

MACHIAVELLI'S FORTUNA

Human Action, Politics, and Dignity in the *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince*

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Abstract:

Niccolo Machiavelli is a political philosopher with a coherent and complex concern for human liberty, as presented through his works *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. Machiavelli's two works must be synthesized, possible through the examination of the mechanism of fortune in both works. Fortune situates human politics and human history, opposed only by human virtue. This concern with virtue reveals Machiavelli's concern for the efficacy of human action in politics, which he expands to a concern for human liberty and dignity. Fortuna situates human politics, but Machiavelli retains hope that her whims may be fought by the virtuous political man with an endpoint of stability.

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Introduction: Machiavelli's Works

Niccolo Machiavelli, one of the most complex political philosophers, is often unceremoniously reduced to a cliché: the ends justify the means. This is inadequate. Machiavelli himself never uttered such a phrase nor would it be possible to reduce his thought to a single sentence. Often when such a formulation is in play, the ends are “good” and the means “evil,” such is the modern usage of the term “*Machiavellian*.” However, Machiavelli himself was concerned with more than simply teaching princes “to be able not to be good”(P XV 62). In delving into the concern that Machiavelli had for the dignity of human politics, it is useful to examine both his famous *Prince* and its counterpoint, the *Discourses on Livy*.

The Prince is most simply an examination of rule by a single individual in the context of Machiavelli's Italy. The *Discourses on Livy* is an examination of rule by many, or republican government, through the lens of Titus Livy's *The History of Rome*. So, the subjects of these discussions are nominally very different. However, Machiavelli's view of ancient republicanism and modern principalities find politics driven by the same mechanisms, even in differing circumstances. A synthesis of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* suggests that Machiavelli has a strong concern for human liberty and dignity in the political field.

This paper will take the view that there is a strong and deliberate consistency in Machiavelli's thought, especially between the two works. In order to reconcile the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, it is not necessary to find that the *Prince* is actually republican, nor should it be necessary to claim that the *Prince* must be read ironically. Instead, Machiavelli's political philosophy is more complex and integrated than simply finding in favor of republics or tyrannies. The seemingly opposed subjects of his two major works, rather than hinting at a

contradictory philosophy, reconcile into a discussion of a single complex view of human politics from two angles.

The means through which these two works may be compared is through the compass of Fortuna. Machiavelli, most outright, devotes chapter XXV of *The Prince* to “How Much Fortune Can Do in Human Affairs, and in What Mode It May Be Opposed”(P 98) Significant though this chapter is to Machiavelli’s conception of fortune, his discussion of this concept, one might even say deity, does not begin and end in chapter XXV. Machiavelli makes extensive reference to both Fortuna the goddess and fortune the mechanism throughout the *Prince* and in his discussion of lessons from ancient Rome in the *Discourses on Livy*.

In the early 16th century, when Machiavelli was writing both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* (possibly but not definitely concurrently) Fortuna’s wheel was a common recurring theme in the mirror for princes genre, to which *The Prince* belongs. However, significantly, Machiavelli does not refer to Fortuna as a wheel, nor make explicit reference to the common renaissance version of the concept. Machiavelli’s Fortuna is a woman, yes, but he makes Fortuna his own and takes fortune seriously as a mechanism, not only as a poetic way of discussion changing fates.

Machiavelli’s *Prince*, while ostensibly a book of advice for princes, has deep insights into history and human politics that mark his work as a work of political philosophy. Machiavelli is, in an important sense, the first truly political philosopher: his break with the imagined republics in chapter XV of *The Prince* is a conscious and philosophically tethered rejection of all philosophical thought that came before. Machiavelli is intent upon creating new modes and orders, which, while based upon the modes and orders of the ancients, move towards a more pragmatic and comprehensive view of human action and virtue.

Fortuna is an element of particular personal significance to Machiavelli for reasons which will be discussed below. Machiavelli marks Fortuna's significance clearly in chapter XXV of *The Prince*, but many of his more subtle references must be examined as well in order to fully flesh out his concern for the preservation of an active human politics and human dignity. Interpreting fortune provides a connection between Machiavelli's two major works and provides a point of navigation for fleshing out Machiavelli's view of history, concern for the real political sphere, and defense of human dignity.

Section I, "Fortune in Interpretation," of this analysis will discuss how the following conclusions fit into the most prominent interpretations of Machiavelli's work. This section also demonstrates how fortune has often been overlooked by scholars studying Machiavelli. Section II, "Machiavelli's Malignity of Fortune," is an inducement to take Machiavelli's relationship to Fortuna seriously based upon his personal history. Machiavelli sincerely believed in a malignity of fortune that affected his personal political career. Section III, "What is Fortune?" outlines a description of fortune drawn from both the *Discourses* and *The Prince* that will be used in order to discuss fortune's relationship to virtue in Section IV. Section V is an examination of how this tension between fortune and virtue defines a project for Machiavelli. Section VI, "The Temporal and the Eternal," examines the implications of the project for Machiavelli's political philosophy, finding that Machiavelli is concerned with the dignity and efficacy of human action.

I. Fortune in Interpretation:

Why does Fortuna matter? In order to assert that it does, it is necessary to find that Machiavelli is a philosophical and political thinker who has significance. This paper finds that this significance is manifold. Machiavelli presents a break with history and thought that came before him, placing him as a founder of modernity. Machiavelli not only demonstrates this break theoretically, but also proposes a project. Machiavelli's project provides one answer to a common political problem. The political problem, in this sense, is the tendency towards an idealism that was unfounded in political reality: aiming too high. Machiavelli wants to bring the "imagined republics" down to earth, anchoring them in political realism. This is not to suggest that Machiavelli's view is something that modern political scientists could write off as "realist"—he presents a new way of thinking that is both realist and idealist in basic definition. The key to understanding the point between this realism and optimism is Fortuna.

So for Fortuna, the significance of analysis comes both from Fortune's importance in Machiavelli's thought and Fortune's importance as a concept that continually presents a challenge to philosophy. Fortune challenges human action through the potential to imply that human action is predetermined and un-free—a situation that certainly applies to the active practice of politics. In Machiavelli's thought, then, Fortune unlocks central discussions of liberty and dignity in politics.

The relationship between Machiavelli's two works, *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, is tricky, to say the least. It requires nuanced theoretical and historical analysis. Here too is where Fortune is particularly helpful: both works discuss Fortune in many of the same terms and functions. This would seem to suggest the interpretation that the works are compatible.

At the very least, Machiavelli's often-cruel, semi-deity Fortuna remained a unifying part of his theory as he wrote both works. The same Fortune also makes an appearance in his personal letters, such as those to Piero Soderini and Francesco Vettori. In terms of theory, Fortune is opposed to virtue, so then Machiavelli's discussion of virtue should be largely and deliberately compatible. In these terms, so should his optimism and goal of stability.

Fortuna in Machiavelli's work has been widely discussed, but what this discussion overlooks is the application of Fortuna to an actual project of Machiavelli's. To deny the project is to deny Machiavelli's point. Scholars have been reluctant to take Machiavelli seriously, mostly due to his "amoral" tendencies and "discrepancies" in different areas of his writings. Understanding Machiavelli requires an attempt to reconcile *The Prince* and the *Discourses* and a more difficult attempt to reconcile liberty with stability and realism with optimism. Fortune offers the key for this reconciliation.

Commentaries on Machiavelli:

Machiavelli is a thinker to whom various levels of importance have been attributed. The question even arises: is Machiavelli a philosopher? Machiavelli's realism and historical context might make him appear a politician, or a product of his times. Eric Voegelin, for one, places Machiavelli squarely with other realist thinkers such as Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes, hinting at progression, not iconoclasm. Other interpretations of Machiavelli the philosopher vary as one looks to intent: if Machiavelli intended simply to bring about the unification of Italy, for example, then his philosophy as such would appear to be purely pragmatic. This essay, of course, hopes to depict Machiavelli as an important philosopher

through discussion of the perennial and original features of Machiavelli's thought. After all, perhaps all it takes to be a philosopher is to reason. As Harvey Mansfield points out, such was Machiavelli's aim: "It is good to reason about everything,' Machiavelli says inconspicuously in a dependent clause (D I 18.I). But reasoning about everything is the mark of the philosopher"(D Intro. xxxvii).

Perhaps the interpretation which attributes the most significance to Machiavelli is that of Leo Strauss. Strauss claims that Machiavelli ushered in the first wave of modernity by breaking radically with all history of thought that had come before. "Machiavelli rejects the whole philosophic and theological tradition. We can state his reasoning as follows...One must start from how men do live: one must lower one's sights"(Strauss, 1989 86). Once one's sights are lowered, Strauss sees Machiavelli as having a solution for the political problem: the goal, being lower, exempts morality from applying to the creation of a political order, so all that is required is "institutions with teeth in them"(Strauss, 1989 87). According to Strauss, the changes of modernity such as the scientific revolution continued in the Machiavellian spirit, demonstrating that this first break was hugely significant. Machiavelli becomes the first defining moment in modernity because of his rejection of everything that came before and his focus on realism, with a practical solution to the political problem.

Machiavelli himself certainly sees his work as something new. While he does, of course, examine the ancients, his explication of them is not purely a revival. Instead, Machiavelli creates *new* modes and orders, or the *new* prince—novelty is an important part of his project. Whether or not Machiavelli would describe himself as the iconoclast that Strauss portrays him to be, Machiavelli certainly did appreciate the revolutionary character of his thought. He writes in the preface to the *Discourses*, "I have decided to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone..."(D preface 5). Machiavelli's importance requires only that he step a

short way down this path, which differed radically from much previous thought, paving the way for further steps.

It is impossible to examine Machiavelli without recognizing his break from traditional morality. Many interpreters of Machiavelli are suspicious of his willingness to depart from Christian morality. Clearly this is a major, deliberate feature of Machiavelli, and must be treated as such. No doubt it is disconcerting to confront this anti-Christian Machiavelli, as historically rooted in Christianity is the Western moral tradition. According to Athanasios Moulakis, Leo Strauss even goes so far as to suggest that Niccolo Machiavelli is the Antichrist (Moulakis 251-256). Still, it must be possible to discuss Machiavelli in light of his hostility to Christianity without dismissing him. Strauss does manage to do so, finding that even though amoral, Machiavelli is undeniable. Machiavelli's importance supersedes the repugnance of his amorality.

What is difficult is that the Christian morality that Machiavelli so energetically criticizes remains the same morality that encompasses what most moderns find to be "good": honesty, mercy, and kindness. It is possible to find that Machiavelli means something almost demeaning by what he eventually calls "good." In the tension between vigorous *virtu* and Christian virtue, Machiavelli finds for the former, reserving the latter as an insult bestowed upon the "good." Strauss writes that "Machiavelli's distinction between goodness and other virtues tends to become an opposition between goodness and virtue: while virtue is required of rulers and soldiers, goodness is required, or characteristic, of the populace engaged in peaceful occupation; goodness comes to mean something like fear-bred obedience to the government, or even vileness"(Strauss 1987 301). Machiavelli's virtue is the

renewal of a more ancient Roman morality, a morality that is easy to find cruelly unsuited to the modern, post-Christian sensibility.

However, Machiavelli is not simply the advocate of political cruelty the popular connotation of the word “Machiavellian” implies. Instead, Machiavelli does subscribe to some sort of moral code in keeping with the traditional Christian values of mercy, justice, and honesty. Machiavelli illustrates this presence of moral scruples, for example, in his characterization of Agathocles, who “attained a principality through crimes.” Machiavelli says, in reference to Agathocles, that “one cannot call it virtue to kill one’s citizens, betray one’s friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion...”(P VIII 35). This statement depicts the presence of traditional morals in Machiavelli’s thinking. Machiavelli, while willing to accept some breaks with morality, does not condone the dissolution into complete sin and evil. Further, Machiavelli’s advocacy of breaks with traditional morals is conditional, and only justified when the stability of the state depends upon those transgressions. To break with morality for political stability is to work for a greater good which justifies specific violations of moral conduct. Thus, the idea that the prince must “learn to be able not to be good” is tempered with the idea that it would be “a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince all of the...qualities which are held good”(P XV62). Reconciling these two statements presents the fundamental challenge.

In keeping with this view of the *Prince*, Victor Anthony Rudowski writes that, “Neither in the *Prince* nor elsewhere in his writing does he [Machiavelli] actually deny the validity of traditional moral values; he simply asserts that they are irrelevant to the conduct of affairs of state”(Rudowski 9). Machiavelli remains utility-based, valuing stability over traditional morality. In fact, Machiavelli may foster morality based on his primacy of utility. Harvey Mansfield writes, “When Machiavelli denies that imagined republics “exist in

truth,”... he says that no moral rules exist, not made by men, which men must abide by. The rules or laws that exist are made by governments or other powers...men cannot afford justice in any sense that transcends their own preservation” (P intro xi). A prince, in creating a political order, also may see himself as creating the rules. Machiavelli is not amoral, but rather a moralist of another sort. Mansfield sees that Machiavelli can teach how to exist in the absence of natural justice.

It matters much to the commentators on Machiavelli whether morality exists before politics in his worldview. Strauss comments that in the *Prince*, “the foundation of justice is injustice; the foundation of morality is immorality; the foundation of legitimacy is illegitimacy or revolution; the foundation of freedom is tyranny”(Strauss 1987 302). But to say this about Machiavelli is to presuppose the existence of something called “legitimacy” or “justice” that does not look towards ends. Is it proper to judge Machiavelli on this basis? Machiavelli’s concept of morality is profoundly different from what was long established before, and he acknowledges his inability to escape that historical fact. But as Machiavelli posits a new justice or a new morality, we should take his argument seriously. To assert that Machiavelli founds legitimacy on injustice may a wrongheaded way to go about the issue: Machiavelli founds legitimacy on justice because he looks towards non-teleological ends. Machiavelli never does say, as so often attributed to him, “the end justifies the means,” but he does say that only looking towards the political goal, stability, can we find the *why* of foundation on perceived “injustice.”

Of course, there are those commentators who find in Machiavelli, instead of a dangerous inversion, a beneficial focus. Eric Voegelin, for instance, writes, “Spiritual morality is a problem in human existence precisely because there is a good deal more to human existence than spirit. All attacks on Machiavelli as the inventor or advocate of a

‘double morality’ for private and public conduct, etc.; can be dismissed as manifestations of philosophical ignorance”(Voegelin in Moulakis 253). Either Machiavelli’s realism speaks to a necessary part of humanity, or it is “digging around in the dirt” of Plato’s cave, studiously ignoring the light above.(Strauss in Moulakis)

Machiavelli did not invent human evil, but he was one of the first to appear to endorse it. This is where it is possible to misunderstand Machiavelli: for many it is difficult to look beyond this perceived cruelty or to move analytically beyond it. When commentators dismiss Machiavelli’s optimism based on the fact that he is “bad,” there one faces the question: Can Machiavelli hope that good can come out of the bad?

It may be useful to look at other philosophers: Thomas Hobbes demonstrated the brutal and selfish nature of man, yet in such a way that allows for the creation of a liberal democracy. Strauss finds that Hobbes developed this idea from Spinoza, who lifted it from Machiavelli himself, although Machiavelli never proposed a theory of justice as such. Thinkers can remain hopeful through providing for selfish human nature to be used against itself, but this is not what Machiavelli does. He does not see something like a system that weighs one individual against another, nor does he mention in particular the idea that individuals act in their own rational self interest. Machiavelli does not posit a contract, in fact, his principalities and his republic are both profoundly non-contractual in that they are established through force. Without allowing for a contract, many moderns find it difficult to perceive Machiavelli as a thinker on liberty.

Within the issue of tyranny lies a deeper discussion of human freedom. Those, such as Strauss, who stand with an interpretation of Machiavelli as a defender of tyranny, see him as opposed to human freedom. If freedom is acquired through the moral and spiritual fulfillment of something such as a human soul, then this would appear to be the case.

However, the opposing interpretation exists, and it is possible to see Machiavelli as a defender of freedom even if he is not read ironically. It is possible to see Machiavelli's support of freedom on the surface, without having to resort to the claim that Machiavelli means something other than what he says. "On a deeper level, however, Machiavelli's proposal offers the opportunity to dispense with the most politically damaging repression—Christianity's repression of human politics. Thus an irreligious republic offers the possibility of human liberation" (Sullivan 8). This is a liberation that includes both the freedom of human politics function and the freedom of individuals to be liberated within that politics. So, either only an irreligious republic offers to humans their freedom, or an irreligious republic denies humans the only true freedom that they can have.

Or, there can be an alternate explanation, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's. Rousseau asserts that Machiavelli is a republican thinker. "While pretending to give lessons to kings, he gave great ones to the people. Machiavelli's *The Prince* is the book of republicans" (Rousseau Social Contract III.6). Many commentators highlight this potential republicanism in Machiavelli. For example, Rudowski writes: "To understand why an ardent republican like Machiavelli could write a treatise advising a prince on how to gain and maintain power, it is necessary to bear in mind that he was firmly convinced that some political objectives are best attained through the agency of a single individual rather than any form of collective action" (Rudowski 96). This absolves Machiavelli, presenting him as nothing worse than a practical republican.

This writer finds that Machiavelli comments on freedom in terms of stability, that is, that his discussion links the purpose of the republic and the value of liberty. While other commentators might see Machiavelli's principality as a "tyranny," and a "tyranny" as an order in which by default no freedom can exist, Machiavelli does not necessarily conflate

these terms. Machiavelli's principality has some of the cruel aspects of a tyranny. However, Machiavelli allows these aspects only in that they provide the foundation for human security. As men "desire freedom so as to live secure," any discussion of Machiavelli's thoughts on liberty should take security closely into account (D I.16 46).

This range of reactions to Machiavelli on liberty, then, is often expressed in terms of finding Machiavelli either for or against tyranny. Maurizio Viroli presents Machiavelli as "a convinced republican and a strenuous opponent of tyranny" (Viroli 2008 10). Often this debate runs along the lines of choosing between the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. Scholars are tempted to find one work more representative of Machiavelli than the other, avoiding the sticky job of assimilating the two. Perhaps Machiavelli wrote the *Prince* as a satire, in which case the *Discourses* would represent his true republican leanings. Perhaps the *Discourses* spread a thin republican veil over tyranny, and Machiavelli's heart lies in the principality. Or, as Harvey Mansfield suggests, perhaps "Just as the *Prince* is more republican than it first appears and than it is reputed to be according to the common opinion that the two books are opposed, so the *Discourses* is more princely or even tyrannical than it first appears and is reputed to be" (D Intro. xxii).

Niccolo Capponi goes so far as to suggest (according to Victoria Kahn), in *An Unlikely Prince*, that "Machiavelli is not as smart as he thinks he is and also not very reliable. Capponi presents him as incapable of systematic exposition and argues that the contradictions between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* are the product of fuzzy thinking" (Kahn 26). Surely this is not a excuse for overlooking the complexity of Machiavelli's thought: Fortune provides the mechanism through which the *Prince* and the *Discourses* can be compared and ultimately reconciled. The solution is not to try to swallow Machiavelli whole,

as Mansfield would have it, nor dismiss him, as Capponi would. Instead, careful analysis of a single feature of Machiavelli's thought may shed some light upon the whole matter.

Those who study Machiavelli could assert that because he does not follow traditional morality, he cannot be a moralist; and because he does not have a view of human nature that is virtuous, he cannot be optimistic. The goal here is to understand Machiavelli in his own terms, not those that he would not choose. Is it possible, given the complexities of Machiavelli's thought, to be optimistic and realistic?

The typical dichotomy between realism and idealism does not exist in quite those terms for Machiavelli. Realism, rather than referring to a focus on the political power of the state, or on a human predicament in which humans are self-interestedly rational, refers instead to the simple primacy of politics. Machiavelli does not tread on the individual—he in fact makes a point of referring to power of individual founders. Nor does Machiavelli completely disregard the spiritual—he acknowledges that there may be “intelligences” in the air which have their eyes on the human things. He is also concerned with the spiritual health of man, in that he desires that man not develop contempt for the human things, and thereby themselves.

Some commentators read Machiavelli as blindly expedient, others as his intentionally defending tyranny. When practical, what does it mean to posit that Machiavelli has a goal? There are those who, for example, believe that Machiavelli's *Prince* is a clarion call for Italian unification. Maurizio Viroli asserts that Machiavelli is a republican thinker and is properly read as a defender of freedom. In this case, Machiavelli's optimism is clear. Optimism stems from the desire to achieve glory for Italy and protect human liberty. These goals are optimistic in that they have a specific, achievable end. The corruptness of human nature need not make this end less viable, but rather just suggests different means for achieving it.

The same applies to Machiavelli's goal of stability: just because human nature is variable does not mean that humans are doomed. They have the ability to act, therefore achieving a goal, if only for a limited time, remains possible.

It is the idea that political actions are achievable only for a limited time that presents somewhat of a challenge for Machiavelli. His thought walks between radical temporality and eternal features of human nature, attempting to bridge the two. Fortune provides the matter to be bridged and also a key into the construction of the bridge itself.

Interpretation aside, one must simply take Machiavelli seriously. Engaging Machiavelli means confronting disturbing and complex arguments concerning human morality, freedom, politics, even time. Interpretations of what Machiavelli means may vary, but it is undeniable that apprenticeship to Machiavelli's thought has the potential to reveal and enlighten. What is required is an appreciation of the complexity of Machiavelli's works and the man himself. Interpretation may raise more questions than answers, but the important features of Machiavelli's thought remain undeniable. One such feature is Fortune, complexly intertwined with discussions of morality and freedom.

II. Machiavelli's Malignity of Fortune

Fortune is a central philosophical concept for Machiavelli, but its significance to his thought is not purely theoretical. Machiavelli discusses fortune's importance within his personal history. The fact that Machiavelli sees himself as closely affected by fortune lends credibility to the discussion of fortune as the major component in Machiavelli's works.

Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince* to Lorenzo de Medici. In doing so, Machiavelli made a reference to the "mirror for princes" genre, which traditionally aimed to instruct or reflect upon the actions of royalty. As such, perhaps Machiavelli meant his work to advise Lorenzo de Medici's actions in a real and literal way. On the other hand, perhaps Machiavelli's mirror is intended to be a subtle attack on tyrannies, or a defense of republics, as some commentators have argued. It may be that Machiavelli is using the mirror for princes in a non-straightforward way. In either case, Machiavelli addresses his work to Lorenzo Medici, and in doing so reveals and comments on his own personal history in the context of his work. Machiavelli had a fraught personal and professional relationship with the Medicis, and by referencing this relationship in the outset of his work, Machiavelli draws his own personal narrative into the text. *The Prince* was written for a real purpose, which Machiavelli may have intended to be personal, ie; to further his career. However, whether the purpose is clear or not does not matter as much as that the context of that purpose be thoroughly examined. In particular, what Machiavelli reveals about himself through his works implores that any analysis of his political philosophy take very seriously the issue of fortune.

Machiavelli had intimate experience in the politics of Italy: it is important to remember that he was not acting purely theoretically in his examinations of political order.

Further, his books had the potential to have actual consequences concerning his political career. While it may be impossible to conclude why Machiavelli wrote each work in the way he did, it is useful to understand what he implies about his motives. He chose to address his works to real individuals that he had some sort of personal relationship with. Through examination of his stated motives, it becomes clear that Machiavelli also had a personal relationship with what he characterized as Fortune.

Machiavelli was active in politics as an ambassador and advisor under Piero Soderini. Soderini was the gonfalonier of Florence and Machiavelli's patron. It was during this time that Machiavelli came into close contact with Cesare Borgia, a key figure in Machiavelli's discussion of his "new prince." Piero Soderini eventually lost his hold on power, and Machiavelli, also at a loss, became suspect under the new Medici regime. Machiavelli was arrested under suspicion of plotting against the Medicis and was subject to extreme physical torture. This was no light matter: Machiavelli was subject to a procedure called *strappado*, a torture intended to dislocate joints (Glendon 70) His hands were tied behind his back and he was lifted by them to the ceiling, then dropped suddenly. Machiavelli endured this process six times without issuing a confession of conspiracy (Viroli 1998 136). He was pardoned after some time of enduring such brutality when a Medici was made pope. Machiavelli then was driven his political career and retreated to the country, where, though downtrodden, he refused to lose touch with the politics that drove his life.

In a personal letter to Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli describes the incredible drudgery of his life in de facto exile. He writes of how he passes the time overseeing his woodcutters, reminiscing about his past romantic encounters, and playing dice with locals at the inn. He states of such activities: "Thus involved with these vermin I scrape the mold off my brain and I satisfy the malignity of this fate of mine, as I am content to be trampled on

this path so as to see if she will be ashamed of it”(P 109). Machiavelli reveals that he finds himself a sufferer of an attack by Fortune, which he feels he can overcome only passively, bitterly accepting his fate. Machiavelli became trapped by Fortune. He writes in the letter, “And because Fortune wants to do everything, she wants us to allow her to do it, to remain quiet and not give trouble, and to await the time at which she allows men something to do; and then it will be right for you to give more effort, to watch things more, and for me to leave my villa and say: ‘Here I am.’”(P 108).

Machiavelli was so attacked by Fortune that he felt he could not reveal himself: he is incapable of leaving his exile or even declaring his identity until Fortune allowed that the time was right. In this letter, he appears as a man paralyzed by ill fortune and even characterizes himself as such, clearly stating that he believes Fortune’s willfulness is the cause of his situation. As Machiavelli examines fortune with such sincerity regarding his personal tragedy, it becomes clear that he conceives of fortune as a very real and powerful force.

A specific malignity of Fortune is evident not only in Machiavelli’s personal correspondence, but also in his dedicatory letter to the *Prince*. Machiavelli implores Lorenzo de Medici to notice and take pity on him: “And if your Magnificence will at some time turn your eyes from the summit of your height to these low places, you will learn how undeservedly I endure a great and continuous malignity of fortune”(P 4). So ends his dedicatory letter, with a profound admission of his suffering at the hands of fate. And suffer he did: to be tortured under the Medicis and deprived of his former influence no doubt gave Machiavelli an intimate sense of the cruel twists of human existence.

Machiavelli, then, no doubt took Fortune seriously as a force that could willfully effect the private and political lives of individuals, and did in fact negatively effect his own. There is a reason that Machiavelli is not able to become the new prince himself: precisely

because of this malignity of fortune. Even if Machiavelli did not want to become a new prince himself, he clearly wanted to be taken seriously in politics. His flattering call for the unification of Italy, for example, seems a desperate plea to the Medici who would otherwise not grant Machiavelli a listening ear. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli speaks with a particular fondness of Friar Girolamo Savonarola, who correctly understood the necessity of cruelty.

“And whoever reads the Bible judiciously will see 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. Friar Girolamo Savonarola knew this necessity very well; Piero Soderini, gonfalonier of Florence, knew it too. The one was not able to conquer it because he did not have the authority to enable him to do it (that was the friar) and because he was not understood well by those who followed him, who would have had the authority for it”(D III.30 280).

Machiavelli here mentions Piero Soderini, his employer. The circumstances of this example, therefore, are somewhat personal. Machiavelli acknowledges that there are men who understand politics rightly but are unable to act upon this understanding because they do not have the authority necessary to do so. Machiavelli himself understands politics rightly, but is not allowed to act due to his exile from politics following the rise of the Medici.

Machiavelli further acknowledges this idea of those who deserve to be princes not having the means to do so in his dedicatory letter to the *Discourses*. Here, he criticizes the mirror for princes genre and instead dedicates his work to Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai, his friends and frequent interlocutors. Machiavelli writes:

“I have gone outside the common usage of those who write, who are accustomed always to address their works to some prince and, blinded by ambition and avarice, praise him for all virtuous qualities when they should blame him for every part worthy of reproach. Hence, so as not to incur this error, I have chosen not those who are princes but those who for their infinite good parts deserve to be”(D 3).

Machiavelli describes his friends as those who understand politics, and therefore deserve to be princes, and yet lack a principality. He continues, “Writers praise Hiero the Syracusan when he was private individual more than Perseus the Macedonian when he was king, for

Hiero lacked nothing other than the principality to be a prince while the other had no part of the king other than the kingdom”(D 3). It is not a given that the virtues required for principedom and the possession of a principality coincide. Fortune is the means by which these two are separated: if one deserves to be prince and yet is not, then he is a sufferer of a malignity of fortune. Machiavelli, as the writer who believed only himself to truly understand the lessons of the ancients, deserved to be prince or at least be listened to by one.

It would be easy to dismiss Machiavelli’s belief in his malignity of fortune by claiming that Machiavelli had a non-political role in mind for himself. One may state that Machiavelli, as a dramatist, understood the power of word more than political action, for example. It is true that Machiavelli the historian did understand these things. Yet, Machiavelli does admit to specifically political ambition. After all, Machiavelli values the realm of politics above the realm of the eternal or transcendent. As such, Machiavelli no doubt saw political involvement, especially the involvement of those who understand political realities, as a form of great human action. Machiavelli explains, in the same letter to Francesco Vettori, his motivations for writing his work on principalities and dedicating it to a Medici. “The necessity that chases me makes me give it, because I am becoming worn out, and I cannot remain as I am for a long time without becoming despised because of poverty, besides the desire that I have that these Medici lords begin to make use of me even if they should begin by making me roll a stone”(P 111). Machiavelli wanted to continue to be involved in Italian politics even if he were forced to restart at the bottom, demonstrating his political ambition that did not ebb even after his exile.

Machiavelli discusses a malignity of fortune that had very real consequences in his political life. As such, it is important to take Machiavelli’s discussion of Fortune in his works seriously. It would not be unrealistic to find that Machiavelli states that Fortune is the key

element that situates the human realm and all human things. Machiavelli discusses Fortune with depth both personally and conceptually as a very real presence in his political philosophy.

III. What is Fortune?

Machiavelli's work contains a multi-faceted description of fortune that is central to the understanding of fortune as a key mechanism. His fortune is personified, deified, spoken of as a force, and described in natural metaphors. It is necessary to find a complete conception of fortune—what Machiavelli means by this variety of descriptions. The descriptions may be synthesized to demonstrate that fortune is a force that acts pervasively in human politics.

The classical, religious conception of Fortune of the ancient Romans as discussed in the *Discourses*, described Fortune as a fickle goddess, but one who could be induced to give goods to those who worshiped her. The Roman people “built more temples to Fortune than to any other god” (D II 1 125). Fortune is a goddess, but one is invoked, as though sacrifice and worship.

Machiavelli's fortune is not invoked, but exists at all times un-summoned. Machiavelli often characterizes fortune as deliberately cruel: a destructive force that destroys stability and foundations. Violence often follows fortune. For example, Machiavelli speaks of how fortune orchestrates the downfall of princes; places enemies against each other; and can even cause illness, as in the case of Pope Alexander IV.

Yet, Machiavelli also often speaks of positives that come from fortune, both in *The Prince* and in the *Discourses on Livy*. In *The Prince*, fortune is responsible for the rise of Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli's example for a new prince, as well as for Borgia's decline. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli writes that fortune provides opportunity for virtue, and that “Fortune does this well, since when it wishes to bring about great things it elects a man of so much spirit and so much virtue that he recognizes the opportunities that it proffers him. Thus in

the same manner, which it wishes to bring about great ruin, it prefers men who can aid in that ruin”(D II.29 198). Fortune is not solely motivated to destroy, but also towards creation and greatness. Fortune can desire that men succeed, and bring about this success through the proffering of opportunities. So, fortune for Machiavelli is not a purely cruel or purely good force. Fortune may act in either mode. Neither is fortune neutral. Neutrality would assume a lack of motivation or value placement, but Fortune does have motivations, just not ones that are easily understood. Fortune is willful, both towards ill and good, and therefore is not neutral. Fortune brings both destruction and creation, but, as its motivations are unknowable, it is impossible to conceive of fortune as either good or bad at any particular moment. Fortune is a force, and a force which wills but which is neither completely good or evil.

As a force, Fortune expresses herself in action. Fortune’s impulse is to *do*. Fortune does not sit idly by, waiting to be invoked, but rather is constantly expressed in the actions of the temporal world. Fortune is unavoidable, and so Machiavelli describes her in careful and powerful terms.

It is necessary to understand the lexicon of fortune, that is, how Machiavelli refers to it and its constituent parts when he does not use the language of “fortune” itself. Machiavelli uses the wording of “opportunity” to speak of fortune. He writes in the *Prince*, when speaking of Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and the others that founded new kingdoms that “one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased. Without that opportunity their virtue of spirit would have been eliminated, and without that virtue the opportunity would have come in vain”(P IV 22). So, *opportunity* appears as a constituent part of fortune, that is,

the lowest common denominator of what fortune can grant. These princes experienced the barest fortune, which came in the form of a moment of opportunity.

The idea of *opportunity* also reveals fortune as temporal—the defining characteristic of an opportunity is that it arrives at the correct time, allowing action. An opportunity is conditional in time, providing a moment which can be seized or ignored. The virtuous man can seize an opportunity provided by fortune and will be successful if he has prepared the means to hold it. Opportunity, for Machiavelli's new prince, most ideally is the coincidence of fortune and virtue. As fortune provides opportunity, fortune enacts itself in temporal ways.

Machiavelli also uses the language of “accident” and “chance” to discuss constituent parts of fortune. This language tends, in his account, to be used to describe what fortune does: often, the creation of accidents. Machiavelli explains this relationship between “chance” and fortune perhaps best in the *Capitolo on Fortune*, a poetic chapter on Fortune written in 1506. In the *Capitolo*, which will be discussed further below, Machiavelli speaks of Fortuna as a goddess in a castle, “Above gates that are never locked may be sitting, it is said, Chance and Luck, without eyes and without ears”(C 91). This image denotes Chance and Luck as smaller parts of fortune, perhaps as her agents in the world. They are blind and deaf in that they cannot direct themselves, but allow themselves to be directed by fortune. Instances of chance and luck are parts of larger fortune. It is possible then, to find that when Machiavelli speaks of “accidents” he refers to fortune.

This idea of “accidents” as the agent of fortune is significant to analysis of the *Discourses*, as Machiavelli discusses the “accidents” that led to the creation of Roman political order. He writes, “Notwithstanding that it did not have a Lycurgus to order it in the beginning in a mode that would enable it to live free a long time, nonetheless so many

accidents arise in it through the disunion between the plebs and the Senate that what an orderer had not done, chance did. For if the first fortune did not fall to Rome, the second fell to it..."(D I.2 14). Here, accidents and chance refer to the course of fortune. It can be concluded, then, that often Machiavelli speaks of "accidents" and "chance" as fortune's constituent parts. This expands the discussion of fortune far beyond chapter XXV of *The Prince*, where fortune is most explicitly named. When Fortune acts in the human realm, these are the conditions under which it appears: those of accident and opportunity.

Fortune, for Machiavelli, is somewhat mystical, but cannot be understood in traditional conceptions of religion. Fortune is a deity, perhaps, but not God. Machiavelli alludes to this when he states, "It is not unknown to me that many have held and hold the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence, indeed that they have no remedy at all"(P XXV 98). Here there is a very distinct separation between the actions of heaven and the actions of fortune, although they may lead to the same ends. Fortune and God are separate in Machiavelli's thought. Though both may govern the human things, Machiavelli focuses on fortune as a the primary governess.

There is a distinction between God, or heaven, and Fortune. For one, they seem to have different impacts in the human realm. For example, it is not necessary that God give a divine mandate to the founder of a political order, but it is necessary that such a founder not be opposed by Fortune. Machiavelli writes, "One sees that for Romulus to order the Senate and to make other civil and military orders, the authority of God was not necessary..." He even refuses to discourse on principalities maintained by God, stating, " But as they subsist by superior causes, to which the human mind does not reach, I will omit speaking of them;

for since they are exalted and maintained by God, it would be the office of a presumptuous and foolhardy man to discourse on them”(P XI 45). Machiavelli facetiously dismisses heaven, but is not so quick to dismiss Fortuna. Instead, Machiavelli elevates fortune from the temporal realm into the eternal realm of mystical concepts. So Machiavelli will not discourse on heavenly matters, but it is evident that Fortune and the eternal are related, though Fortune is not religious as such.

Further, Machiavelli delivers discourse on how to overcome fortune with virtue, but he does not deliver a censure of fortune itself, as he does with the Christian religion. “For our religion, having shown the truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honor of the world...it wishes you to be more capable of suffering than of doing something strong”(D II.2 131). He condemns Christianity on the grounds that it makes men learn to suffer rather than to act. The Christian religion, then, makes men weak, he writes, whereas their struggle with fortune manifests itself in virtue, making them active. Fortune is not an object of religion, such as the Christian religion, but rather some other mystical element.

Fortune, then is a deity, but not a deity of heaven, or at least not one relating to the Christian depiction of God. Machiavelli identifies the separate nature of his fortune as a deity when he refers to the Roman goddess of Fortuna. In his analysis of how the Romans came to power, through fortune or through virtue, Machiavelli writes: “Many have had the opinion—and among them Plutarch, a very grave writer—that the Roman people in acquiring the empire was favored more by fortune than by virtue. Among the other reasons he brings up for it, he says that the confession of that people demonstrates that it acknowledges all its victories came from fortune, since it built more temples to Fortune than to any other god”(D II.1 125). This passage shows that Machiavelli compares his fortune to the Fortuna of the Roman people, at least in the sense that non-deified fortune is similar to

Fortuna-the-goddess, in function if not in form. Machiavelli's personified Fortuna is a reformed version of the Roman goddess, still linked to the eternal though requiring perhaps different means of induction towards favor.

Machiavelli view religion as something that is potentially useful and man-made. For example, Machiavelli refers to Saint Gregory as taking great pains to eliminate the memory of previous religions in order to glorify his: "Whoever reads of the modes taken by Saint Gregory and by the other heads of the Christian religion will see with how much obstinacy they persecuted all the ancient memories, burning the works of the poets and the historians, ruining images, and spoiling every other thing that might convey some sign of antiquity"(D II.5 139). This hardly upholds religion as heavenly, but rather places it in terms of the human. Machiavelli writes, "For when a new sect—that is, a new religion—emerges, its first concern is to extinguish the old and give itself reputation; and when it occurs that they orderers of a new sect are of a different language, they easily eliminate it"(D II.5 139). Machiavelli does not take this removed tone with the issue of Fortune, nor does he ever imply that Fortune is the deity of a "sect." Rather, Fortuna is a real force that can be characterized as a goddess in order to understand the power and pervasiveness of its actions. With such power, Fortune may indeed be the underlying mystical element beyond the human world.

Machiavelli further deifies Fortune in the *Capitolo*. He refers to fortune outright as "this inconstant goddess and restless divinity" (C 34). He also refers to the defining elements of Fortune as a deity: her inconstancy and her being a mystical unknown. "Whose daughter she is or from what family she sprang, nobody knows; but it is known for a certainty that even Jove himself fears her power" (C 43). Fortune cannot be known in terms of a character, but rather in terms of her power, her tangible effects on the human realm. Her

motivations and origin are largely unknown, but what is known is her significance and potential malevolence in human affairs.

Fortune as a force can be understood in Machiavelli's simile of fortune as a river.

The river has, if not a comprehensible will, a certain undeniable impetus. He writes:

“And I liken her to one of those violent rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift earth from this part, drop in another; each person flees before them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in any regard. And although they are like this, it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for them with dikes and dams...”(P XXV 98).

Fortune is like a river in that it is understood mostly in terms of force and effect. The river is not a consciously destructive being, but rather a powerful force, that, when uncontained, can cause turmoil. Fortune, like the river, is also a force of change and constant movement. It can be bound, somewhat, but not halted. The impetus of fortune as a river drives it ever forward. Fortune operates like the river: an unstoppable and potentially destructive force. Further, fortune is temporality. Machiavelli states that “For time sweeps everything before it and can bring with it good as well as evil and evil as well as good”(P III 13). Fortune is a river, the river sweeps everything before it, and causes constant destruction and renewal.

Here, Machiavelli depicts the temporal character of fortune. This will be discussed at length below, but in terms of mechanism, it can be noted that fortune manifests itself in temporality. The actions of fortune take place characterized as constant manipulations of time. Opportunity, for instance, is one of such temporal mechanisms. Further, Machiavelli writes, in his chapter XXV of *The Prince* on fortune, “I say that one sees a given prince be happy today and come to ruin tomorrow without having seen him change his nature or any quality...I believe, further, that he is happy who adapts his mode of proceeding to the qualities of the times; and similarly, he is unhappy whose procedure is in disaccord with the

times”(P XXV 99). The prince is shrouded in dependence on the times, which fortune manifests. This will be discussed at length below.

Machiavelli writes of a fortune that is personified. He attributes to fortune the human characteristics of having a will, gender, and motivations. Perhaps most trenchantly, he speaks of Fortune as a woman:

“I judge this indeed, that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down. And one sees that she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly. And so always, like a woman, she is the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity”(P XXV 101)

This passage speaks to the relationship between virtue (,through impetuosity,) and fortune. Here, Machiavelli characterizes the struggle between fortune and virtue as the struggle between the masculine qualities of virtue and the female nature of deified fortune. The way to overcome fortune is to rape her—but the commonplace suffering of the prince at the hands of the malignities of fortune would suggest that this power dynamic is not, perhaps, one way. The prince may attempt to beat fortune into submission, but her character as a force suggests that often he must submit to her as well.

This description suggests that aggression, even violence, must be used in order to overcome the fickleness of fortune. If fortune defines the field of politics, violence will not and cannot be eliminated. The new prince, or the man in a republic who acts upon virtue, must continue to hold fortune down and beat her; to use traditionally amoral and violent means in order to achieve stability. The violent response is the one that is appropriate and necessary to overcome the cruel variations of fortune. However, it is important too to remember that Fortuna is not literally a woman, but rather a concept, so the violence spoken of is directed towards uncertainty, not humanity.

The framing of the conflict between fortune and virtue as one of rape may induce the reader to reflect upon the moral character of Machiavelli's politics. Fortune is personified as a woman, not just an element, which places her in a realm where morals, as such, may apply. Machiavelli's Fortuna is also a deity, which suggests too this moral question. What does it mean when the gods suggest traditionally amoral action? It must mean that Christian morals are not the appropriate response to the field of politics. The appropriate response to the gods as they define human limitations is as virtue, as Machiavelli conceives of it, which includes traditionally irreligious "amoral" elements. Machiavelli here remains a moralist, he is suggesting a code of morals, but his code is based on a different conception of gods: Fortune as a deity. Therefore his description of moral activity differs from traditional ideals.

The *Capitolo on Fortune*, a poem that Machiavelli wrote in 1506 and dedicated to Giovan Battista Soderini, further elaborates these descriptions of fortune as a woman and as a deity. Machiavelli writes, with an obvious similarity to his description in chapter XXV of *The Prince*, that "...it plainly may be seen how much he pleases Fortune and how acceptable to her he is who strikes her, who thrusts her aside who hunts her down"(C 163). There is similarity here too in the image of Fortune as a river, where in the *Capitolo* Machiavelli writes, "As a rapid torrent that swells higher and higher as it rushes on, and overthrows everything wherever it turns its course, / It adds to one shore and cuts down the other, it shifts its banks, changes its bed to the very bottom, and makes the earth tremble where it passes;/So Fortune, in her furious onrush..."(C 151). These similarities between Machiavelli's account of fortune in the *Capitolo* and fortune in *The Prince* offer a justification for including the *Capitolo on Fortune* in Machiavelli's definition of fortune as a force. The similarities also provide evidence of the fact that Machiavelli's conception of fortune remains stable

throughout his works, and therefore provides an appropriate vector of analysis for comparing *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.

In particular, the *Capitolo* emphasizes the role of Fortune as a deity, and emphasizes her therefore temporal nature. Machiavelli writes, “There is nothing eternal in the world, Fortune wishes it so, and makes herself more splendid through it, that her power may be more clearly seen”(C 121). Fortune emerges as the only eternal element, disrupting the eternality of any other thing in the human world. Nothing is eternal, ironically the only guarantee is that this remain so. Fortune is the power that erodes the human realm, subjecting it to constant temporality.

Machiavelli’s description of fortune is multi-faceted, but clearly consistent between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. Of all the described aspects of fortune, it is clear that Machiavelli describes fortune largely as a force. Her nature, even though personified, is not one of willful malevolence, but rather unknowable motivation. She allows herself to be won, yes, but not in a rational or clearly motivated sense. Fortune remains largely unknowable as a divinity, but the force of her actions is undeniable. Fortune is to Machiavelli more her actions than herself. Her character serves to emphasize her effects; their power and their malignity.

And yet fortune’s character does remain significant in particular respects. Fortune is temporal, characterized by the forceful flow of time. Machiavelli reveals the fact that Fortune exists as time through speaking of fortune as opportunity, and of men who are out of synch with fortune, and therefore suffer her malignities. Fortune is also mystical, it seems to define the field of human action. If time sweeps everything before it, and Fortune is this temporal aspect, then Fortune exists *behind human activity*. For instance, virtue, which is a human

attribute, would be created *in response* to fortune, not the other way around. Further, fortune is a mystical element, a deity, and this mysticism as such lies behind the human things.

Fortune defines the field of politics.

IV: Fortune and Virtue:

Political action, then, must take place in the context of fortune. Fortune determines the field of play for human actions. Though fortune situates the field, it is not completely unopposed. Virtue is the counterpoint to fortune, allowing human action to have effect. Virtue, in the Machiavellian conception, is not morals typically defined as through the Christian tradition. Rather, Machiavelli emphasizes and mourns the loss of an ancient conception of virtue, made relevant for the new prince and the founders of republics. This ancient conception of virtue is made relevant through its ability, through strength and vigor, to oppose fortune.

Virtue is a complex entity, but the simplest definition of it is its opposition to fortune. Virtue is whatever opposes fortune and allows man to act. More specifically, virtue for Machiavelli is based on strength and necessity. Virtue, in another simple sense, is whatever Machiavelli instructs the ruler to do in order to create stability. This includes, for example, the ownership of one's own arms, the willingness to learn to be able not to be good when necessary, and the pursuit of security and well-being. Necessity defines virtue. Cyclically, necessity itself is defined by fortune: the reason that princes *need* to act a certain way is precisely in order to oppose ill fortune that may strike the unprepared, bringing political shifts. The prince does what is necessary so that he might take up arms against fortune, and seek foundation and stability.

This is seen when Machiavelli writes that princes are praised for some qualities, such as mercy and honesty, and blamed for others, such as hardness and ferocity. He writes that it would be a "very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince all of the above-mentioned qualities that are held good. But because he cannot have them, nor wholly observe them, since

human conditions do not permit it, it is necessary for him to be so prudent as to know how to avoid the infamy of those vices that would take the state away from him..."(P XV 62).

The ultimate goal is the preservation of the state, and the only reason to avoid "vice" as such is in order to keep the state. It is "*necessary*" to do so. Machiavelli continues, "for if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one's ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one's security and well-being"(P XV 62). Machiavelli inverts this calculation. Security and well-being, objects which are opposed to fortune, are the ultimate goals of Machiavelli's virtue.

Machiavelli's virtue, then, simply, would appear to be human actions which result from a calculus to overcome fortune and achieve stability. Virtue is not traditional morality. Yet the definition of virtue cannot end there. More specifically, Machiavelli writes that the prince "needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him, and, as I said above, not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity"(P XVII 70). Here again, necessity, called into being by fortune, defines the virtue of the ruler. Virtue becomes flexibility across a continuum that may necessitate both traditionally moral and amoral behavior. Machiavelli only makes few concessions to this calculus, but they do exist, such as the idea that "Yet one cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory"(P VIII 35).

To start, then, fortune and virtue oppose each other. Only through virtue can man overcome fortune through the power and prudence of his actions. There are more particular aspects of virtue that link it to Roman *virtu* and masculinity. The virtuous prince does not sit idly by. He must be flexible and driven towards action. The virtuous prince is to be

impetuously bold, yet cautiously preventative. A new prince can have the virtue in foresight to build the dikes and dams to contain the river of fortune, and he can have the impetuosity in virtue required to hold Fortuna down and beat her. Virtue redeems the power of his actions against fortune. This is why Machiavelli is concerned with teaching the prince to be virtuous—only then can his actions be sure of having an effect.

Virtue is a guard against the variations of fortune. “It happens similarly with fortune, which demonstrates her power where virtue has not been put in order”(P XXV 99). Machiavelli demonstrates this relationship with examples depicting how foresight, the tool of prudence in virtue, guards against fortune. Machiavelli writes that “Whosoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic and to take the remedies for them that were used by the ancients...”(D I.39 83) Virtue can be prudence. Prudence and learning from the past are required to avoid the bad and the cruel variations of fortune.

Yet, virtue is not always merely preventative: it can also attract good fortune. The prince uses virtue in order to oppose fortune in the hope that through this opposition fortune will come to be formed with respect to this virtue. Fortune “lets herself be won”(P XXV 101). When a prince or republic is virtuous, they induce fortune to act with them either through force or through fortune’s desire to assist the impetuous. The more specific interactions between fortune and virtue in these cases, both of the synchronicity of virtue and fortune and of their opposition, can be seen in Machiavelli’s case study of Cesare Borgia in chapter VII of the Prince.

Cesare Borgia

Fortune and virtue are not polar opposites, but rather they relate in their function. Fortune and virtue are both modes by which one may become a prince. The challenges that each potential prince faces as a result of their employed mode reveal more fully the nature of fortune and its relation to virtue.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses Francesco Sforza and Cesare Borgia as examples of those who came to power through each mode. Sforza used virtue to secure his principality, and therefore where he had trouble attaining it, he had an easier time maintaining it. Machiavelli's discussion of Sforza as a counterpoint to Borgia begins and ends with this remark: "Francesco became the duke of Milan from private individual by proper means, and with a great virtue of his own; and that which he had acquired with a thousand pains he maintained with little trouble"(P VII 26). Cesare Borgia, on the other hand, Machiavelli chooses to discuss at length in terms of fortune. This is a nominally odd choice as Machiavelli examines Cesare Borgia's virtue as an example to other princes far more than he emphasizes the fortune that befell him, although it is impossible to ignore that fortune did have its influence in the beginnings and the demise of Cesare's principality.

Machiavelli writes that "Cesare Borgia, called Duke of Valentino by the vulgar, acquired his state through the fortune of his father and lost it through the same, notwithstanding the fact that he made use of every deed and did all those things that should be done by a prudent and virtuous prince man to put his roots in the states that the arms and fortune of others had given him..."(P VII 26). So, Machiavelli sets up Cesare as an example of a prince who acquired his principality through the arms and fortune of another. Yet, Machiavelli then goes on to spend the bulk of chapter VII discussing Cesare as an example for the new prince. He writes: "Thus, if one considers all the steps of the duke, one

will see that he had laid for himself great foundations for future power, which I do not judge superfluous to discuss; for I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of his actions”(P VII 27).

How did virtue and fortune interact in the actions of Cesare Borgia? That is, what can be said about which parts of his action belonged to virtue and which parts to fortune, and what does that mean for fortune and virtue generally? In general, Machiavelli attributes most of Cesare’s acts, especially those of military action, to virtue. Machiavelli attributes to the presence of fortune accidents in the material world, such as the illness that struck Cesare and his father.

Cesare Borgia and Machiavelli came into personal contact during Machiavelli’s career as an assistant emissary in 1502-1503. The two had great respect for each other, and Borgia often allowed Machiavelli to obtain lengthy audiences with him even during political crises. Machiavelli’s admiration is evidenced in a letter he wrote to his dispatchers on 26 June 1502:

“This prince is very splendid and magnificent, and in war he is so bold that there is no great enterprise that does not seem small to him, and to gain glory and territory he never rests or knows danger or weariness: he arrives at a place before anyone has heard that he has left the place he was in before: he wins the love of his soldiers, and has got hold of the best men in Italy. These things make him victorious and formidable, and are attended with invariable good fortune. (Ridolfi 50)”(Rudowski 53)

Machiavelli begins to link Borgia’s ascent with good fortune, while not overlooking his bold qualities of virtue. This passage also emphasizes the unlikelihood that Machiavelli would be referring to Cesare’s actions in the prince ironically. Machiavelli seriously draws much of his advice for new princes from Borgia’s life, including this emphasis on boldness and control of and admiration by one’s own arms. Their relationship was one of admiration, not likely to instigate satirical lampooning of “tyrant.”

Machiavelli's account of Borgia's rise to power focuses on the instances that Borgia used his virtue to great effect in acquiring Romagna. Yet, Machiavelli bookends his discussion with the admission that fortune influenced Borgia in the beginning of his princely rise, and had a key role in his final failures. Cesare's life was initially heavily influenced by fortune in that he was the illegitimate son of Pope Alexander IV, who had a penchant for elevating those related to him, particularly the favorites among his flock of illegitimate children. Cesare Borgia, as the youngest, was relegated to a role in the church, but, after the murder of his brother Giovanni, who had been Alexander's secular arm, Cesare rose to replace him in secular and military power.

Borgia became Duke of Valentino through an agreement forged by his father the pope, but, even at that point, it would be wrong to say that Cesare lacked personal ambition. He "carried a sword decorated with engravings that depicted scenes from the life of Julius Caesar. Two mottoes were inscribed on the sword: on one side it read "Either Caesar or nobody" (*Aut Caesar aut nullus*), and on the other, "The die is cast" (*Alea iactus est*)" (Rudowski 50). This affectation summarizes much of Cesare's fate: he was greatly influenced by Fortune's cast, but also had ambition that matched only those found in ancient history. No doubt this willingness to learn virtue from the ancients appealed to Machiavelli, and Borgia's unwillingness to be less than a Caesar likely expanded this appeal.

Virtue was present in Cesare's life concerning the way he conducted himself in armed action. Machiavelli writes of Borgia's reluctance to rely on the arms and fortunes of others, and therefore his development of his own military with which to conquer Romagna. The duke entered Romagna with French auxiliary arms, but those soon appeared unsafe, so he then turned to mercenaries, and when those appeared dangerous, to the construction of his own loyal arms. Further, when Cesare could not trust the arms of both France and those

controlled by the Orsini, he prudently turned to deceit. This led to his gain of such important territories as Imola, Fiorli, Pesara, and Rimini, all due to his own virtue and not solely through the fortune of his father. Cesare demonstrated the military prudence necessary to Machiavelli's new prince. Machiavelli writes with admiration how Cesare "was never so esteemed as when everyone saw that he was the total owner of his arms"(P XIII 55).

Cesare was also not afraid to use non-military force, but to use it prudently and not to inspire anger in the masses. After he overtook Romagna, the duke desired that order be imposed upon the city, so he placed the city under charge of Remirro de Orco, who cruelly and violently implemented obedience. After this successful cowing, Cesare wished to rid himself of this cruel commander, lest he inspire hatred in the people, and so had him cut into pieces in the piazza at Cesena. Machiavelli writes that "the ferocity of this spectacle left the people at once satisfied and stupefied," a satisfactory outcome (P VII 30). Cesare was not afraid to be cruel, and yet his cruelty always remained within the bounds of virtue: "Cesare Borgia was held to be cruel; nonetheless his cruelty restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and faith"(P XVII 65). This willingness to be cruel when necessary is the hallmark of the new prince. In Cesare, it came entirely through his own virtue. Further, Cesare's cruelty was necessary due to his goal of unity, a type of stability worthy of active political pursuit.

Machiavelli demonstrates Cesare's important attribute of foresight through showing that Cesare had a plan for what he must do to retain power if his father were to no longer be pope. Machiavelli lays out four conditions that Cesare was to meet, and states that "of these four things he had accomplished three at the death of Alexander, the fourth he almost accomplished"(P VII 31). In preparation for the death of his father, Cesare had killed off the

lords of bloodlines he had offended, won over the gentlemen of Rome, acquired a large party in the College of Cardinals, and nearly overtaken Tuscany. The foresight and prudence demonstrated here Machiavelli approves of, he states that “If he [Cesare] had succeeded in this (as he was succeeding in the same year that Alexander died), he would have acquired such force and reputation that he would have stood by himself and would no longer had depended on the fortune and force of someone else, but on his own power and virtue”(P VII 31). With foresight, Cesare became very close to maintaining his principedom through virtue.

For Borgia, however, fortune intervened in an instance where foresight could not be of assistance. Borgia had provided for action in the event of the death of Alexander VI, but no prudence or foresight could have assisted him in the fact that he was on the edge of death himself. Cesare Borgia and his father Alexander IV were both struck with what appeared to be malaria only six months after Cesare began to consolidate his rule over Romagna. His foundations still were sound: he remained secure in Rome even on the point of death. But Cesare admitted that his foresight did not provide for this perversity of fortune. Machiavelli writes of a conversation with Cesare, “And he told me, on the day that Julius II was created, that he had thought about what might happen when his father was dying, and had found a remedy for everything, except that he never thought that at his death he himself would also be on the point of dying”(P VII 32).

Concerning Borgia, Machiavelli does not discuss Fortune as willfully destructive, but rather simple obstructive. Borgia was impetuous and bold, so he could have been expected to hold Fortuna down. Yet, foresight could not really be useful in this instance, so fortune was not directly opposed to virtue, but rather subverted it. For Cesare, “the only things in the way of his plans were the brevity of Alexander’s life and his own sickness”(P VII 32).

Other than these malignities of fortune, Machiavelli says that the way to learn to be a new prince is to follow the example of Cesare Borgia. Fortune gave Cesare his principality and took it away, but not through any lack of virtue on the part of Cesare. He would appear to have been impetuous, the type of prince to hold Fortuna down and beat her, why, then, did he fail?

Machiavelli does admit that Cesare made at least one mistake. “One could only accuse him in the creation of Julius as pontiff, in which he made a bad choice; for, as was said, though he could not make a pope to suit himself, he could have kept anyone from being pope”(P VII 33). Julius II had been offended by Cesare and his father in the past, but Cesare chose to overlook this offense and allowed Julius II to be elected pope with the promise that Cesare would be made papal vicar. Instead, after the election, Julius II sent Cesare into Iberian exile, where he died three years later.

The account of Cesare Borgia’s rise and fall would profoundly lack hope if Machiavelli were to leave his analysis at the fact that Borgia’s illness, and the death of his father, were malignities of fortune that overcame his virtue entirely. Instead, however, Machiavelli chooses to ultimately ascribe Borgia’s failure to a mistake that he made. This means that while Machiavelli sees the interplay of fortune and virtue to be such that one often eclipses the other, he is reluctant to admit that fortune can account for the decline of a prince entirely. He writes: “And whoever believes that among great personages new benefits will make old injuries be forgotten deceives himself. So the duke erred in this choice and it was the cause of his *ultimate ruin*” (P VII 33) [emphasis added]. Rather than leave his analysis on the note that Cesare’s actions should be imitated by the new prince, Machiavelli is driven, either through love of accuracy or through reluctance to let fortune lead to ultimate ruin, to

admit mistakes on the part of Cesare Borgia. Fortune is not the sole destroyer of Cesare's pryncedom.

This is actually hopeful: to admit a mistake is to find that Cesare could have regained power if he had taken a different course of action. Machiavelli lets some of the blame for the downfall of the new prince rest on fortune, but emphasizes the other part, that of failed course of virtue or action, in order to show that the new prince could have followed a different precept with a different outcome. Fortune, while it gave Cesare the opportunity for pryncedom, pushed him into decline but did not complete it. Virtue could have opposed fortune, even in these extreme circumstances, giving credit to human action even concerning the most ill of fortunes.

V. The Project: Fortune in Human Politics

With Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli presents an image of the exemplary new prince despite Borgia's eventual failure. Borgia was flexible, willing to use violent means in order to provide stability, and willing to evaluate his course and change his modes when necessary. Even though he suffered downfall through fortune, Cesare Borgia is made a role model by Machiavelli as having provided as much foundation for a principality acquired through fortune as a new prince should aspire to.

Foundation and stability are revealed as the primary political goals in Machiavelli's thought. He reveals this in his discussion of Cesare Borgia, but also throughout the entirety of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. This goal of human politics reveals itself through Machiavelli's discussion of the problems of politics. These problems include the problems of liberty and problems of action. They may be defined as problems because if Fortune is found to overwhelm the political field, then human liberty and the dignity of human action may cease to exist. These problems are present in a field defined by fortune, and are often created directly through fortune itself. This suggests Machiavelli's philosophy of politics, situated by his philosophy of history.

Machiavelli is concerned with both the foundation and perpetuation of political orders. Both of these aspects are fraught with complexities and difficulties for the political man searching for stability. Concerning foundation, Machiavelli is interested in the founding act. An act must be sufficiently impressive to incite following. After all, "it should be considered that nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders"(P VI 23).

This dangerous undertaking requires force and violence from the founder: “when they depend on their own [arms] and are able to use force, then it is that they are rarely in peril. From this it arises that all the armed prophets conquered and the unarmed ones were ruined” (P VI 24). The initial founding act must be new and it must be forceful.

The perpetuation of political orders is opposed by human inflexibility. Fortune creates and defines a significant problem in human politics: the problem of the fixity of men’s natures. Machiavelli does not have a terribly consistent view of human nature: he states, for example, that it is malleable through education: “[difference] cannot solely arise from the bloodline...but it necessarily comes from the diverse education of one family from another” (D III.46 306). He writes that men have a tendency to act poorly: “For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood, property, lives, and children, as I said above, when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt”(P XVII 66). At other times, he presents honest and mercy as obvious goods. After all, the prince should “proceed in a temperate mode with prudence and humanity so that too much confidence does not make him incautious and too much diffidence does not render him intolerable”(P XVII 66). Why these inconsistencies?

Machiavelli appears to be more concerned with the utility of suggesting that men are formed a certain way rather than the accuracy of such statements. In the Discourses, he writes: “As all those demonstrate who reason on a civil way of life, 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 free opportunity for it”(D I 3 15). To have such a view of human nature is not necessary for everyone, only the one who orders the laws of a republic. The utility of

suggesting such a view outweighs its accuracy. The complexity of Machiavelli's views of human nature, rather than suggest that Machiavelli is self-contradictory, further suggests that defining something as human *nature* may simply not be his goal. Machiavelli emphasizes how men *act*, not the natural makeup of their humanity. Further, his inconsistency on the subject may be instrumental in discussing the nuanced inconsistencies of human nature itself.

Despite this apparent contradiction, Machiavelli often he presents a view of human nature as, if not impossible to change, rather difficult to. He writes 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 one individual has prospered very much with one mode of proceeding, it is not possible to persuade him that he can do well to proceed otherwise"(D III.9 240). Nature grants us a rather inflexible inclination, one which is reinforced through learning and experience. If a man learns without regard to Fortune, that is, without acknowledging that his modes are contingent, he becomes fixed. This fixity presents a political problem for Machiavelli.

Fortune is radically temporal; it changes with every passing moment. The project is to find a man who is in tune with the times or can be flexible enough to change when fortune and the times do. Machiavelli writes in the *Discourses*: "I have often considered that the cause of the bad and to the good fortune of men is the matching of the mode of one's proceeding with the times"(D III.9 239). He indicates this problem quite clearly in the *Prince* as well, where he writes, "I conclude, thus, that when fortune varies and men remain obstinate in their modes, men are happy while they are in accord, and as they come into discord, unhappy"(P XXV 101). Machiavelli describes the conflict of fortune with fixity both in the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, that is, both for the principality and the republic.

Machiavelli also describes the problem of fixity in the *Capitolo on Fortune*, where he writes of Fortune's control over men: "And since you are not able to change your character nor to leave the course that heaven has marked out for you, Fortune abandons you in the midst of your journey"(C 112). The fixity of character denies man the opportunity to change and continue to benefit from Fortune. "Therefore, if this can be understood and fixed in the mind, he who can leap from wheel to wheel will ever be successful and happy...But because the ability to do this is denied by the mysterious power that rules us, our condition changes with the course of Fortune"(C 115). This "mysterious power that rules us" could easily be non-virtuous nature, which does not allow man the flexibility necessary to change in synch with Fortune's tumults. Fortune as a wheel brings man to heights and depths—if a man stays inflexibly on one wheel this cycle is inevitable. Man would be happy if he could learn to adjust himself by shifting from Fortune's first wheel to another wheel.

Yet Machiavelli does not believe that men can easily adjust themselves in this manner; it appears that human nature may often be too fixed for men to learn which modes to use according to the times. He argues that it may be simpler to find the man who fits the times, rather than wait for the times to produce a necessary change of mode in men. Because of this, Machiavelli states that "Hence it arises that a republic has greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality, for it can accommodate itself better than one prince can to the diversity of times through the diversity of the citizens that are in it"(D III.9 240). Machiavelli provides the precepts for the creation of a new prince, one who could exercise flexibility, but this requires an acknowledgment of fortune that is difficult to accept. The republic remains more stable through finding men of the appropriate fixed nature, rather than through undertaking the project of changing the nature of one man to suit the times.

So, Fortune dictates that men will either act eventually in a way that is incongruous with the times, or must change their nature through the acknowledgement of fortune. In both cases, Fortune holds sway in that fortune limits the options for men. Individuals must either give themselves to Fortune or to kneel in front of her. By acknowledging the rule of Fortune, humans may then take up arms against her. Fortune creates a field of contingency in which fixed man finds it difficult to act appropriately. Politics is the constant struggle against Fortune and time.

The other problem fortune poses to politics is that of the problem of human liberty. What does it mean if men are subject to the caprices of a divinity such as fortune, unable to control their own actions in the human realm? Virtue seems to present the possibility for freedom, whereas Fortune subverts and limits this expression of liberty. And yet, even virtue is defined by fortune in a limited way in that humans must act according to the precepts of virtue in a manner that may not express what is often conceived of as individual liberty ie; the power to act in a chosen manner at a chosen time. Fortune presents the political problem of defining freedom.

This is freedom expressed in the terms of individual free will. Freedom in terms of the state will be discussed below. Individual free will is the capacity to act in a way that makes one's actions have meaning, but this seems to be opposed by Fortune. So, Machiavelli introduces his calculus that men control half of action and fortune the other half, a fifty-fifty conception that he introduces perhaps not so much for its reality as for its consequences. Machiavelli focuses on the beneficial effects of believing that human actions are within individual control instead of probing deeper into the causes of the matter.

Machiavelli writes in chapter XXV of *The Prince* that

“It is not unknown to me that many have held and hold the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence, indeed that they have no remedy at all...When I have thought about this sometimes, I have been in some part inclined to their opinion. Nonetheless, so that our free will not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern”(P XXV 98).

This is not a particularly convincing argument: Machiavelli himself even admits that he is sometimes “inclined” towards the idea that Fortune allows no room for human will. He introduces his concession with the preface “so that our free will not be eliminated.” He admits he writes in order to preserve the *belief* in free will. Therefore, there must be something to the idea of free will that is significant enough to define Machiavelli’s opinion on this interaction between humans and fortune itself.

Free will is important because it is only through accepting an idea of free will that men can understand themselves to act and act responsibly. Without free will, there would be no cause for virtue. Men would also have no cause to hope. Machiavelli discusses this in the *Discourses*, after he introduces a view of fortune from a different angle. He pessimistically states that “men can second fortune by not oppose it, that they can weave its warp but not break it. They should indeed never give up, for since they do not know its 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 whatever travail they may find themselves”(D II.30 199). This may seem like a refutation of the fifty-fifty conception, but in actuality Machiavelli’s goal remains the same. He remains mostly concerned not with the actual role of fortune opposed to free will, but with the effect that this perceived role has upon men. What is important remains the fact that men still must sweat, must try, and must act, whether or not they can beat fortune or merely second her. Fortune continues to oppose free will, but not if

men believe that they can overcome her. This belief is more important than the reality itself, and it defines the necessity of virtue in the political action of men.

As such, Fortune does not degrade the human things. Actions directed against Fortune necessitate that men become strong in order to overcome Fortune and impose their will in the sphere of politics. Fortune provides necessity, and “men never work any good unless through necessity, but where choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder”(D I 3 15). This is important as it shows that Machiavelli believes that Fortune, as a force or as a deity, allows for respect of human action . This is a counterpoint to his discussion of Christianity and the Renaissance’s traditional religion. Fortune, through the fifty-fifty conception, teaches men action. Through action they can experience human power and freedom. Christianity subverts this teaching, and action itself. On the other hand, Fortuna teaches men action.

Machiavelli writes, in his criticism of Christianity:

“Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human; the other placed it in greatness of spirit, strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong. And if our religion asks that you have the strength in yourself, it wishes you to be capable more of suffering than of doing something strong”(D II.2 131).

Here, Machiavelli clearly indicates that Christianity is against the actions that make men have greatness of spirit, body, and strength. These are the attributes that Fortune draws out through the necessitation of virtue. These strong masculine attributes are opposed to “contempt of things human.” So, Machiavelli finds that through situating the human things through Fortune, instead of through Christianity, man is able to avoid the contempt of himself. His human capabilities can find true fulfillment in strength and glory. Man is allowed and encouraged to respect man.

This avoidance of contempt has a significant link to freedom. Machiavelli writes in the same discussion:

“Thinking then whence it can arise that in those ancient times people were more lovers of freedom than in these, I believe it arises from the same cause that makes men less strong now, which I believe is the difference between our education and the ancient, founded on the difference between our religion and the ancient. For our religion, having shown the truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honor of the world...”(D II.2 131)

He goes on to add that it is not the fault of religion as a whole that has made modern man weak, but rather the fault of those who have interpreted it according to weakness instead of according to strength. Machiavelli links strength in men to being “lovers of freedom.” Freedom exists in the same plane as the elevation or degradation of the total human realm, and this raising or lowering of respect towards men has an impact on the definition of this freedom. Esteeming the world causes love of freedom, as in the ancients.

Criticism of those who condemn the human realm is central to the hope of Machiavelli’s political philosophy. Machiavelli allows men to retain control over half of their actions despite the willfulness of fortune. Man attains further freedom when he is freed from the compulsion to despise himself, as he must with the Christian religion. Machiavelli’s Fortune allows Machiavelli to assert support for greatness of man’s spirit and man’s strength, what he calls the “human things.” The individual, in that he is human, is granted free will and the opportunity for glory under Fortune.

Freedom for Machiavelli also has implications in the political and governmental sphere. How can one provide freedom for citizens under capricious Fortuna, especially when one advocates an amoral response for princes to this Fortuna? Is freedom possible in the state if the prince, or the republic, acts contrary to traditional Christian morality? Machiavelli

places the goal of stability ahead of that of freedom in an ultimately cyclical definition of liberty. Men desire to live in stability so that they then may experience what it is like to be free, and then they exercise this freedom so that they might be able to live secure. Security and freedom are both endpoints intrinsically linked to each other.

Machiavelli asserts a goal of stability—it is only then that men can learn to be able to enjoy their freedom with contentedness. He writes, “The common utility that is drawn from a free way of life is not recognized by anyone while it is possessed: this is being able to enjoy one’s things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honor of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself”(D I.16 45). Freedom here is freedom from fear, a subtle freedom that may not be recognized until it is taken away, and man is made to fear. Freedom from fear is expressed as security. For Machiavelli, men “desire freedom so as to live secure”(D I.16 46). Security remains the ultimate goal on the political playing field, and only once security is achieved can men turn to the idea of collective political freedom.

In fact, Machiavelli sees the role of government as very limited except to provide stability: stability both for the governing body and for the people in the political order. He writes, “For a government is *nothing other* than holding subjects in such a mode that they cannot or ought not offend you. This is done by securing oneself against them altogether...or by benefiting them in such a mode that it would not be reasonable for them to desire to change fortune”(D II.23 182) [emphasis added]. The project of government is not to exercise power over citizens in a coercive way, but rather to exercise power in relation to citizens in such a way that induces their cooperation for stability.

This concern for stability often expresses itself in Machiavelli’s thought as a project of unity. *The Prince*, due to its final chapter, can be read as a clarion call for the unification of Italy. This, rather than subverting the theoretical messages contained in the work, is

strengthened by the fact that the call for unity immediately follows Machiavelli's discussion of fortune. Fortune can be combated by a project of virtuous unity: after all, the united form Machiavelli views as more stable than the fragmented. A united form would revive the Italy that "So, left as if lifeless, she awaits whoever it can be that will heal her wounds"(P XXVI 102).

Freedom is a way to induce men to act with benefit to the stability of the republic. So, once again, Machiavelli shows his bent towards utility in discussions of political goods. In a free republic, men are seen to live better, "For each willingly multiplies that thing and seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired. From which it arises that men in rivalry think of private and public advantages, and both one and the other come to grow marvelously"(D II.2 132). Freedom, not on the individual level, but on the level of the free republic, creates advantages for the political order. There is great utility in the freedom of political orders.

Political freedom as a result of virtue against Fortune arises in Machiavelli's discussion of republican government. Men enjoy a free way of life if they are free from fear. Yet, with even this simple freedom comes consequences: freedom from fear allows men to act against the state. The problem remains that malignant humors arise in men and threaten the existence of the state if not given a means by which to vent, for "when these humors do not have an outlet by which they may be vented ordinarily, they have recourse to extraordinary modes that bring a whole republic to ruin"(D I.7 24). In order for men to enjoy a free way of life, the state must create stability and then protect that stability through allowing means by which ill humors may be vented.

This freedom, then, is not for the prince or for the political actors in the republic, but for the citizens. They live secure and the republic or principality should take measures to

ensure that their security is protected. Yet, the prince, or the founder of a republic, is not free from fear. The Founder must subscribe to virtue narrowly, in order to create the best foundation for an order. Here, Machiavelli reveals a slight and surprising benevolence. The common citizen may enjoy something resembling freedom, though the prince may not. Stability allows the private citizen to be free from fear. The prince, on the other hand, must constantly fear: he must fear the variations of fortune that may cause his downfall, others that may wish to harm him, the shifting of the political tide. The prince or founder must subscribe to virtue exactly in order to remain in power, and even then, he may not be free from fear.

The political problem, then, is to create stability. This calls for an integration of Machiavelli's *Prince* and Machiavelli's *Discourses*. The utility of the prince is that he can be the founder and right-orderer of an order. Machiavelli writes that "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"(D 1.9 29). So the prince, as an individual, has the political role of providing the foundations for the principality, even the principality that becomes a republic. The republic requires an individual as a founder, one such as Romulus (D I 2). Following, the role of the republic is to provide flexibility in the face of temporality. The fixity of men's natures finds solution in the republic: "Besides this, if one individual is capable of ordering, the thing itself is ordered to last long not if it rests on the shoulders of one individual but rather if it remains in the care of many and its maintenance stays with many"(D I 9 29). With a distinct role for each of these seemingly irreconcilable orders, it becomes clear that the ultimate project of politics is good foundation and stability. The *Discourses* and *The Prince* are

integrated through their recognition of the common enemy of politics as fortune,
recognition which results in the quest for foundation.

VI. The Temporal and the Eternal:

“There is nothing eternal in the world, Fortune wishes it so, and makes herself more splendid through it, that her power may be more clearly seen,” Machiavelli writes in the *Capitolo on Fortune* (C 121). Fortune is radically temporal. Fortune’s influence over the human things extends through destruction of the eternal in order to make contingency rule. Somewhat ironically, Fortune is the only known, constant element in a world mired in extreme temporality and the unknown. Fortune’s constancy makes all else inconstant, subject to unending change. The relationship between the eternal and the temporal in Machiavelli’s political philosophy warrants further examination in order to develop an understanding of political possibilities and goals.

Imagined Republics

Chapter XV of the *Prince* includes Machiavelli’s famous exhortation against imagined republics. He writes: “And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation”(P XV 61). Here is where Machiavelli gets his reputation for realism. On the surface, this scorn appears as a basic rejection of the idea that man should aspire towards something eternally or truly good. Rather, what Machiavelli means is that man should be more concerned with what *is* than what *ought to be*.

Machiavelli rejects the imaginary republics on the grounds that these “imagining” writers, Plato and Augustine in their number, desire a truly good political order but overlook the cruelty and hardship that would be necessary to institute any kind of order, including a

“good” one. In that case, then, these imagined republics are impossible. If a republic eschews violence, then it must not exist, as no political order can come into being without the means necessary to foundation, such as violence. Even further, they are damagingly hypocritical: to expound a “true” republic without understanding the means necessary to found a republic denies political reality.

In a pragmatic sense, then, Machiavelli understands politics only in reference to the human realm. Rather than positing a beautiful goal for politics, Machiavelli allows politics to exist as they are and examines them based on this reality. On the surface, in this censure is the explanation for Machiavelli going against traditional morality: traditional morals, while agreed upon as an ideal code, do not constitute the truth of politics, and therefore cannot hold weight as a part of political action. Deception and violence are political realities. And yet, Machiavelli desires that man “learn...his preservation.” So, he does not reject all political goals and standards in order fully to examine political reality. Machiavelli desires something more permanent, not imaginary, which lurks below the surface of Machiavelli’s so-called realism.

Machiavelli’s rejection of the imagined republic, then, goes further than simple realism. Machiavelli opposes the ancient philosophical tradition that saw a realm of the eternal beyond the political and tangible. Plato, in his allegory of the Cave, demonstrates this—only false shadow images are within the cave, the sphere relegated to the political and the experience of the majority of humans. The eternal-beautiful, the goal of the philosopher who wishes to get in touch with the Truth, exists outside the cave. It is this “beyond” that Machiavelli appears to reject. Further, the “imagined republic” could be, for example, the system evoked in Plato’s *Republic*. The ideal republic posited by Plato would be the closest that humans could get to living in line with these eternal things. Machiavelli rejects this.

Additionally, Machiavelli no doubt acknowledges and rejects the idea of a progressive, “heavenly city,” which humans are to aspire to either on earth or to live in within their hearts. For Machiavelli, progression cannot take place based on the existence of an extra-temporal sphere, such as these imagined republics. Instead, humans are mired in radical temporality. Nothing eternal exists with relevance to politics except the perpetual truth of contingency and change.

The imagined republics imply a project of aligning men’s souls to live in accordance with the city in speech or with the City of God. Machiavelli has no such project concerning the souls of men. Fortuna is in control of only the material. Fortune is able to create illness, accidents of birth, and chance occurrences, but she is not capable of re-ordering men’s spirits or qualities. Fortune necessarily has no control over the souls of men, as they must and do oppose her. So, instead of concerning himself with the souls of men, Machiavelli regards their spirit. This is the essence of men in another form: while the soul looks to make men in line with the eternal, spirit exists as a fully human trait. Spirit is the hope that makes men turn towards glory and the strong fulfillment of their human capabilities. Glory, strength, and virtue exist from moment to moment only in man as he expresses these qualities: they are entirely earthly, temporal, human, and real. Glory is to be aspired to, but even if attained, it ensures men nothing about their souls, only according them the chance that they be remembered by historians for a fleeting moment.

Machiavelli prefaces his condemnation of imagined republics with this statement: “But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it”(P XV 61). As with his conception of free will, Machiavelli once again speaks of the *utility*

of his findings against tradition. He intends to write something *useful*; there must be a reason for his realism aimed at creating this utility.

Perhaps this usefulness comes from his position against condemning the human realm. Machiavelli's criticism of Christianity for degrading the human things, for making men weak, can no doubt apply in this case. What is to be expected when men live in accordance with extra-temporal, extra-human ideals? They align themselves with these heavenly ideals, debasing the power of the human realm. They cannot be expected to be as devoted to seeking glory or strength on this earth. Machiavelli values strength and virtue highly, both of which come from his pragmatically hopeful conception of actual human politics, not higher authority, whether aesthetic or godly. Humans act without permission from an *authority*, and instead only in regard to radical temporality and chance, which, while eternal features, are not particularly authoritative. In order for politics to work, that is, in order for political orders to be stable, humans must be dedicated towards virtue and success on earth. True success is the creation of a moment of stability. Only then can freedom and glory be seen.

Fortune exists only inside Plato's allegorical cave. Outside the cave, in the realm of the true and the eternal, there could be no contingency. Inasmuch as Machiavelli's political philosophy is based on Fortune, it exists within the cave. Yet, Machiavelli's political philosophy qua philosophy may not be particularly applicable to the cave allegory at all: perhaps Machiavelli's ideas subvert that binary that divides the cave from the outside. Fortune and temporality define the entire field of history and politics, creating both "true" and "false" images. The distinction between these images cannot be drawn in terms of eternal/contingent because all of reality is contingent, situated by Fortune. Rather they become true and false in another sense—in the calculation of their utility for mankind. False

images prevent man from demonstrating strength and spirit, whereas the true images relate to Machiavelli's political goal of stability and faith in human action. The cave becomes the whole, but not in a way that prevents men from finding something they think good and usefull.

In the cave, Machiavelli creates a different definition of imagined republics. Man is still certainly capable of imagination; he is able to choose and direct projects based on their attractiveness. These projects are to take place in a future, certainly, and in that sense they remain imagined. Instead of imagining the beautiful city, Machiavelli desires that men imagine an imminent political project—one related to the search for stability. Both the heavenly city and the real political project are imagined in that they are to take place in a future time, but the act of imagining is distinctly different in scope. Machiavelli intends that humans imagine projects from within the cave, from and for the realm of the real and temporal.

Machiavelli himself takes part in the imagining of projects when he desires to create new modes and orders, as discussed in the *Discourses*. In the preface to the first book, Machiavelli writes:

“Although the envious nature of men has always made it no less dangerous to find new modes and orders than to seek unknown waters and lands, because men are more ready to blame than praise the actions of other, nonetheless, driven by that natural desire that has always been in me to work, without any respect, for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone, I have decided to take a path as yet untrodden by anyone...”(D I.preface 5).

Machiavelli decides to go down a path that he will be the first to explore, a definite act of imagining. His new modes and orders are to be something new and beneficial. Machiavelli also creates the image of the “new prince”: in both cases, he is imagining the new. He creates a project with a goal, that of benefit, and imagines his way to this goal through the project of

defining new modes and orders. Machiavelli rejects the traditional, eternal, imagined republics and instead imagines within the human sphere a project that will be beneficial to political man.

What is Good, What is Great

Some projects within the cave are more valuable than others, to Machiavelli, and therefore more readily worth imagining. This is evident in Machiavelli's limited direct discussion of what he calls good. He certainly implies, through creating an extensive and specific definition of virtue, that virtue is good. He also, through his criticism of Christianity and his censure of effeminate modern Italy, demonstrates his belief that greatness, strength, and glory are goods. Specifically, Machiavelli writes on the topic of republic, "Here two things have to be noted. The first is that many times, deceived by a false image of good, the people desires its own ruin; and if it is not made aware that it is bad and what the good is, by someone in whom it has faith, infinite dangers and harms are brought into republics"(D I.53 106). It is good that a republic desires to perpetuate itself, to protect itself from danger, and to remain stable. Stability is the key good, and it is good that the republic persists.

Machiavelli makes a distinction between greater and lesser achievements. Great achievements include the imagining of an appropriate project and then directing oneself in a manner consistent with virtue in order to achieve the project. The great project should bring one glory, in the sense that history will remember the achievement. When historians remember the achievements of a political order, it insulates these achievements against the inevitable temporality of the human situation. For example, the Roman republic lasted in glory in that it both lasted a long time in actuality and an even longer time in the memories of historians and scholars. The glory of the individuals that created such a republic is also

evident: their names and actions last even through modernity, as in Machiavelli's discussion of them in the *Discourses*. Lesser achievements do not last to this extent, and the measure of an action's historical impact is a large part of the measure of their greatness.

Perhaps the ultimate great achievement of imagining, for Machiavelli, is the founding act. The foundation of a political order is essential in the definition of the course and character of the order from that point. A good foundation can be either one that is long-standing and builds upon the previous order, or one that is sudden but so virtuous that the foundation become lasting: "Then, too, states that come to be suddenly, like all other things in nature that are born and grow quickly, cannot have roots and branches, so that the first adverse weather eliminates them—unless indeed, as it was said, those who have suddenly become princes have so much virtue that they know immediately how to prepare to keep what fortune has placed in their laps..."(P VII 26). The princes who provide for stability through good ordering are those with the most virtue, the greatest achievement. Machiavelli writes of the greatness of Aeneas, one of the possible founders of Rome, "In this case one can recognize the virtue of the builder and the fortune of what is built, which is more or less marvelous as the one who was the beginning of it was more or less virtuous"(D I.1 8). The virtue of the founder continues to afterwards affect the right-ordering of the order, showing that the founding act requires appropriate greatness.

So there is an idea of good in Machiavelli's political philosophy, although not the eternal true or the eternal good that exists in an imagined republic. This could seem to be a lesser good: and yet there is something distinctly hopeful about Machiavelli's rejection of imagined republics. Machiavelli is working in the human realm, without qualifications, and believes that what exists in the human realm is enough matter to make men great. There is no need to introduce something beyond what humans have because, ill-natured and weak as

humans may be, their potential to create is entirely their own. Machiavelli either sees the imagined republic as untrue or irrelevant, or both. By placing himself in opposition to imagined republics, he reveals that he retains truth and hope in the human things.

A Theory of History

Machiavelli introduces a politics in which the eternal, as traditionally defined, is not obviously relevant. There is only one element of the human realm that is permanent with which humans should be concerned when ordering themselves: the element of Fortune. Contingency pervades every aspect of human action as the only constant. It is not difficult to imagine that Machiavelli really does subscribe to this worldview where contingency is paramount and pervasive. His entire political philosophy could exist to overcome Fortune: hence his examination of the ancients in order to learn from their accidents, his compilation of case studies of exemplary new princes, and his focus on virtue. For Machiavelli, fortune is real in experience. He sees this in human experience: events occur that are unanticipated, humans experience accidents and mistakes. Fortune makes it difficult for humans to find meaning, because their actions are not in line with something eternal and can easily be overridden by a malignancy of the willful deity. The struggle for meaningful human action is central to Machiavelli's theory.

The struggle for meaningful human action is situated through a theory of history. If history were to be progressive, then man could find meaningful action in leading humankind to its teleological end. Progressiveness can end with the city of heaven on earth, so the eternal city becomes another way for men to live in accordance with and find meaning. Even if history were non-progressive, living in accordance with something eternal would at least give men the meaning and comfort of knowing that their actions were right.

Machiavelli creates a view of history that is decidedly non-progressive. Instead, Machiavelli sees history as constantly in motion. He writes in the *Discourses*, against the idea of a progressive history, “But since all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall; and to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you”(D I.6 23). The ascent and descent of history promotes contingency. This rise and fall mimics the traditional conception of Fortune as a wheel, constantly rotating and bringing those at their peak swiftly to their downfall.

Through this, Machiavelli is able to make a judgment of some times as ascending, or higher than others, even though this ascendancy is, from the beginning, doomed. He writes, of those who judge the ancients, “I reply, therefore, that the custom written about above of praising and blaming is true, but it is not at all always true that to do so is to err. For it is necessary that they sometimes judge the truth, for since human things are always in motion, either they ascend or descend”(D II.preface 123). It is possible for Machiavelli to conceive of times as in ascent or in decline, and yet this is not and can never be a concept of progression, because the cyclical nature of history causes all things to rise and fall.

For Machiavelli, history is cyclical, then, but unevenly so. Thus, moderns must have some relation to the ancients. These cycles imply the potential for but no guarantee of repetition. Machiavelli establishes a comparison between the moderns and the ancients that holds human nature constant, or at least constant enough for the moderns to be able to learn from the ancients. (Machiavelli’s image of human nature is somewhat flexible itself, but he consistently holds that nature is more easily solid and unchangeable than not.) Machiavelli writes, “Whosoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in

every republic and to take the remedies for them that were used by the ancients...”(D I.39 83). So, even though Fortune is radically temporal, encompassing the human realm, this temporality does not separate the moderns from the ancients. If the ancients are within the memory of the moderns, then new princes should be able to learn virtue from the examples of the ancients. Human things are cyclical, so learning and renewal are relevant. Yet, the human realm is radically temporal, so cycles of decay and renewal are non-progressive, without a beginning or an end to history.

It is important to note that this cyclical nature of history does not imply that the same cycles will be repeated exactly as before, ie; that the moderns will experience the same peaks and declines as the ancients in an unmodified way. Rather, history does move forward: this is what makes it possible and relevant to learn from the ancients. However, forward movement is different from progression. Time moves on, so cycles continue without exact repetition. Still, the mere lack of precise repetition is not progression.

Machiavelli asserts the loss of the beginning of history. This loss has the potential to be repeated, with the idea that the beginnings of history, or any true eternity, are unrecoverable. Without a known beginning of history, history is not comprehensive, and it is difficult to imagine an end. Machiavelli writes, “To those philosophers who would have it that the world is eternal [Aristotle], I believe that one could reply that if so much antiquity were true it would be reasonable that there be memory of more than five thousand years—if it were not seen how the memories of times are eliminated by diverse causes, of which part come from men, part from heaven”(D II.5 138). These causes can be natural, such as floods or plagues, or human-made, such as the creation and destruction of a diversity of languages. Everything will collapse, even each cycle that Machiavelli’s theory of history makes the norm.

This collapse takes place either through natural or human processes. Quite simply, “Those that come from men are the variations of sects and of languages”(D II.5 139). When a new sect finds itself in power, it desires to eliminate the traces of those that came before, so that it might make itself greater through its own elevation. Even if some history of the previous language or sect remains, it has been lost to true memory, as the remains begin to contain a somewhat mystical, abstract existence that faith is “not lent faith to”(D. II.5 139). This erasure by men forces the loss of the beginnings of a history. Further, Machiavelli writes, “As to the causes that come from heaven, they are those that eliminate the human race and reduce the inhabitants of part of the world to a few. This comes about either through plague or through famine or through an inundation of waters”(D II.5 139). Nature and heaven second or cause this loss of history to the degree that so long as the natural physical world exists, the loss of histories will be inevitable.

The cyclical nature of history makes true progress impossible. Yet, the moderns may attempt to learn from the ancients in order to fashion an attempt at ascendancy, albeit a nonpermanent one. Machiavelli himself communes with the ancients, in the famous passage from his letter to Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli writes, of when he comes home after a menial day:

“At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently reclothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me”(P 109).

Here, Machiavelli reveals that the lessons one can learn from the ancients are potent and relevant. Machiavelli asserts that blind worship of things ancient simply because they are ancient is unwise. Machiavelli’s regard for the ancients, while admittedly prone to this viewpoint, mixes it with pure practicality: the idea that the lessons in virtue Machiavelli finds

for the new prince are based on the mistakes and the triumphs of the ancients. Machiavelli uses the examples of the ancients as case studies, in both the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, through which to examine the components and triumphs of virtue.

Then, history is non-progressive, and yet moderns can learn from the ancients. How is this possible? How does Machiavelli reconcile the space between the relevance of the ancients in improving modern conditions and the idea that progression or improvement is not a function of history? The above might seem to hint that humans become stuck in attempts, trying to imitate the ancients and then falling prey to cyclical destruction. Is this so?

First, Machiavelli sees that it is possible to have an improved, or stable, political order without defining it as progress in a broad sense. Even a stable political order, such as that provided by the Romans, will eventually be subject to downfall. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli examines the causes for the downfall of the Romans, demonstrating that even what he holds as a high political order must fall. Machiavelli demonstrates this more generally in the *Capitolo on Fortune*, where he states, “Here may be seen Memphis and Thebes tamed, Babylon, Try, and Carthage too, Jerusalem, Athens, Sparta, and Rome...Here is shown how splendid they were, noble, rich, powerful; and how at the end Fortune gave them as booty to their enemies”(C 145). Even a republic is not safe from the radical destructive temporality of the human things, “Because one cannot give a certain remedy for such disorders that arise in republics, it follows that it is impossible to order a perpetual republic, because its ruin is caused through a thousand unexpected ways”(D III.17 257). For example, the republic will be required to expand or else lose all: “it is impossible for a republic to succeed in staying quiet and enjoying its freedom and little borders. For if it will not molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and desire

to acquire...”(D II.19 173). The republic will never be able to stay completely stable, whether it is outside forces or internal forces that destabilize it. All political orders can be *improved* through virtue, but are by no means made permanent through it.

There is dignity even in this improvement. Though improvements are necessarily temporary, Machiavelli finds them worthwhile, demonstrated by his focus on pragmatic political projects such as unification and foundation. These projects allow men to act freely, trying their hand at establishing for even a brief time a beneficial order.

A cyclical view of history shows that the potential for human action can remain and even be strengthened through destruction. When the beginnings of history are lost, man has the opportunity to remake himself anew. Machiavelli states,

“...nature many times moves by itself and produces a purge that is the health of that body, so at happens in this mixed body of the human race that when all provinces are filled with inhabitants...and human astuteness and malignity have gone as far as they can go, the world must of necessity be purged...so that men, through having become few and beaten, may live more advantageously and become better”(D II.29 140).

This passage asserts that nature and time, though destructive, are healthy. This destruction may be nothing more than a purge to make way for renewal. This purge of humanity would serve a twofold purpose. First, Machiavelli asserts that men, becoming “few and beaten,” will live better. This could be through the same mechanism of fortune that compels men to become better through necessity. Necessity insists that men use their capabilities in the expression of virtue. Fortune, particularly ill fortune, makes it necessary that men find strength and glory through such virtuous means. Men oppose Fortune and are made better through it. This hearkens back to Machiavelli’s censure of the weakening aspects of modern interpretation of the Christian religion, as discussed in section V. Christianity enervates men’s spirits whereas Fortune drives men’s spirits into action by opposing them, giving men nobility even in the temporal realm.

Further, the cyclical purges of history make it possible to continue the creation of form out of matter. Machiavelli sees this creation of form out of matter as the initial founding act of an order—the act that sets up the order for stability or dooms it to downfall. In the *Prince*, as quoted before, he writes of Moses and those like him, “And as one examines their actions and lives one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased”(P VI 23). Founders impose form upon chaos, creating from bare matter an order in the image of virtue. Virtue requires that the founders act with a strong, defining act of foundation, which may include violence, in order to create stable orders. The purges of history can be beneficial to the provision of appropriate matter. Machiavelli writes, of the ordering of republics, that “a sculptor will get a beautiful statue more easily from coarse marble than from one badly blocked out by another”(D I.11 35). The cyclical destruction of history allows the potential for a better-ordered renewal. Those who will be founders can learn from the ancients, and apply this learning to the coarse matter that the destruction of orders brings. This gives them the chance that they may found an order better, and more stable—but this too will be destroyed.

The question then becomes: how can a philosophy of history be both non-progressive and hopeful? The key for Machiavelli is that he retains hope in human agency and human action. Fortune, through being radically temporal, may come to destroy all things that man creates, but this does not subvert man’s ability to create in the first place. In fact, it gives man coarse matter upon which to practice methods of foundation that have been informed by the failures and triumphs of the ancients. This is progression in only a very limited sense; it bears little resemblance to an ultimate theory of progression that would align itself with traditionally eternal things, or with a final goal of history. Yet, such a view does

ensure that humans have the potential for action in a political sense, that is, in the non-permanent realm where security and freedom can be temporarily experienced and retained.

What, then, does the temporality created by Fortune look like? Human action exists as if a grain of sand in a desert, constantly buffeted by Fortune's strong winds. Dunes are created, destroyed, and reshaped, lasting for a time and then sinking back into the sand to become mere matter once more. The political project is not to create fortresses against this wind, (after all, Machiavelli states that "fortresses are generally much more harmful than useful,"(D II.24 184)) but to attempt to enjoy an oasis temporarily unravaged by time. Man is able, with virtue, to create these oases, although the winds of the desert always reclaim them. A good political order is expressed in terms of this stability, although it remains a stability eventually subject to Fortuna and time. Meaning comes when human action is directed towards the enjoyment of such stability. Man can act with meaning both despite of and because of radical temporality.

Conclusion: Machiavelli's Concern

Machiavelli, rather than being a pessimist who justifies amoral means through pursuit of concrete ends, is a political theorist deeply concerned with the dignity of human action in the face of the vicissitudes of fortune. This leads him to be optimistic: Machiavelli believes that there is space in the purely political realm for men to act without degrading themselves or their actions.

Machiavelli does not prescribe; instead, his discussion is drawn from a series of examples. To reason from case studies of human history is to lend further nobility to the actions of political individuals. Machiavelli does not simply outline what human nature is. He provides examples, role models, and descriptions of events that may lead the reader, windingly, to such a conclusion. The provision of role models, as with Cesare Borgia, is especially significant. What is required of the most noble of political humans is not impossible: others before them have undertaken the same actions, and if they have failed, it was after a valiant struggle with fortune. Reasoning by example shows that man is capable, and does not need to rely upon the precepts of a theory or imagined republic. Man is his own master.

When Machiavelli discusses politics with such vigor, it is not necessarily to the degradation of the non-political life. For Machiavelli, certainly, the political life was his personal calling and of intense personal significance. However, the purpose of success in the political realm is to establish security. Security is established not only against political machinations for the prince, as he is constantly subject to the whims and variations of fortune. Rather, security is established in Machiavelli's thought as an oasis from the radical temporality of human life. Thus, a republic is a secure form of government, though not in

the sense where a ruler is secured from his people. Rather, the people are secured, briefly, from the vicissitudes of political upheaval.

Though security is the endpoint, Machiavelli does not degrade the process of reaching this goal either. Human action, the struggle of virtue against fortune, too contains a very precise human dignity. Man must be intent upon stabilizing himself, he is not to despise himself as suggested to Machiavelli by the Christian religion. The nobility of the struggle comes from the fact that humans are allowed participation in the process: whether more or less than the fifty-fifty conception that Machiavelli so carefully outlines. The constant struggle with fortune forms the necessity for the creation of virtue, and so the chaos outlined by fortune becomes matter that virtuous men can shape, for a time. The primacy of fortune is why Machiavelli finds it necessary to propose new modes and orders: he is the first of the philosophers to believe deeply in the primacy of the temporal and simultaneously desire a solution to political problems of order and freedom.

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