

Machiavelli: A Proto-Pluralist?

Written by Emil Panzaru

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EMIL PANZARU, AUG 16 2013

Who is Niccolo Machiavelli? Some say he is a demon in disguise. Indeed, this Renaissance thinker is so 'Machiavellian' that he has devised his masterpiece, *The Prince*, as an elaborate republican trap for the Medici family![1] Others, like Isaiah Berlin, claim that he is a forerunner of political pluralism.[2]

I will argue that Machiavelli is neither a hero, nor evil incarnate, and reject Berlin's hypothesis. I will claim that Machiavelli is an amoral political realist, who thought politics is a field of its own, not based on morality.

But what is this morality we speak of? I take it to be a compound of two parts: metaphysical and empirical. Metaphysical morality represents a set of principles that we believe are universal, uniform (they apply to everybody in the same manner—'Thou shall not kill') and constraining (one cannot escape their fate—The Final Judgement). People base these laws on a third party—be it God or natural law. This external force is taken to be absolute: God is Almighty, natural law cannot be denied. Empirical morality is a follow-up of the metaphysical one. It includes our judgements and actions based on those initial principles. Thus, all our actions as subjective beings depend on an objective reason.

An amoral person is one who severs this connection between metaphysical and empirical morality: there is no God/natural law to justify our actions. Morality is not the end purpose of our deeds.[3]

Amorality is what Machiavelli seeks to achieve. He invites us to see the world as it is, not as we would want it to be.[4] Our human nature is revealed to the prince by the centaur Chiron: half man, half beast.[5] To take his analogy further, the feet of a centaur are those of a horse, and those are the ones propelling us. In other words, our inner beast drives us. Human beings are selfish. They constantly crave for elements to satisfy their desires. Acquisition is, therefore, never-ending. States (whether republics, or principalities) conquer, people steal. This leads to insecurity both among people and among states.[6] The ordering principle of the world is not God or some disembodied virtue, but an atmosphere of chaos and violence—a playground for the accidental, or Fortuna.

In this unstable, insecure universe of man, a prince cannot cling to the rigidity of ethics unless he wants the stream of events (a metaphor Machiavelli himself uses) to overwhelm him.[7] His primary, permanent concern becomes survival and security out of necessity (because of the chaotic nature of this world) and for Machiavelli, the ruler and the state are one. The latter is not the impersonal state we know of today. It is acquired *by* someone, described as belonging *to* somebody. The ruler's survival and security, therefore, imply the stability and continuous existence of the state.[8]

As a consequence, Fortuna does not constitute a metaphysical moral element because it is *not* a one-way street. The prince builds order from the disorder of this world by embracing both continuity and change, by adapting to live on. He *overcomes* fortune, the day to day challenges, and the ever-changing preferences of his people on whom a prince's rule depends. The ruler is able to do this because he understands *contexts* plus people and can subsequently predict reactions and outcomes (prudentialia). In this instance, he is very-much what Jonathan Haidt calls "Homo economicus": a rational, selfish actor who does a cost-benefit analysis of *situations* and makes choices based on the best possible result.[9]

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Machiavelli likens this side of a prince to a fox: intelligent and cunning.[10] The fox is a shifty creature: it judges based on *contexts and situations*. Thus, Machiavelli describes at length different types of principalities, their characteristics, and how certain specific methods are required to approach them.[11] Stability and security are, as a result, *particular* in shape. They are not 'one size fits all' shirts fit to accommodate a single solution. It's not so much 'the ends justifying the means' as 'appropriate means for appropriate ends in the right states'. A discriminating rationality, not an absolute uniform morality, is the one at the steering wheel, making decisions.

However, this does not mean that the latter has simply disappeared, but it has been recycled to serve the prince. His subjects will still judge him based on a good image (they will grant him 'glory', as Machiavelli puts it), even though they are unable to understand his true character. Therefore, one cannot just be a fox because that would distance you from your people, an act which leads to you being vulnerable in the face of competition (other nobles) and inevitably to your downfall. As a follow-up, the prince should avoid immorality for its own sake, if he doesn't want to end up a (dead) tyrant like Commodus.[12] As a result, it is sometimes rational to act or simply to appear to act morally because it is in the prince's interest to do so.[13]

This brings us to the second animal: the lion, connected to the people, sporting an impeccable moral image and charisma. If the fox is the rational side, the lion is the younger, courageous, masculine part that can seize, not just anticipate, opportunities. He can use Fortuna to his own advantage.[14] It is the quality made evident in Tony Blair when he rose to the leadership of the Labour Party following the death of John Smith. Blair turned the misfortune of his party into a trampoline both for the success of the Labour Party and his own.[15]

We arrive at a paradox. Morality is neither completely excluded, nor upheld for its own sake. It is no longer an absolute word with a capital 'M', only a tool to be found in the skills (the *virtu*) of a prince. He should strive neither to be inherently good, nor evil, but to employ either when necessary (i.e. when this or that method yields the best result according to his interest— the state and subsequently his own security).[16] Metaphysical morality is no more, while logic has 'hijacked' empirical morality for its own purpose (politics).

This is the essential duality and amorality of Machiavelli's ethics, the fox and the lion that dissolve morality into a means, not an end. Isaiah Berlin also sees a duality in his politics, though it is of a different nature.

Berlin begins his account by recognising Machiavelli as a 'mirror of philosophers'. Thinkers over the ages have peered into his works and saw themselves, what they cherish or what they hate. Berlin ends by committing the same mistake, assimilating Machiavelli into his own theory of freedom—negative liberty (or freedom from), only possible to attain if one rejects the tyrannical conception of rationalism, that there is only one truth in this world we must find. He proposes pluralism as a solution: instead of there being *no* truth (amorality), Berlin suggests we should accept *all* competing opinions as valid.[17] Machiavelli then becomes a Renaissance champion who opened the way to pluralism, by pitting ancient values against Christianity.[18] This claim rests on another conceived equivalence between Machiavelli and Aristotle's views on politics.[19] Nothing can be further from the truth.

First of all, Machiavelli rejects the unity of virtue that Aristotle endorsed. This doctrine assumed that moral values are interconnected. Of course, no one single person can embody all virtues, but the more the better. Simply put, the best man in terms of ethics is the best politician.[20] Machiavelli would answer: the best man would not make a good politician. In fact, if a good man were to enter politics, he would inevitably have to make moral concessions to become a successful politician and see his plans through. He would point to Nelson Mandela for an instructive case. We all look up to Mandela as a paragon of virtue and a hero who fought against the unfair apartheid regime. If we can remove our rose-tinted glasses and look closer at what actually happened, we discover that Mandela reluctantly accepted collaboration between the African National Convention and The Communist Party and actually led a parallel paramilitary organisation, the Umkhonto we Sizwe, in order to achieve freedom for the oppressed majority in South Africa.[21] Mandela acted like a true prince: he set aside his own moral considerations and the ones society endorses because he knew there was no way to abolish apartheid other than violence. Machiavelli is revealed through this objection as a political realist. Politics does not play by the rules of society. On the contrary, it runs against them from time to time.

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The second objection follows from the first. Machiavelli does not accept the doctrine of the mean, central to Aristotle's philosophy. Just as good men are not good politicians, certain virtues should be avoided by the prince. One of these is moderation, which in politics makes you look indecisive. In other words, a moderate prince can only flip-flop (as Mitt Romney discovered).[22] Machiavelli comes up with a better solution. His idea of equilibrium involves combining two extremes: for instance, being generous by not taxing your subjects and being greedy by pillaging other states and/or taxing the nobles.[23] It is the 'shock and awe' tactic that Cesare Borgia employs with the execution of his adjutant Remirro de Orco, which at once satisfies the beasts in people (that harboured hatred and desired revenge), makes them both fear and love and thus respect Borgia.[24] An able prince combines good and evil, love and fear, generosity and greed, as part of his virtue.

Finally, it has become clear that Machiavelli is not a staunch supporter of Aristotle's virtue ethics, but he does not totally rebuke Christianity either. The very conception of humanity as being inherently bad and of the prince trying to contain this chaotic evil stems from Christian philosophy.[25] Furthermore, in *The Prince*, we find examples of good rulers in the likes of Pope Julius II.[26] Therefore, the ultimate 'sin' for Machiavelli is not Christianity per se, but putting a metaphysical conception of morality (be it classical or Christian) above politics. If one follows the doctrine of the mean, he is indecisive (as we have seen). Conversely, if somebody is a Christian to a tee, he will be weak.[27]

Berlin ends up contradicting himself: Machiavelli is said to endorse an ancient virtue taken by mistake to include classical Greek morality, when the Renaissance thinker is actually denying it. Berlin himself admits this when he reconstructs Machiavelli as a political pluralist, we learn that there is no Aristotelian *telos*, an ultimate truth that guides Machiavelli.[28] So why would he choose one over the other? Berlin anticipates this objection, so the two former opposites are now depicted "side by side," and Machiavelli simply "prefers" one over the other, without any reason left as to why.[29]

A clearer picture of Machiavelli emerges if we do not conceive him as challenging Christianity with ancient values, but liberating politics from both. He does not want morality to act as a compass for politics, but neither should immorality. However, if morality is no longer our universal standard, it ceases to *be* morality according to my definition. That is why it is of no importance if the prince as a lion *appears* to be moral or if he really *is* moral.[30]

Machiavelli's efforts paid off in time. His negative view of human nature, emphasis on the autonomy of politics, morality as a useful image for the politician rather than an end in itself, and on the primacy of state interests make him a forerunner of political realism. Centuries after *The Prince* was written, Hans Morgenthau will use these very same principles to elaborate his theory of international relations.[31] *The Prince* lives on.

In conclusion, Niccolo Machiavelli is neither an Ethics teacher, nor a corruptor. He is a political psychologist who studied people in politics and concluded that politics should be a field of its own. He is a political realist: neither moral, nor immoral, but amoral.

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