic thinkers Plato and Xenophon. Furthermore, as far as I know, my discussion of Numa (on which the argument of this chapter relies heavily) is one of the very few that considers the meaning of this story for Machiavelli from the angle of intentional deception and manipulation rather than a manner of "Platonic philosophical religion" or "ancient theology."⁴ While my treatment of Numa contributes to this discussion to some degree, it is also the only one to argue that Numa⁵ matters not only insofar as he used popular

⁴ Miguel Vatter, "Of Asses and Nymphs: Machiavelli, Platonic Theology and Epicureanism in Florence," *Forthcoming*.

⁵ For a great chronology of the thought around Numa into the Renaissance and beyond, see Mark Silk, "Numa Pompilius and the Idea of Civil Religion in the West," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no 2 (December 2004): 863-896.

religion to implement policy, but specifically insofar as he is *lying* about religion. As Croce put it: “The king Numa made a religion to trick the plebs, and for it was praised by Machiavelli [...].”⁶

The acquisition of political knowledge

When it comes to politics at the very least, it seems that Machiavelli follows very closely his predecessor, the Italian scholar and poet Angelo Poliziano, in the thought that history is superior to philosophy. In accordance with the discussion of the previous chapter, the similarity between the two is striking: both think that teaching by examples is better than via theory, and both are deeply attached to biographers of great men as the chroniclers of those histories from which the teachers should lift their examples.

Machiavelli tells us that we can learn about politics in general, as well as context-appropriate political behavior, if we study history carefully. By this he seems to mean that there exist an undisclosed number of political axioms that always have been and will always be true. This is because, as has been rightly noted by Harvey Mansfield,⁷ Machiavelli seemed to have thought that nothing was ever really new, or ever really changed, in the heavens as on the earth. Therefore actions only appear to be different while in reality they are not. Machiavelli thought that the apparent diversity of human behavior was in reality no different than the (apparent) change in the makeup of the

⁶ *Il re Numa foggiava una religione per ingannare la plebe, e ne era lodato dal Machiavelli [...]*. Benedetto Croce, *Teoria et storia della storiographia* (Milan : Adelphi Edizioni, 1989), 289. My translation.

⁷ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 27.

heavens. According to him men, like the sun, the moon and the stars, behaved cyclically and repetitively, and accordingly people's actions can be adequately predicted if we study them carefully, something for which we can use history. Therefore, a careful study of past human behavior could help the political analyst (or agent) to predict future behavior as the astronomer can predict the motion of the stars.⁸ It follows that the would-be political actor (or his advisor) should include in his study of human behavior that of excellent men of the past and their particular actions during trying, tough situations, so as to learn from and to be able to imitate them if need be (even though perfect imitation may be ultimately impossible,⁹ in actions and in results).¹⁰

⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 6; 84.

⁹ In his book *Lineages of European Political Thought*, Cary J. Nederman discusses this same problem but reaches the opposite conclusion. Nederman rightly notes that Machiavelli thought political actors could refine their capacity to predict the future through careful study of history. Nederman immediately mentions that Machiavelli qualified this advice. History is useful but one cannot never truly imitate the great examples of the past because circumstances will never be exactly the same. There, Nederman's argument becomes problematic: he immediately leaps to the conclusion that this must be because "[...] *Fortuna* is too fickle to and unstable to assure to assure that the circumstances in which some previous historical figure succeeded will be identical to those faced by his imitators." It is unclear why fortune needs to be brought into his conversation. More plausibly, Machiavelli knew, like us, that a near-infinite number of variables led to the occurrence of any one particular situation, and as such the statistical likelihood of perfect replication of circumstances rendered it almost impossible. But that does not matter to Machiavelli. He did think that the differences from one (studied) situation to another may require some flexibility on behalf of the prince, but ultimately it is the general similarity of accidents that matters and allows the study of history to give any prince an edge.

The problem with Nederman's argument is its rigidity. He is correct because he defines the standard to which we should hold the value of historical knowledge in Machiavelli's thought as "systematic predictive knowledge" that would allow us to "control our futures;" then of course it falls short of such unrealistic expectations. It is evident that Machiavelli would not have argued that the study of history was a foolproof way to be prepared to react adequately to *any* situation, *every* time. However, like the

So far nothing is too problematic: different men will act similarly through time, therefore situations repeat themselves and similar problems will arise, and thus solutions that once worked will likely work again.¹¹ It is man's unchanging nature that renders good princely behavior possible. Thanks to that nature, political leaders can use past histories as repositories of data about the likely result of their actions and reactions to a number of situations and/or problems. Even if human behavior fails to repeat itself (and it does not always), Machiavelli says, knowledge of a vast array of past examples should be enough for a good prince to recognize a pattern and draw inspiration from the past to

contemporary social scientists who Nederman (who cites MacIntyre here) argues Machiavelli should *not* be grouped with, Machiavelli seemed to have thought that the study of history could help princes derive general axioms and rules of behavior that were statistically likely to be useful in situations in which a certain similarity of accidents could be observed. Social scientists, like Machiavelli, *never* say that under a set of circumstances X, individual Y (provided he possesses an aggregate of characteristics Z), will inevitably behave in manner A. Yet this is what Nederman seems to think both social scientists and Machiavelli do. What they *do* say is that, given the data we have (in the case of Machiavelli that would be the wealth of accumulated historical knowledge), under a set of circumstances X, individual Y (provided he possesses an aggregate of characteristics Z), *is statistically likely, to a certain degree of confidence*, to behave in manner A. If a prince does not desire to bring about the equally statistically likely outcome of that behavior, historical knowledge will allow him to break the pattern.

See Cary J. Nederman, *Lineages of European Political Thought: Explorations along the Medieval/Modern Divide from John of Salisbury to Hegel* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 277-303.

¹⁰Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58-60.

¹¹ As I noted earlier, scholars like Cary Nederman and Alison Brown after him have argued against this. They argue that Machiavelli's "view of cosmos and of man's nature as unchanging seems difficult to reconcile with the flexibility he demanded in the field of politics [...]."

See also Cary J. Nederman, "Amazing Grace: God, Fortune and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60:4 (October 1999): 617-638; and Alison Brown, "Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 157.

create a new solution, setting his own precedent.¹² This is what has been referred to in the literature as the creative resourcefulness of Machiavelli's ideal prince.¹³ This is also how Machiavelli's apparently contradictory statements about the necessity of a return to ancient things (and the stability and reliability of old institutions) become compatible with his repeated assertions that he "departs from the orders of others."¹⁴ His work is essentially an attempt to usher in a new order or at least a new way to think about politics.¹⁵ Machiavelli, like his imaginary prince, draws from his study of the past and his knowledge of the present to conjure a new philosophy of politics, something he also tells his readers repeatedly.¹⁶

Can we therefore really afford to say that there is any confusion with respect to the question of knowledge, its value and its acquisition in Machiavelli's philosophy, as I contend? Any writer or philosopher who shares with us their thoughts is in a sense a 'teacher.' The answer to what Machiavellian pedagogy is might just be to learn whatever Machiavelli attempts to teach us in his books. This interpretation would be consistent with Strauss's famous assertion that Machiavelli was (intentionally) a teacher of evil.¹⁷ After all, the study and imitation of great historical examples is the key. Machiavelli seems as straightforward as can be in his view (and practice) of education: princes are to study ancient examples and histories along with 'contemporary' ones, identify patterns,

¹² Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 84.

¹³ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, Vol.II (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 125.

¹⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60.

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 5-6.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 3; Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 3.

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9; Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'œuvre de Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 260-261.

draw the appropriate political lessons from this exercise, and go on to emulate the actions of great men.¹⁸ And it just so happens that Machiavelli himself has compiled for us an aggregate of anecdotes, complete with appropriate conclusions in the form of a triad of philosophical works: the *Prince*, the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*.

A quick note on my inclusion of the *Florentine Histories* as a ‘philosophical work.’ Although recent scholarship has seen the work garner greater attention, its status as a work of political philosophy needs some manner of justification for two reasons. First, as I have stated previously, Machiavelli thought that history was a tool we could use to learn the nature of men and sometimes even predict behavior and estimate the likely results of certain actions. We know that Machiavelli modeled his *Histories* on Leonardo Bruni’s own *History of the Florentine People*. Thanks to the scholarship of James Hankins, we also know that Bruni himself intended his *History* to be “a work of moral education.”¹⁹ According to Hankins, Bruni’s historical work shows a departure from Ancient Greek notions of virtue, and offers a political theory more concerned with pragmatic solutions to the then-contemporary problems of Florence. Bruni, like Machiavelli after him,²⁰ expected his readers to acquire some prudence thanks to the

¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 38.

¹⁹ James Hankins, “Teaching Civil Prudence in Leonardo Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People*,” in Sabrina Ebbesmeyer and Eckhard Keßler, eds, *Ethik – Wissenschaft oder Lebenskunst?* (Berlin: Lit, 2007), 144.

²⁰ Hankins concludes that “[...] Bruni’s mode of analysis, his subordination of virtue to the glory of the state, shows that his closest kinship as a political thinker is not with Polybius, Thomas Aquinas, or even Ptolemy of Lucca, but with Machiavelli.” James Hankins, “Teaching Civil Prudence in Leonardo Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People*,” in Sabrina Ebbesmeyer and Eckhard Keßler, eds, *Ethik – Wissenschaft oder Lebenskunst?* (Berlin: Lit, 2007), 155.

study of history, but also to “develop a theory of political success and failure.”²¹ In sum, history is a philosophical tool, and I think it appropriate to approach the *Florentine Histories* as one of Machiavelli’s many attempts to teach by example (something for which he unceasingly expresses a fondness). The book is also loaded with philosophical and ethical judgments from which normative conclusions are drawn. One thinks of Messere Corso, the beautiful failure whom Machiavelli treats as virtuous in spite of his demise, or the famous (or famously invented) speech of the Wool Guild leader, loaded with allusions to conspicuously Machiavellian notions of necessity and expediency. As such the *Florentine Histories* is not meaningfully different from the *Discourses* other than in the format in which the thoughts are presented and because the ‘lessons’ of each chapter are not necessarily announced in their titles or conclusions.

My argument also extends to Machiavelli’s other works. It would not be incorrect to treat most of Machiavelli’s work as philosophically loaded (perhaps with the exception of his diplomatic reports), and an increasingly high number of scholars are doing so. Florentine humanists - and Machiavelli is no exception - often wrote *fabulae*, i.e., fictional tales meant to convey a philosophical truth. The *Florentine Histories* full of fiction, such as the rendering of speeches at which Machiavelli was not present, for example. In addition, established scholars have repeatedly treated his allegedly ‘non-philosophical’ writings as *fabulae*. Zuckert reads an anti-Platonic message in the *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, lessons on faith and *eros* in the plays *Mandragola* and *Clizia*, and an esoteric defense of his political philosophy underneath a thin veneer of praise for

²¹ Ibid., 146.

the Medici in the *Florentine Histories*.²² Miguel Vatter, Diego von Vacano and Ed King all approach the *Asino* as a *de facto* philosophical parable inextricably linked to his other works traditionally received as ‘philosophical’ (although they each read it differently).²³

Strauss’s argument intimates that the principal idea Machiavelli thinks his readers should learn is that sometimes evil is necessary, or at the very least that what is understood as ‘evil’ is not so. In the end, the distinction between the former and the latter matters little in the realm of politics, because most people cannot transcend commonsense morality. My argument is that Machiavelli is not simply a teacher of evil. It is that Machiavelli also teaches where to turn in order to educate ourselves and others politically. Machiavelli gestures toward certain authors and fields of study as an invitation to his readers to further their intellectual education.

There are, however, several problems with this hasty conclusion. The first and most obvious one is that the imperative to ‘study ancient history’ seems a little simplistic. It lacks the practical aspect necessary to proper political training. Another one is that any reader of the prefaces to the first two books of the *Discourses* knows that Machiavelli does not think every history to be a proper subject of study, much less of imitation. As the allegory of the ancient statue so clearly illustrates,²⁴ it is bad to focus on fragmentary remnants of the past, no matter how great the work seems to have been (on the basis of what we have). Furthermore, it is possible to miss the point completely

²² Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics*.

²³ See Edward King, “Machiavelli’s l’Asino: Troubled Centaur into Conscious Ass,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41:2 (June 2008): 279-301; Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power*; Miguel Vatter, “Of Asses and Nymphs.”

²⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 5.

and study the wrong subject (in this case art over military history). Finally, although one could object that sorting that which we should emulate from that which we should not is easy, all we need is to stick to the success stories. To that I reply that even a superficial reader of Machiavelli will know that all successes are not equally enviable. Agathocles of Sicily,²⁵ the glorious, gory, ruthless example of the despicable winner in chapter fifteen of the *Prince*, is one example among many of such an instance in Machiavelli's writings.²⁶ Given that Machiavelli also shamelessly manipulates history (one famous example of this is his account of Castruccio Castracani's life),²⁷ it becomes obvious that to learn the right political lessons from Machiavelli is not as simple as it may seem to be on the surface. Consequently, either the reader has to extract Machiavelli's actual teaching from his books, or at the very least his message is a bit more complex than to study historical examples and imitate them when there is a precedent, or use the acquired knowledge of historical patterns to solve problems when there is no precedent.

The importance of education

Education is nowhere as central or obvious a theme in Machiavelli's thought as it is in other famous works of philosophy, such as Plato's *Republic* or Rousseau's *Émile*. Machiavelli seems more straightforwardly preoccupied by issues such as the key to

²⁵ Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 2013), 101; Gennaro Sasso, *Studi su Machiavelli* (Napoli : Casa editrice A. Morano, 1967), 117-118.

²⁶ Skinner, *Visions of Politics Vol. II*, 119; William Parsons, *Machiavelli's Gospel: The Critique of Christianity in The Prince* (NY: Rochester University Press, 2016), 114.

²⁷ Catherine Zuckert, "The Life of Castruccio Castracani : Machiavelli as Literary Artist, Historian, Teacher and Philosopher," *History of Political Thought* 31:4 (Winter 2010): 577-600.

stable and successful rule, his unique new type of virtue ethics, and the constant struggle of humans who attempt to control their own destinies in spite of the random destructive, incomprehensible, and arbitrary assaults of *fortuna*.

Machiavelli is very insistent that a good, stable polity that has the potential to last must possess three things: good laws, good arms and good education.²⁸ These three qualities are interdependent, but Machiavelli is unclear as to which (if any) really needs to come first. This creates a chicken-and-egg type problem. In *Discourses* I.4, he mentions that good education is rooted in good laws, suggesting that laws come first. But this is after writing, at the very onset of that same chapter, that Rome, the example which he brings up as evidence of the importance of this ‘triumvirate’ of assets, owed its success to a good military (or arms) and fortune (*fortuna*). A similar discussion in chapter six of the *Prince*, about armed prophets, suggests that arms are most important. Unarmed prophets, i.e., leaders who try to bring about political change or upheaval but fail to understand the necessity of weapons to accomplish this task, are doomed to failure. Such was the case of Girolamo Savonarola.²⁹ Additionally, Machiavelli famously emphasizes the centrality of great founders (specifically Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus)³⁰ who are notorious for their might (and/or ruthlessness).

More importantly, at least two (Moses and Cyrus) of the above-mentioned founders had educations we cannot afford to ignore. In his recent book *Machiavelli's Gospel*, William Parsons argues that Machiavelli is reticent to celebrate Moses alongside

²⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 16.

²⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 21-25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

Theseus, Romulus and Cyrus because Moses supposedly had actual contact with God as opposed to just a pretension of supernatural mentorship like the other three.³¹ Parsons' argument, although plausible, is weaker there than it is in the rest of his book. Neither Theseus nor Romulus simply 'pretended' to have divine guidance (at least from their own perspective). They certainly were in constant contact with divine beings, but only in the sense that they were helped along by divine intervention, not in the sense they were counseled or verbally instructed by divine beings. On top of this, neither Romulus nor Theseus pretended to have divine support because, just like Moses, they knew (or thought) the god(s) they interacted with to be real beings who constantly interfered with the human world. Consequently, Parson's argument is flawed in that the criterion by which he groups Romulus and Theseus alongside Cyrus while excluding only Moses is invalid. If Machiavelli was as skeptical of the truth of Christianity (a not insignificant element of which is belief in God's existence), as Parsons contends, then this would logically imply that Machiavelli suspected Moses (insofar as we assume Machiavelli thought Moses' past existence to be real) to have also feigned his interaction with the divine.

What Parsons misses is that the real divisive criterion between the four founders is that Moses and Cyrus were most likely to be considered by Machiavelli as actual historical figures, whereas he would have known Romulus and Theseus to be mythical. This interpretation is consistent with what most scholars (including myself) identify as Machiavelli's famous disdain for the 'imaginary' over the real in the fifteenth chapter of

³¹ Parsons, *Machiavelli's Gospel*, 44.

the *Prince*, a distinction Parsons himself acknowledges as central to Machiavelli's thought.³² Not coincidentally Moses and Cyrus are the only ones of the four who remain part of the *Prince's* on-going conversation; Theseus is entirely dropped and the discussion of Romulus' actions is relegated to the *Discourses*. What Moses and Cyrus have in common is the particularity and greatness of their respective educations. Moses is literally and figuratively guided by no other than God (Machiavelli explicitly refers to God as Moses' 'great teacher' – *gran precettore*) in the journey leading to the creation of Israel. Cyrus had Xenophon dedicate a whole book to the detail of his education - a book, by the way, that Machiavelli emphatically enjoins us to read.³³

That issue of education is further muddled by an account – again in the sixth chapter of the *Prince* – of political persuasion. Men, we are told, are not very creative, proceed mostly by imitation, and are credulous. Straying from the beaten path is not something we tend to do as political agents, and normally we require “firm experience” in order to be made to believe new things and/or abandon our usual behavior.³⁴ This at first does not seem so problematic or antithetical to the rest of Machiavelli's major philosophical propositions. The fact that men are indeed creatures of habit could well be one of the reasons why history seems so cyclical and that a careful study of it helps the apt politician to make tough decisions.

³² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61-62; Parsons, *Machiavelli's Gospel*, 108.

³³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-25.

Low mass intelligence as a political obstacle

But Machiavelli clearly does not believe that we are that committed to a need for evidence in order to change our minds *nor* that we generally have the potential to recognize evidence *qua* evidence to evaluate its worth as acceptable or unacceptable proof. The very historical evidence he values so much leads him repeatedly to identify low mass intelligence as a major obstacle on the road to a great polity or good policy-making.³⁵ As there are good images and examples one can use to teach generals and princes, incorrect images and examples can have a corrupting power. At least twice Machiavelli warns us of this.

A first example is offered late in the *Discourses*: blinded by a “false type of good,” the people of Rome establish a dictator during time of famine.³⁶ Earlier in the book, citing Dante, Machiavelli told us that “a false image of the good” leads men to desire their own ruin³⁷ and mistake policies conducive to life with policies conducive to death or ruin. False images of the good lead to the problem Machiavelli identifies in *Prince* 15, i.e., that confusion about proper behavior and/or ethics leads to a result opposite to our expectations. Given the lexical and thematic similarities between the passages, it is hard here not to draw a link between fifteenth-century Florentine common sense morality (read: Christianity) and that “false image of the good.” Unfortunately, Machiavelli does not pair his warning against false appearances of the good with advice about how to recognize the falsity of ‘false images’.

³⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

John P. McCormick devoted a section of *Machiavellian Democracy* to this problem.³⁸ The book is largely concerned with demonstrating that Machiavelli's political philosophy is compatible with democratic governance. Of course, the problem of low mass intelligence stands in the way of that reading, and McCormick acknowledges that there is no way around it. While the people's desire not to be oppressed generally causes its political judgment to be superior on average to that of other political actors, this doesn't mean that their judgment is "always wise or invariably conducive to freedom."³⁹ McCormick is right, and doubly so as he adds that Machiavelli's thought is bereft of actors who can exercise perfect judgment, such as philosopher kings. But, as this chapter will demonstrate, Machiavelli also thought a certain type of enlightened ruler (like Numa) could do as much good or more than the people, in part because of their ability to create truly superior policies and because their knowledge of the caveats created by low mass intelligence allowed them to manipulate it, but for good.

Recall the discussion above regarding the three kinds of brains. Machiavelli seemed to have thought that a significant amount of human beings were completely uneducable. Low mass intelligence likely would not be an obstacle to good governance if two thirds of the population were educable. It is not a surprise then that Machiavelli thought people would tend to judge by appearance rather than substance. This is an idea Machiavelli may have lifted directly from Xenophon's *Hiero*. In the dialogue, the tyrant expresses the same idea: "I don't find it at all surprising," Hiero replied, "that the mass of mankind are taken in by tyranny, since the rabble tend to assess happiness and

³⁸ John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 81-85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

unhappiness by external appearance.’’⁴⁰ To appear to be something or someone would become more important than actually being that thing or person when it comes to the avoidance of popular disapproval.⁴¹

So why promote philosophical education as an essential part of political education then, as I contend Machiavelli tries to do? We must remember that although most people may not be educable, Machiavelli also thought the people have the ability to hold to good policies once they are made for them, as I noted in the introduction. This is also echoed by Zuckert in *Machiavelli's Politics*, where she argues that the multitude are apt keepers of good laws because it is hard to sway. In her reading, it also possesses various conflicting humors and opinions that make policy implementation and policy change difficult. Thus, the multitude is a stable repository of good laws once they are implemented.⁴² It may be hard, or even impossible, to implement good policies (or eliminate policies that were once good but have outlived their usefulness) by relying simply on persuasion and the ability of the people to know what is good for them. This is why we may need a philosophically educated noble liar like Numa because simply explaining why a good policy is good will probably not work.

In light of this hierarchy of ‘brains,’ it is hardly shocking when we are told that some political precepts or truths can be evident to prudent men, yet not have in themselves the necessary elements to persuade people who would be exposed to them.⁴³

⁴⁰ Xenophon, *Hiero the Tyrant and Other Treatises*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Penguin, 1997), 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴² Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 173.

⁴³ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 35.

Men are hard to convince or educate not because they are rational creatures in need of evidence to change their minds but because they are intellectually lazy.⁴⁴ For this reason Numa and Savonarola were able to bypass men's aversion to new orders because they pretended to have access to supernatural insight, an access that, as far as we know, they were not asked to prove extensively.

Savonarola's story is neither a testament to his greatness nor one to his political acumen, as Alison Brown implied when she wrote that he managed to enthrall the Florentines despite the fact that they were "far from stupid."⁴⁵ Savonarola predicted a storm once and that was sufficient to impress the Florentines, who from then on took him at his word that God spoke to him;⁴⁶ his actions testify to how easy it is to gain a following when one appeals to the supernatural. There is no mention of Numa having to do much more than simply say he was talking to the Nymph Egeria for people to believe him.⁴⁷ Discussing that same relationship, Plutarch writes:

Indeed there is no absurdity in the other account which is given of Lycurgus and Numa and their like, namely, that since they were managing headstrong and captious multitudes, and introducing great innovations in modes of government, they pretended to get a sanction from the god, which sanction was the salvation of the very ones against whom it was contrived.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴⁵ Brown, "Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli," 167.

⁴⁶ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 113; Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 147.

⁴⁷ Titus Livius, *The History of Rome Books I-VIII*, trans. D. Spillan (Overland Park, KS: Digireads.com, 2009), I.19.

⁴⁸ Plutarch, "Numa," in *Lives*, Vol I, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 321.

Interestingly, Lycurgus is also one of Machiavelli's favorite ancient legislators, mentioned at the beginning of the *Discourses* in contrast to Solon, of whom Machiavelli is critical. The passage of the *Discourses* is unclear as to the specific reasons behind Machiavelli's admiration for Lycurgus (he is simply mentioned as being great). We can infer from the above passage of Plutarch's lives that Lycurgus' resort to the same strategy as Numa certainly accounts for part of it. Although Machiavelli does so covertly, we can see the beginning of a pattern emerge here.

Both Livy and Machiavelli are clear about the intentional deception in which the second king of Rome engaged. In the *Discourses*, the Italian verb used is *simulo*, from *simulare*, to simulate, feign, while Livy specifically mentions that Numa's meetings were without witnesses and meant to look 'as if' he were meeting with Egeria.⁴⁹ Machiavelli says men are difficult to convince without hard evidence, but he ultimately shows us that they really are not: when Numa says a nymph informed his policy positions and when the *pularii* (the Roman chicken soothsayers who predicted battle outcomes based on the eating habits of their birds) pretend the chicken ate (and that therefore the battle will be won), citizens, not unlike the *pularii*'s poultry on a good day, gobble it all up. Men are not hard to convince - men are hard to educate. Machiavelli dedicated his books to "those who understand," because he presumed, based on the evidence, that there are very few of them out there.

⁴⁹ "[...] *Numa sine arbitris velut ad congressum deae inferebat [...]*." Livy, *History of Rome: Books 1-2*, trans. B.O. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 73-75.

At this point we already have a preliminary answer to the seminal question of the chapter with regards to how we learn or at least how we should learn in Machiavelli's view. The answer is that some of us can learn autonomously, some others through exposition, and the rest not at all. The existence of the third group of people transforms the problem of political education into one of political persuasion. Low mass intelligence can seriously hinder competent lawmakers who try to implement legitimately good policies (like Numa) or interest groups who want to bring about positive outcomes (like the *pularii*). Like Livy's Numa, Machiavelli's solution to this is that those who cannot and/or will not be convinced by evidence or the sheer rationality of a proposition need to be presented with a source whose authority they cannot question. Confronted with the failure of the rational, use the supernatural – not to say the mythical or mystical. But this introduces a bigger problem: if supernatural deception is a tool whose efficacy and expediency is mostly guaranteed, then how is the ruler or his entourage to differentiate between good and bad recourses to myth and belief? Good laws, good arms and good education require that this tool finds itself in the hands of someone who will use it intelligently, something that it turn requires the ability to see through the myth itself, i.e., know it to be superficially false.

Here I want to advance the possibility that Machiavelli is trying to salvage Numa's philosophical meaning from the Neo-Platonist interpretation, and in doing so re-appropriate a part of the non-Christian Platonic intellectual heritage. The rapprochement between Numa and Plato is not original to this work. Ficino, in his commentary on the Republic, also sees a link between the Roman king and Platonic political philosophy.

(Numa, of course, was not alive when Plato wrote, so the comparison is somewhat unprompted by Plato's dialogue itself. In other words, there is a tradition of identifying Numa as a figure that invites Platonism into the conversation.) To Ficino, Numa is a prime example of the divinely inspired philosopher king. Ficino sees in Numa a real-life example of Minos, the Cretan king who received advice from Jupiter in order to rule his people. Ficino seems to think, against literally all other interpreters of Numa's life, that the Roman king was sincere when he claimed to have received divine inspiration.

Ficino thinks Plato would have approved of Numa in the same manner as he approved of Minos on account of their establishment of a type of theocracy. He praises Numa for having governed the state with religious laws after having contemplated God.⁵⁰ What is interesting is that Ficino seems to have completely missed the point. No one – not even Numa himself – seemed to have been sincerely invested in Numa's elaborate lie. It is treated, by ancient and Renaissance sources alike, as a basic lie that banked on popular gullibility and aimed at making policy implementation easier for the king. Yet Ficino reads into it a prime example of Platonic governance. Numa becomes a real-life incarnation of the philosopher-king of *Kallipolis*, but one that has been reinterpreted as compatible with Christianity by Ficino.

Ficino may or may not have truly thought that Numa was a) sincere about his conversations with Egeria, b) actually compatible with Christian doctrine. (It is more likely that he was, however odd that seems from our standpoint.) In spite of these obvious oddities, proving that Ficino meant this more or less ironically, or that he was

⁵⁰ Arthur Farndell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule: Ficino on Plato's Republic, Laws, and Epinomis*, (London: Sheapheard –Walwyn, 2009), 31-32.

covertly aware of his inaccuracies, would be tremendously difficult. Suffice it to say, however, that Ficino seems invested at times in the enterprise of smoothing over certain elements of the content of the *Republic* and the *Laws* for the sake of making it appear compatible with Christianity. (A clear example of this is his quick dismissal of the topic of homosexuality.) But Ficino's unprompted mention of Numa in a book otherwise dedicated to Plato means that the figure of the Roman king would have been previously associated with discussions of 'Platonic' leadership by the time Machiavelli wrote the *Discourses*.

As such we may assume that Machiavelli's discussion of Numa may in part have been an act of re-appropriation. I want to argue that said discussion does indeed render him compatible with Platonism, but only 'Ficinian' Platonism. It inserted Numa within the Platonic tradition of 'noble liars,' political manipulators who consciously used superstition in order to facilitate the implementation of good policies that would otherwise be impossible to implement due to the people's inability to really know what's good for them. According to my interpretation Machiavelli would have agreed that Numa is a figure emblematic of 'Platonic' politics, but not in the sense Ficino meant him to be. By recasting Numa's significance, Machiavelli is in a sense establishing a connection to an aspect of Platonism with which his own thought is compatible, and covertly attacking the Neo-Platonist Christian interpretations of the *Republic*.

Back to Machiavelli's treatment of Numa's pretended divine inspiration: through it, Machiavelli has put his readers (and presumably himself as well) in the same predicament as Glaucon, Adeimantus and Socrates at the end of the second book of the

Republic. As they discuss the relationship between truth and myths, the three Greeks readily agree that truth, if it is constant and independent of us in its existence, must therefore be the most ancient thing (and also will exist for eternity). They agree that the Good, God or the Gods are all valid terms by which humans refer to these ancient objective truths. But the problem the three men encounter is that their present source regarding the most ancient things, the Homeric myths, cannot possibly be correct, since they attribute to the Gods characteristics that are definitely incompatible with virtue and the teaching of virtue. Because we know virtue through God or the Good, that which is not virtuous cannot possibly be related to the Good.⁵¹ Unfortunately, men assume a kinship between ancient, timeless truths and ancient, timeless tales because both can allegedly be traced back to the Gods (who are the repository of all things timeless and true). The challenge is to replace the pedagogically nefarious myths (i.e., the Homeric myths in this case) with more appropriate ones (i.e., myths that ‘point to the truth of ancient things’), or at the very least to separate the educationally bad myths from the good ones.

Recent scholarship by Miguel Vatter supports the thesis that Numa implies that there is more intellectual kinship between Machiavelli and Plato than previously assumed in the literature. Vatter rightly underlines that Numa was, in Machiavelli’s eyes, critical to the development of the Roman Republic because he extended the good orders from the elites to the people. That Numa is celebrated in the *Discourses* as a ruler who has instilled good modes and orders is interpreted by Vatter as a sign that it does not

⁵¹ Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 379c-383c.

suffice to say that Numa's lying was strictly political manipulation. Given the lasting positive effects of Numa's intentional deception of his people, we must conclude that he grasped a number of fundamental truths of politics that he needed to act upon in spite of his subjects' subpar political intellect or their counter-productive desires. Therefore, we need to interpret Numa as a noble liar in the Platonic sense. He treated religion not as sheer superstition but as a vehicle for philosophical truths, "a way in which philosophical insights can become accessible to the many who are not yet philosophically educated."⁵²

Vatter convincingly brings Machiavelli and Plato together on this issue by way of al-Farabi. Al-Farabi was (a) clear about his agreement with Platonic philosophy and (b) writing political philosophy that largely anticipated Machiavelli's own. Based on this, Vatter concludes that that making a *rapprochement* between the three is in correct.⁵³ Like Machiavelli, al-Farabi thought that princes should cultivate the art of war. This means not strictly military exercises, but any faculty that enables the prince to conquer the nations and cities that will not comply with the policies needed to lead them to civil happiness. The art of war implies a war on two fronts: one physical and one spiritual. Sometimes the war is with one's own people – say, if they are blind to the potential benefits of a policy of another for lack of education or intelligence – and as such the cultivation of the art of war has a philosophical element. Vatter's al-Farabi thus treated

⁵² Miguel Vatter, "Machiavelli, Ancient Theology, and the Problem of Civil Religion," in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, ed. David Johnston et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 120.

⁵³ For a similar point on this topic, see Paul A Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory Under the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 56-70.

divine revelation as “a topic of political science,” which he argues is a different way of saying what Machiavelli meant when he wrote that a crucial princely skill was to interpret religion prudently and according to necessity. The prudent interpreters of religion are military commanders as well as students of philosophy.⁵⁴

It is in that sense that our situation as students of Machiavelli’s philosophy is similar to the Greek trio’s. Although Machiavelli may not have thought that there was such a thing as an objective, timeless truth or Good, certainly there was enough regularity and repetition in human political affairs that we can know certain things about politics definitively. But acquiring this knowledge necessitates that we be able to approach ancient examples correctly and pay attention to the right things: pick apart the pedagogically useless (or deleterious) stories from the useful ones that point to (a) truth.⁵⁵ For example, it is possible Machiavelli did not regard the tenets of revealed religion (in particular Christianity) as true,⁵⁶ and as such it may well have been one of

⁵⁴ Miguel Vatter, “Machiavelli, Ancient Theology, and the Problem of Civil Religion,” in *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*, ed. David Johnston et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 122.

⁵⁵ For a different discussion of Machiavelli’s ‘mythologizing’ of Caterina Sforza and Cesare Borgia to convey philosophical and political points, see Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 109-121.

⁵⁶ As I have discussed in chapter II, page 41n26 and 92n7 of this chapter, Cary Nederman has argued that Machiavelli in fact thought that while Machiavelli may not have been a great friend of the Catholic Church, he may have firmly believed in the existence of God. As such, he also believed that politics and political success were in part a function of one’s standing in Divine eyes. Relatedly, Maurizio Viroli has argued in *Machiavelli’s God* that Machiavelli favored an interpretation of Christianity more republican in nature. According to Viroli, Machiavelli wanted to see Christianity renew itself, shed some of its antiquated *accoutrements*, and re-emerge in Italian life as a religion of liberty, where salvation and good moral standing are closely related to service of the common good. In this interpretation, the new, transformed Christianity Machiavelli wanted to see would become an integral part of good republican orders in a

the harmful myths readers are invited to abandon. Like Socrates and his younger interlocutors, Machiavelli's readers must pick apart the good 'stories' from the bad ones in order to get to his teachings but also to learn about his way of teaching us politics.

It is worth noting here that my argument implies Plato and Machiavelli to be, as odd as it may seem, in agreement, a thesis that is very widely rejected in the literature.⁵⁷ However, I do think there is some agreement between the two philosophers with regards to the fact that proper governance requires that at some level of the policymaking process, there needs to be a philosopher-turned-policymaker or philosophically capable and philosophically educated member of government. That person is necessary to help craft the expedient myths necessary to the ideological compliance of the non-philosophically-inclined rest of the population. Where I think the two thinkers differ, as I intend to expose below, is that, whereas Plato would want the myth to point to a truth otherwise incomprehensible to the non-philosopher, Machiavelli does not think the myth

thriving and free Florence. Although I do not think this is the correct reading, Viroli's argument is compatible with mine. In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I argue that Machiavelli thought the Christian Church to have once been a politically expedient myth that had outlived its usefulness. In that sense, the new republican Christianity that Viroli argues Machiavelli hoped to see emerge from the chrysalis of the old, politically deleterious Christian Church could well fit the description of the new, healthier political myth I argue Machiavelli thought should replace fifteenth century Italian Christianity. However, Viroli's argument (as does Nederman's) implies Machiavelli truly and honestly believed in God.

See Cary J Nederman, "Amazing Grace: God, Fortune and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no 4 (October 1999): 627-633; Cary J Nederman, *Machiavelli: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Books, 2009), 28-49; Cary J Nederman, *Lineages of European Political Thought*, 277-303; Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 208-294.

⁵⁷ See Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, "Introduction," in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

is rooted in a particular timeless truth, although philosophical inclinations and agreement are necessary to recognize the myths/falsehoods *qua* falsehoods while simultaneously understanding their indispensability. Machiavelli sends this message via aesthetic metaphors and through his gestures toward Xenophon.

Philosophy and the proper political education

To Machiavelli, like Plato, we learn by imitation, but not only physical imitation. Art and representation are also forms of imitation, and consequently we also learn from artistic representations (such as the Homeric poems or accounts of ancient history). However we also tend to imbue our creations with what we learned or what we think we know. As such, art, for both Machiavelli and Plato, has a dual status of being both a product of our education and a pedagogical tool. And if it is imbued with incorrect knowledge, then it has the potential to be a very dangerous tool.

In the case of Machiavelli, teaching politics is often associated with the action of painting or drawing, particularly in terms of representations of natural sceneries or making comparisons between political concepts and nature (mountains and valleys). He describes *fortunà*, easily one of the most important and difficult concepts of political life, in natural terms: a river that flows out of its bed and destroys the nearby landscape.⁵⁸ One of the first times Machiavelli links geography, geographical representations and political knowledge is in the dedicatory letter of the *Prince*, wherein he tells Lorenzo that princes are so far above the people that it is like they are on top of a mountain while

⁵⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 98-99.

the people are down in a valley.⁵⁹ Each of the two parties can see (and examine) the other but not itself (so the prince can know the people but not himself, and the people the prince but not itself), which generates a self-awareness problem that gets in the way of complete political knowledge. In the words of Diego von Vacano, political knowledge, as Machiavelli describes it, is dependent on aesthetic perspectivism: “[...] the totality of politics is so complex that only partial understanding can be achieved at any given time. In order to reach this kind of understanding, one’s *perspective*, be it from the plain or the mountain, is critical.”⁶⁰ (This opinion seemed to also have been shared by Mary Dietz.⁶¹) Thankfully for Lorenzo, Machiavelli comes along to tell him about both, although he pretends he is simply going to inform him about the nature of the people. This is in itself somewhat puzzling, because Machiavelli pretends to include himself in the people. Going along with his own metaphor would mean he should be incapable to inform Lorenzo about the nature of the people. The fact that he thinks he is suited to do so (as the *Prince*’s content testifies) suggests Machiavelli thought he actually occupied a special vantage point from which he can learn (and teach) about both. Sheldon Wolin made this point so eloquently in *Politics and Vision* that it is worth quoting at length here:

[...] Machiavelli went on to compare the political writer to a landscape artist who could best execute his canvas by situating himself in the valley so that he might faithfully render the towering mountains; and, conversely, he could best sketch the valley by occupying the heights. In the metaphor the valley symbolized the people, the mountains the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power*, 139. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹ Mary G. Dietz, “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no 3 (September 1986): 795.

prince; the political theorist, as painter, was superior to both, moving with equal facility to either position, and capable of prescribing for one or the other.⁶²

That third perspective, as is suggested by Machiavelli's famous letter detailing a day in exile that culminates in the private study of history and philosophy,⁶³ is that of the political philosopher.⁶⁴ As such, the knowledge contemplated by the political philosopher, which Machiavelli allegorically describes as a representation of a geographical landscape, is philosophical knowledge.

The idea that Machiavelli covertly addresses the value of philosophical knowledge in his works is not new. Catherine Zuckert argued in "The Life of Castruccio Castracani: Machiavelli as Literary Artist, Historian, Teacher and Philosopher" that the whole point of Machiavelli's fictionalized account of Castracani's life was to criticize Socratic/Platonic thought. Contra much of the previous literature,⁶⁵ Zuckert argues that

⁶² Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 181.

⁶³ Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, 109-110.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that the interpretation of this passage is highly contested. Textualists tend to read it as a covert expression of Machiavelli's deep appreciation of political philosophy. This in itself is not far-fetched: Machiavelli refers to Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Thucydides, Lucretius and Cicero throughout his work and therefore it is not a stretch to assume he read, enjoyed and/or respected intellectually these authors (or some of them) regardless of their agreements and disagreements. But there is also a very clear sense in which it can be interpreted as the study of history. Machiavelli mentions the ancient courts of ancient rulers, and thus it can be reasonably believed is he referring here to the study of ancient examples – so the actions of past political actors passed on to us via historical accounts - he thought were so important to political education. References to Plutarch, Livy and Bruni, for example, are just as integral to his work. In my humble opinion, it's likely to be both.

⁶⁵ Joseph C. MacFarland, "Machiavelli's Imagination of Excellent Men: An Appraisal of the Lives of Cosimo de Medici and Castruccio Castracani," *American Political Science Review* 93:1 (March 1999): 133-146; Peter E. Bondanella, "Castruccio Castracani: Machiavelli's Archetypal Prince," *Italica* 49:3 (Autumn 1972): 302-314.

Machiavelli's revisited Castracani is not an idealized version of a good prince. Despite seemingly following ancient examples, Zuckert's Castracani is a failure on all counts. His 'teaching' left his heir an incompetent politician who soon lost all he inherited,⁶⁶ he failed to understand how to obtain the glory he sought, and did not even understand the inherent tension between his way of life and the philosophical views Machiavelli attributed to him on his deathbed. This goes against interpretations in which Castracani is contrasted with a feeble and politically deleterious Cosimo de Medici, who was himself associated with Ficino and Plato,⁶⁷ Zuckert highlights that the dying Castruccio is turned into a bad mouthpiece for famous Socratics.⁶⁸ To argue, like MacFarland, that Castracani turned to ancient sources does not mean that he turned to the right ones: as we saw, the preface of the *Discourses* warns readers rather explicitly about how likely and wasteful is it to focus on the wrong ancient things. Therefore, it is not sufficient to conclude that Machiavelli meant Castracani to be an example of virtue.

This thesis is somewhat moderated by Zuckert herself in her book *Machiavelli's Politics*, in which the chapter on Castracani is a reworked version of her article. Castruccio is still depicted as a failure and interpreted by Zuckert as a figure Machiavelli did not mean to be sympathetic to his readers. On top of that, he does remain a mouthpiece for famous Socratics, but Zuckert argues that his behavior shows he misunderstood their maxims entirely. The chapter thereby defends the idea that since the character is meant to be understood as unsympathetic and as having misunderstood the

⁶⁶ Zuckert, "The Life of Castruccio Castracani," 592.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 593.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 595.

Socratic philosophers he quotes, we can infer that Machiavelli had a certain level of sympathy for these Socratics, communicated covertly by way of this double-layered approach.

Castruccio becomes not a vehicle for Machiavelli's disdain of ancient politics, but simply an example of an unsophisticated actor who failed to understand the complex relationship politics and philosophy were meant to have. Because he had so little self-knowledge and was contemptuous of philosophers, Zuckert's Castracani failed to understand that some philosophical acumen is necessary to achieve political success. Self-knowledge is required to be able to navigate the public and private personas a prince must necessarily have. Castracani's failure is result of his anti-philosophical behavior, not of his Socratic propensities.

In this re-worked reading, with which I find myself in profound agreement, Machiavelli becomes "a follower and a critic of Socrates."⁶⁹ By this she means that the locus of Machiavelli's hostility to Socratic thought rested in its apolitical nature. She rightly notes that the non-Platonic Socrates was primarily depicted as one who thought of philosophy as something that needed to be entirely divorced from politics. Of course, this is not Machiavelli's opinion. Zuckert correctly points out, therefore, that the conclusion we are meant to reach is that, like the philosopher he thoughtlessly parrots, Castracani missed a crucial aspect of human life, namely, that point where philosophy and politics intersect. In doing so Zuckert discovers a Machiavelli sympathetic to the more 'political' Socrates depicted by Plato and Xenophon. It is this same Socrates with

⁶⁹ Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 359.

whom I contend Machiavelli is more compatible than previously assumed. It is this, the more ‘political’ Socrates, the one who focuses on the ‘human things’ (to borrow Zuckert’s vocabulary), with which Machiavelli’s thought is compatible. It is the Socrates of the *Republic* and of the *Laws* (if we are permitted to conjecture that the Athenian Stranger is Socrates, or at least a Socratic placeholder).

Zuckert goes so far as to say that Machiavelli is in a sense himself a Socratic figure. Like Socrates, he strove to educate the young, as is shown by the numerous dedications to his books and the records that we have of his life.⁷⁰ More importantly, he repeatedly stressed the importance of self-knowledge in politics by way of his historical determinism. Since humans and celestial bodies always behave in similar manners and we therefore observe similarities in accidents (i.e., the situations in which they find themselves), studying history becomes a tool of self-knowledge. Machiavelli’s emphasis on the importance of familiarity with historical examples for princes is in part due to the fact that human homogeneity means that a certain knowledge of others implies heightened knowledge of one’s self.

Machiavelli’s covert invitations to study philosophy more closely to understand politics do not stop with this subtle commentary on the Platonic and non-Platonic Socrates. Wolin’s insightful analysis into Machiavelli’s use of geographical landscapes to signify political knowledge (quoted above) invites us to consider whether we can interpret the other instances where Machiavelli resorts to images of nature and natural representations as metaphors for philosophy. We can, if we pay careful attention to

⁷⁰ Ibid., 360.

Machiavelli's discussion of hunting, as well as the treatment of geographical knowledge and the invitation to refer to Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* that comes with the topic of hunting. It seems that some parts of the *Prince* indeed suggest that either a prince or his advisors should study philosophy (but not only philosophy, of course). Therefore, we should pay special attention whenever Machiavelli likens political to natural phenomena or discusses artistic representation.

One such instance is the famous passage where Machiavelli discusses the importance of hunting for a prince. The prince, Machiavelli tells us, should never remove his mind from the art of war. He shall do this both with 'actions' and 'with the mind,' by studying ancient histories as well as hunting in order to study the terrain.⁷¹ It seems that the combination of theoretical and empirical knowledge is essential to proper political training. Consequently, Quentin Skinner's thesis about princely education, that "[Machiavelli perhaps] genuinely believed (as he sometimes seems to imply) that the best education for a prince would simply consist of memorizing the *Prince*,"⁷² seems incorrect.

In enjoining the prince to hunt, Machiavelli praises the knowledge acquired via the practice of hunting with the same vocabulary with which he described political knowledge in the dedicatory letter of the *Prince*. It is true that he could have been talking of metaphorical landscapes then and of literal landscapes now. But this possibility quickly becomes less plausible as Machiavelli begins to attribute to hunting benefits it cannot possibly bring. In his view, hunting will help a prince to "recognize how

⁷¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 59.

⁷² Skinner, *Visions of Politics* Vol.II, 122.

mountains rise, how the valleys are hollowed out, how plains lie, and to inform himself on the nature of rivers and swamps.”⁷³ That it is useful because

[...] the hills, the valleys, the plains, the rivers, and the marshes that are in Tuscany, for instance, have a certain similarity to that of other provinces, so that from the knowledge of a site in one province one can easily come to the knowledge of others.⁷⁴

Hills, plains and rivers have already been conceptually tied to crucial elements of Machiavelli’s political teaching: the prince, the people, and *fortuna*. This points to the conclusion that he may be discreetly talking about these things rather than about the actual landscape. But his statement that geography is somewhat similar throughout Italy (or the world; Machiavelli could be referring to either in that passage) is obviously false, although puzzlingly so. It is literally impossible that a man as well travelled as the former ambassador of the Florentine Republic thought this to be true. That error alone is evidently not sufficient to assert that such a mistake signifies that Machiavelli is subtly referring to philosophical knowledge instead of simply being mistaken about geography. But as we will see in the next chapter, Machiavelli’s invitation to turn to Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* following the discussion of hunting in the *Prince* offers further evidence that Machiavelli is gesturing toward the importance of philosophical education for the prince. Still, the reader is left to wonder why Machiavelli would tell such a blatant lie unless it served some purpose. Machiavelli, I think, hints twice in this chapter that he is in fact talking about philosophy and not strictly hunting.

⁷³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 59-60.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

CHAPTER V
SIGNIFYING THE IMPORTANCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION THROUGH
XENOPHON

“[...] s’il est vrai [que Machiavel] emprunte à Xénophon ou à Aristote, c’est s’appliquer à entendre comment il les fait parler sa propre langue.”

-Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre de Machiavel*¹

So far, we have discussed how Machiavelli may have meant to communicate to his readers the importance of philosophical education through geographical metaphors and allegorical representations of politics. These might suggest that when he advises the prince to hunt in order to acquire knowledge of the land, he may also mean, figuratively, to acquire knowledge of political landscapes. I contend that the prince acquires this knowledge of political landscapes partly through philosophical education.

At the end of *Prince* 14, Machiavelli links hunting to Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*. And so I propose to accept Machiavelli’s invitation to turn to Xenophon’s work in order to elucidate the puzzle of the potential double meaning of hunting. Doing so reveals that Machiavelli is inscribing himself into a tradition of authors including Plato, Ficino and Xenophon who used hunting as a symbolic placeholder for philosophical exercise. In the *Education of Cyrus*, we see the themes of *Prince* 14 developed in more depth. It seems that Cyrus is a Machiavellian prince before his time, and his education gives us valuable insight into Machiavelli’s view of the share of intellectual and philosophical growth in princely education.

¹ Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l’œuvre de Machiavel* (Paris : Gallimard 1972), 57.

It is worth noting that Machiavelli repeats this same advice about the importance of hunting for a prince in the third book of the *Discourses*.² This time, however, it is not Italy-specific, but extended to the whole world.³ Once a hunter has acquainted himself with a particular area he can generalize his knowledge to other areas. More importantly, Machiavelli delves deeper into what makes hunting such an effective pedagogical tool.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 298.

³ In her article “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” Mary G. Dietz argued that Machiavelli’s *Prince* is written subversively, meaning that the author gives the Medici advice contrary to what is necessary for them to actually thrive. Dietz’s argument and my own hardly ever intersect specifically, but the nature of her argument makes it so that any work attempting to uncover the lessons of the *Prince*, be they overt or covert, must engage a reading which claims Machiavelli presented the political axioms of his book insincerely.

“Trapping the Prince” runs into a continuity problem of its own as its author uses the discontinuities between the *Prince* and the rest of Machiavelli’s corpus to cement her thesis. While Dietz regards the *Prince*’s lessons as insincere, she considers the propositions of the rest of Machiavelli’s corpus, from the *Discourses* to his correspondence and plays, to have been advanced honestly. Therefore, we must wonder what to make of the moments of continuity between these books, such as the advice for political leaders to hunt, its associated precept about the importance of geographical knowledge, and the essentiality of history for one’s acquisition of political knowledge (to name a few examples crucial to the argument made in this work). Dietz’s argument relies on cherry-picking inconsistencies between Machiavelli’s books and pairing them with his well-documented and entirely plausible dislike of the Medici’s soft tyranny to argue that the *Prince* is entirely a work of deception. A more convincing case for this would have needed some consideration of the advice Machiavelli sticks to throughout his work.

Regarding the intersection between Dietz’s thesis and the argument I make here. I agree with a broader version of her central point: Machiavelli is not presenting some important lessons of the *Prince* in the most straightforward manner. Even if Dietz is specifically right and the *Prince*’s lessons need to be turned inside out in order to grasp the real intent of its author, then we have a right to assume Machiavelli’s condemnation of philosophical/theological approaches to politics as mere fantasies was equally deceptive. Therefore, while princes should neither seek knowledge via hunting nor through historical studies, there is indeed a need for philosophical education in princely education, although its aim may be less practical than I contend.

See Mary G. Dietz, “Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no 3 (September 1986): 777-799.

Channeling Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* once more (just as he did in the *Prince*), Machiavelli writes that the real point of this discussion is to understand that hunting is pedagogically useful to learn how to conduct war but not simply on account of the geographical knowledge it necessarily imparts to the hunter. Hunting stands out as a teaching tool for generals because it is an image (*immagine*) of war. The theme of art and representation resurfaces here. Machiavelli attempted to teach Lorenzo about politics by allegorically painting him a picture of peoples and princes. Generals learn about war through hunting, because hunting is a good representation of war. Effective education is about crafting accurate images, or good representations, of the things one is attempting to teach. The teacher, like the political theorist, is part artist.

As I have discussed above, images and representations can be deleterious to politics because of low mass intelligence. People are just as likely to be seduced by a false image of the good as they are by an image faithful to the good. The metaphor of hunting, which is intimately linked with this very warning, however, seems to hint subtly that we may be able educate ourselves into being able to tell the difference between good and bad representations of the good with the help of some ancient insights. While that may seem far-fetched to some, we will see that hunting as a metaphor for philosophical exercise had become something of a literary trope by Machiavelli's time.

Hunting as a metaphor for philosophy in Plato and Xenophon

As Machiavelli was likely aware, there is an established tradition in classical Western thought that treats hunting as a metaphor for philosophical exercise. It begins

with Xenophon himself, who, as Machiavelli (not coincidentally) mentions in the same chapter as hunting, wrote one such treatise. In it Xenophon describes hunting as training for war but also as an activity conducive to virtue. Hunting is a sort of preparation or training for philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge. It should be practiced by young men who “desire to grow up to be good men, not only in war but in all else of which the issue is perfection in thought, word and deed.”⁴

Xenophon credits Cheiron as the original teacher of the art of hunting. Because of his ‘uprightness,’ the Gods commanded the centaur to teach young heroes how to hunt, which in turn would lead them to learn chivalry and nobility.⁵ Close examination of the lives of all these heroes, says Xenophon, reveals that they owe their greatness to their dedication to the art of hunting in their youth, because it led all of them to virtue.⁶ The great benefit of hunting is that its physical component teaches youths resilience and perseverance, while its strategic component turns them toward public service and the proper treatment of their friends, which Xenophon will suggest, via Socrates, is dependent on the possession of pre-existing philosophical propensities.

Moreover, and in a manner that links philosophy and hunting more directly, Xenophon asserts (still in *On Hunting*) that sophists have ranted against the practice of hunting in youths, but true philosophers see that hunting is actually training in virtue. Xenophon uses ‘philosopher’ and ‘hunter’ interchangeably to tell us that as much as sophist-hunters are dangerous, philosopher-hunters lead men to virtue and cure the

⁴ Xenophon, “On Hunting,” in *On Horsemanship, The Duties of a Hipparch, and On Hunting*, trans. H.G. Dakyns (Kansas: Digireads.com, 2010), I.

⁵ Ibid. I.

⁶ Ibid., XII.

ailments of a political community, and thereby rids it of vice.⁷ The sophist-hunters hunt for the young and the rich with a view to personal gain. They end up draining and despoiling their friends and make their ‘prey’ less able to hold public office and face foreign foes.⁸ The philosopher-hunter, on the other hand, practices his art with self-restraint and benefits his friends.

Xenophon further develops this relationship between the philosopher-hunter and his friends allegorically in the *Memorabilia*. In it, Socrates is referred to as a ‘hunter of friends.’⁹ As such, he will come to instruct another hunter of friends, Theodote, on how to take care of friends in a healthy and virtuous manner, which will turn out to be a mix of loyalty and philosophical mentorship. While both the ‘sophist-hunter’ and the ‘philosopher-hunter’ will bait their ‘friends’ with the promise to satisfy their desires, only the philosopher-hunter will fulfill these desires in a manner conducive to virtue, and that does not consume the resources of his friends. In the book, we are presented with a Socrates whose wisdom is much more actively prescriptive and proscriptive than Plato’s. The Socrates of the *Memorabilia* points directly to overindulgence in food and sex, for example, as types of immoderate behaviors in conflict with the philosophical life.¹⁰ To this Socrates, immoderate appetites like thirst, hunger, or lust create a situation in which incontinent young men can be baited by their adversaries and subsequently defeated. Metaphorically, incontinence and desire cause the social downfall of these promising

⁷ Ibid., XIII.

⁸ Ibid., XIII.

⁹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. Amy L. Bonnette (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), III.11.7-18.

¹⁰ Ibid., I.2.23.

youths in a social setting, in a manner akin to the way animals are ensnared by drink or ‘quails and partridges’ are drawn into nets out of lust.¹¹

Socrates comes into this picture as a different kind of hunter. While sophists and political adversaries use the youths’ desires to bait and ensnare them with a view to consumption, Socrates hunts for friends. The immoderate youths come to Socrates via the same channels through which they go to politicians or sophists: out of desire for intellectual or sensory gratification. But, as we know, Socrates is not interested in “consumption”: he seeks neither sex nor money, as is repeatedly made explicit throughout both the Xenophontic and Platonic corpuses.

Later in the *Memorabilia*, Socrates returns to the metaphor of hunting over the course of a conversation about livelihood. As he learns that Theodote depends on her friends’ charity to make ends meet, Socrates, who himself is in a very similar situation, enjoins her to become a ‘hunter of friends’ in order to ensure some measure of financial stability. The conversation, however, quickly departs from strictly material concerns. It is better to have a lot of friends than a lot of livestock, says Socrates, but one must know how to treat friends properly in order to retain their friendship.¹² Friends and friendships must be maintained in accordance with a particular art. That art, says Socrates, is not to ensnare them by violence and retain them by force. It entails repeated performance of the honest acts of care that true friends perform towards one another: congratulations in times of success, support in times of failure, and encouragement in times of adversity. But very much like Diotima’s ladder of knowledge in Plato’s *Symposium*, Theodote’s

¹¹ Ibid., II.1.4.

¹² Ibid., III.11.4.

friend-retention power, like Socrates', will depend on her ability to channel her friends' love of beauty first with her body and elevate it towards a love of concepts and knowledge with her soul.¹³ In order for this to work properly, she must not offer her charms willy-nilly, but wait instead for people who desire to be satiated (like our aforementioned prey) and then offer her attributes; those already full will react with the disdain common to those offered extra food after a big meal. The sum total of skills required to ensnare and retain friends well, says Socrates, are those 'charms and spells' that he has worked on his own companions present during the conversation - Apollodorus, Athistenes, Cebes and Simmias. This art, a mix of knowledge of how to educate as well as how to placate friends, is what makes such a skilled 'hunter.' We know this art to be philosophy, since we know these four young men to have been following Socrates around on account of his philosophical acumen.

Even Ficino himself refers to Socrates as a hunter.¹⁴ In his discussion of the early books of the *Republic*, Ficino makes a connection between philosophy and hunting. While Xenophon's Socrates is a hunter of friends, Ficino's Socrates is a hunter for justice. The process of dialogic investigation by which Socrates and his friends try to elucidate the nature of justice is equated to a form of the hunt in accordance with the allegorical meaning that this chapter argues and that Machiavelli subscribes to as well.

Since this is a project about education, it would be remiss to let an important Xenophontic insight about pedagogy fly by. Socrates' point about satiation, which is in

¹³ Ibid., III.11.10-11.

¹⁴ Arthur Farndell, trans., *When Philosophers Rule: Ficino on Plato's Republic, Laws, and Epinomis*, (London: Sheapheard –Walwyn, 2009), 11.

essence a desire or a certain impression of incompleteness that needs to precede any friendship or ‘philosophical ensnaring,’ suggests that education is dependent on student receptivity. While this might seem self-evident, Socrates’ point implies that philosophical education can only happen when the students come to him, and not vice-versa. At the onset in the *Memorabilia*, this point is made more explicitly: Xenophon, who addresses the reader directly, writes: “no one receives an education from someone who does not please him.”¹⁵ (Perhaps we may be able to find in this axiom a philosophical explanation for Lorenzo’s indifferent dismissal of Machiavelli’s *Prince*.)

Other scholars have noted the connection between hunting and philosophy. According to Harvey Mansfield, Machiavelli thought Xenophon to be in line with his design for a “politicized virtue.”¹⁶ Mansfield’s analysis of the relationship between the art of war and philosophy suggests that Machiavelli and Xenophon might have agreed with the Socratic principle that knowledge of war requires knowledge of strategy, hence knowledge of human character, and thus ends up being nothing short of philosophical knowledge,¹⁷ the two having a ladder-of-knowledge type of relationship. While this is highly plausible (and not at all incompatible with my argument), I want to suggest that the relationship between hunting and philosophy proposed by Machiavelli is best understood through Cheiron.

To both Machiavelli and Xenophon, hunting is great on account of its physical and mental benefits. Xenophon thinks that hunting makes men good because it teaches

¹⁵ Ibid., I.2.39.

¹⁶ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 199-200.

them, on the one hand, resiliency and perseverance on top of making them physically fit, but, on the other hand, it turns them toward public service and the proper treatment of friends, of which he understands philosophy to be a part.¹⁸ Similarly, Machiavelli says that the prince must learn through both physical and mental activity, and that the physical part should be the activity of hunting. If what I have suggested so far is correct, then Machiavelli actually thought, like Xenophon, that hunting was also partly physical and partly intellectual in its benefits – making the education of the prince something more like three-fourths intellectual and one-fourth physical, so to speak. Along with the argument explicated above (and continuing at length below), I am tempted to advance this interpretation on the grounds of another thematic link between the *Prince* and *On Hunting*, i.e., the figure of Cheiron. The greatness of Xenophon’s Cheiron is that he was such a skilled teacher of hunting that he led all the classical Greek heroes to virtue by way of it. Last but not least, he instructed Achilles before his death.¹⁹ Machiavelli draws our attention to this.

Since Machiavelli has already linked his discussion of hunting to Xenophon directly as well as indirectly, I propose that the famous ‘two natures’ of Cheiron (that of beast and of man) symbolize to Machiavelli that the good leader’s self should be divided between a strictly amoral appetitive part and another more akin to the Greek concept of *logos*. William Parsons’ take on this issue aligns with mine and is so nicely put that it deserves to be quoted at length here:

¹⁸ Xenophon, “On Hunting,” XIII.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, XII.

While Machiavelli cites the imitators of chapter 14 as models *of* imitation, he explicitly establishes that Chiron is a model *for* imitation. Importantly, Chiron was not merely an untamed and warlike beast: he was regarded as a wise and gentle centaur, with knowledge of war, prophecy, and medical healing. Chiron embodies the education that Alexander could approach only by combining the glorious history of Homer with Aristotle's philosophical corrective (emphasis in original).²⁰

The lesson of Cheiron is the same lesson as that of hunting: while the self is and should be divided between the beastly and the rational, both of these parts need to complement each other. The lesson covertly taught by ancient authors, here Xenophon, is that the hunters' skills by themselves are necessary for survival in the basest sense (eating) but that good practice begs the use of the intellectual part of our selves, which in turn reveals to us an imperative to put these skills toward public service and the appropriate treatment of our friends. And the connection between hunting, education and philosophy does not, I think, stop there.

In *Machiavelli's Ethics*, Erica Benner devotes a portion of her argument to an examination of the metaphorical significance of hunting. Benner argues that Machiavelli first cues the reader into the allegorical significance of hunting through his repetition of the word *cognizione*. To Benner, the unusually high frequency with which this particular word and its associated lexical field of reflective forms of knowledge is used indicates that Machiavelli thought there was a connection between hunting and philosophical inquiry.²¹ In line with the argument I made in this chapter, Benner notes that the discussion of hunting in the *Discourses* recalls Plato's maxim that everyone should

²⁰ William Parsons, *Machiavelli's Gospel: The Critique of Christianity in The Prince* (NY: Rochester University Press, 2016), 91.

²¹ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 122-123.

acquire knowledge of their country, since that knowledge is easily transferable elsewhere. Benner also picks up on the odd falsity of this statement and concludes that it is better read metaphorically. She goes on to argue that Machiavelli gestures towards Xenophon's *Cyrus* as an expert-hunter as well, something linked to his virtue, or appearance of virtue. Benner concludes that

Machiavelli's discussions of hunting provide important, seldom-noticed evidence of his affinities with Socratic ethics and political philosophy. His hunting teaches princes and citizens how to improve their defenses not just by acquainting them with physical terrain, but by urging them to reflect in a philosophical way on the civil conditions for maintaining a strong state. He concurs with Socratic writers on who held that an adequate military of political *scienza* must rest on a bedrock of practical philosophy.²²

Seven years later Catherine Zuckert took issue with Benner's reading in *Machiavelli's Philosophy*. Dr. Zuckert is unwilling to read any second or third layer of meaning, or any covert lesson, in Machiavelli's injunction that the prince should practice hunting in order to prepare for war and get to know the terrain of his own territory. The point of hunting is to train the body via exercise. The point of reasoning with one's subordinates, far from a roundabout way to mean philosophical exercise, is simply so that through rational inquiry about war together with the prince, said subordinates will know what to do if they have to make military decisions in his absence.²³

²² Ibid., 124.

²³ Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 75.

In a footnote, Zuckert directly challenges Benner's interpretation.²⁴ According to Zuckert, Benner makes the connection between Socratic philosophy and hunting too rapidly. In Zuckert's reading, Benner fails to notice that the texts on which she based her reading are almost exclusively the non-Socratic writings of their authors. Zuckert clearly means to imply that these non-Socratic writings are meaningfully non-Socratic, in the sense that Socrates' absence from them signifies some manner of departure from examination and promotion of the Socratic way of life in these works. She writes:

Benner, [in] *Machiavelli's Ethics*, takes Machiavelli's discussion of hunting as a metaphor for education as "evidence of his affinities with Socratic ethics and philosophy" (124) without noticing that the texts she cites from both Xenophon and Plato are non-Socratic (Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* and Plato's *Laws*). Machiavelli clearly and explicitly embraces Xenophon's depiction of Cyrus as a *political* man, but as Strauss, [in *Thoughts in Machiavelli*], 291, notes, Machiavelli hardly mentions Socrates (Xenophon's other "hero") or Plato.²⁵

Without wishing to sound trite, both of them are only partially correct. The right answer lies somewhere in between. Zuckert ignores the fact that Machiavelli inscribes himself in a pre-existing tradition in which hunting is already established to signify philosophical learning allegorically in some respect. This tradition is one in which Socrates is *de facto* inscribed. What this means is that there is a real possibility that

²⁴ One may also wonder if the entire book is not somewhat meant by Zuckert to be a subtle jab at Benner's whole enterprise. Zuckert's entire argument is about how Machiavelli's thought is in large part an effort to divorce political philosophy from Socratic and Platonic arguments that the contemplative life is best or even minimally beneficial to politics. Zuckert's argument is all about how Machiavelli is bringing, so to speak, philosophy back down to the practical human realm, contrary to what Plato seems to be doing. She constantly emphasizes the importance of the political over the philosophical and ethical in Machiavelli's thought. From that angle, her title seems to be coyly mirroring that of Benner's own book, a book that argues essentially the opposite.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75n59.

Socrates is absent from those texts but that the mention of hunting as a stand-in for philosophical practice is meant to bring him covertly into these otherwise non-Socratic works. Because the association between hunting and philosophy is established via the characterization of Socrates as a type of hunter, there is scarcely any need to mention him by name, since the mention of hunting implies a sort of Socratic innuendo. Zuckert does little work to solidify the premise on which her argument against Benner is based, namely, that Socrates' absence from these texts is meaningfully pregnant. Surely the conspicuous absence of Socrates should be considered when we try to understand these texts, but to assume that this absence signifies a symbolic dissociation from him without further justification is a something of a big jump. Zuckert dismisses Benner's whole argument solely on the grounds that Socrates is absent from the texts Benner cites, but it seems it would be more accurate to conclude that Socrates' absence means that perhaps the metaphor of hunting is simply meant by Machiavelli to convey the importance of philosophy *per se*, but not necessarily Socratic philosophy. To borrow from common parlance, Zuckert throws out the baby with the bath water here.

Benner is too attached to the Socratic component of her argument regarding philosophy in Machiavelli's thought. Zuckert upholds too strict a distinction between philosophy and politics and/or political theory. There is no doubt that Machiavelli rejected the life of contemplation, for princes and citizens alike. That does not mean however that all philosophy and philosophical exercise are *de facto* incompatible with political education and praxis. Some knowledge of philosophy, a modicum of philosophical practice, is essential to the rearing of a great prince.

It is correct, however, that Benner missed the more active component in hunting. As such if hunting is a stand-in metaphor for philosophical exercise, we should not be too quick to dismiss the ‘exercise’ part, meaning here that we should probably interpret Machiavelli’s ‘hunting-philosophy’ equation to be active, political philosophy and not strictly a Socratic approach. Here again hunting is strictly a stand-in for philosophy, not a particular brand of philosophical approach. Benner’s equation of philosophy as meaning Socratic philosophy is too quick.²⁶ While we may criticize Zuckert because Socrates’ absence may not mean anti-Socratic innuendo, then we may equally criticize Benner on the grounds that citing students of Socrates is not obviously meant to convey sympathy towards Socratic philosophy. I want to suggest that the correct interpretation is simply to assume hunting to be a stand-in for philosophical education and philosophically informed intellectual gymnastics. Exercise for the mind and the body. Just like Machiavelli re-appropriates Numa’s example from Ficino’s Christian Platonism, so too he re-appropriates the metaphor of hunting, redefining its meaning in the process. Numa sheds his religiosity, and the trope of hunting sheds its Socratic accouterments.

Finally, another instance of the hunting-philosophy link can be found in Plato’s *Laws*. Plato discusses how the rulers of the city should also hunt as a preparation for

²⁶ In her recent book *Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading*, Benner revisits this argument but moderates it into impotence. She summons all the same evidence she had presented in *Machiavelli’s Ethics* plus an extended analysis of Xenophon’s “double-meaning” and of Philopoemen’s as Plutarch’s example of a philosophical prince. She then apparently refrains from taking her own argument to its natural conclusion (i.e., that hunting implies philosophical exercise) and instead proposes the weaker thesis that it is “exercise of the mind” as well as physical exercise. See Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 170-175.

ruling.²⁷ Not coincidentally, this proposition comes at the end of the discussion dedicated to education in the city.²⁸ There we find that the legislators-philosophers should hunt – and that there is a kind of hunting that occurs in friendship. It can be of two kinds: one blamable, one praiseworthy. While the Athenian Stranger does not elaborate on the specifics of each, we can surmise from the rest of the Platonic corpus that hunting aimed at sensory gratification is the lesser kind, while Socratic friend-hunting is the higher, if only because Plato’s Socrates is the absolute opposite of a gratification-driven character. But not all kinds of hunting are good to the Athenian Stranger.²⁹ He argues that fishing is too easy and therefore encourages laziness; bird-

²⁷ Thomas Pangle, trans., *The Laws of Plato*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 823b-823d.

²⁸ The Athenian Stranger also reiterates that poets and their works should not be banned but rather trained thoroughly to avoid saying evil instead of good, in line with the argument in made in chapter 2 of this dissertation, i.e., that poetry should exist under the tutelage of philosophy.

The aim of education seems to be twofold. First, instill early familiarity with the children’s future profession. The kids are to play with toys that prepare them for their adult lives. The second aim of education is to make sure the children are not exposed to incorrect notions about the gods and the heavens. The goal of this education is to prevent the children from having misconceptions about these topics that they would carry later in life, since this particular ignorance can later be inimical to the rule of law. Children who grow up in the city of Laws would therefore learn first by imitation (which is also done through dance) and later via exposition. Only the future rulers have to go through an extra step, hunting, which cultivates both physical fitness and philosophical habits. Thomas Pangle, trans., *The Laws of Plato*, 801a-822c; Brent Edwin Cushner, “How does Law Rule? Plato on Habit, Political Education, and Legislation,” *Journal of Politics* 76, no 4 (October 2014): 1032-1044; H. D. Rankin, “Toys and Education in Plato’s *Laws*,” *Hermathena* 92 (November 1958): 62-65.

²⁹ In his article “The Form of Freedom in Plato’s *Laws*: An Interpretation,” Diego von Vacano argued that a theory of freedom emerges from book III of Plato’s *Laws*. In von Vacano’s reading, book III of the *Laws* implies that men have an “organic” and a knowledge-oriented “spiritual” freedom of the soul. In von Vacano’s view, the members of the ruling elite are the only truly free members of the community because the exercise of lawmaking is the only one where both civic and organic freedom are essentially

hunting and hunting by night, on the other hand, require too much setting of nets, traps and snares and are conducive to shrewd and deceptive behavior. Only the hunt of terrestrial mammals is really conducive to virtue because it promotes physical fitness and the type of courage that is divine.³⁰

Hunting and the ruler's philosophical training

Let us go back to Machiavelli and his odd geographical mistakes. Even if we account for his ignorance of the geography of the newly-discovered Americas, Machiavelli, like anyone who had gone from France to Italy, Germany, Switzerland, etc. (as he had during his time in the Florentine government), could not but know how utterly incorrect this statement is. This is the case even if Machiavelli was talking strictly about Italy, which seems more likely since the original Italian text mentions similitudes (*similitudine*) between provinces (*provincia*) over countries and how knowledge of one (in this case Tuscany) facilitates the acquisition of knowledge about the others (which is a mistake of a lesser degree, but still a significant one). Anyone who has travelled Italy from North to South (as Machiavelli had) knows this to be grossly incorrect. All of this

realized. At the end of his article, von Vacano wonders what kind of curriculum would be necessary for the elites to be educated to the point where they can reach that level of intellectual and reasonable control. My argument in a sense completes von Vacano's: hunting is the only art where organic freedom and civic/intellectual freedom are truly combined. Hunting is both play and dialectic intellectual exercise that fosters virtue. As such it is the only training/activity that truly prepares the leaders for the art/game of lawmaking. See Diego von Vacano, "The Form of Freedom in Plato's *Laws*: An Interpretation," *Theoria* 59, no. 132 (September 2012): 56-57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 824a.

is to say that we are left to ponder the reason behind Machiavelli's deliberate insertion of such an obvious inaccuracy.

If we assume that hunting is a metaphor for the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, however, the answer emerges quickly. As I have argued earlier in this chapter, there is only one thing that a) makes political knowledge possible and b) stays the same throughout time, and it is the constancy of human nature and human behavior. As such, the statement about studying the local geography can be transposed like this (considering that valleys, etc. are placeholders for the concept mentioned above): if a prince studies philosophy, then he will learn about other princes and governments, peoples and *fortuna*, and so he will easily acquire an understanding of other regions because politics and men in one region are generally the same as they are in another. Machiavelli simply did not think that men changed fundamentally across time or location. Circumstances do change, however, but as I discussed above, knowledge of history helps us recognize the substantial similarities between events, identify patterns, and inspire political actors to react correctly based on the knowledge they have of past actions and their results. In fact, there is a link between geographical situation and knowledge of human character. Men who are born in a given region, we are told in *Discourses* 3.43, almost always show the same nature.³¹ The thematic linkage between human character and geographical characteristics is also established by Circe's herdsman in *The Golden Ass*. As she points the lions to the narrator of the poem, the herdsman specifies that only the magnanimous and noble are changed into that beast,

³¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 302.

and that few come from the narrator's city since its "hills are made desert and deprived of every splendid bough that made them less rocky and less rough."³² The moral character of Florentine men (presumably) is likened to hills that were formerly beautiful and welcoming, but that are now inhospitable. From all this we can see how knowledge about regions entails knowledge about the nature of the men who inhabit it; men are like Machiavelli's landscapes in that they are mostly similar throughout the world, so familiarity with one can easily be transposed into familiarity with all. This knowledge of a given region is acquired via hunting. Therefore hunting is at least partly about the acquisition of knowledge about human nature, which is philosophy.

Machiavelli indeed means philosophy and not just, for example, the careful study of history he earlier said was conducive to the knowledge of humans and politics. One of the most interesting implications of this argument is that it demands we reassess the role of *fortuna* within Machiavelli's philosophy. As we saw earlier, Machiavelli has already associated *fortuna* with an element of nature. *Fortuna* is like a river, ever-flowing, implacable and prone to overflow. But if I am correct that geographical metaphors are also allegorical placeholders for political phenomena, and that Machiavelli tells us that hunting-philosophizing is necessary to know landscapes-politics, then it may well mean that he also thought philosophy could give us some insight into the nature of *fortuna*. Knowledge of geography means knowledge of mountains (princes), plains (peoples) and also rivers (*fortuna*). And while geographical knowledge can do nothing for princes who are swept by rivers, it can enable them to estimate where the river is carrying them.

³² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 765.

Philosophical knowledge may not shield princes from the blows of *fortuna*, but it may be able to enable them to better roll with them.

This solves the problem encountered by Alison McQueen in her 2016 article “Politics in Apocalyptic Times: Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment”. In it,³³ McQueen hypothesizes that Machiavelli had used natural imagery to describe fortune so as to suggest the possibility that men can a) know about its nature and b) learn to control it. McQueen argues that Machiavelli describes fortune as a river because “in quiet times, prudent men may prepare for [the] extraordinary onslaughts [of the river of fortune flooding] by building dams and dykes.” The image of the river is used by Machiavelli to tell his readers that fortune can be tamed with the help of “technological mastery and foresight.”³⁴ Since there are no provisions about how to acquire a precise knowledge of fortune, McQueen concludes that Machiavelli’s own argument leads him straight back to “the opinion he had intended to disprove” and that “fortune remains impersonal and unintelligible.”³⁵ My argument implies that if McQueen had followed her own line of inquiry and paid more attention to the other uses of natural imagery in the *Prince* and *Discourses*, she might have reached a different conclusion. It is not so certain that Machiavelli used the image of the river to inspire prudent men to build metaphorical “dams.” It seems more likely that this image was meant to go in conjunction with his

³³ Alison McQueen, "Politics in Apocalyptic Times: Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment," *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 3 (2016): 920.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 920. Interestingly, this thesis would make Machiavelli a precursor of Descartes and Bacon insofar as he would have pre-empted their famous “modern” proposition that knowledge should be sought for its instrumentality and eventually aimed at the mastery of nature.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 920-921.

instructions regarding princely education. In the big picture of politics Machiavelli paints, where every element of political life can be depicted as a geographical or natural feature, fortune is represented as a river. Rivers are part of the natural landscape. Princes gain knowledge of the lay of the land and its different elements by being philosopher-hunters. So Machiavelli does offer a prescription about how we might prepare to deal with fortune's twists and turns.

Returning to *Prince* 14, let us note first that I am not the first scholar to think that this chapter³⁶ touches on the theme of philosophical practice and encourages it. Parsons (channeling Nathan Tarcov) makes a similar point in his discussion of Philopoemen's role in the text. So does Benner, who cites Plutarch's description of Philopoemen to make the point that Philopoemen is "a philosophical soldier-prince par excellence, [...]".³⁷ To Parsons, Philopoemen (whom Machiavelli mentions as an example of a hunting prince) represents a type of proxy for Machiavelli himself on the grounds that his "life's work, spirit and education mirror closely Machiavelli's own."³⁸ Philopoemen does not simply hunt, but also asks questions and interrogates his friends about strategy as well as tests himself and others with hypotheticals. Along with Parsons, I think that his "cogitations" do indeed "resemble philosophical activity."³⁹ Philopoemen, the

³⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58.

³⁷ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 172.

³⁸ Parsons, *Machiavelli's Gospel*, 85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

philosophically inquisitive prince,⁴⁰ is an example of a ruler who tries to understand things both by himself and through interaction with others; he clearly belongs to one of the upper two tiers of mental types discussed earlier. So thorough was Philopoemen's inquiry that he never encountered a situation he did not know how to deal with.⁴¹ Parson's conclusions about this align with mine: "The nature of the people may necessitate the use of force or fraud to bind them to a prince, but for those who can understand, rational inquiry, employed in a scheme against a common enemy, is sufficient."⁴² Philosophical practice is part of a prince's proper education.

Philopoemen is not alone in having practiced philosophy as part of his training. Chapter 14 of the *Prince* mentions two more examples. The first one is Alexander the Great, famously tutored by Aristotle. Machiavelli does not mention Aristotle, but rather the mythical Greek warrior Achilles as the object of Alexander's imitation. But Machiavelli knew, thanks to Plutarch's *Lives*, that Alexander's *Iliad* had been revised by Aristotle.⁴³ This is perfectly consistent with our previous discussion of princely learning. It is not strictly sufficient to study past histories; one must also have sufficient knowledge or guidance to separate the good ancient examples from the bad ones.

⁴⁰ Philopoemen is described by Plutarch as someone who "applied himself to the writings of philosophers" and also to Homer, but only the parts he deemed conducive to virtue. In this sense Philopoemen is in a kind of agreement with the Socrates and Adeimantus of *Republic II*. Plutarch, *Lives, Vol. X: Agis and Cleomenes, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Philopoemen and Flaminius*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 265.

⁴¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 59-60.

⁴² Parsons, *Machiavelli's Gospel*, 86.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

Parsons, along with Vickie Sullivan,⁴⁴ is right to intimate that Machiavelli tells us here that such guidance comes with philosophical training: “Alexander’s example demonstrate that classical philosophy can help enable conquest.”⁴⁵

I must underline before moving forward that this instance is eerily reminiscent of the ending of the second book of the *Republic* that was discussed at the beginning of the present chapter. It appears that for once Machiavelli and Plato are telling us the same thing: myths, representation and imitations are useful, powerful tools for political control and political education, but these tools are available to everyone, and that poses a problem. Consequently artists, among others, conjure powerful narratives that influence, for better or for worse, the political education of citizens – albeit they probably do so without malice. Plato and Machiavelli very clearly imply, as they summon the examples of philosophers who have corrected Homeric myths, that the teacher and/or ruler’s job is to rectify the content of these myths so that they convey the correct lesson.

The final example in that chapter is Scipio, who allegedly followed the example of Xenophon’s *Cyrus*.⁴⁶ Parsons here, too, notes that Scipio is used by Machiavelli to convey the importance of philosophical training. Parsons’ argument is only superficially correct. Parsons argues that Scipio misunderstood Xenophon’s *Cyrus* and tried to emulate his nobility and pleasantness of character rather than his leadership abilities and “capacity for necessary fraud.”⁴⁷ This, to Parsons, is due to the fact that Scipio lacked

⁴⁴ Vickie Sullivan, “Alexander the Great as ‘Lord of Asia’ and Rome as His Successor in Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” *Review of Politics* 75, no 4 (Fall 2013): 536.

⁴⁵ Parsons, *Machiavelli’s Gospel*, 90.

⁴⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60.

⁴⁷ Parsons, *Machiavelli’s Gospel*, 96.

the philosophical mentorship of an Aristotle-type tutor and as such failed to distinguish between what Xenophon ‘wrote’ and what he ‘showed’ of Cyrus’ action.⁴⁸ Without philosophy, the wrong lessons will be learned from history.

While this account is by no means incompatible with my argument, I think Parsons committed the same error he attributes to Scipio and approached Machiavelli’s invitation to go back to Xenophon (which I agree with Parsons is definitely there) a little superficially. Parsons struggles to make sense of Scipio’s presence in this chapter because he seemed to be praised for qualities (affability, nobility, humanity, generosity) that Machiavelli tells us repeatedly good leaders have to fake or at least learn to depart from periodically. At worst, adherence to these qualities can lead to one’s ruin. Certainly Scipio lacked philosophical acumen, but as with the example of Alexander, it is the teacher on whom we must focus, and not the student, if we want to comprehend the real lesson about proper princely training. *Machiavelli’s Gospel* misses the many thematic kinships and philosophical similarities between the lessons of Machiavelli’s *Prince* and those learned by Cyrus during his education.

The three acts of Cyrus’ political education

Cyrus’ early education can be divided into three moments, each with a corresponding lesson. First, Cyrus the child exhibits a love of hunting that is discussed by Xenophon with the lexical field of love of knowledge and curiosity, which suggests once again that ‘hunting’ is a loaded metaphor for philosophical propensities. Second,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

Cyrus learns that despite his rule-oriented upbringing, rigid adherence to rules and laws is not always good and does not always produce the most desirable outcome. Shortly after, a trip to his grandparents reveals that justice might be a less objective principle than his Persian upbringing led him to believe. Finally, Cyrus learns from his father about the importance of (1) moral flexibility in rulers and (2) hiding the malleable nature of morality from people not mature or intelligent enough to use it wisely.

Let us turn to Cyrus' education during the formative years of early adolescence to early adulthood. It is hard not to notice that a substantive thematic commonality between *Prince 14* and *The Education of Cyrus* is that, above all else, the young Cyrus loves to hunt. We are also told that he had "a sharp mind" and that he "loved to learn," and that he was constantly asking questions to whoever happened to be around him "about how things happened to be."⁴⁹ Very early in his life Cyrus shows signs of a philosophical inclination. This inclination, which is paired with his love of hunting, leads him to desire to explore and to hunt outside the bounds of his grandfather's estate.⁵⁰ His grandfather, Astyages, eventually submits and permits him do so provided his uncle and a group of guards accompany him. As soon as they reach the park, Cyrus resumes his intellectual inquiry and starts to ask a myriad of questions. Not unlike Parsons' Philopoemen, Cyrus asks about the approach their party should take in case a wild and dangerous beast appears, and questions his companions about which beasts "one should

⁴⁹ Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, trans. Wayne Ambler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

not approach and which one should pursue boldly.”⁵¹ In short, he shows the same type of inclination that Machiavelli praised in Philopoemen.

But the similarities do not stop there. Hunting leads Cyrus to learn many lessons about politics, which are often echoed in Machiavelli’s *Prince*. The first lesson derived by Cyrus is that hunting is good practice for war. Shooting animals is good for marksmanship, and killing prepares the hunter to take the life of human beings should he need to.⁵² There is more to it: hunting also trains the hunter in the art of the deception and manipulation of beasts, and if need be, humans as well.⁵³ Cyrus’s father, Cyaxares, tells his son that ultimately hunting is practice at “knowing how to do both good and harm to human beings.”⁵⁴ Cyaxares continues and tells Cyrus that the inevitability of dissimulation and manipulation in politics is a lesson only adults can learn. Smart young people like Cyrus need to reach a certain level of maturity before they are taught this important lesson for the same reason young children are not taught about sex right away: they have neither the knowledge of human beings necessary to understand this lesson nor the maturity to use it well.⁵⁵ This is almost exactly the lesson and most famous teaching of *Prince* 15, wherein Machiavelli tells us that a prince must “learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not to use it according to necessity.”⁵⁶ No ruler can

⁵¹ Ibid., 34.

⁵² Ibid., 55.

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 55-56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 55-56.

⁵⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61. The Italian reads “... *imparare a potere essere non buono, et usarlo e non usare seconda la necessità.*” *Imparare* can mean learn or memorize, and my translation of this passage therefore is: “... to learn to be able to be not

possess and practice the virtues held to be good, and therefore he must learn to deceive people into thinking he possesses these traits.⁵⁷ *The Education of Cyrus* shows the protagonist learning these philosophical lessons as a result of a guided reflection on the practice of hunting. Here Machiavelli is not directing us to the consequences of lack of philosophical training by way of Scipio (Parsons' argument), but rather points to the benefits of philosophical training by way of Xenophon's Cyrus.

It is hard not to see other parallels between the young Cyrus' educational arc and the progression of Machiavelli's core teachings in the early *Prince* and *Discourses*. At first, Cyrus is brought up like every other young noble Persian child. He is taught gratitude, moderation, obedience, how to eat and drink in reasonable amounts, and how to use spears and bows.⁵⁸ Cyrus loves "beauty and honor" and quickly develops an affable and noble character. He is modest and satisfied with little despite his high status. He repeatedly displays generosity by sharing his food and other luxuries with servants and friends regardless of their status.⁵⁹ In other words, Cyrus is someone conventionally understood to be, even in Western twenty-first century terms, an admirable person. We could even go as far as to say that he wouldn't be a bad Christian (at this stage of his life),⁶⁰ if it weren't for the fact that he was a few centuries early. But as he matures and

good, and use this knowledge and/or not use it according to necessity." Machiavelli, *Il Principe e Discorsi* (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1960), 65.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁸ Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, 25.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 29

⁶⁰ Ptolemy of Lucca seemed to have thought so as well. In his *De Regimine Principium*, Ptolemy discusses how God was favorable to Cyrus because Cyrus showed great humanity toward God's chosen people. See Ptolemy of Lucca, *De Regimine Principium: On the Government of Rulers*, translated by James M. Blythe (Philadelphia, PA :

develops the philosophical propensities mentioned above, the moral assumptions that frame his worldview are challenged one after the other.

It begins while on a trip to his grandfather's (Astyages) estate. Cyrus greatly enjoys his time there and adapts quickly even though he realizes that there are some cultural differences between his people and his grandfather's. As the trip draws to an end, Cyrus realizes that he doesn't want to leave, but would rather stay as his grandfather's ward. Although not much is made of it, his mother's (Mandane) reaction to Cyrus' demands has profound philosophical implications. Mandane is worried that Cyrus will learn a theory of justice unsuited to life back in Persia upon his return. Mandane's concern implies that justice is circumstantial and not fundamental. She expresses her reservation as follows: in Persia justice is understood to be more egalitarian than in Astyages' kingdom. She means that Cyrus' father Cambyses (and his people) take what is equal to be just. Indeed we are told earlier in the book that Cyrus' education placed great emphasis on gratitude and giving to everybody their due.⁶¹ Furthermore, Cambyses is legally accountable for his actions and governs not according to his preference but according to the law and to what the city itself takes to be its greater good. Mandane says that when Cambyses rules, "not his soul but the law is his measure,"⁶² a practice she calls the 'kingly' way. In contrast, Astyages is an absolute monarch (he is literally referred to as 'tyrant,' but it is not meant to carry negative connotation, just an indication of absolute power) and as such is not beholden to this

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 165. As I have discussed in chapter 1, Nederman does so as well; see p.14n24.

⁶¹ Ibid., 33.

⁶² Ibid., 35.

notion of justice. Rather, he aggregates resources with little or no regard to redistribution. Neither Mandane, Astyages, nor Cyrus attempts to evaluate which of the two approaches is better or truly just. They are simply taken to be different, which suggests that the three interlocutors consider justice to be determined contextually.

Cyrus, moreover, has started to express some doubts *vis-à-vis* the validity of ‘Persian justice.’ He has already realized (after being asked to rule on the issue of a stolen tunic) that to follow the letter of the law at all costs might end up landing one in uncomfortable or absurd territory. In the ‘tunic’ case, both the tunic thief and its original owner end up with a better-fitting tunic as a result of the crime, yet Cyrus is still beaten for not voting to punish the thief. This is in spite of the fact that the overall outcome of said thief’s “crime” was beneficial to all parties, including the “victim’s”.⁶³ Cyrus has respected strict property rights, but failed to give each boy their due in terms of the best-fitting tunic. As such, respect for the letter of the law ultimately fails to yield a result that respects the Persian precepts of ruling mentioned above. Additionally, the ruling style of his grandfather shows that counter-intuitive methods can sometimes yield positive results. And so, with a somewhat sophistic argument, Cyrus convinces his mother that he will not return spoiled or immodest, since Astyages’ brand of leadership (i.e., absolute rule) has successfully “taught all the Medes to have less than [he does].”⁶⁴ What the young Cyrus implies here is that living under Astyages entails some acceptance of scarcity, which renders the possibility of Cyrus’ spoilage null. Mandane is convinced and leaves Cyrus in Medea.

⁶³ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 33.

The real blow to Cyrus' worldview comes upon his return home. As they ride, Cambyses meets Cyrus on his way back to Persia and instructs his son about the demands of leadership. The gist of Cambyses' point is that leadership requires sacrifice and that the leader should always shoulder more hardship than his soldiers. Doing so will make him loved and admired by the soldiers, which will make them more obedient. But by 'sacrifice' Cambyses means making hard decisions that may hurt friends as well as enemies from time to time.⁶⁵ In short, Cyrus must learn to be "a plotter, a dissembler, a wily, a cheat, a thief, rapacious, and the sort who takes advantage of his enemies in everything."⁶⁶ Doing so makes a man not only just but also law-abiding, in Cambyses' view. Cyrus is understandably shocked and demands an explanation as to why his father went through the trouble of raising him in a spirit exactly opposite to that lesson if he had planned all along to undo that education.

Cambyses' answer is that this particular lesson is not suited to everyone. According to him, the Greeks used to teach it to all their youths, and this had the unfortunate consequence of making deceivers and dissimulators of everybody. Some unscrupulous citizens started using these tactics at the expense of their kin in the pursuit of personal gain. Therefore, says Cambyses, this lesson is now only taught to those who exhibit the intellectual maturity necessary to learn when to be and when not to be 'conventionally' good with friends and/or enemies.⁶⁷ Cambyses remains persuaded that the 'Greek lesson' is correct, despite initial decisional mistakes about the proper scope of

⁶⁵ Ibid., 55-56.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55-56.

its dispersion. If the result excuses, then it is just to deceive and steal from one's friends. In other words, Cyrus is told that his earlier reflex to attribute the right-fitting tunic to each of the boys despite the fact that the swap originated from a crime was actually correct. Unfortunately, the judge who presided over Cyrus had to beat him, presumably because Cyrus was not mature enough to learn the truth about justice yet and/or could not be seen overtly propagating this alternate theory of the right, lest Persian society devolve into the same disorder caused by the Greeks' mistake. Cyrus' father tells his son the same lesson Machiavelli tells us via Agathocles: it is not only results or intellectual and/or leadership potential that matters, but also the nature of the person taught. The knowledge to recognize the circumstances under which a leader must temporarily cease to be good is too dangerous to be put in the hands of people who have the potential to become monsters.

Cyrus and Machiavelli's *Prince*

The early chapters of the *Prince* and the *Discourses* have the same progression as Cyrus' philosophical upbringing, *sans* the Cyrus narrative. Cyrus is an intellectually curious child who is quickly inculcated with notions of the rule of law, modesty, and magnanimous behavior, moral commitments he carries with himself (despite some conflicts) up until his father's final revelation about morality and politics. Cambyses' behavior and his words suggest that he thought his son needed a foundation of strict moral commitments in order to use the revelation of moral relativism responsibly. And Machiavelli seems to agree with that.

Cyrus learns, over the course of his upbringing, one of the fundamental lessons of the *Prince*, a lesson Machiavelli may have learned over the course of his own education. According to Virginia Cox, a rhetorical treatise titled *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* circulating during the early years of Machiavelli's life, and that Machiavelli would doubtlessly have read, laid the groundwork for the (in)famous moral elasticity advocated in the *Prince* (and, to an extent, in the *Education of Cyrus*). Cox admirably shows how *Ad Herennium* advocates a shift in valuation from the morally good or desirable to interrelated considerations of reputation and security, of which the latter is always to be preferred. Thanks to Cox's work⁶⁸ it seems clear Machiavelli was

⁶⁸ Cox is not the only one who offered an analysis of the influence of Roman rhetoric on Machiavelli's work. In chapter 3 of his 1998 book *Machiavelli*, Maurizio Viroli examined the influence of Cicero's work and that of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* on Machiavelli's political theory. Viroli's analysis of the import of that tradition is radically different, and rather less compelling, than Cox's. For Cox, Machiavelli took not only a stylistic page form the *Rhetorica*, but also a philosophical one. In her reading, the author of the *Prince* is inspired formally and intellectually by the *Rhetorica*. Cox does a wonderful job of inscribing Machiavelli's moral argument in a tradition continued in *Ad Herennium*, as well as exemplifying how he also used the rhetorical tactics proposed by the work to subvert traditional humanist arguments. What Machiavelli did with *Ad Herennium*, to paraphrase Joseph Femia, is to present an unconventional message in a conventional manner. See Joseph V. Femia, *Machiavelli Revisited* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2004), 30.

Viroli, however, takes a radically different approach. It becomes apparent right at the beginning that Viroli is anxious to discredit readings of Machiavelli as both philosopher and proto-political scientist, and uses Machiavelli's clear debt to the Roman rhetorical tradition to make his case. In Viroli's eyes, Machiavelli's rhetorical proclivities imply a *de facto* incompatibility with readings of Machiavelli as author or social scientist; a proposition Viroli seems to assume is self-evident. (It is not.) Viroli's argument is convincing insofar as he shows Machiavelli as an apt writer able to use figures of speeches and draw on the rhetorical tradition to convince. However, Viroli assumes continuity between Ciceronian rhetoric and *Ad Herennium*'s, a point that Cox's work (published a year prior) has made clear is incorrect.

In fact, the great strength of Cox's argument is how it shows how Machiavelli's impressive subversive powers, inspired stylistically and intellectually by *Ad Herennium*,

convinced directly or indirectly by the rhetorical strategy of *Ad Herrenium* (pointing to the disputability of strong moral claims about proper political behavior), its argument about what is politically desirable (security), and the moral flexibility required to bring it about.⁶⁹ In fact, by bringing up Cyrus, Machiavelli makes a subtle rhetorical move of his own to intimate that his argument, and by association that of *Ad Herrenium*, go back as far as the ancient world.

Machiavelli obviously thinks that people have preconceived notions of justice and correct behavior, because this is an obvious fact of the human condition that no one really fails to grasp. Machiavelli constantly points to Christianity as the source of these assumptions about good behavior. The most famous example of this is probably the fifteenth chapter of the *Prince*, in which Machiavelli announces his desire to depart from

succeeded in breaking with the Ciceronian tradition while staying under the radar; rejecting humanist axioms in the most humanistic way. Viroli is blind to this. Because he assumes Machiavelli's rhetorical inspiration means we should read the *Prince* as a strictly rhetorical work, Viroli flip flops between two ill-fitting arguments. On the one hand Machiavelli's debt to the rhetorical tradition implies that we should neither think Machiavelli offered his advice as truths nor that his works suggest a particular vision of ethics or moral theory. On the other hand, Viroli thinks that this same debt to the rhetorical tradition visibly strengthens Machiavelli's commitment to republicanism, liberty, and justice. (It seems that Viroli thinks that commitment to these three principles have neither moral nor philosophical implications.) See Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73-113.

For a more detailed and thorough account of the inconsistencies in Viroli's view that Machiavelli's intellectual enterprise was completely antithetical to a scientific undertaking, see also Joseph V. Femia, *Machiavelli Revisited* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2004), 44-61.

⁶⁹ Virginia Cox, "Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica Ad Herrenium*: Deliberative Rhetoric in *The Prince*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28, no 4 (Winter 1997): 1128-1129; Virginia Cox, "Rhetoric and ethics in Machiavelli," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181.

kingdoms and republics that are imaginary, or never known to have existed.⁷⁰ Regardless of whether one agrees that this particular quip is aimed at Christianity's kingdom of heaven and/or Plato's *Kallipolis*, it is hard to deny that the substance of the chapter is an injunction to abandon pre-existing assumptions readers that may have had with regard to the relationship between ethics and politics.

Machiavelli devotes the early part of the *Discourses* to the idea that justice is also circumstantial rather than fixed – an idea he seems to have gotten from Cicero. In his own all-too-often glossed over account of the state of nature, Machiavelli tells us that humans formerly lived scattered throughout the globe⁷¹ and behaved like animals.⁷² As the population grew, men banded together in societies, elected the strongest and bravest as their leaders, and obeyed them out of a desire for physical protection. From this arose the early conceptions of good and bad: because everyone desired to eschew injury, any harm directed at the leader/protector generated hatred and reproach and was labeled ungrateful. As societies expanded, however, men realized that these leaders could use their superiority to harm their subjects equally as they fended off threats. In order to avoid this, people eventually created laws and institutions to which citizens and rulers were equally subject. These laws established punishment for actions against the people as well as against rulers. Citizens called the respect for these laws and the consequences of disobedience 'justice'.⁷³ After these institutions were established, they preferred rulers

⁷⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61-62.

⁷¹ Gennaro Sasso, *Studi su Machiavelli* (Napoli : Casa editrice A. Morano, 1967), 168.

⁷² Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 11-12.

⁷³ It seems likely that this account was greatly inspired by, if not lifted, from *De Oratore* and/or the first four chapters of the first book of Cicero's *De Inventione*. In this part of

who showed a propensity to obey the laws rather than one who were brave and strong, so that the likelihood that the leader would prey on citizens was reduced.⁷⁴

This passage leads me to disagree with one of the arguments recently advanced by Catherine Zuckert in her book *Machiavelli's Politics*. Zuckert proposes early on that Machiavelli's political theory is based on the premise that although human beings are weak and need to cooperate to ensure their survival,⁷⁵ they do not "accept the

the book Cicero expresses doubts that early men have been turned, unprompted from what was certainly a form of primeval savagery into the kind of people that band together to form civil societies. Cicero laughs at the idea that a "mute and voiceless wisdom" led humankind out of savagery into a society of laws. He theorizes that the appearance of rhetoric is responsible for the appearance of civilization and, with it, the concepts of justice, good and evil. To Cicero early societies were doubtlessly steered by the desires and will of the strongest and most barbarous, and that only an equally strong and appealing speech could have ever tamed the savage impulses of these early "rulers." Only a speech "at the same time powerful and entrancing" could have convinced the strongest to submit to "justice without violence." What differs between the accounts of Machiavelli and Cicero is that Cicero's account of man's development prioritizes the rule of law is a story of two competing types of strength, physical and intellectual, that eventually result in the appearance of civil society and the rule of law. In Cicero, rhetoric tames barbarity. In Machiavelli's account a group of people who are clearly at a disadvantage engage in intellectual manipulation in order to create a narrative meant to be internalized by the potentially threatening elements of civil society, effectively neutering them. In this sense Machiavelli certainly lifts his account of the state of nature from Cicero, but he also anticipates Nietzsche's concept of slave morality.

For more, see Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Inventione; De Optimo Genere; Oratorium Topica*, translated by H.M. Hubbell (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 3-11; Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 84; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989). For more on Cicero's *De Officiis* in relation to Machiavelli's *Prince*, see Marcia L. Colish. "Cicero's *De Officiis* and Machiavelli's *Prince*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 80-93.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11-12

⁷⁵ Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 36.

government of others gladly or freely.”⁷⁶ She argues that government, insofar as Machiavelli is concerned, never appears naturally or spontaneously. This seems to me to be in direct contradiction to Machiavelli’s account of the origins of government in the *Discourses* that was discussed above. It seems to me that it is precisely because human beings are weak that government appears spontaneously. Without the cooperation that is made necessary by our weaknesses, we need to band in groups and form political societies. In Zuckert’s account, governments come into being as a result of the desire of the powerful to dominate, and the internal rhythm of societies is set by the conflict created when the weaker elements of said societies devote their resources to not being oppressed. But this account clashes with Machiavelli’s. In his version of origins of government, the roles of oppressor and oppressed are quickly reversed as the oppressed eventually gain control of the narrative about justice and start to select rulers who comply with this moral invention. Thus, Zuckert completely overlooks the importance of myth-making and moral manipulation in her explanation of the power dynamics that govern political societies in Machiavelli’s philosophy.

Zuckert’s reading seems simplistic in that regard. Much of the discussion surrounding control and power dynamics within polities in Machiavelli’s work has centered on an understanding of elites that has been articulated almost solely in terms of landed elites. When contemporary Machiavelli scholars think of the ‘great’ or *grandi*, the oppressive side of the perpetual struggle between groups of humans, they think strictly of material control. According to them, the *grandi*’s tools of oppression come

⁷⁶ Ibid., 56.

from their abundance of financial resources and physical means of coercion. And it certainly does, but only to some extent. There is more to it. Very little thought is ever given to the possibility that Machiavelli also conceived of oppression in terms of control over the governing moral paradigms setting the boundaries of acceptable behavior within communities. There is no doubt in my mind that Machiavelli thought the Christian ethical paradigms were a much more potent tool of oppression than the pope's army or the Medici's wealth. Ironically (and in a somewhat self-contradictory manner), scholars who dismiss the centrality of philosophy (and its power) to Machiavelli's political thought, such as Zuckert herself, are also those who tend to argue that he vehemently disliked Christianity and its effects. Machiavelli's brief imagination of the origins of civil societies tell us quite clearly that the real tool of oppression and control are the dominant notions of good and evil adopted by groups of individuals. Therefore we are left to wonder at the possibility that there is another caste of *grandi*, one that is not simply the landed nobility and elites who have the physical means to oppress the people and guide policy according to their wishes, but also another, like perhaps priests and philosophers, whose influence is more insidious because their means of coercion are internalized by the people.

The socially constructed nature of justice also features preeminently in the famous Wool Guild speech of *Florentine Histories* 3.14. One of the most fascinating aspects of the speech is that its - anonymous, probably entirely fictional - author makes the same points as those from the *Discourses* above, but backwards. (Note Machiavelli once again using invention to push a useful - if uncomfortable - idea.) The imaginary

leader starts his speech from civil society and ends with primal discord. According to him, it is self-evident that he and his fellow agitators should refrain from taking up arms and continuing their crime spree-turned-uprising. He continues, saying that the poverty in which they existed had the advantage of safety over the danger that their desire of gain now finds them in. The problem, unfortunately, is that arms have already been taken up and discord already sown; safety not being an option any more, the orator invites his audience to look past the illusion of a rigid social hierarchy and lawfulness rooted in justice. The threat of harm under which their actions now put them forces the scales to fall from their eyes. They realize that the only way to eschew punishment is to rise to the top of the social order. Now that weapons have been drawn, the social constructs that ensured everyone's safety are no longer useful, and the speech-giver is no longer careless to underline their arbitrariness. The myth of a social hierarchy based on ancestry is false; men are all equally ancient. Pretension that there exists any other meaningful difference between human beings is fraudulent as well, since everyone can see that stripped, i.e., without man-made clothing and apparatus, everyone is alike. The peasant dressed in the noble's clothes, and with the noble's money, is unrecognizable from the original noble himself.

According to the Wool Guild speech-giver, the pressure of necessity acts as a threshold that modifies the moral value of a given action, a notion that is repeated over and over in the *Prince*. While this member of the Wool Guild is incorrect about the fame or infamy incurred by the methods of conquerors, he is, however, correct, from a Machiavellian standpoint, about necessity (the concept) and about the value of social

constructs once they cease to ensure one's safety. Although it was their own fault, the Wool Guild members are now in a situation where the rule of law, and conceptions of justice and divine retribution, are of no use to them anymore. The Christian Hell, which keeps other men in check, is a concept they can no longer afford to fear, since their immediate security is at stake. In their extreme peril, they are thrown back in the Machiavellian 'pseudo state of nature' discussed above, and as such the Christian myths *de facto* lose their social usefulness. The speaker, while he recognizes the usefulness of the myths to other non-criminal members of society, also realizes that their communal survival now hinges on transcending them.⁷⁷

In other words, Machiavelli teaches his readers, like Mandane did Cyrus, that the notions of good, bad, evil and justice are probably not rooted in objective truths. What we observe from this passage is a strictly need-motivated account of the origin of justice and social organization stemming strictly from men's fundamental desire not to be hurt. Machiavelli follows in the footsteps of Cicero once again. Men choose the strongest leaders and start calling the action of placating them 'good' and that of not doing so 'evil' or 'bad.' As men realized that their leaders' might was a double-edged sword, laws were put in place to ensure that the rulers only directed their might at outside threats. Then they began calling the respect of those laws 'justice,' and labeling the action of being just as 'good' or 'noble.'

⁷⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Laura F. Banfield (Princeton: University Press, 1988), 121-124.

Machiavelli's account of the origins of goodness, laws and justice paints the people as collectively smarter than the three-brains classification discussed earlier. In this account of government's origins, the people show themselves to be surprisingly creative in their endeavor to avoid injury. What we have, in fact, is an account of the development of politically expedient, normative inventions aimed strictly at harm-avoidance. That the people would first select the strong and brave for protection and leadership positions and then invent legal accountability for all members of the polity shows some level of instrumental wisdom. Even if the interval between step one (raising strong protectors to leadership positions), step two (inventing legal accountability and extending it to community heads), and step three (selecting leaders according to their respect of the law) may have taken as long as the time between early ancient civilizations.

Unfortunately, it seems that we have lost sight of the true origins of government and the implications they should have on our understanding of good, bad, evil and justice as concepts. Machiavelli's annoyance with our habit of considering the deontological precepts of Christianity or the virtue ethics of Platonism as rooted in objective truth culminates in the fifteenth chapter of the *Prince*. There is so much confusion about the origins of the good and the bad that concepts that were meant to facilitate our continued survival are now actively working against it: someone who is considered 'good' is headed toward ruin, the exact thing that the concept of good, Machiavelli thinks, was invented to avoid. Like a later-day Cambyses, Machiavelli meets us halfway through his book to teach successful princes, if they are smart enough

and mature enough to understand, how *not* to be good in order to save ourselves. To bring security and well-being to ourselves and those we care about, we must, like Cyrus, abandon our previous moral assumptions.

According to this interpretation, Machiavelli is a teacher of evil in more ways than one: he suggests not only that Christian doctrine might be deleterious to our continued survival, but also that the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘justice’ are entirely instrumental. My interpretation, however, differs from Strauss’. To Strauss Machiavelli is a teacher of evil in the sense that he either accepts contemporary Renaissance morality and still argues for a contrary set of principles for political behavior, or at least recognizes the existence of a set of deontological principles that he thinks his prescribed behavior will inevitably infringe upon. In Strauss’s interpretation, Machiavelli is self-aware and still decides to move forward with his moral transgression.

For me, Machiavelli is only a teacher of evil in a perspectival sense. To propose that what we call goodness and justice are just politically expedient inventions conducive to eschewing physical harm is not evil from the perspective of the inventor. It is only evil from the perspective of the people who believe that their moral commitments are rooted in a higher objective authority. Deontological commitments logically entail that any different teaching is in one way or another a ‘teaching of evil.’ From the perspective of Christianity, teachers of Islam and Judaism are teachers of evil in at least some minor respect when they attempt to inculcate their adherents with that portion of their doctrine that does not fit with the Christian one. So, of course, someone who questions the truth-value of Christianity by way of his account of the origin of justice is

a teacher of evil. But much like the teachers of different ethical theories, that same person is not going to be evil from their own perspective, although they doubtlessly will understand why they are understood to be by others.

Human beings, through time, have been confused about the truth. In fact, anything that belongs to a higher level of abstraction than “pain is bad, avoid pain” seems to be impossible to agree upon collectively. This in itself is not so bad, since survival is a powerful motivator and has led us to band together into communities. The governance of these communities rapidly became problematic due to the hazardous mix of human ignorance, human stubbornness and human stupidity. Plato, and good leaders like Numa, realized that the only way to implement good policy smoothly was to appeal to an authority that citizens would not contest. This appeal to supernatural authority came in the form of lies, or ‘myths.’ These myths are strictly tools of political control. They are moral frameworks, i.e., sets of behavioral guidelines attributed to a higher authority, put in place to keep our collective fear of being harmed by our peers from becoming reality. As such they are not an “expression of the deeply rooted beliefs and fears of ordinary people”⁷⁸ as much as they are inventions meant to prevent these fears from materializing. Legal accountability and divine judgment carry with them the promise that if anyone harms a fellow citizen, that person will, immediately, be harmed by the community in return and subsequently punished by God after leaving this world.

⁷⁸ Alison Brown, “Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 167.

Unfortunately, these myths crystallized and it seems that many of us forgot the origin of ethics and conventional morality: useful lies aimed at preserving social order, security and well-being. In fact, we became so invested in those lies that we insist on perpetuating them although they are no longer conducive to security and well-being. These myths have become harmful.

Enter Machiavelli, who teaches us that not everyone can learn the truth about conventional morality, and that in fact not everyone should learn it. Learning ‘not to be good’ entails a set of responsibilities that can only be trusted to people who have a certain nobility of character, i.e., people who do not display a love of gain (to put it in Cambyses’ words) or a disproportionate propensity toward cruelty (remember Agathocles). Then Machiavelli enjoins us to turn to classical philosophy via the metaphor of hunting in the *Prince*. By paying attention to the examples of Alexander and Aristotle as well as Xenophon’s Cyrus, we learn that philosophy helps smooth over the harmful elements of these myths that make human cohabitation possible, not unlike Socrates’ proposition to ‘amend’ some Homeric poems in the second book of the *Republic*. From Xenophon we learn that simulation and dissimulation are not in themselves bad. They are in fact as inherent in human society and human behavior as our propensity to avoid pain. The well-educated man, however, is he who remains aware of the mythical nature of society’s moral foundations and is ready to infringe on them if need be, all the while recognizing their necessity. Machiavellian pedagogy directs a few highly capable human beings toward philosophy so that they learn this and gain the

ability to sort the good from the bad myths, i.e., those conducive to human prosperity versus those noxious to communal harmony.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I fully realize how the story this dissertation tells is controversial and counterintuitive. Its aim has been to demonstrate that Machiavelli and Plato are aligned in their opinion that arts and literature should exist in the city under the tutelage of philosophy. That agreement stems from the same place in their respective thought: that the people may not be capable of recognizing good policymaking even when the truth of a proposition is presented to them. This, in turn, leads them both to the conclusion that certain ‘noble lies’ may be necessary for good governance and the implementation of good policies. In Plato’s work Socrates carries the mantle of noble liar. In Machiavelli’s it is Numa -- a figure he salvages from Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s *Republic* – who does. Following the way in which Machiavelli tried to solve the puzzle of low mass intelligence leads us straight into his discussion of princely education, which, Machiavelli signals to us, involves philosophical education. This is conveyed by a) the way in which Machiavelli is subtly inscribing himself in a tradition of writers like Plato, Xenophon, and Ficino, who used hunting as a symbol for philosophy, and b) Machiavelli’s invitation to his readers to turn to Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*.

Proving Machiavelli to be unsympathetic to Ficino’s brand of Platonism and to his thought does not in itself produce a scholarly paradigm shift. What is worth noting is that Ficino’s interpretive largesse sometimes draws attention to elements of Platonic philosophy he seemed to have misunderstood (or intentionally misconstrued). Those

elements, free of Ficino's modifications, appear to be reconcilable with some key aspects of Machiavelli's philosophy. In fact, they help uncover unprecedented aspects of Machiavelli's thought, like the centrality of philosophical education to princely training. Catherine Zuckert is right when she argues that Machiavelli staunchly disagreed with Ficino's brand of Platonism and Socratic philosophy. The question I have tried to answer here is whether we can reasonably believe that Machiavelli took Ficino to be a trustworthy representative of Platonic thought. What I have discovered is that the answer is no. It is a stretch, as the literature did up to this point, to assume with certainty that Machiavelli has no intellectual kinship with Plato without controlling for the presence of Florentine Neo-Platonism in that picture.

We have to ask if Machiavelli was taken to be so hostile to Plato because of the distorted picture he received of it from the Florentine Neo-Platonists, or if he himself understood Plato to be an advocate of these things regardless of the background presence of Ficino's commentary. It is possible that Machiavelli thought Ficino to be an accurate interpreter of Plato. The extent of that we will probably never know for lack of direct discussions of Ficino in Machiavelli's writings. The best we can do is to put their works side by side and highlight areas of agreement and disagreement, and try to infer clues from what we know of the intellectual context of Renaissance Florence, which is what this dissertation tried to accomplish.

The conclusion of these efforts is that we can reasonably assume that the "Ficinian" picture of Plato and the argumentative work behind it were at the very least somewhat familiar to Machiavelli. Because he did not express in his writing a clear

stance toward Platonism, we might never get to the bottom of this. Consequently part of my argument will always be up for historical and exegetical contestation, or at the very least historically informed skepticism. It remains, however, that there are simply so many important overlaps between Machiavelli's and Plato's work that we need now to move toward an understanding of Machiavelli's philosophy as one that entertains a complex and nuanced relationship with Plato's - be it incidental or intentional - and not simply one of outright and complete dismissal.

The fact that Machiavelli disagrees with Ficino, to speak colloquially, is hardly newsworthy (or even dissertation-worthy). It goes without saying and the scholarship in general is correct in that respect.¹ What is important is that over the course of fleshing out the details of these disagreements, we stumble upon moments of topical overlap - such as the discussions of sensory knowledge or Numa's significance, or Socrates' condemnation of poetry and literature in the *polis* - where Machiavelli is directly positioning himself vis-à-vis Ficino and, thus, Plato. That line of inquiry does yield some interesting contributions to the field. The salient contributions of this project are the following: 1) Machiavelli thought philosophical education to be a necessary element of princely education, 2) Machiavelli's famous historical determinism comes from a pre-established tradition of Humanist scholars who were in competition over resources with another branch of humanism, the Neo-Platonists; 3) Machiavelli's 'non-philosophical' writings can be seen as examples of Renaissance *fabulae*; 4) Christianity is, in Machiavelli's view, a type of 'noble lie' that has outlived its usefulness; 5) Machiavelli's

¹ Andrea Guidi, *Un Segretario militante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), 82.

view of political education is partly meant to address the problem of low mass intelligence.

This work tries to establish, in part, how Machiavelli's theory of low mass intelligence as a political problem has been understudied. When I started this dissertation, I could not imagine how sadly relevant Machiavelli's insight into this problem would be by the time I finished it. Who can doubt now, in an age where policies that have been time and again demonstrated to be deleterious to political health (like economic protectionism or climate change denial) remain alive, that there is a tendency for truth to drown in a sea of conflicting, uninformed opinions? The recent political developments in American political life have seen some resurgence of discussions about Plato's and Machiavelli's insights in public discourse. Since the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency, hardly a day goes by without a pop culture take on Machiavelli's thought telling us on social media that he would not have been surprised or alarmed by the advent of fake news. What such takes unfortunately miss is that manipulation of information is an effective tool in the hands of both good and bad princes alike. Without a philosophically savvy and publicly-minded prince, the power to craft effective and convincing political myths is just another tool for oppression.

Machiavellian lessons for today's world

The recent election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, with its accompanying controversies regarding the dissemination of 'fake news' and the deliberate, unapologetic abandonment of fact-based discourse, has generated quite a lot

of unrest (if not outright panic) in academic and journalistic circles alike. Scholars² and pundits now lament in unison the advent of ‘post-truth politics.’ The discovery of knowledge, its creation, and its dissemination are now at best ignored and at worst received with anger from the very people educators and journalists like to think they work for.

Students of philosophy may wonder if this era of the ‘death of expertise’ is not the result of Nietzsche’s idea that there are no facts, only interpretations, incubated at length in the bosom of a society where the spirit of egalitarianism has undermined appeals to expert authority because it generates the illusion that everyone’s opinions or ideas are as good as their neighbors’ (as per Tocqueville).³ These ideas have loomed heavily behind the public discourse of the American populists and their followers (although they seldom have been attributed to their rightful owners). Citizens of all stripes are becoming increasingly skeptical of the benefits of university education and of the opinions articulated by the expert professors who venture into the public spotlight.

The left perceives these university-affiliated public intellectuals as being right-wing skills, while the right sees them as being left-wing propagandists. To members of both these groups, every intellectual output can be reduced to an expression of bias deliberately disguised as truth. In their eyes, professors - especially those who gravitate to the humanities and/or work for public institutions – have a dual nature. For this reason

² See Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Daniel Drezner, *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17-18.

they are simultaneously criticized for being useless idealists who live at the expense of the state and shameless corruptors of the youth who aim to mold the political allegiances of future generations in the image of their own arbitrary and self-serving convictions.

Without saying that higher education and professorial expertise are in crisis, I would suggest that we ask ourselves about the future of social scientific and humanistic education in this ‘post-truth’ world. If we assume the veracity of the premise that nothing is indeed true (or at least that the process of reconciliation and persuasion cannot start from outside this framework), how can we claim that there is value in the socio-political education academics provide? What ought we to teach that will be received without hostility while still sowing the seeds of intellectual growth and healthy political discourse? My answer to this question is in a sense not really mine; it is Machiavelli’s. According to his philosophy, not only are social scientific, philosophical and humanistic educations still valuable in a world such as ours, they are indispensable if we are to maintain liberty and the rule of law, aspects of political life he thought essential to the preservation of security and well-being, the two chief goals of all good polities.

As I have argued, Machiavelli’s thought tackles this issue. Machiavelli foresaw the problem of the legislative and executive chaos generated by political and moral allegiances in competition in a world where true knowledge is either unobtainable by most (for lack of intellectual acumen) or simply nonexistent. In such a world, where a multiplicity of opinions regarding the good is paired with the relative impossibility of political persuasion, the lasting modes and orders Machiavelli sees as the hallmark of competent leadership are incredibly difficult to establish, let alone to maintain.

There are additional questions raised by the existence of this problem. Is the acquisition of true knowledge possible or even politically relevant in the eyes of Machiavelli? In essence, we must ask ourselves again, as Hannah Arendt did in 1967, if truth matters to politics.⁴ Like Arendt's, Machiavelli's answer is a resounding no. But in that case, what kind of knowledge (if any) is important for political leadership and good governance? The answer is: prudential knowledge that allows political actors to anticipate the direction in which fortune will push them.⁵ While philosophy is necessary to acquire said knowledge, this type of philosophizing is not contemplative, nor is the knowledge acquired transcendental or eternal. Philosophy is a stepping-stone into the world of civic engagement. It is also a tool necessary to the best possible completion of political endeavors.⁶ Machiavelli forces us to think about the value of knowledge and the relevance of debates between competing moral political claims where there is a high probability that none of it can objectively be described as 'true' or 'Good.' It is a world where philosophy nonetheless retains vital importance.

Machiavelli, with the help of carefully manipulated historical examples, images, metaphors, and calculated references to ancient political thought, enjoins his readers to abandon a fruitless philosophical search for the good in order to solve this problem. Rather, Machiavelli suggest political leaders circumvent the problem of popular idiocy

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006): 223-259.

⁵ See Benedetto Croce, *Teoria et storia della storiografia* (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1989), 261; Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York : Russell & Russell, 1960), 235.

⁶ Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 70-75.

and ethical confusion by harnessing the power of the images and myths that make up religion and common-sense morality (when they are healthy, i.e., conducive to survival and growth) without entertaining any illusion as to their truthfulness in order to implement good modes and orders. While Machiavelli is obviously hostile to the life of philosophical contemplation for its own sake, philosophical competence and philosophical knowledge have a crucial role to play in his political philosophy.

While further work is needed, it would be fruitful to further develop how Machiavelli's theories about knowledge acquisition, human intelligence and human intellectual potential can help us navigate the so-called 'post-truth world' heralded by the election of Donald Trump. Machiavelli's blueprint for political education, and the defense of philosophy and the humanities implied in it, has the advantage of working within the argumentative framework according to which "nothing is true," and convincingly establishing a hierarchy of knowledge that stresses the importance of philosophical, political and civic education.

Future research

The possibility that Machiavelli subscribed to the vision that works of fiction should be philosophically loaded demands that we expand our scholarship beyond the *Discourses*, *Prince* and *Florentine Histories*. If Machiavelli's more literary works are indeed *fabulae*, then we can assume they can help us deepen our understanding of Machiavelli's philosophy. Certainly the occasional article or book chapter discusses

Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, and, as we have seen, *l'Asino*⁷ has generally made its way into the scholarship of political theorists. The *Life of Castruccio Castrani* has been minimally covered, too.⁸ Cary Nederman is one of the only scholars to have considered the *Tercets on Fortune* in his work,⁹ and many biographers have spent time pouring over Machiavelli's correspondence. Why not broaden our research to include works like Machiavelli's two other plays and his short story? There is no reason to exclude these works in our inquiries while we include all the other mentioned above. Yet there is still very little discussion of *Clizia* and *The Woman from Andros* and absolutely none on *Belfagor the Devil who Married*.

Granted, Catherine Zuckert has already begun this work. In her analysis of the play *Clizia*, she argues that Machiavelli criticizes the Platonic notion of *eros*. The message of the play is that sexual and transcendental *eros* should be mitigated by lowlier worldly concerns for reputation and wealth. *Clizia*, in this sense, is a work that engages

⁷ Ed King, "Machiavelli's *L'Asino*: Troubled Centaur into Conscious Ass," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41, no 2 (June 2008): 279-301; Diego von Vacano, *The Art of Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Paul A. Rahe, "In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli's Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 28, no 1 (Spring 2007): 30-55; Miguel Vatter, "Of Asses and Nymphs: Machiavelli, Platonic Theology and Epicureanism in Florence" *forthcoming*.

⁸ Joseph C. MacFarland, "Machiavelli's Imagination of Excellent Men: An Appraisal of the Lives of Cosimo de Medici and Castruccio Castracani," *American Political Science Review* 93:1 (March 1999): 133-146; Peter E. Bondanella, "Castruccio Castracani: Machiavelli's Archetypal Prince," *Italica* 49:3 (Autumn 1972): 302-314; Catherine Zuckert, "The Life of Castruccio Castracani : Machiavelli as Literary Artist, Historian, Teacher and Philosopher," *History of Political Thought* vol. 31, no 4 (Winter 2010): 577-600.

⁹ Cary J Nederman, "Amazing Grace: God, Fortune and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no 4 (October 1999): 617-638.

Plato's *Symposium*. The core of its meaning is that the "root of the difference" between Socrates and Machiavelli is their relationship to that transcendental *eros*.¹⁰

This analysis should be extended to all three plays. The plays, as well as the short story *Belfagor the Devil who Married*, may be inscribed in the tradition of the Renaissance *fabulae*, i.e., philosophically loaded works of literary fiction. In this case, the four *fabulae* are used by Machiavelli to convey criticism of the Platonic notion that *eros* is the spark and fuel of our pursuit of wisdom. Machiavelli seems to be telling his readers that the Platonic *eros* is more harmful than helpful in our quest for knowledge, security and well-being.

All of Machiavelli's plays tell the story of one or more lovers driven by their desire to obtain the attention of a woman. In the *Mandragola*, Callimaco seeks the attention of Lucrezia, a married woman who is desperate to conceive a child with her husband Nicia. In *Clizia*, an old man named Nicomaco competes with his son in an attempt to have intercourse with Clizia, a young woman he has kept as his ward for most of her life. In *The Woman from Andros*, a young man named Panfilo, who is cast as an example of Aristotelian moderation, strives to get out of a loveless arranged marriage in order to be with another woman, one whom he loves and has already impregnated out of wedlock. All of these men feel the pull of *eros*. In accordance with the tale of Diotima, all of the protagonists of Machiavelli's plays exemplify the Platonic narrative according to which *eros* is the child of Need and Resource. They all discover themselves to be

¹⁰ Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 364.

profoundly distressed by the need they feel to reach their goal, and all of them become surprisingly resourceful and devious in their quests.

Unfortunately for them, none of their efforts leads to enlightenment. To the contrary, their unbridled *eros* has almost the opposite effect. Nicomaco ends the play under the threat of public humiliation, shamed into subservience by his wife. Callimaco does get what he wants – to have intercourse with Lucrezia – but as readers we have every right to wonder how ‘happy’ that ending really is. Lucrezia has been tricked into having sex with a man she did not want to be with, and it is unclear if she agrees to continue doing so because she likes Callimaco or because she fears exposure and dishonor. Callimaco has to continue to have a clandestine relationship with the woman he desires, and poor dumb Nicia has been made a cuckold. The child he so desperately wanted, when it comes, will most likely not be his.

The only exception to these pathetic stories is Panfilo. *The Woman from Andros* is a more subversive jab at *eros*, in the sense that most of its characters do exhibit that mix of need and resourcefulness that love generates. It quickly becomes clear as the play goes on that although Panfilo and his friends will eventually prevail, there is no real distinction between them and their antagonists (who are their parents). Everyone is equally resourceful and conniving, and the “erotically motivated” protagonists of the play have no comparative advantage or competitive edge. Panfilo wants to wed Glicerio, but Cremete and Simo (Panfilo’s father) want to see him wed to Cremete’s daughter, much to the chagrin of Carino, Panfilo’s friend. As the play unfolds from act three to act four the reader realizes that the young men in the throes of *eros* are at no particular

advantage *vis-à-vis* their elders, who are not. Every member of every camp deploys treasures of wit and trickery in the hopes of achieving their goal. Therefore we are forced to contemplate the possibility that what Plato had attributed to love, Machiavelli shows is only a consequence of self-interest. Diotima's mistake, in Machiavelli's eyes, is to have mistaken *eros* for something greater and nobler than simply a more palatable form of self-interest. Machiavelli is laughing at us - and the Socrates of the *Symposium* - through his characters, by making their frankly disturbing actions acceptable on account of having been done in the name of love. None of Machiavelli's tales of *eros* led any of his protagonists, to paraphrase the *Symposium*, from beautiful bodies to the idea of beauty, to love of wisdom. It would be interesting to expand Zuckert's analysis of *Clizia* as a commentary on Platonic *eros* from an angle where all the plays are a type of *fabulae* critical of that notion.

Belfagor the Devil who Married has even more of the accoutrements of a reversed *Symposium*. A little bit of scene setting is necessary. The story tells the tale of Belfagor, a demon from hell who is sent by his peers to investigate a particular aspect of the human condition. Hell's judges are starting to have some doubts with regards to the justness of their sentences because every other man who comes before them claims the bad actions he has committed have been perpetrated on account of his wife. The denizens of hell collectively decide to investigate that claim and send Belfagor as their emissary to earth, where he is to take human form and be subject to human needs and passions.

Belfagor takes the appearance of Roderigo, a rich Florentine nobleman (hell has sent him over with a sizeable but limited expense account) returning from years of living abroad and looking to marry. He meets and falls in love with a woman named Onesta. The narrative is clear that his love for her is honest. As a result of it, he spends all of his resources setting up his wife's family in business and marrying away his sisters-in-law into good families. Eventually, his wife reveals herself to have an awful character and Roderigo progressively loses all his money as well as most of the devils that came up to earth with him to help him in his quest. Roderigo eventually incurs a significant amount of debt and flees from Florence.

With his debtors in hot pursuit, Roderigo is hidden away by a nearby farmer named Gianmatteo, to whom he also reveals himself as Belfagor. In exchange for his help, Belfagor promises him that he will possess the womenfolk of rich nobles and only leave on Gianmatteo's summons, thereby securing a hefty payday for the peasant. Belfagor honors his promise and first possesses the daughter of Messer Amadei, and after that the daughter of Charles, the King of Naples. He then goes on to possess the daughter of Charles VII, the King of France, but this time refuses to leave, in an attempt to doom Gianmatteo to death by hanging because of his incompetence (Belfagor is a demon, after all). Gianmatteo prevails: he manages to convince Belfagor that the wife he left hell to marry, Onesta, heard of his whereabouts and was on her way to get him back, which prompts Belfagor to scurry back to hell. Despite the obvious impossibility of that occurrence – we have no indication Roderigo revealed himself as Belfagor to Onesta –

the possibility that Gianmatteo is telling the truth is enough to make Belfagor cut his mission short and go away forever.

Machiavelli's story touches on many themes central to this dissertation. Belfagor's trip seems along a weirdly upside-down version of Diotima's ladder. Belfagor starts from a divine place. He was an archangel who eventually fell. Through him Machiavelli intimates that there is a share of knowledge that is inaccessible even to supernatural entities. This is a world in which they are in charge of judging the ethical worth of human actions, yet they ignore everything about the powerful human motivations behind these actions, such as, in this case, love. Contra Plato, love has nothing divine about it in this world. In fact, it is so earthly and human that good and evil supernatural beings alike ignore everything about it.

Prompted by love, Belfagor does ascend to higher realms, although it is from the depths of hell onto earth and not from earth into the divine realm of Platonic forms. In a fictional world in which heaven (and God) is real, Machiavelli implies that *eros* is just enough to make one rise from the depths of damnation to everyone else's level, more or less. If anything, Belfagor, as Roderigo, discovers that love is more of a handicap than an asset. His wife alienates all of his servants, including the devils under his command who came up from hell with him in order to help in his quest. His affection for his wife clouds his judgment and leads him to make irresponsible financial decisions, splurging to make her happy, maintaining the appearance of wealth, but getting into debt. Like Nicomaco, Nicia and Callimaco, Roderigo is inhibited by his love for a woman, not

inspired by the inherent nobility of his feelings to turn to philosophical knowledge. In this case knowledge of human affairs would have been useful to avoid this pitfall.

It is true that knowledge of love and its potential dangers could have helped our protagonist here. But as he makes Roderigo suffer typically earthly ills as a result of his feelings, Machiavelli is re-appropriating *eros* by painting it as a strictly human impulse, not a divine one. In that sense Belfagor seems to provide additional evidence of Zuckert's thesis about the dangers of unchecked *eros*.

Also interesting about Belfagor is that he seems to reaffirm Machiavelli's contempt for the Catholic Church. When Belfagor possesses his first victim, we are told that he made her reveal the hidden sins of many but also to speak Latin and debate philosophy. In addition to this, the holy artifacts brought to save the first possessed woman from Belfagor have no effect and are made ridiculous by him in their inefficiency. The Catholic Church is incapable of chasing evil away, something we imagine to be within its purview, if not its main task. Evidently, Machiavelli is poking fun at the Catholic establishment by making erudition the mark of evil. In a multi-layered jab at the Church, Machiavelli has Belfagor manifest the possession of the Amadei daughter by making her speak the scholarly language of the time, a language that is also that of the Church, the scholastics, and the Neo-Platonists, all Machiavelli's intellectual opponents.¹¹ The Amadei recognize the mark of evil when their daughter

¹¹ We are told Belfagor possesses the daughter of Louis VII of France, who lived 1120 to 1180. Therefore, we can deduce that the tale is set in the 12th century. I do not wish to get ahead of myself and assert that it is not a coincidence, but interestingly, the 12th century marks the beginning of the resurgence of the Neo-Platonists that would culminate into the founding of the Platonic Academy of Florence.

starts to participate in the debates of these philosophers. Machiavelli is not so subtly accusing the Catholic Church of anti-intellectualism by associating love of knowledge with moral depravity.

All of this is to say that the work done to situate Machiavelli with regard to Plato has only just begun. For decades now, the field has been content to assume there was no relevant line of inquiry worth pursuing. Machiavelli's critique of Plato could be boiled down to a simple all-out dismissal, with no nuance. I hope to have shown that this is not the case. Further work will be needed to examine how topics important to both thinkers, such as imagination or learning by imitation, add to the project begun in this dissertation.

What did come out of this dissertation is a new contribution to the debate regarding the status of Machiavelli as a philosopher. In her recent article "Machiavelli: A Socratic?," Catherine Zuckert examines that question through a comparative study of two books, Leo Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and Erica Benner's *Machiavelli's Ethics*. She concludes, alongside Strauss, that Machiavelli is a "political philosopher" and not a philosopher largely understood, and definitely not a thinker of the Socratic or Platonic persuasion, i.e., in the sense that he thought there was a real possibility for thinking men to live a life outside the political sphere.¹²

This begs the question of whether or not the essential quality of a "Socratic" or "Platonist" is the possession of an intellectual commitment to the idea that a life of contemplation outside the *polis* is truly possible. I have some doubts about this. It seems more appropriate to me to say that Machiavelli proposes philosophical notions and

¹² Catherine Zuckert, "Machiavelli: A Socratic?," *Perspectives on Political Science* 47, no 1 (November 2017): 34-35.

axioms, some of which are compatible with Socratic and Platonic philosophy broadly understood, and some not.

Undeniably the locus of Machiavelli's philosophical enterprise was to achieve a certain political effect. But in doing so he proposes a philosophy of history based on a comprehensive theory of human nature and political behavior. He starts with a point of agreement with Plato's Socrates: that lies may be necessary to implement policy. But he disagrees with Socrates's conclusion that these policies should and can be based on some kind of transcendental and accessible truth(s). Machiavelli's doubts about the real possibility that humans can acquire a type of moral knowledge led him to propose the more readily achievable goals of security and well-being, a fundamental element of which is freedom (or at least freedom from oppression).

Socrates and Plato did not simply describe men as they *should* be, they may have seriously believed that men *could* be virtuous enough to implement the policies needed for the city and the philosophers to live harmoniously. Machiavelli clearly did not think *kallipolis* could come into being and seemingly believed that Plato seriously thought it could. In that sense they may differ philosophically. Yet Machiavelli and Plato thought philosophy to be an essential part of political education and that philosophers could be effective and positive political influences. And they seem to agree that there exists some tri-partite stratification of human beings as it relates to their potential for knowledge. Yet the virtuous man of Machiavelli's philosophy possesses a virtue intrinsically tied to politics, while Plato's doesn't.

Is this sufficient to say that Machiavelli was a strictly “political” philosopher? I don’t think so. His political philosophy has for its foundation a fundamentally apolitical view of ethics. In a way that anticipates Nietzsche, it seems that Machiavelli thought that the existence and knowledge of some objective truth was less important than the myths we can create to reach more immediately attainable goods. Machiavelli isn’t waiting for an *übermensch*, but he is hoping that a sufficiently intelligent, philosophically-educated man can realize the import of the inhuman and apolitical forces of fortune and necessity. He hopes that this prince will understand, like Cyrus, that this means that some rules of conventional morality, which may be an illusion anyway, will need to be bent subtly in order to achieve security and well-being. Machiavelli’s political philosophy only realizes itself after he articulates his more strictly philosophical doubts about the existence or, at the very least, attainability of transcendental moral knowledge. In this sense he is undeniably not a Socratic, but also not a strictly “political” philosopher.

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