

The Philosopher and the Fox:

Similarities in Plato and Machiavelli's Treatment of Ideal Leaders

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Plato's *The Republic* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* are two of political theory's most definitive works. Many scholars see the two as diametrically opposed in their philosophies (Berlin, 1955, pp. 37, 38 & 68). Some may say that they are similar only insofar as they both discuss hypothetical leaders; Plato's teleological idealism seems fundamentally incompatible with Machiavelli's empirical realism. While they may differ widely in their general approaches to political philosophy, their conceptions of leadership share certain key characteristics. Plato and Machiavelli treat the revolutionary leader in the same vein, essentially prescribing different leaders through the same process. They each find their respective society fundamentally lacking in political efficacy, and thus seek to reestablish their conception of the political cycle. They also both ascribe to their leaders the understanding of pervasive metaphysical forces, and advocate similar treatments of knowledge, and presentations of public image.

Notoriously, there are a myriad of divergent interpretations of Machiavelli's works, particularly of *The Prince*. Not only are there debates over semantic details, but even over Machiavelli's fundamental intentions (Berlin, 1955, p.25). For the sake of avoiding drawn out interpretative passages, this essay assumes that Machiavelli's (1532/1998) purposes are those which he explicitly presents, namely, to "give a skillful and prudent prince the opportunity to introduce a form of government," (p. 84) which would allow him to "redeem her [Italy] from these barbaric cruelties and insolence" (p.

85). Put more simply, that Machiavelli's ultimate goal is to see a stable, united, Italy and that a strong autocratic rule is the best form of establishing said stability.

The interpretation of Plato's Republic presents a different set of issues. Not only is there still debate over Plato's intentions in writing *The Republic* (Lane, 2003/2007a, p. xlix), but the sheer range of his philosophical thought is overwhelming. Thus this essay will focus on the political aspects of *The Republic*. I will avoid involving much of Plato's epistemology, save for the Forms of Good and Justice.¹ As for Plato's intentions, I accept Socrates' professed goal of "look[ing] at a community coming into existence" (Plato, 1955/2009, §369a, p. 55), and I treat the ensuing discussion as a practical plan for a possible society, rather than an allegory. That being said, the plausibility and potential effects of the hypothetical republic of Plato are also beyond the scope of this essay; I seek only to examine the process and intent of Plato's political thought and its correspondence with that of Machiavelli.

Though separated by the vast span of nearly two thousand years, Plato and Machiavelli both write against what they saw as chaotic and fundamentally self-destructive societies. Their goals, therefore, share the same basis of political reform in the name of sociopolitical stability. Machiavelli's Italy, "the battleground of Europe," is torn apart by infighting, power-grubbing and foreign invasion (Bondanella 1984/1998b p. ix). It is the vestige of a great society in the throes of decay, "in which there was no fear either of private or of public men, so that since each one lived as he pleased, every day a thousand wrongs were done" (Machiavelli, 1532/1965a, p. 198). This anarchic system may seem the exact opposite of the Athenian democracy under which Plato lived

¹ In this essay, the 'Form of Good' and 'Form of Justice' will be referred to as 'Good' and 'Justice,' respectively. Their subjective manifestations in the temporal sphere will be referred to as 'good' and 'justice,' respectively.

(Kraut, 2009, p. 1), yet for Plato (1955/2007) it is perfectly analogous. For Plato, his democratic society is one that “goes on to abuse [...] those who obey the authorities and reserves its approval, in private life as well as public, for rulers who behave like subjects and subjects who behave like rulers” (§562d, p. 299). Both thinkers find themselves in completely degraded societies, where authority is disregarded and inverted, and where men desire and strive towards perverted goals; societies in which leaders prostitute the stability of their society for chimerical conceptions of freedom.

This widespread societal concupiscence precipitated events that personally devastated both Plato and Machiavelli. Plato’s friend and teacher, Socrates, was put to death by the democratic assembly of Athens (Lane, 2007b, p. xix). Plato (2009a) blamed the corrupt nature of democracy for allowing malicious slanderers of Socrates to legally prosecute him (§19b, p. 6). This epithet is especially clear in his *Crito* (2009b), in which Socrates says, “we shouldn’t care all that much about what the populace will say of us [...] ‘Even so,’ some might say, ‘the populace has the power to put us to death.’” (§48a, pp. 25-6). This irrational, unpredictable power is the impetus for Socrates’s death, which in turn solidifies Plato’s firm stance against populism and democratic government. While Plato’s political cynicism is precipitated by the loss of an actual friend, Machiavelli’s loss is that of a metaphorical friend: the Florentine Republic. At the height of Florence’s republican period, Machiavelli was a high-ranked administrator. During his lifetime, political infighting and foreign invasions allowed the Medici’s to retake the city-state, who subsequently relieved Machiavelli of his dearly held political offices, punished him, and exiled him from his patria (Bondanella, 1532/1998c, p. xviii; Kain, 1995, p. 38). Thus, both Plato and Machiavelli recognize the political dissolution

around them, and have been personally affected by its repercussions. They pen their treatises in answer to the same question: ‘What would make this society stable?’ They provide the same answer: ‘An enlightened autocrat.’

Machiavelli and Plato both subscribe to cyclical views of political and societal evolution, and each require a strong leader to begin a new cycle. As far as Plato (1955/2007) is concerned, in political organization “there is one form of goodness”—that is, the just rule of the philosopher kings—“but an infinite variety of wickedness, though there are four varieties in particular that are worth our attention” (§445c, p. 155). These four represent the gradual degeneration of the perfect state: they are the militaristic ‘timarchy’, the chrematistic ‘oligarchy’, the hedonistic ‘democracy’, and the despotic ‘tyranny’ (§§545a-576b, pp. 277-314). Rather than a simple list of subordinate forms of government, Plato portrays them “in a historical series” which begins with the Republic and sequentially decays through each iteration (Lee, 1955/2007, p.275). Therefore, the Republic is the cause of timarchy, the first iteration in the cycle, as Plato (1955/2007) describes “how our ideal state turns into a timocracy²” (§545c, p. 278), not ‘how timocracy organically emerges’. While this cycle will inevitably decline, due to human rather than structural imperfections (§§473c-e, pp. 191-2), it must be reestablished, in particular by a philosopher king. Similarly, “[f]or Machiavelli, as for Plato, a legitimate regime depended for its inception on the talents of a creative individual who was above or outside the system he devised” (Feinberg, 1970, p. 455). Machiavelli (1531/1965a) also subscribed to a cyclical system of political degradation, one in which government passes back and forth between individuals and masses as it slowly corrupts itself, until it

² Plato (1955/2007) uses the terms ‘timarchy’ and ‘timocracy’ interchangeably to describe what he sees as the Spartan paradigm of political organization: “The Spartan form of society [...] the ambitious society - I know no current name for it; let us call it ‘timarchy’ or ‘timocracy’” (§§545a-b, pp. 277-8).

eventually and inevitably succumbs to a stronger foreign power (p. 199). Therefore, a state inevitably descends into discord. From there the cycle must be restarted, not popularly—as a democracy or republic—but by one individual. Machiavelli justifies this requirement through references to the annals of history, saying that “seldom or never is any republic or kingdom organized well from the beginning, or totally made over, [...] except when organized by one man” (p. 218). Both Plato and Machiavelli place the burden of emancipation squarely on the shoulders of one single leader, he whom Feinberg (1970) dubs the “hero-founder” (p. 478-9). Though the vicissitudes of human folly may inevitably corrupt the state, the hero-founders, whether philosopher-king or prince, must “each descend in turn and live with [his] fellows in the cave” (Plato, 1955/2007, §520c, p. 247) in order “to advance not his own interests but the general good,” (Machiavelli, 1531/1965a, p. 218) as “[t]he object of our legislation [...] is not the special welfare of any particular class in our society, but of the society as a whole” (Plato, 1955/2007, §§519e-520a, pp. 246-7). Thus the establishment of a hero-founder is both necessary and beneficial to the state, for he³ is the only one capable of rebuilding a stable society from the rubble of its ultimate degeneration.

Plato and Machiavelli each invest their view of the world with a pervading metaphysical force which defines the core characteristics of their leader. Plato is fairly clear, if long-winded, about this. For Plato, a just ruler is he who moulds his own character to match, as closely as possible, that of Justice. Plato (1955/2007) says that

³ The use of gendered language in reference to Plato and Machiavelli’s leaders is intentional, in order to reflect the authors’ original intentions. Though Plato (1955/2007) makes reference to the fact that women are included in the Guardian class in *The Republic* (§456b, p.166), and presumably therefore are technically eligible for the role of philosopher-king, he makes it clear that “in all [aspects] women will be the weaker partners,” (§455d, p. 165) which would imply that there will always be a better male candidate, effectively disqualifying women from the necessarily singular role of philosopher king. Machiavelli’s stance is even harsher, and the very masculine nature of *virtù*, and the role of the prince inherently requires a male actor.

objects of knowledge receive their truth from the Good (§508e, p. 235), therefore justice is good because it conforms itself, to the best of its ability, to Justice, which itself emanates from the Good. The important fact here is that Plato's philosopher king, and his state as a whole, are defined in relation to a metaphysical ideal. While this is completely in line with mainstream interpretations of Plato's philosophy, the idea of Machiavelli doing something similar seems paradoxical.

It seems unthinkable that Niccolò Machiavelli, champion of realism and despiser of metaphysics, should base the crux of his prince's power on a metaphysical entity. Before I continue, I should clarify that I am speaking of *virtù* and *fortuna*, with the former defined against the latter. It is true that Machiavelli (1532/1814; 1998; 2009a)⁴ often refers to *virtù* and *fortuna* as opposing forces, for example: "those who, by means of their own skill [*virtù*] and not because of fortune [*fortuna*], have become princes" (p. 21; p. 20; p. 17). This statement, and numerous other occurrences of this thought seem to concur with theses like that of I. Berlin, (1955) who says that Machiavelli has no interest in any "metaphysical or theological issue," (p. 37-8), and J.V. Femia (2009), whose Machiavelli "has no time for [...] abstract universals, [i.e.,] for standards outside history" (p.172). Those who want to find in Machiavelli the first true political realist tend to marginalize his dependence on *fortuna*. Femia's position comes closest to describing Machiavelli's actual position, in that he rejects 'abstract universals'. Machiavelli's (1532/1998) rejection of metaphysics is only a rejection of them as knowable and

⁴ Most English translations translate certain terms of Machiavelli, especially *virtù*, differently throughout *The Prince*. In this passage, Bondanella and Musa (Machiavelli, 1532/1998) use 'strength' (p. 82), where Marriott (Machiavelli, 1532/2009b) uses 'valour' (p.116), Gilbert (Machiavelli, 1532/1965b) uses 'strength and wisdom' (p.90), and Ricci (Machiavelli, 1532/1921) uses 'measures taken against her' (p. 100). In order to illustrate Machiavelli's use of the concept of *virtù*, I have given the original Italian terms in addition to the translation. These additions have been referenced against two Italian editions (Machiavelli, 1532/1814; 1532/2009a). Unless otherwise noted, the occurrence of the original terms concurs between these editions.

universal. Fortuna, in *The Prince*, is the only metaphysical force—in that it is not manifest in the physical world despite its reality—that acts upon the affairs of humanity (p. 81). Fortuna, he famously states, “is the arbiter of half of one half of our actions,” (p. 82) which, while radically ineffective compared to the Good of Plato (1955/2007) that acts as the source of all truth (§508e, p. 235), nonetheless is still an active force in the consequences of human action.

Machiavelli’s conception of *virtù* is indirectly defined by fortuna’s metaphysical nature. While Machiavelli (1532/1998) cedes the fact that we cannot know the nature of fortuna (p. 81), he later tells us that fortuna “shows her force where there is no organized strength [*virtù*] to resist her” (1532/1814, p. 96; 1532/1998, p. 82; 1532/2009a, p. 81). While we cannot “control [...] or have remedy for” the vicissitudes fortuna enacts against us (1532/1998, p. 81), we seem to have the chance to curb its negative effects through the proper application of *virtù*. Therefore, if we cannot know fortuna, but can know what has an effect on it, this we must have learned through historical experience. *Virtù*, then, is not the objective force which actively opposes fortuna, but is a conventional composite of all those characteristics that Machiavelli has seen best allow men to overcome fortuna. This composite, defined specifically by its efficacy against the metaphysical fortuna, is the foundational characteristic that Machiavelli prescribes for his prince. In light of such considerations it is fair to say that, despite their different beliefs regarding the pervasiveness of metaphysical forces, Machiavelli’s *virtù* is to his fortuna as Plato’s justice is to his Good; each endows his leader with a crucial trait that is deduced from his limited knowledge of ubiquitous metaphysical forces.

Some, like P. Bondanella (1998a), argue that Machiavelli's extended discussion of fortuna in Chapter XXV of *The Prince* "owes more to his poetic inclinations than to a dispassionate philosophical discussion" (p. 100), and that everywhere else in *The Prince*, fortuna is treated on the same level as virtù. Overlooking the fact that such an assertion invents some sort of inherent divide between poetic language and philosophical meaning, which any scholar of Dante would be more than eager to debate, Machiavelli does hint at times towards a more complex relationship between virtù and fortuna in places other than Chapter XXV. His discussion in Chapter VI begins with phrases that seem to support this contrary position. Machiavelli (1532/1814; 1998; 2009a) tells us that new principalities are gained by either virtù, or fortuna, and specifically moves his discussion to those gained by virtù—not fortuna (p. 21; p. 20; p. 17). However, some lines further into the discussion, Machiavelli qualifies this statement by telling us that princes who gain their principalities through virtù receive from fortuna "the opportunity [...] and without that opportunity the strength [virtù] of their spirit would have been extinguished, and without that strength [virtù] the opportunity would have come in vain" (p. 22; p. 21; p. 18). This makes it clear that virtù and fortuna operate on two different levels of necessity: without fortuna, virtù is 'extinguished,' while fortuna without virtù carries on existing, if in vain. This distinction, while not as explicit as those made in Chapter XXV, places the nature of fortuna in a position of importance to Machiavelli's central thesis and distinguishes it as a fundamentally different force than that of virtù. In light of this, it is inconceivable that the chapter Machiavelli dedicates to the discussion of this relationship is relegated to the status of 'poetic inclinations' for their own sake. Therefore, the previous assertions stand firm and it is clear that

Machiavelli, like Plato, endows his leader with a characteristic whose very nature is derived from a metaphysical source.

Moving on to Plato and Machiavelli's leaders themselves, they both present leaders who consciously create their central virtue, whether justice or *virtù*. The most desirable leader is one who best conforms himself to ideals of, for Plato (1955/2007), Justice (§§519b-c, p. 246), and for Machiavelli (1532/1814; 1998; 2009a), *virtù* (pp. 21-24; pp.20-23; pp. 17-19). These are achieved by a combination of inherent characteristics (Plato, 1955/2007, §376c, p. 66; Machiavelli, 1532/1998, p. 63)⁵ and careful instruction. Plato's (1955/2007) instruction consists of a carefully considered regime of physical and mental education, moulding the future philosopher king for leadership (§521c, p. 249), while Machiavelli's (1532/1998) consists of lessons gleaned from history (p. 5). Both educations allow the leaders' natural propensities, whether towards justice or *virtù*, to be further refined to point at which the leader can affect change in the corrupt society.

The prince and philosopher king both require the natural ability to understand certain knowledge, process it, and apply it appropriately according to the situation. The prince must have the knowledge of fortuna and *virtù*, "since if men are not of great intelligence and ingenuity [*virtù*] it is not reasonable that they know how to rule" (Machiavelli, 1532/1814, p. 25; 1998, p. 23; 2009, p. 20). If the prince is "of such ability [*virtù*] that they know how to prepare themselves quickly and preserve what fortune has

⁵ While Machiavelli does not explicitly state that *virtù* is partly an inherent trait, his use of the terms "virtù dell'animo" (1814, p. 22), "virtù dello animo" (2009, p. 18), "virtù di animo" (1814, p. 33; 2009 p. 26), and "virtù d'animo" (1814, pp. 73; 2009, p. 61), as well as the consistent translation of certain occurrences of *virtù* (1814, p. 30; 2009, p. 24) as 'ability' (1921, p. 30; 1965b, p. 33; 1998, p. 28; 2008, p. 41) in place of other commonly used translations, such as 'strength,' strongly implies that Machiavelli envisioned *virtù* as something to be found in a person and subsequently cultivated, not simply implanted.

put in their laps”—that is, if the prince understands virtù and fortuna well enough to analyze the situation accurately—he will have the prudence to apply this knowledge and “construct afterwards those foundations others have built before coming princes” (p. 25; p. 23; p. 20). Thus, after proper training, the prince can analyze the opportunities that fortuna presents, and apply his virtù accordingly; this creates the basis for a newly stable society. Similarly, the philosopher king must ascend to the contemplation of Justice and Good, and attempt to understand as much as he can before realigning his thoughts with the visible world (Plato, 1955/2007, §§520b-d, p. 427). He then uses his knowledge to guide the uninitiated towards a just and stable society, because “once you get used to [living in the visible world] you will see a thousand times better than they do [...] because you have seen the truth about things admirable and [J]ust and [G]ood⁶” (§520c, p. 427). Therefore, Plato and Machiavelli’s leaders both use their knowledge of higher truths, received either metaphysically or historically, in conjunction with their natural abilities, in their construction of stable sociopolitical foundations.

The intentional deception of the masses is the final step in the process by which both the prince and the philosopher king apply received knowledge to the political sphere. Machiavelli (1532/1998) spends great lengths of time (pp. 51-69) describing how the practical means of leadership, that which is in tune with virtù, is not for public consumption. It is important to tailor one’s image for the people—to appear as that which the ignorant masses think a leader should be—while privately conforming to the actual authority of virtù (p.59). This process is similar, if slightly more convoluted, in *The Republic*. Plato (1955/2007) establishes that the philosopher king must put his

⁶ This translation of Plato does not use capitalization to differentiate the form of Justice from earthly justice, instead, the translator retains signal phrases such as ‘the truth about’. I have added capitalization according to the premises that I have previously outlined (p. 3).

knowledge into practical political use (§§520b-d, p. 427). Nevertheless, he concludes *The Republic* with an allegorical myth of the afterlife (§§614a-621d, pp. 361-8), which condenses and oversimplifies the complex ethical discussions of the dialogue for the general populace. Thus, though the philosopher king knows that justice is good in itself and does not need to be incentivized (§592a, p. 334), he presents the masses with a system in which justice and injustice are rewarded and punished after death (§§615a-c, p. 362). Here, Plato provides an example of the need for the philosopher king to tailor the truth to his audience; not every person in the republic has the time, inclination, or ability to contemplate Justice and Good, so it is sometimes necessary and expedient to deceive them for society's greater benefit. Thus, Machiavelli and Plato both outline leaders who, by necessity, conceal their knowledge of the truth from the general populace, while also using it as the crucial tool for just, stable leadership.

It follows that, while Plato and Machiavelli conceive of the world in fundamentally different ways, they provide strikingly similar remedies for the degeneracy of their contemporary societies. This comes in the form of the prince and the philosopher king. Despite their interpretative and systematic differences, they each conceive of an individual leader who emerges from a corrupt society to use his received knowledge in the establishment of a new, stable society. This consistent thread of strong leadership—from anarchy and corruption, to unity and strength, by means of knowledge and skill—is found in both of these thinkers, who are otherwise so fundamentally opposed in their philosophies. This shows the power such an idea can hold, in that it transcends boundaries of time, and, perhaps more impressively, of philosophy. Perhaps the pervasiveness of this idea has something to teach us. Machiavelli (1998, p. 88) quotes

Petrarch (1347/1996): “[i]ngenuity [vertù]⁷ over rage/Will take up arms; and the battle will be short” (pp. 208-209). In recognizing the ubiquity of these ideas, we can find comfort: Any corruption, any anarchy, can be overcome by ingenuity better than by rage. Plato and Machiavelli show us that the path to stability is not one of bloodlust and cruel, wanton violence, but one of leadership through knowledge and ability.

⁷ Bondanella and Musa translate Petrarch’s ‘*vertù*’ as ‘ingenuity’ in their translation of *The Prince*, which I have kept, though Musa translates it as ‘virtue’ in his translation of Petrarch, also cited. This is consistent with Machiavelli’s use of the term, and with how he would present Petrarch’s verse. Petrarch uses a dated spelling of *virtù* here. Ménage (1692) notes that Petrarch uses *vertù* and *virtù* interchangeably, with no difference in meaning, only “according to the judgement of the ear” (p. 286, translation mine).

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