

**MACHIAVELLI AND MODERNITY: THE STRENGTH OF JUSTICE;  
Thoughts on Machiavelli's *Prince*\***

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*Whoever in his Empire is tyed to no other Rules than those of his own Will and Lust, must either be a Saint or else a very Devil incarnate; or if he be neither of these, both his Life and his Reign are like to be very short; for whosoever takes upon him so execrable an Employment as to rule Men against the Laws of Nature and of Reason, must turn all topsie turvy, and never stick at any thing, for if once he halt he will fall and never rise again...*

*[Machiavelli to Zenobio, 1 Apr. 1537]*

*by Henry Neville*

Machiavelli spoke the Christian truth, according to the English republican, Henry Neville, writing a century after Machiavelli. In his “Machiavelli’s Vindication,” adopting Machiavelli’s persona, Neville responded to three charges against Machiavelli.<sup>1</sup> The first charge was that “I insinuate my great Affection to the Democratical Government” and incite the subjects of monarchy to rebellion. The second charge was that of “Slighting and Vilifying the Church as Author of all the Misgovernment in the World” and promoting atheism. The third charge was that “I teach Monarchs all the execrable Vilanies that can be invented.”

The central charge, impiety, echoes Athens’ main charge against Socrates, while the first and third charges echo the minor charges against Socrates—corrupting the youth (undermining their loyalty to the regime) and spawning tyrants. Machiavelli’s defense, therefore, is as important to his philosophy (though it was penned by Neville) as Socrates’ defenses were to his philosophy (though they were penned by Xenophon and Plato). Interestingly, however, Socrates based his claim of innocence on his ignorance, while Neville founded Machiavelli’s claim of innocence on Machiavelli’s knowledge.

Whether Machiavelli were justly accused or no, it would be of immense aid in appraising the moral tendency and intellectual significance of his teaching to ponder why such charges accompanied the teaching and why a fore-runner of liberal democracy (Neville) thought it imperative to take up the defense. Whatever Machiavelli wrote about

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Neville, 1620-1694. “Machiavelli's Vindication of Himself and his Writings, against the imputation of Impiety, Atheism, and other high Crimes; extracted from his Letter to his Friend Zenobius.” Neville also wrote *Plato Redivivus, or a Dialogue Concerning Government*. A copy of the text of “Vindication” has been made available to me by the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

truth and politics carries the burden of having suggested to certain orthodox minds at least an appearance of heterodoxy.

Responding to the charge of fomenting rebellion, Neville's Machiavelli forswears any such intent and even declares rebellion properly understood "the greatest crime that can be committed among Men, both against Policy, Morality and *in foro conscientiae*..." This great crime, he avers nevertheless, will recur for as long as "Princes tyrannize." The defense, then, amounts to a warning to princes not to cause men to rebel, to accomplish which princes must adopt certain habits of thought regarding human affairs. "So that Princes and States ought in the Conduct of their Affairs not only to consider what their People are bound to submit to, if they were inspired from Heaven, or were all Moral Philosophers: But to weigh likewise what is probable *de facto* to fall out in this corrupt Age of the World..." The era prior to this corrupt one was an era ruled by "that excellent Maxim of the Ancients" that "*the Interest of Kings and of their People, is the same.*" In Neville's Machiavelli lexicon, rebellion becomes not the act of the people against the government, but the conduct of the government contrary to the interest of the people.

Neville closed his "apology" for Machiavelli with the text reproduced as an epigram above and a supposed date of authorship which is in fact ten years after the death of Machiavelli. Neville, in short, plainly indicates that this unsigned writing ought to be read by the thoughtful rather as illustrative of an appropriate defense for Machiavelli than as a literal defense. In that regard, it cannot be an accident that the epigram bears so striking a relationship to a famous passage from Aristotle's *Politics*:

The man who is isolated—who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient—is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god. ... Man, when perfected, is the best of animals; but if he be isolated from law and justice he is the worst of all. ... That is why, if he be without virtue, he is a most unholy and savage being, and worse than all others in the indulgence of lust and gluttony. Justice [which is his salvation] belongs to the polis. [*Politics*, 1253<sub>a</sub>-21-38, Barker tr.]

To supplant the reference to "a beast or a god" with a reference to "a saint or a devil" befits the way of looking at things after the revelation of Christ. Neville did more, however, for his "isolated man" is by definition a ruler and one who is isolated only in proportion as he fails in the assertion of an empire of unjust force over others. Aristotle had argued, by contrast, that the "polis is by nature," and that man is "perfected" within the polis. Most importantly, however, Aristotle's "worst animal" is worse because living without virtue and therefore living only to satisfy "lust and gluttony;" while Neville's "worst man" is worse precisely because the only way to succeed in his "will and lust" is to prevail over others with complete injustice (he "must never stick at anything"). That is, while for Aristotle "lust and gluttony" offer no prospect of human perfection, and even separates the human from the political association, for Neville "lust and gluttony" can be perfected in instruments of rule that disregard demands of justice. It is an "execrable" business, but it is just a business to "rule men against the Laws of Nature and Reason."

Because Neville presented his account as a gloss on Machiavelli's teaching in the *Prince*, above all, it is appropriate to inquire whether Machiavelli's teaching concurs in the conclusion that perfectly unjust rule not only can be sustained but, once undertaken,

must be perpetuated if the ruler is to preserve himself. Stated in this manner, the question which Neville succeeded to pose for Machiavelli by comparison with Aristotle becomes in fact a question posed out of Plato's *Republic*—namely, the challenge of Glaucon and Adeimantus that Socrates prove the superiority of justice to injustice even in the worst case, in which the justest of persons must endure the reputation for perfect injustice. The brothers had argued that, alone in this manner could Socrates refute the accusation of Thrasymachus that justice was for the simple-minded who did not know their own interest. According to Thrasymachus, justice properly speaking was the right of the stronger—that is, successful injustice; Thrasymachus's justice is Neville's "worst man."

This has always been the charge made against Machiavelli, that he teaches the "means justifying the end" or, in Neville's words, that to succeed in ruling one must "never stick at anything." The question that emerges, however, is whether this is the "Christian truth" which Neville attributes to Machiavelli. Does the revelation of Christ in fact result in leaving man here below wholly in the grip of the devils, the Thrasymachuses, on earth? The apology for Machiavelli collapses the three charges against him into this one, namely that he finds no space for virtue or justice among men, save as tools to be used in pursuit of the ends of power. That is, politics by definition lowers men.

The analysis of the charge against Machiavelli is complicated by the fact that Machiavelli, and not Neville, must in the end speak for Machiavelli. Machiavelli himself, however, in a letter which he did indeed write, suggests how difficult it may be to discern what is his own proper defense:

... for some time now I never say what I think, and I never think what I say; and if some morsel of truth slips out, I bury it in so many lies that it is difficult to recover it... [Letter to Guiccardini, 17 May 1521].<sup>2</sup>

We may let Machiavelli speak for himself, but how shall we understand what he says? While Neville's fictitious defense of Machiavelli does not authentically respond to this question, Neville does suggest a reasonable posture to take. When he closed the essay by invoking Aristotle and Plato, tacitly showing how the abandonment of Aristotle's moral distinctions leads ineluctably back to the challenge to Plato to defend justice, he invited the speculation that his own most comprehensive work, *Plato Redivivus*, perhaps recognized in Machiavelli its inspiration. The re-born Plato was not Neville but Machiavelli, and the defense of "liberal democracy" which Neville outlined has to be understood as founded on the moral distinctions introduced by the "born again Plato." The question: Is the "born again Plato" a dialectically superior Thrasymachus or is there an alternative to the defense of justice which Plato placed in the mouth of Socrates? Correlatively, is liberal democracy founded in indifference to justice (i.e., overthrowing the claims of every other regime), or is liberal democracy founded in superior claims to justice?

Neville's defense denied that Machiavelli expressed a preference for democracy (people in general are rather "corrupt" than "inspired by heaven, or all moral philosophers"), fended off the charge of atheism by the claim that Machiavelli revealed Popes and priests to be not a heavenly but an alternative, earthly regime ("all my reasons drawn

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Lars Vissing, *Machiavel et la Politique de L'Apparence* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), p. 12.

from Experience and frequent Example”), and refuted the charge of instructing tyrants with the claim that all rule without rule (the condition of all men after “the lust of our first Parents did at that time disappoint the good intention of God in making a pure world,” and after the “Bishops of Rome ... frustrated the merciful purpose [God] ... intended the World by his Son”) eventuates in the “empire of will and lust.”

If this were the truth Machiavelli meant in his mountain of lies, we would still face serious questions. For example, if every possible regime must make light of moral virtue, by what standard would a choice of regime be made? If Machiavelli abandoned ancient standards, in what sense is he a “born again Plato?” If politics lowers men (a question related to the foregoing), and organized churches are merely other forms of politics, what opportunities for human elevation exist? Finally, how can we separate the real Machiavelli from his image.

### Appearance is Everything

Vissing’s *Machiavel* stands out among interpretations of recent years as that best suited not only to addressing the questions of this essay but, in many respects, the best simply. As did Neville and so many other commentators, Vissing placed the *Prince* at the center of his analysis. Nevertheless, Vissing attempted to arrive at a coherent view of Machiavelli based on his entire career of political-administrative service, his private correspondence, and his corpus of works. Before taking up my own engagement with Machiavelli, it would not be amiss to review briefly Vissing’s particular contribution to our understanding of the questions posed here.

Vissing’s conclusion joins the issues raised in the foregoing discussion. “No absolute guarantee” of existence can be provided for “any kind of regime,” he reasoned, because “Machiavelli accorded no definitive privilege to certain regimes to the disadvantage of others.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, Vissing has embraced the view that the relative moral advantages of regimes have been thoroughly effaced in Machiavelli’s work. This conclusion is founded on an analysis of politics as mainly the work of cultivating “illusions,” in which the only remaining question of “principle” is the extent to which “custom [ethics]” and “rule [force]” (*ethos* and *krathos* in the French transliteration of the Greek) will enter into play for the sake of the “representation.”<sup>4</sup> We may translate this as the distinction between “generally received right” and “positive right.” It is the task of the ruler or prince, according to Vissing, to decide clearly when one or the other of these resources conduces most to the interest of the regime. Following Meinecke, he concludes that this is the center of Machiavellian thought and that it serves to reduce “*ethos*” to an “essentially illusory, theatrical order.”<sup>5</sup>

If Machiavelli reduced ethics to illusion or “appearances,” it must follow that his teaching in the *Prince* can be elucidated in terms of the role of appearances. That is precisely what Vissing set out to accomplish. It must first be acknowledged, however, that

<sup>3</sup> Vissing, p. 236.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 207: “Rather than belonging to a particular regime as its thing, as its manner of being, appearance is an integral part of the exercise of power, whatever might be the name that the political authority assumes.”

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 223.

he had a high hurdle to scale in the form of the claim to Guiccardini that Machiavelli never said what he thought nor thought what he said. We may parse that claim in a manner to further this enterprise, namely, in terms of the possible addressees of speech delivered in that mode. After all, if Machiavelli “covered grains of truth with mountains of lies,” it would follow that he did so with certain expectations of his readers/listeners. Let us say, for example, that Machiavelli’s readers must perceive in what he wrote either the truth or many at least of the lies (as truth). The latter must surely be regarded either as unable or unwilling to see the truth; while the former may be regarded as surely able to see the truth. Now, the only reasonable account for making the truth available to those able and willing to see it in such a fashion as this has to be some presumption that it is better seen by them alone. To restrict the truth to them in this fashion, it would be necessary to make it appear as something else or not to appear at all to others. Again, if one of the grains of truth is that all politics is appearances, it would be necessary to state some reason why this should remain inaccessible to those unable or unwilling to see the truth. For it is surely the case that, it being true that appearances prevail in moral matters, it would make no practical difference whether all men or only a few thought so. For those unable or unwilling to see it, there would be no advantage gained from being forced to accept it; they would remain within the same realm of calculations and chances as before. Vissing, therefore, needs not only to demonstrate that Machiavelli thought it true that all politics is merely appearance, he needs also to demonstrate how that truth differentially affects the few and the many.

Vissing did not fail to observe, as Leo Strauss before him,<sup>6</sup> that Machiavelli’s *Prince* organizes all political discourse in terms of the relations between the prince and the people (the multitude). The very form of the discussion, accordingly, introduces a distinction between the few and the many which is elaborated not in terms of relative power but in terms of relative knowledge. In the “preface” to the *Prince* the distinction between prince and people is one of different knowledges and perspectives, not one of different powers. Thus, even those who take Machiavelli’s great work in its nominal terms as a “manual” for princes must nonetheless concede that it addresses itself to the few. However it is no less true that Machiavelli speaks of the people’s understanding (although never in the terms of exhortation addressed to princes). The assumption we make here is that Machiavelli spoke of the multitude’s knowledge as part of the instruction devoted to the few and not as a mode of direct address to the people. Thus, when Machiavelli writes in the “preface” that in order to know the nature of the people, it is best to be a prince, and in order to know the nature of the prince, it is best to be of the people, we do not assume that he means that the people have knowledge of the princely nature. Rather, it seems that someone of Machiavelli’s virtuosity can lend insight to the opinion or perspective which is otherwise characteristic of the people and, accordingly, render the few not only knowledgeable of politics but also of themselves. It is Machiavelli’s version of the familiar  $\gamma\nu\omega\theta\iota\ \sigma\epsilon\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu$  for which Socrates is famous. In that sense, Vissing perhaps errs in reading the relation of the few and the many as reciprocal in point of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> What is required is to read Machiavelli as describing things

<sup>6</sup> *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), pp. 77, 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> He is aware of the difficulty. For, on account of the formulation, he suggested that Machiavelli could not possibly mean “the entire populace,” and therefore probably meant only that portion of qualified bourgeois

knowable rather than knowers; namely, the relations of rulers and ruled. That rulers *may* correspond with knowers results from other factors yet to be considered.

Correcting Vissing's error as to reciprocal knowledge, while conceding the accuracy of the notion of reciprocal powers, between prince and people, we are now in a position to inquire why the latter relation consists entirely in the careful management of appearances.

### A Sun Without Shadow

Vissing applied chapter 15 of the *Prince* still more straightforwardly to Socrates than anyone has done heretofore. When Machiavelli says that he will spurn "imagined republics and principalities" in order to pursue what is "known to be in reality,"<sup>8</sup> in order to avoid the certain ruin that would befall the few who could be good "in all things ... among so many who are not good," Vissing takes him to refer more specifically to the idea of the "philosopher-king" than to the idea of the just city.<sup>9</sup> "Le terrain sur lequel avait opéré le roi-philosophe était vraiment imaginaire dans la mesure où il n'y avait aucun phénomène naturel..." Thus, the philosopher-king's knowledge was of things that did not exist ("the political object there was flattened") and there was a "total absence of shadows."<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli's political universe, by contrast, consisted in a return to nature—to thickness and solid ground.

This account points above all to the "myth of the cave" in Plato's *Republic*, wherein the philosopher is distinguished from the multitude by an ability to free himself from the shadows on the wall of the cave, formed by artificial light illuminating man-made objects (conventions) and casting their shadows against the wall of a cave. The philosopher, perhaps wrenched free by some special intervention, escapes from the artificial light of the cave, and its shadows, to gaze upon the pure light of the sun. It is the knowledge gained from reflecting on the pure sun light which presumably informs the philosopher-king's legislative activity in creating the just republic. This is the reality which Machiavelli calls "imaginary," presumably because the rule of the philosopher-king must concern itself with the ordinary powers of people who remain chained in the shadows of artificial light. For ordinary people, every political judgment must proceed from the appearances created by the shadows within the cave. Accordingly, the philosopher-king is not in a position to alter their positions by introducing pure sun light, a light which blinds one to shadows in direct proportion to the extent that one looks at it directly. On the other hand, when one cannot endure direct sunlight, and turns towards the shadows which even sunlight creates, one reintroduces the possibility for other "sources d'éclairage" to intervene between the sun and the shadows seen.

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who "might gain entry to the Grand Council." This slight mental gymnastic testifies to the error of his interpretation at the outset. The introduction of unnecessary terms, such as bourgeois, and the interpretation of a part of the people as standing for the whole in a representative capacity all suggest an effort to fit the old theory to accepted modern realities. See pp. 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> "...he who lets go of what is done for that which one ought to do, sooner learns ruin than his own preservation..."

<sup>9</sup> He builds his analysis on the "myth of the cave;" Cf., pp. 122-126.

<sup>10</sup> Vissing, p. 175.

Socrates was not unaware of this difficulty, and accordingly provided for a “noble lie” to be taught to citizens in the just city—a Phoenician tale regarding their births and the differences resulting from their having different metals (gold, silver, bronze) in their souls. The critique of Machiavelli-Vissing, therefore, must be based on the argument that the noble lie is no less palpable a convention than every other convention and produces no superior likelihood of improved moral results. Now, even if this were Machiavelli’s position, it would still leave him to deal with Socrates’s concern with the philosophical soul, and the question of whether it ought to concern itself with politics. Vissing, on the other hand, believes to have settled this question without a further observation regarding the problem of lying in the *Republic*. Vissing assumes that Machiavelli believes the philosopher/prince can live with the “lie in the soul,” i.e., repeating a mere convention, an appearance, the “*realta effettuale*,” while knowing it is only a convention. Socrates, on the other hand, held that the “lie in the soul” was the thing the philosopher *per se* could least tolerate.<sup>11</sup> If the ability to see appearances for what they are, mere appearances, is properly the tool of philosophical wisdom, then Machiavelli’s discussion of politics as all appearance must be as much informed by pure sunlight as Socrates’s. If that is true, however, then Machiavelli must have a powerful reason to counsel turning back from sunlight toward shadows, one that avoids the difficulty of living with a “willing lie.”

It is not clear why Vissing fails to see that the Socratic notion of the “lie in the soul” imperils a direct Machiavellian absorption of the Socratic notion of truth in opposition to appearances. Nevertheless, he does exactly that, and explicitly, affirming that:

Machiavelli fundamentally exploits the Platonic universe [and] develops all its consequences. If the world [here below] is made up of appearances, it is by means of a theory of appearances [a phenomenology] that one suitably analyses its processes. The displacement of the predicates “reality/truth” towards the world of appearances assumes a Platonic origin. Machiavelli’s new constructions remain rooted in and oriented by Plato’s thought.<sup>12</sup>

In acknowledging this much Vissing requires further to acknowledge that the ability to think in this Platonic fashion is not general but rather limited to a few. Thus, the “people” play a passive role, as “clients” of the knowing prince who manages their illusions.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, not every would be prince can manage the illusions, since in addition to being able to “sniff out the reality,” it is necessary to be able to “smell” it and have an opportunity to “touch” it.<sup>14</sup> We have, then, a special class of prince, the philosopher-prince, who conforms to the Machiavellian standard.

In what way is the philosopher-prince a departure from Socrates’s philosopher-king—or, in Vissing’s terms, how does Machiavelli represent a complete rupture with antiquity<sup>15</sup> while still remaining “rooted in and oriented toward Platonic thought?” Vissing describes Machiavelli’s political philosophy of appearances as “colonization of

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<sup>11</sup> Cf., 485c-490e and 535e.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

the true [real] by the fictive [artificial].”<sup>16</sup> In this he means to argue that the metaphysical grounds of Platonic thought are henceforth to be trod exclusively in the terms of the principles applying here below, within the cave. The meaning of the terms, “to appear” and “appearances” have been generalized “to designate the long run political ends and means, including the *mode d’être* of the state and its agents, a dimension of its legitimacy...”<sup>17</sup> Where nature stood in Plato (“the law wishes to be reason), now appearances construed in ultimate terms must prevail. Since all politics is dissimulation, even in the best case, the sense in which one distinguishes the best rule from the worst rule can no longer include reference to rule itself (to regimes as such). Thus, a Borgia or an Agathocles can become examples of political virtue. For the best state is that commanded by the best or the worst man, and every other state, including the republican, attains like success only as a matter of degree.<sup>18</sup> We ask, though, what can be meant by the terms “best man” and “worst man” on these grounds? Particular virtues having been jettisoned for the sake of the “sovereign virtue,” political virtue, do we not lose all ability to distinguish best and worst?

Here is where Machiavelli loses Vissing—or leaves him in the cave. For Machiavelli could respond that the only answer to the challenge of Glaucon-Adeimantus is precisely that in which justice and the just man, in the true sense, are lost to sight—meaning, this reality is discussable only outside of or beyond the realm of appearances or opinion. Even if some few could still recognize the best men, they would be unable to make them visible to the many, and the language they would use to discuss the best would echo nothing of the world of politics. If such men were involved in politics, they would stand on the same ground as the worst men in point of reputation:

The prince’s reputation now depends ‘... exclusively, not on the knowledge of his true being, but on the totality of opinions that folk have about him.’<sup>19</sup>

Here is where Machiavelli’s insertion of the *vérità effettuale* in our story, for it replaces, not the “noble lie,” but the “lie in the soul.” Here the philosopher-prince encounters a constraint of nature, which makes it impossible for him to speak to the many save by means of their illusions. Thus, he does not so much lie as approach the truth by means of the *vérità effettuale*. That is the best he can do. Vissing here turned to the political outcome, rather than the natural constraint, and missed the most telling point of Machiavelli’s usage. When Machiavelli substituted for the Platonic distinction between truth and appearance (or nature and convention), the concept of *vérità effettuale*, he applied reason across the board to every political undertaking, including appearances or the manipulation of opinion. True, he made political efficacy depend on success in sustaining the passivity of the prince’s clientele,<sup>20</sup> but he did so from necessity. That is why one

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 122; citing Payot, R, “J.-J. Rousseau et Machiavel” (in *Études philosophique/La Philosophie Italienne*, 1971, 2009-226, Paris, 1971). Vissing seems not to have realized the full implication of this analysis, namely, the existence of a “true being” for every appearance and the access to it which at least the discoverer of appearances must have.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

cannot stop at saying a prince can be loved by his people.<sup>21</sup> What being loved by the people means is to be thought just. For the best men, who rule as princes, to be thought just, and to know themselves to be regarded so, is to live with a “lie in the soul.”

For this reason Machiavelli taught that appearance is everything, as far as politics is concerned, “... the more or less perfect, more or less deceiving representation of human realities.”<sup>22</sup> Vissing found this to result from historical tendencies in the pre-Renaissance and after. In the context of these historical developments, and Machiavelli’s own political/administrative experiences, he maintained, Machiavelli “explicitly evacuated the moral question” at the start of chapter 15 of the *Prince*. To re-introduce the moral question by means of interpretation, he argued, is to “refuse to read Machiavelli beginning with the premises he announced himself.”<sup>23</sup> Because the moral question has no “citizenship” in Machiavelli, whoever “dares to pose it” may expect to stray. The moral question may serve to place Machiavelli in historical perspective, but not to explain the reason for his philosophical isolation from the past.<sup>24</sup> It is fair to say, however, that the foregoing account indeed does re-introduce the moral question (in the form of the challenge of Glaucon-Adeimantus), reveals a distinctive response to it, and explains Machiavelli’s isolation by means of surfacing his attitude to the “lie in the soul.” The only accident has occurred: Machiavelli emerges as more solidly a classical thinker—i.e., preserving a clear image of unbridgeable distinctions between politics and philosophy.

To return to the world which Machiavelli’s philosophy abandoned—separating the sun from the shadow, -- we can understand why Machiavelli distinguishes the philosopher-prince’s knowledge from the citizens’ command of or subjection to appearances. Vissing implies knowledge on both parts (based on the similes of the “preface”),<sup>25</sup> but eventually he acknowledges that the appearances visible to the “vulgar” remain distinctly opaque, and not clear.<sup>26</sup> What is significant in this is that the argument that all politics is appearance itself becomes opaque, once all appearance seems (at least to most people) opaque. That is how Vissing portrays the emergence of this view in Machiavelli, though not explicitly.

Setting an “Augustinian” background of “traditional forms of government” in which the natural order is “absorbed into the supernatural order,” and the background of the emergence of the “community as a *persona ficta*,” Vissing identifies a progressive development of political thought, culminating in Machiavelli, in whom the progress consists in detachment from *des autorités traditionnelles*.” This means that, when the public or collectivity acts positively (without guide or guideline), and not just retributively, it is as much liable to ill doings as any *persona integrala* or *realita*. Thus, we must prepare to act against the *persona ficta*. In this case, however, the basis cannot be punishment or retribution (*personae fictae* are not morally or, more importantly, rationally accountable). So, the just return for a deed done (the *persona ficta* neither senses nor is improved by

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

justice) must rather be founded in defensive notions of restraint, constraint, deterrence, and self-defense, similar to those which characterized private vengeance in the hours prior to the emergence of public vengeance or retribution as a mediating process which lowers the risks inherent in exacting just returns from wrong doers (later theorists, after Machiavelli, would describe this as the transition from the state of nature to the state of civil society, wholly effacing any moral considerations in the account).

This is the underlying reality which constitutes the world of appearances, a reality which a prince must understand even as he must know the appearances themselves besides. (Vissing says the prince cannot know the perspective of the multitude, except by report.<sup>27</sup> There, however is no need to complicate this analysis with philosopher-reporters to join people and prince.) Now, the world of appearances derives entirely from the quotidian, and in that world all is rather a matter of what is (that is, actual appearances) rather than a world of what ought to be. Plato and Aristotle conceive of the quotidian in exactly the same light. The question is, do they regard politics as confined to the quotidian, founded in the quotidian but depending on the transcendent, or a consequence of the transcendent. If politics emerges out of the communalizing of private vengeance, the first option is highly likely. Ecclesiastical statutes, which must seek reform of ill deeds (or the improvement of evil doers), are peculiarly inapposite as surrogates for private vengeance.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the generalization of appearances as the exhaustive description of things political necessarily foreshortened human horizons, creating a shadow world deprived of light.

### **The Return of Justice**

Founded on the argument that all politics is appearances, Machiavelli's response to Glaucon-Adeimantus is two-fold. He declared in chapter 18 of the *Prince* that it is better to "appear virtuous than to be virtuous." We now see this to mean that the virtuous or just man labors under the disadvantage that the appearance of injustice is a political liability. Hence, it is easier for the unjust to appear just than it is for the just to appear unjust, if our reference is to a standard of political success. Since the title to rule is rather the appearance of justice than justice itself, the appearance of injustice defeats every title to rule. The challenge from Glaucon-Adeimantus, however, questioned not whether justice were more or less effective in politics than justice. It questioned whether justice were better than injustice for the individual. Thus, a further response is required. The further response produces Machiavelli's embrace of Thrasymachus, not as a sophist but as the best of men.

To argue that the just man is better off, even when appearing unjust, one must deal with Socrates's claim that the best men rule only to avert rule by the worst men. If justice's failure to appear just results in the actual rule of the unjust, then the just must accustom themselves to the rule of the worst men, the fate Socrates reprehends. Moreover, such an eventuality would defeat the sense of responsibility the best men have towards other men.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., see pp. 26-29.

Plato and Aristotle believed that the best men had to concern themselves with rule, because that was the only prospect of bringing virtue to the lives of the many, if vicariously. The many, in their eyes, could not accomplish that self-control which is the condition of virtue: knowledge is virtue. In that formulation the classical authors tie the prospects of political success by the few to the fates of the many. By defeating that causal connection Machiavelli liberates the best from the many and leaves only the question whether there are other reasons, or at least one other reason, for the few to concern themselves with rule.

Once custom or generally received right possesses no greater moral or intellectual authority than positive right—and all must concede that the few can generate positive right as handily as anyone else—the question that remains is whether the few in any sense require to participate in the management of political appearances to secure their own interests. The chief interest of the few is to know things as they are, rather than as they appear to be or as they ought to be. The chief condition for the effective management of appearances is a knowledge of things as they are. It follows, therefore, that the few will be strongest in the management of appearances (the least subject to the eruptions of chance which can undermine carefully crafted appearances). Where the few prevail in politics, accordingly, they will enjoy the best opportunities to sustain their own interest in reality.

Thrasymachus defined political justice as the “right of the stronger;” he insisted that rulers rule in their own interests and not in the interest of the ruled. Socrates insisted that such rule would be possible only where the rulers had actual knowledge of the interest/good of the ruled. Shepherds, he maintained, can benefit from the sheep only by means of an art which looked to the good of the sheep. Similarly, rulers had to look to the good of the ruled even to preserve the ruled in a condition suitable to provide the rulers with the advantages rulers sought from them. Neville (speaking as Machiavelli) argued that rulers must know how to avoid causing “subjects to rebel.” Machiavelli himself maintained that the ruled are governed in their propensities to rebel by their opinions, and that their opinions could be managed. Machiavelli, therefore, embraced Thrasymachus’s view on the Socratic ground of comprehensive knowledge. What Machiavelli added is that it suffices for rulers to keep the ruled quiet (“abstain from their women”) in order to reap the benefit which is material to rulers—not the lust and gluttony which seemed to inform Thrasymachus but the knowledge of what is which informed Socrates and in which the ruled have no interest. The right of the stronger, for Machiavelli, is to be unimpeded by the many in the pursuit of the interest of the stronger.

The reason this result produces implications for liberal democracy is easy to perceive. The rule of greater numbers (in the realm of appearances) is the only remaining title to rule once the titles of every other regime have been evacuated (the residues of those expired titles survive in the explicit guarantees afforded individuals and minorities in democratic regimes). Neville was right. Machiavelli did not “insinuate an affection for democratical government.” Rather, he overturned every moral claim to rule, in the vacuum which otherwise remained leaving only the dynamics of greater numbers. Since those greater numbers are to be managed through their opinions, however, it must also follow that the rule of the stronger will consist entirely of staging the opinions to be embraced by the multitude.

Once government been reduced to staging the opinions to be embraced by the multitude, every political calculation must have reference to those opinions. While the language or the appearances of politics must invoke “rights,” or the “common good,” or earthly salvation, in fact all that is at stake is what the people imagine themselves to enjoy. Liberal democracy consists above all in fostering the enjoyments of the people (I mean that this is the explicit understanding of such regimes in the contemporary era), with an ever watchful eye toward the emergence of non-sanctioned, unique claims and enjoyments by isolable groups or individuals. The claim of the genuinely few never emerge in that light, not only because they must rule (constitute the opinion makers) and thus manage the appearances (constitute the rulers), but more importantly because their differences can only become visible in a world in which moral claims are treated substantively—as figuring what ought to be against what is. That is the way in which Socrates stood out in, and threatened, ancient Athens.

Rule by the weight of the greater number of opinions interestingly reconstitutes—as an empty shadow—the actual rule of the stronger at the foundation of liberal democracy. For the greater number is taken as the strongest social force in the absence of all competing claims. Indeed, this rule of the stronger is explicitly evoked as rule in the interest of the stronger. So long, then, as coherent opinion may be fashioned in any society, that society can be constituted as a liberal democracy which sanctions the Thrasymachean principle of justice. This is Machiavelli’s accomplishment.

On this reading Machiavelli did not produce this result on the grounds of the moral superiority of liberal democracy, nor on account of a view of human nature which sees liberal democracy as providing human fulfillment or perfection. Remember, Machiavelli agreed with Plato and Aristotle that only the few are genuinely capable of fulfillment or perfection. Machiavelli doubtless fostered his political philosophy as the best means to reconcile the tensions between the claims of the few and the many which lay at the foundations of political philosophy. Rather than to subject philosophy to the moral claims of the city, Machiavelli liberated the philosophers by means of the subjection of the city. The prince speaks not from the point of view of justice (to which he could lay claim only through an act of submission), but from the point of view of complete knowledge (to which he must lay claim without submission).

### **The United States**

Is the United States a liberal democracy on the Machiavellian model? When George Washington delivered his “Farewell Address,” he took special pains to distinguish the regime in the United States from other regimes. He was led, on that basis, to urge against all “permanent alliances or enmities” with foreign states. This position was taken by some at the time and not a few since as an example of self-conscious Machiavellianism. Washington, on the other hand, urged his argument as an example of the constraint under which the United States labored as a free republic: it would always lack that virtuoso flexibility which would allow an independent prince to be one thing today and another tomorrow, all in pursuit of his nation’s interest. The reason for this constraint, Washington believed, was the nation’s foundation in public opinion. This reasoning escaped the French minister to the United States:

... a piece extolling ingratitude, showing it as a virtue necessary to the happiness of states, presenting interest as the only counsel which governments ought to follow in the course of their negotiations, putting aside honor and glory.<sup>29</sup>

Washington, on the other hand, committed to the position that opinion in a free republic had to be sustained, and could not alter with the intricacies of policy. Accordingly, the free republic must operate so as never to sacrifice to expediency the public faith, a thing attainable only to the degree a city is parsimonious in pledging its faith. The only course consistently to follow, without incurring that risk, is a policy of humanity, a policy in which America pursues her interests (a matter of necessity) consistently “guided by justice.” Washington identified a transcendent interest that would become the permanent basis of opinion in the republic. In doing so, he rejected the notion that opinion, once established, could be managed into any shape to fit whatever interest of the rulers. A settled and permanent opinion is the foundation of republican freedom in the United States.

How, then, does the United States arrive at a defense of liberal republicanism independent of the Machiavellian foundation? Well before Washington’s farewell, John Adams had indicated the significance of this question:

Machiavelli was the first who revived the ancient politics. The best part of his writings he translated almost literally from Plato and Aristotle, without acknowledging the obligation; and the worst of sentiments, even in his *Prince*, he translated from Aristotle without throwing upon him the reproach. Montesquieu borrowed the best part of his book from Machiavel, without acknowledging the quotation.<sup>30</sup>

The foregoing argument makes clear the extent to which we dissent from Adams’s moral archeology. Nevertheless, he hints at some kind of relation between Machiavelli’s moral skepticism and the revolution which eventuated in the United States. We must ask further, therefore, whether the United States is Machiavellian, despite Washington’s attempt to place the nation beyond such a choice.

The first defense of the nation’s liberal republicanism occurs in the “Declaration of Independence,” and we may concentrate on that source to respond to our main question, whether the United States avoids Machiavellianism in espousing republicanism. Since there is an apparent moral skepticism in the “Declaration,” the question then becomes the nature of its relationship to the quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns. We have doubtless reflected too little on this aspect of the “Declaration,” which is surprising given its centrality in the comprehensive significance in the founding of the United States. The neglected truth at the core of “Declaration” is that moral skepticism which authorizes the prescriptive force of the axiom, all men are created equal, and its deduction, that legitimate governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. While these principles are founded in the laws of nature and of nature’s God,

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<sup>29</sup> *Correspondence of the French Ministers to the United States, 1791-1797* (Annual Report, American Historical Association, 1903), ed. by Frederick Jackson Turner. The Letter from Minister P. A. Adet is found at p. 954.

<sup>30</sup> John Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*.

not even God may be conceived to provide forms of government for men by any agency other than their particular consent. I call this a form of moral skepticism not, however, on account of any imagined limitation on God, but rather on account of the limitation it imposes on man.

To understand the “Declaration” as a form of moral skepticism we must abandon the notion that moral skepticism is somehow in opposition to morality. More shortly. Secondly, we need to situate the claims of the “Declaration” amid comprehensive claims about the human condition. Plato and Aristotle first, in writing, raised the question of morality and wisdom in human politics. They did so in such a way as to make clear beyond every haggle that all law points to an independent standard of right, however defective the law may be in reality. Where the end of law or politics is right, the deduction seems unavoidable that law or politics is legitimated in direct proportion to its approximation to right.

It is an intellectual commonplace that Machiavelli sundered the ligature between politics and right. This set up the war between the Ancients and the Moderns. Paradoxically, however, this idea both fails to do justice to Machiavelli (as we have shown) and also obstructs our vision of the true grounds of genuinely modern (which is to say, American) politics. The injustice to Machiavelli stems from the fact that the common judgment is superficial; it conceives that Machiavelli became indifferent to right. This way of understanding fails to note that Machiavelli cared even more about right than about politics. His charge against the ancients amounted to the case that they had enslaved or subordinated right (or truth or wisdom) to politics, to the disservice of truth and wisdom.

How did this come about? The junction of politics and right eventuated in clear recognition of distinctions among men—those who were capable of penetrating human things and those could aspire no higher than salutary opinions. It was then the differences in men, in their equipment, which the ancients recognized and Machiavelli accepted. Because Machiavelli regarded this as the most important human matter (*il principe e il popolo*), he did not see himself as breaking with the ancients in the most important regard. By the same token, because he saw that the ancients recognized these distinctions, yet seemed to persevere in making the best men subservient to the end of politics, he regarded their achievement as manifestly inequitable. He then opposed them, not merely to save the best men from having to bow before ordinary virtue but also to emancipate the best souls from an enterprise which could indeed eventuate in decent, republican order but could never attain justification before the tribunal of reason. Charity, or a turning away from the beautiful, could render mankind equally tranquil, without imposing on the more important labors of philosophers.

In summary, the moral problem stands thus: Because the law wishes to be reason (Plato), those who are or may be wisest incur special obligations to cast the law in an appropriate mold. The question, Who shall rule?, comes to be cast in the form of a question about the best capacities to realize the intent of the law. After political philosophy enters reason or wisdom seems the only just title to rule. Further, titles to rule increase in importance to the exact degree that distinctions in men eventuate in the deduction that some souls needs must be ruled. There were distinctions among men prior to political philoso-

phy. The antecedent distinctions, however, whether founded in custom or religion, could not sustain the inquiry of political philosophy, and then only virtue and wisdom effectively remained (the former having been largely assimilated to the latter). Legitimate governments are governments in which good men, self-governing men, rule. From a standard of right inherent in but beyond the city, we had arrived at a morality prior to politics, and in the name of which politics could be shaped.

The ancients admitted distinctions among men; Machiavelli did too. The ancients saw the end of rule, wherever good rule was possible, to produce self-governing citizens. Rule was for the sake of the virtue of the citizens. Ancient thought ended where it began. Here Machiavelli drew the line: the rule of the best aimed to obviate the problem of virtue as an obstruction to the exertions of the best. Gallileo *par excellence*, and indeed all modern thinkers who have wanted to be free to think without regard to political constraints, are the fruits of the Machiavellian revolution.

We see in the war between the Ancients and the Moderns, therefore, what has the look of moral certainty, their contrary practical deductions notwithstanding. The Machiavellian revolution produced a crisis; namely, it tied the best men still more closely to political life but without supplying a ready articulation of acceptable political means. Since ruling had become decisively instrumental and had no proper end of its own to shape appropriate means, men had to seek new modes of expression and institution to guide their exertions. Several principles were put in play, including substitution of a beginning (state of nature) for a proper end, but ultimately a single device won general acceptance—namely, consent. Consent was needed insofar as any other mechanism implied a species of moral persuasion, hence, ultimately tutoring in virtue (even if specious). Consent now became (not what it was for Aristotle, decisive in a good regime but) decisive for politics altogether.

This was not yet the consent of the “Declaration,” although the practical and theoretical antecedents of that document are frequently and promiscuously taken as saying the same thing. The main difference: in most, and almost all early antecedents, men consent rather to the fact of government than to its form and powers. This is still true in Locke, for whom the whole consents to a government and the majority establishes it. The precise application of the “Declaration’s” principle is thus obscured. What we confront in the “Declaration” is the identical question which animated Machiavelli’s dialogue with the ancients: Who has just title to rule? The answer given by the “Declaration” is that the least shall rule (insofar as the many means the least). That is, there are no longer any reservations of any sort recognizing the priority of the best souls.

This is all stated more simply than it is in fact. The “Declaration” is not an *anathema* against the best. That hard won liberation was not to be retracted, but neither were the best to be exempted from the spirit of obedience to the laws which would eventuate. But the principle of equality in the “Declaration” was a direct response to the earlier recognition of distinctions among men respecting titles to rule. The claim that no one man was constituted by nature the ruler of any other amounted to a denial that any of the superiorities among men could answer in themselves to determine the foundations of polity or morality. Conceded wisdom, virtue, or inspiration deserved deference (as the reason of a “candid world” deserved), but not to the point of interposing the will of a superior to that

of any other man whatever. The practical consequence is that the founders separated from Machiavelli's (and the ancient's) regard for the best, which they could have justified doing only on the basis of a far more sanguine expectation of human capacities than characterized either Machiavelli or Socrates.

The "Declaration's" consent reposes on natural right and reason, without for all that conceding that any one voice of reason would have title to order human affairs. The "Declaration" imposes moral persuasion as the only legitimate ground of polity. It takes men as commencing self-governing (however errantly) and makes that the comprehensive moral foundation of political life (this, then, is the radical departure from prior reflections). It is a skepticism not about morality, *per se*, but about the status to be accorded all competing moral claims, even true claims. It were as if the founders believed that the greatest human good were inaccessible, save by the labored repetition in every instance of the process from birth to maturity. Everyone knows the vulnerabilities of infancy and childhood, and the question is therefore natural, What form of polity can incorporate such weaknesses and yet perpetuate its virtues? That is the question to which George Washington provided his distinctly non-Machiavellian response in the "Farewell Address."

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