

In approaching Machiavelli's Discourses on Livy, a classicist such as myself is in many ways on familiar terrain. Machiavelli purports to analyze the work of the ancient historian, who himself was an analyst of an even more distant Roman past. Indeed, at their most remote, some of the events narrated by Livy were nearly as far removed from his day as was the time of Charlemagne. Thus the exercise of looking back to a historian of a previous era to examine his work on a yet more distant antiquity is nothing new.

But the Discourses are not so much about engaging with the past, as about engaging with the present. Machiavelli opens the work by criticizing those who treat the past as if it is to be "rather admired than imitated" (I.P.2)—"as if heaven, sun, elements, men had varied in motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity" (I.P.2). For Machiavelli, "All worldly things in every time have their own counterpart in ancient times" (III.43.1); he "judge[s] the world always to have been in the same mode and there to have been as much good as wicked in it" (II.P.2). He compares Romans, Spartans, Aetolians, Venetians, Florentines, and Swiss on equal footing, Numa Pompilius with Savonarola, and rather amusingly refers to the ancient Gauls as the French. The book is therefore not subtly aimed at drawing direct, useful lessons for the present from knowledge of the past.

The past is thus to be taken seriously— it is not of mere antiquarian interest, to be revered or treated with kid gloves. The goal of its study is to "diligently foresee future things in every republic and to take 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" (I.39.1). The past can be not only imitated, but improved upon. For Livy is not approached with mere reverence; Machiavelli feels free to contradict him and to offer his own advice on how even the Romans could have improved upon their achievements. Rather than looking backwards, therefore, Machiavelli makes a claim to originality—as he puts it, he "takes a path as yet untrodden by anyone" (I.P.1). In examining examples of the human condition to perfect the science of managing human affairs, Machiavelli places himself at the forefront of advancing the inquiry. Indeed, he states that men's praise of the past is not always reasonable (II.P.1), and that deeds of the present may actually deserve as much praise or glory (II.P.1). It is difficult not to detect in these words a hint of reference not only to his modern historical examples, but to his own work as a historian and political scientist in comparison with the ancients.

This perspective about using—and improving upon—the lessons of the past brings us squarely to Machiavelli's present. He writes in the context of a world experiencing very real political problems. Italy is weak and divided, subject to revolutions and wars waged by foreign powers. He refers unhappily to "our irresolute Republic" of Florence, and speaks of a world "rendered weak" and "given in prey to criminal men" (II.2.2).

The problems he confronts are intractable. And the material with which to build a better government is unstable. "Human appetites are insatiable" (II.P.3) he claims; and "it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it" (I.3.1). In addition to shaky material, whatever structure one hopes to shape the polity into will have its own weaknesses. He claims that all three classical forms of government—monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy-- are "pestiferous" (I.2.5); but the mixed constitution championed by Aristotle and Polybius and implemented in a form by the Romans is no pure solution—for "in every republic there are two diverse humors, that of the people and that of the great" (I.4.1), with the irreconcilable desires of the nobles to dominate and the people not to be dominated (I.5.2) resulting in "tumults" which cannot be prevented. Even the Romans ultimately failed to solve these problems and in the end succumbed to corruption.

But Machiavelli refuses to accept these realities as the dictates of Fortune to which one must acquiesce. Human beings can in fact oppose themselves to nature in order to better their world. As he puts it, "good orders make good fortune, and from good fortune arose the happy successes of enterprises" (I.11.4). In his view, the world is in a state to be preyed on simply because the multitude "think more of enduring beatings than of avenging them" (II.2.2).

For Machiavelli, the path to take is to avenge the beatings of men. For at its heart, the Discourses comprise a work concerning itself with republics—founding them, making them strong, keeping them free. Despite his reputation for cynicism, the key assumption underlying Machiavelli’s work is that states, and their citizens, ought to be free. Most people simply want to be allowed to keep what they have and not be dominated or terrorized by those with the lust to do so. But fire must be fought with fire—if evil men are willing to use any tactic whatsoever against the people, those who wish to defend the country cannot deny themselves the use of the same arms.

For, in a critical departure from previous political philosophers, Machiavelli clearly believes that being moral is not enough. Looking after one’s own soul is useless—the goal is to actually achieve practical benefit for one’s countrymen. Indeed, Machiavelli puts it as nearly the first words of the Discourses, where he describes himself as being “driven by that natural desire that has always been in me to work, without any respect, for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone” (I.P.1).

It is perhaps worthwhile to compare Machiavelli’s stance with that of Plato’s Socrates. In his *Apology*, his defense speech before the citizens of Athens, where he stands on trial for his life on charges of corrupting the youth, he taunts his fellow citizens that they can **only harm themselves**, rather than him, by putting him to death, since they will be committing a wrong which stains their own souls—the only true harm that one can suffer—while he will suffer physical punishment but no impairment of his moral purity. He seems willing to stand before them and explain to them that they are about to do themselves grave harm, and rather than trying to avert it, he actually eggs them on with his provocative proposal that they punish him by maintaining him for life in the Prytaneum. Might morality not be better served by Socrates being willing to inflict moral harm on himself in order to preserve the people of Athens from the same? Might not Machiavelli’s advocacy of a willingness to stain one’s own soul—the only true harm one can endure, according to Socrates-- to preserve the practical benefit of one’s country be considered more noble, and perhaps more moral? The distinction between the righteous and the self-righteous is thrown into high relief. Machiavelli’s willingness to advocate sacrificing one’s own moral purity in the service of protecting fellow citizens is a radical departure from previous moral philosophy.

From this stance arises Machiavelli’s well-known acceptance, or even advocacy, of unjust or immoral methods to achieve his ends. “Close to the good,” he says, “there is always some evil” so that “it appears impossible to be able to miss the one if one wishes for the other” (III.37.1). He is willing to tolerate the frequent “tumults” arising from the conflict between the few and the many, because “whoever examines well their end will find that they engendered not any exile or violence unfavourable to the common good but laws and orders in benefit of public freedom” (I.4.1). If not formally the beginning of utilitarianism, we nevertheless have a clear statement of a political philosophy that judges the worth of thoughts and actions by their practical results, and places the highest value in terms of those results on maintaining political liberty.

Machiavelli is therefore willing to submit that “a prudent orderer of a republic, who has the intent to wish to help not himself but the common good, should contrive to have authority alone” (I.9.2), excusing on these grounds Romulus’s murder of Remus. He advocates the manipulation of religion, the use of sensational executions to maintain order among the multitude, and includes an entire chapter—the longest in the book-- on practical methods for conspiracy. Bad motives and bad deeds can lead to good ends, and may in fact be required for them. As Machiavelli himself observes, “because the reordering of a city for a political way of life presupposes a good man, and becoming head of a republic by violence presupposes a bad man, one will find that it very rarely happens that someone good wished to become prince by bad ways, even though his end be good, and that someone wicked, having become prince, wishes to work well” (I.18.4). Machiavelli’s goal can be seen as to bring about this rarity—to arm a good person with the methods of the bad in order to protect his country. “Where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland,” he says, “there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed every other concern put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty” (III.41.1).

What modes and orders may be required to defend a republic against factions and foreign powers intent on subverting its freedom is an inquiry that carries special relevance in our day.

For Machiavelli, it is a topic well worth considering, since participation in politics is in his view a practical obligation even more than a moral one. Simply put, any person of substance cannot avoid some kind of engagement with the political community. One cannot say, he posits, “I do not care for anything; I do not desire either honors or useful things; I wish to live quietly and without quarrel!” For these excuses are heard and not accepted; nor can men who have quality choose to abstain even when they choose it truly and without any ambition because it is not believed of them; so if they wish to abstain, they are not allowed by others” (III.2.1). One simply has no choice but to participate in politics, since any person of substance will not go unnoticed by those in power who have the desire to dominate. The necessity is thrust upon you—your choice is to be prepared to realistically confront nature and Fortune with all the means at your disposal—“without any respect,” as Machiavelli might say— or not.

One can, perhaps, read into Machiavelli whatever one will; but I believe it is possible to distill from the Discourses the intellectual and political philosophy of a man at once highly sensitive and highly practical. A man who sees the mismanagement of human affairs all around him, recognizes it as a threat to liberty, and even in the service of a humanity he considers fundamentally flawed, requires—if nothing else on a practical level—the active engagement of anyone of talent to resist the malignity of fortune and set things right, even at the expense of sacrificing one’s own morality, to benefit the common good. And the method he proposes for understanding how to achieve success is the use of rational human inquiry to seek guidance and inspiration from the deeds of other men who have come before. I submit that there can be no more humanistic proposition.