

## The Originality of Machiavelli

### I

THERE is something surprising about the sheer number of interpretations of Machiavelli's political opinions.<sup>1</sup> There exist, even now, over a score of leading theories of how to interpret *The Prince* and *The Discourses* – apart from a cloud of subsidiary views and glosses. The bibliography of this is vast and growing faster than ever.<sup>2</sup> While there may exist no more than the normal extent of disagreement about the meaning of particular terms or theses contained in these works, there is a startling degree of divergence about the central view, the basic political attitude of Machiavelli.

This phenomenon is easier to understand in the case of other thinkers whose opinions have continued to puzzle or agitate mankind – Plato, for example, or Rousseau, or Hegel, or Marx. But then it might be said that Plato wrote in a world and in a language that we cannot be sure we understand; that Rousseau, Hegel, Marx were

<sup>1</sup> The first draft of this paper was read at a meeting of the British section of the Political Studies Association in 1953. I should like to take this opportunity of offering my thanks to friends and colleagues to whom I sent it for their comments. They include A. P. d'Entrèves, Carl J. Friedrich, Felix Gilbert, Myron Gilmore, Louis Hartz, J. P. Plamenatz, Lawrence Stone and Hugh Trevor-Roper. I have greatly profited from their criticisms, which have saved me from many errors; for those that are left I am, of course, alone responsible.

<sup>2</sup> The full list now contains more than three thousand items. The bibliographical surveys that I have found most valuable are P. H. Harris, 'Progress in Machiavelli Studies', *Italica* 18 (1941), 1–11; Eric W. Cochrane, 'Machiavelli: 1940–1960', *Journal of Modern History* 33 (1961), 113–36; Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Princeton, 1965); Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Machiavelli anticristo* (Rome, 1954), trans. into English as *Machiavelli* (New York, 1967; London, 1968); De Lamar Jensen (ed.), *Machiavelli: Cynic, Patriot, or Political Scientist?* (Boston, 1960); and Richard C. Clark, 'Machiavelli: Bibliographical Spectrum', *Review of National Literatures* 1 (1970), 93–135.

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prolific theorists, whose works are scarcely models of clarity or consistency. But *The Prince* is a short book: its style is usually described as being singularly lucid, succinct and pungent – a model of clear Renaissance prose. *The Discourses* is not, as treatises on politics go, of undue length, and it is equally clear and definite. Yet there is no consensus about the significance of either; they have not been absorbed into the texture of traditional political theory; they continue to arouse passionate feelings; *The Prince* has evidently excited the interest and admiration of some of the most formidable men of action of the last four centuries, especially of our own, men not normally addicted to reading classical texts.

There is evidently something peculiarly disturbing about what Machiavelli said or implied, something that has caused profound and lasting uneasiness. Modern scholars have pointed out certain real or apparent inconsistencies between the (for the most part) republican sentiment of *The Discourses* (and *The Histories*) and the advice to absolute rulers in *The Prince*; indeed there is a difference of tone between the two treatises, as well as chronological puzzles: this raises problems about Machiavelli's character, motives and convictions which for three hundred years and more have formed a rich field of investigation and speculation for literary and linguistic scholars, psychologists and historians.

But it is not this that has shocked western feeling. Nor can it be only Machiavelli's 'realism' or his advocacy of brutal or unscrupulous or ruthless policies that has so deeply upset so many later thinkers, and driven some of them to explain or explain away his advocacy of force and fraud. The fact that the wicked are seen to flourish or that immoral courses appear to pay has never been very remote from the consciousness of mankind. The Bible, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle – to take only some of the fundamental works of western culture – the characters of Jacob or Joshua or David, Samuel's advice to Saul, Thucydides' Melian dialogue or his account of at least one ferocious but rescinded Athenian resolution, the philosophies of Thrasymachus and Callicles, Aristotle's advice to tyrants in the *Politics*, Carneades' speeches to the Roman Senate as described by Cicero, Augustine's view of the secular state from one vantage point, and Marsilio's from another – all these had cast enough light on political realities to shock the credulous out of uncritical idealism.

The explanation can scarcely lie in Machiavelli's tough-mindedness alone, even though he did perhaps dot the i's and cross the t's more

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sharply than anyone before him.<sup>1</sup> Even if the initial outcry – the reactions of, say, Pole or Gentillet – is to be so explained, this does not account for the reactions of those acquainted with the views of Hobbes or Spinoza or Hegel or the Jacobins and their heirs. Something else is surely needed to account both for the continuing horror and for the differences among the commentators. The two phenomena may not be unconnected. To indicate the nature of the latter phenomenon let me cite only the best known rival interpretations of Machiavelli's political views produced since the sixteenth century.

According to Alberico Gentili<sup>2</sup> and Garrett Mattingly,<sup>3</sup> the author of *The Prince* wrote a satire, for he certainly cannot literally have meant what he said. For Spinoza,<sup>4</sup> Rousseau,<sup>5</sup> Ugo Foscolo,<sup>6</sup> Luigi Ricci (who introduces *The Prince* to the readers of *The World's Classics*)<sup>7</sup> it is a cautionary tale; for whatever else he was, Machiavelli was a passionate patriot, a democrat, a believer in liberty, and *The Prince* must have been intended (Spinoza is particularly clear on this) to warn men of what tyrants could be and do, the better to resist them. Perhaps the author could not write openly with two rival powers – those of the church and of the Medici – eyeing him with equal (and not unjustified) suspicion. *The Prince* is therefore a satire (though no work seems to me to read less like one).

For A. H. Gilbert<sup>8</sup> it is anything but this – it is a typical piece of its period, a mirror for princes, a genre exercise common enough in the Renaissance and before (and after) it, with very obvious borrowings and 'echoes'; more gifted than most of these, and certainly more

<sup>1</sup> His habit of putting things *troppo assolutamente* had already been noted by Guicciardini. See 'Considerazioni intorno ai *Discorsi* del Machiavelli', book 1, chapter 3, p. 8 in *Scritti politici e ricordi*, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi (Bari, 1933).

<sup>2</sup> Alberico Gentili, *De legationibus libri tres* (London, 1585), book 3, chapter 9, pp. 101–2.

<sup>3</sup> Garrett Mattingly, 'Machiavelli's *Prince*: Political Science or Political Satire?', *American Scholar* 27 (1958), 482–91.

<sup>4</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus politicus*, chapter 5, section 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Du contrat social*, book 3, chapter 6, note.

<sup>6</sup> *I sepolchri*, 156–8: 'che, temprando lo scettro a' regnatori, / gli allòr ne sfronda, ed alle genti svela / di che lagrime grondi e di che sangue . . .'.

<sup>7</sup> Luigi Ricci, preface to Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (London, 1903).

<sup>8</sup> Allan H. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and its Forerunners* (Durham, North Carolina, 1938).

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hard-boiled (and influential); but not so very different in style, content, or intention.

Giuseppe Prezzolini<sup>1</sup> and Hiram Haydn,<sup>2</sup> more plausibly, regard it as an anti-Christian piece (in this following Fichte and others)<sup>3</sup> and see it as an attack on the church and all her principles, a defence of the pagan view of life. Giuseppe Toffanin,<sup>4</sup> however, thinks Machiavelli was a Christian, though a somewhat peculiar one, a view from which Roberto Ridolfi,<sup>5</sup> his most distinguished living biographer, and Leslie Walker (in his English edition of *The Discourses*)<sup>6</sup> do not wholly dissent. Alderisio,<sup>7</sup> indeed, regards him as a sincere Catholic, although he does not go quite so far as Richelieu's agent, Canon Louis Machon, in his *Apology for Machiavelli*,<sup>8</sup> or the anonymous nineteenth-century compiler of *Religious Maxims faithfully extracted from the works of Niccolò Machiavelli* (referred to by Ridolfi in the last chapter of his biography).<sup>9</sup>

For Benedetto Croce<sup>10</sup> and all the many scholars who have followed him, Machiavelli is an anguished humanist, and one who, so far from seeking to soften the impression made by the crimes that he describes, laments the vices of men which make such wicked courses politically

<sup>1</sup> op. cit. (p. 25, note 2 above).

<sup>2</sup> Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> e.g. the Spaniards Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Tratado de la Religión* (Madrid, 1595), and Claudio Clemente (pseudonym of Juan Eusebio Nieremberg), *El Machiavelismo degollado* (Alcalá, 1637).

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Toffanin, *La fine dell'umanesimo* (Turin, 1920).

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli* (Rome, 1954), trans. by Cecil Grayson as *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli* (London and Chicago, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. with introduction and notes in 2 vols by Leslie J. Walker (London, 1950).

<sup>7</sup> Felice Alderisio, *Machiavelli: l'Arte dello Stato nell'azione e negli scritti* (Turin, 1930).

<sup>8</sup> As quoted by Prezzolini, op. cit. (p. 25, note 2 above), English version, p. 231.

<sup>9</sup> op. cit. (note 5 above), Italian version, p. 382; English version, p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> Croce ascribes to Machiavelli 'un'austera e dolorosa coscienza morale', *Elementi di politica* (Bari, 1925), p. 62. The idea that Machiavelli actually wishes to denounce naked power politics—what Gerhard Ritter in a volume of that name has called *Die Dämonie der Macht*—goes back to the sixteenth century (see Burd's still unsurpassed edition of *The Prince* (Oxford, 1891), pp. 31 ff.).

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unavoidable – a moralist who ‘occasionally experiences moral nausea’<sup>1</sup> in contemplating a world in which political ends can be achieved only by means that are morally evil, and thereby the man who divorced the province of politics from that of ethics. But for the Swiss scholars Walder, Kaegi and von Muralt<sup>2</sup> he is a peace-loving humanist, who believed in order, stability, pleasure in life, in the disciplining of the aggressive elements of our nature into the kind of civilised harmony that he found in its finest form among the well-armed Swiss democracies of his own time.<sup>3</sup>

For the neo-stoic Justus Lipsius and a century later for Algarotti (in 1759) and Alfieri<sup>4</sup> (in 1786) he was a passionate patriot, who saw in Cesare Borgia the man who, if he had lived, might have liberated Italy from the barbarous French and Spaniards and Austrians who were trampling over her and had reduced her to misery and poverty, decadence and chaos. Garrett Mattingly<sup>5</sup> could not credit this because it was obvious to him, and he did not doubt that it must have been no less obvious to Machiavelli, that Cesare was incompetent, a mountebank, a squalid failure; while Eric Vögelin seems to suggest that it is not Cesare, but (of all men) Tamerlane who was hovering before Machiavelli’s fancy-laden gaze.<sup>6</sup>

For Cassirer,<sup>7</sup> Renaudet,<sup>8</sup> Olschki<sup>9</sup> and Keith Hancock,<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli is a cold technician, ethically and politically uncommitted, an objective analyst of politics, a morally neutral scientist, who (Karl

<sup>1</sup> op. cit. (p. 28, note 10 above), p. 66; see Cochrane’s comment, op. cit. (p. 25, note 2 above), p. 115, note 9.

<sup>2</sup> For references see Cochrane, *ibid.*, p. 118, note 19.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Swiss are most free [*liberissimi*] because the best armed [*armatissimi*].’ *The Prince*, chapter 12.

<sup>4</sup> Vittorio Alfieri, *Del principe e delle lettere*, book 2, chapter 9. *Opere*, vol. 4, ed. Alessandro Donati (Bari, 1927), pp. 172–3.

<sup>5</sup> op. cit. (p. 27, note 3 above).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Vögelin, ‘Machiavelli’s *Prince*: Background and Formation’, *Review of Politics* 13 (1951), 142–68.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (London and New Haven, Connecticut, 1946), chapter 12.

<sup>8</sup> Augustin Renaudet, *Machiavel: étude d’histoire des doctrines politiques* (Paris, 1942).

<sup>9</sup> Leonardo Olschki, *Machiavelli the Scientist* (Berkeley, California, 1945).

<sup>10</sup> W. K. Hancock, ‘Machiavelli in Modern Dress: an Enquiry into Historical Method’, *History* 20 (1935–6), 97–115.

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Schmid<sup>1</sup> tells us) anticipated Galileo in applying inductive methods to social and historical material, and had no moral interest in the use made of his technical discoveries – equally ready to place them at the disposal of liberators and despots, good men and scoundrels. Renaudet describes his method as ‘purely positivist’, Cassirer, as concerned with ‘political statics’. But for Federico Chabod he is not coldly calculating at all, but passionate to the point of unrealism;<sup>2</sup> Ridolfi, too, speaks of *il grande appassionato*,<sup>3</sup> and De Caprariis<sup>4</sup> thinks him positively visionary.

For Herder he is, above all, a marvellous mirror of his age, a man sensitive to the contours of his time, who faithfully described what others did not admit or recognise, an inexhaustible mine of acute contemporary observation; and this is accepted by Ranke and Macaulay, Burd and, in our day, Gennaro Sasso.<sup>5</sup> For Fichte he is a man of deep insight into the real historical (or super-historical) forces that mould men and transform their morality – in particular, a man who rejected Christian principles for those of reason, political unity and centralisation. For Hegel he is the man of genius who saw the need for uniting a chaotic collection of small and feeble principalities into a coherent whole; his specific nostrums may excite disgust, but they are accidents due to the conditions of their own time, now long past; yet, however obsolete his precepts, he understood something more important – the demands of his own age – that the hour had struck for the birth of the modern, centralised, political state, for the formation of which he ‘established the truly necessary fundamental principles’.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karl Schmid, ‘Machiavelli’, in Rudolf Stadelmann (ed.), *Grosse Geschichtsdenker* (Tübingen/Stuttgart, 1949); see the illuminating review of Leonard von Muralt, *Machiavellis Staatsgedanke* (Basel, 1945) by A. P. d’Entrèves, *English Historical Review* 62 (1947), 96–9.

<sup>2</sup> In his original article of 1925 (‘Del “Principe” di Niccolò Machiavelli’, *Nuova rivista storica* 9 (1925), 35–71, 189–216, 437–73; repr. as a book (Milan/Rome/Naples, 1926)) Chabod develops Croce’s view in a direction closer to the conclusions of this article. See the English collection of Chabod’s essays on Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. David Moore, introduction by A. P. d’Entrèves (London, 1958), pp. 30–125 (‘The Prince: Myth and Reality’) and *Scritti su Machiavelli* (Turin, 1964), pp. 29–135.

<sup>3</sup> op. cit. (p. 28, note 5 above), Italian version, p. 364.

<sup>4</sup> For reference see Cochrane, op. cit. (p. 25, note 2 above), p. 120, note 28.

<sup>5</sup> Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli* (Naples, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> If Machiavelli’s *Prince* is viewed in its historical context – of a divided, invaded, humiliated Italy – it emerges not as a disinterested ‘summary of moral and political principles, appropriate to all situations and therefore to

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The thesis that Machiavelli was above all an Italian and a patriot, speaking above all to his own generation, and if not solely to Florentines, at any rate only to Italians, and must be judged solely, or at least mainly, in terms of his historical context, is a position common to Herder and Hegel, Macaulay and Burd, De Sanctis and Oreste Tommasini.<sup>1</sup> Yet for Herbert Butterfield<sup>2</sup> and Raffaello Ramat<sup>3</sup> he suffers none', but 'as a most magnificent and true conception on the part of a man of genuine political genius, a man of the greatest and noblest mind' (*Die Verfassung Deutschlands*, in *Schriften zur Politik und Rechtsphilosophie (Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Georg Lasson, vol. 7), 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1923), p. 113). See p. 135 of the same work for Hegel's defence of 'die Gewalt eines Eroberers' conceived as a unifier of German lands. He regarded Machiavelli as a forerunner in an analogous Italian situation.

<sup>1</sup> Especially Tommasini in his huge compendium, *La vita e gli scritti di Niccolò Machiavelli nella loro relazione col Machiavellismo* (vol. 1, Rome/Turin/Florence, 1883; vol. 2, Rome, 1911). In this connection Ernst Cassirer makes the valid and relevant point that to value – or justify – Machiavelli's opinions solely as a mirror of their times is one thing; to maintain that he was himself consciously addressing only his own countrymen and, if Burd is to be believed, not even all of them, is a very different one, and entails a false view of him and the civilisation to which he belonged. The Renaissance did not view itself in historical perspective. Machiavelli was looking for – and thought that he had found – timeless, universal truths about social behaviour. It is no service either to him or to the truth to deny or ignore the unhistorical assumptions which he shared with all his contemporaries and predecessors. The praise lavished upon him by the German historical school from Herder onwards, including the Marxist Antonio Gramsci, for the gifts in which they saw his strength – his realistic sense of his own times, his insight into the rapidly changing social and political conditions of Italy and Europe in his time, the collapse of feudalism, the rise of the national state, the altering power relationships within the Italian principalities and the like – might have been galling to a man who believed he had discovered eternal verities. He may, like his countryman Columbus, have mistaken the nature of his own achievement. If the historical school (including the Marxists) is right, Machiavelli did not do, and could not have done, what he set out to do.

But nothing is gained by supposing he did not set out to do it; and plenty of witnesses from his day to ours would deny Herder's assertion, and maintain that Machiavelli's goal – the discovery of the permanent principles of a political science – was anything but Utopian; and that he came nearer than most to attaining them.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Raffaello Ramat, 'Il Principe', in *Per la storia dello stile rinascimentale* (Messina/Florence, 1953), pp. 75–118.

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from an equal lack of scientific and historical sense. Obsessed by classical authors, his gaze is on an imaginary past; he deduces his political maxims in an unhistorical and *a priori* manner from dogmatic axioms (according to Lauri Huovinen)<sup>1</sup> – a method that was already becoming obsolete at the time in which he was writing; in this respect his slavish imitation of antiquity is judged to be inferior to the historical sense and sagacious judgement of his friend Guicciardini (so much for the discovery in him of inklings of modern scientific method).

For Bacon<sup>2</sup> (as for Spinoza, and later for Lassalle) he is above all the supreme realist and avoider of Utopian fantasies. Boccalini<sup>3</sup> is shocked by him, but cannot deny the accuracy or importance of his observations; so is Meinecke<sup>4</sup> for whom he is the father of *Staatsräson*, with which he plunged a dagger into the body politic of the west, inflicting a wound which only Hegel would know how to heal (this is Meinecke's optimistic verdict half a century ago, apparently withdrawn after the Second World War).

<sup>1</sup> Lauri Huovinen, *Das Bild vom Menschen im politischen Denken Niccolò Machiavellis* (*Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, series B, vol. 74 (Helsinki, 1951), No 2).

<sup>2</sup> 'We are much beholden to Machiavelli and other writers of that class, who openly and unfeignedly declare and describe what men do, and not what they ought to do.' Bacon goes on to qualify this by explaining that to know the good one must investigate the evil, and ends by calling such approaches 'corrupt wisdom' (*De augmentis*, book 7, chapter 2, and book 8, chapter 2: quoted from *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. Spedding, Ellis and Heath (London, 1857-74), vol. 5, pp. 17 and 76). Compare Machiavelli's aphorism in a letter to Guicciardini, No 179 in the Alvisi edition (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere familiari*, ed. Edoardo Alvisi (Florence, 1883)): 'io credo che questo sarebbe il vero modo ad andare in Paradiso, imparare la via dell'Inferno per fuggirla.' A. P. d'Entrèves has kindly drawn my attention to this characteristic passage; so far as I know there is no reason for supposing that Bacon had any knowledge of it. Nor, it may be, had T. S. Eliot when he wrote 'Lord Morley . . . intimates that Machiavelli . . . saw only half of the truth about human nature. What Machiavelli did not see about human nature is the myth of human goodness which for liberal thought replaces the belief in Divine Grace' ('Niccolò Machiavelli', in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London, 1970), p. 50).

<sup>3</sup> Traiano Boccalini, *Ragguagli di Parnaso*, centuria prima, No 89.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte*, 2nd ed. (Munich/Berlin, 1927), trans. by Douglas Scott as *Machiavellism* (London, 1957).

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But for König<sup>1</sup> he is not a tough-minded realist or cynic at all, but an aesthete seeking to escape from the chaotic and squalid world of the decadent Italy of his time into a dream of pure art, a man not interested in practice who painted an ideal political landscape; much (if I understand this view correctly) as Piero della Francesca painted an ideal city; *The Prince* is to be read as an idyll in the best neoclassical, neopastoral, Renaissance style (yet De Sanctis in the second volume of his *History of Italian Literature* denies it a place in the humanist tradition on account of Machiavelli's hostility to imaginative visions).

For Renzo Sereno<sup>2</sup> it is a fantasy indeed but of a bitterly frustrated man, and its dedication is the 'desperate plea'<sup>3</sup> of a victim of 'Fortune's great and steady malice'.<sup>4</sup> A psychoanalytic interpretation of one queer episode in Machiavelli's life is offered in support of his thesis.

For Macaulay he is a political pragmatist and a patriot who cared most of all for the independence of Florence, and acclaimed any form of rule that would ensure it.<sup>5</sup> Marx calls the *History of Florence* a 'masterpiece', and Engels (in the *Dialectics of Nature*) speaks of Machiavelli as one of the 'giants' of the Enlightenment, a man free from *petit-bourgeois* outlook. Soviet criticism is more ambivalent.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> René König, *Niccolo Machiavelli: Zur Krisenanalyse einer Zeitenwende* (Zurich, 1941).

<sup>2</sup> Renzo Sereno, 'A Falsification by Machiavelli', *Renaissance News* 12 (1959), 159-67.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> *The Prince*, dedication (trans. by Allan Gilbert in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, 3 vols (Durham, North Carolina, 1965), vol. 1, p. 11: all quotations in this essay from Machiavelli's writings are given in this version, unless otherwise stated).

<sup>5</sup> For an extended modern development of this, see Judith Janoska-Bendl, 'Niccolò Machiavelli: Politik ohne Ideologie', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 40 (1958), 315-45.

<sup>6</sup> The only extended treatment of Machiavelli by a prominent Bolshevik intellectual known to me is in Kamenev's short-lived introduction to the Russian translation of *The Prince* (Moscow, 1934), reprinted in English as 'Preface to Machiavelli', *New Left Review* No 15 (May-June 1962), 39-42. This unswervingly follows the full historicist-sociological approach criticised by Cassirer. Machiavelli is described as an active publicist, preoccupied by the 'mechanism of the struggles for power' within and between the Italian principalities, a sociologist who gave a masterly analysis of the 'sociological' jungle that preceded the formation of a 'powerful, national, essentially bourgeois'

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For the restorers of the short-lived Florentine republic he was evidently nothing but a venal and treacherous toady, anxious to serve any master, who had unsuccessfully tried to flatter the Medici in the hope of gaining their favour. George Sabine (in his well-known textbook)<sup>1</sup> views him as an anti-metaphysical empiricist, a Hume or Popper before his time, free from obscurantist, theological and metaphysical preconceptions. For Antonio Gramsci<sup>2</sup> he is above all a revolutionary innovator who directs his shafts against the obsolescent feudal aristocracy and papacy and their mercenaries: his *Prince* is a myth which signifies the dictatorship of new, progressive forces: ultimately the coming role of the masses and of the need for the emergence of new politically realistic leaders – *The Prince* is ‘an anthropomorphic symbol’ of the hegemony of the ‘collective will’.

Like Jakob Burckhardt<sup>3</sup> and Friedrich Meinecke,<sup>4</sup> C. J. Friedrich<sup>5</sup> and Charles Singleton<sup>6</sup> maintain that he has a developed conception of the state as a work of art; the great men who have founded or maintain human associations are conceived as analogous to artists whose aim is beauty, and whose essential qualification is understanding of their material – they are moulders of men, as sculptors are moulders of marble or clay.<sup>7</sup> Politics, in this view, leaves the realm of ethics,

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Italian state. His almost ‘dialectical’ grasp of the realities of power, and freedom from metaphysical and theological fantasies, establish him as a worthy forerunner of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. These opinions were brought up at Kamenev’s trial and pilloried by Vyshinsky, the prosecutor. See on this Chimen Abramsky, ‘Kamenev’s Last Essay’, *New Left Review* No 15 (May–June 1962), 34–38; and, on the peculiar fate of Machiavelli in Russia, Jan Malarczyk, *Politieskoe uchenia Makiavelli v Rossii, v russkoi dorevolucionionnoi i sovetskoi istoriografii* (*Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Sklodkowska*, vol. 6, No 1, section G, 1959 (Lublin, 1960)).

<sup>1</sup> George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (London, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Note sul Machiavelli*, in *Opere*, vol. 5 (Turin, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London, 1929), part 1, chapter 7, pp. 104 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.* (p. 32, note 4 above).

<sup>5</sup> C. J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Reason of State* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> Charles S. Singleton, ‘The Perspective of Art’, *Kenyon Review* 15 (1953), 169–89.

<sup>7</sup> See Joseph Kraft, ‘Truth and Poetry in Machiavelli’, *Journal of Modern History* 23 (1951), 109–21.

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and approaches that of aesthetics. Singleton argues that Machiavelli's originality consists in his view of political action as a form of what Aristotle called 'making' – the goal of which is a non-moral artefact, an object of beauty or use external to man (in this case a particular arrangement of human affairs) – and not of 'doing' (where Aristotle and Aquinas had placed it), the goal of which is internal and moral – not the creation of an object, but a particular kind – the right way – of living or being.

This position is not distant from that of Villari, Croce and others, inasmuch as it ascribes to Machiavelli the divorce of politics from ethics. Singleton transfers Machiavelli's conception of politics to the region of art, which is conceived as being amoral. Croce gives it an independent status of its own: of politics for politics' sake.

But the commonest view of him, at least as a political thinker, is still that of most Elizabethans, dramatists and scholars alike, for whom he is a man inspired by the Devil to lead good men to their doom, the great subverter, the teacher of evil, *le docteur de la scélératesse*, the inspirer of St Bartholomew's Eve, the original of Iago. This is the 'murderous Machiavel' of the famous four-hundred-odd references in Elizabethan literature.<sup>1</sup> His name adds a new ingredient to the more ancient figure of Old Nick. For the Jesuits he is 'the devil's partner in crime', 'a dishonourable writer and an unbeliever', and *The Prince* is, in Bertrand Russell's words, 'a handbook for gangsters' (compare with this Mussolini's description of it as a '*vade mecum* for statesmen', a view tacitly shared, perhaps, by other heads of state). This is the view common to Protestants and Catholics, Gentillet and François Hotman, Cardinal Pole, Bodin and Frederick the Great, followed by the

<sup>1</sup> Edward Meyer, *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama* (Litterarhistorische Forschungen I: Weimar, 1897). See on this Christopher Morris, 'Machiavelli's Reputation in Tudor England', *Il pensiero politico* 2 (1969), 416–33, especially p. 423. See also Mario Praz, 'Machiavelli and the Elizabethans', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 13 (1928), 49–97; Napoleone Orsini, 'Elizabethan Manuscript Translations of Machiavelli's *Prince*', *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1937–8), 166–9; Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London, 1964; Toronto, 1965); J. G. A. Pocock, 'Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century', in *Politics, Language and Time* (London, 1972), pp. 104–47; and, most famous of all, Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox* (London, 1951). Zera S. Fink in *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston, 1945), J. G. A. Pocock and Felix Raab stress his positive influence in seventeenth-century England, with Bacon and Harrington at the head of his admirers.

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authors of all the many anti-Machiavels, among the latest of whom are Jacques Maritain<sup>1</sup> and Leo Strauss.<sup>2</sup>

There is *prima facie* something strange about so violent a disparity of judgements.<sup>3</sup> What other thinker has presented so many facets to the students of his ideas? What other writer – and he not even a recognised philosopher – has caused his readers to disagree about his purposes so deeply and so widely? Yet, I must repeat, Machiavelli does not write obscurely; nearly all his interpreters praise him for his terse, dry, clear prose.

What is it that has proved so arresting to so many? Let me deal with some obvious answers. It is no doubt astonishing to find a thinker so free from what we have been taught to regard as being the normal intellectual assumptions of his age. Machiavelli does not so much as mention natural law, the basic category in terms of which (or rather the many varieties of which) Christians and pagans, teleologists and materialists, jurists, theologians and philosophers, before and indeed for many decades after him, discussed the very topics to which he applied his mind. He was of course not a philosopher or a jurist: nevertheless, he was a political expert, a well-read man of letters. The influence of the old Stoic-Christian doctrine was not, by his time, what it had once been in Italy, especially among the early humanists. Still, having set himself to generalise about the behaviour of men in society in a novel fashion, Machiavelli might have been expected, if not to refute or reject explicitly, at least to deliver a glancing blow at some of the assumptions which, he clearly thinks, have led so many to their doom. He does, after all, tell us that his path has never before been trodden by any man, and this, in his case, is no mere cliché: there is, therefore, something extraordinary in the fact that he completely

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, 'The End of Machiavellianism', *Review of Politics* 4 (1942), 1–33.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> One of the best and liveliest accounts of the mass of conflicting theories about *The Prince* is provided by E. W. Cochrane in the article cited above on p. 25, note 2, to which this catalogue owes a great deal. For earlier conflicts see Pasquale Villari's standard and in some ways still un superseded *The Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Linda Villari (London, 1898), and the earlier works cited by him, e.g. Robert von Mohl, 'Die Machiavelli-Literatur', in *Die Geschichte und Literatur der Staatswissenschaften* (Erlangen, 1855–8), vol. 3, pp. 519–91, and J. F. Christius, *De Nicolao Machiavelli libri tres* (Leipzig, 1731). For later works see above, p. 25, note 2.

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ignores the concepts and categories – the routine paraphernalia – in terms of which the best-known thinkers and scholars of his day were accustomed to express themselves. And, indeed, Gentillet in his *Contre-Machiavel* denounces him precisely for this. Only Marsilio before him had dared do this: and Neville Figgis thinks it a dramatic break with the past.<sup>1</sup>

The absence of Christian psychology and theology – sin, grace, redemption, salvation – need cause less surprise: few contemporary humanists speak in such terms. The medieval heritage has grown very thin. But, and this is more noteworthy, there is no trace of Platonic or Aristotelian teleology, no reference to any ideal order, to any doctrine of man's place in nature in the great chain of being, with which the Renaissance thinkers are deeply concerned – which, say, Ficino or Pico or Poggio virtually take for granted. There is nothing here of what Popper has called 'essentialism', *a priori* certainty directly revealed to reason or intuition about the unalterable development of men or social groups in certain directions, in pursuit of goals implanted in them by God or by nature. The method and the tone are empirical. Even Machiavelli's theory of historical cycles is not metaphysically guaranteed.

As for religion, it is for him not much more than a socially indispensable instrument, so much utilitarian cement: the criterion of the worth of a religion is its role as a promoter of solidarity and cohesion – he anticipates Saint-Simon and Durkheim in stressing its crucial social importance. The great founders of religions are among the men he most greatly admires. Some varieties of religion (e.g. Roman paganism) are good for societies, since they make them strong or spirited; others on the contrary (e.g. Christian meekness and unworldliness) cause decay or disintegration. The weakening of religious ties is a part of general decadence and corruption: there is no need for a religion to rest on truth, provided that it is socially effective.<sup>2</sup> Hence his veneration of those who set their societies on sound spiritual foundations – Moses, Numa, Lycurgus.

There is no serious assumption of the existence of God and divine law; whatever our author's private convictions, an atheist can read Machiavelli with perfect intellectual comfort. Nor is there piety towards authority, or prescription – nor any interest in the role of the

<sup>1</sup> John Neville Figgis, *Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1916).

<sup>2</sup> *Discourses* I 12.

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individual conscience, or in any other metaphysical or theological issue. The only freedom he recognises is political freedom, freedom from arbitrary despotic rule, i.e. republicanism, and the freedom of one state from control by other states, or rather of the city or *patria*, for 'state' may be a premature term in this connection.<sup>1</sup>

There is no notion of the rights of, or obligation to, corporations or non-political establishments, sacred or secular – the need for absolute centralised power (if not for sovereignty) is taken for granted. There is scarcely any historical sense: men are much the same everywhere, and at all times, and what has served well for the ancients – their rules of medicine, or warfare, or statecraft – will surely also work for the moderns. Tradition is valued chiefly as a source of social stability. Since there is no far-off divine event to which creation moves and no Platonic ideal for societies or individuals, there is no notion of progress, either material or spiritual. The assumption is that the blessings of the classical age can be restored (if fortune is not too unpropitious) by enough knowledge and will, by *virtù* on the part of a leader, and by appropriately trained and bravely and skilfully led citizens. There are no intimations of an irrevocably determined flow of events; neither *fortuna* nor *necessità* dominates the whole of existence; there are no absolute values which men ignore or deny to their inevitable doom.

It is, no doubt, this freedom from even such relics of the traditional metaphysics of history as linger on in the works of even such perfectly secular humanists as Egidio and Pontano, not to mention earlier authors of 'mirrors for princes', as well as Machiavelli's constant concern with the concrete and practical issues of his day, and not any mysterious presentiment of the coming scientific revolution, that gives him so modern a flavour. Yet it is plainly not these characteristics that have proved so deeply fascinating and horrifying to his readers

<sup>1</sup> See on this much-discussed issue the relevant theses of J. H. Whitfield in *Machiavelli* (Oxford, 1947), especially pp. 93–5, and J. H. Hexter in 'Il principe and lo stato', *Studies in the Renaissance* 4 (1957), 113–35, and the opposed views of Fredi Chiapelli in *Studi sul linguaggio del Machiavelli* (Florence, 1952), pp. 59–73, Francesco Ercole in *La politica di Machiavelli* (Rome, 1926) and Felix Gilbert, op. cit. (p. 25, note 2 above), pp. 328–30. For an earlier version of Gilbert's anti-Ercole thesis see his 'The Concept of Nationalism in Machiavelli's Prince', *Studies in the Renaissance* 1 (1954), 38–48. H. C. Dowdall goes further and seems to maintain that it is, in effect, by inventing the word 'state' that Machiavelli founded modern political science ('The Word "State"', *Law Quarterly Review* 39 (1923), 98–125).

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from his day to our own. 'Machiavelli's doctrine', wrote Meinecke, 'was a sword thrust in the body politic of Western humanity, causing it to cry out and to struggle against itself.'<sup>1</sup>

What was it that was so upsetting in the views of Machiavelli? What was the 'dagger' and the 'unhealed wound' of which Meinecke speaks, 'the most violent mutilation suffered by the human practical intellect'<sup>2</sup> which Maritain so eloquently denounced? If it is not Machiavelli's (ruthless, but scarcely original) realism, nor his (relatively original, but by the eighteenth century pretty widespread) empiricism that proves so shocking during all these centuries, what was it?

'Nothing,' says one of his commentators:<sup>3</sup> *The Prince* is a mere tabulation of types of government and rulers, and of methods of maintaining them. It is this and no more. All the 'feeling and controversy' occasioned by it evidently rest on an almost universal misreading of an exceptionally clear, morally neutral text.

I cite this not uncommon view for fairness's sake. My own answer to the question will be clearer if before offering it I state (in however brief and over-simplified a form) what I believe Machiavelli's positive beliefs to have been.

## II

Like the Roman writers whose ideals were constantly before his mind, like Cicero and Livy, Machiavelli believed that what men – at any rate superior men – sought was the fulfilment and the glory that come from the creation and maintenance by common endeavour of a strong and well-governed social whole. Only those will accomplish this who know the relevant facts. If you make mistakes and live in a state of delusion, you will fail in whatever you undertake, for reality misunderstood – or worse still, ignored or scorned – will always defeat you in the end. We can achieve what we want only if we understand firstly ourselves, and then the nature of the material with which we work.

Our first task, therefore, is the acquisition of such knowledge. This, for Machiavelli, was mainly psychological and sociological: the best

<sup>1</sup> op. cit. (p. 32, note 4 above), p. 61 (English version, p. 49).

<sup>2</sup> op. cit. (p. 36, note 1 above), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Pulver, *Machiavelli: The Man, His Work, and His Times* (London, 1937), p. 227.

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source of information is a mixture of shrewd observation of contemporary reality together with whatever wisdom may be gleaned from the best observers of the past, in particular the great minds of antiquity, the sages whose company (as he says in his celebrated letter to Vettori) he seeks when he gets away from the trivial occupations of his daily life; these noble spirits, in their humanity, treat him kindly and yield answers to his questions; it is they who have taught him that men are in need of firm and energetic civil government. Different men pursue different ends, and for each pursuit need an appropriate skill. Sculptors, doctors, soldiers, architects, statesmen, lovers, adventurers 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. (This kind of approach is wholly typical of the humanism of Machiavelli's country and his time.) Men need rulers because they require someone to order human groups governed by diverse interests and bring them security, stability, above all protection against enemies, to establish social institutions which alone enable men to satisfy their needs and aspirations. They will never attain to this unless they are individually and socially healthy; only an adequate education can make them physically and mentally sturdy, vigorous, ambitious and energetic enough for effective cooperation in the pursuit of order, power, glory, success.

Techniques of government exist – of that he has no doubt – although the facts, and therefore the methods of dealing with them, may look different to a ruler and to his subjects: this is a matter of perspective: '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'.<sup>1</sup> What is certain is that unless there is a firm hand at the helm, the ship of state will founder. Human society will collapse into chaos and squalor unless a competent specialist directs it; and although Machiavelli himself gives reasons for preferring freedom and republican rule, there are situations in which a strong prince (the Duke of Valentino, even a Medici, if his plea had any sincerity to it) is preferable to a weak republic.

All this Aristotle and the later Stoics would have endorsed. But from the fact that there is such a thing as an art of government, indispensable to the attainment of goals that men in fact seek, it does not follow that Machiavelli did not care to what uses it was applied, and merely produced a handbook of scientific political 'directives' that was

<sup>1</sup> *The Prince*, dedication.

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morally neutral, *wertfrei*. For he makes it 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 unchanging human nature the range of whose response to changing situations can be determined (there is no trace in Machiavelli's thought of any notion of systematic evolution or of the individual or society as a self-transforming entity); one can obtain this knowledge 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 widely different from what in fact they are and always have been and cannot help being. Men (at least his own countrymen for and about whom he was writing) seem to him for the most part to be 'ungrateful, wanton, false and dissimulating, cowardly and greedy . . . arrogant and mean, their natural impulse is to be insolent when their affairs are prospering and abjectly servile when adversity hits them.'<sup>1</sup> They care little for liberty – the name means more to them than the reality – and they place it well below security, property or desire for revenge. These last the ruler can provide to a reasonable degree. Men are easily corrupted, and difficult to cure. They respond both to fear and to love, to the cruel Hannibal and to the just and humane Scipio. If these emotions cannot be combined, fear is the more reliable: provided always that it does not turn to hate, which destroys the minimum of respect that subjects must retain for those who govern them.

Society is, normally, a battlefield in which there are conflicts between and within groups. These conflicts can be controlled only by the judicious use of both persuasion and force. How is this done? As in medicine, architecture or the art of war, we can obtain systematic knowledge of the required technique if only we will look at the practice (and the theory) of the most successful societies we know, namely those of classical times.

Machiavelli's theories are certainly not based on the scientific principles of the seventeenth century. He lived a hundred years before Galileo and Bacon, and his method is a mixture of rules of thumb, observation, historical knowledge and general sagacity, somewhat like

<sup>1</sup> This celebrated passage from the seventeenth chapter of *The Prince* is here given in Prezzolini's vivid rendering: see his 'The Christian Roots of Machiavelli's Moral Pessimism', *Review of National Literatures* 1 (1970), 26–37: 27.

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the empirical medicine of the pre-scientific world. He abounds in precepts, in useful maxims, practical hints, scattered reflections, especially historical parallels, even though he claims to have discovered general laws, eternally valid *regole generali*. An example of a triumph or a failure in the ancient world, a striking saying by an ancient author, carries more weight with him (as Butterfield and Ramat correctly note) than historical analysis of the type that was becoming common even in his own day, and of which Guicciardini was a master.

Above all he warns one to be on one's guard against those who do not look at men as they are, and see them through spectacles coloured by their hopes and wishes, their loves and hatreds, in terms of an idealised model of man as they want him to be, and not as he is and was and will be. Honest reformers, however worthy their ideals, like the worthy leader of the Florentine republic, Piero Soderini, whom Machiavelli served, or the far more gifted Savonarola (towards whom his attitude oscillates sharply), foundered and caused the ruin of others, largely because they substituted what should be for what is; because at some point they fell into unrealism.

They were men of very different quality. Savonarola had a strong will, whereas Soderini was, in Machiavelli's view, small-minded and indecisive. But what they had in common was an inadequate grasp of how to use power. At the crucial moment they both showed their lack of a sense of *verità effettuale* in politics, of what works in practice, of real power, of the big battalions. Machiavelli's texts contain frequent warnings against unreliable sources of information, émigrés for example, whose minds are distorted by their wishes and cannot attain to an objective view of the facts, and others whose reason (this is a humanist commonplace) is darkened by the passions that distort their vision.

What has led and will lead such statesmen to their doom? Often enough only their ideals. What is wrong with ideals? That they cannot be attained. How does one know this? This is one of the foundations upon which Machiavelli's claim to be a thinker of the first order ultimately rests. Machiavelli has a clear vision of the society which he wishes to see realised on earth, or if this sounds too grandiose for so concrete and applied a thinker, the society which he wishes to see attained in his own country, perhaps even in his own lifetime; at any rate within the predictable future. He knows that such an order can be created, because it, or something sufficiently close to it, has been

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realised in Italy in the past, or in other countries – the Swiss or German cities for example, or the great centralised states in his own time. It is not merely that he wishes to create or restore such an order in Italy, but that he sees in it the most desirable condition that can, as both history and observation teach, be attained by men.

The data of observation are drawn mainly from contemporary Italy; as for history, it is for him what had been recorded by the great historians, the writers whom he most admires, Romans, Greeks, the authors of the Old Testament. Where have men risen to their full height? In Periclean Athens, and in the greatest period of human history – the Roman Republic before its decline, when Rome ruled the world. But he thinks well, too, of the reigns of the ‘good’ emperors, from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius. He does not feel that he needs to demonstrate that these were golden hours in the life of humanity; this, he believes, must be self-evident to anyone who contemplates these epochs and compares them with the bad periods – the last years of the Roman Republic, the collapse that followed, the barbarian invasion, the medieval darkness (although he may not have thought of it in these terms), the divisions of Italy, the weakness, the poverty, the misery, the defencelessness of the faction-ridden Italian principalities of his own day before the trampling armies of the great, well organised national states of the north and the west.

He does not trouble to argue this at length: it seems to him perfectly obvious (as it must have done to most men of his age) that Italy was both materially and morally in a bad way. He did not need to explain what he meant by vice, corruption, weakness, lives unworthy of human beings. A good society is a society that enjoys stability, internal harmony, security, justice, a sense of power and of splendour, like Athens in its best days, like Sparta, like the kingdoms of David and Solomon, like Venice as it used to be, but, above all, like the Roman Republic. ‘Truly it is a marvellous thing to consider to what greatness Athens came in the space of a hundred years after she freed herself from the tyranny of Pisistratus. But above all, it is very marvellous to observe what greatness Rome came to after she freed herself from her kings.’<sup>1</sup>

The reason for this is that there were men in these societies who knew how to make cities great. How did they do it? By developing certain faculties in men, of inner moral strength, magnanimity, vigour, vitality, generosity, loyalty, above all public spirit, civic sense,

<sup>1</sup> *Discourses* II 2.

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dedication to the security, power, glory, expansion of the *patria*. The ancients developed these qualities by all kinds of means, among which were dazzling shows and bloodstained sacrifices that excited men's senses and aroused their martial prowess, and especially by the kind of legislation and education that promoted the pagan virtues. Power, magnificence, pride, austerity, pursuit of glory, vigour, discipline, *antiqua virtus* – this is what makes states great. Agesilaus and Timoleon, Brutus and Scipio, are his heroes; not Pisistratus or Julius Caesar who extinguished republican regimes and destroyed their spirit by exploiting human weaknesses. But there is no need to stay within Graeco-Roman confines; Moses and Cyrus are as deserving of respect as Theseus and Romulus – stern, sagacious and incorruptible men who founded nations and were rightly honoured by them.

What was done once can be done again. Machiavelli does not believe in the irreversibility of the historical process or the uniqueness of each of its phases. The glories of antiquity can be revived if only men vigorous and gifted and realistic enough can be mobilised for the purpose. In order to cure degenerate populations of their diseases, these founders of new states or churches may be compelled to have recourse to ruthless measures, force and fraud, guile, cruelty, treachery, the slaughter of the innocent, surgical measures that are needed to restore a decayed body to a condition of health. And, indeed, these qualities may be needed even after a society has been restored to health; for men are weak and foolish and perpetually liable to lapse from the standards that alone can preserve them on the required height. Hence they must be kept in proper condition by measures that will certainly offend against current morality. But if they offend against this morality, in what sense can they be said to be justified? This seems to me to be the nodal point of Machiavelli's entire conception. In one sense they can be justified, and in another not; these senses must be distinguished more clearly than he found it necessary to do, for he was not a philosopher, and did not set himself to the task of examining, or even spelling out, the implications of his own ideas.

Let me try to make this clearer. It is commonly said, especially by those who follow Croce, that Machiavelli divided politics from morals – that he recommended as politically necessary courses which common opinion morally condemns: e.g. treading over corpses for the benefit of the state. Leaving aside the question of what was his conception of the state, and whether<sup>1</sup> he in fact possessed one, it seems to

<sup>1</sup> See p. 38, note 1 above.

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me that this is a false antithesis. For Machiavelli the ends which he advocates are those to which he thinks wise human beings, who understand reality, will dedicate their lives. Ultimate ends in this sense, whether or not they are those of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, are what is usually meant by moral values.

What Machiavelli distinguishes is not specifically moral from specifically political values;<sup>1</sup> what he achieves is not the emancipation of politics from ethics or religion, which Croce and many other commentators regard as his crowning achievement; what he institutes is something that cuts deeper still – a differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life, and therefore two moralities. One is the morality of the pagan world: its values are courage, vigour, fortitude in adversity, public achievement, order, discipline, happiness, strength, justice, above all assertion of one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction; that which for a Renaissance reader Pericles had seen embodied in his ideal Athens, Livy had found in the old Roman Republic, that of which Tacitus and Juvenal lamented the decay and death in their own time. These seem to Machiavelli the best hours of mankind and, Renaissance humanist that he is, he wishes to restore them.

Against this moral universe (moral or ethical no less in Croce's than in the traditional sense, that is, embodying ultimate human ends however these are conceived) stands in the first and foremost place, Christian morality. The ideals of Christianity are charity, mercy, sacrifice, 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 as being of incomparable value – higher than, indeed wholly incommensurable with, any social or political or other 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 Roman sense, can in principle be constructed. It is not simply a question of the unattainability of an ideal because of human imperfection, original sin, or bad luck, or ignorance, or insufficiency of material means. It is not, in other words, the inability in practice on the part of ordinary human

<sup>1</sup> For which he is commended by De Sanctis, and (as Prezzolini points out, *op. cit.*, p. 25, note 2 above) condemned by Maurice Joly in the famous *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (Brussels, 1864), which served as the original of the forged *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (London, 1920).

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beings to rise to a sufficiently high level of Christian virtue (which may, indeed, be the inescapable lot of sinful men on earth) that makes it, for him, impracticable to establish, even to seek after, the good Christian state. It is the very opposite: Machiavelli is convinced that what are commonly thought of as the central Christian virtues, whatever their intrinsic value, are insuperable obstacles to the building of the kind of society that he wishes to see; a society which, moreover, he assumes that it is natural for all normal men to want – the kind of community that, in his view, satisfies men's permanent desires and interests.

If human beings were different from what they are, perhaps they could create an ideal Christian society. But he is clear that human beings would in that event have to differ too greatly from men as they have always been; and it is surely idle to build for, or discuss the prospects of, beings who can never be on earth; such talk is beside the point, and only breeds dreams and fatal delusions. What ought to be done must be defined in terms of what is practicable, not imaginary; statecraft is concerned with action within the limits of human possibility, however wide; men can be changed, but not to a fantastic degree. To advocate ideal measures, suitable only for angels, as previous political writers seem to him too often to have done, is visionary and irresponsible and leads to ruin.

It is important to realise that Machiavelli does not wish to 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 or Spinoza (or eighteenth-century *philosophes* or, for that matter, the first Stoics), who try to define (or redefine) moral notions in such a way as to fit in with the kind of community that, in their view, rational men must, if they are consistent, wish to build, Machiavelli does not fly in the face of common notions – the traditional, accepted moral vocabulary of mankind. He does not say or imply (as various radical philosophical reformers have done) that humility, kindness, unworldliness, faith in God, sanctity, Christian love, unwavering truthfulness, compassion, are bad or unimportant attributes; or that cruelty, bad faith, power politics, sacrifice of innocent men to social needs, and so on, are good ones.

But if history, and the insights of wise statesmen, especially in the ancient world, verified as they have been in practice (*verità effettuale*), are to guide us, it will be seen that it is in fact impossible to combine Christian virtues, for example meekness or the search for spiritual

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salvation, with a satisfactory, stable, vigorous, strong society on earth. Consequently a man must choose. To choose to lead a Christian life is to condemn oneself to political impotence: to being used and crushed by powerful, ambitious, clever, unscrupulous men; if one wishes to build a glorious community like those of Athens or Rome at their best, then one must abandon Christian education and substitute one better suited to the purpose.

Machiavelli is not a philosopher and does not deal in abstractions, but what his thesis comes to is of central concern to political theory: that a fact which men will not face is that these two goals, both, evidently, capable of being believed in by human beings (and, we may add, of raising them to sublime heights), are not compatible with one another. What usually happens, in his view, is that since men cannot bring themselves resolutely to follow either of these paths wherever they may lead ('men take certain middle ways that are very injurious; indeed, they are unable to be altogether good or altogether bad'),<sup>1</sup> they try to effect compromises, vacillate, fall between two stools, and end in weakness and failure.

Anything that leads to political ineffectiveness is condemned by him. In a famous passage in the *Discourses* he says that Christian faith has made men 'weak', easy prey to 'wicked men', since they 'think more about enduring their injuries than about avenging them'.<sup>2</sup> The general effect of Christian teaching has been to crush men's civic spirit, and make them endure humiliations uncomplainingly, so that destroyers and despots encounter too little resistance. Hence Christianity is in this respect compared unfavourably with Roman religion, which made men stronger and more 'ferocious'.

Machiavelli modifies this judgement on Christianity in at least two passages in the *Discourses*. In the first he observes that Christianity has had this unfortunate effect only because it was misinterpreted in a spirit of *ozio* – quietism or indolence – for there is surely nothing in Christianity which forbids 'the betterment and the defence of our country'.<sup>3</sup> In the second passage he declares that 'If religion of this sort had been kept up among the princes of Christendom, in the form in which its giver founded it, Christian states and republics would be more united, much more happy than they are',<sup>4</sup> but the decadent Christianity of the church of Rome has had the opposite effect – the

<sup>1</sup> *Discourses* I 26.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* II 2.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* I 12.

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papacy has destroyed 'all piety and all religion' in Italy, and her unity too.

Even if these passages are taken literally, and are not viewed as pieces of minimum lip-service to avert clerical censorship or persecution, what they assert is that if the church had developed a patriotic and thoroughly militant outlook, on the lines of Roman *antiqua virtus*, and had made men virile, stern, devout and public-spirited, it would have produced more satisfactory social consequences. What it has done is to lead, on the one hand, to corruption and political division – the fault of the papacy – and on the other, to other-worldliness and meek endurance of suffering on earth for the sake of the eternal life beyond the grave. It is this last strain that dissolves the social fabric and helps bullies and oppressors.

In his political attack on the church of Rome, shared by Guicciardini and others in his time, Machiavelli might have found enthusiastic allies in the Reformation (there is no evidence, so far as I know, that news of the 'monks' quarrel' had ever reached his ears). His demand for a Christianity which did not put the blessings of a pure conscience and faith in heaven above earthly success, and exalted love of glory and self-assertion above meekness and resignation, might have been more difficult to meet. Machiavelli finds nothing to criticise in pagan Roman religion at its most vigorous; he demands a similar religion – not necessarily wholly unchristian, but muscular enough to be, for practical purposes, not less effective. It does not seem unreasonable to conclude from this (as Fichte<sup>1</sup> and Prezzolini<sup>2</sup> tell us) that he is an implacable critic of truly Christian institutions, rather than their champion. In this he is followed by all those later thinkers who share with him either his conception of man and his natural needs (eighteenth-century materialists, Nietzsche, social Darwinists) or (like Rousseau and some nineteenth-century positivists) his civic ideals.

It is important to note that Machiavelli does not formally condemn Christian morality, or the approved values of his own society. Unlike systematic moralists like Hobbes or Spinoza he does not attempt to redefine terms to conform with an egoistic rationalism, so that such Christian virtues as, say, pity, humility, self-sacrifice, obedience are shown to be weaknesses or vices. He transposes nothing: the things men call good are indeed good. Words like *buono*, *cattivo*, *onesto*, *inu-*

<sup>1</sup> *Fichte's Werke*, ed. Immanuel Hermann Fichte (Berlin, 1971), vol. 11, pp. 411–13.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.* (p. 25, note 2 above), English version, p. 43.

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*mano* etc. are used by him as they were in the common speech of his time, and indeed of our own. He merely says that the practice of these virtues makes it impossible to build a society which, once it is contemplated, in the pages of history or by the political imagination, will surely awaken in us – in any man – a great longing.

One of the crucial passages is to be found in the tenth chapter of the first book of the *Discourses*: he is distinguishing between the good and the bad Roman emperors on the lines of Tacitus or Dio, and adds 'if a prince is of human birth, he will be frightened away from any imitation of wicked times and will be fired with an immense eagerness [*immenso desiderio*] to follow the ways of good ones' – 'good' in some non-Christian sense, evidently. Whitfield thinks that he is not pessimistic or cynical. Perhaps not cynical – that is a fine point: the line between cynicism (and indeed pessimism too) and an unflinching realism is at times not easy to draw. But Machiavelli is not, in the usual sense of the word, hopeful. Yet like every humanist thinker from his own day to ours, he believes that if only the truth were known – the real truth, not the fairy tales of shallow moralists – it would help to make men understand themselves and make them go farther.

He believes also that the qualities that men need in order to revive these *buoni tempi* are not compatible with those that are urged upon them by Christian education. He does not seek to correct the Christian conception of a good man. He does not say that saints are not saints, or that honourable behaviour is not honourable or to be admired; only that this type of goodness cannot, at least in its traditionally accepted forms, create or maintain a strong, secure and vigorous society, that it is in fact fatal to it. He points out that in our world men who pursue such ideals are bound to be defeated and to lead other people to ruin, since their view of the world is not founded upon the truth, at least not upon *verità effettuale* – the truth that is tested by success and experience – which (however cruel) is always, in the end, less destructive than the other (however noble).

If the two passages mentioned above<sup>1</sup> are to be taken literally, Christianity, at least in theory, could have taken a form not incompatible with the qualities that he celebrates; but, not surprisingly, he does not pursue this line of thought. History took another turn. The idea of such a Christian commonwealth – if he gave it a serious thought – must have seemed to him as Utopian as a world in which all

<sup>1</sup> See p. 47, notes 3 and 4 above.

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or even most men are good. Christian principles have weakened men's civic virtues. Speculation on the form that Christianity might have taken, or could, in unlikely circumstances, still take, can for him only be an idle (and dangerous) pastime.

Christians as he knew them in history and his own experience, that is, men who in their practice actually follow Christian precepts, are good men, but if they govern states in the light of such principles, they lead them to destruction. Like Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, like the well-meaning *Gonfalonieri* of the Florentine Republic, like Savonarola, they are bound to be defeated by the realists (the Medici or the Pope or King Ferdinand of Spain) who understand how to create lasting institutions; build them, if need be, on the bones of innocent victims. I should like to emphasise again that he does not explicitly condemn Christian morality: he merely points out that it is, at least in rulers (but to some degree in subjects too), incompatible with those social ends which he thinks it natural and wise for men to seek. One can save one's soul, or one can found or maintain or serve a great and glorious state; but not always both at once.

This is a vast and eloquent development of Aristotle's *obiter dictum* in the *Politics* that a good man may not be identical with a good citizen (even though Aristotle was not thinking in terms of spiritual salvation). Machiavelli does not explicitly rate either way of life above the other. When he says 'hate is incurred as much by means of good deeds as of bad',<sup>1</sup> he means by 'good deeds' what any man brought up to live by Christian values means. Again, when he says that good faith, integrity are 'praiseworthy'<sup>2</sup> even if they end in failure, he means by 'praiseworthy' that it is right to praise them, for of course what is good (in the ordinary sense) *is* good. When he praises the 'chastity, affability, courtesy, and liberality'<sup>3</sup> of Scipio or Cyrus or Timoleon, or even the 'goodness' of the Medici Pope Leo X, he speaks (whether he is sincere or not) in terms of values that are common to Cicero and Dante, to Erasmus and to us. In the famous fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* he says that liberality, mercy, honour, humanity, frankness, chastity, religion, and so forth, are indeed virtues, and a life lived in the exercise of these virtues would be successful if men were all good. But they are not; and it is idle to hope that they will become so. We must take men as we find them, and seek to improve them along possible, not impossible, lines.

<sup>1</sup> *The Prince*, chapter 19.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, chapter 18.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, chapter 14.

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This may involve the benefactors of men – the founders, educators, legislators, rulers – in terrible cruelties. ‘I am aware that everyone will admit that it would be most praiseworthy for a prince to exhibit such of the above-mentioned qualities as are considered good. But because no ruler can possess or fully practise them, on account of human conditions that do not permit it’,<sup>1</sup> he must at times behave very differently in order to compass his ends. Moses and Theseus, Romulus and Cyrus all killed; what they created lasted, and was glorious; ‘. . . any man who under all conditions insists on making it his business to be good will surely be destroyed among so many who are not good. Hence a prince . . . must acquire the power to be not good, and understand when to use it and when not to use it, in accord with necessity.’<sup>2</sup> ‘If all men were good, this maxim [to break faith if interest dictates] would not be good, but . . . they are bad.’<sup>3</sup> Force and guile must be met with force and guile.

The qualities of the lion and the fox are not in themselves morally admirable, but if a combination of these qualities will alone preserve the city from destruction, then these are the qualities that leaders must cultivate. They must do this not simply to serve their own interest, that is, because this is how one can become a leader, although whether men become leaders or not is a matter of indifference to the author – but because human societies in fact stand in need of leadership, and cannot become what they should be, save by the effective pursuit of power, of stability, *virtù*, greatness. These can be attained when men are led by Scipios and Timoleons or, if times are bad, men of more ruthless character. Hannibal was cruel, and cruelty is not a laudable 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.

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 population is thoroughly corrupt, and needs violent measures to restore it to health, e.g. where a new prince takes over, or a revolution against a bad prince must be made effective. Where a society is relatively sound, or the rule is traditional and hereditary and supported by public sentiment, it would be quite wrong to practise violence for violence’s sake, since its results would be destructive of social order, when the purpose of government is to create order, harmony, strength. If you are a lion and a fox you

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, chapter 15.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, chapter 18.

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can afford virtue – chastity, affability, mercy, humanity, liberality, honour – as Agesilaus and Timoleon, Camillus, Scipio and Marcus did. But if circumstances are adverse, if you find yourself surrounded by treason, what can you do but emulate Philip and Hannibal and Severus?

Mere lust for power is destructive: Pisistratus, Dionysius, Caesar were tyrants and did harm. Agathocles, the tyrant of Syracuse, who gained power by killing his fellow citizens, betraying his friends, being ‘without fidelity, without mercy, without religion’,<sup>1</sup> went too far, and so did not gain glory; ‘his outrageous cruelty and inhumanity together with his countless wicked acts’<sup>2</sup> led to success, but since so much vice was not needed for it, he is excluded from the pantheon; so is the savage Oliverotto da Fermo, his modern counterpart, killed by Cesare Borgia. Still, to be altogether without these qualities guarantees failure; and that makes impossible the only conditions in which Machiavelli believed that normal men could successfully develop. Saints might not need them; anchorites could perhaps practise their virtues in the desert; martyrs will obtain their reward hereafter; but Machiavelli is plainly not interested in these ways of life and does not discuss them. He is a writer about government; he is interested in public affairs; in security, independence, success, glory, strength, vigour, felicity on earth, not in heaven; in the present and future as well as the past; in the real world, not an imaginary one. And for this, given unalterable human limitations, the code preached by the Christian church, if it is taken seriously, will not do.

Machiavelli, we are often told, was not concerned with morals. The most influential of all modern interpretations – that of Benedetto Croce, followed to some extent by Chabod, Russo and others – is that Machiavelli, in Cochrane’s words,<sup>3</sup> ‘did not deny the validity of Christian morality, and he did not pretend that a crime required by political necessity was any less a crime. Rather he discovered . . . that this morality simply did not hold in political affairs and that any policy based on the assumption that it did would end in disaster. His factual, objective description of contemporary political practices, then, is a sign not of cynicism or of detachment, but of anguish.’

This account, it seems to me, contains two basic misinterpretations. The first is that the clash is one between ‘this [i.e. Christian] morality’ and ‘political necessity’. The implication is that there is an incompatibility between, on the one hand, morality – the region of ultimate

<sup>1</sup> *The Prince*, chapter 8. <sup>2</sup> *ibid.* <sup>3</sup> *op. cit.* (p. 25, note 2 above), p. 115.

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values sought after for their own sakes – values recognition of which alone enables us to speak of ‘crimes’ or morally to justify and condemn anything; and on the other, politics – the art of adapting means to ends – the region of technical skills, of what Kant was to call ‘hypothetical imperatives’, which take the form ‘If you want to achieve  $x$  do  $y$  (e.g. betray a friend, kill an innocent man)’, without necessarily asking whether  $x$  is itself intrinsically desirable or not. This is the heart of the divorce of politics from ethics which Croce and many others attribute to Machiavelli. But this seems to me to rest on a mistake.

If ethics is confined to, let us say, Stoic, or Christian or Kantian or even some types of utilitarian ethics, where the source and criterion of value are the word of God, or eternal reason, or some inner sense or knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong, voices which speak directly to individual consciousness with absolute authority, this might have been tenable. But there exists an equally time-honoured ethics, that of the Greek *polis*, of which Aristotle provided the clearest exposition. Since men are beings made by nature to live in communities, their communal purposes are the ultimate values from which the rest are derived, or with which their ends as individuals are identified. Politics – the art of living in a *polis* – is not an activity which can be dispensed with by those who prefer private life: it is not like seafaring or sculpture which those who do not wish to do so need not undertake. Political conduct is intrinsic to being a human being at a certain stage of civilisation, and what it demands is intrinsic to living a successful human life.

Ethics so conceived – the code of conduct, or the ideal to be pursued by the individual – cannot be known save by understanding the purpose and character of his *polis*: still less be capable of being divorced from it, even in thought. This is the kind of pre-Christian morality which Machiavelli takes for granted. ‘It is well known’, says Benedetto Croce,<sup>1</sup> ‘that Machiavelli discovered the necessity and the autonomy of politics, politics which is beyond moral good and evil, which has its own laws against which it is futile to rebel, which cannot be exorcised and banished from the world with holy water.’ Beyond good and evil in some non-Aristotelian, religious or liberal-Kantian sense; but not beyond the good and evil of those communities, ancient or modern, whose sacred values are social through and through. The art of colonisation or of mass murder (let us say) may also have their ‘own laws against which it is futile to rebel’ for those who wish to practise them

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.* (p. 28, note 10 above), p. 60.

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successfully. But if or when these laws collide with those of morality, it is possible and indeed morally imperative to abandon such activities.

But if Aristotle and Machiavelli are right about what men are (and should be – and Machiavelli's ideal is, particularly in the *Discourses*, drawn in vivid colours), political activity is intrinsic to human nature, and while individuals here and there may opt out, the mass of mankind cannot do so; and its communal life determines the moral duties of its members. Hence in opposing the 'laws of politics' to 'good and evil' Machiavelli is not contrasting two 'autonomous' spheres of acting – the 'political' and the 'moral': he is contrasting his own 'political' ethics to another conception of it which governs the lives of persons who are of no interest to him. He is indeed rejecting one morality – the Christian – but not in favour of something that cannot be described as a morality at all, but only as a game of skill, an activity called political, which is not concerned with ultimate human ends, and is therefore not ethical at all.

He is indeed rejecting Christian ethics, but in favour of another system, another moral universe – the world of Pericles or of Scipio, or even of the Duke of Valentino, a society geared to ends just as ultimate as the Christian faith, a society in which men fight and are ready to die for (public) ends which they pursue for their own sakes. They are choosing not a realm of means (called politics) as opposed to a realm of ends (called morals), but opt for a rival (Roman or classical) morality, an alternative realm of ends. In other words the conflict is between two moralities, Christian and pagan (or as some wish to call it, aesthetic), not between autonomous realms of morals and politics.

Nor is this a mere question of nomenclature, unless politics is conceived as being concerned not (as it usually is) with means, skills, methods, technique, 'know how', Croce's *pratica* (whether or not governed by unbreakable rules of its own), but with an independent kingdom of ends of its own, sought for their own sake, a substitute for ethics.<sup>1</sup> When Machiavelli said (in a letter to Francesco Vettori) that he loved his native city more than his own soul, he revealed his basic moral beliefs, a position with which Croce does not credit him.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Meinecke, Prezzolini (op. cit. (p. 25, note 2 above), English version, p. 43) and Ernesto Landi, 'The Political Philosophy of Machiavelli', trans. Maurice Cranston, *History Today* 14 (1964), 550–5, seem to me to approach this position most closely.

<sup>2</sup> Benedetto Croce, 'Per un detto del Machiavelli', *La critica* 28 (1930), 310–12.

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The second thesis in this connection which seems to me mistaken is the idea that Machiavelli viewed the crimes of his society with anguish. (Chabod in his excellent study, unlike Croce and some Croceans, does not insist on this.) This entails that he accepts the dire necessities of the *raison d'état* with reluctance, because he sees no alternative. But there is no evidence for this: there is no trace of agony in his political works, any more than in his plays or letters.

The pagan world that Machiavelli prefers is built on recognition of the need for systematic guile and force by rulers, and he seems to think it natural and not at all exceptional or morally agonising that they should employ these weapons wherever they are needed. Nor is the distinction he draws that between the rulers and the ruled. The subjects or citizens must be Romans too: they do not need the *virtù* of the rulers, but if they also cheat, Machiavelli's maxims will not work; they must be poor, militarised, honest and obedient; if they lead Christian lives, they will accept too uncomplainingly the rule of mere bullies and scoundrels. No sound republic can be built of such materials as these. Theseus and Romulus, Moses and Cyrus, did not preach humility or a view of this world as but a temporary resting place to their subjects.

But it is the first misinterpretation that goes deepest, that which represents Machiavelli as caring little or nothing for moral issues. This is surely not borne out by his own language. Anyone whose thought revolves round central concepts such as the good and the bad, the corrupt and the pure, has an ethical scale in mind in terms of which he gives moral praise and blame. Machiavelli's values are not Christian, but they are moral values.

On this crucial point Hans Baron's criticism of the Croce-Russo thesis<sup>1</sup> seems to me correct. Against the view that for Machiavelli politics were beyond moral criticism Baron cites some of the passionately patriotic, republican and libertarian passages in the *Discourses* in which the (moral) qualities of the citizens of a republic are favourably compared with those of the subjects of a despotic prince. The last chapter of *The Prince* is scarcely the work of a detached, morally neutral observer, or of a self-absorbed man, preoccupied with his own inner personal problems, who looks on public life 'with anguish' as the graveyard of moral principles. Like Aristotle's or Cicero's, Machiavelli's

<sup>1</sup> Hans Baron, 'Machiavelli: the Republican Citizen and the Author of "The Prince"', *English Historical Review* 76 (1961), 217-53, *passim*.

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morality was social and not individual : but it is a morality no less than theirs, not an amoral region, beyond good or evil.

It does not, of course, follow that he was not often fascinated by the techniques of political life as such. The advice given equally to conspirators and their enemies, the professional appraisal of the methods of Oliverotto or Sforza or Baglioni, spring from typical humanist curiosity, the search for an applied science of politics, fascination by knowledge for its own sake, whatever the implications. But the moral ideal, that of the citizen of the Roman Republic, is never far away. Political skills are valued solely as means – for their effectiveness in recreating conditions in which sick men recover their health and can flourish. And this is precisely what Aristotle would have called the moral end proper to man.

This leaves still with us the thorny problem of the relation of *The Prince* to the *Discourses*. But whatever the disparities, the central strain which runs through both is one and the same. The vision – the dream – typical of many writers who see themselves as tough-minded realists – of the strong, united, effective, morally regenerated, splendid and victorious *patria*, whether it is saved by the *virtù* of one man or many – remains central and constant. Political judgements, attitudes to individuals or states, to *fortuna*, and *necessità*, evaluation of methods, degree of optimism, the fundamental mood – these vary between one work and another, perhaps within the same exposition. But the basic values, the ultimate end – Machiavelli's beatific vision – does not vary.

His vision is social and political. Hence the traditional view of him as simply a specialist on how to get the better of others, a vulgar cynic who says that Sunday school precepts are all very well, but in a world full of evil men you too must lie, kill and so on, if you are to get somewhere, is incorrect. The philosophy summarised by 'eat or be eaten, beat or be beaten' – the kind of wordly wisdom to be found in, say, Mazzei<sup>1</sup> or Giovanni Morelli,<sup>2</sup> with whom he has been compared – is not what is central in him. Machiavelli is not specially concerned with the opportunism of ambitious individuals; the ideal before his eyes is a shining vision of Florence or of Italy; in this respect he is a typically impassioned humanist of the Renaissance, save that his ideal is not artistic or cultural but political, unless the state – or regenerated Italy – is considered, in Burckhardt's sense, as an artistic goal. This is very

<sup>1</sup> Ser Lapo Mazzei, *Lettere di un notaro a un mercante del secolo XIV*, ed. Cesare Guasti, 2 vols (Florence, 1880).

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, ed. Vittore Branca (Florence, 1956).

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different from mere advocacy of toughmindedness as such, or of a realism irrespective of its goal.

Machiavelli's values, I should like to repeat, are not instrumental but moral and ultimate, and he calls for great sacrifices in their name. For them he rejects the rival scale – the Christian principles of *ozio* and meekness – not, indeed, as being defective in itself, but as inapplicable to the conditions of real life; and real life for him means not merely (as is sometimes alleged) life as it was lived around him in Italy – the crimes, hypocrisies, brutalities, follies of Florence, Rome, Venice, Milan. This is not the touchstone of reality. His purpose is not to leave unchanged or to reproduce this kind of life, but to lift it to a new plane, to rescue Italy from squalor and slavery, to restore her to health and sanity.

The moral ideal for which he thinks no sacrifice too great – the welfare of the *patria* – is for him the highest form of social existence attainable by man; but attainable, not unattainable; not a world outside the limits of human capacity, given human beings as we know them, that is, creatures compounded out of those emotional, intellectual and physical properties of which history and observation provide examples. He asks for men improved but not transfigured, not superhuman; not for a world of ideal beings unknown on this earth, who, even if they could be created, could not be called human.

If you object to the political methods recommended because they seem to you morally detestable, if you refuse to embark upon them because they are, to use Ritter's word, 'erschreckend', too frightening, Machiavelli has no answer, no argument. In that case you are perfectly entitled to lead a morally good life, be a private citizen (or a monk), seek some corner 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 to the public world and to the men in it that he addresses himself. This is expressed most clearly in his notorious advice to the victor who has to hold down a conquered province. He advises a clean sweep: new governors, new titles, new powers and new men; he should 'make the rich poor, the poor rich, as David did when he became king: "the poor he filled with good things and the rich he sent away empty"'. Besides this, he should build new cities, overthrow those already built, change the inhabitants from one place to another; and in short he should leave nothing in that province

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untouched, and make sure that no rank or position or office or wealth is held by anyone who does not acknowledge it as from you.<sup>1</sup> He should take Philip of Macedon as his model, who 'grew in these ways until he became lord of Greece'.

Now Philip's historian informs us – Machiavelli goes on to say – that he transferred the inhabitants from one province to another 'as herdsmen transfer their herds' from one place to another. Doubtless, Machiavelli continues,

These methods are very cruel, and enemies to all government not merely Christian but human, and any man ought to avoid them and prefer to live a private life rather than to be a king who brings such ruin on men. Notwithstanding, a ruler who does not wish to take that first good way of lawful government, if he wishes to maintain himself, must enter upon this evil one. But men take certain middle ways that are very injurious; indeed, they are unable to be altogether good or altogether bad.<sup>2</sup>

This is plain enough. There are two worlds, that of personal morality and that of public organisation. There are two ethical codes, both ultimate; not two 'autonomous' regions, one of 'ethics', another of 'politics', but two (for him) exhaustive alternatives between two conflicting systems of value. If a man chooses the 'first good way', he must, presumably, give up all hope of Athens and Rome, of a noble and glorious society in which human beings can thrive and grow strong, proud, wise and productive; indeed, they must abandon all hope of a tolerable life on earth: for men cannot live outside society; they will not survive collectively if they are led by men who (like Soderini) are influenced by the first, 'private' morality; they will not be able to realise their minimal goals as men; they will end in a state of moral, not merely political, degradation. But if a man chooses, as Machiavelli himself has done, the second course, then he must suppress his private qualms, if he has any, for it is certain that those who are too squeamish during the remaking of a society, or even during its pursuit and maintenance of its power and glory, will go to the wall. Whoever has chosen to make an omelette cannot do so without breaking eggs.

Machiavelli is sometimes accused of too much relish at the prospect of breaking eggs – almost for its own sake. This is unjust. He thinks these ruthless methods are necessary – necessary as means to provide

<sup>1</sup> *Discourses* I 26.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

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good results, good in terms not of a Christian, but of a secular, humanistic, naturalistic morality. His most shocking examples show this. The most famous, perhaps, is that of Giovanpaolo Baglioni, who caught Julius II during one of his campaigns, and let him escape, when in Machiavelli's view he might have destroyed him and his cardinals and thereby committed a crime 'the greatness of which would have transcended every infamy, every peril that could have resulted from it'.<sup>1</sup>

Like Frederick the Great (who called Machiavelli 'the enemy of mankind' and followed his advice),<sup>2</sup> Machiavelli is, in effect, saying 'Le vin est tiré: il faut le boire.' Once you embark on a plan for the transformation of a society you must carry it through no matter at what cost: to fumble, to retreat, to be overcome by scruples, is to betray your chosen cause. To be a physician is to be a professional, ready to burn, to cauterise, to amputate; if that is what the disease requires, then to stop half-way because of personal qualms, or some rule unrelated to your art and its technique, is a sign of muddle and weakness, and will always give you the worst of both worlds. And there are at least two worlds: each of them has much, indeed everything, to be said for it; but they are two and not one. One must learn to choose between them, and having chosen, not look back.

There is more than one world, and more than one set of virtues: confusion between them is disastrous. One of the chief illusions caused by ignoring this is the Platonic-Hebraic-Christian view that virtuous rulers create virtuous men. This according to Machiavelli is not true. Generosity is a virtue, but not in princes. A generous prince will ruin the citizens by taxing them too heavily, a mean prince (and Machiavelli does not say that meanness is a good quality in private men) will save the purses of the citizens and so add to public welfare. A kind ruler – and kindness is a virtue – may let intriguers and stronger characters dominate him, and so cause chaos and corruption.

Other writers of 'mirrors for princes' are also rich in such maxims, but they do not draw the implications; Machiavelli's use of such generalisations is not theirs; he is not moralising at large, but illustrating a specific thesis: that the nature of men dictates a public morality which is different from, and may come into collision with, the virtues of men who profess to believe in, and try to act by, Christian precepts. These may not be wholly unrealisable in quiet times, in private life.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.* I 27.

<sup>2</sup> It is still not clear how much of this Frederick owed to his mentor Voltaire.

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But they lead to ruin outside this. The analogy between a state and people and an individual is a fallacy: 'a state and a people are governed in a different way from an individual';<sup>1</sup> 'not individual good but common good is what makes cities great'.<sup>2</sup>

One may disagree with this. One may argue that the greatness, glory and wealth of a state are hollow ideals, or detestable, if the citizens are oppressed and treated as mere means to the grandeur of the whole. Like Christian thinkers, or like Constant and the liberals, or like Sismondi and the theorists of the welfare state, one may prefer a state in which citizens are prosperous even though the public treasury is poor, in which government is neither centralised nor omnipotent, nor, perhaps, sovereign at all, but the citizens enjoy a wide degree of individual freedom; one may contrast this favourably with the great authoritarian concentrations of power built by Alexander or Frederick the Great or Napoleon, or the great autocrats of the twentieth century.

If so, one is simply contradicting Machiavelli's thesis: he sees no merit in such loose political textures. They cannot last. Men cannot long survive in such conditions. He is convinced that states which have lost the appetite for power are doomed to decadence and are likely to be destroyed by their more vigorous and better armed neighbours; and Vico and modern 'realistic' thinkers have echoed this.

Machiavelli is possessed by a clear, intense, narrow vision of a society in which human talents can be made to contribute to a powerful and splendid whole. He prefers republican rule in which the interests of the rulers do not conflict with those of the ruled. But (as Macaulay perceived) he prefers a well-governed principate to a decadent republic: and the qualities he admires and thinks capable of being welded into – indeed, indispensable to – a durable society, are not different in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*: energy, boldness, practical skill, imagination, vitality, self-discipline, shrewdness, public spirit, good fortune, *antiqua virtus, virtù* – firmness in adversity, strength of character, as celebrated by Xenophon or Livy. All his more shocking maxims – those responsible for the 'murd'rous Machiavel' of the

<sup>1</sup> '... una repubblica e un popolo si governa altrimenti che un privato', *Legazioni all'Imperatore*, quoted by L. Burd, op. cit. (p. 28, note 10 above), p. 298, note 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Discourses* II 2. This echoes Francesco Patrizi's 'aliae sunt regis virtutes, aliae privatorum', in *De regno et regis institutione*, quoted by Felix Gilbert in 'The Humanist Concept of the Prince and *The Prince* of Machiavelli', *Journal of Modern History* 11 (1939), 449–83: 464, note 34.

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Elizabethan stage – are descriptions of methods of realising this single end: the classical, humanistic and patriotic vision that dominates him.

Let me cite a round dozen of his most notoriously wicked pieces of advice to princes. You must employ terrorism or kindness, as the case dictates. Severity is usually more effective, but humanity, in some situations, brings better fruit. You may excite fear but not hatred, for hatred will destroy you in the end. It is best to keep men poor and on a permanent war footing, for this will be an antidote to the two great enemies of active obedience – ambition and boredom – and the ruled will then feel in constant need of great men to lead them (the twentieth century offers us only too much evidence for this sharp insight). Competition – divisions between classes – in a society is desirable, for it generates energy and ambition in the right degree.

Religion must be promoted even though it may be false, provided it is of a kind which preserves social solidarity and promotes manly virtues, as Christianity has historically failed to do. When you confer benefits (he says, following Aristotle), do so yourself; but if dirty work is to be done, let others do it, for then they, not the prince, will be blamed, and the prince can gain favour by duly cutting off their heads; for men prefer vengeance and security to liberty. Do what you must do in any case, but try to represent it as a special favour to the people. If you must commit a crime do not advertise it beforehand, since otherwise your enemies may destroy you before you destroy them. If your action must be drastic, do it in one fell swoop, not in agonising stages. Do not be surrounded by over-powerful servants – victorious generals are best got rid of, otherwise they may get rid of you.

You may be violent and use your power to overawe, but you must not break your own laws, for that destroys confidence and disintegrates the social texture. Men should either be caressed or annihilated; appeasement and neutralism are always fatal. Excellent plans without arms are not enough or else Florence would still be a republic. Rulers must live in the constant expectation of war. Success creates more devotion than an amiable character; remember the fate of Pertinax, Savonarola, Soderini. Severus was unscrupulous and cruel, Ferdinand of Spain is treacherous and crafty: but by practising the arts of both the lion and the fox they escaped both snares and wolves. Men will be false to you unless you compel them to be true by creating circumstances in which falsehood will not pay. And so on.

These examples are typical of 'the devil's partner'. Now and then doubts assail our author: he wonders whether a man high-minded

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enough to labour to create a state admirable by Roman standards will be tough enough to use the violent and wicked means prescribed; and conversely, whether a sufficiently ruthless and brutal man will be disinterested enough to compass the public good which alone justifies the evil means. Yet Moses and Theseus, Romulus and Cyrus, combined these properties.<sup>1</sup> What has been once, can be again: the implication is optimistic.

All these maxims have one property in common: they are designed to create or resurrect or maintain an order which will satisfy what the author conceives as men's most permanent interests. Machiavelli's values may be erroneous, dangerous, odious; but he is in earnest. He is not cynical. The end is always the same: a state conceived after the analogy of Periclean Athens, or Sparta, but above all the Roman Republic. Such an end, for which men naturally crave (of this he thinks that history and observation provide conclusive evidence), 'excuses' any means; in judging means, look only to the end: if the state goes under, all is lost. Hence the famous paragraph in the forty-first chapter of the third book of *The Discourses* where he says, 'when it is absolutely a question of the safety of one's country, there must be no consideration of just or unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praiseworthy or disgraceful; instead, setting aside every scruple, one must follow to the utmost any plan that will save her life and keep her liberty.' The French have reasoned thus: and the 'majesty of their king and the power of their kingdom' have come from it. Romulus could not have founded Rome without killing Remus. Brutus would not have preserved the Republic if he had not killed his sons. Moses and Theseus, Romulus, Cyrus and the liberators of Athens had to destroy in order to build. Such conduct, so far from being condemned, is held up to admiration by the classical historians and the Bible. Machiavelli is their admirer and faithful spokesman.

What is there, then, about his words, about his tone, which has caused such tremors among his readers? Not, indeed, in his own lifetime – there was a delayed reaction of some quarter of a century, but after that it becomes one of continuous and mounting horror. Fichte, Hegel, Treitschke 'reinterpreted' his doctrines and assimilated them to their own views. But the sense of horror was not thereby greatly mitigated. It is evident that the effect of the shock which he administered was not a temporary one: it has lasted almost to our own day.

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper has drawn my attention to the irony of the fact that the heroes of this supreme realist are all, wholly or in part, mythical.

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Leaving aside the historical problem of why there was no immediate contemporary criticism, let us consider the continuous discomfort caused to its readers during the four centuries that have passed since *The Prince* was placed upon the Index. The great originality and the tragic implications of Machiavelli's theses seem to me to reside in their relation to a Christian civilisation. It was all very well to live by the light of pagan ideals in pagan times; but to preach paganism more than a thousand years after the triumph of Christianity was to do so after the loss of innocence – and to be forcing men to make a conscious choice. The choice is painful because it is a choice between two entire worlds. Men have lived in both, and fought and died to preserve them against each other. Machiavelli has opted for one of them, and he is prepared to commit crimes for its sake.

In killing, deceiving, betraying, Machiavelli's princes and republicans are doing evil things, not condonable in terms of common morality. It is Machiavelli's great merit that he does not deny this.<sup>1</sup> Marsilio, Hobbes, Spinoza, and, in their own fashion, Hegel and Marx, did try to deny it. So did many a defender of the *raison d'état*, imperialist and populist, Catholic and Protestant. These thinkers argue for a single moral system: and seek to show that the morality which justifies, and indeed demands, such deeds, is continuous with, and a more rational form of, the confused ethical beliefs of the uninstructed morality which forbids them absolutely.

From the vantage point of the great social objectives in the name of which these (prima facie wicked) acts are to be performed, they will be seen (so the argument goes) as no longer wicked, but as rational – demanded by the very nature of things – by the common good, or man's true ends, or the dialectic of history – condemned only by those who cannot or will not see a large enough segment of the logical, or theological, or metaphysical, or historical pattern; misjudged, denounced only by the spiritually blind or short-sighted. At worst, these 'crimes' are discords demanded by the larger harmony, and therefore, to those who hear this harmony, no longer discordant.

Machiavelli is not a defender of any such abstract theory. It does not occur to him to employ such casuistry. He is transparently honest

<sup>1</sup> This is recognised by Jacques Maritain (see his *Moral Philosophy* (London, 1964), p. 199) who conceded that Machiavelli 'never called evil good or good evil'. *Machtpolitik* is shown to be what it is: the party with the big battalions; it does not claim that the Lord is on its side: no *Dei gesta per Francos*.

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and clear. In choosing the life of a statesman, or even the life of a citizen with enough civic sense to want your state to be as successful and as splendid as possible, you commit yourself to rejection of Christian behaviour.<sup>1</sup> It may be that Christians are right about the well-being of the individual soul, taken outside the social or political context. But the well-being of the state is not the same as the well-being of the individual – they ‘are governed in a different way’. You will have made your choice: the only crimes are weakness, cowardice, stupidity, which may cause you to draw back in midstream and fail.

Compromise with current morality leads to bungling, which is always despicable, and when practised by statesmen involves men in ruin. The end ‘excuses’ the means, however horrible these may be in terms of even pagan ethics, if it is (in terms of the ideals of Thucydides or Polybius, Cicero or Livy) lofty enough. Brutus was right to kill his children: he saved Rome. Soderini did not have the stomach to perpetrate such deeds and ruined Florence. Savonarola, who had sound ideas about austerity and moral strength and corruption, perished because he did not realise that an unarmed prophet will always go to the gallows.

If one can produce the right result by using the devotion and affection of men, let this be done by all means. There is no value in causing suffering as such. But if one cannot, then Moses, Romulus, Theseus, Cyrus are the exemplars, and fear must be employed. There is no sinister Satanism in Machiavelli, nothing of Dostoevsky’s great sinner, pursuing evil for evil’s sake. To Dostoevsky’s famous question ‘Is everything permitted?’, Machiavelli (who for Dostoevsky would surely have been an atheist) answers ‘Yes, if the end – that is, the pursuit of a society’s basic interests in a specific situation – cannot be realised in any other way.’

This position has not been properly understood by some of those who claim to be not unsympathetic to Machiavelli. Figgis, for example,<sup>2</sup> thinks that he permanently suspended ‘the *habeas corpus* acts of the whole human race’, that is to say, that he advocated methods of terrorism because for him the situation was always critical, always

<sup>1</sup> At the risk of exhausting the patience of the reader, I must repeat that this is a conflict not of pagan statecraft with Christian morals, but of pagan morals (indissolubly connected with social life and inconceivable without it) with Christian ethics, which, whatever its implication for politics, can be stated independently of it, as, e.g., Aristotle’s or Hegel’s ethics cannot.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.* (p. 37, note 1 above), p. 76.

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desperate, so that he confused ordinary political principles with rules needed, if at all, only in extreme cases.

Others – perhaps the majority of his interpreters – look on him as the originator or at least a defender of what later came to be called ‘raison d’état’, ‘Staatsräson’, ‘ragion di stato’ – the justification of immoral acts when undertaken on behalf of the state in exceptional circumstances. More than one scholar has pointed out, reasonably enough, that the notion that desperate cases require desperate remedies – that ‘necessity knows no law’ – is to be found not only in antiquity but equally in Aquinas and Dante and other medieval writers long before Bellarmino or Machiavelli.

These parallels seem to me to rest on a deep but characteristic misunderstanding of Machiavelli’s thesis. He is not saying that while in normal situations current morality – that is, the Christian or semi-Christian code of ethics – should prevail, yet abnormal conditions can occur, in which the entire social structure in which alone this code can function becomes jeopardised, and that in emergencies of this kind acts which are usually regarded as wicked and rightly forbidden, are justified.

This is the position of, among others, those who think that all morality ultimately rests on the existence of certain institutions – say Roman Catholics who regard the existence of the church and the papacy as indispensable to Christianity – or nationalists who see in the political power of a nation the sole source of spiritual life. Such persons maintain that extreme and ‘frightful’ measures needed for protecting the state or the church or the national culture in moments of acute crisis may be justified, since the ruin of these institutions may fatally damage the indispensable framework of all other values. This is a doctrine in terms of which both Catholics and Protestants, both conservatives and communists, have defended enormities which freeze the blood of ordinary men.

But this is not Machiavelli’s position. For the defenders of the *raison d’état*, the sole justification of these measures is that they are exceptional – that they are needed to preserve a system the purpose of which is precisely to preclude the need for such odious measures, so that the sole justification of such steps is that they will end the situations that render them necessary. But for Machiavelli these measures are, in a sense, themselves quite normal. No doubt they are called for only by extreme need; yet political life tends to generate a good many such needs, of varying degrees of ‘extremity’; hence Baglioni, who

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shied away from the logical consequences of his own policies, was clearly unfit to rule.

The notion of *raison d'état* entails a conflict of values which may be agonising to morally good and sensitive men. For Machiavelli there is no conflict. Public life has its own morality, to which Christian principles (or any absolute personal values) tend to be a gratuitous obstacle. This life has its own standards: it does not require perpetual terror: but it approves, or at least permits, the use of force where it is needed to promote the ends of political society.

Sheldon Wolin<sup>1</sup> seems to me right in insisting that Machiavelli believes in a permanent 'economy of violence' – the need for a consistent reserve of force always in the background to keep things going in such a way that the virtues admired by him and by the classical thinkers to whom he appeals can be protected and allowed to flower. Men brought up within a community in which such force, or its possibility, is used rightly, will live the happy lives of Greeks or Romans during their finest hours. They will be characterised by vitality, genius, variety, pride, power, success (Machiavelli scarcely ever speaks of arts or sciences); but it will not, in any clear sense, be a Christian commonwealth. The moral conflict which this situation raises will trouble only those who are not prepared to abandon either course: those who assume that the two incompatible lives are in fact reconcilable.

But to Machiavelli the claims of the official morality are scarcely worth discussing: they are not translatable into social practice: 'If all men were good . . .', but he feels sure that men can never be improved beyond the point at which considerations of power are relevant. If morals relate to human conduct, and men are by nature social, Christian morality cannot be a guide for normal social existence. It remained for someone to state this. Machiavelli did so.

One is obliged to choose: and in choosing one form of life, give up the other. That is the central point. If Machiavelli is right, if it is in principle (or in fact: the frontier seems dim) impossible to be morally good and do one's duty as this was conceived by common European, and especially Christian ethics, and at the same time build Sparta or Periclean Athens or the Rome of the Republic or even of the Antonines, then a conclusion of the first importance follows: that the belief that the correct, objectively valid solution to the question of how men should live can in principle be discovered, is itself in principle not

<sup>1</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (London, 1960), pp. 220–4.

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true. This was a truly *erschreckend* proposition. Let me try to put it in its proper context.

One of the deepest assumptions of western political thought is the doctrine, scarcely questioned during its long ascendancy, that there exists some single principle which not only regulates the course of the sun and the stars, but prescribes their proper behaviour to all animate creatures. Animals and sub-rational beings of all kinds follow it by instinct; higher beings attain to consciousness of it, and are free to abandon it, but only to their doom. This doctrine, in one version or another, has dominated European thought since Plato; it has appeared in many forms, and has generated many similes and allegories; at its centre is the vision of an impersonal Nature or Reason or cosmic purpose, or of a divine Creator whose power has endowed all things and creatures each with a specific function; these functions are elements in a single harmonious whole, and are intelligible in terms of it alone.

This was often expressed by images taken from architecture: of a great edifice of which each part fits uniquely in the total structure; or from the human body as an all-embracing organic whole; or from the life of society as a great hierarchy, with God as the *ens realissimum* at the summit of two parallel systems – the feudal order and the natural order – stretching downwards from Him, and reaching upwards to Him, obedient to His will. Or it is seen as the Great Chain of Being, the Platonic-Christian analogue of the world-tree Ygdrasil, which links time and space and all that they contain. Or it has been represented by an analogy drawn from music, as an orchestra in which each instrument or group of instruments has its own tune to play in the infinitely rich polyphonic score. When, after the seventeenth century, harmonic metaphors replaced polyphonic images, the instruments were no longer conceived as playing specific melodies, but as producing sounds which, although they might not be wholly intelligible to any given group of players (and might even sound discordant or superfluous if taken in isolation), yet contributed to the total pattern perceptible only from a loftier standpoint.

The idea of the world and of human society as a single intelligible structure is at the root of all the many various versions of natural law – the mathematical harmonies of the Pythagoreans, the logical ladder of Platonic Forms, the genetic-logical pattern of Aristotle, the divine *Logos* of the Stoics and the Christian churches and of their secularised offshoots. The advance of the natural sciences generated more

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empirically conceived versions of this image as well as anthropomorphic similes: of Dame Nature as an adjuster of conflicting tendencies (as in Hume or Adam Smith), of Mistress Nature as the teacher of the best way to happiness (as in the works of some French Encyclopedists), of Nature as embodied in the actual customs or habits of organised social wholes; biological, aesthetic, psychological similes have reflected the dominant ideas of an age.

This unifying monistic pattern is at the very heart of traditional rationalism, religious and atheistic, metaphysical and scientific, transcendental and naturalistic, that has been characteristic of western civilisation. It is this rock, upon which western beliefs and lives had been founded, that Machiavelli seems, in effect, to have split open. So great a reversal cannot, of course, be due to the acts of a single individual. It could scarcely have taken place in a stable social and moral order; many beside him, ancient sceptics, medieval nominalists and secularists, Renaissance humanists, doubtless supplied their share of the dynamite. The purpose of this essay is to suggest that it was Machiavelli who lit the fatal fuse.

If to ask what are the ends of life is to ask a real question, it must be capable of being correctly answered. To claim rationality in matters of conduct was to claim that correct and final solutions to such questions can in principle be found.

When such solutions were discussed in earlier periods, it was normally assumed that the perfect society could be conceived, at least in outline; for otherwise what standard could one use to condemn existing arrangements as imperfect? It might not be realisable here, below. Men were too ignorant or too weak or too vicious to create it. Or it was said (by some materialistic thinkers in the centuries following *The Prince*) that it was technical means that were lacking, that no one had yet discovered methods of overcoming the material obstacles to the golden age; that we were not technologically or educationally or morally sufficiently advanced. But it was never said that there was something incoherent in the very notion itself.

Plato and the Stoics, the Hebrew prophets and Christian medieval thinkers and the writers of Utopias from More onward had a vision of what it was that men fell short of; they claimed, as it were, to be able to measure the gap between the reality and the ideal. But if Machiavelli is right, this tradition – the central current of western thought – is fallacious. For if his position is valid then it is impossible to construct even the notion of such a perfect society, for there exist at least two

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sets of virtues – let us call them the Christian and the pagan – which are not merely in practice, but in principle incompatible.

If men practise Christian humility, they cannot also be inspired by the burning ambitions of the great classical founders of cultures and religions; if their gaze is centred upon the world beyond – if their ideas are infected by even lip-service to such an outlook – they will not be likely to give all that they have to an attempt to build a perfect city. If suffering and sacrifice and martyrdom are not always evil and inescapable necessities, but may be of supreme value in themselves, then the glorious victories over fortune which go to the bold, the impetuous and the young might neither be won nor thought worth winning. If spiritual goods alone are worth striving for, then of how much value is the study of *necessità* – of the laws that govern nature and human lives – by the manipulation of which men might accomplish unheard-of things in the arts and the sciences and the organisation of social lives?

To abandon the pursuit of secular goals may lead to disintegration and a new barbarism; but even if this is so, is it the worst that could happen? Whatever the differences between Plato and Aristotle, or of either of these thinkers from the Sophists or Epicureans or the other Greek schools of the fourth and later centuries, they and their disciples, the European rationalists and empiricists of the modern age, were agreed that the study of reality by minds undeluded by appearances could 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, or different ends for men of different kinds or in dissimilar historical environments. Objectivists and universalists were opposed by relativists and subjectivists, metaphysicians by empiricists, theists by atheists. There was profound disagreement about moral issues; but what none of these thinkers, not even the sceptics, had suggested was that there might exist ends – ends in themselves in terms of which alone everything else was justified – which were equally ultimate, but incompatible with one another, that there might exist no single universal overarching standard that would enable a man to choose rationally between them.

This was indeed a profoundly upsetting conclusion. It entailed that if men wished to live and act consistently, and understand what goals they were pursuing, they were obliged to examine their moral values. What if they found that they were compelled to make a choice

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between two incommensurable systems, to choose as they did without the aid of an infallible measuring rod which certified one form of life as being superior to all others and could be used to demonstrate this to the satisfaction of all rational men? Was it, perhaps, this awful truth, implicit in Machiavelli's exposition, that has upset the moral consciousness of men, and has haunted their minds so permanently and obsessively ever since?

Machiavelli did not himself propound it. There was no problem and no agony for him; he shows no trace of scepticism or relativism; he chose his side, and took little interest in the values that this choice ignored or flouted. The conflict between his scale of values and that of conventional morality clearly did not (*pace* Croce and the other defenders of the 'anguished humanist' interpretation) seem to worry Machiavelli himself. It upset only those who came after him, and were not prepared, on the one hand, to abandon their own moral values (Christian or humanist) together with the entire way of thought and action of which these were a part; nor, on the other hand, to deny the validity of, at any rate, much of Machiavelli's analysis of the political facts, and the (largely pagan) values and outlook that went with it, embodied in the social structure which he painted so brilliantly and convincingly.

Whenever a thinker, however distant from us in time or culture, still stirs passion, enthusiasm or indignation, or any kind of intense debate, it is generally the case that he has propounded a thesis which upsets some deeply established *idée reçue*, a thesis which those who wish to cling to the old conviction nevertheless find it hard or impossible to dismiss or refute. This is the case with Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx.

I should like to suggest that it is Machiavelli's juxtaposition of the two outlooks – the two incompatible moral worlds, as it were – in the minds of his readers, and the collision and acute moral discomfort which follow, that, over the years, has been responsible for the desperate efforts to interpret his doctrines away, to represent him as a cynical and therefore ultimately shallow defender of power politics, or as a diabolist, or as a patriot prescribing for particularly desperate situations which seldom arise, or as a mere time-server, or as an embittered political failure, or as a mere mouthpiece of truths we have always known but did not like to utter, or again as the enlightened translator of universally accepted ancient social principles into empirical terms, or as a crypto-republican satirist (a descendant of Juvenal, a forerunner of Orwell); or as a cold scientist, a mere political techno-

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logist free from moral implications; or as a typical Renaissance publicist practising a now obsolete genre; or in any of the numerous other roles that have been and are still being cast for him.

Machiavelli may have possessed some, at any rate, of these attributes, but concentration on one or other of them as constituting his essential, 'true' character, seems to me to stem from reluctance to face, still more discuss, the uncomfortable truth which Machiavelli had, unintentionally, almost casually, uncovered; namely, that not all ultimate values are necessarily compatible with one another – that there might be a conceptual (what used to be called 'philosophical') and not merely a material obstacle to the notion of the single ultimate solution which, if it were only realised, would establish the perfect society.

### III

Yet if no such solution can, even in principle, be formulated, then all political and, indeed, moral problems are thereby transformed. This is not a division of politics from ethics. It is the uncovering of the possibility of more than one system of values, with no criterion common to the systems whereby a rational choice can be made between them. This is not the rejection of Christianity for paganism (although Machiavelli clearly preferred the latter), nor of paganism for Christianity (which, at least in its historical form, he thought incompatible with the basic needs of normal men), but the setting of them side by side, with the implicit invitation to men to choose either a good, virtuous, private life, or a good, successful, social existence, but not both.

What has been shown by Machiavelli, who is often (like Nietzsche) congratulated for tearing off hypocritical masks, brutally revealing the truth, and so on, is not that men profess one thing and do another (although no doubt he shows this too), but that when they assume that the two ideals are compatible, or perhaps are even one and the same ideal, and do not allow this assumption to be questioned, they are guilty of bad faith (as the existentialists call it, or of 'false consciousness', to use a Marxist formula), which their actual behaviour exhibits. Machiavelli calls the bluff not just of official morality – the hypocrisies of ordinary life – but of one of the foundations of the central western philosophical tradition, the belief in the ultimate compatibility of all genuine values. His own withers are unwrung. He has made his choice. He seems wholly unworried by, indeed scarcely aware of, parting company with traditional western morality.

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But the question that his writings have dramatised, if not for himself, then for others in the centuries that followed, is this: what reason have we for supposing that justice and mercy, humility and *virtù*, happiness and knowledge, glory and liberty, magnificence and sanctity, will always coincide, or indeed be compatible at all? Poetic justice is, after all, so called not because it does, but because it does not, as a rule, occur in the prose of ordinary life, where, *ex hypothesi*, a very different kind of justice operates: 'a state and a people are governed in a different way from an individual'. Hence what talk can there be of indestructible rights, either in the medieval or the liberal sense? The wise man must eliminate fantasies from his own head, and should seek to dispel them from the heads of others; or, if they are too resistant, he should at least, as Pareto or Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor recommended, exploit them as a means to a viable society.

'The march of world history stands outside virtue, vice and justice,' said Hegel. If for 'the march of history' you substitute 'a well governed *patria*', and interpret Hegel's notion of virtue as it is understood by Christians or ordinary men, then Machiavelli is one of the earliest proponents of this doctrine. Like all great innovators, he is not without ancestry. But the names of Palmieri and Pontano, and even of Carneades and Sextus Empiricus, have left little mark on European thought.

Croce has rightly insisted that Machiavelli is not detached or cynical or irresponsible. His patriotism, his republicanism, his commitment, are not in doubt. He suffered for his convictions. He thought continually about Florence and Italy, and of how to save them. Yet it is not his character, nor his plays, his poetry, his histories, his diplomatic or political activities, that have gained him his unique fame.<sup>1</sup> Nor can

<sup>1</sup> The moral of his best comedy, *Mandragola*, seems to me close to that of the political tracts: that the ethical doctrines professed by the characters are wholly at variance with what they do to attain their various ends: virtually every one of them in the end obtains what he wants; if Callimaco had resisted temptation, or the lady he seduces had been smitten with remorse, or Fra Timoteo attempted to practise the maxims of the Fathers and the Schoolmen with which he liberally seasons his speeches, this could not have occurred. But all turns out for the best, though not from the point of view of accepted morality. If the play castigates hypocrisy and stupidity, the standpoint is not that of virtue but of candid hedonism. The notion that Callimaco is a kind of prince in private life, successful in creating and maintaining his own world by the correct use of guile and fraud, the exercise of *virtù*, a bold challenge to *fortuna*, and so on, seems plausible. For this see Henry Paolucci, Introduction to *Mandragola* (New York, 1957).

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this be due only to his psychological or sociological imagination. His psychology is often excessively primitive. He scarcely seems to allow for the bare possibility of sustained and genuine altruism; he refuses to consider the motives of men who are prepared to fight against enormous odds, who ignore *necessità* and are prepared to lose their lives in a hopeless cause.

His distrust of unworldly attitudes, absolute principles divorced from empirical observation, is fanatically strong – almost romantic in its violence; the vision of the great prince playing upon human beings like an instrument intoxicates him. He assumes that different societies must always be at war with each other, since they have differing purposes. He sees history as an endless process of cut-throat competition, in which the only goal that rational men can have is to succeed in the eyes of their contemporaries and of posterity. He is good at bringing fantasies down to earth, but he assumes, as Mill was to complain about Bentham, that this is enough. He allows too little to the ideal impulses of men. He has no historical sense and little sense of economics. He has no inkling of the technological progress which is about to transform political and social life, and in particular the art of war. He does not understand how either individuals, communities or cultures develop and transform themselves. Like Hobbes, he assumes that the argument or motive for self-preservation automatically outweighs all others.

He tells men above all not to be fools: to follow a principle when this may involve you in ruin is absurd, at least if judged by worldly standards; other standards he mentions respectfully, but takes no interest in them: those who adopt them are not likely to create anything that will perpetuate their name. His Romans are no more real than the stylised figures in his brilliant comedies. His human beings have so little inner life or capacity for cooperation or social solidarity that, as in the case of Hobbes's not dissimilar creatures, it is difficult to see how they could develop enough reciprocal confidence to create a lasting social whole, even under the perpetual shadow of carefully regulated violence.

Few would deny that Machiavelli's writings, more particularly *The Prince*, have scandalised mankind more deeply and continuously than any other political treatise. The reason for this, let me say again, is not the discovery that politics is the play of power – that political relationships between and within independent communities involve the use of force and fraud, and are unrelated to the principles

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professed by the players. That knowledge is as old as conscious thought about politics – certainly as old as Thucydides and Plato. Nor is it merely caused by the examples that he offers of success in acquiring or holding power – the descriptions of the massacre at Sinigaglia or the behaviour of Agathocles or Oliverotto da Fermo are no more or less horrifying than similar stories in Tacitus or Guicciardini. The proposition that crime can pay is nothing new in western historiography.

Nor is it merely his recommendation of ruthless measures that so upsets his readers: Aristotle had long ago allowed that exceptional situations might arise, that principles and rules could not be rigidly applied to all situations; the advice to rulers in the *Politics* is tough-minded enough; Cicero is aware that critical situations demand exceptional measures – *ratio publicae utilitatis*, *ratio status*, were familiar in the thought of the Middle Ages. ‘Necessity knows no law’ is a Thomist sentiment: Pierre d’Auvergne says much the same. Harrington said this in the following century, and Hume applauded him.

These opinions were not thought original by these, or perhaps any, thinkers. Machiavelli did not originate, nor did he make much use of, the notion of *raison d’état*. He stressed will, boldness, address, at the expense of the rules laid down by calm *ragione*, to which his colleagues in the *Pratiche Fiorentine*, and perhaps the Oricellari Gardens, may have appealed. So did Leon Battista Alberti when he declared that *fortuna* crushes only the weak and propertyless; so did contemporary poets; so, too, in his own fashion, did Pico della Mirandola in his great apostrophe to the powers of man, who, unlike the angels, can transform himself into any shape – the ardent image which lies at the heart of European humanism in the north as well as the Mediterranean.

Far more original, as has often been noted, is Machiavelli’s divorce of political behaviour as a field of study from the theological world-picture in terms of which this topic is discussed before him (even by Marsilio) and after him. Yet it is not his secularism, however audacious in his own day, that could have disturbed the contemporaries of Voltaire or Bentham or their successors. What shocked them is something different.

Machiavelli’s cardinal achievement is, let me repeat, his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity. It stems from his *de facto* recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a

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result of abnormality or accident or error – the clash of Antigone and Creon or in the story of Tristan – but (this was surely new) as part of the normal human situation.

For those who look on such collisions as rare, exceptional and disastrous, the choice to be made is necessarily an agonising experience for which, as a rational being, one cannot prepare (since no rules apply). But for Machiavelli, at least of *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, *Mandragola*, there is no agony. One chooses as one chooses because one knows what one wants, and is ready to pay the price. One chooses classical civilisation rather than the Theban desert, Rome and not Jerusalem, whatever the priests may say, because such is one's nature, and – he is no existentialist or romantic individualist *avant la parole* – because it is that of men in general, at all times, everywhere. If others prefer solitude or martyrdom, he shrugs his shoulders. Such men are not for him. He has nothing to say to them, nothing to argue with them about. All that matters to him and those who agree with him is that such men be not allowed to meddle with politics or education or any of the cardinal factors in human life; their outlook unfits them for such tasks.

I do not mean that Machiavelli explicitly asserts that there is a pluralism or even a dualism of values between which conscious choices must be made. But this follows from the contrasts he draws between the conduct he admires and that which he condemns. He seems to take for granted the obvious superiority of classical civic virtue and brushes aside Christian values, as well as conventional morality, with a disparaging or patronising sentence or two, or smooth words about the misinterpretation of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This worries or infuriates those who

<sup>1</sup> e.g. in the passages from the *Discourses* cited above, or when he says, 'I believe the greatest good to be done and the most pleasing to God is that which one does to one's native city.' I must thank Myron Gilmore for this reference to *A Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence* (Gilbert, op. cit. (p. 33, note 4 above), vol. 1, pp. 113–14). This sentiment is by no means unique in Machiavelli's works: but, leaving aside his wish to flatter Leo X, or the liability of all authors to fall into the clichés of their own time, are we to suppose that Machiavelli means us to think that when Philip of Macedon transplanted populations in a manner that (unavoidable as it is said to have been) caused even Machiavelli a qualm, what Philip did, provided it was good for Macedon, was pleasing to God and, *per contra*, that Giampaolo Baglioni's failure to kill the Pope and the Curia was displeasing to Him? Such a notion of the Deity is, to say the least, remote from that of the New Testament. Are the needs of the *patria* automatically identical with the will of the Almighty? Are those who permit themselves to doubt this in danger of

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disagree with him the more because it goes against their convictions without seeming to be aware of doing so – and recommends wicked courses as obviously the most sensible, something that only fools or visionaries will reject.

If what Machiavelli believed is true, this undermines one major assumption of western thought: namely that somewhere in the past or the future, in this world or the next, in the church or the laboratory, in the speculations of the metaphysician or the findings of the social scientist, or in the uncorrupted heart of the simple good man, there is to be found the final solution of the question of how men should live. If this is false (and if more than one equally valid answer to the question can be returned, then it is false) the idea of the sole true, objective, universal human ideal crumbles. The very search for it becomes not merely Utopian in practice, but conceptually incoherent.

One can surely see how this might seem unfaceable to men – believers or atheists, empiricists or apriorists – brought up on the opposite assumption. Nothing could well be more upsetting to those brought up in a monistic religious or, at any rate, moral, social or political system, than a breach in it. This is the dagger of which Meinecke speaks, with which Machiavelli inflicted the wound that has never healed; even though Felix Gilbert is right in thinking that he did not bear the scars of it himself. For he remained a monist, albeit a pagan one.

Machiavelli was doubtless guilty of much confusion and exaggeration. He confused the proposition that ultimate ideals may be incompatible with the very different proposition that the more conventional human ideals – founded on ideas of natural law, brotherly love, and

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heresy? Machiavelli may at times have been represented as too Machiavellian; but to suppose that he believed that the claims of God and of Caesar were perfectly reconcilable reduces his central thesis to absurdity. Yet of course this does not prove that he lacked all Christian sentiment: the *Esortazione alla penitenza* composed in the last year of his life (if it is genuine and not a later forgery) may well be wholly sincere, as Ridolfi and Alderisio believe; Capponi may have exaggerated the extent to which he 'drove religion from his heart', even though 'it was not wholly extinct in his thought'. The point is that there is scarcely any trace of such *états d'âme* in his political writings, with which alone we are concerned. There is an interesting discussion of this by Giuseppe Prezzolini in his already cited article (p. 41, note 1 above), in which this attitude is traced to Augustine, and Croce's thesis is, by implication, controverted.

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human goodness – were unrealisable and that those who acted on the opposite assumption were fools, and at times dangerous ones; and he attributed this dubious proposition to antiquity, and believed that it was verified by history. The first of these assertions strikes at the root of all doctrines which believe in the possibility of attaining, or at least formulating, final solutions; the second is empirical, commonplace, and not self-evident. The two propositions are not, in any case, identical or logically connected.

Moreover he exaggerated wildly: the idealised types of the Periclean Greek or the Roman of the old Republic may be irreconcilable with the ideal citizen of a Christian commonwealth (supposing such were conceivable), but in practice – above all in history, to which our author went for illustrations if not for evidence – pure types seldom obtain: mixtures and compounds and compromises and forms of communal life that do not fit into easy classifications, but which neither Christians, nor liberal humanists, nor Machiavelli would be compelled by their beliefs to reject, can be conceived without too much intellectual difficulty. Still, to attack and inflict lasting damage on a central assumption of an entire civilisation is an achievement of the first order.

Machiavelli does not affirm this dualism. He merely takes for granted the superiority of Roman *antiqua virtus* (which may be maddening to those who do not) over the Christian life as taught by the church. He utters a few casual words about what Christianity might have become, but does not expect it to change its actual character. There he leaves the matter. Anyone who believes in Christian morality, and regards the Christian commonwealth as its embodiment, but at the same time largely accepts the validity of Machiavelli's political and psychological analysis and does not reject the secular heritage of Rome – a man in this predicament is faced with a dilemma which, if Machiavelli is right, is not merely unsolved but insoluble. This is the Gordian knot which, according to Vanini and Leibniz, the author of *The Prince* had tied – a knot which can be cut but not undone.<sup>1</sup> Hence the efforts to dilute his doctrines, or interpret them in such a way as to remove their sting.

After Machiavelli, doubt is liable to infect all monistic constructions. The sense of certainty that there is somewhere a hidden treasure – the final solution to our ills – and that some path must lead to it (for,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Prezzolini, *op. cit.* (p. 25, note 2 above), English version, pp. 222–3.

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in principle, it must be discoverable); or else, to alter the image, the conviction that the fragments constituted by our beliefs and habits are all pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which (since there is an *a priori* guarantee for this) can, in principle, be solved, so that it is only because of lack of skill or stupidity or bad fortune that we have not so far succeeded in discovering the solution, whereby all interests will be brought into harmony – this fundamental belief of western political thought has been severely shaken. Surely in an age that looks for certainties, this is sufficient to account for the unending efforts, more numerous today than ever, to explain *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, or to explain them away?

This is the negative implication. There is also one that is positive, and might have surprised and perhaps displeased Machiavelli. 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. Such certainty is one of the great justifications of fanaticism, compulsion, persecution. But if not all values are compatible with one another, and choices must be made for no better reason than that each value is what it is, and we choose it for what it is, and not because it can be shown on some single scale to be higher than another; if we choose forms of life because we believe in them, because we take them for granted, or, upon examination, find that we are morally unprepared to live in any other way (although others choose differently); if rationality and calculation can be applied only to means or subordinate ends, but never to ultimate ends; then a picture emerges different from that constructed round the ancient principle that there is only one good for men.

If there is only one solution to the puzzle, then the only problems are firstly how to find it, then how to realise it, and finally how to convert others to the solution by persuasion or by force. But if this is not so (Machiavelli contrasts two ways of life, but there could be, and, save for fanatical monists, there obviously are, more than two), then the path is open to empiricism, pluralism, toleration, compromise. Toleration is historically the product of the realisation of the irreconcilability of equally dogmatic faiths, and the practical improbability of complete victory of one over the other. Those who wished to survive realised that they had to tolerate error. They gradually came to see merits in diversity, and so became sceptical about definitive solutions in human affairs.

But it is one thing to accept something in practice, another to

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justify it rationally. Machiavelli's 'scandalous' writings begin the latter process. This was a major turning point, and its intellectual consequences, wholly unintended by its originator, were, by a fortunate irony of history (which some call its dialectic), the bases of the very liberalism that Machiavelli would surely have condemned as feeble and characterless, lacking in single-minded pursuit of power, in splendour, in organisation, in *virtù*, in power to discipline unruly men against huge odds into one energetic whole. Yet he is, in spite of himself, one of the makers of pluralism, and of its – to him – perilous acceptance of toleration.

By breaking the original unity he helped to cause men to become aware of the necessity of having to make agonising choices between incompatible alternatives in public and in private life (for the two could not, it became obvious, be genuinely kept distinct). His achievement is of the first order, if only because the dilemma has never given men peace since it came to light (it remains unsolved, but we have learnt to live with it). Men had, no doubt, in practice, often enough experienced the conflict which Machiavelli made explicit. He converted its expression from a paradox into something approaching a commonplace.

The sword of which Meinecke spoke has not lost its edge: the wound has not healed. To know the worst is not always to be liberated from its consequences; nevertheless it is preferable to ignorance. It is this painful truth that Machiavelli forced on our attention, not by formulating it explicitly, but perhaps the more effectively by relegating much uncriticised traditional morality to the realm of Utopia. This is what, at any rate, I should like to suggest. Where more than twenty interpretations hold the field, the addition of one more cannot be deemed an impertinence. At worst it will be no more than yet another attempt to solve the problem, now more than four centuries old, of which Croce at the end of his long life spoke as 'Una questione che forse non si chiuderà mai: la questione del Machiavelli'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Quaderni della 'Critica'* 5 No 14 (July 1949), 1–9.