

THREE TURNING-POINTS
IN POLITICAL THOUGHT

2 *Machiavelli*

This is a lightly edited transcript of a text of a lecture in Isaiah Berlin's papers. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars. Berlin published a heavily revised version as 'The Originality of Machiavelli' in 1972.

IN MY DISCUSSION of the Greeks I tried to show that one of the legs of the tripod – the notion of man as conceivable only in social terms (anything not social is not human) – was shaken by the doctrines that came after Aristotle. No one, so far as I know, before the Christians, at any rate in the West, preached the viciousness of society as such – the proposition that a man could realise his essence best, or do what he should do, only in solitude. The Essenes, unworldly as they were – they conscientiously resisted orders issued by the State – were after all a community, even though they showed no wish to perpetuate themselves. The Stoics were prepared to act as advisers to rulers and as private chaplains to Hellenistic kings; in Roman times Stoicism was diluted with a good deal of Platonic and Aristotelian doctrine and developed a political philosophy of its own, the assumption of which was that wise or virtuous men would also be good citizens: it was proper for the individual to play his part in social and political life. But the identification of man and citizen had nevertheless been shaken: even if certain types of social organisation were the best frames within which men could live the most reasonable lives, they remained mere frameworks. The collapse of this or that kingdom or republic, a revolutionary upheaval, the corruption and disintegration of a society were not the worst calamities imaginable: the good man, whether pagan or Christian, was not ruined by social collapse, especially of course if the State was irrational or, for Christians, pagan and wicked. But

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

even if it was reasonably virtuous, the division between the inner and the outer life had come to stay.

Even if this leg of the tripod had been damaged, the other two stood firm. Let me summarise them once more. The first was that all questions of value, and in particular questions about the ends of life – what one should do, how one should live, individually or collectively – were genuine questions. That is, each was capable of one true answer only, and this answer was, in principle, knowable, although the conditions under which it could be known and or the mind to which it could be known were matters for dispute. The second leg was that all the true answers to these questions were interrelated, or at least not incompatible with one another. There was one world, one humanity, one set of answers to the central questions, and one set of rules derivable from them for the conduct of life. The reason or providence or nature of the Stoics, the God of the Jews and Christians, the single supreme value and the laws by which the world was governed of the Epicureans constituted monistic systems from which, at least in theory, a set of self-consistent truths and rules could be deduced by those who understood the nature of the system correctly. Rulers and subjects, republicans and imperialists, Romans and Asiatics fought each other; after the rise of Christianity, Pope and emperor, Pope and councils, Christians and Moslems might, and did, clash. But that was due to error. If men only knew – whether by natural means or by divine grace, by observation or intuition or revelation – these collisions would not occur. Their source, in the end, was ignorance. Perhaps this ignorance was inevitable and, in some cases, invincible. Original sin, weakness of the flesh, moral blindness, the obstacles created by nature against the advance of knowledge – there were a hundred possible causes that prevented the truth, the whole truth, from being known to all men. But in principle the solution after which they sought exists somewhere. It is discoverable. It is a treasure to which the path may be hidden, may never be fully revealed, but must be open to some real or imaginary being – the omniscient mind, or God, or the universe when it comes to full consciousness of itself, or finite spirits when they have achieved union with the absolute spirit. There is no fundamental scepticism: above all, no belief that there is some logical reason or reasons in the nature of things preventing its discovery. And so long as this is so it is not irrational to conceive of social and political ideal worlds. They may be unattainable

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

because of material difficulties or ignorance, the failures of education, the inherent vices of human nature, but the general lines along which such solutions must lie – the unity, the harmony, the total pattern in terms of which the jigsaw puzzle that represents the chaos of actual existence is to be solved – must in principle be conceivable.

It is this fundamental assumption, upon which the notion of the possibility of a final solution of human problems rests, that was, if I am right, questioned by Machiavelli. I do not think that he necessarily knew that he was doing so. Neither did Kant know what a Pandora's box of violent romantic doctrines he had released. Nor am I attempting to fix responsibility or dispense praise or blame. It will be enough to describe what occurred.

It is, of course, this assumption that underlies the whole doctrine of natural law: there is some single principle that not only regulates the course of the sun and the stars, but prescribes their proper behaviour to all animate creatures. Some follow it by instinct – animals, sub-rational beings of all kinds – others attain to consciousness of it and may abandon it, but only at their peril. It may take several forms – for example, belief in a creator who made all things and creatures for specific purposes which together form a great comprehensive whole, an orchestra in which each instrument or group of instruments has its own tune to play, but none but the divine conductor can hear the polyphonic whole. When in later days harmonic metaphors were adopted, the instruments no longer played specific melodies but contributed sounds, which although they might not be intelligible to them, and might even sound superfluous or ugly if taken in isolation, contributed to a pattern visible only from the loftier standpoint of a profound thinker, or the universe come to consciousness of itself, as the German metaphysicians taught at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Or natural law may simply be repetitive, as in the logical pattern of Aristotle or the great geometrical design of Plato, or some more empirically conceived totality: nature as an adjuster of conflicting tendencies, as in Hume or Adam Smith; as a teacher of the best way of obtaining happiness, as in the French Encyclopaedists; as the actual customs or habits of organised social wholes, as in certain of the natural sciences; and so forth. This is the very heart of the traditional rationalism, both religious and atheistical, metaphysical and militantly scientific and naturalistic, that is characteristic of Western civilisation. It is this

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

rock, upon which Western beliefs and lives are founded, that Machiavelli seems to have split. This is the thesis to which I now turn.

There is something strange about the history of the interpretations of Machiavelli. There are various problems in connection with his writings: the precise doctrines contained in his two principal works (I do not intend to refer to the others), *The Prince* and the *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*; their historical background, in particular the specific circumstances of Machiavelli's own life, and the fate of Florence to which his works refer and which explains them; the relation of *The Prince* to the *Discourses*; Machiavelli's precise relation to previous writers of mirrors for princes and other discourses of the same type; his own convictions, republican or absolutist; his attitude to history and his capacity for understanding it; his position in the politics and culture of his own time; his influence on other writers; and so on. With none of this am I concerned. Rather, by way of coming to the question I wish to examine, I should like to ask what it is that is so peculiarly worrying about his doctrines. There is plainly something that Machiavelli said or implied that has caused profound and unceasing uneasiness, so that – as in the case of other disturbing thinkers (in matters of ideology they are clearly the most important) such as Plato, Rousseau and Marx – the interpreters cannot agree about his purposes and meaning and character. It is certainly not the fact that Machiavelli was realistic, or hard-boiled, or advocated tough, ruthless policies that has upset subsequent thought. The fact that the wicked appear to flourish or that unscrupulous and vicious courses of action appear to pay has never been very far from the consciousness of mankind. Thrasymachus and Callicles, the Melian dialogue and the resolution about Mitylene, Carneades' speech to the Roman senate, Augustine from one vantage point and Marsilio of Padua from another, had said enough, thrown enough light upon the nature of the secular world, to shock the credulous out of naïve idealism if they were prone to it. It cannot be this alone, even though Machiavelli dotted the i's and crossed the t's perhaps more sharply than anyone before him.

Consider the fantastic list of rival verdicts on Machiavelli that have been reached, beginning at the end of the sixteenth century. The author of *The Prince* wrote a satire, according to Gentili – for he certainly cannot have meant what he said. For Spinoza,

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Rousseau, Ugo Foscolo it is a cautionary tale – Machiavelli was a patriot, a democrat, a believer in liberty. And *The Prince* is meant to warn men of what tyrants could do. He wrote under censorship – he could not do otherwise. For A. H. Gilbert it is not this at all – it is a *pièce d'occasion* like many a piece in the Renaissance, a gay, cynical semi-literary exercise, a routine mirror for princes such as many authors were in the habit of writing, with no particular significance, though doubtless more gifted than most. For Prezzolini and Berti[?] it is an anti-Christian piece of neo-paganism – an attack on the Church and all Christian principles and a serious advocacy of the pagan view of life. But for Croce and all the many scholars who have followed him, Machiavelli is an anguished humanist who, so far from advocating the wicked courses that he describes, laments the wickedness of man, which makes such courses necessary. He wrings his hands over a world in which good ends can be achieved only by such dreadful means. But for Kaegi and Von Muralt he is a humanist, indeed, but a charming elegant Epicurean who believed in order, peace, pleasure in life, in the disciplining of the irrational elements of our nature into civilised harmony, which he found in its finest form among the Germans and the Swiss of his own time.

For Alfieri and Lipsius he was passionate libertarian and patriot, not indeed a republican or a rationalist but a burning nationalist who saw in Cesare Borgia a possible liberator from the barbarous French and Spaniards and Austrians who were trampling over Italy and had reduced her to misery, poverty and squalor. Garrett Mattingly cannot believe this because Cesare Borgia was, from the evidence we have, a fool and a mountebank. No man as intelligent as Machiavelli could have offered him as a hero and a saviour. Eric Vögelin, therefore, thinks that it is Tamerlane, the great Mongol emperor, who was really hovering before Machiavelli's fantastic vision.

Others have suggested even remoter figures. For Cassirer, Olschki and Hancock he is a cold technician, ethically and politically uncommitted, a pure analyst of politics in the scientific spirit, morally neutral, a man who anticipated Galileo in applying inductive methods to social and historical material and did not mind what use was made of his technical discoveries – equally ready to place them at the disposal of liberators and tyrants, saints and scoundrels.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

For Herbert Butterfield he lacks all scientific and historical sense. He is obsessed by classical authors and deduces his political maxims in a dogmatic and a priori manner that was already becoming obsolete in the time in which he was writing, and in this respect he is infinitely inferior to his contemporary and friend Guiccardini. For König he is an aesthete seeking to escape from the chaotic and squalid world of the decadent Italy of his time into an exquisite classical world. He is not interested in practice: he paints an ideal political landscape, as Piero della Francesca painted an ideal city. *The Prince* is an idyll in the best Renaissance, neoclassical, neopastoral style.

For Herder and for Boccalini he is, above all, the mirror of his age – a man exquisitely sensitive to every contour of his own time, who described what others did or preached and is an inexhaustible mine of contemporary observation. For Hegel and Fichte he is a man of deep insight into the fundamental laws of human history – into the real forces that mould men and transform their morality in terms of the progressive goals of the Objective Spirit – the man who understands the need for creating unity out of plurality, socially and politically as well as intellectually, the father of realism and nationalism. But for others he is nothing but a venal, treacherous toady, anxious to serve any master, and trying merely to flatter the Medici in Florence in order to restore himself to his lost position in the Florentine civil service.

To George Sabine he is an anti-metaphysical empiricist, a Popper before his time, free from obscurantist, theological and philosophical preconceptions. For Gramsci he is above all a bourgeois revolutionary who directs his shafts against the obsolescent aristocracy and papacy, a man who understood the role of the masses and the ultimate need for the dictatorship of new politically realistic leaders of mankind. For modern existentialists he is the father of the great Promethean hero who, alone in a bleak world with no metaphysical props, anticipated the romantic metaphysicians, and in particular Nietzsche and his modern followers, in the great act of self-commitment to a form of life for which no theological or metaphysical justification was in principle possible. The most normal view of him was as a man inspired by the evil one to lead good men to their doom, the great subverter in history, *le docteur de la scélératesse* – so Cardinal Pole described him, and all the authors of the anti-Machiavels, the latest of whom is Leo Strauss.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Surely there is something strange in so violent a disparity of judgements. What other writer – and not a professional thinker either – has caused his readers to disagree so deeply and so far? And yet Machiavelli is not an obscure writer: indeed not one of his interpreters but praises him for the sparseness and clarity of his style. *The Prince* is short and the *Discorsi* not very long – the obscurities of expression are fewer than in authors concerning whom there is far less disagreement. There is surely a mystery here.

Let me before going further remark on certain aspects of Machiavelli's thought. It is no doubt astonishing to find a thinker so free from the normal intellectual assumptions of his age. He does not bother so much as to mention natural law, the staple category in terms of which jurists and philosophers before him, and indeed for many decades after him, discussed the very topics to which he applied his mind. He was not a professional philosopher or jurist: nevertheless, having decided to write about his theory of government, one might have expected him at least to refute or reject explicitly the metaphysics and theology of his time. He tells that his path is wholly original and that he will do something that no one has attempted before him. He keeps his word only too well; there is something sublime in this bland ignoring of the concepts and categories and entire paraphernalia in terms of which the most distinguished thinkers and scholars of his day were wont to express themselves. No mention of natural law; no assumption of teleology of any kind – the great pyramid at the head of which is God himself, and at the base of which are the lowest objects of creation, is totally missing here. There is nothing of what Popper calls 'essentialism', no a priori assumptions about the necessary evolution of men or social groups in certain directions following unalterable laws implanted in them by God or by nature. There is no religion save as utilitarian cement – some varieties are good for societies, make them stable or spirited; others, on the contrary, cause decay or disintegration. There is no serious assumption of the existence of God – an atheist can read Machiavelli with perfect intellectual comfort. There is no piety towards tradition, no interest in individual liberty – only in the political liberty of the State from control by other States, or rather the community, for 'State' is a premature term in this connection, as J. H. Hexter has well shown.¹

¹ See also J. H. Whitfield.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

There is no notion of individual rights – the need for centralisation and authority is taken for granted. There is not much sense of history. Men are the same everywhere. Since there are no supreme goals – the Hebraic-Christian tradition being entirely left out – there is no notion of progress, either material or spiritual. The assumption is that the classical age can be restored with enough *virtù* on the part of properly educated citizens. There is no sense of the irreversible flow of events. There are no absolute values. But the most astonishing thing of all, as has already been made clear, is the total absence of the entire medieval accumulation; the great metaphysical hierarchy is totally ignored. This is a very astonishing performance, and casts grave and fascinating doubts on the canons of intellectual history. It is evident that not all men are affected by what we like to think of as ‘the climate of opinion’ or ‘the spirit of the age’.

It is no doubt more plausible to remind oneself (as Felix Gilbert does) that there were certain contemporary political issues which the Secretaries of the Florentine government found of greater concern – the fact that the existence of republics had proved autocracy not to be indispensable; or that there were a good many usurpers in Italy, new princes who had seized power and needed to be made respectable, needed justification and legitimation; that the Sack of Rome had stimulated interest in the crushing role of the vast impersonal forces that had defeated the ends of princes and republics, and thus excited renewed interest in the laws of history, which could evidently not be ignored with impunity by those who took part in public affairs. These were the immediate issues: yet when one thinks of how wonderfully unconcerned Machiavelli seems to be with the most routine, and one would have thought deepest, intellectual habits and ideas of his time, the reliability of traditional intellectual history is somewhat compromised. Either it is gravely misleading: or revolutionary breaks in it, not fully accounted for by known causes, must, at least provisionally, be allowed.

What was it then that was so upsetting in the views of Machiavelli? What was Meinecke’s dagger, or ‘the most violent mutilation suffered by the human practical intellect’² which Maritain so eloquently denounces? My answer can be clear only if I

² [See *AC*, p. 39, n. 2.]

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

first say, in a brief and oversimplified form, what I take Machiavelli's positive beliefs to have been.

Like Plato and like Aristotle, he believed that what men sought after was the happiness that lies in the harmonious realisation of certain human faculties. This can be obtained only by discovering what the facts are. If you do not discover what they are, but make mistakes and live in a state of delusion, you will fail in whatever you undertake, for reality will always get you in the end. This is cosmic utilitarianism. We can achieve what we want only if we understand the nature of the material with which we work, and ourselves. Our first task is therefore the acquisition of such knowledge, which for Machiavelli consisted of psychology and sociology: the best source of information is a mixture of sage observation of contemporary reality with whatever wisdom may be gleaned from the best observers of the past, in particular of antiquity. For it is clear that he believes that thinkers affected by Christianity were deluded by the profound misconceptions with which that religion has misled men. Different men pursue different ends: the notion of each occupation as requiring a different technique is certainly typical of Renaissance thought. Artists pursue art; conquerors, conquest; lovers, love; mathematicians, doctors, soldiers, scholars each pursue their own particular goals. To make it possible for them to do so, governments are needed, for there is no hidden hand which brings all these human activities into natural harmony. The notion of the common good is not very manifest in Machiavelli's writings. Rulers are needed because they must order human society and bring to it peace, stability, vigour, power to protect itself against enemies, power to grow and create institutions in which men can develop their faculties towards satisfying their natural needs. There is certainly such a thing as the technique of government, and it will look different to a prince and to the rulers of a republic, 'those who draw maps of countries put themselves low down on the plains to observe the nature of mountains ... and to observe that of low places put themselves high up on mountain tops'.³ Unless there is a firm hand at the helm, the ship will founder. Human society will collapse into a jungle unless it is directed by a competent specialist or specialists – and although he himself plainly prefers freedom and republican rule, there are situations in which a good prince is preferable to a

³ *The Prince*, dedication.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

weak republic. All this Aristotle would have fully endorsed. But from the fact that there is such a thing as the technique of government it certainly does not follow that Machiavelli did not care to what uses it was applied and merely produced a handbook of scientific 'directives' that was morally neutral – *wertfrei*. It is all too plain what it is that he himself desires.

Men must be studied in their behaviour as well as in their professions. There is no a priori route to the knowledge of the human material with which a ruler must deal. There is, no doubt, an unaltering human nature which is the same at all times – in Machiavelli there is no notion of evolution or of man as a self-transforming entity. But one can obtain knowledge of human nature only by empirical observation. Men are not as they are described by those who idealise them – Christians or other Utopians – nor by those who want them to be different from what they cannot help being. Men are for the most part fickle, cowardly, envious, overawed by power and brilliance. They care little for liberty, for real liberty, and place it below security or desire for revenge on their persecutors. They are easily corrupted and difficult to cure. They respond both to fear and to love, to the cruel Hannibal and the just and humane Scipio, but on the whole are more easily governed by fear than by love. Society is, as a rule, a battlefield in which there are conflicts between groups – and within groups.

These conflicts can be controlled only by the judicious use of force. How is this force to be applied? As in medicine, architecture, sculpture, we can obtain systematic knowledge of the required techniques if only we will look at the wisdom of the ancients. Machiavelli's method is certainly not the developed inductive system of the seventeenth century; he lived before Galileo and Bacon and his method is a mixture of rules of thumb, observation and general sagacity, somewhat like the empirical medicine of the pre-scientific world. His precepts take the form of maxims rather than laws. An example from classical history, a striking saying by a classical author, carries more weight with him than elaborate historical analysis of the type that was becoming common even in his own day. Above all he warns one to be on one's guard against those who do not look at men as they are, but see them through spectacles tinted by their reformers, however worthy their ideals, such as the Gonfalonieri of Florence, Pietro Soderini or Savonarola, who foundered and caused ruin to others

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

by substituting what should be for what is as a result of their unrealism. Machiavelli's texts contain more than one warning against unreliable sources of information – *émigrés* whose minds are distorted by their wishes and who cannot attain to an objective view of the facts, and others whose reason is darkened by the passions that distort their vision.

What leads such men to ruin? Their ideals. What is wrong with their ideals? That they cannot be obtained. How does he know? This is the point upon which Machiavelli's claim to be a thinker of the first order ultimately rests. Machiavelli has a clear vision of the society that he wishes to see realised on earth – or, if this sounds too grandiose for so concrete a thinker, that he wishes to see attained in his own country, perhaps even in his own lifetime, at any rate within the projectible future. He knows that this order can be created because it, or something sufficiently near to it, has been realised in the past. It is not merely that he wishes to see this order, but that he sees in it the natural fulfilment, the harmonious realisation, of those faculties and goals which observation and history tell us are natural to man – observation of contemporary Italy, and history as conveyed by the greatest historians, the men that he admires most, the Romans and the Greeks.

What is this society? It is Periclean Athens and the great moments and periods of Roman history – the Roman Republic before its decline and fall, and the golden days of the 'good' emperors, from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius. He does not think that he needs to demonstrate that these were good moments in the life of humanity. That, he believes, will be self-evident to anyone who contemplates these epochs and compares them with the bad periods – the darkness that followed, the barbarians, the mediaeval darkness (although he did not think of it in these terms), the divisions of Italy, the weakness, the poverty, the misery, the defencelessness of the little Italian principalities before the trampling armies of the great well-organised national States of the North and the West.

He does not argue this case. It seems to him self-evident, as it must have to most men of his age, that Italy was both materially and morally in a deplorable state. He did not need to explain what he meant by corruption, weakness, a life unworthy of human beings. A good society is a society that possesses stability, internal harmony, security, justice, like Rome, like Athens in its best day, like Sparta, like Venice once upon a time. 'It is wonderful to think

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

of the greatness to which Athens had attained within the space of a hundred years after having freed herself from the tyranny of Pisistratus; and still more wonderful is it to reflect on the greatness which Rome achieved after she was rid of her kings.⁴

The reason for this is that there were men in these societies who knew how to make cities great. How was this done? By developing certain faculties in men: inner moral strength, magnanimity, vigour, vitality, generosity, loyalty, above all civic sense and dedication to the riches, power, glory, expansion of the city. The ancients developed these qualities by all kinds of means: splendid shows, bloodstained sacrifices that excited men's senses and mobilised the resources of the inhabitants of the country towards attainment of these splendid pagan virtues. Glory, power, magnificence, that is what makes States great – pride, austerity, discipline, *antiqua virtus*. These are the qualities of Aegesilaus and Timoleon, Brutus and Scipio, not of Pisistratus or Julius Caesar, who extinguished noble republican regimes. But there is no need to stay within classical confines. Moses and Cyrus are equally deserving of respect for this reason – stern, perspicacious and incorruptible men who created peoples and are rightly honoured by them.

Since this was done once, and Machiavelli does not believe in the irreversibility of history or the uniqueness of each of its phases, it can be done again. The glories of antiquity can be revived if only men vigorous enough and gifted enough and realistic enough can be mobilised for the purpose. In order to cure the degenerate populations of their diseases they may have to have recourse to violent measures, guile and force, slaughter of the innocent, fraud, treachery, deception – all the surgical measures that are needed to restore a decayed body to a condition of health. And, indeed, even after it has been restored, since men are liable to lapse from the standards that are wanted, they must be kept in proper condition by measures that will certainly offend against current morality. But if they offend against this morality, how can they be justified? This is the nodal point of Machiavelli's entire conception. In one sense they can be justified, and in another not; and these senses must be rigidly distinguished, more rigidly than he found it necessary to do, for he was not a philosopher and did not set himself to the elucidation of his own ideas.

⁴ *Discourses* ii 2.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Let me put it this way. It is commonly said that Machiavelli distinguished politics from morals – that he recommended courses as politically necessary which common opinion condemns, treading over corpses for the benefit of the State. Leaving aside the question of what his conception of the State was, and whether this concept properly occurs in his writings, it seems to me that this is a false antithesis. For Machiavelli the ends which he advocates are those to which he thinks men should dedicate their lives. This is what is meant by moral values. What he distinguishes are not moral values from political ones; what he achieves is not the emancipation of politics as a technique from moral considerations, on which Croce and others congratulate him, but a sharp differentiation between two incompatible moralities. One is the morality of the pagan world: its ends are courage, vigour, beauty, public achievement, order, discipline, all that Pericles praised in Athens, all that Livy found in the old Roman Republic, all that of which Tacitus and Juvenal lament the decay and death in their own time. These seem to Machiavelli the best moments of mankind, and he wishes to return to them.

Against this there is the morality of Christianity: its ideals are charity, mercy, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter. Belief in the salvation of the individual soul is of incomparable value – far higher than, indeed incommensurable with, any social or political terrestrial goal, any economic or military or aesthetic consideration. Machiavelli lays it down that out of men who believe in such ideals, and practise them, no satisfactory human community, in his sense, can ever in principle be constructed. It is not simply a question of original sin or bad luck or ignorance or insufficient material means: it is not, in other words, the inability to educate human beings into sufficient Christian virtue, which may be the lot of men on earth, that makes it impossible to establish the good Christian State. It is that these characteristics are in principle unusable by those who wish to build the kind of community Machiavelli wishes to see, and believes that it is natural for human beings to want – the kind of community that in his view satisfies their natural and unalterable impulses. If human beings were different from what they are, perhaps they could live in an ideal Christian community: but he thinks that human beings would have to differ so greatly from those who have ever lived on this earth that the title ‘human beings’ would be inappropriate to them. And

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

he thinks it idle to build for human beings as they never can be, and still remain human – which for him is virtually equivalent to saying that they never should be so. For what should be must be defined in terms of possibility and not impossibility; we must build for human beings within the realm of human possibility, however wide; men can be altered but only within certain limits. To advocate as appropriate to human beings measures suitable only for angels is madness and can lead only to ruin.

The important thing is that Machiavelli does not deny that what Christians call good is in fact good, that what they call virtue and vice are in fact virtue and vice. Unlike Hobbes, who tries to redefine moral notions in such a way as to fit in with what he believes to be the community that rational men would wish to build, Machiavelli does not cheat. Certainly humility, kindness, scruples, unworldliness, faith in God, sanctity are good qualities; cruelty, bad faith, power politics, the sacrifice of innocent men to social needs, and so forth, are not good acts at all. But it is impossible to combine Christian virtues with a happy, satisfactory, stable society on earth. Therefore one must choose. If one chooses the Christian virtues, one condemns oneself to being done in by powerful, ambitious, unscrupulous men; if one chooses to build a glorious community like Athens and Rome at their best, one must abandon Christian education.

The cardinal error consists in believing that these two ideals, both valid, both capable of being believed in by normal human beings and capable of raising them to sublime heights, are in fact compatible with one another. This is the illusion the entertaining of which drives men to their doom. What normally happens, in his view, is that men cannot bring themselves to choose either of these ideals in their fullness, and therefore make compromises between them which create states of affairs of various degrees of imperfection, and, in the case of contemporary Italy, lead to hypocrisy and cynicism, with which the absurdity of pagan behaviour attached to alleged Christian ends is unsuccessfully covered up.

In a most vivid passage devoted to Christianity he says that the Christian faith has made men ‘feeble’, easy prey to ‘evil-minded men’, since, ‘intent on paradise, they endure injuries meekly’.⁵ Christianity has made mankind effeminate, and though Christianity

⁵ Discourses ii 2.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

permits us to ‘exalt and defend our country’⁶ its general effect has been to enfeeble men and make them endure humiliations uncomplainingly, because of their unimportance compared to the blessings of a pure conscience and the rewards of heaven. This is, in effect, repeated by Rousseau, by Nietzsche, and by many late thinkers who share Machiavelli’s conception of human nature and its natural ends.

It is very important to note that Machiavelli does not condemn Christian morality or the common scale of values in his own society. He transposes nothing: the things men call good are indeed good. His words *buono* and *cattivo*, *onesto*, *inumanita* are used precisely as in the common speech of his time, and, indeed, ours too. He merely says that with these qualities it is impossible to build a society which, once it is encountered, in the pages of history or in the imagination, must be desired by all sane men with the most immense desire. When in the *Discourses* he distinguishes between the good and the bad Roman Emperors, very much on the lines of Tacitus, and adds, ‘any human being will burn with an immense desire [*immenso desiderio*] to avoid the bad and imitate the good’,⁷ he is, as Whitfield quite rightly remarks, not pessimistic, not cynical, not bitter, but on the contrary, like every humanist thinker from his own day to ours, believes that if only the truth were known it would help to make men better and happier; it is only that the qualities that men need in order to revive these *buoni tempi* are not those that are urged upon them by Christian education.

At the same time, he does not wish to deny that what the Christians call a good man is truly good, nor that the saints are saints, only that those kinds of good qualities, so far from being indispensable, as Christian (and to some extent, too, Stoic and Platonic) teachers maintained, to the building of a good society, are in fact fatal to it. Good men of this type are bound to be defeated and lead other people to ruin, for their view of the world is not founded upon the truth, at least not upon the *verità effettuale* – the truth that is tested by success and experience – which, however cruel, is always less destructive than the other, however noble. Christians or men who follow Christian precepts are good men, but deluded, and lead others and themselves into destruction. Like

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *Discourses* i 10.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, like the 'good' head of the Florentine Republic, Soderini, they are bound to be defeated by the more effective realists, who aim at public ends and understand how to create lasting institutions, if need be on the bones of innocent victims.

But I should like to emphasise again that what he does is to distinguish two moral systems – the Christian and the pagan (we can call them so for short) – and he gives its full due to the former. Let me give some examples of what I mean. When he says 'good works gain as much hatred as evil ones',⁸ he means by 'good' what we mean by 'good', and by 'evil', evil. When he says 'good faith, integrity are laudable even if they end in failure',⁹ he means by 'laudable' that if people praise them they are right, for what is good is good. When he admires the 'chastity, affability, humanity, liberality'¹⁰ of Scipio or of Cyrus in Xenophon's description, or the goodness of Pope Leo X, he means, whether he is sincere or not, the qualities we mean. So in the famous fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* he says 'a man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in all things must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince ... to learn how not to be good, and use this knowledge or not according to the necessity of the case', and goes on to say that liberality, mercy, honour, humanity, frankness, chastity, religion and so forth are indeed virtues. 'I know that everyone will admit that it would be highly praiseworthy in a prince to possess all the above-named qualities that are reputed good, but as they cannot all be possessed or observed, human conditions not permitting of it,' he must behave differently in order to compass his ends. For 'some [qualities] that seem virtuous ... lead to one's ruin, and some others which appear vices result in one's greatest security and well-being'. He does not begin to deny that what are reputed to be virtues are so indeed; he merely points out that if one is to construct the kind of State which those who contemplate States must desire 'with an immense desire', the qualities necessary will be very different. Hannibal was cruel and cruelty is not an admirable quality, but if a sound society can be built only by conquest, and if cruelty is necessary to it, then it must not be evaded. The qualities of the

⁸ *The Prince*, chapter 19.

⁹ *ibid.*, chapter 18.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, chapter 14.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

lion and the fox are not morally admirable, but if a combination of these qualities will alone preserve the city from destruction, then these are the qualities that in a principality the prince, in a republic the citizens, must possess in an adequate degree. 'If men were good this precept [to break faith if interest dictates] would not be good; but ... they are bad.'¹¹

Machiavelli is not sadistic; he does not gloat on the need to employ ruthlessness or fraud for creating or maintaining the kind of society that he admires and recommends. His most savage examples and precepts apply only to situations in which the people are deeply corrupt and need very violent measures to restore them to health: where a new prince takes over or a revolution against a bad prince needs to be made effective enough to last. Where a society is relatively sound or rule is traditional and hereditary and supported by public sentiment, it would be wrong to practice violence for violence's sake, for its results would be purely destructive of social order, and the purpose of government is to create order, harmony, strength. Hence Agathocles, the Sicilian tyrant, who gained power by 'killing one's fellow citizens, betraying one's friends, being without faith, without pity and without religion',¹² went too far, and so did not gain glory. 'His barbarous cruelty and inhumanity, his countless atrocities'¹³ exclude him from the pantheon. Still, to be altogether without these qualities guarantees failure; and that makes impossible the only conditions in which Machiavelli believed normal men could successfully develop. Saints might not need this; anchorites could perhaps practice their virtues in the desert; martyrs will obtain their reward hereafter; but Machiavelli makes it plain that he is not interested in that. He is a writer for those who ask about the right government: he is interested in happiness, success, peace, justice on earth; and for that Christian morality, literally interpreted, will not do.

Of course, Machiavelli is a moralist. Anyone who uses such central concepts as 'the corrupt' and 'the pure' has a moral scale in mind in terms of which he awards praise and blame. Machiavelli's values are not Christian, but they are moral values, and in their name he rejects the rival scale – Christianity – not as false but as being, unfortunately, inapplicable to the conditions of real life: and

¹¹ *ibid.*, chapter 18.

¹² *The Prince*, chapter 8.

¹³ *ibid.*

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

real life for him means not merely (as is sometimes alleged) life as it is lived around him in Italy, because his purpose is not to reproduce this kind of life but to lift it to new planes, to rescue Italy from the squalor and slavery into which she has fallen. The moral ideal for which he thinks no sacrifice too great is the highest ideal attainable by men; but attainable, not unattainable; not a universe outside the realm of human capacity, given that human beings are what we know them to be, compounded of the emotional, intellectual and physical properties in terms of which they are to be defined, and not angelic beings who have never been, and perhaps never will be, on this earth, and even if they were could hardly be counted as men.

If you object to the methods recommended so violently, because they seem morally detestable to you, that you cannot embark upon them – your revulsion is too great – Machiavelli has no objection, no argument. In that case you are perfectly entitled to lead a holy life, be a private citizen, or a monk – seek some lonely cell of your own – but, in that event, you must not make yourself responsible for the lives of others or expect good fortune; in a material sense you must expect to be ignored or destroyed. In other words, you can opt out of the public world, but in that case he has nothing to say to you, for it is the public world and men who choose to remain in it that he wishes to address. This is expressed most clearly in his advice to the conqueror who has to hold a province. He advises a clean sweep: new governors, new titles, new powers and new men; ‘and he should make the poor rich, as David did when he became king, “who heaped riches on the needy and dismissed the wealthy empty-handed”. Besides this, he should destroy the old cities and build new ones, and transfer the inhabitants from one place to another. In short, he should leave nothing unchanged in that province, so that there should be neither rank, nor grade, nor honour, nor wealth that should not be recognised as coming from him.’¹⁴ He should take Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander, as his model, who by proceeding in that manner became, from an obscure Macedonian prince, master of all Greece. And Philip’s historian tells that he transferred the inhabitants from one province to another, as shepherds move their flocks from one place to another. Doubtless these means are cruel, and destructive of all civilised life, and neither Christian nor even

¹⁴ *Discourses* i 26.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

human, and should be avoided by everyone. In fact the life of a private citizen would be preferable to that of a king at the expense of the ruin of so many human beings. Nevertheless, whoever is unwilling to adopt the first and humane course must, if he wishes to maintain his power, follow the latter evil course. But men generally decide upon a middle course which is most hazardous; for they know neither how to be entirely good nor how to be entirely bad.

This is clear enough. There are two worlds, that of private virtue and that of public organisation. There are two codes of morality and one must choose between them. With the first code one cannot create a noble and glorious society in which human beings can thrive and grow wise and happy and productive. If one chooses the second course one must suppress one's private qualms if one has any; one has chosen to prepare the omelette and one cannot make it without breaking eggs. Machiavelli is sometimes accused of advocating the breaking of eggs for its own sake. But this is unjust. He thinks these evils are necessary – necessary as means to produce good results, good not in the sense of a Christian but in the sense of the secular, humanistic, naturalistic morality. One of his most shocking examples is that of Giovanpaolo Baglioni, who caught Julius II unprepared, during a campaign against him, and let him escape when he might have committed the crime of killing him, 'so doing an act the greatness of which would have overshadowed the infamy and all the danger that could possibly result from it'.¹⁵ He is simply saying what Frederick the Great said: 'Le vin est tiré: il faut le boire.' If you embark on a campaign of public transformation of a society you must carry it through and not stop half way, or it gives you the worst of both worlds. And there are two worlds: either world has much, indeed everything, to be said for it, but there are two worlds and not one. And one must learn to choose.

Men are neither wholly good nor wholly bad; they fear sanctions; without that they will go to pieces. The Christian thesis is that virtuous rulers create virtuous men. This is not true. A generous prince will ruin the citizens by taxing them too heavily; a mean prince – and meanness is not a good quality in private men – will save the purses of the citizens and so be beneficent; a kind ruler – and kindness is a virtue – may let strong men dominate

¹⁵ *ibid.* i 27.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

him, and so cause chaos and corruption. Some forms of order can be created only by cruel exercises. A State and a people cannot be governed like an individual. 'The State and people are governed in a different way from an individual.'¹⁶ 'It is not the well-being of individuals that makes cities great, but of the community.'¹⁷ One may disagree with this: one may argue that the greatness, glory and wealth of a State are hollow and indeed detestable ideals if the citizens are oppressed and treated as means to the grandeur of the whole. Like Sismondi and the other theorists of the welfare state, one may prefer a State in which there are prosperous citizens and a poor treasury, free men and a decentralised, none too powerful directorate rather than the militarised authoritarian concentrations of power built by Caesar or Frederick the Great or Napoleon or the great despots of the twentieth century. If so, one is simply contradicting Machiavelli's thesis: he believes that such liberal States are doomed to decadence and destruction by their more vigorous and better-armed neighbours, and Vico and many a modern thinker have echoed this. Hence the famous passage in the forty-first chapter of the third book of the *Discourses*, where he says: 'When the very safety of the country depends upon the resolution to be taken, no considerations of justice or injustice, humanity or cruelty, nor of glory or of shame should be allowed to prevail.' But putting all other considerations aside the only question should be 'What course will save the life and liberty of the country?' The French do this. Machiavelli implies that the 'majesty of their King and the greatness of France' comes from this. He is stating a thesis which he imagines would be defended by Pericles and Livy, Thucydides and Tacitus. If you reject it, you reject the possibility of a society the very contemplation of which excites the 'immense desire' to live in it. Moses acted thus and so created a civilisation; Romulus could build Rome only by killing Remus; Theseus and Cyrus acted likewise.

This caused no criticism, only admiration, he supposes, in the ancient world. What has created doubts in ours is the advent of Christianity, and this is precisely the originality, the tragic implication, of his thesis. It was very well to live by the light of pagan virtues in pagan times; but to preach paganism after Christianity is to have lost innocence and to be forced into making

¹⁶ [See *AC*, p. 60, n. 1.]

¹⁷ *Discourses* ii 2.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

a conscious choice. The choice is painful because it is a choice between good ends. In killing, deceiving, breaking faith the statesman is certainly perpetrating crimes, sacrificing and destroying good things. It is Machiavelli's great merit that he does not deny this. Marsilio, Hobbes, Spinoza, in their own fashion Hegel and Marx, did try to deny it by arguing that the morality in terms of which such deeds had to be perpetrated was higher than the morality which forbade them; and from the vantage-point of the successful fulfilment of the great social objectives in the name of which these *prima facie* wicked acts were to be performed; they were perceived as no longer wicked but discords demanded by the higher harmony, and so, to those who hear this harmony, no longer discordant.

Machiavelli is not a defender of any abstract theory: it does not occur to him to imply any such casuistry. He is transparently honest and clear. In choosing the life of a statesman, or even the life of a citizen in a State with enough civic sense to want the State to be as successful and splendid as possible, you commit yourself to trampling on the Christian virtues. The well-being of the State is not the same as the well-being of the individual – they cannot be governed in the same way. You have made your choice: the only crime is weakness, cowardice, stupidity, which may cause you to draw back in the middle, or fumble or botch in some other way. Appeasement is always despicable and, when practiced by statesmen, involves men in ruin. The means may be dreadful: but you must always look to the end. The end 'excuses' the means if it is, in terms of the public morality, lofty enough. Brutus was right to kill his children: he saved Rome. Soderini did not have the stomach to perpetrate such deeds and so ruined Florence. Savonarola, who had good ideas about purity and denounced corruption soundly enough, perished because he did not realise that an unarmed prophet will always go to the gallows. If one can produce the result by the devotion and affection of men, let it be so done by all means. But if not, then Moses, Romulus, Theseus, Cyrus are the exemplars, and fear must be employed. There is no sadism, no diabolism as such in Machiavelli. He is not a Satanist according to Milton's notion of what Satan is; not like Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, who pursues evil for evil's sake. 'Is everything permitted?' Dostoevsky asked. 'Yes,' Machiavelli answers, 'if the end – that is the needs of men in a specific situation – cannot be satisfied in any other way.'

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

This position has not been properly understood by some of those who claim to be not unsympathetic to him. Figgis, for example, thinks that Machiavelli permanently suspended ‘the *habeas corpus* acts of the human race’,¹⁸ that he advocated methods of terrorism because he thought that the situation was always critical, always desperate, and so applied rules that might be needed only in extreme cases. Others have taken him to be offering a defence of what later came to be called ‘raison d’état’ – the justification of immoral acts when undertaken on behalf of the State in exceptional circumstances. Such thinkers point out, with reason, that the notion that in desperate cases desperate remedies are needed – that ‘necessity has no law’ – finds its place in St Thomas and Dante long before Machiavelli. This shows a radical misunderstanding of Machiavelli’s thesis. He is not saying that normally the usual morality – that is, the Christian or semi-Christian code of ethics – should prevail, although situations arise in which the very conditions in which this code can be applied may become jeopardised, and in those cases acts are justified which would in normal circumstances certainly be wicked and forbidden. This is the position of, say, those Catholics who think that all morality ultimately rests on religious sanctions, and that the vitality of a religion cannot be preserved save by preserving the particular religious establishment, and, therefore, that all measures needed for protecting it in moments of crisis are automatically justified, since without them the conditions for ordinary morality would be subverted. This is a doctrine in terms of which both Catholics and Protestants, both conservatives and communists, have defended enormities condemned by ordinary men. But it is not Machiavelli’s position. For him these exceptional cases are not exceptional, but normal. He does not advocate perpetual terrorism: merely a reserve of force, arrangements whereby those in charge are not trammelled by Christian morality – arrangements, indeed, which legitimise the use of whatever means are needed for the attainment of the supreme end – the creation of a society in which the virtues that he and the ancient thinkers to whom he appeals admire can be given full and harmonious play. Such a system will not be terroristic once its bases are established. Men brought up within it will live the happy lives of Romans during the best periods. There will be vitality, variety, pride, peace, happiness, but it will not be a

¹⁸ [See *AC*, p. 64, n. 2.]

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Christian commonwealth. Indeed, he thinks the conception self-contradictory.

This is the central point: the incompatibility of the two moralities, the need to choose between them. For if Machiavelli is right and it is indeed impossible both to be morally good – to perform one's duty as conceived by Christianity – and to build Periclean Athens or the Rome of the Republic or the Antonines, then a conclusion of the first importance follows: that the belief that a solution can in principle be discovered to the question of how men should live is in principle false. If such solutions were condemned as Utopian in earlier periods the reason given was that, although the perfect society could in principle be conceived, at least in outline, it was not realisable in practice: men were too ignorant or weak or vicious ever to create such a society. Or the material means were lacking, or no one had yet invented or discovered adequate means of reaching the goal – either a technological or an educational method of arriving there. But there was nothing logically vicious in the notion – Plato and the Stoics, the Hebrew prophets and Christian medieval thinkers could conceive what a perfect society would be like, they knew what it was that men fell short of, they could, as it were, measure the gap between reality and the ideal. But if Machiavelli is right, then it is logically impossible to construct the notion of such a society, for there are two sets of virtues – the Christian and the pagan, we have decided to call them – which are, not merely in practice but in principle, logically incompatible.

If men practiced Christian humility they could not also feel the noble ambition of the great classical founders of religion and cultures; if their gaze was centered upon the world beyond they could not sacrifice their lives to attain goods on earth; if suffering and sacrifice were to be the human lot, not merely as inescapable necessity, then the great victories over *Fortuna* which the bold and the impetuous and the young gained more often than the old and cautious and craven could neither be won or thought worth winning. If spiritual goods alone were worth striving for, then the study of *necessità* – laws that govern nature and human lives, by the manipulation of which all kinds of unheard-of human achievements could be accomplished, both in the arts and the sciences and in the organisation of human societies – would not be worth life-long devotion.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Whatever the differences between Plato and Aristotle, or between either of these thinkers and the Sophists or the thinkers of the fifth century and the third, they all agreed that the study of reality would reveal the correct ends to be pursued by men – that which would make men free and happy, strong and rational. Some thought that there was a single end for all men in all circumstances everywhere, others that ends differed as circumstances or human characteristics or historical environments differed; objectivists and universalists were opposed by relativists and subjectivists. But none of these thinkers suggested that there might exist ends equally ultimate – ends in terms of which alone other things were justified – yet incompatible with one another; without an overarching single standard enabling a man to choose between them. This was a revolutionary notion – that men were compelled to choose between ideals if they wished to be consistent and understand what they were pursuing, what the scale of their values was; that men were compelled to make a choice in favour of one ideal or the other, choosing what they did because it was what it was and not because there was some measuring-rod in terms of which it was possible to pronounce one form of life superior to the other, and demonstrate this to the satisfaction of all rational men.

It is this implication of Machiavelli's exposition, it seems to me, that has upset the moral consciousness of men, and has haunted their minds so obsessively ever since. This seems to me responsible for the desperate efforts to interpret his doctrines away, to represent him either as being merely a cynical defender of power politics, or a Satanist, or a patriot prescribing for a particularly desperate situation which does not arise often, or a time-server, or an embittered political failure, or a mere transcriber of the immoral practices of his time, or the enlightened translator of ancient metaphysical truths into empirical terms which rendered them even securer and more intelligible, or a cold scientist, a mere political technologist, or a routine Renaissance publicist, or all the other things that have been said about him. These are all diversions, it seems to me, from the uncomfortable truth that he had, all-unknowing, uncovered: that not all values are compatible with one another – that there is a logical and not merely a material obstacle to the notion of the ultimate solution, which if it were only realised would establish the perfect society.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

If there is no such solution in principle, then all political and, indeed, moral problems are transformed. This is not the division of politics from ethics: it is the uncovering of two ethical systems side by side; not the rejection of Christianity for paganism (although in fact he preferred the latter), nor of paganism for Christianity (which he thought unacceptable to normal men), but the setting of them side by side with the invitation to men to choose either a good individual life or a good society, but not both. The hypocrisy that Machiavelli exposed – and he is often congratulated for tearing off masks, brutally revealing the truth – is not that men believe one thing and do another, although no doubt he does this too, but that to believe that the two ideals are compatible is a case of bad faith, as the existentialists now call it; that the way that men, in fact, live is testimony against their own sincere view of themselves. Machiavelli calls the bluff not just of official morality – the hypocrisies of ordinary life – but of the second leg of the great Western tripod: the belief in the compatibility of all genuine values.

Why should justice, benevolence, humility and *virtù* coincide with happiness, power, success, glory, liberty? Poetic justice is so called not because it does not, but because it logically cannot, happen in the prose of ordinary life: ‘The State and people are governed in a different way from an individual.’¹⁹ Hence there can be no talk of rights either in the medieval or in the liberal sense. This is the position of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor and of Pareto. The wise man must eliminate fantasies from his head, and should seek to dispel them from the heads of others; if he cannot should at least use them in such a way as to produce a viable society. ‘The march of world history stands outside virtue and vice and justice and injustice,’ said Hegel.²⁰ If for the ‘march of history’ you substitute ‘good government’ and interpret the virtues cited by

¹⁹ loc. cit. (p. above, note).

²⁰ Paraphrase of Knox [*Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1837), trans. T. M. Knox (London etc., 1952)] 217 (‘Justice and virtue, wrongdoing, power and vice ... World-history ... is above the point of view from which these things matter’), Glockner [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart, 1927–51)] vii 448 (§ 345); cf. Sibree [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956) 67, Glockner xi 106.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Hegel as they are understood by Christians or ordinary men, then Machiavelli is the father of the doctrine.

His concrete recommendations are governed by the strictest moral values which, contrary to received opinion, are not cynical, not detached, not irresponsible in the least. Croce is right in thinking that Machiavelli is none of these things. He desires an Italy free from the barbarians – the famous eloquent last pages of *The Prince* and every page of the *Discourses* are written by a man possessed by a most passionate ideal of life, firmly committed, prepared to sacrifice everything to a form of life that he regards as at once attainable and the fulfillment of all that he and, in his opinion, mankind need and believe in.

Consider his specific maxims. You must employ terrorism or kindness as the case dictates. Severity is usually better,²¹ but humanity, in some cases, brings better fruit. It is best to keep men poor and on a war footing for this will be an antidote to ambition and boredom, and they will then be in constant need of great men (this policy was practiced with great success by Stalin, for example). Competition in a society is desirable, for it generates energy and ambition in the right degree. Religion is to be promoted even though we think it false, provided it is of a kind which preserves social solidarity (as Christianity conspicuously does not). When you confer benefits, do so yourself, but if dirty work is to be done, let others do it; let them be blamed and then cut off their heads; this will render you popular. Do what you must in any case, and try to represent it as a favour to the people. If you must commit a wrong, do not advertise it beforehand, for otherwise your enemies may destroy you before you destroy them. If it must be drastic, do it in one fell swoop, not in agonising stages. Do not be surrounded by powerful servants – victorious generals are best got rid of, otherwise they may get rid of you. You may be arrogant, but you must not break your own laws, for that disintegrates the social texture. Men must either be caressed or annihilated; appeasement is always fatal. Good ideas without arms are not enough (remember the fate of Savonarola). Princes must think perpetually of the possibility of war. You may terrorise people, but you must not be hated by them, for if you are hated, you will ultimately be destroyed. Success creates devotion. Severus was treacherous and cruel, but he boldly assailed the Goddess

²¹ *Discourses* 466 [a page number in which edition?].

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Fortune (he practised the qualities of both the lion and the fox) and so escaped both snares and wolves. Men will be false to you unless you compel them, by making use of *necessità* (the nature of the material and the laws that govern it), to be true. You can always compel men to be true to you by creating circumstances in which falsehood will not pay (the attempts of Hegel and Meinecke to twist these simple doctrines into a metaphysical bridge between the two moralities, whereby private morality is tied by 'necessity' to public, is a very unconvincing piece of metaphysical juggling).

All these maxims violently outrage normal morality, and are perfectly compatible with the public system, which Machiavelli managed to persuade himself to believe in, and in which he accepted that the ancients believed. Sometimes he has doubts even about that: he says very truly that it is difficult to find a suitable ruler, for if he is good (in the Hellenic sense) he will not be tough enough to use the unscrupulous means needed, and will not walk over sufficient corpses, while if he is ruthless enough and wicked enough, he will not be disinterested enough to compass the good ends for the sake of which the ruthlessness is to be used. But if he sees this obstacle there are many other respects in which he himself indulges in fantasies about human behaviour. His psychology is, at times, over-primitive: he does not allow enough even to the possibility of genuine altruism – he distrusts idealism with a romantic fanaticism. The vision of the great prince playing upon human beings like an instrument intoxicates him too much. He assumes that different societies must always be at war with each other, for they have no common ideals; that history is one endless cut-throat competition; that the only goal that human beings can conceive is to score as much as possible. He is good at bringing fantasies down to earth, but he remains on earth: he assumes that that is enough, as Mill said of Bentham. He allows too little to the ideal impulses of men; he has no sense of history; he does not understand the nature of the evolution of either individuals or communities; he obstinately refuses to consider the motives of men who resist enormous odds and are prepared to lose their lives in a hopeless cause.

His argument is always in favour of self-preservation. He tells men not to be fools, as Hitler told the French Government at Vichy; he does not allow the possibility of justified martyrdom in the name of values which, for all the martyrs know, may never triumph. His man is a mechanistic creature with no inner life at all.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

Like Hobbes's, his men could scarcely achieve sufficient co-operation even for the rational organisation of force to keep society going. He confused two propositions: (1) that ideals may be incompatible; (2) that all ideals are unrealisable, and, indeed, absurd, except one, which he attributed to antiquity, and the test of which he believed to be practical success – or perhaps it was simply the ideal to which he himself was so passionately dedicated.

But his cardinal achievement is his discovery that ideals may not be compatible with one another: that values equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other. He merely outlined two such systems, but in principle there is no reason why there should not be many more, if this is so. The notion that somewhere in the past or the future, in this world or the next, in the Church or the laboratory, in the speculation of the metaphysician or the uncorrupted heart of the simple good man, there is to be found the final solution of the question 'How should men live?' is false. If this is true, the way is open to empiricism, toleration, compromise. So long as only one ideal is the true goal, it will always seem to men that no means can be too difficult, no price too high, to do whatever is required to realise the ultimate goal. This is certainly one of the great causes of fanaticism, compulsion, persecution. If not all values are compatible with one another, and choices must be made for no better reason than each value is what it is and we choose it for what it is and not because it is demonstrably higher than another; if we choose forms of life because we believe in them, either because we find that we are morally unable to live in any other way, or by conversion of a specific kind, and rationality and calculation are applied to means only and never to ends; then a very different type of picture emerges from that constructed round the ancient principle that there is only one good for men, and that the only problems are how to find it, and how to realise it, and how to convert others to it, by persuasion or by force.

For this major discovery, the consequences of which, intellectually, were the very liberalism that Machiavelli would have condemned as lacking in passion and in glory, in singleness of aim, in power to discipline unruly men into one energetic whole – for this discovery, which broke the original unity and forced men into agonising choices in public and in private life (for the two cannot, it is obvious, be genuinely kept distinct), Machiavelli is responsible. It is an achievement of the very first order if only because it has

THREE TURNING-POINTS 2: MACHIAVELLI

never given men peace since it came to light. Genius consists in converting paradoxes into platitudes. Men have no doubt in practice often experienced the conflict which Machiavelli made explicit. It is when the conflict is one of the deepest, most constant, intimate and familiar experiences of human beings that it takes many centuries of sophistication before it is articulated into words.

© *The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust 2005*

Posted 24 November 2005