

# Machiavelli: A Prudential Morality

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## Machiavelli: A Prudential Morality

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CHARLES TAY, JUN 21 2012

*He who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers and for his action it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.*

– Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" (1946: 122-123)

*Even if, and precisely if we are forced to grant that his (Machiavelli's) teaching is diabolical and he himself a devil, we are forced to remember the profound theological truth that the devil himself is a fallen angel.*

– Leo Strauss, "Thoughts on Machiavelli" (1958: 13)

The sheer infamy Niccolo Machiavelli has drawn to himself in the five centuries since he wrote *The Prince* underscores the fact that he was no political infant. On the contrary, he has been called, amongst other things, a 'great sinner' (Dostoevsky, cited in Frank 2003:13), a 'teacher of evil' (Strauss 1958: 11), a 'quintessential tactician' (Lukes 2001: 562) and a 'utilitarian moralist' (Wilde 1928: 222). After all, against the ecclesiastical backdrop of the post-Augustinian Christianity of his time, Machiavelli boldly challenges religious morality in politics, lambasts older traditions of political thought, exposes the harshest truths of political life and extols a realistic understanding of the intractable nature of mankind (Major 2007: 171). Though they are all intricately interconnected, it is the first that this paper aims to explore; in light of the entirety of his life and works, does Machiavelli justify departures from canons of morality in politics, and if so, to what extent and in what circumstances?

In the following, I will argue that in politics, far from being the devil's literal advocate for immorality, Machiavelli was an apostle for a superior morality of prudence that trumps all other conceptions of morality.[1] In turn, I will delimit the pertinent scope of 'morality' and demonstrate how this thesis corroborates with Machiavelli's work and relates with relevant contemporary scholarly literature.

### Morality

#### General definition and a critique of Berlin's dichotomy

'Morality' is generally defined as 'a code of conduct'; the term can be used either descriptively or normatively and has been recognised as potentially ambiguous in meaning (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 2008). In approaching the question of morality in relation to Machiavelli's work, Isaiah Berlin's landmark treatise *The Originality of Machiavelli* (1998) must be considered. In it, Berlin (1998: 43) challenges simplistic conceptions of moralities and proposes divergent pagan and Christian ideals. He argues (1998: 43-56) that Machiavelli did not strictly divorce politics from morals; Machiavelli merely adopted the ethical stance of pagan antiquity, which lauded 'courage, vigour, fortitude in adversity, public achievement, order, discipline, happiness, strength, justice and above all assertion of one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction', as opposed to that of a Christian morality, which esteems 'charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of the world, faith in the life hereafter, and belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value'.

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Berlin's dichotomy is a mostly persuasive one and is supported by significant scholarly recognition. However, it does not explain Machiavelli's commendation of the 'greatness of mind' of Liverotto for, amongst other heinous deeds, inviting the principal nobles of Fermo, including Giavanno Fogliani, his maternal uncle and foster father, to a banquet only to have them slain in order to gain control of the city in Chapter 8 of *The Prince*. McIntosh (1984: 185) convincingly supposes that such an act must stand condemned by even 'the most savage pagan code', as it violates two of the most sacred obligations of any traditional ethic, namely, the honour due to parents and the respect and hospitality due to invited guests. Furthermore, Mukherjee (2002) points out that Aristotelian ethics extol the virtue of temperance in the sense of adopting a mean between absolute good and absolute evil.[2] Machiavelli, in contrast, through the example of Pope Julius II and Giovanpagolo Baglioni in Book 1, Chapter 27 of the *Discourses*, urges men to know how to be 'wholly good' or 'wholly bad'.

The above two examples, besides *prima facie* supporting the assertion that Machiavelli justified immoral conduct in politics, suggest that Berlin's explanation of Machiavelli as an advocate for a pagan morality was imperfect at best and seriously wanting at worst. In challenging simple conceptions of moralities, Berlin seems to have committed the simplicity *faux-pas* himself.

## A polycentric understanding of morality

A fuller appreciation of Machiavelli's work thus requires a complex, polycentric understanding of 'morality' that extends beyond the umbra of religiosity, specifically of Christianity. McShea (1963: 793) postulates five possible grounds of morality, namely:

*Customary morality*: involving conduct in conformity with prevailing societal standards.

*Religious morality*: involving conduct congruent to the will of God.

*Prudential morality*: involving conduct that leads to desired consequences.

*Inspirational morality*: involving conduct harmonious with directly intuited ethical values (Bergson 2002, Thoreau 1989).

*Natural law morality*: involving conduct in conformity with the intrinsic moral nature of things.

Due to their inherent complexities and incongruence with Machiavellian themes, further investigation on inspirational and natural law moralities are beyond the scope of this paper.[3] The following analysis will examine the remaining conceptions in light of Machiavelli's work.

## Machiavelli's Position

### Customary morality vis-à-vis prudential morality

Upon an examination of Machiavelli's work, it will be seen that, even as the virtues and vices of everyday life retain for him their customary value (Wilde 1928: 222), considerations of necessity and prudence may occasionally impel a wise prince to depart from the ideal.

In Book 3, Chapter 41 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli reflects approvingly upon Lucius Lentulus' argument that whether by means 'honourable or ignominious ... were her army preserved, Rome, in course of time, might wipe out the disgrace; but if her army were destroyed, however gloriously it might perish, Rome and her freedom would perish with it.' This opinion was made during an era where honour and noble conduct were customarily prized as civic virtues and Machiavelli's selection and endorsement of it exemplify his belief that necessity and prudence trump even considerations of custom, law and civic virtue. With an austere alacrity, Machiavelli goes on to declare that, for those involved in political affairs:

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[W]hen the entire safety of our country is at stake, no consideration of what is just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or shameful, must intervene. On the contrary, every other consideration being set aside, that course alone must be taken which preserves the existence of the country and maintains its liberty.

Additionally, in Chapter 18 of *The Prince*, despite his recognition of the customary value of a prince keeping 'faith' and living with 'integrity', Machiavelli observes that it is the prince who holds 'good faith of little account', knows 'how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft' and overcomes those 'who have relied upon' his word who achieves great things. He then counsels princes to know how to avail themselves of natures of the 'beast' and the 'man',<sup>[4]</sup> for 'one without the other is not durable', and advises that it is he who knows how to deceive (employing the ways of the fox) who tends to succeed best. Essentially, Machiavelli preaches the supervening import of achieving desired outcomes in politics at any cost. Illustratively, in Chapter 19 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli observes that Pertinax and Alexander, despite being 'men of modest life, lovers of justice, enemies to cruelty, humane, and benignant', came to ruin because they knew not how to gratify the baser humours of their militaries and nobles and thus could not navigate through the tumult of their treachery.

What differentiates prudential morality from abject immorality then? It must be recognised that Machiavelli was no advocate for the wanton disregard of customary morality. It is only when the dictates of necessity call for the abandonment of laws and custom that their desertion is warranted. Chapter 19 of *The Prince*, as cited above, must be read with reference to Book 1, Chapter 10 of the *Discourses* in which Machiavelli extols the Roman emperors Titus, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus and Marcus who led lawful and worthy lives and castigates the 'depraved lives' of Caligula, Nero and Vitellius. In Book 3, Chapter 3 of the *History of Florence*, Machiavelli writes that it is only 'when necessity presses' that 'audacity becomes prudence'. Moreover, in Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, he cautions that where it is necessary to take another's life, it must be done 'on proper justification and for manifest cause'. On a parallel, in his provocative play *La Mandragola*, Machiavelli depicts the protagonist, Callimaco, conspiring to win Lucrezia, the beautiful young wife of Nicia, from her husband. Through ingenious deception, Callimaco achieves his desires with nary a drop of blood shed. Sumburg (1961: 322) argues that *La Mandragola*, as a political satire, depicts the use of fraud as highly moral, since it is the arm of 'the downtrodden against the established order'. Essentially, it is only in deception and a departure from the customary that injustice can be effectively contested and peaceful change and political progress can ensue. From the above four examples, Machiavelli evinces his intention to convey that he was no advocate for gratuitous antinomianism<sup>[5]</sup>; it is only the political end that justifies unconventional means and it is only when conventional methods are inadequate to the task that unconventional means are warranted.

## Religious (Christian) morality vis-à-vis prudential morality

Any fair reading of Machiavelli will lead one to the inevitable conclusion that he was partial to the idea that true religious morality in the aforementioned sense had but a secondary place in politics. This is especially and relevantly so for the Christian ethic of his time.<sup>[6]</sup> In Book 2, Chapter 3 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli disparages Christianity for sapping from the people the strength required for active civil life. However, in disparaging religious morality and transcendentalism as potentially 'imaginary' and removed from reality,<sup>[7]</sup> Machiavelli does not deny that religious institutions and ethics are integral parts of any human, political society. In Chapter 18 of *The Prince*, he notoriously asserts that:

... [I]t is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated (mercy, faith, humanity, religiosity and uprightness), but it is very necessary to appear to have them... [T]o have them and always to observe them is injurious, and ... to appear to have them is useful; to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite.

He further states later in the chapter that it is of critical importance for a prince to maintain especially an *appearance* of religiosity. From this, on the one hand, it can be seen that Machiavelli does not advocate any radical, widespread departure from the maintenance of Christian virtues. He recognises the entrenched position of Christianity in his contemporary society and the fact that a prince's claim to allegiance with the Christian fraternity can well act as a

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shield guarding him from potential hatred from the people that is so anathema to effective rule.[8]

On the other hand, cross-referencing the above passages from *The Prince* and the *Discourses* with each other, one would logically conclude that Machiavelli's true stance was not only that true religiosity (of any form) in a prince is unnecessary, but that it is unwise. True religiosity requires one to be continually spiritually-minded and to live in accordance to divine ordinance. In Book 1, Chapter 14 of the *Discourses*, Papirius is lauded for his going to battle despite negative spiritual omens.[9] Furthermore, in *La Mandragola*, Callimaco's churchgoing despite his patent lack of faith helps him achieve his ends (Sumberg 1961: 328). These amount to prudent departures from religiosity as advocated in *The Prince*. Though these illustrations relate to warfare and private passions respectively, the principle underlying them can be grafted into politics without much difficulty. Further substantiating, Machiavelli approves of the saying of Gino Capponi that the Council of Ten for War should always be composed of men 'who loved their country better than their souls' (Villari 1892: 81).

In all, it is clear that for Machiavelli, adherence to religious moralities plays second fiddle to the importance of prudence and practical instrumentalism in the exigencies of the political arena; a wise prince must know how to use religious passions and sentiments, but not be used by them. Geerken (1976: 365) goes as far as to opine that Machiavelli work divorces the 'marriage made in heaven between politics and ethics' and Wilde (1928: 225) neatly summarises Machiavelli's position into the statement: 'Politics is a rude business, and not a nursery of the Christian virtues.'

## Scholarly Opinion

Needless to say, the interpretative problem created by the intricacies within Machiavelli's work has stupefied generations of academics. The collection of scholarly literature is far from satisfied, however, and remains divided.[10]

Besides the aforementioned Berlin, Meinecke (1965: 25-48), Chabod (1980), Dotti (1979), Foscolo (1972), Russo (1983) and Zanini (1984) detect a sensitivity to and a residue of morals in Machiavelli's work. Derla (1980: 35) argues that Machiavelli allowed departures from moral norms for 'emergency reasons'. Interestingly, Wolin (1960: 207), Derla (1980: 27-28), Sasso (1980: 293-327) and Struever (1992: 164-181) argue that Machiavelli's work was 'an essentially moral response inspired by a concern for man in an age of political corruption' and Dietz (1986) argues that it was a use of the 'diabolical to end the diabolical'.

On the contrary, Croce argues that Machiavelli's politics 'precedes morality as base precedes superstructure' (1914, see, Lukes 2001: 561) and that Machiavelli discovered 'the necessity and autonomy of politics, which is beyond or rather, below moral good or evil' (1945: 59). Cassirer (1944: 167), de Sanctis (1956: 511), Gentile (1968: 118), Hulliung (1983), Kahn (1986) and Mansfield (1985) offer similar arguments.

Strauss (1958), at the extreme along the continuum, contends that Machiavelli, a 'teacher of evil', advocated immoral and irreligious modes and orders.

It is submitted, with regret, that a thorough examination of the analysis and arguments of each of the abovementioned commentators lies far beyond the ambit of this paper. Provisionally, however, the conceptualisation and understanding of Machiavelli and his works in this paper are generally sympathetic with, and specifically extend upon, the aforementioned work of Berlin (1998: 43-56), Meinecke (1965: 25-48) and Derla (1980: 35).

## Conclusion

Machiavelli 'never called evil good or good evil' (Maritain 1964: 199). In fact, in the preface to Chapter 2 of the *Discourses*, he is persuaded that the world has in it 'a constant quantity of good and evil'. Upon analysis of his work, it is seen that he is an apostle for the gospel to politicians that necessity and prudence trump all other considerations. In doing so, however, he does advise conformity with the moral standards of custom and religion where possible. Accordingly, he is far from being the 'teacher of evil' that Strauss makes him out to be. Reiterating what was stated at

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the start of this paper, a morality is a code of conduct that guides actions. As such, it is opportune at this juncture to conclude with the comment that Machiavelli's prudential morality is a morality unconcerned with 'imaginary' questions of 'good' or 'evil'. True to the spirit of his work, it is merely one concerned with practical 'oughts' and 'ought nots'. Ominously, it is a morality without defined rules and without a transcendent moral underpinning (Zmora 2005: 142). Whether this counts as diabolical, however, remains for the reader to decide.

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[1] It is recognised that Machiavelli was a politician at heart and that he evinced a penchant for the political throughout the breadth of his works. In the Preface of Book 1 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli likens himself to Christopher Columbus for his discovery of 'new modes and orders' for politics. Discussion of Machiavelli's work in relation to conduct not relating to politics is thus beyond the purposes of this paper.

[2] See, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3, Chapters 11-12.

[3] It is recognised, however, that Machiavelli's consistent characterisation of *fortuna* across his works (see e.g., *The Prince*, Chapter 25; *Discourses*, Book 3, Chapter 9; 'letter to Vettori', 10 December 1513; also depicted as 'opportunity' in his poem 'On Occasion') as the feminine to be dominated by a man of *virtu* (theme recurring generally throughout *The Art of War* and *The Prince*) could impute an 'intrinsic moral nature' to the relationship between man and his environs and circumstances.

[4] See also, Cicero, *De Officiis (On Moral Obligation)*, Book 1, which puts forth the principle that wrong can be done in two ways, either by force or by fraud. Both, Cicero declares, 'are bestial' and 'wholly unworthy of man'. However, it is worth noting here that Machiavelli was not the first to preach the necessity of indulging in 'bestial' ways; in, Cicero, *De Officiis*, Book 1, Chapter 11, para 34, the Roman aristocrat informs his departing son that there may come a time when the human method for settling disputes may not be available to him, and he may need to resort to tactics of the beast (*beluarum*).

[5] Lawlessness; from the Greek *ἀντί*, 'against' + *νόμος*, 'law'. George Orwell was a frequent user of the term 'antinomian' in this secular sense. In his essay on Henry Miller, *Inside the Whale* (1940), the word appears several times, including one in which he calls A. E. Housman a writer of 'a blasphemous, antinomian, "cynical" strain', meaning defiant of arbitrary societal rules.

[6] It is worth noting here that congruently in 1536, John Calvin opined, in the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book 4, Chapter 20, para 12, that, '[N]o express declaration on this subject (specifically war, implicitly politics) is to be expected in the writings of the apostles, whose design was not to organise civil government, but to describe the spiritual kingdom of Christ.'

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[7] See, *The Prince*, Chapter 15.

[8] See, *The Prince*, Chapter 19.

[9] Cf., Appius Pulcher, in the same chapter, who was condemned for using imprudent means to circumvent soothsayers' negative auspices. His conduct led to inimical results. This suggests that a blind disregard for religious morality could constitute prudential *immorality*.

[10] See, *The Prince*, Chapter 7, where Cesare Borgia's conduct left the people at once 'satisfied and stupefied'.

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