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A Machiavellian Christian: Analyzing the Political Theology of 'The Prince'

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**A Machiavellian Christian:
Analyzing the Political Theology of *The Prince***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors Studies in History

By

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Spring 2016
History
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Introduction

Few individuals in the history of political philosophy are as polarizing as Niccolò Machiavelli. One of the most prominent figures of the Renaissance, the name of Machiavelli quickly became known to his contemporaries and to posterity as a symbol of duplicity, immorality, and ruthless pragmatism. After its posthumous publication in 1532,¹ *The Prince* granted its author recognition throughout Christendom as being “of the devil,” and this historical tradition has continued to dominate the majority of scholarly and public opinion on Machiavelli ever since.² Machiavelli was hardly alone in promulgating a political philosophy that was not in perfect synchronization with Christian morality, yet he stands above all others in the ranks of those considered irreligious and heretical. A long line of philosophers, theorists, and even reformers such as Martin Luther advised actions that opposed prevailing religious sentiment and teaching, and most have seen history and scholarship either ignore or vindicate their positions—with the seemingly singular exception of Machiavelli. As noted by historian Quentin Skinner: “so much notoriety has gathered around Machiavelli’s name that the charge of being a Machiavellian still remains a serious accusation in political debate.”³

Seminal and formative scholarship on Machiavelli has hitherto largely dismissed or generalized the interplay between the author and the religious Christian intellectual milieu of Renaissance Florence. In his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*—an

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull (London: Penguin, 1999). Except where noted, all references in English are to Bull’s edition, hereafter cited as Bull, *The Prince*, here xii.

² Maurizio Viroli, *Redeeming The Prince: The Meaning of Machiavelli’s Masterpiece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1.

³ Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

erudite and expansive two-volume introduction to the transitional period of political thought spanning from the late thirteenth-century to the end of the sixteenth-century—Skinner innovatively argued that, contrary to prevailing belief, *The Prince* was not a work *sui generis*, but rather: a “contribution to the *genre* of advice-books for princes which at the same time revolutionized the *genre* itself.”⁴ Though Skinner conducts his reading of *The Prince* within the surrounding context of Italian humanism, skillfully placing the arguments of Machiavelli in the existing current of other writers such as Pontano, Castiglione, and Patrizi, his study still largely neglects extending this contextual framework to the relationship of Machiavelli and religion. Skinner instead focuses on Machiavelli’s criticism and revision of several tenants of contemporary Florentine humanism, and his challenges to “the prevailing assumptions of the mirror-for-princes writers in discussing the role of *virtù* in political life.”⁵

The most obvious of these challenges is in Machiavelli’s denial of the “central conclusion” of previous leading theorists of princely government: “that if a ruler wishes to maintain his state and achieve the goals of honor, glory, and fame, he needs above all to cultivate the full range of Christian as well as moral virtues.” Machiavelli “rejects with great vehemence” this prevailing belief—instead asserting that the only true way for a ruler to maintain his state is to “shake off the demands of Christian virtue, wholeheartedly embracing the very different morality which his situation dictates.”⁶ However, Skinner rightly notes that the main locus of Machiavelli’s advice “does not generally involve him in abandoning the conventional moral norms,” but rather the

⁴ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. 1: *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 118 (emphasis original).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 131; 134-35.

“essential contrast” between Machiavelli and his humanist contemporaries is between two different moralities: “two rival and incompatible accounts of what ought ultimately to be done.”⁷

Recent scholarship, however, has begun to reexamine the religious and moral assessments of Machiavelli and his writings. Several scholars have delved into the direct connections between Judeo-Christian scripture and theology and Machiavelli’s political writings—most often focusing on *The Prince* in particular. For his part, John H. Geerken argues that for Machiavelli, Moses was fundamentally important and provided Machiavelli a “middle ground between pagan and Christian alternatives.”⁸ Geerken asserts that Machiavelli used Moses:

“not to make fundamentally ironic points about religion to an audience already imbued with anticlericalism, but to personify and dramatize his claim that the military and the prophetic can be effectively conjoined, indeed must be so conjoined if long-term political greatness is to be successfully achieved.”⁹

Rather than accept an ironic or simply rhetorically utilitarian purpose for Machiavelli’s linking of God and Moses with separate, secular and pagan historical figures, Geerken takes the position that by introducing God and Moses: “Machiavelli was manipulating basically secular and potentially skeptical readers into more willing acceptance of a

⁷ Ibid., 135. See in this connection also Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 25-79, originally published in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron P. Gilmore (Florence: Sansoni, 1927), 147-206.

⁸ John H. Geerken, “Machiavelli’s Moses and Renaissance Politics,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 594-95.

⁹ Ibid., 595.

religious dimension by inserting it and then immediately withdrawing it.”¹⁰ Geerken’s discussion rests on the implicit assumption that Machiavelli (to put it colloquially) ‘believed in’ both God and Moses as understood by orthodox biblical theology. Therefore, their invocation was an honest reference to their respective roles and legitimacy, biblically understood, that Machiavelli marshalled in order to provide religious exemplification for his cause of reforming contemporary religion and restoring liberty to Florence.

In contrast, Graham Hammill explores this interplay between Judeo-Christian theology Machiavelli’s political thought, but with a rather disparate result than that of Geerken. Hammill, in *The Mosaic Constitution*, analyzes the uses and implication of the scriptural figure of Moses and his role in the emergence of early modern concepts of the state—beginning with Machiavelli.¹¹ Like Geerken, Hammill asserts one of the ways Machiavelli used Moses in *The Prince* was “to measure Savonarola’s successes and failures.”¹² However, Hammill goes on to state: “in the process showing how a new prince needs to use the fiction of religion to maintain obedience through the manipulation of belief.”¹³ Hammill begins his study of political theology—understood by him as the “seemingly unavoidable level of commerce between religious belief and civil modes of communal life that distresses and stains the idea of a purely secular political community”—with Machiavelli because: “not only does Machiavelli initiate a secular vision of politics; he also probes the politico-theological predicaments that this vision of

¹⁰ Ibid., 591.

¹¹ Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹² Ibid., 1; See in this connection also Geerken, “Machiavelli’s Moses,” 591-92.

¹³ Hammill, *Mosaic Constitution*, 1.

politics produces in an attempt to sort them out.”¹⁴ Moses and Hebrew scripture, then, serve for Machiavelli in *The Prince* nothing more than a utilitarian purpose: examples of how a prince can “instrumentalize religious belief in order to legitimate and bolster his authority” through the use of “divine violence” and scripturally-related “charismatic authority.”¹⁵ Hammill also notes that Machiavelli forged “a new link between ancient Jewish texts and the Christian West” through treating “Hebrew scripture as political history.”¹⁶

In addition to these textually focused discussions, more expansive methodological studies considering the question of Machiavelli and his Christianity have been lately produced. Some contemporary scholars, such as Maurizio Viroli, have argued for an interpretation of Machiavelli and *The Prince*, in particular, much more deeply embedded in a religious context. Viroli contends explicitly that religion—especially “Christian religion properly interpreted”—was a fundamental element of Machiavelli’s republican political thought, and “utterly necessary to found, preserve, and reform good political orders.”¹⁷ According to Viroli:

“Machiavelli thought of himself as a Christian: a Christian sui generis, certainly not a Christian in full compliance with the church of Rome; with a God all his own, but not a God that he invented out of whole cloth; in other words, a God that

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷ Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), xi-xiii.

had a great deal in common with the God that existed in the religious consciousness of the Florence of his time.”¹⁸

And while Viroli goes on to qualify his position, stating: “I think that the Christian God did not occupy the central place in Machiavelli’s soul. His own spiritual food, the one that was giving him true life as he understood it, was love of country”—his interpretation does not wholly rule out the possibility of a religious salvation of Machiavelli’s eternal soul.¹⁹ In accordance with this view, Viroli argues in a separate work that: “Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* to design and invoke a redeemer of Italy capable of creating, with God’s help, new and good political order, thereby attaining perennial glory.”²⁰

Other scholars, such as Robert Black, reinforce the regnant, traditional view of Machiavelli as an irreligious—if not atheistic—pragmatist whose relationship with Christianity goes only so far as is politically useful. Indeed, in the Preface to his intellectual biography, simply titled *Machiavelli*, Black states his authorial purpose as an attempt to: “begin to bring the vast subject of Machiavelli—as it has lately developed—to a wider readership.”²¹ For Black, however, any ‘lately developed’ scholarship that sought to “whitewash Machiavelli the radical” was “misleading” and “misguided”, if not categorically incorrect.²² In fact, he argues that Machiavelli was: “history’s most startling commentator on politics”; who, characterized by his “radical” “uniqueness”, believed that “politics were outside the realm of ethical principles.”²³ Black’s Machiavelli “was no conventional Christian, indeed no Christian at all, and possibly even an effective atheist.

¹⁸ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁹ Ibid., xiii.

²⁰ Viroli, *Redeeming The Prince*, 3.

²¹ Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (New York: Routledge, 2013), xxvii.

²² Ibid., xix-xxiv.

²³ Ibid., xviii-xix.

While he did accept the existence of a natural order, he did not believe in a moral or providential order,” who “died a religious radical—with no second thoughts about the life he had led.”²⁴

The debate over Machiavelli’s Christianity has been waged since even before the Florentine himself was even laid to rest. Francesco Guicciardini, a humanist contemporary and close friend of Machiavelli, once joked in a letter: “My very dear Machiavelli...if at this age you start to think about your soul, because, since you have always lived in a contrary belief, it would be attributed rather to senility than to goodness.”²⁵ This is a question that persisted throughout the sixteenth-century and beyond. But despite the voluminous work dedicated to the study of Niccolò Machiavelli and his writings, however, the majority of scholarship has given short shrift to the relationship between Machiavelli’s political theology and the Christian context from which it emerged.

Black and Viroli, therefore, stand at (or at least very near) the forefront of the opposing sides of this newly emerging scholarly spectrum. In promulgating their views, each dutifully enlists scores of academics, theorists, and accepted sources—both contemporary and historical—to assert their respective arguments in comprehensive and persuasive ways. It speaks to the truly innovative and lasting impact of Machiavelli and his writings, so often characterized by paradox and ambiguity, that separate parties can believably, if not definitively, present almost completely opposite moral and religious

²⁴ Ibid., xix; 287.

²⁵ Francesco Guicciardini to Machiavelli, dated 17 May 1521. Except where noted, all personal correspondences in English are to *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*, trans. by James Atkinson and David Sices (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), hereafter cited as Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, here 221.

interpretations. Arguably, this is a debate that can never be solved. However, understanding the unique version and role of religious morality and theology (more specifically, those of Christianity) in the political philosophy of Machiavelli remains quintessential to interpreting his works, as well as contributing a crucially influential piece to the broader scholarly interest regarding religion in the development of modernity.

Rather than attempt to authoritatively prove whether or not Machiavelli the man was or was not a Christian, or even to what extent he subscribed to orthodox Christian teachings in his personal life, the much more fruitful task lies in examining these elements within the political philosophy expounded in his writings and how they could have emerged out of his Christian context. This is a goal quite similar to those of Black and Viroli. Black, as previously mentioned, finds Machiavelli to be an innovative radical: repeatedly rejecting the norms and contentions of his socio-theological context. Viroli, on the other hand, finds Machiavelli to be a variation on a theme: a resulting product of his humanist and Christian environment, who seeks to reform the contours of action and belief from within, rather rejecting or standing wholly apart.

If Black and Viroli represent the opposing extremes of scholarly interpretation, I contend that the answer therefore lies somewhere towards the middle—though, admittedly, much closer to the side of Viroli. While Machiavelli was undoubtedly a unique and innovative theorist and writer, when viewed through the interpretive framework of the humanist and Christian religious traditions that comprised the socio-political intellectual milieu of Renaissance Florence, many of his putatively radical or irreligious beliefs and prescriptions take on a much less revolutionary simulacrum. His

characterization as an amoral misanthrope, or, as Black repeatedly opines, “an effective atheist,”²⁶ is largely textually unfounded, and misunderstands the explicit goals and desires of Machiavelli. However, the narrow, humanistic definition of Renaissance Christianity used by Viroli in placing Machiavelli within his social context—while, in my opinion, largely accurate and scholastically necessary—inappropriately minimizes the inimical and striking reaction of his contemporaries. Such reaction to *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* denote the presence of unique differences between how and what Machiavelli was saying compared to more orthodox humanist and religious theorists.

In this paper I will argue the thesis that the beliefs and intellectual traditions surrounding Christian conceptions of morality and theology played a fundamental role in Machiavelli’s political philosophy. Despite his comparative originality and pragmatic focus, Machiavelli’s ideological foundation was composed of such religious elements, and are thus inseparable from his political thought. Rather than mark the divorce of politics and religion, then, Machiavelli’s basic understanding of the world was steeped in the Florentine Christian milieu from which it emerged. While his beliefs were reframed through his own unique framework of political expediency, he neither sought nor succeeded in recasting successful politics outside the realm of conventional morality. The ultimate purpose of Machiavelli’s political works, including and especially that of *The Prince*, was intended to promote governance that would allow for the best welfare of his country and its people, and from the texts themselves it is clear that he did not conceive of the possibility that such goals could be achieved without traditional morality or Christian religious theology.

²⁶ Black, *Machiavelli*, xix.

The Nature of Things

Before considering any theological or moral implications of the numerous, and often controversial, pragmatic precepts that constitute the corpus of Machiavellian political advice, it is crucial to first explore and define various aspects of Machiavelli's political world. Within the sphere of political action, and in a broader sense the world at large,²⁷ Machiavelli understood there to be several distinct elements that determined the outcome and progression of human endeavors—each characterized by its own unique nature, each independent, but also invariably impacted by its interaction with the others. Of these, by far the most significant being: God, fortune, and human nature itself. Machiavelli built his political philosophy upon, and often in reaction to, the ideological cornerstone of his interpretation of these three natures and their corresponding relationships. His views on nature are the collective wellspring from which all of his subsequent advice flows.

Such an analytical framework has been asserted and accepted by countless scholars across almost as many decades. Indeed, many in the scholarly contingent who hold Machiavelli as a piteously pragmatic profligate, prophet of the pursuit of power in politics, and the premier purveyor of personal pessimism point to his explicit statements regarding nature as proof. Robert Black, for example, maintains that: “Machiavelli had a fundamental set of principles that changed little throughout his writings,” and proceeds to repeatedly utilize Machiavelli's assorted invectives on human nature to support his scholarly interpretation that the Florentine's immutable principles included a belief in

²⁷ For my purposes, however, I will mostly restrict the following discussion to the realm of politics and human government, as was the preferred framework of our advisor to princes.

“evil human nature, [the] rejection of Christianity and orthodox religion.”²⁸ When introducing his discussion to *The Prince*, Black declares: “The environment of *The Prince* is overwhelmingly negative: it is a corrupt political world that the new prince inhabits”; and goes on to supplement this assertion with various statements of disapprobation from Machiavelli toward the nature of man.²⁹

Black is doubtlessly correct when he states that: “growth and development were not key features of Machiavelli’s ideas,” due to maintaining a “fundamental set of principles,” as I have similarly introduced. It is only when concerning the exact makeup of these precepts that I diverge from Black and many others. This departure from Black and those of his critical persuasion begins with an opposite comprehension of Machiavelli’s views of nature. Such a different interpretation [or similar, for that matter] is not due to an antithetical reading of Machiavelli’s texts, however, but to a far more accurate contextual understanding of the Christian milieu from which they emerged. For what has largely been overlooked or misunderstood by both popular perception and scholarly consideration, is the close proximity—even near-canonical similarity—that Machiavelli’s presented interpretations of human nature, the nature of God, and the nature of fortune, have to the traditions of orthodox Judeo-Christian religious thought and conventional Florentine Renaissance humanism.

Human Nature

At the very heart of Machiavelli’s ideology lies a specific, underlying belief about the nature of mankind upon which his subsequent political advice is built. Indeed, as we

²⁸ Black, *Machiavelli*, xxv.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

have seen, it is often for his view of human nature that Machiavelli is most condemned. As Skinner notes: “the main reason for the shocking tone Machiavelli tends to employ lies in his deeply pessimistic view of human nature.”³⁰ Black echoes this sentiment, asserting: “He was the first philosopher of misanthropy: for Machiavelli, there was not a spark of good in human nature.”³¹

In order to analyze Machiavelli’s view of human nature, it is first necessary to expose the inherent duality present in nature as assumed by all medieval and Renaissance thinkers. To Machiavelli and these other theorists, human nature was to be understood as both innately designated and universally applicable.³² That is, humans as a species share a common nature, containing a general set of inborn, naturally-attributable predispositions that are fixed and universally applicable to all people across all places and times.³³ Additionally, just as the whole of mankind shares a general nature, so also do

³⁰ Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 137.

³¹ Black, *Machiavelli*, xviii.

³² For a more thorough explanation of duality of nature and Machiavelli’s perception of it, see in this connection the excellent essay by Janet Coleman, “Machiavelli’s *via moderna*: Medieval and Renaissance Attitudes to History,” in *Niccolò Machiavelli’s The Prince: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. by Martin Coyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 50-53. As Coleman rightly points out, in order to fully grasp Machiavelli’s view of nature, it is necessary to understand the conditions of historical analysis utilized and shared by all medieval and Renaissance thinkers, including Machiavelli: “It is important to realise that this medieval and Renaissance approach assumed and was aware of assuming two things. First, the world to be experienced is perceived to be as it is and is presumed to be as it was, that is, the world to be experienced is and always has been stable. This is what enables men to perceive certain conditions in the present and judge them to be similar to those in the past and hence, conditions are thought to repeat themselves. . . . Second, the human mind has fixed ways of operating when it experiences and considers experience. What varies over time is not the world that is experienced or mind in its understanding of experiences but *language*” (49; italics original).

³³ Cary J. Nederman, “Amazing Grace: Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli’s Thought,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 622.

people “possess ingrained individual characteristics,” creating “fixed patterns of personal conduct.”³⁴

For example, beginning in Chapter III of *The Prince*, entitled *Composite principalities*, Machiavelli immediately establishes the tenor of his analysis of humanity. Difficulties arise in new principalities, Machiavelli informs, particularly if it is a scion of former state, where:

“Disorders there arise chiefly because of one natural difficulty always encountered in new principalities. What happens is that men willingly change their ruler, expecting to fare better. This expectation induces them to take up arms against him; but they only deceive themselves, and they learn from experience that they have made matters worse.”³⁵

From this warning, Machiavelli outlines his understanding of both aspects of human nature. Firstly, that men have specific, inborn characteristics, that he describes to be: fickleness, over-ambition, ingratitude, naivety, and discontent; and secondly, that they ‘always’ occur, and are no less than ‘natural’ to all mankind, and thus natural to the states and principalities of which they comprise the populace.³⁶ *The Prince* provides numerous explicit statements outlining Machiavelli’s opinion of human nature, or, more specifically, the deficiencies endemic to human nature. Taken together, these

³⁴ Ibid., 623. See in this connection also Coleman, “Machiavelli’s *via moderna*,” 53-57.

³⁵ *The Prince*, 3 (Bull, *The Prince*, 8).

³⁶ Machiavelli continues to hold this general view throughout his writing. For instance, see the persistence in the Preface to Book II of his *Discourses*: “Besides this, human appetites are insatiable, for since from nature they have had ability and the wish to desire all things and from fortune the ability to achieve few of them, there continually results from this a discontent in human minds and a disgust with the things they possess.” Except where noted, all references in English are to *Discourses on Livy*, trans. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), hereafter cited as Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, here 125.

characteristic traits of nature form the backbone of a topos prolific in the whole of the Machiavellian corpus, almost invariably emphasized when Machiavelli presents his precepts of political methodology.

Continuing on in Chapter VI: *New principalities acquired by one's own arms and prowess*, Machiavelli, explaining the difficulty of acquiring a principality, notes the “lukewarm support” forthcoming from those who could prosper under the new order as stemming: “partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the existing laws on their side, and partly because men are generally incredulous, never really trusting new things unless they have tested them by experience.”³⁷ So while men are prone to naivety and capricious, self-seeking desires, their actions and self-interest can also be heavily shaped by fear and an incredulous perception toward change. Because of these apprehensions, as he previously stated in the same chapter, instead: “men nearly always follow the tracks made by others and proceed in their affairs by imitation.”³⁸ These beliefs are reiterated in the *Discourses*, serving to underpin a similar discussion on why “men always praise ancient times...and accuse the present”: “as men hate things either from fear or from envy, two very powerful causes of hared come to be eliminated in past things”.³⁹

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli goes on to synthesize these opinions in seeking to enunciate the necessity for all new princes to utilize force as well as persuasion: “That is why all armed prophets have conquered, and unarmed prophets have come to grief. Besides what I have said already the populace is by nature fickle; it is easy to persuade

³⁷ *The Prince*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 21).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 19).

³⁹ *Discourses*, II, Preface (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 123).

them of something, but difficult to confirm them in that persuasion.”⁴⁰ Later, in doubtless one of the most oft referenced of his statements on human nature and highlighting his now-infamous contribution to the age-old question as to whether it is better for a prince to be loved or feared (Ch. XVII), Machiavelli reiterates almost verbatim these same deficient qualities in yet another bluntly acerbic summation: “One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit; while you treat them well, they are yours....But when you are in danger they turn away.”⁴¹

Machiavelli further reinforces this perception of human nature in Chapter XVII: *Cruelty and compassion; and whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse*—this time emphasizing mankind’s characteristic gullibility: “Men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived.”⁴² This sentiment is also echoed in the *Discourses*, where he notes: “For the generality of men feed on what appears as much as on what is; indeed, many times they are moved more by things that appear than by things that are.”⁴³ The gullibility of men is heavily influenced by mankind’s subjugation to the senses. As he says later in *The Prince*: “Men in general judge by their eyes rather than their hands; because everyone is in a position to watch, few are in a position to come in close touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.”⁴⁴ This results in judgments being made only on outcome: “In the actions of all men, and especially

⁴⁰ *The Prince*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 21).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 17 (Bull, *The Prince*, 54).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17 (Bull, *The Prince*, 57).

⁴³ *Discourses*, I, 25 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 60).

⁴⁴ *The Prince*, 18 (Bull, *The Prince*, 58).

princes, where there is no court of appeal, one judges by the result.”⁴⁵ “The common people are always impressed by appearances and results,” Machiavelli concludes—exemplifying further the reasons why ‘men follow the tracks made by others’ who were successful and ‘proceed in their affairs by imitation.’⁴⁶

In my opinion, the most important statement in understanding Machiavelli’s view of human nature, and the subsequent political theology propounded in *The Prince* occurs in Chapter XVIII: *How princes should honor their word*. After describing why a prince should act like both the fox and the lion—as it is sometimes necessary for a prudent ruler to deceive others and break his word—thus revising Cicero’s metaphor,⁴⁷ Machiavelli bases his defense on a single statement on human nature: “If all men were good, this precept would not be good; but because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them.”⁴⁸ Machiavelli makes very clear that his advice operates upon an ideology centered within the realm of experienced reality. This is the foundation he builds upon when he asserts later in the *Discourses*:

“As all those demonstrate who reason on a civil way of life, and as every history is full of examples, it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it 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”.⁴⁹

While this might seem a detached, if not flippant, condemnation of humanity, Machiavelli’s expressed opinion of human nature is squarely scriptural. Beginning even

⁴⁵ Ibid., 18 (Bull, *The Prince*, 58).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18 (Bull, *The Prince*, 58).

⁴⁷ See in this connection the essay by J.J. Barlow, “The Fox and the Lion: Machiavelli replies to Cicero,” in *History of Political Thought* 20, no. 4 (1999): 627-645.

⁴⁸ *The Prince*, 18 (Bull, *The Prince*, 57).

⁴⁹ *Discourses*, I, 3 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 15).

in Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Torah and the Christian Bible, man is shown to be fickle, ungrateful, prone to lying, susceptible to deceit, and utterly wretched. Within the first three chapters of Genesis: Eve (the first woman) was deceived by the serpent; Adam (the first man), following her, disobeyed explicit orders from God; they hid themselves from God when He called; each cast blame on another when confronted with their sins; and were cast out of paradise.⁵⁰ From then on, as Judeo-Christian theology teaches, all men were born with an inherent sin nature: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”; “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me”; “God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one”; “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”; “For out of the heart proceed evil thought, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”⁵¹

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Romans, perhaps most effectively summarizes the inherent negativity of human nature as seen in Christian religion:

“As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit;

⁵⁰ Genesis 3:1-6, 6, 9-10; 12-13; 23-24. (All references are to the Vulgate edition. Except where noted, all English translations are from the King James Version [K.J.V.]

⁵¹ Genesis 6:5-6; Psalms 51:5; 53:3-4; Jeremiah 17:9; Matthew 15:19.

the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes.”⁵²

Here Paul points to nearly the same collection of characteristics as Machiavelli in explaining the nature of man. Similarly, Paul charges men as: naïve, lacking understanding, deceitful, liars, bitter, conceited, ungrateful, prone to their own destructive ways and ambition. And this fallen nature is both universal and inherently inborn. Paul goes on to famously conclude: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”.⁵³

This Christian doctrine, commonly referred to as “Original Sin,” was most famously promulgated by St. Augustine of Hippo. Developed largely through his debates against the Pelagians, Augustine’s articulation of original sin soon became a central pillar of Christian orthodoxy. As he writes in his treatise *On Nature and Grace*: “Man’s nature, indeed, was created at first faultless and without any sin...But the flaw which darkens and weakens all those natural goods, it has not contracted from its blameless Creator...but from that original sin, which it committed of its own free-will.”⁵⁴ Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas taught what can be called a “modified Augustinianism” position of

⁵² Romans 3:10-18.

⁵³ Romans 3:23.

⁵⁴ St. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 55.3, 4. See in this connection also the explanation and context of Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. by Roy W. Battenhouse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 212-229, especially 218-19.

original sin.⁵⁵ The Thomist position held the nature of original sin as consisting of the lack of original righteousness, passed on from Adam to his descendants by their natural birth.⁵⁶ Such doctrines pervaded the understanding of medieval Christian theology, and later served to underpin precepts common to both the Calvinist and Lutheran schools of the Reformation.⁵⁷ In his ponderous study on “the Fall” of man and the doctrine of original sin, Norman Powell Williams explains:

“In the last analysis [before the Reformation] original sin—the sin of universal human nature as such, apart from the actual sins of individuals—is the only real sin that exists. Actual sin is regarded as being merely an *epiphenomenon*—a loathsome efflorescence of which the foul root is the inherent sinfulness of humanity.”⁵⁸

Thus, individual sins were simply scions of the natural human condition.

Machiavelli’s opinion of human nature as expressed in *The Prince*, then, is largely similar to one of the defining doctrines of the Christian moral tradition, and wholly grounded in a specific religious interpretation found throughout the scriptures—especially regarding how easily men are deceived, their wretchedness, and bad faith. In his *Tercets on Ambition*, Machiavelli explicates this understanding of human nature by painting an even more explicitly biblical, Augustinian view of the fall of man resulting in

⁵⁵ See in this connection the book by Norman Powell Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1927), xxiv-xxv.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiv. See in this connection also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, i.qq.xciv-i.iae.q.lxxxii.a.3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 432-433.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 433.

an inborn sin-nature characterized by greed and covetousness.⁵⁹ Speaking of the vices of “Ambition and Avarice,” Machiavelli decries: “When man was born into the world, they were born too; and if they had no existence, happy enough would be our condition.”⁶⁰ For, “hardly had God made the stars, the heavens, the light, the elements, and man—master over so many things of beauty—and had quelled the pride of angels,” then man sinned, and “through them the quiet and happy life always lived in Adam’s dwelling with Peace and Charity took flight,” and God was forced to “[banish] Adam with his wife for their tasting of the apple” from “Paradise.”⁶¹ After the fall, Machiavelli continues, human nature became inherently wretched:

“Oh human spirit insatiable, arrogant, crafty and shifting, and above all else malignant, iniquitous, violent and savage, because through your longing so ambitious, the first violent death was seen in the world, and the first grass red with blood...Not merely whatever good his enemy has, but what he seems to have—and so always the world has been, modern and ancient—every man values.”⁶²

This fallibility and inherently sinful nature of man as described by Machiavelli is a fundamental precept of orthodox Christian religion, as it leaves only God [and Christ, his son] as perfect and divine.

⁵⁹ See in this connection the thoroughly documented essay by Marcia L. Colish, “Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (October, 1999): 597-616, especially 603-604.

⁶⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tercets On Ambition [Della ambizione]*, lines 13-15, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1965), hereafter cited as Gilbert, *Works*, here II, 735.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, lines 16-19, 43-45, 20-21 (Gilbert, *Works*, II, 735-36).

⁶² *Ibid.*, lines 55-60, 70-73 (Gilbert, *Works*, II, 736).

In fact, Machiavelli even uses the biblical story of Moses returning from Mt. Sinai to further illustrate the accuracy of his views on human nature. Moses is the first among the list of Machiavelli's "armed prophets" in *The Prince*,⁶³ and in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli goes on to explain: "that since he wished his laws and his orders to go forward, Moses was forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans."⁶⁴ The story of Exodus 32, then, serves the dual-purpose of highlighting the fickleness and bad faith of men (in this case, the Israelites) and proving the necessity of force along with persuasion. In referring to this passage, J.G.A Pocock concedes: "Machiavelli's language is irritatingly orthodox."⁶⁵

However, it is quite important to recognize that Machiavelli's view of human nature is not, in fact, exclusively negative. In the *Discourses*, he makes plain that he considers ample goodness to exist in the world at large:

"I judge the world to always have been in the same mode and there to have been as much good as wicked in it. But the wicked and the good vary from province to province, as is seen by one who has knowledge of those ancient kingdoms, which varied from one to another because of the variation of customs, though the world remained the same."⁶⁶

As with varying proliferations of either goodness or wickedness geographically, so too Machiavelli views it in men—specifically as related to socio-economic class conditioning. Though throughout *The Prince* he continues to admonish the nature of

⁶³ *The Prince*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 21).

⁶⁴ *Discourses*, III, 30 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 280). See in connection also Exodus 32:25-28.

⁶⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 170.

⁶⁶ *Discourses*, II, Preface (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 124).

nobles—stating: “it is impossible to satisfy the nobles honourably,” as they “want to oppress the people,” and “always act in time to safeguard their interests, and they take sides with the one whom they expect to win”—he paints the nature of the people at large much more positively.⁶⁷

All through Chapter IX: *The constitutional principality*, Machiavelli continually asserts opinions related to the authentic and humble nature of the general populace. Here he notes that, unlike the nobles, a prince can, in fact, satisfy *the people* honorably, as: “the people are more honest in their intentions...they want only not to be oppressed.”⁶⁸ Machiavelli concludes the chapter by assuring that “a prince who builds his power on the people,” assuming they have followed his prescriptions and won their general allegiance: “will never be let down by the people; and he will be found to have established his power securely.”⁶⁹

Another element of human nature according to Machiavelli is a love of freedom and liberty, especially as it relates to one’s own country. In his *Art of War*, Machiavelli makes it clear this is a characteristic inherent in mankind: “Love of country is caused by nature.”⁷⁰ Likewise, Machiavelli upholds this opinion in *The Prince*, such as his warning in Chapter V: *How cities or principalities which lived under their own laws should be administered after being conquered*:

“Whoever becomes the master of a city accustomed to freedom, and who does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed himself; because, when there is a rebellion,

⁶⁷ *The Prince*, 9 (Bull, *The Prince*, 33).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 (Bull, *The Prince*, 33).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 (Bull, *The Prince*, 35).

⁷⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, IV, 151, trans. and ed. by Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), hereafter cited as Lynch, *Art of War*, here, 99.

such a city justifies itself by calling on the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, never forgotten despite the passing of time and the benefits received from the new ruler. Whatever the conqueror's actions or foresight, if the inhabitants are not dispersed and scattered, they will forget neither that name nor those institutions; and at the first opportunity they will at once have recourse to them."⁷¹

He ends the chapter by reinforcing his belief that the natural inclination of peoples who have experienced freedom is to seek to preserve it against tyranny: "But in republics there is more life, more hatred, a greater desire for revenge; the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest."⁷² For a political critic who so ardently advocated the necessity of vigor, impetuosity, and manly action, this statement surely contains elements of praise injected into the platonic observation.

So while man might be constituted of a 'wretched nature,' Machiavelli does not deny the possibility for this nature to also be supplemented with a simple humility and authentic virtues of loyalty, resolve, and perseverance of human spirit. This echoes the dictum he maintains in the *Discourses*: "[men] do not know how to be either altogether wicked or altogether good."⁷³ In a letter to Guicciardini years later, Machiavelli would once again reiterate this view of imperfect- but-not-irredeemable human nature, quipping: "You know—and anyone who knows how to reason about this world knows it, too—that the people are fickle and foolish; nevertheless, as fickle and foolish as they are, what

⁷¹ Ibid., 5 (Bull, *The Prince*, 18-19).

⁷² Ibid., 5 (Bull, *The Prince*, 19).

⁷³ *Discourses*, I, 26 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 62). See in connection also *Discourses*, I, 27: "Rarely Do Men Know How to Be Altogether Wicked or Altogether Good" (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 62-63).

ought to be done is frequently what they say to do.”⁷⁴ Far from ‘stripping away all innate human goodness,’⁷⁵ then, Machiavelli allows for an inherently flawed nature to still produce positive—both morally virtuous and objectively successful—results.

The Nature of God

Unlike his discussion of human nature, Machiavelli does not make many explicit references to the nature of God, or even the presence of God, in *The Prince*. This obviously leaves much more room for ambiguity and subjectivity when attempting to elucidate how Machiavelli understood the nature of God, but there is sufficient textual information between *The Prince* and the remainder of the Machiavellian corpus to fashion a general picture. Perhaps none have so eloquently summarized this endeavor as Sebastian de Grazia, who writes in his lauded book, *Machiavelli in Hell*: “Nowhere does our author discuss at length his conception of God. Scattered about his writings, though, like poppies in a field of chick peas, are many references to God. Together they form an unmistakable likeness.”⁷⁶

While scholars are in somewhat relative agreement on Machiavelli’s view of human nature, there is a far wider range of scholarly interpretation on the nature of Machiavelli’s God. As befitting his overall irreligious interpretation, Black sees the nature of Machiavelli’s God as: “impotent,” prone to “divine indifference to the moral order,” possibly lacking “divine omnipotence,” and most likely a deity that Machiavelli

⁷⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Guicciardini, dated 15 March 1526 (Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and his Friends*, 382).

⁷⁵ Black, *Machiavelli*, 103.

⁷⁶ Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 58.

himself regarded with disbelief.⁷⁷ Viroli, in stark contrast, saw the nature of God for Machiavelli to be: based “in the tradition of republican Christianity that he experienced in Florence,” and so a God that “participates in human history, loves free republics, supports and rewards those who govern justly, created men in his own image, and wishes them to be like him with their virtue.”⁷⁸ Viroli’s understanding of the nature of Machiavelli’s God is very similar to that of de Grazia, who contends:

“Niccolò’s God is the creator, the master deity, providential, real, universal, one of many names, personal, invocable, thankable, to be revered, a judge, just and forgiving, rewarding and punishing, awesome, a force transcendent, separate from but operative in the world.”⁷⁹

And for his part, Geerken characterized the nature of God in Machiavelli as:

“an aggressive, political deity, not the unmoved First Mover, uncaused First Cause, or First Being of a Thomas Aquinas. Machiavelli’s was a God with a libertarian agenda, a God who manifested himself in history by, among other things, speaking to men of *virtù*, potential agents like Moses.”⁸⁰

Similar to Viroli, de Grazia, and Geerken, I contend it is clear from *The Prince* that Machiavelli understood there to be a God. Machiavelli believed God to be the Creator, who had created man with a divinely inspired free will. Not only does God exist for Machiavelli, He actively intervenes in human affairs—aiding those He selects as

⁷⁷ Black, *Machiavelli*, xxiii; 253; 285; 286.

⁷⁸ Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, 2. The entirety of *Machiavelli’s God* is focused on this discussion and is an interpretation that has heavily influenced the formation of my own opinions.

⁷⁹ de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 58. See in this connection Maurizio Viroli’s admitted deference to the work of de Grazia in the Preface to *Machiavelli’s God*, especially p. xi.

⁸⁰ Geerken, “Machiavelli’s Moses,” 586. In reference to Thomas Aquinas, see *Summa Theologica*, I. 1, QQ 1-26.

friends and punishing those who are His enemies. While he expressed that the divine plan might at times remain obscure to human reasoning, Machiavelli saw the scriptures and human history as explanation of how God operated in the world. Just and purposeful, Machiavelli's God allows for the temporal functioning of actions and consequences in order for His creations to reap their rewards (or their consequences).

The most explicit references to the nature of God in *The Prince* come in the final two chapters—XXV: *How far human affairs are governed by fortune, and how fortune can be opposed*; and XXVI: *Exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarians*. Indeed, as Leo Strauss rightly notes concerning Chapter XXVI: “[Machiavelli] mentions God as often there as in all other chapters of the *Prince* taken together.”⁸¹ Beginning in the first sentence of Chapter XXV, Machiavelli tellingly separates the concepts of ‘fortune’ and ‘God’, thereby denoting them as detached, delineated entities:

“I am not unaware that many have held and hold the opinion that events are controlled by fortune and by God in such a way that the prudence of men cannot modify them, indeed, that men have no influence whatsoever. Because of this, they would conclude that there is no point in sweating over things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance. This opinion has been more widely held in our own times, because of the great changes and variations, beyond human imagining, which we have experienced and experience every day. Sometimes, when thinking of this I myself have inclined to this same opinion. None the less, so as not to rule out our free will, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is

⁸¹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), 73. Chapter 2: “Machiavelli’s Intention: *The Prince*” (54-84) was a reissuing of his earlier essay published in the *American Political Science Review* 51, no. 1 (1957): 13-40.

the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.”⁸²

Included in this passage as well is another essential element of Machiavelli’s view of

human nature—namely, the presence of free will. Free will is a powerful force for Machiavelli, allowing for the prudence and ability to govern at least half of human actions, and allowing for the besting of fortune when actions are taken impetuously.

Additionally, by reserving the potency of free will, Machiavelli also explains an element of the nature of God by allowing His creations to act of their own accord. An example of God allowing human free will and thus the influence of men occurs in Machiavelli’s earlier praising of Moses in Chapter VI. Explaining how a prudent prince should imitate great men “who became princes by their own abilities and not by good fortune,”

Machiavelli states: “I say that the most outstanding are Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and others like them. Although one should not reason about Moses, since he merely executed what God commanded, yet he must be praised for the grace which made him worthy of speaking with God.”⁸³ Even though God explicitly guided Moses, He still allowed for the personal abilities and virtues of Moses to lead him to temporal action and eventually glory.

Moving on to Chapter XXVI, or the ‘Exhortation’ as Viroli aptly calls it, the nature of God becomes much more apparent.⁸⁴ The country of Italy: “beseeches God to

⁸² *The Prince*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 79).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20).

⁸⁴ See in this connection Maurizio Viroli, *Redeeming The Prince*, for a much more thorough survey of the meaning and purpose of the Exhortation, especially 14-15 and 17-20.

send someone to save her from those barbarous cruelties and outrages.”⁸⁵ Machiavelli sees the possibility for the redemption of Italy resting with Lorenzo and the house of the Medici: “And at the present time it is impossible to see in what she can place more hope than in your illustrious House, which, with its fortune and prowess, favoured by God and by the Church, of which it is now the head, can lead Italy to her salvation.” Important here is the delineation Machiavelli makes between ‘God’ and the ‘Church.’ Implicit in this separation is the potential for the favor of God to be disparate from any ecclesiastical institution.

This distinction between earthly representation of the Christian faith embodied by the Roman Catholic Church and the office of the papacy, and that of the eternal, divine figure of God is an essential element in Machiavelli’s religiosity. Pervading his writings, and occurring most frequently in the *Discourses*, is a current of criticism aimed at the state of the Church and religious observance in his contemporary age of Christendom that he sees partly guilty for the abrogation of the pursuit of *virtù* and the collapse of liberty. Many scholars, such as Black and Berlin, tend to assimilate the concepts of the Church, Christian practice, and God Himself when discussing these critiques, and thus point to this plaint as proof of Machiavelli’s wholly irreligious, anti-Christian attitude.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

⁸⁶ See in this connection Black, *Machiavelli*, throughout, including Preface, 167-171, 284-287, and especially 192-194 concerning his discussion on *Mandragola*. In his analysis, Black goes immediately from discussing how in the play “Machiavelli emerges yet again as vehemently anticlerical... Religion is utterly commercialized,” to concluding “Machiavelli conceives of a universe in which there is no room for a Christian god, much less for a god with any discretion at all.”; As well, Berlin, *Originality of Machiavelli*, 39-79, especially 45-51, 67-69, and 75-77. According to Berlin, Machiavelli understood there to be “at least two sets of virtues—let us call them the Christian and the pagan—which are not merely in practice, but in principle incompatible,” and from this distinction concludes that Machiavelli too “split open” the notion of “a divine Creator whose power

However, when we consider the instances of rhetorical separation used here and elsewhere by Machiavelli, it becomes clear that he viewed the nature and deity of God as being separate from that of the Church, and very noticeably held different opinions and beliefs about each respectively.

Machiavelli goes on to explain in the ‘Exhortation’ further elements of God’s nature. Speaking of the actions and lives of his cadre of great men led by Moses, Machiavelli assures Lorenzo: “Their enterprise was neither more just nor easier, and God was no more their friend than he is yours. There is great justice in our cause: ‘*iustum*

has endowed all things and creatures each with a specific function.”; For her part, Vickie B. Sullivan goes even farther in this association, see *Machiavelli’s Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 3-101, 157-71, especially 4-15. Sullivan contends: “the tyrant from whose grip Machiavelli would see humanity extricated is the Christian god...just behind this orthodox veneer lies a forceful criticism of not only the clergy, but also Christianity itself—itsself a reaction to what Machiavelli sees as the deleterious effect that the Church and its doctrines have had on the practice of politics.”; Additionally, other supporters of these positions include Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 196-232; idem, “Machiavelli and Classical Literature,” in *Review of National Literatures* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1970): 7-25; Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 62, 203-18, 238-54; Anthony Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 46-59; Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli: A Dissection* (New York: Gollancz, 1969), 72-73, 75-76, 85, 109-13, 118, 139-41, 264; Harvey C. Mansfield, “Necessity in the Beginning of Cities,” in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli’s Philosophy*, ed. by Anthony Parel (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1972), 101, 117, 120-25; idem, “Party and Sect in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*,” in *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought* ed. by Martin Fleischer (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 209-66; Neal Wood, “Machiavelli’s Concept of *Virtù* Reconsidered,” in *Political Studies* 15, no. 2 (June, 1967): 169-70; Clifford Orwin, “Machiavelli’s Unchristian Charity,” in *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 (December, 1978): 1217-28; Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1956), 15-36, 80-85; Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 140-162; Jacques Maritain, “The End of Machiavellianism,” in *Review of Politics* 4, no. 1 (January, 1942): 1-33; and Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d’État and Its Place in Modern History*, trans. by Douglas Scott (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 29-44.

enim est bellum quibus necessarium, et pia arma ubi nulla nisi in armis spes est”⁸⁷ As de Grazia notes and neatly traces, the phrase used by Machiavelli denoting the friendship of God had a long and tangible tradition, running back to both the pagan and the religious.⁸⁸ Beginning in the late second and third centuries with the emergence of Christianity, Christian martyrs were called “friends of God”; in the fourth century beginning with Saint Anthony, celebrated ascetics and holy men too were “friends of God”; following the year 1000 A.D., “friend of God” was used to denote the extraordinarily pious and faithful believer and marvelous persons with saintly nature; groups in the thirteenth and fourteenth century in Germany and Switzerland called themselves “friends of God”; in 1517, in the eighty-fourth of his Ninety-Five Theses, Martin Luther refers to “friendship with God”; Petrarch in fourteenth century Italy wrote in his reflections “On the Solitary Life” of secluded souls who are the “friends of God”; and in the fifteenth century, Fra Girolamo Savonarola used the phrase “friendship of God,” from his pulpit of San Marco in Florence (where Niccolò Machiavelli himself heard him preach).⁸⁹ “The friend of God, then, has a long history, longer than that of the Christian church.”⁹⁰

Additionally, the phrase appears in Plato’s *Republic*, Latin literature such as Horace, and the writings of Epictetus (who applied it to himself). Machiavelli himself also used variants of this phrase in other of his writings: in the play *Andria*, his vernacular translation of Terence’s *The Girl from Andros*, one character is “loved by the Gods”; in the preface to Book II of his *Discourses*, Machiavelli writes of his hope that

⁸⁷ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83). The English translation reads: “Because a necessary war is a just war and where there is hope only in arms those arms are holy.” Here Machiavelli is quoting Livy from his *History of Rome*, IX.1.

⁸⁸ de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 50-56.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

one may be “more loved by Heaven”; and again in his *Florentine Histories*, he writes that Lorenzo the Magnificent “was loved by fortune and by God to the highest degree.”⁹¹

Thomas Aquinas, the immensely influential Italian Dominican friar, theologian and philosopher, “misquotes” the very phrase from Exodus in his *Summa Theologica*, referring to it instead as ‘a friend of a friend’: “Hence it is written (Ex. 33:11) that the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend.”⁹² Girolamo Savonarola, another Italian Dominican friar, was also reported to have talked with God, and thus was considered by some to be among His friends. Machiavelli himself wrote as much in a letter to Ricciardo Becchi following the former’s attending of Savonarola’s sermon on the Carnival day in San Marco: “He said that God had told him that there was someone in Florence who sought to make himself a tyrant”.⁹³ In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli again reiterates this popularly-held assumption of Savonarola:

“To the people of Florence it does not appear that they are either ignorant or coarse; nonetheless, they were persuaded by Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he spoke with God. I do not wish to judge whether this is true or not, because one should speak with reverence of such a man; but I do say that an infinite number

⁹¹ Ibid., 52. See in this connection also Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, Preface (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 125); idem *Florentine Histories*, VIII, 36 (Gilbert, *Works*, III, 1433).

⁹² Ibid., 54. De Grazia contends that this misquotation by Aquinas “thereby [emphasized] the reciprocity of God’s friendship with Moses. Aquinas continues, this is to be understood as expressing the opinion of the people, who thought that Moses was speaking with God, mouth to mouth.”; See in connection St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, q. 174, art. 4. trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros. ed., 1947; Project Gutenberg, 2006).

⁹³ Niccolò Machiavelli to Ricciardo Becchi, dated 9 March 1498 (Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 8-10).

believed him without having seen anything extraordinary to make them believe him.”⁹⁴

In Machiavelli’s comment on Savonarola, De Grazia is careful to point out: “the existence of the Deity or His ability to converse is not in question. Niccolò simply is not sure that the friar ever talked with Him.”⁹⁵

Further, this appellation draws from a scriptural tradition as well. The biblical figures of Abraham and Job are recorded as being friends of God: “And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God”⁹⁶; “Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God’s intimate friendship blessed my house”.⁹⁷ David, though not expressly referred to as a ‘friend of God’, is spoken of quite similarly as being a man after God’s own heart: “And when he had removed him, he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will.”⁹⁸ The Apostle John was referred to as the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, and is later recorded as receiving a revelation from God Himself.⁹⁹ Christ, too, conferred the title of friend upon the

⁹⁴ *Discourses*, I.II.5 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 36).

⁹⁵ de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 56.

⁹⁶ James 2:23. James is referencing Genesis 15:6: “And [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” Again in Isaiah 41:8, Abraham is referred to as a friend of God: “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.” Other references toward Abraham as a friend of God occur 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Romans 4:3.

⁹⁷ Job 29:4 (New International Version [N.I.V.]).

⁹⁸ Acts 13:22. Here the Apostle Paul is referencing the words of the Prophet Samuel from the book of 1 Samuel 13:14, who, speaking of David, declares: “the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people”.

⁹⁹ John 13:23. The Apostle John recorded his vision from God in the book of Revelation.

Disciples as they knew their ‘master’s business’ which he had elocuted to them from God: “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.”¹⁰⁰

Most famously, and arguably most important for Machiavelli, the book of Exodus records Moses as being a friend of God: “And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.”¹⁰¹ Philologically, de Grazia explains, this phrase in its original Latin, ‘*ad amicum suum*,’ which Machiavelli would have read in the Vulgate or heard preached, seems the most likely source phrase that Machiavelli recast into his “God more a friend.”¹⁰² Machiavelli’s phrase used in *The Prince*, De Grazia emphasizes: “is original and stronger: it commits the affection of God unmistakably.”¹⁰³

So it is clear to Machiavelli and his audience that friendship with God is available to certain men, but how is this divine friendship to be achieved? Machiavelli goes on in the ‘Exhortation’ to explain the prerequisites for obtaining this friendship—and in doing so further illuminates what he understands to be the nature of God. Firstly, there will be provided an opportunity. Beginning this impassioned exhortation for Italian redemption, Machiavelli admits:

“After deliberating on all the things discussed above, I asked myself whether in present-day Italy the times were propitious to honour a new prince, and whether the circumstances existed here which would make it possible for a prudent and capable man to introduce a new order, bringing honour to himself and prosperity

¹⁰⁰ John 15:15.

¹⁰¹ Exodus 33:11.

¹⁰² de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 53.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 56.

to all the Italians. Well, I believe that so many things conspire to favour a new prince, that I cannot imagine there was ever a time more suitable than the present.”¹⁰⁴

Machiavelli, then, ‘cannot imagine’ a more suitable time for a new prince to arise than in present-day Italy—thus defining the setting of opportunity. In doing so, Machiavelli additionally defines the true purpose for the advice given throughout his treatise ‘on all the things discussed above’—namely, to aid a new prince in seizing this opportunity.

He then goes on to list the underlying circumstances necessary for Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus to emerge as men who he singles out as friends of God in order to explain why he believes Italy is ripe for a savior:

“And if, as I said, the Israelites had to be enslaved in Egypt for Moses to emerge as their forceful leader; if the Persians had to be oppressed by the Medes so that the greatness of Cyrus could be recognized; if the Athenians had to be scattered to demonstrate the excellence of Theseus: then, at the present time, in order to discover the worth of an Italian spirit, Italy had to be brought to her present extremity. She had to be more enslaved than the Hebrews, more oppressed than the Persians, more widely scattered than the Athenians; leaderless, lawless, crushed, despoiled, torn, overrun; she had to have endured every kind of desolation.”¹⁰⁵

The same opportunity given to Moses et al. for friendship with God, therefore, has been

¹⁰⁴ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

provided through the present state of Italy—indeed, even more so, in Machiavelli’s mind: “each of them had less opportunity than is offered now.”¹⁰⁶

Further, Machiavelli assures his reader that this opportunity is a just and achievable one. God does not call on men to do the impossible, and God does not grant His friendship to those pursuing unjust causes. Machiavelli first calls attention to the prayers of his kinsmen: “See how Italy beseeches God to send someone to save her from those barbarous cruelties and outrages; see how eager and willing the country is to follow a banner, if only someone will raise it.”¹⁰⁷ Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus “may be exceptional and remarkable”, Machiavelli concedes, but, assuredly, “they were men none the less”.¹⁰⁸ What’s more: “Their enterprise was neither more just nor easier”.¹⁰⁹ Machiavelli goes on to emphasize again the “great justice in our cause”, quoting the famed historian Livy: “Because a necessary war is a just war and where there is hope only in arms those arms are holy.”¹¹⁰ He concludes: “There is the greatest readiness, and where that is so there cannot be great difficulty...all things have conspired to your greatness”.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

¹⁰⁸ Here it is important to note, as done by Sebastian de Grazia, that: “Without questioning the divinity of the Lord or the allegorical teachings of the Bible, [Machiavelli] is attributing literal historical value to the Old Testament just as he might do with Livy or any other classical historian.” See *Machiavelli in Hell*, 54.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83). Machiavelli also reiterates this belief and quotation of Livy again in his later works, including the *Discourses*, III, 12: “War is just to whom it is necessary, and arms are pious to those for whom there is no hope save in arms” (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 248), and *The History of Florence*, V, 8: “Only those wars are just that are necessary; and arms are holy when there is no hope apart from them” (Gilbert, *Works*, III, 1242).

¹¹¹ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

Elsewhere, however, a seemingly different understanding of “friend of God” occurs in Machiavelli. In his *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli invokes this appellation while addressing the indiscernibility of God’s will. Beyond simply standing removed and thus allowing corrupt and powerful men to freely oppress the citizenry, Machiavelli considers how it can even appear that God actively aides those pursuing evil ends:

“And even if ambition blinds you, the whole world as witness to your wickedness will open your eyes; God will open them for you, if perjuries, if violated faith and betrayals displease Him, and if He does not always wish to be the friend of wicked men, as up to now He has done for some hidden good.”¹¹²

At times, Machiavelli expresses, it seems God has ‘been a friend’ to wicked men. But how can this be if, as proposed here, God’s friendship requires a just cause?

For his part, Black sees this reference as denoting Machiavelli’s rejection of divine power altogether, saying: “Atheism is one conceivable implication of divine indifference to the moral order posited by Machiavelli.”¹¹³ However, Black’s analysis omits any consideration of what Machiavelli writes immediately following:

“So do not promise yourself sure victory, for that will be kept from you by the just wrath of God...And even if our sins have yet been such that we have fallen into your hands against every wish of ours, have firm faith that the kingdom you have begun with deceit and infamy will come to an end for you or your sons with disgrace and harm.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, VI, 20, trans by. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 252.

¹¹³ Black, *Machiavelli*, 253.

¹¹⁴ *Florentine Histories*, VI, 20 (Banfield and Mansfield, *Florentine Histories*, 252).

Machiavelli emphatically assures that while it might appear that God has allowed wicked men to reign over the good, this is not the final outcome. As His nature is supremely just, He will ultimately punish those who are deserving of His wrath. Despite the possible appearance of divine friendship, those who act wholly in deceit and infamy, who commit perjury and betray God displease Him, and will be judged accordingly.

Further, Black's charge of implicit atheism utterly disregards Machiavelli's admission that it was human error, 'our sins,' that were the cause of Florence's oppression, not any malevolent action of God. Because of sins committed through the exercise of human free-will, (which, as we have seen, is in itself divinely inspired), God justly permitted the resulting consequences of those sins to afflict the Florentines. This is a lesson repeated throughout the scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament. When the Israelites sinned through disbelief and turned away from God, He punished them to wander the wilderness for forty years:

“Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; Surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it.”¹¹⁵

Despite having held special favor as God's chosen nation, being saved from Egypt and witness to countless miracles, Israel sinned and God punished them. Likewise,

¹¹⁵ Numbers 14:22-23.

Machiavelli writes of Florence in the same way—a nation that considered itself to be favored by God as well.¹¹⁶

The moral order, then, that Machiavelli posits here is not one promoting atheism, or even declaring divine indifference—in fact it is wholly the opposite. Even when writing of his beloved country’s suffering, Machiavelli still clearly enunciates a firm belief that although he does not understand the divine plan, he faithfully understands that God must be acting ‘for some hidden good.’ When compared with what he writes in the *The Prince* regarding oppression, this ‘hidden good’ manifests itself for Machiavelli in the form of opportunity for friendship with God. As he writes in the ‘Exhortation’:

“And if, as I said, the Israelites had to be enslaved in Egypt for Moses to emerge as their forceful leader...then, at the present time, in order to discover the worth of an Italian spirit, Italy had to be brought to her present extremity. She had to be more enslaved than the Hebrews...she had to have endured every kind of desolation.”¹¹⁷

The subjugation of Italy provides the same opportunity as was given to Moses and the other friends of God, whose enterprises were neither: “more just nor easier, and God was no more their friend than he is yours.”¹¹⁸

Having established opportunity, one that is both just and achievable, as the first necessity for friendship with God, Machiavelli then supplies the second—action. “The rest is up to you,” Machiavelli declares, “God does not want to do everything Himself,

¹¹⁶ See in this connection Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 44. For further exploration of the Florentines’ understanding of religion in politics, see 50-51 below.

¹¹⁷ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

and take away from us our free will and our share of the glory which belongs to us.”¹¹⁹

Here again is a further emphasis from Machiavelli on the presence of free will characterizing human nature and determining actions and outcomes. Not only, then, did God give us free will, it is a thing He does not want to take away. As we have divinely-ordained free will, and God does not wish to strip His creation of this element of their nature, He then expects us to act: ‘God does not want to do everything Himself.’

It is for this reason that Machiavelli is able to praise Moses as he does previously in Chapter VI, saying: “Although one should not reason about Moses, since he merely executed what God commanded, yet he must be praised for the grace which made him worth of speaking with God.”¹²⁰ This statement, far from paradoxical, first gives deference to the power of God and concedes the inability of humans to reason about Him fully, while at the same time explaining why Moses is to be praised and imitated by prudent men because his actions and institutions made him worthy of God’s friendship.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20).

¹²¹ Considering this statement on Moses in Ch. VI of *The Prince*, John H. Geerken has argued a more literary and rhetorical angle rather than the interpretation I have just explicated. He contends: “Had Machiavelli *not* thus qualified Moses’ presence in *The Prince*, his readers might have themselves dismissed Moses, arguing that he was too special, heroic, and unusual to warrant inclusion in a discussion aimed at imitative political behavior. By anticipating such an objection and articulating it, Machiavelli neutralized it.” Therefore, “Machiavelli was manipulating basically secular and potentially skeptical readers into a more willing acceptance of a religious dimension by inserting it and then immediately withdrawing it.” While there is definitely merit to this understanding, and I agree that Machiavelli, as he did so often, could have qualified Moses in the way he did to serve more than one purpose, I think Geerken’s rhetorical analysis disregards the previously explored tradition surrounding the “friends of God” and downplays the ultimate use and importance of Moses for Machiavelli in his ‘Exhortation’ concluding chapter.

In the Christian scriptural tradition, the need for action as a requirement for friendship with God is thoroughly documented. Abraham was only granted divine friendship after first taking action, as God Himself tells Abraham's son, Isaac:

“Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father... Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws.”¹²²

This promise to Abraham by God was first made after Abraham had followed divine command and acted upon his instruction to sacrifice his son Isaac. Though God ultimately intervened and spared the life of Isaac, Genesis 22 shows the faithful action taken by Abraham: “And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.”¹²³ It was only after acting upon his faith in God that Abraham's son was spared, and friendship of God granted.

Far more important for Machiavelli, Moses was only granted his divine friendship after acting to preserve God's commandments, statutes and laws. Even before God first spoke to Moses through the burning bush,¹²⁴ Moses, then a prince of Egypt, had acted to save a Hebrew from being beaten by an Egyptian: “[Moses] spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that

¹²² Genesis 26:3-5.

¹²³ Genesis 22:9-10.

¹²⁴ Genesis 3:2-22.

there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.”¹²⁵ Similarly, it was only after Moses had begged for divine mercy for the rebellious nation of Israel, and then acted himself to protect the law by ordering the Levites to kill the idolatrous among them that Exodus records Moses spoke with God face to face as a friend.¹²⁶

Throughout the Old and New Testament of the Bible, action is a central part of keeping the covenant of God. It was spoken of by the prophet Daniel, (whom Machiavelli was known to have referenced¹²⁷): “And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he corrupt by flatteries: but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.”¹²⁸ Speaking of Abraham, who was called “the Friend of God,” James reiterates the necessity of action: “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only...For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”¹²⁹ Even Christ, when preaching his Sermon on the Mount, instructs action: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”¹³⁰

When Machiavelli states ‘God does not want to do everything Himself,’ he is quite obviously expressing his belief for the requirement for human action. But contingent in this precept is also the undeniable belief that God *is doing* a portion

¹²⁵ Genesis 2:11-12.

¹²⁶ Exodus 32:11-13, 26-28; 33:11.

¹²⁷ For example, Machiavelli references the figure of Daniel in a lighthearted poem written to his father, Bernardo, dated sometime between the latter’s death in 1500: “But in order not to make the maggots starve, we shall repeat a word after Daniel, since perhaps already there is something that he reads, because, eating only bread and knife, we have got beaks that seem like those of woodcocks, and hardly hold our eyes half open.” Most likely in reference to Daniel 10. See in this connection the poem entitled “A Sonnet to Messer Bernardo His Father On the Farm at San Casciano” in Gilbert, *Works*, II, 1012.

¹²⁸ Daniel 11:32.

¹²⁹ James 2:23, 24, 26.

¹³⁰ Matthew 5:16.

Himself, taking an active role on behalf of His friend. This is shown by his use of the word ‘everything’ (*ogni cosa*, in the original Italian), as opposed to ‘anything’ or ‘nothing.’ Machiavelli assures: ‘As well as this, unheard-of wonders are to be seen, performed by God.’ Invoking the Bible, Machiavelli goes on to list miracles done in Exodus by God in helping ‘His friend’, Moses: “the sea is divided, a cloud has shown you the way, water has gushed from the rock, it has rained manna.”¹³¹ Because God was a friend to Moses, He acted on his behalf and performed miracles to aid in the emancipation of his people from the bonds of slavery and the heel of tyranny.

Therefore, Machiavelli’s God is by nature an active deity, or, at the very least, willing to act when it is deserved through aiding men of virtue. It is only ‘the rest’ God requires of those He would grant His friendship. This, too, God does for specific reasons—not wishing to ‘take away from us our free will’ and not wanting to take away: “our share of the glory which belongs to us.”¹³² Machiavelli concludes: ‘all things have conspired to your greatness.’ ‘Greatness’ and ‘our share of the glory which belongs to us,’ then, are things acceptable, ordained, and reserved for humanity by God. He goes on to declare: “And nothing brings a man greater honour than the new laws and new institutions he establishes. When these are soundly based and bear the mark of greatness, they make him revered and admired.”¹³³ Throughout the ‘Exhortation’, Machiavelli paints a personal interpretation of a God who is purposeful, a God who operates in a manner that is at least somewhat understandable by human reasoning, and a God who

¹³¹ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83). See in connection also Exodus 14:19-20, 21-31; 16:11-18; 17:1-6.

¹³² Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

¹³³ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

allows for the temporal functioning of actions and consequences in order for His creations to reap what they sow.

Here Machiavelli falls squarely into the tradition of Christian Renaissance humanists who understood free will to be a divinely imbued element of human nature. For example, in his *The Remedies of Both Kinds of Fortune*, Petrarch became the first humanist to treat explicitly the theme of ‘the dignity of man,’ which retained the fundamental framework of Christian religion.¹³⁴ Skinner summarizes Petrarch’s influential contention that: “alone of all creation, man may be said to have the capacity to control his own destiny.”¹³⁵ Petrarch writes of the special status man holds in creation: “for unless you have willingly submitted to the yoke of sin, you may have dominion over all things which are under the heavens.”¹³⁶ Unlike all other things, God created man in His own image—complete with a discerning free will, and without constraint on action. Similarly, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola contended in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* that this meant God had placed man at the center of the world, and thus desired that man would craft his own outcome.¹³⁷ Using the perspective of God, Pico explains:

“We have set thee at the world’s center... We have made thee... so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt

¹³⁴ See in this connection also Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), I, 179, 190-3.

¹³⁵ Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 97.

¹³⁶ Francesco Petrarch, *Lettere*, trans. by Giuseppe Fracassetti, 2 vols. (Florence, 1869-70), cited in Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), I, 180.

¹³⁷ Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 97.

have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.”¹³⁸

Like these humanists, then, Machiavelli is advocating action from a biblically-defined framework of human nature—namely, one that is characterized by divinely-granted free will, and granted consequences or rewards accordingly.

As has been countlessly argued, the requirement of action is a central tenet throughout the entirety of Machiavelli's political advice. Neal Wood, in his influential essay, aptly termed this position the “humanism of action,” and upheld it as the third rung of Machiavelli's humanism.¹³⁹ What has been largely missed by scholarship (including Wood),¹⁴⁰ however, is Machiavelli's contention that action is necessary not only for overcoming fortune, preserving the rule of the prince, and achieving worldly honor and glory, but it is also an inseparable requirement for upholding the will, laws, and covenant of God, and therefore has the capacity to additionally be religiously motivated and theologically compatible. Machiavelli reiterates this belief again in *The Ass*:

“To believe that without effort on your part God fights for you, while you are idle and on your knees, has ruined many kingdoms and states. There is assuredly need for prayers; and altogether mad is he who forbids people their ceremonies and

¹³⁸ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. by Elizabeth Forbes in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oksar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 225.

¹³⁹ Neal Wood, “Machiavelli's Humanism of Action,” in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli's Philosophy*, ed. by Anthony Parel (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1972), 33-58.

¹⁴⁰ Along with being a “humanist of action” who encourages men to combat fortune through exercising their *virtù*, Wood argues that Machiavelli is also a “cultural humanist” through his interaction with classical texts and authors, and a “secular humanist” actively separating politics from theology. See Wood, “Machiavelli's Humanism of Action,” 56.

their devotions; because in fact it seems that from them may be reaped union and good order; and on them in turn rests good and happy fortune. But there should be no one with so small a brain that he will believe, if his house is falling, that God will save it without any other prop, because he will die beneath that ruin.”¹⁴¹

Black—while acknowledging that here Machiavelli is “once more” upholding “a political religion, stressing the need for divine observance to maintain civic well-being”—interprets these remaining lines as evidence of Machiavelli’s further digression away from religion: “Machiavelli’s emphasis on God’s impotence hints that his religious skepticism had made the cosmic leap beyond anticlericalism and anti-christianism to atheism.”¹⁴² However, this analysis fundamentally misses Machiavelli’s intended target. Machiavelli here is not addressing God at all; rather he is ‘once again’ decrying the idle, passive religious observance of men.¹⁴³ Just as he contends that a strong state requires good arms *and* good laws,¹⁴⁴ and a great general must be skilful as a commander *and* an orator,¹⁴⁵ Machiavelli believes that proper religious activity requires both prayer *and* action, devotion *and* operation. To Machiavelli action is clearly commanded by God, and thus those who have acted justly to redeem their state have earned His friendship, seen

¹⁴¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The [Golden] Ass [L’asino]*, lines 115-127 (Gilbert, *Works*, II, 764).

¹⁴² Black, *Machiavelli*, 184.

¹⁴³ In my opinion, what I see to be Black’s baseless assumption that here Machiavelli is condemning the nature or very existence of God is made even more interesting by the fact that in the following sentence, Black states: “Machiavelli’s misanthropy had appeared laconically in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, but in *The Ass*...it receives fullest expression” (184). Even regarding Black’s own overall analysis, then, it would seem much more logical that the lines in question be directed at men.

¹⁴⁴ *The Prince*, 12 (Bull, *The Prince*, 40).

¹⁴⁵ *Art of War*, IV, 138 (Lynch, *Art of War*, 98).

Him intervene on their behalf by performing ‘unheard-of wonders’, and won their rightful share of honor and glory as granted through divine imprimatur.¹⁴⁶

Nature of Fortune

By now it should be generally clear what were Machiavelli’s views on human nature and on the nature of God underpinning the advice of *The Prince*. It remains, then, to briefly explore the nature of fortune (or *fortuna*, in the original Italian)—the third element at play in determining the outcome of human endeavors. Cary J. Nederman refers to fortune as the “certainly best known” of Machiavelli’s list of “contributing factors that largely, if not entirely, account for the tumultuous events of human government (and presumably every other human enterprise),” and undeniably, the scholarship dedicated to this concept of *fortuna* is voluminous.¹⁴⁷

It is first necessary to consider the intellectual tradition of fortune in Renaissance Florence. Fortune was, at its best, an abstract concept comprised of many facets.¹⁴⁸ In his study on the history and developments of intellectual thought in sixteenth-century Florence, Felix Gilbert introduces *fortuna* as: “the term symbolizing the world of non-rational forces...*Fortuna* was responsible for those events which happened against all

¹⁴⁶ For a further discussion of glory and honor, see 44-46, 50 below.

¹⁴⁷ See in this connection Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 621. Other scholarship focusing on Machiavelli and *fortuna* includes: Thomas Flanagan, “The Concept of *Fortuna* in Machiavelli,” in *The Political Calculus*, ed. by Anthony Parel; Hannah F. Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Oded Balaban, “The Human Origins of *Fortuna*,” in *History of Political Thought* 11, (1990): 21-36.

¹⁴⁸ See in this connection Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 40.

rational calculations and expectations.”¹⁴⁹ Classically, Fortuna was worshiped by the Romans as a goddess and daughter of Jupiter.¹⁵⁰ As Skinner summarizes:

“[The Romans] always conceded her a great power over human affairs, portraying her with a wheel on which the fates of men are kept turning by her sheer caprice. They insisted, however, that her sway is not inexorable, since she can always be wooed and even subdued by a man of true [virtue].”¹⁵¹

This classical belief was revived by the humanists, whom, like the Romans before them, envisioned the nature of the human predicament as: “a struggle between man’s will and fortune’s willfulness.”¹⁵² To the Florentines and other Renaissance humanists, the concept of fortune still preserved many of the characteristics that defined the nature of the pagan goddess. As noted by Gilbert: “She is a personality, she has her whims; she interferes arbitrarily in human affairs. Some men she dislikes, on others she smiles.”¹⁵³

Such elements are found in Machiavelli’s conception of fortune. Beginning in Chapter I: *How many kinds of principality there are and the ways in which they are acquired* of *The Prince*, Machiavelli follows in the footsteps of his fellow humanists and pairs fortune with virtue:¹⁵⁴ “Dominions so acquired...a prince wins them...either by

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵⁰ Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 95. See in this connection as well Howard R. Patch, *The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Philosophy and Literature*, in *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 3, no. 4 (Northampton, Massachusetts: Smith College, 1922), 180-84; also idem, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), throughout.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵² Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁵³ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 41.

¹⁵⁴ See this observation in de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 203.

fortune or by prowess.”¹⁵⁵ For Machiavelli, fortune plays a large role in determining the outcome of human affairs. As he maintains in *The Prince*: “I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.”¹⁵⁶ Fortune can be an ally: Machiavelli counts it as one of the ways a prince can win dominion¹⁵⁷; and it can be a foe: as seen with the case of Cesare Borgia.¹⁵⁸ In the dedicatory letter beginning *The Prince*, Machiavelli accredits fortune as at once promoting the greatness of Lorenzo de’ Medici while at the same time working against himself unrelentingly¹⁵⁹: “[Your Magnificence] will discover in it my urgent wish that you reach the eminence that fortune and your other qualities promise you...you will realize the extent to which, undeservedly, I have to endure the great and unremitting malice of fortune.”¹⁶⁰

Above all fortune is capricious, and therefore not to be trusted nor relied upon by prudent men. Thus, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises: “the less a man has relied on fortune the stronger he has made his position.”¹⁶¹ He continues in Chapter VII: *New principalities acquired with the help of fortune and foreign arms* to disparage the nature of fortune, asserting that those who: “become princes purely by good fortune do so with little exertion on their own part; but subsequently they maintain their position only by

¹⁵⁵ *The Prince*, 1 (Bull, *The Prince*, 7). In his translation, Gilbert uses the words “strength and wisdom” rather than prowess, and notes in footnote 1 that together they “render the single word virtù.” See in this connection Gilbert, *Works*, I, 11.

¹⁵⁶ *The Prince*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 79).

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 22).

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 23).

¹⁵⁹ See in this connection Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 622.

¹⁶⁰ *The Prince*, Dedicatory Letter (Bull, *The Prince*, 4).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20).

considerable exertion.”¹⁶² This precept is reiterated in *Discourses*: “So the good is acquired only with difficulty unless you are aided by fortune, so that with its force it conquers this ordinary and natural inconvenience.”¹⁶³ For this reason, he praises Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus as the “most outstanding” examples because they became princes by their own prowess and not through fortune:

“And when we have come to examine their actions and lives, they do not seem to have had from fortune anything other than opportunity. Fortune, as it were, provided the matter but they gave it its form; without opportunity their prowess would have been extinguished, and without such prowess the opportunity would have come in vain”¹⁶⁴

As has been argued, opportunity is required to achieve the friendship of God. In the

‘Exhortation’, Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus were all friends of God because they acted with virtue in confronting their respective opportunities. Here, then, Machiavelli seemingly grants fortune a vital role in this spiritual equation—providing opportunity. If we return to the Renaissance intellectual tradition, we find that such a divine appropriation of fortune was in fact a widely-held belief.

While, as we have seen, the Renaissance understanding of fortune retained similarities to its pagan origin, at the same time this revival was being carried out by Christian theorists operating in a Christian world, and thus the goddess was integrated into

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 22).

¹⁶³ *Discourses*, III, 37 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 294).

¹⁶⁴ *The Prince*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20).

a religious worldview.¹⁶⁵ Though “the recovery of this classical dramatization of the human condition [represented] an almost Pelagian departure from the prevailing assumptions of Augustinian Christianity” and “hallmarks of medieval moral and political thought,” it was done by thoroughly Christian humanists, such as Petrarch and his successors, who continued to insist on fundamental Christian doctrines.¹⁶⁶ Being integrated into a Christian world meant that fortune was separate from providence and under the power and will of God. This did not mean that God could not use fortune, however. As de Grazia explains: “[Fortune] was still a pagan deity, but Supreme God was above her, and consequently she had to be carrying out His will. Beyond this, the relationship remained indefinite.”¹⁶⁷ Gilbert, too, notes the ambiguity in this relationship, saying that for the Florentines: “God rules everything on this earth and thus it is not possible clearly to distinguish between what is done by God and what is done by *Fortuna*.”¹⁶⁸

But while it was not always discernable when fortune was operating for God’s will, God always sat alone atop the divine panoply.¹⁶⁹ Often, as Gilbert traces, the Florentines saw fortune as serving a divine purpose: “*Fortuna* is God’s messenger and He directs her. Thus God can ‘change fortune.’”¹⁷⁰ God could use fortune to act as a sign to show an opportunity where He was willing to help.¹⁷¹ Implying this work of Gilbert, de Grazia similarly notes: “The language of Florentine citizens as preserved in the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶⁶ Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 93, 95-97, 100.

¹⁶⁷ de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 204.

¹⁶⁸ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 41.

¹⁶⁹ de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 204.

¹⁷⁰ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 41-2.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 42.

records of government meetings around the turn of the fifteenth century shows that their conception, too, was that Fortuna was God's aide or minister, and that she was to be identified with His direction or wishes."¹⁷²

Though Augustine, Aquinas, and many of their medieval successors had attempted to repudiate the Roman understanding of the goddess Fortuna, various other Christian theorists and exegetes had created ample space within the religious tradition for such an understanding of fortune as is found in Machiavelli. Patch, in his influential study of the medieval tradition of the goddess Fortuna, explored the two great conceptions of Fortuna in the Middle Ages—that is, the pagan and the Ecclesiastical. On the one hand, Augustine and Aquinas comprised the most influential interpretations of the Ecclesiastical understanding of fortune, forbidding all treatment of fortune as pagan heresy. Patch summarizes this view as completely “annihilating” fortune.¹⁷³ However, other Christian writers, such as Boethius and Albertus Magnus, sought to enunciate an interpretation that acted as a reconciliation between the classical treatment of fortune with and Christian doctrine. Patch describes fortune in these compromise interpretations as being: “retained with a supreme God above her, —their relations are not exactly definite, but obviously she must be in part fulfilling His will.”¹⁷⁴

The union of these two great conceptions Patch found to rest with the: “poetic vision of Dante, who solves the problem of Fortuna without a compromise and with

¹⁷² de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 204-5.

¹⁷³ Patch, *Traditions of Fortuna*, 203.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

conclusions satisfactory to both opinions.”¹⁷⁵ According to Patch, Dante’s treatment of the “complete Christian Fortuna”:

“is a fusion of the old traits of the pagan goddess with Christian doctrine. Fortuna is pagan and Boethian in that she embodies the pagan whimsicality in outward manner and yet is subordinate to a greater Deity; she does not award necessarily according to merit, and yet her madness had method because she is obeying the decrees of a superior will.”¹⁷⁶

Beyond medieval theorists, later Renaissance humanists also considered the ambiguous relationship between fortune and providence.¹⁷⁷ Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of the Florentine Republic from 1375 until his death in 1406, serves as one influential example.¹⁷⁸ As noted by Trinkaus, fortune for Salutati was not relegated to “mere chance or mere contingency,” but was rather an: “intrusion of the preternatural, or the pretervoluntary into experiences.” Trinkaus goes on to explicate:

“For Salutati...fortune is a concrete notion by which the process of divine intervention outside of the regular course of nature or the play of human wills may be designated. It is a manifestation of God’s *potentia absoluta*, which is also evident in His revelation when contra-natural means of instruction are resorted to.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Patch, *Traditions of Fortuna*, 200.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁷⁷ See in this connection, Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 626.

¹⁷⁸ For further consideration of Salutati, see the translation and introduction by Ronald G. Witt, in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, Volume I: *Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179; and Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, I, 51-102.

¹⁷⁹ Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, I, 98. “*Potentia absoluta*” refers to the theological understanding of the absolute power of God, as exercised on his own without outside

Therefore, Salutati understood fortune to be: an element outside out rational human action; something subservient to the will of God; and held the potential to act as an exhibition or signal of divine intervention outside the normal course of human endeavors. Additionally, Salutati did not consider it improper, irreligious, or blasphemous to imagine fortune as a goddess, but rather as a symbolic representation of: “the demonic power by which providence manages our affairs.”¹⁸⁰

Machiavelli’s conception of the nature of fortune contained many of these characteristic strands of the Christian intellectual tradition. As Nederman emphasizes: “That some plan or wisdom stands behind fortune forms an article of faith in Machiavelli’s thought. Even if the scheme cannot be discerned (hence, the arbitrary appearance of fortune to most men at most times), it is present.”¹⁸¹ Similar to the dual-capacity for both good and evil within his understanding of human nature, Machiavelli likewise allows for the nature of fortune to be not only malevolent, but also divinely inspired. In the final chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli assures his Medici audience: “at the present time it is impossible to see in what [Italy] can place more hope in than in your illustrious House, which, with its fortune and prowess, favoured by God and by the Church...can lead Italy to her salvation.”¹⁸² Here Machiavelli includes fortune alongside prowess [virtue] as advantageous components linked to the favor of God.

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli again invokes the role of fortune in conjunction with divine selection:

intervention, i.e.: creation, miracles, immediate revelation, inspiration, and regeneration. See in this definition Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1873), I, 10, 412.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹⁸¹ Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 628.

¹⁸² *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

“Hence men who commonly live amid great troubles or successes deserve less praise or less blame, because most of the time we see that they have been pushed into a destructive or an elevated action by some great advantage that the Heavens have bestowed on them, giving them opportunity—or taking it from them—to work effectively. Skillfully Fortune does this, since she chooses a man, when she plans to bring to pass great things, who is of so much perception and so much ability that he recognizes the opportunities she puts before him.”¹⁸³

Within this passage, Machiavelli tellingly asserts that it is God (‘the Heavens’) who gives advantage and provides opportunity, and that fortune functions as the mechanism carrying out a greater divine design. Further, it continues the delineation of the nature of fortune as seen in *Salutati* and others within the Christian tradition: fortune operates outside of man’s rational sphere, it is secondary to the will of God, and it can act on behalf of and in accordance with a divine plan by providing a test in the form of opportunity.

Even as Machiavelli holds out hope for a providential purpose behind the actions of fortune, however, he does concede that the human mind cannot ultimately grasp the nature of a divine plan if it is not made clear to him. This is why the outcome of politics is often arbitrary and confusingly unpredictable. Machiavelli echoes this uncertainty when reasoning about a divine plan later in his *Florentine Histories*. When considering the actions of Florence in the 1460s, Machiavelli writes that it seemed God had abandoned the city to vengeful nobles, who: “increased power for themselves and terror to the others; they exercised this power without any hesitation and so conducted

¹⁸³ *Discourses*, II, 29 (Gilbert, *Works*, I, 408).

themselves that it appeared that God and fortune had given them that city in prey.”¹⁸⁴

Here Machiavelli concedes a lack of divine intervention that he does not claim to understand; only that the misery of Florence’s current situation made it ‘appear’ as if God had forsaken them. It also functioned for Machiavelli as a historical example that God, for His own purposes, does not always intervene.

Far from disbelieving or irreligious, even such thoroughly Christian thinkers as Augustine, “an extreme champion of providential design,” understood the limits of human rationality as it related to discerning the will of God.¹⁸⁵ In his *Retractations*, Augustine first reiterates his understanding of fortune, which, as we have seen, he associates with “divine Providence” before explaining: “What is commonly referred to as fortune is governed by a certain hidden order, and in events, we do not term anything ‘chance’ unless its reason and cause are unknown.”¹⁸⁶ In other words, chance occurrences or random happenstance are ruled by the will of God, which is hidden from human understanding.

And just as Machiavelli similarly contended that the divine plan was obscured to the human mind, so too was the nature of fortune’s participation. While God could and did use fortune for His own purposes, this did not mean for Machiavelli that fortune was always acting as a divine instrument. Fortune remained something ambiguous and multi-faceted: on the one hand able to be utilized by God as an operating framework determining the intercession of divine grace, while at the same time entirely capable of

¹⁸⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, VII, 21 (Banfield and Mansfield, *Florentine Histories*, 300).

¹⁸⁵ See in this connection Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 627.

¹⁸⁶ St. Augustine, *The Retractations*, 1.2, trans. by Sister Mary Inez Bogan included in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol. 60 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 7.

playing its own capricious role in determining human affairs. As he writes in *The Prince*: “I say that we see that some princes flourish one day and come to grief the next, without appearing to have changed in character or any other way.”¹⁸⁷ The conclusion Machiavelli at which arrives lays the blame squarely on the caprice of fortune: “This I believe arises, namely, . . . that those princes who are utterly dependent on fortune come to grief when their fortune changes.”¹⁸⁸

For this reason, Machiavelli warns against dependence on fortune, and advocates for prudent, impetuous action when attempting to subdue her. He did, however, continue to maintain that man should never count out the possibility that fortune was favoring him with an opportunity for glory. As Machiavelli exhorts in the *Discourses*: “[Men] should indeed never give up for, since they do not know [fortune’s] end and it proceeds by oblique and unknown ways, they have always to hope and, since they hope, not to give up in whatever fortune and in whatever travail they may find themselves.”¹⁸⁹

Nature of Purpose

Before turning to the specific methods and observations Machiavelli provides in *The Prince* for obtaining political success, it is first necessary to briefly consider yet another of his definitions of nature—this time the nature of purpose. The nature of purpose in Machiavelli should be seen both personally and generally. Firstly, Machiavelli had a personal, authorial purpose in writing *The Prince* as well as his other works. Secondly, his various treatises on government also contained within them a political purpose—what I will call a goal of politics.

¹⁸⁷ *The Prince*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 80).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 80).

¹⁸⁹ *Discourses*, II, 30 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 199).

However, these two purposes need not be mutually exclusive; indeed, especially in the case of Machiavelli, they should not be so considered. For, if he was anything, Machiavelli was above all a man who was dedicated to his *patria* [fatherland]. As he had written in 1527 only a short time before his death, in a letter to Francesco Vettori, one of his oldest and most-trusted friends: “I love my native city more than my own soul.”¹⁹⁰

Despite his obvious republicanism,¹⁹¹ occurring most clearly and emphatically later in his *Discourses*, Machiavelli penned *The Prince* in order to advise a new prince. As he writes in his dedicatory letter to Lorenzo de' Medici¹⁹²: “So, Your Magnificence, take this little gift in the spirit in which I send it; and if you read and consider it diligently, you will discover in it my urgent wish that you reach the eminence that fortune and your other qualities promise you.”¹⁹³ In purpose as well as form, *The Prince* stands as one among many: this, his most infamous work, marked Machiavelli's contribution to a long-standing genre of political treatises intended specifically as “advice-books”¹⁹⁴ for princes, a genus Allan Gilbert calls: “*de regimine principum*,” or rather, “*the prince*.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori, dated 16 April 1527 (Atkinson and Sices, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, 416).

¹⁹¹ For perhaps the most thorough consideration of Machiavelli's republicanism and its outgrowth from the larger European tradition, see in this connection *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. by Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁹² Though the Dedicatory Letter that prefaces his treatise is addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici, most scholars maintain that Machiavelli had most likely intended to dedicate *The Prince* originally to Giuliano de' Medici. See in this connection Bull, *The Prince*, 98: footnote 1.

¹⁹³ *The Prince*, Dedicatory Letter (Bull, *The Prince*, 4).

¹⁹⁴ See in this connection Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 116-118.

¹⁹⁵ Allan H. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and Its Forerunners: The Prince as a Typical Book de Regimine Principum* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1938), v.

Contrary to what some have argued¹⁹⁶, Machiavelli's goals were largely no-different from the advice-books of other humanists, or even from the earlier works of 'mirror-for-princes' theorists.¹⁹⁷ For these would-be advisors to princes, their purpose was two-fold: to earn personal favor for themselves through aiding their respective ruler in achieving his political goals. More specifically, these writers sought to help their prince govern in a way that would result in winning for him glory, honor, and fame. As Alkis Kontos explains: "As success is directly related to results, so is glory to success. Glory is the natural consequence of success."¹⁹⁸

For example, in his *Book of the Courtier*—one of "the most celebrated and influential" of the advice-books and "one of the most widely-read books of the sixteenth century"¹⁹⁹—Baldesar Castiglione declares "the end of the perfect courtier" to be: "to win for himself the mind and favour of the prince he serves that he can...make his prince realize the honour and advantages that accrue to him and his family", thus earning him "the same glory" and "worthy emulation" given to other outstanding men of the ancient

¹⁹⁶ See in this connection for example Black, *Machiavelli*, 103. Black contends that Machiavelli's goals of politics were outside of accepted traditions, saying: "A political theorist such as Cicero had envisaged glory as the highest goal but it was glory inextricably linked to public welfare and the common good; in *The Prince* it was the prince, not his subjects who counted."; Also, see Hammill, *Mosaic Constitution*, 54-56. Hammill similarly argues that the purpose of politics Machiavelli describes in *The Prince* is related to maintaining "power and security" as it is related to "the self-interest of the prince."

¹⁹⁷ See in this connection the influential study of *The Prince* within the context of other advice-books for princes by Allan Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and Its Forerunners*, v, 2; Additionally, such a view was upheld by Quentin Skinner in his seminal study, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 118-19, 131.

¹⁹⁸ Alkis Kontos, "Success and Knowledge in Machiavelli," in *The Political Calculus*, ed. by Anthony Parel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 85.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

world.²⁰⁰ Similarly, in his *The Prince*, Giovanni Pontano ends his advice to Alfonso II, duke of Calabria, by declaring his hope that: “in reading [which I have written] you will recognize yourself and those accomplishments of yours which win the highest praise, and you will inspire yourself on toward greater glory each day.”²⁰¹

If earning glory, honor, and fame were the supreme goal of political action, how were these achieved? These writers asserted this was done through action that promoted the common good and welfare of the state, or *patria*. According to Kontos:

“The goal of political leadership is to establish an environment whereby the basic and immutable tenets of human nature are fully accommodated and utilized, and maintain and stabilize such accommodation as long as possible through the creation of appropriate socio-political institutions.”²⁰²

Public good was prioritized over personal ambition; methods and institutions that promoted liberty were to be praised, those tending toward tyranny to be condemned.

Like his humanist forerunners, Machiavelli upholds glory, honor, and fame as the ultimate goals of political action. And for Machiavelli, there were particular political actions that were able to earn a prince the highest share of this glory. As he writes in the ‘Exhortation’: “nothing brings a man greater honour than the new laws and new institutions he establishes. When these are soundly based and bear the mark of greatness, they make him revered and admired.”²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, VI, trans. by George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 284-5, 288.

²⁰¹ Giovanni Pontano, *The Prince [De Principe]*, trans. by Nicholas Webb, included in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, Volume II: *Political Philosophy*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 85.

²⁰² Kontos, “Success and Knowledge in Machiavelli,” 84.

²⁰³ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

The difference and originality of Machiavelli as it relates to the other advisor-for-princes writers is not due, then, to a separate understanding of political purpose, but rather in regards to the particular *pathway* he advocates in reaching traditionally accepted goals. Such a contention is well-founded, and has been argued by various influential scholars across the years and ideological spectrum. As has been previously considered, Allan Gilbert and Quentin Skinner each hold similar positions regarding this overstated belief of Machiavelli's originality. Each scholar respectively has argued that *The Prince* is not in fact an advice-book *sui generis*, but rather an accepted contribution to the genre that innovatively repurposed and reconstructed its conventions from the inside out.²⁰⁴

For Skinner, Machiavelli's innovation to the advice-for-princes genre came through the promulgation of a moral framework separate from that of the demands of traditional Christian virtue. This created a "different morality" for Machiavelli in comparison to his humanist contemporaries and predecessors: "two rival and incompatible accounts of what ought ultimately to be done."²⁰⁵ Using a delineation framework built upon Berlin,²⁰⁶ Skinner argued this "essential contrast" between the traditional moral system of other humanists and that of Machiavelli to reside within their respective conceptions of *virtù*: where *virtù* for the former was almost wholly equated with the possession of all the major virtues as understood through contemporary Christianity, while for the latter, *virtù* could be applied to "whatever range of qualities" dictated by political necessity.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ See in this connection, Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and Its Forerunners*, vi, 231-32; also Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 118, 135.

²⁰⁵ Skinner, *Foundations of Political Thought*, 131, 134-35.

²⁰⁶ See in this connection Berlin, *Originality of Machiavelli*, especially 183.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 138 (emphasis original).

Similar to Skinner, what comprised the difference and originality of *The Prince* for Gilbert was its commitment to realism. Machiavelli's "true originality" according to Gilbert: "may be summed up in his conviction that government is an independent art in an imperfect world; it is practical, and the only true theory is that derived from returning to practice."²⁰⁸ Unlike the previous works of *de regimine principum*, Machiavelli spoke of new ideas and methods not based altogether in moral virtue, including those derived from actions and rulers which had hitherto been condemned as tyrannical. In doing this, Machiavelli created a "new moral principle" centered around his "theory of state," predicated on an understanding that: "for the good life of man settled order was indispensable," and thus "at all costs there must be firmly established government; there rests the morality of nations."²⁰⁹ So likewise, Gilbert asserts that Machiavelli was no teacher of evil, in no small part due to the conventionality of his goals of politics and their purposeful adherence to upholding the common good of man.

Further, it is important to understand that the within the humanist and Christian intellectual tradition, seeking such goals as worldly glory was not considered to be an immoral or irreligious pursuit. As Viroli explains:

"Even the earthly glory that makes men immortal, while it may be a human creation, is not isolated from God... The concept of a man whose love of fatherland and glory makes him godlike, and who takes on a certain divine nature, is present in a venerable tradition of political and religious thought."²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and Its Forerunners*, 235.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

²¹⁰ Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 42-43.

Petrarch, one of Machiavelli's literary heroes, believed that a desire for glory was a natural facet of human nature. Viroli summarizes from Petrarch's *Prose*: "Earthly glory is a goal that men can pursue with a view to eternal salvation, and there was no reason to renounce the former in exchange for the latter."²¹¹ Other influential Italian humanists, including: Giovanni Conversano, Poggio Bracciolini, Flavio Biondo, Leon Battista Alberti, and Matteo Palmieri, among others, defended and promoted the prevailing notion that the classical notion of glory was not only acceptable, but favored by God.²¹²

Machiavelli himself even included such associations between temporal exaltation and religious dependency in his writings. In his *Discourse on Florentine Affairs After the Death of Lorenzo*, a treatise he wrote for Giulio de' Medici,²¹³ Machiavelli attributes the ability to achieve worldly glory and immortality to God ('Heaven'):

"Heaven cannot give a man a greater gift than this or point him a more glorious way. Amid all the happiness that God has given your house and your Holiness personally, this is the greatest: the gift of the power and the occasion to make yourself immortal and far outdo the fame of your father and your ancestors."²¹⁴

This statement echoes what he had written earlier in *The Prince* when speaking of the opportunity for glory provided by the oppression of present-day Italy. As Machiavelli

²¹¹ Ibid., 43. See in this connection Petrarch, *Prose*, ed. by Guido Martellotti et al (Milan-Naples, 1955), part III, 198, 204.

²¹² Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 43-45. [Though Viroli quotes each author from his own works, and cites as reference either selections or commentaries, English translations are not present. Due to further difficulty in accessing appropriate translations, no corresponding references to these works as they appear in Viroli are included in this paper].

²¹³ Ibid., 43-44.

²¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourse on Florentine Affairs After the Death of Lorenzo* [*Discursus florentinarum rerum post morem iunioris Laurentii Medices*], in *Machiavelli: The History of Florence and Other Selections*, trans. by Judith A. Rawson and ed. by Myron P. Gilmore (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), 27.

declares in the 'Exhortation': "I believe that so many things conspire to favour a new prince, that I cannot imagine there ever was a time more suitable than the present."²¹⁵ He then proceeds to explicate further the nature of the opportunity for winning glory and honor, and in doing so, again intermixes the pursuit of worldly praise with a divine element: "See how Italy beseeches God to send someone to save her...your illustrious House, which, with its fortune and prowess, favoured by God and by the Church...can lead Italy to her salvation."²¹⁶ Finally, Machiavelli concludes this discussion of opportunity by yielding to God not only the ultimate determination on allocating glory, but also that He actually chooses to yield a portion of His glory to mankind as a reward for proper exercise of free will: "God does not want to...take away from us our free will and our share of the glory which belongs to us."²¹⁷

It is clear, therefore, that in *The Prince* Machiavelli upholds the pursuit of glory, honor, and fame as the goals of politics, and that he sees lying within the situation of present-day Italy a rare opportunity to win the greatest possible portion of admiration and praise. He can imagine no circumstance more apposite, and declares that both God and fortune favor the new prince set on redemption. His declaration of divine favor and participation in granting glory for human actions also make expressly clear that Machiavelli understands the goals and rewards of politics to be permitted and sanctioned by God.

Nature of Outcome

²¹⁵ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

As has been seen, Machiavelli understood the nature of political action to be contingent on the interaction of various forces—the most important being man, fortune, and God. The outcome of human endeavors (more specifically, those involving political governance) was determined by not only human nature, but also the changeable nature of fortune and the divine nature of God that together shaped the nature of circumstance and opportunity. For its part, fortune could either act favorably or malevolently, while—separately and according to His own divine plan—God chose to intervene to aid those He selected as friends, or remain uninvolved for some unknowable purpose.

With the final chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli ultimately brings together his framework of nature to give practical purpose for the corpus of political advice provided in his treatise. It is in the ‘Exhortation’ that we find the nature of Machiavelli’s purpose. Beginning in the very first sentence, Machiavelli explains his goals of politics and his goal in writing *The Prince*:

“After deliberating on all the things discussed above, I asked myself whether in present-day Italy the times were propitious to honour a new prince, and whether the circumstances existed here to introduce a new order, bringing honour to himself and prosperity to all the Italians. Well, I believe that so many things conspire to favour a new prince, that I cannot imagine there ever was a time more suitable than the present.”²¹⁸

No time is more suitable for action. Though fortune can act capriciously and maliciously against a new prince, in the present day it has created the greatest opportunity for divine friendship and aid. Further, Machiavelli goes on to assure his reader that the political

²¹⁸ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

endeavor at hand is both just and achievable. All that remains is for someone to exercise their divinely-ordained free will, raise the banner, and take action. And in doing so, the new prince will not only liberate Italy from tyranny, but he will earn for himself the utmost honor and glory.

Having asserted this framework with an inspiration and emotion quite uncharacteristic of the previous twenty-five chapters, Machiavelli then proffers several qualifying statements on why others have failed to achieve the political outcome he essentially promises to his Medici audience. Doubtless, these qualifications are intended as final assurance to his reader—seeking both to quell any remaining apprehensions about the plausibility of the task at hand, and to further fortify his claims regarding the efficacy and exceptionality of his prescriptions. However, these qualifying statements, wherein Machiavelli briefly diagnoses the failures of those who had come before, also provide critical insight into how Machiavelli's understanding of nature—i.e. human nature, the nature of God, and the nature of fortune—underpins the foundation of his political philosophy.

Machiavelli sees the nature of outcome of a particular human endeavor—that is, a successful outcome or a failed outcome—as contingent upon the relationship between each of these disparate but interacting natures. Some times the respective natures of humans, God, and fortune are all in alignment; other times they are in conflict. Most of the time, the nature of outcome depends on only the interplay between humans and fortune—as, we have seen, a central element to the nature of Machiavelli's God is allowing His creations to function independently of Him through the exercise of their free will. Therefore, through his assurances and admonitions in the concluding chapter of *The*

Prince, Machiavelli, with complete intellectual honesty and unmistakable urgency, passion, and sincerity, presents his understanding of the nature of outcomes—of which, the only assured positive political outcome for Italy involves the assistance and blessing of God.

He begins with a practical diagnosis of failure. “It is not to be marveled at,” Machiavelli declares, “that none of the Italians I have named has succeeded in doing what, it is hoped, your illustrious House will do, or that in so many revolutions in Italy and so many martial campaigns it has always seemed that our military prowess has been distinguished.”²¹⁹ For this charge, he indicts two things: inept military systems and inadequate leaders.

Firstly, Machiavelli prosecutes contemporary military systems for why no one had yet accomplished this Italian salvation he claims ‘will not be very hard.’ He immediately explains: “this is because the old military systems were bad and there has been no one who knew how to establish one.”²²⁰ The Italian military, he asserts, requires a “thorough reorganization,” as “we would find greater prowess among those who follow, were it not lacking among the leaders.”²²¹ It is not that Italian stock is incapable of military prowess, he is careful to clarify, in fact quite the opposite. Ever the nationalist, Machiavelli is quick to defend the virtue of the Italian individual: “Look at the duels and the combats between a few, how the Italians are superior in strength, in skill, in inventiveness”; only “when it is a matter of armies, they do not compare.”²²²

²¹⁹ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

²²² *Ibid.*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

This second fault he levies at individual leaders: “All this is because of the weakness of the leaders.”²²³ Disobedience pervades armies, he states, even: “those who are capable are not obeyed.” Rather than lay blame for this on the ‘superior’ Italian soldiers, however, Machiavelli explains it is because: “hitherto no one has had the competence to dominate the others by his prowess and good fortune,” and, “as a result of this, over so long a time, in so many wars during the past twenty years, when there has been an all-Italian army it has always given a bad account of itself”.²²⁴ So in addition to poor military organization, the reason no Italian has yet succeeded in doing what Machiavelli hopes will be done by the Medici is due to incompetent, weak leaders who lack great prowess, good fortune, and the inventiveness to establish new systems.

This sets the foundation for the ultimate qualification Machiavelli provides to explain why ‘none of the Italians [he had] named’ had yet led Italy to her salvation: that they had not emulated the methods of those Machiavelli had singled out for admiration, and had not heeded Machiavelli’s political advice. Throughout the ‘Exhortation’, Machiavelli correlates the ease, not to mention the success, of Italian restoration with adherence to his explication on how to imitate Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus: “The task will not be very hard, if you will call to mind the actions and lives of the men I have mentioned”; “There is the greatest readiness, and where that is so there cannot be great difficulty, provided only your House will emulated the methods of those I have singled out for admiration”; “Therefore if your illustrious House wants to emulate those eminent men who saved their countries”.²²⁵

²²³ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

²²⁴ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83-84).

²²⁵ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82-3; 83; 84).

On one hand, this qualification is again practical—it deals with the temporal, pragmatic application of methodology Machiavelli considers to be more politically advantageous than that used latterly by other men and would-be princes. In short, Machiavelli posits that the imitation of the actions and institutions utilized by Moses et al. lends a more favorable political outcome for Italy and a new prince than yet had arisen deviating from their examples. Others have failed to restore their states because in either their actions, institutions, or dealings with fortune their methods were found wanting.

This qualification is also obviously self-aggrandizing: Machiavelli contrasts the failures of others who came before with the triumphs of great men, in whose name he provides his own prognosis and enunciation of the particular methods they used to achieve their positive outcome—essentially appropriating their successes for himself, and in doing so purposefully demonstrating his discerning erudition and concomitant value as an apposite political advisor. Machiavelli himself even acknowledges the ambitious element supplementing his authorial intent in the dedicatory letter preceding *The Prince*: “And if, from your lofty peak, Your Magnificence will sometimes glance down to these low-lying regions, you will realize the extent to which, undeservedly, I have to endure the great and unremitting malice of fortune.”²²⁶ Furthermore, this qualification also serves the practical purpose of rhetorically protecting the credibility of its author. In the case that his supplied prescriptions and assumptions were proven fruitless, Machiavelli could retain sufficient recourse to assert his advice was not followed irrevocably, or perhaps it was only followed pusillanimously, and remain shielded from excessive censure.

²²⁶ Ibid., “Letter from Niccolò Machiavelli to the Magnificent Lorenzo de’ Medici” (Bull, *The Prince*, 4).

On the other hand, however, in a much subtler way this qualification—that all required for Italian redemption through the present opportunity is emulation of these three eminent men and their methods—is also providential. It is providential in that it deals with the spiritual, incorporeal intervention of God into the worldly equation, tipping the scales of outcome in favor of His friends. As we have seen, Machiavelli’s God gives friendship to a select few who act with *virtù* in their presented opportunities, and intervenes to aid His friends in order for their task of restoration to be achievable. Quite telling, then, are the men Machiavelli ‘singles out’ in the ‘Exhortation’ as friends of God—first Moses, then Cyrus, and finally Theseus.²²⁷ Absent from this ultimate list were other men Machiavelli had also previously cited as practical, political archetypes to be imitated, such as: Romulus, whom he includes in addition to this recommended troika when originally introducing them in Ch. VI; Hiero of Syracuse, whom in the same chapter he cites as a lesser example, but still one to be emulated by others of its kind; and Cesare Borgia, of whom he states: “I know no better precepts to give a new prince than ones derived from Cesare’s actions.”²²⁸

The omission of Romulus, Hiero, Cesare, and anyone else previously praised within *The Prince* from the triad Machiavelli repeatedly charges his reader to imitate in the ‘Exhortation’, then, denotes the presence of a special status conferred by Machiavelli on those possessing the friendship of God. True friends of God will not fail in their task of redeeming their country, as did the unspecified man Machiavelli refers to earlier in the ‘Exhortation’: “And although before now there was a man in whom some spark seemed to show that he was ordained by God to redeem the country, none the less it was seen

²²⁷ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 82).

²²⁸ Ibid., 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20-21; 22; 23).

afterwards, at the very height of his career, he was rejected by fortune.”²²⁹ Though some allow for the possibility of reference to other recent Italian leaders, such as Pope Julius II, the vast majority of scholars maintain that the unspecified man in question was most likely Cesare Borgia.²³⁰ In my opinion, this widely-held assumption that here Machiavelli was referring to Cesare Borgia appears by and far the most logical choice, supported by both historical context and the of language of the text.²³¹ Therefore, once we [safely] assume Cesare as the intended target of this remark, then this too serves to further reinforce Machiavelli’s implication that only friendship with God truly ensures ultimate success for those attempting to save their country. Moreover, it strengthens the overall interpretation that in his political theory, Machiavelli placed considerable emphasis on the role and power of God.

For, operating under this assumption of Cesare Borgia, we see Machiavelli deliberately juxtapose the nature of outcome of the practical with the providential: the triumph of fortune over those independent from divine grace versus the glorious outcome

²²⁹ Ibid., 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 81).

²³⁰ For instance, see George Bull’s translation of *The Prince*, where he notes the reference in question: “there was a man...ordained by God to redeem the country: Cesare Borgia, almost certainly”; Allan Gilbert’s translation of *The Prince* cites the passage in question: “Easily applied to Cesare Borgia (cf. chap. 7, above), but probably including ‘the Italians mentioned above’ of the fourth paragraph of this chapter. Machiavelli’s praise of Cesare, though hearty, is limited; nowhere, unless here, does he suggest redemptive qualities in Borgia,” included in his *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, I, 93; Russell Price cites the passage in he and Quentin Skinner’s edition as: “Probably a reference to Cesare Borgia,” (*The Prince*, trans. and ed. by Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 88; in addition, Robert Black lists the reference from Ch. 26, ‘at the very height of his career he was cast aside by fortune’ in regard to his discussion of Cesare Borgia: “The supreme example of fortune’s malign power in *The Prince*,” in *Machiavelli*, 108.

²³¹ For a thorough explanation of the historical context surrounding Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia, see in this connection the essay by John T. Scott and Vickie B. Sullivan, “Patricide and the Plot of *The Prince*: Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli’s Italy,” in *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (1994): 887-900.

given and promised to the friends of God. His reader would recall earlier, in Chapter VII, where Machiavelli had considered Cesare at some length and praised him highly for his practical political ability:

“Cesare Borgia, commonly called duke Valentino, acquired his state through the good fortune of his father, and lost it when that disappeared; and this happened even though he used the same ways and means any prudent and capable prince would to consolidate his power in the states he had won by the arms and fortune of others...So if we consider the duke’s career as a whole, we find that he laid strong foundations for the future. And I do not consider it superfluous to discuss these, because I know no better precepts to give a new prince than ones derived from Cesare’s actions; and if what he instituted was of no avail, this was not his fault but arose from the extraordinary and inordinate malice of fortune.”²³²

However, ‘at the very height of his career,’ Machiavelli tells us, even Cesare (putatively considered by many the “hero of *The Prince*” and Machiavelli’s “ideal monarch”²³³), his prime example of practical princely virtue and the representative manifestation of the zenith of independent human ability, ultimately failed to redeem Italy. In *The Prince* Machiavelli tells that Cesare’s downfall came at the hand of fortune—both through its ‘extraordinary and inordinate malice’ and its ‘rejection’—explaining: “his plans were

²³² Ibid., 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 23).

²³³ Black, for his part, relates: “Cesare Borgia has been considered the hero of *The Prince*,” see *Machiavelli*, 97. For further listing of these historiographical references, see the essay by Scott and Sullivan, “Patricide and the Plot of *The Prince*,” especially 887. Those scholars listed by Scott and Sullivan include: Montesquieu, Frederick of Prussia, Hulliung, and Skinner.

frustrated only because Alexander's life²³⁴ was cut short and because of his own sickness."²³⁵ Machiavelli eventually goes on to acknowledge a single error made by Cesare: "The duke deserves censure only regarding the election of Pope Julius [II], where he made a bad choice."²³⁶

Elsewhere, though, Machiavelli supplies additional context for Cesare's failure. Machiavelli's dispatches to the Signoria from late 1503, written on a diplomatic mission to the papal court in Rome while his post in the Florentine chancery, contain more detailed accounts of Cesare's shortcomings, particularly related to the deficiencies of his natural character: "The Duke meantime allows himself to be carried away by his sanguine confidence, believing that the word of others is more to be relied upon than his own"²³⁷; "have perceived a change in [the Duke, who] seems...irresolute, suspicious, and unstable in all his conclusions. This may be the result of his natural character, or because the blows of fortune, which he is not accustomed to bear, have stunned and confounded him"²³⁸; "the Duke seemed to him to have lost his wits, for he appeared not to know himself what he wanted, and that he was confused and irresolute."²³⁹

Machiavelli here depicts the maxim he later encapsulates in *The Prince*. When the well of good fortune Cesare had inherited from his father eventually ran dry, the defects

²³⁴ "Alexander" here refers to Alexander VI (formerly Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia), who was Pope from 1492-1503 and the father of Cesare Borgia.

²³⁵ Ibid., 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 27).

²³⁶ Ibid., 7 (Bull, *The Prince*, 28).

²³⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli to the Florentine Signoria, dispatch dated 4 November 1503. Except where noted, all references in English to Machiavelli's dispatches are to *Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. by Christian E. Detmold, 4 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1891), hereafter cited as *Diplomatic Writings*, here III, 300.

²³⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli to the Florentine Signoria, dispatch dated 14 November 1503, in Detmold, *Diplomatic Writings*, III, 320.

²³⁹ Ibid., Dispatch 14.11.1503 (Detmold, *Diplomatic Writings* III, 321).

endemic to his human nature quickly undid him. The Duke's nature, characterized by a 'sanguine confidence,' which before had helped him act impetuously, metastasized into obstinate arrogance in the vicissitudes of fortune and clouded his judgment irreparably. This resulted in him overplaying his hand by mistaking the strength and nature of his enemies, leading him to vacillate rather than act to secure his position, and eventually rendered him mercurial and ineffective. As such, he was then easily bested by ill-fortune and his mountain of enemies.

In short, the full picture of Cesare given through Machiavelli's dispatches echoes the latter's precepts in Chapter XXV of *The Prince* regarding the constraints of individual nature in dealing with the circumstances of fortune. "I...believe that the one who adapts his policy to the times prospers, and likewise that the one whose policy clashes with the demands of the times does not," Machiavelli opines frankly, "Nor do we find any man shrewd enough to know how to adapt his policy in this way; either because he cannot do otherwise than what is in character or because, having always prospered by proceeding one way, he cannot persuade himself to change."²⁴⁰ Machiavelli ends this discussion with perhaps one of his most paradoxical and thoroughly debated propositions: "I conclude, therefore, that as fortune is changeable whereas men are obstinate in their ways, men prosper so long as fortune and policy are in accord, and when there is a clash they fail."²⁴¹ This sentiment is reiterated by Machiavelli again in the *Discourses*:

"Two things are causes why we are unable to change: one, that we are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us; the other, that when on individual has prospered very much with one mode of proceeding, it is not possible to persuade

²⁴⁰ *The Prince*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 80).

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 81).

him that he can do well to proceed otherwise. Hence it arises that fortune varies in one man, because it varies the times and he does not vary the modes.”²⁴²

As Cary J. Nederman has suggested, that, for Machiavelli: “nature and character combine

to render people incapable of responding to new conditions and changes of fortune.

Regardless of circumstance, individuals can be expected to follow a consistent path in their actions.”²⁴³ “If they are lucky,” he continues, “their nature and character will suit the

times, and they will succeed; otherwise, their failure is assured.”²⁴⁴ Though Nederman

does go on to qualify this assertion that ‘*their failure is assured*’—acknowledging that

Machiavelli, at times, “appears to intimate that fortune...may be overcome by rulers”

through developing a nature of “practical” “flexibility”²⁴⁵—resigning those not favored

by fortune to ‘assured failure’ is undoubtedly an overstatement of Machiavelli’s position.

After all, as seen above, Machiavelli begins this discussion of fortune by reproving the

regnant belief that men have no influence over events, instead supplying as a correction

his view that fortune is the arbiter of only half the things we do, leaving the remaining

partial to be controlled by us.²⁴⁶ And, as Nederman points out, Machiavelli goes on to

advance that if a man is flexible enough to vary his methods according to the

circumstance, and prudent enough to recognize the transience of his circumstances, the

prosperity of his fortunes “would not change.”²⁴⁷ This leads to Machiavelli’s infamous

conclusion: “that it is better to be impetuous than circumspect; because fortune is a

²⁴² *Discourses*, III, 9 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 240).

²⁴³ Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 623.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 623.

²⁴⁵ See in connection “Amazing Grace,” 623-24, for Nederman’s full explanation.

²⁴⁶ *The Prince*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 79).

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 80).

woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her,” and that “being a woman, she favours young men, because they are less circumspect and more ardent and because they command her with greater audacity”²⁴⁸ The very fact that Machiavelli holds certain conditions as the most favorable to command fortune, and advises requisite precepts he contends most useful to maintaining a positive state of fortune denotes that he believes, at least hypothetically, that men through their nature and action can overcome fortune.

However, Nederman’s argument regarding what Machiavelli sees as the *likelihood* that an individual *can*, in fact, actively and flexibly regulate and amend their characteristic nature is, in my opinion, insightful and well-substantiated. Nederman posits:

“Machiavelli’s evaluation of the chances for creating a new, psychologically flexible type

of character is extremely guarded. He tends to word his advocacy of it in conditional

form and in the subjunctive mood: ‘*If* it were possible to change one’s nature to suit the

times and circumstances, one *would* always be successful.’”²⁴⁹

While Machiavelli, perhaps (ironically) even despite himself, seems to retain some possibility that such a thing can be accomplished by human nature and thus fortune can be repeatedly defeated, the outlook he presents is bleak. Despite the ample

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 25 (Bull, *The Prince*, 81.)

²⁴⁹ Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 624. In-text quotation cited and altered from Gilbert, *Works*, I, 92, (italics Nederman’s).

consideration given to the topic of fortune in *The Prince*, nowhere does Machiavelli explicitly affirm a personal belief that unaided, autonomous human nature can overcome the purview of fortune indefinitely.

Scholars point to this so-called “Machiavellian Predicament” as further evidence of Machiavelli’s true pessimism and condemnation of human nature.²⁵⁰ After all, if Cesare Borgia—understood to be the most highly exalted of Machiavelli’s new princes—was ultimately rejected by fortune, then it is only logical to conclude that in effect Machiavelli must truly regard the supposition as futile. An exemplary iteration of this common scholarly interpretation can be found in Robert Black’s discussion on the message and meaning of *The Prince*.²⁵¹ At this time, I believe it both appropriate and necessary to briefly explore Black’s consideration of this ambiguous Machiavellian topos in order to more sufficiently contextualize the issue at hand.

According to Black, Machiavelli understood the political world to be: “susceptible to irrational forces that could frustrate even the most ‘virtuous’ individuals.”²⁵² Of these, fortune was the most important: “regarded by Machiavelli and his contemporaries as an unpredictable and chaotic agent capable of wreaking havoc on the most carefully planned and executed human endeavors.” Black cites Cesare Borgia as: “the supreme example of fortune’s malign power in *The Prince*.” While “Machiavelli did

²⁵⁰ Nederman seems to have aptly coined the phrase “The Machiavellian Predicament,” however, the concept and paradox itself is a common facet of Machiavelli scholarship. See in this connection the presented discussion of Robert Black’s argument below.

²⁵¹ For the entirety of this discussion, see in this connection Black, *Machiavelli*, 108-109.

²⁵² It is important to note that Black’s understanding of what Machiavelli conceived as ‘virtuous individuals’ is in some ways different than what has been presented here. According to Black: “If a prince possessed *virtù* in its basic sense of manliness, if he cast aside the moral virtues and if he concealed himself behind a veil of conventional probity and religion, then there was hope that he could achieve glory,” (108).

not accept that fortune was omnipotent in human affairs,” Black contends, “his analysis in *The Prince* of how fortune can be overcome is far from straightforward.” As Black sees it: “The difficulty with Machiavelli’s exposition is that he puts forward one argument, only to contradict in the next what he has just asserted.” Black then proceeds to trace the lines of argumentation Machiavelli proposes in Chapter XXV—what he considers “amounts to a dialogue” Machiavelli has with himself, wherein “one hypothesis is suggested, only to be overturned by the next argument.”:

“First, Machiavelli compares fortune to an overflowing river that needs to be opposed”; “Then, however, he returns to the theory of harmony with the times”; But, “individuals cannot change their own character, and so the implication is that the earlier argument...is invalid”; “Then Machiavelli launches into a third argument: fortune is a woman”; Meaning “he again undermines his previous argument: regardless of the prevailing circumstances, it is normally best to be impetuous”; “However, in the next chapter he soon refutes even this argument. By pointing to Cesare Borgia...he gives a prime example of how daring and manliness can be of no avail in the face of fortune.”²⁵³

Black concludes: “In the end, however, Machiavelli does wind up the process of self-contradiction, although the final solution is articulated obliquely. The key factor turns out to be timeliness or the right occasion: a prince can succeed in his endeavors if he finds the proper moment.” Or, more generally, Black sees Machiavelli’s “answer to the puzzle about fortune posed in *The Prince*” to be nothing more than: “a variation of another time-honoured proverb: *carpe diem*.”

²⁵³ Ibid., 108-109.

As has been seen, Black's interpretation of Machiavelli is viewed through an ardently irreligious lens: God to Machiavelli was impotent and indifferent to human affairs, if He even existed at all.²⁵⁴ Through this God-less framework, Black is forced to conclude his analysis with the entirely unsatisfying 'oblique final solution' that Machiavelli himself conceded that the successful articulation of his political philosophy rested entirely on a cliché. Though he includes the fact that "the visionary, messianic note of Chapter XXVI has confounded readers," Black proffers no explanation attempting to solve this dubiety, and admits the chapter does not seem "internally consistent".²⁵⁵ Perhaps because of this, Black never considers the 'Exhortation' at length, and his analysis ultimately omits any discussion or explanation of Machiavelli's invocation of the friendship of God.

However, when Black's self-imposed interpretive restriction against divine consideration is removed, Machiavelli's conclusion in the 'Exhortation' becomes much clearer. Not only does Machiavelli declare the opportunity ripe for the taking, he also injects the friendship of God into the calculus. Imitation of Moses, Cyrus and Theseus, men 'singled out for admiration,' men Machiavelli understood to be 'friends of God,' and *not* Cesare Borgia, who acted against fortune *without* divine assistance is the way to assured success. This interpretation is corroborated by the *Discourses*, where Machiavelli

²⁵⁴ Ibid., xix, xxiii, 285-87.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 118. When considering the confounding tone of Chapter 26, Black only asserts that any hypotheses "that this final chapter was written at a moment different from the principal text's composition" are "without foundation in manuscript or textual evidence." A unique dating of the composition of *The Prince* plays a role in Black's analysis (see 89-96), and thus his comment here is only intended to refute any chronological assumptions stemming from the confusion over the chapter. Beyond this, Black makes no attempt to rebuff the present confusion, and implicitly seems to place himself among them.

supplies: “If how human affairs proceed is considered well, it will be seen that often things arise and accidents come about that the [Heavens] have not altogether wished to be provided against.”²⁵⁶ When the ‘Heavens,’ or, rather, God, stands by and does not get involved in human affairs, the best that man can hope for is to work alongside fortune, not overcome her completely. He concludes: “I indeed affirm it anew to be very true, according to what is seen through all the histories, that men can second fortune but not oppose it, that they can weave its warp but not break it.”²⁵⁷

Only when God is injected into human affairs can man be sure of defeating fortune. It is only for the ‘friends of God,’ Machiavelli boasts, that “unheard-of wonders are to be seen, performed by God,” and conspire to their greatness.²⁵⁸ God’s friendship is given to a select few who act according to certain methods within their presented opportunities, and He intervenes to aid His friends in order for their task of restoration to be achievable.

In the ‘Exhortation’, then, Machiavelli seems to be guaranteeing a positive outcome in the endeavor of Italian redemption contingent upon the new prince’s status as a friend of God, and achieving the highest level of glory and honor that accompanies ordering new laws and institutions. Just as with Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus, divine intervention will counter the limitations of nature and fortune and provide for unequivocal success. Despite this, various scholars have denied Machiavelli’s belief in divine intervention by pointing to the fact that, unlike Moses, Cyrus and Theseus were secular rulers. Graham Hammill contends that by linking Moses to non-theocratic rulers,

²⁵⁶ *Discourses*, II, 29 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 197). In Gilbert’s translation, “Heavens” is capitalized and made formal. See in this connection Gilbert, *Works*, I, 406.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 30 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 199).

²⁵⁸ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

Machiavelli in effect actually: “underscores the fictional nature of Moses’s claims.”²⁵⁹

According to Hammill:

“[Machiavelli] *stages and performs* deference to divine intervention in order to underscore the way in which claims to revelation secure political authority through belief in them. . . Machiavelli presents Moses as an exemplary instance of political calculation. It ends up that Moses is not that different from Cyrus and other pagan rulers who founded their governance based on their own powers, ‘if their particular actions and methods are examined’ . . . All founders and reformers, Moses included, use the fiction of revelation to further their political ends.”²⁶⁰

Hammill supplements this analysis by referencing Victoria Kahn, who had previously argued that the rhetoric utilized by Machiavelli underlined his true opinion.²⁶¹ Kahn

insisted:

“Renaissance readers of this chapter were particularly disturbed by the inclusion of Moses among those who became princes ‘by their own *virtù*.’” They could not help noticing Machiavelli’s ironic deference to Moses’s ‘teacher’ and his sly imputation that Moses had feigned divine favor. . . In these remarks Machiavelli conflates the language of divine providence with that of princely *virtù*, and so negates the distinction between Moses and Cyrus even as he insists on it.”²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Hammill, *Mosaic Constitution*, 41.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 41 (emphasis original).

²⁶¹ See in this connection Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 18-25.

²⁶² Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, 21-22.

Thus, Hammill concludes: “Machiavelli demonstrates the political force of the fiction of revelation at the very moment that he wryly denies its status as fiction.”²⁶³

Yet several issues arise with this line of argumentation; not the least of which is the blinding, preconceived bias required to derive an implicitly ‘ironic,’ tongue-in-cheek underlying rhetorical motive. If one considers the same passages with an opposite religious interpretation to those of Hammill and Kahn (as I admit to holding), then they just as easily lend themselves to a clearly orthodox reading. In fact, it follows that the reverse of Hammill and Kahn’s assumption is far more plausible. For, just as Machiavelli’s linking of Moses to the secular rulers could conceivably undermine his religious authenticity, so too could this connection cogently strengthen Machiavelli’s ability to reason about his political activity.

As John H. Geerken explains:

“Had Machiavelli *not* thus qualified Moses’ presence in *The Prince*, his readers might have themselves dismissed Moses, arguing that he was too special, heroic, and unusual to warrant inclusion in a discussion aimed at imitative political behavior. By anticipating such an objection and articulating it, Machiavelli neutralized it.”²⁶⁴

Following a well-worn rhetorical pathway utilized by both Cicero and Aristotle, Geerken clarifies: “Machiavelli resorted to such standard forensic tactics as beginning to say something, but stopping short; of citing, but not amplifying, thereby bringing the reader

²⁶³ Ibid., 41.

²⁶⁴ Geerken, “Machiavelli’s Moses,” 591.

to greater receptivity.”²⁶⁵ Therefore, Machiavelli: “was manipulating basically secular and potentially skeptical readers into more willing acceptance of a religious dimension by inserting it and then immediately withdrawing it.”²⁶⁶

Additionally, as Black repeatedly notes, Machiavelli did not write *The Prince* for publication or wide-circulation: “*The Prince* and the *Discourses* were written in a casual, conversational, even ungrammatical and rough manner—suitable for what amounted to conversation or communication with friends.”²⁶⁷ In these works, Machiavelli: “wrote as a rejected and angry outcast”²⁶⁸; his opinions and positions are presented “with stupefying candor.”²⁶⁹ For example, despite addressing the end of Chapter XI to Pope Leo X: “Machiavelli does not altogether conceal his anticlerical and antichristian sentiments. The derogatory tone of his remarks about ecclesiastical principalities cannot be missed.”²⁷⁰ Perhaps most notoriously, Machiavelli in Chapter XVIII explicitly advocates the necessity for a new prince to: “act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion” and thus only need “*appear* a man of compassion, a man of good faith, a man of integrity, a kind and religious man.”²⁷¹ All this to emphasize, Machiavelli had no qualms against opposing prevailing political, moral, or religious sentiment. His opinions are clear, often repeated, and personal, while his sarcasm, censure, and references are, on the

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 591. See in this connection also Cicero (attrib.), *Ad C. Herennium IV De Ratione Dicendi [Rhetorica AD Herennium]*, trans. by Harry Caplan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 353-55, 403; and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, 23, 44; III, 1, 2, 7, in *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. by George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 591.

²⁶⁷ Black, *Machiavelli*, 217.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 218.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. 98.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 114.

²⁷¹ *The Prince*, 18 (Bull, *The Prince*, 57-8; emphasis mine).

whole, obvious and apparent. Therefore, there was not only no need to ‘*stage and perform*’ ‘wryly ironic’ rhetorical facades, to do so would have been inconsistent with the tone of his treatise.

The most substantive error of these contentions of Hammill and Kahn, however, relates to historical context. Omitted from these interpretations is any consideration of the longstanding religious intellectual tradition upholding the idea that God is willing to intervene on behalf of secular as well as theocratic rulers. Such a belief, described by Nederman as a “hallmark of Christian thought,” had an intellectual tradition dating back much farther than Machiavelli’s ‘Exhortation’.²⁷² As Nederman asserts: “the worthiness of the greatest pagan rulers in the eyes of God was upheld by medieval thinkers.”²⁷³ Viroli, too, similarly explains: “In exceptional cases, the Christian God is willing to admit into the ranks of the blessed souls even rulers of pagan states.”²⁷⁴

Both scholars reference the legend of the Roman Emperor Trajan, popular in the Middle Ages, and narrated by Machiavelli himself in his *Allocution to a Magistrate*. According to Machiavelli’s iteration: “Though a pagan and an infidel, [Trajan] was received into the number of the elect, through the intercession of St. Gregory, for no other merit than he administered Justice without any special regard for anyone.”²⁷⁵ Following this, Machiavelli quotes from Dante’s *Purgatorio*,²⁷⁶ and concludes: “From this we can

²⁷² Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 632. For Nederman’s full explanation of this tradition, see 631-33.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 631.

²⁷⁴ Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, 62.

²⁷⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Allocution to a Magistrate* [*Allocuzione fatta ad un magistrato*], ed. and trans. by Anthony Parel, in *Political Theory* 18, no. 4 (November, 1990): 526.

²⁷⁶ See in this connection Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) canto 10, lines 73-93.

see how much God loves Justice and mercy.”²⁷⁷ Similarly, the Thomist scholastic protégé, Ptolemy of Lucca, connected the political success of another pagan ruler, Cyrus, to divine intervention of the Christian God.²⁷⁸ As he wrote in his continuation of Aquinas’s unfinished work, *The Rule of Princes*:

“With regard to those [pagans] exercising lordship, God seems to have granted the legitimacy of lordship...God makes a disposition on behalf of the subjects to bring about a better result when a ruler, although a sinner, strives to please God. ...God disposed things in this way because Cyrus showed humility towards His faithful Jews...As a result of these good and virtuous works in favor of the divine cult and the people of God, he obtained the monarchy of the entire East.”²⁷⁹

In this connection, Ptolemy quotes the Prophet Isaiah, who says of Cyrus:

“Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 526-27. See in this connection also Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, 62; and Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 631.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 631-32.

²⁷⁹ Ptolemy of Lucca, *The Rule of Princes* [*De regimine principum*], in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opuscula Omnia*, ed. by Jean Perrier, vol. 1 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1949), 3.7.4, quoted in Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 631-2. For explication on Ptolemy’s continuation of Aquinas’s work, see Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 52.

²⁸⁰ Isaiah 45:1-3.

In this passage it is scripturally clear that not only does God grant favor to the secular, pagan ruler Cyrus, He also promises to divinely intervene to aid His ‘anointed’ friend in his political endeavor, *and* to give him earthly, material rewards of glory and riches. It is therefore as Nederman asserts: “Not only does Machiavelli develop an internally consistent position with regard to the divine design regarding earthly political affairs, but he does so in a manner that perpetuates medieval Christian doctrines.”²⁸¹

Additionally, Machiavelli’s Florentine audience was fully attuned to the pervasive intermingling of religion and politics in their contemporary Renaissance milieu. Within this intermixed political-religious tradition, biblical sources held a vaulted status equal to that of secular, pagan, or ancient political writers. In tracing the context of official, political documents of the Florentine Republic, Gilbert explained: “There were two sources from which authoritative statements were drawn: classical literature and Christian writings. They carried equal weight.”²⁸² Gilbert goes on to assert: “the Florentines did not assign to politics a separate sphere of their own, that they had no distinct criteria for politics.”²⁸³ Thus: “the Florentines were not inclined to take an exclusively religious or an exclusively mundane attitude.”²⁸⁴ Leaning on the work of Gilbert, Geerken likewise writes: “Florentines had for centuries been intermixing religion and politics, believing, for example...that [God] cared about their worldly affairs. They were, therefore, quite at

²⁸¹ Nederman, “Amazing Grace,” 633.

²⁸² Felix Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions in the Period of Savonarola and Soderini,” in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 20, no. 3/4 (1957), 204.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁸⁴ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 43.

ease in including God in their calculations of political, economic, and pragmatic interest.”²⁸⁵

Like Machiavelli, this Florentine belief rested upon an awareness that: “there were limits to what a rational approach in politics could achieve.”²⁸⁶ Therefore, while the Florentines “might deliberate according to human reason,” there remained a deeply religious conviction that political events were directly influenced by God’s will.²⁸⁷ Indeed, even in the “deliberations of men who prided themselves on having the most subtle minds of Italy,” (here Machiavelli surely comes to mind), there often appears “an unrealistic, illusionary spirit,”; wherein “in their inner hearts, [they] would never believe that their situation could be hopeless” because repeatedly: “God had given signs that he had taken the city on the Arno under his special protection.”²⁸⁸

A contextual understanding of the Florentine political-religious tradition further enforces this interpretation that God played an essential role in Machiavelli’s political calculus, and thus that Judeo-Christian religion and theology comprise an inseparable element in his political philosophy. When viewed within this framework, it is clear that Machiavelli’s comparison and parallel analysis of scriptural figures (such as Moses) to pagan or secular figures (such as Cyrus and Theseus) would not have undermined the authority of either, but instead covered both facets of his contemporary political sphere. Rather than seem confusing or satirical, the ‘Exhortation’, with its ‘visionary, messianic tone’ and uncharacteristically ‘idealistic’ message, falls squarely into an accepted

²⁸⁵ Geerken, “Machiavelli’s Moses,” 588. See in this connection also Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions,” 207-211.

²⁸⁶ Gilbert, “Florentine Political Assumptions,” 205.

²⁸⁷ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 43-44.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

tradition that the only assured path to worldly political success relies upon divine intervention as religiously understood.

The Nature of Friendship

The goal of politics and the purpose of his treatise are only arrived at for Machiavelli through a continuation and emphatic declaration of orthodox belief concerning the relationship between politics and religion: only through divine friendship can a prince be assured to overcome fortune and achieve the greatest glory, honor, and praise. Therefore, *The Prince* assuredly cannot mark a separation between politics and religion as is so often claimed.

Beyond solving to the so-called “Machiavellian Predicament,” the nature of divine friendship also serves to justify Machiavelli’s putative separation between the traditional moral system of Christian virtues and the maxims of political necessity he so notoriously promoted in *The Prince*. As we have seen, the true the difference and originality of Machiavelli’s treatise was not in a redirection of political goals or purpose, but rather a revision of the accepted routes leading to the conventional terminus of glory et al. This contention was upheld by both Skinner and Gilbert, who each pointed to moral separation from Christianity to be the defining trait of Machiavelli’s new theory of state, in their respective ways. Though Skinner flatly refutes Strauss’s influential insistence that Machiavelli can only be characterized as a “teacher of evil,” no remaining consideration of the role of Christian religious morality and theology within Machiavelli’s political

philosophy is taken; thus resigning religion to the dictates of political expediency.²⁸⁹ For his part, Gilbert, although repeatedly emphasizing that “Machiavelli’s first interest was the good of the people of Italy,” and that *The Prince* “is not addressed to a tyrant but to a good ruler,” leaves the presence and question of Christian religion largely untouched in his history of *de regimine principum*.²⁹⁰ So while he too asserted that Machiavelli was no teacher of evil, Gilbert likewise removes any true emphasis of Christian theology from Machiavelli’s work.

However, when the ‘Exhortation’ is considered with the appropriate theological emphasis, a new moral principle [to borrow Gilbert’s appellation] emerges. As we have seen, Machiavelli makes explicitly clear that it is in God’s nature to aid those He selects as friends in their political endeavors through divine-intervention. What Machiavelli makes less clear, however, is his corresponding belief that it is also characteristic of God’s nature to forgive His friends and those who act in pursuit of the greater good when, through necessity, they are unable to succeed without the exercise of sin. Just as divine forgiveness allows for the salvation of human souls through grace despite their sins, so too Machiavelli conceives this doctrine applying to the sphere of political action.

Divine forgiveness (which can be alternately understood as falling underneath the concept of grace), alleviates the inherent conflict arising from political action in a fallen world. God does not call on man to do the impossible, yet ‘all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.’ Without divine forgiveness, Christianity would lack internal-logic. Viroli understood such a conception of forgiveness to be the bridge between God and the world, resulting in Machiavelli’s answer to Guicciardini’s claim of irreconcilable

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 136-38. See in this connection Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 9-10, 12, 175.

²⁹⁰ Gilbert, *Machiavelli’s Prince and Its Forerunners*, especially 2, 203, 226-28.

incompatibility: “There is consequently no need to choose between God and the world...since God himself wants us to work in the world in order to achieve his plans, even at the cost of committing evil.”²⁹¹

As we have seen, Machiavelli understood opportunities for achieving true glory to involve a divine element. Further, these opportunities were both just and achievable. And finally, action was required in order to earn the share of glory God reserves for His friends who exercise their free will. In the ‘Exhortation’ Machiavelli assures that all of these elements are in place for a new prince who would redeem Italy from her present oppression. “The task will not be very hard,” he writes, “if you will call to mind the actions and lives of the men I have mentioned.”²⁹²

Among these actions, Machiavelli had notoriously included: the judicious use of cruelty; the practice of parsimony up to the precipice of being a miser; choosing to be feared over loved; breaking your word when it suits you; the desire to appear virtuous rather depend on obtaining true virtue, particularly as it relates to appearing religious; and similarly, to don the cloak of religion in order to appropriate faith for pious cruelty.²⁹³

Tellingly, Machiavelli does not assert or posture even the most tepid of these deceptive or self-seeking precepts to be considered as truly virtuous. On the contrary, most of these maxims are first introduced with a concession that if one is able to act

²⁹¹ Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 63. In 1521, Guicciardini had famously come to the conclusion that one had to live either according to the reason of states or else to the law of God: “I wanted to say this not to pronounce a verdict on these difficulties, which are immense, since anyone who wants to live totally according to God’s will can ill afford not to remove himself totally from the affairs of this world, and it is difficult to live in the world without offending God.” See in this connection Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, trans. by Alison Brown (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 158-59.

²⁹² *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 8; 15; 17; 18; 21 (Bull, *The Prince*, 31-2; 52; 54; 57; 58; 71).

virtuously, then that is the praiseworthy path. These actions and methods are only presented as having been proven to be politically effective through Machiavelli's study of history. And many of them, such as the use of cruelty, come with explicit instructions regarding the nature in which they are acceptable. He considers the use of cruelty in Chapter VIII, positing:

“I believe that here it is a question of cruelty used well or badly. We can say that cruelty is used well (if it is permissible to talk in this way of what is evil) when it is employed once and for all, and one's safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far as possible turned to the good of one's subjects. Cruelty badly used is that which, although infrequent to start with, as time goes on, rather than, disappearing, grows in intensity.”²⁹⁴

First, Machiavelli concedes that cruelty is ‘evil,’ and not something to be praised. That said, it remains something that can ultimately be used to promote the greater ‘good of one's subjects.’ So it seems that with cruelty, the end justifies the means. However, Machiavelli goes on to further qualify the means of cruelty—it is good only when one's safety is directly contingent upon its use, and it continues only as long as it can aid the good of the subjects. Here, it is important to emphasize the good of the *subjects*. Thus, Machiavelli allows the prince to resort to cruelty *only* in matters of extreme personal safety, as the perseverance of the head of state ensures the continuing stability of the state for those below. The ruler *is not*, however, allowed to use cruelty for his own personal good (except for the obvious concession that it is good for the ruler to preserve his own life)—meaning it is only to be used in dire need of preservation, not as a mechanism of

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 8 (Bull, *The Prince*, 31-2).

self-interest or political ambition. Additionally, while there are certain specific instances where cruelty can be ‘used well,’ it can still continue to be used badly. Excluding ensuring direct safety, the remainder of cruelty *cannot* be classified as a necessary evil.

Therefore, we find that the maxim most associated with Machiavelli is not, in fact, even truly Machiavellian. As we see here, the end justifies the means—until it doesn’t. Machiavelli explains that his political experience has shown that a very narrow appropriation of an evil (cruelty), restricted in both intent and frequency, can ultimately prove a justifiable means. He concludes: “Those who use the first method can, with God and men, somewhat enhance their position, as did Agathocles.”²⁹⁵ Anything else, however, is disqualifying. Those who use cruelty badly: “cannot possibly stay in power.”²⁹⁶

When considering Machiavelli’s full discussion of Agathocles, the necessity for revision of his popularly attributed cliché becomes even more clear. Earlier in the chapter, he concludes his consideration of the the Sicilian turned king of Syracuse by acknowledging Agathocles’ independency from fortune:

“So whoever studies that man’s actions and life will discover little or nothing that can be attributed to fortune... his progress was attended by countless difficulties and dangers; that was how he won his principality, and he maintained his position with many audacious and dangerous enterprises.”²⁹⁷

As we have seen, Machiavelli previously considered Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus in almost the exact language. These men were praised as “the most outstanding”

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 8 (Bull, *The Prince*, 32).

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 8 (Bull, *The Prince*, 32).

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 8 (Bull, *The Prince*, 29).

examples of those who came to power by their own abilities and not from reliance upon fortune: “And when we come to examine their actions and lives, they do not seem to have had from fortune anything other than opportunity.”²⁹⁸

Following this acknowledgment of personal ability, however, Machiavelli immediately alters the tenor of his discussion on Agathocles. He qualifies:

“Yet it cannot be called prowess to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory. One can draw attention to the prowess of Agathocles in confronting and surviving danger, and his courageous spirit in enduring and overcoming adversity, and it appears that he should not be judged inferior to any eminent commander; none the less, his brutal cruelty and inhumanity, his countless crimes, forbid his being honoured among eminent men.”²⁹⁹

Though not denying him political ability, particularly as related to ruthless pragmatism, military prowess, and impetuosity of spirit, Machiavelli ultimately censures with clear vitriol the memory of Agathocles. Seemingly, if Machiavelli’s goal of politics and moral system were related to political expediency, the acquiring of power, and totally divorced from Christian morality, Agathocles should be among the those singled out for admiration in his concluding ‘Exhortation.’

However, it is precisely because Machiavelli’s purpose of politics was one that intermixed the pursuit of glory with the involvement of God as understood by Christian theology that Agathocles is condemned as a villain and tyrant in *The Prince*, while Moses stands at the forefront of Machiavelli’s greatest men and is exalted among all others.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20).

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 8 (Bull, *The Prince*, 29).

Agathocles, a direct example of how a vice can be used as a virtue for political expediency—thus typifying what Skinner and Gilbert’s understood to be Machiavelli’s redefinition of *virtù*—was denied glory while Moses showed the pathway to the ultimate achievement of political goals through friendship with God.

Implicit in this discussion of cruelty used well is Moses himself. Recorded in *The Prince* as an ‘armed prophet’ and praised for supplementing persuasion with force, Machiavelli gives further explanation of Moses’s actions in the *Discourses*. There he writes in reference to Exodus 32: “since he wished his laws and his orders to go forward, Moses was forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans.”³⁰⁰ Undoubtedly, Machiavelli considered Moses’ purge to be an act of cruelty. Further, Moses even claims divine authority for his orders to kill those who had turned away from God and His laws. The granting of such divine authority, however, is not recorded in Exodus. Such a thing Machiavelli surely would have considered as operating under the cloak of religion for one’s own purposes.³⁰¹

However, as Viroli explains, Machiavelli understood Moses’ behavior to be: “a perfect example of a cruelty used well.”³⁰² And, as has been seen, Machiavelli asserted that those who use cruelty well can: “with God and with men, somewhat enhance their position.”³⁰³ For Moses, his cruelty was performed in order to remove the threat of idolatry and disbelief from consuming the nation of God. Moses’ cruelty was used well because it was not used for himself, but rather to protect and enforce the law of God,

³⁰⁰ *Discourses*, III, 30 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 280). See in connection also Exodus 32:25-28.

³⁰¹ Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, 64.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁰³ *The Prince*, 8 (Bull, *The Prince*, 32).

which he understood as the only true path to goodness. In this way, Machiavelli saw from Exodus that Moses was in fact able to use the evil of cruelty well, and in doing so saved his state from corruption, which ultimately enhanced his position with God.

After the events of the golden calf, the following chapter of Exodus records the moment of supreme interaction between God and Moses, saying: “the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.”³⁰⁴ Not only was Moses not punished by God, he was instead granted a personal conversation with Him. For Machiavelli, the lesson of Exodus was clear: God did not punish those who were forced by necessity to commit evil—so long as their purpose and method remained one that could bring out glory, which itself comes from God. Machiavelli understood the nature of friendship between God and Moses as recorded in the Bible to alleviate both the deficient sin nature of man and the powers of malignant fortune, and this was the nature of friendship he triumphantly included in *The Prince*.

Conclusion

The hero of *The Prince* for Machiavelli was undoubtedly Moses.³⁰⁵ Placing him foremost on his list of eminent men, Moses held the position of greatest honor in the mind of Machiavelli. As he wrote later in his *Discourses*:

“Among all men praised, the most praised are those who have been heads and orderers of religions. Next, then, are those who have founded either republics or

³⁰⁴ Exodus 33:11.

³⁰⁵ Such a contention is similarly upheld by Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, 6.

kingdoms. After them are celebrated those who, placed over armies, have expanded their kingdom or that of the fatherland.”³⁰⁶

As prophet of God and redeemer of his people, Moses symbolized the zenith of Machiavelli’s hierarchy of greatness. Further, Moses brought down the Ten Commandments and the law of God to his people, and established a new political order. In the ‘Exhortation’, Machiavelli declares: “nothing brings a man greater honour than the new laws and new institutions he establishes. When these are soundly based and bear the mark of greatness, they make him revered and admired.”³⁰⁷ And when his state was threatened, when the law given to him by God was rejected, Moses acted as he had to in order preserve good order and faith: “since he wished his laws and his orders to go forward, Moses was forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans.”³⁰⁸

There is an almost tangible presence of personal attachment when Machiavelli considers Moses. Tellingly, Machiavelli’s assertion that those who opposed Moses were ‘moved by nothing other than envy,’ is an active revision of the passage as it occurs in Exodus. In the Bible, though he is the servant of God and divine mouthpiece to the Israelites, it is not Moses that the people turn against, but rather God Himself. Exodus 32 reads: “And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them”.³⁰⁹ However, in his conception

³⁰⁶ *Discourses*, I, 10 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 31).

³⁰⁷ *The Prince*, 26 (Bull, *The Prince*, 83).

³⁰⁸ *Discourses*, III, 30 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 280). See in connection also Exodus 32:25-28.

³⁰⁹ Exodus 32:7-8.

presented in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli remains focused on the person of Moses. Most likely his addition of ‘envy’ was gathered from an earlier verse in the same chapter:

“And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.”³¹⁰

Certainly, Machiavelli’s addition of ‘envy’ reorients the biblical story to better suit his on-going argument in that section of the *Discourses*. But even so, Machiavelli’s version injects a personal element into the discourse, centered upon defending the actions of Moses. This is made even more clear when considering the introductory preface Machiavelli gives to his iteration of the passage from Exodus. Here he opines: “He who reads the Bible *intelligently* sees that if Moses...”³¹¹ As is so often the case, an ‘intelligent’ reading of the Bible for Machiavelli translated to reading it as he himself would, and did. Such a statement is inherently subjective, and thus his following consideration of Moses is given through his own personal biases.

The personal element to Machiavelli’s discussion of Moses is seen again throughout *The Prince*. Moses is praised in Chapter VI as an ‘armed prophet’ in reference to the passage in Exodus 32. In the scriptures, however, it is not Moses that personally takes up arms in the defense of his laws and orders, but rather the Levites who do so at his command: “Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp...And the children of Levi did

³¹⁰ Exodus 32:1.

³¹¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, III, 30, appearing here from Gilbert, *Works*, I, 496 (emphasis mine). In their edition of the *Discourses*, Mansfield and Tarcov translate the passage as: “And whoever reads the Bible ‘judiciously’ rather than ‘intelligently’ (280).

according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men.”³¹² But again, we find a variation in Machiavelli’s discussion, whereby his praise of an ‘armed prophet’ implies much more active involvement taken on the part of Moses in fighting against his enemies.

It should, of course, certainly be conceded that such a revisionist implication could be logically caused simply through the rhetorical method utilized here by Machiavelli, perhaps for expediency of message. When Moses’ status as an ‘unarmed prophet’ is compared with that of David, another biblical figure considered within *The Prince*, however, the argument regarding Machiavelli’s personal preference toward Moses becomes far stronger. In Chapter XIII: *Auxiliary, composite, and native troops*, Machiavelli acknowledges David as the perfect example for demonstrating the need to take up your own arms. Recalling the story of David and Goliath from the Old Testament, he writes: “Saul, to inspire [David] with courage, gave him his own weapons and armour. Having tried these on, David rejected them, saying that he would be unable to fight well with them and therefore wanted to face the enemy with his sling and his knife.”³¹³ Machiavelli then concludes with one of the precepts most fundamental to his political philosophy: “In short, armour belonging to someone else either drops off you or weighs you down or is too tight.”³¹⁴ At its full conclusion, Machiavelli iterates this lesson exemplified by David as a central reason why a prince should not rely upon mercenary troops, but rather his own people and arms.

³¹² Exodus 32:26, 28.

³¹³ *The Prince*, 13 (Bull, *The Prince*, 46).

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 (Bull, *The Prince*, 46).

It should also be noted, that, as we have seen, David was chosen by God to be the redeeming king of Israel after the corrupted rule of Saul. The prophet Samuel anointed David as king after fulfilling God's call to find 'a man after His own heart.'³¹⁵ Further, it was from the very line and lineage of David that God brought His son, Jesus, into the world as Christ. As Paul writes in the New Testament: "and [God] said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfill all my will. Of this man's seed hath God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Savior, Jesus."³¹⁶ It was through David, therefore, that the nation of Israel was truly redeemed, and that the religion of Christianity was later realized—each things listed among Machiavelli's hierarchy of greatness.

However, it remains Moses and not David that leads the great men Machiavelli emphasizes for imitation. The reason for this is found in a further instance of interpretive biblical revision in *The Prince*. When first introducing Moses in Chapter VI as an example to be praised, Machiavelli qualifies: "Although one should not reason about Moses, since he merely executed what God commanded, yet he must be praised for the *grace* which made him worthy of speaking with God."³¹⁷ Interestingly, Machiavelli here directs the bounty of grace not toward God, but instead toward Moses. It is *Moses* who possessed grace, which made him worthy of speaking with God; although, as we have seen, Machiavelli very clearly understood that it was God whom, through the grace characteristic of His divine nature, selected and provided opportunity for men to count Him as a friend. Rather than be seen as a heterodox or irreligious claim, this puzzling

³¹⁵ See in this connection 1 Samuel 13:14.

³¹⁶ Acts 13:22-23.

³¹⁷ *The Prince*, 6 (Bull, *The Prince*, 20; emphasis mine).

accreditation of grace is in fact yet another instance of Machiavelli gently altering scripture to promote a more favorable interpretation of his hero.

Further, it is Machiavelli's definition of Moses' grace that exposes the true nature of his favoritism. The grace that Machiavelli attributed Moses was concerned with Moses' love for his own people. As we have seen, even before God had first appeared to him in the burning bush, Moses had acted to save a Hebrew from being beaten by an Egyptian.³¹⁸ Despite being raised within the house of the Egyptian pharaoh himself,³¹⁹ Exodus records that Moses had still considered the Hebrew man to be of his own people: "and [Moses] spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren."³²⁰ With no regard to his own position or self-interest, Moses acted to save his one of brethren from tyranny: "he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand."³²¹ No doubt Machiavelli saw in this a kindred spirit—one, like himself who loved his *patria* more than his own soul.

Finally, Moses is Machiavelli's true hero of *The Prince* for the reason that he never entered the promised land. Despite leading his people in redemption from slavery in Egypt, and ordering and maintaining the law of God, Moses was ultimately denied a part in the state he labored so long to create. After disregarding God's command and striking the rock twice, God punished Moses for his public disobedience: "And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them."³²²

³¹⁸ See in this connection Exodus 2:11-12.

³¹⁹ See in this connection Exodus 2:1-10.

³²⁰ Exodus 2:11.

³²¹ Exodus 2:12.

³²² Numbers 20:12.

As we have seen, throughout *The Prince* and especially in the final ‘Exhortation’, Machiavelli calls for the new prince to imitate the actions *and lives* of Moses. Though he dedicated his treatise to Lorenzo de’ Medici and advised him on how to rule as a monarch, Machiavelli remained at heart a republican still. However, as he wrote in the *Discourses*: “this should be taken as a general rule: that it never or rarely happens that any republic or kingdom is ordered well from the beginning or reformed altogether anew outside its old orders unless it is ordered by one individual.”³²³ Machiavelli understood that Italy, and more specifically Florence, in its present state was not able to sustain a republic. What it needed was a singular agent to reorder the laws and institutions, and then to step aside to allow for the creation of a new, stronger Florentine Republic. It needed a Moses.

He wrote explicitly of this progression in the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* he presented to Giulio de’ Medici several years after he wrote *The Prince*. As Black summarizes: “In this *Discourse*, Machiavelli had proposed that Florence should, in the first instance, be transformed into a monarchy and then, following the deaths of Leo X and Cardinal Giulio, become a republic.”³²⁴ And Machiavelli asserts that this task should be undertaken “from the House of Medici” and in doing so earn “your own glory” through establishing “a stable government in Florence.”³²⁵ Thus, in the same language as his ‘Exhortation’, Machiavelli asserts that a new Medici ruler should redeem his country and win glory for himself through reordering its laws and institutions, and then step aside. And if Machiavelli sought such a goal when he wrote *The Prince*, which it is safe to

³²³ *Discourses*, I, 9 (Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 29).

³²⁴ Black, *Machiavelli*, 257.

³²⁵ *Discourses on Florentine Affairs* (Myron and Gilmore, 18-19).

contend he did, then it follows that he could think of no greater example for imitation than that of Moses.

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