NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

(1469-1527)

Portrait by Santi di Tito
in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence
where Machiavelli worked as Secretary of the Chancery

Sources
Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*
Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses*
Isaiah Berlin, ‘The originality of Machiavelli’ in *The Proper Study of Mankind*
Stuart Hampshire, ‘Morality and Machiavelli’ (chapter 5) in *Innocence and Experience*.
Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*
Bertrand Russell, ‘Machiavelli’ in *History of Western Philosophy*
Wikipedia, *Niccolò Machiavelli*

Note: This seminar text partly consists of (sometimes literal) excerpts and summaries of texts from the above sources, to which I often, but not always, explicitly refer. Some parts of this seminar text are original.

Introduction
We will discuss the following topics:

- Machiavelli and his time
- Machiavelli’s empirical method of investigation
- Machiavellianism
- Machiavelli’s ‘new ethics’, which sharply contrasted with orthodox, religious and classical ethics.
- Famous statements by Machiavelli
- Machiavelli’s political philosophy described in his *The Prince* and *Discourses*
- Different explanations of Machiavelli
- Isaiah Berlin’s explanation
- Machiavelli’s value-pluralism and conflicts of values
- Topicality of Machiavelli: ‘dirty hands politics’
- General discussion of Machiavelli’s controversial views. [Students are invited to discuss the question whether Machiavelli was right or wrong. Arguments for and against Machiavelli’s philosophy.]
- Stuart Hampshire’s reply to Machiavelli [With the help of Hampshire’s reply I will conclude with an overall judgment about Machiavelli’s approach]

Who was Machiavelli?
Niccolò Machiavelli lived from 1469 – 1527. He was an Italian historian, politician, diplomat, philosopher and writer in Florence during the Renaissance.

The Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, where Machiavelli worked as Secretary in the chancery from 1498 until 1512 [Here also resides Machiavelli’s portrait by Santi di Tito]

Machiavelli was a founder of modern political science and political ethics. Machiavelli’s most famous (not to say notorious) works are The Prince and Discourses.
Machiavelli wrote The Prince exactly 500 years ago in 1513. We will investigate whether this book has still always something to say that is relevant to our time, half a millennium later.

**Machiavellianism**
Machiavelli’s moral and ethical views led to the creation of the word Machiavellianism.

MACHIAVELLIANISM

*Oxford English Dictionary:*

"The employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct"

*Machiavellianism* is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "the employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct".

The adjective *Machiellian* became a pejorative term (a term with an unfavourable meaning) describing someone who aims to deceive and manipulate others for personal advantage. Referring to his first name ‘Niccolò’ Old Nick became an English by-name for the Devil.

In the 16th century, immediately following the publication of The Prince, Machiavellianism was seen as a foreign plague infecting northern European politics, originating in Italy. In the 16th century Machiavelli was called an *organum Satanae*, a diabolical writer. Shakespeare called Niccolò ‘the murderous Machiavel’. Also in the 20th century some political philosophers, among others, Leo Straus, called Machiavelli diabolic. Bertrand Russell, called The Prince “a handbook for gangsters”.

We will see that these explanations of Machiavelli are based on a *Straw Man Fallacy* (Straw Man Fallacy means: ascribing particular ideas to somebody which the relevant person does not really adhere to). Machiavelli does not advocate deception and manipulation ‘for personal advantage’ but for the common good, and only if they cannot be avoided – if ‘necessity’ requires it – and only if the common good (rather the personal good) is really threatened. Therefore, paradoxically, Machiavelli himself is not a machiavellist!; at least not in the current meaning of this word.

As Isaiah Berlin writes:

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 realized in any other way.”
His vision is social and political. Hence the traditional view of him as simply a
specialist in 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, a man must lie, kill,
and betray if he is to get somewhere, is incorrect.

Machiavelli is not 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.

This does not necessarily mean that Machiavelli’s real views are not, or cannot be,
objectionable. Presently we will pay attention to possible criticism on Machiavelli’s real views,
but not until we better understand these views, so that we avoid the Staw Man fallacy and
avoid doing him wrong in our criticism.

Does the end justify the means?

Machiavelli’s works are sometimes said to have contributed to the modern negative
connotations of the words politics and politician. Politicians are often seen as people who are
keen on power and pursue their goals with means that are prone to criticism.

By his approach Machiavelli has indeed become associated with the thesis that ‘the end
justifies the means’, whatever dubious the means are in the light of conventional ethical
considerations, if the end cannot be achieved without these means.

MACHIAVELLI

The end justifies the means

Leo Strauss wrote:

Machiavelli is a political thinker whose name has come into common use for designating a kind of
politics guided exclusively by considerations of expediency, which uses all means, fair or foul, for
achieving its ends - its end being the glory of one's country or fatherland.

Machiavelli argues as follows:
In judging means, look only to the end: indeed, if the state goes under, all is lost.

A famous paragraph in The Discourses (III.41) runs as follows:

“For when the safety of one’s country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no
attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its
being praiseworthy or ignominious. On the contrary, every other consideration being
set aside, that alternative should be wholeheartedly adopted which will save the life
and preserve the freedom of one’s country.”

Like Thomas Hobbes, Machiavelli assumes that the argument or motive for self-preservation
outweighs all others.
The thesis ‘the end justifies the means’ sharply contrasts with what the Christian religion taught and teaches, namely, that the end, however good and great, can never justify doing wrong. Also Immanuel Kant would reject the view that the end justifies the means. He has tried to show the wrongness of this view in his famous *Categorical Imperative*.

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

Categorical means ‘absolute’ and ‘without exceptions’. According to Kant, the categorical imperative is not a means to an end but an end in itself. This implies that we should never act in such a way that we treat ourselves or others, as a means only, but always as an end in itself.

According to this principle of the Categorical Imperative a moral duty should never be violated, irrespective of the consequences, however good or bad these consequences may be.

Kant’s view is opposed to so-called *consequentialism* or *utilitarianism* which take the consequences of actions as the criterion of rightness or wrongness.

A famous phrase, quoted by Kant, is *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus*, ("Let justice be done, even if the world would perish"). This radical statement reveals the counter-utilitarian nature of Kant’s moral philosophy.

In fact, Machiavelli was a consequentialist, who took the right consequence for the ultimate aim as the criterion for action and for rightness and wrongness. For him the ultimate aim was the stable power and security of the state and sustained well-being of its citizens. If justice would threaten or diminish state security and flourishing of the society and its citizens, and certainly if the state would run the risk of perishing, measures to maintain state security and well-being of the society would outweigh justice.
Machiavelli and his time

In Machiavelli’s time Italy was a divided country. Niccolò was born in a tumultuous era – popes waged acquisitive wars against Italian city-states, and people and cities might fall from power at any time. Bertrand Russell: “Few rulers were legitimate; even the popes, in many cases, secured election by corrupt means.”

Many parties battled for regional influence and control: for instance, the pope, the major cities like Venice and Florence, foreign powers such as France and Spain. Political-military alliances continually changed. Machiavelli’s time experienced the rise and fall of many short-lived governments.

Machiavelli took as an example to be imitated Cesare Borgia who was an Italian nobleman, politician, and cardinal. He achieved successes by making frequent use of violence, deceit and deception.

In enlarging his influence and power Cesare Borgia was helped by his father who was pope – Pope Alexander VI – from 1492 until 1503. The name Borgia became a byword for nepotism, which are traditionally considered as characterizing his papacy.
Nepotism is favoritism granted to relatives regardless of merit. The word *nepotism* is from the Latin word *nepos*, which means ‘nephew’.

Cesare Borgia’s father succeeded in buying the largest number of votes and his opponent Sforza was said to be bribed by Cesare’s father with four mule-loads of silver. Corruption was the order of the day, not only amongst secular, but also amongst religious rulers.

Since the publication of *The Prince*, sometimes called a ‘handbook on political power’, the name Machiavelli has become synonymous with brutal and deceptive means of grasping and retaining power.

The supposedly amoral tone of Machiavelli’s work, starkly contrasted with earlier works on leadership, which tended to glorify humanistic and moral virtues.

**Machiavelli’s method:** *empiricism and realism versus unrealistic idealism*

Machiavelli is sometimes seen as the prototype of a modern empirical scientist, building generalizations from experience and historical facts, and emphasizing the uselessness of theorizing with the imagination.

As Joshua Kaplan argues:

> Machiavelli emancipated politics from theology and conventional moral philosophy. He undertook to describe simply what rulers actually did and thus anticipated what was later called the scientific spirit in which questions of good and bad are ignored, and the observer attempts to discover only what really happens.

Machiavelli’s drew conclusions about the best statesmanship from events, developments and decisions in his time and the past.
As Bertrand Russell writes, *The Prince* is concerned to discover, from history and from contemporary events, how principalities are won, how they are held and how they are lost. Fifteenth century Italy afforded a multitude of examples . . .”

So Machiavelli emphasizes the importance of starting from the facts, rather than from imagination; to put it differently, one should start from what *is* rather than from what *ought to be*.

From chapter 15 of *The Prince*:

> It appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of the matter than the imagination of it. Many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen. How one lives is far distant from how one ought to live. He who neglects what is done and only looks at what *ought to be* done, effects his ruin rather than his preservation: a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him – rather than what preserves him – among so much that is evil.

Thus, Machiavelli starts from empiricism and makes use of the method of induction.

**MACHIAVELLI’S RESEARCH METHOD**

- Empiricism
- Induction

He is sometimes compared with David Hume and Karl Popper before their time. I think this is not correct: Hume and Popper rightly showed the dangers and weaknesses of the inductive method. Popper emphasized that – in order to be scientific – one should try to search for weaknesses in one’s theory and try to falsify the hypothesis which was deduced from empiricism by induction.

Machiavelli, by contrast, regarded historical events and his experiences as verifications of the rightness of his approach, instead of searching for counter-evidence, counter-arguments and falsifications. Therefore, Popper would call him a pseudo-scientist.

**Machiavelli’s views**

From Quentin Skinner:

In *The Prince* Machiavelli starts to discuss the princely virtues and vices, and warns us that although “many have written about this” already, he is going to “depart very far from the methods of the others.”
He begins by alluding to the familiar humanist commonplaces: that there is a special group of princely virtues; that these include the need to be liberal, merciful and truthful; and that all rulers have a duty to cultivate these qualities.

Next he concedes that “it would be most praiseworthy for a prince” to be able at all times to act in such ways.

But then he totally rejects the fundamental humanist assumption that these are the virtues a ruler needs to acquire if he wishes to achieve his highest ends. This belief—the nerve and heart of humanist advice-books for princes—he regards as an obvious and disastrous mistake…

He argues that, if a ruler wishes to reach his highest goals, he will not always find it rational to be moral; on the contrary, he will find that

Practising all those things for which men are considered good

will prove a ruinously irrational policy.

A wise prince will be guided above all by the dictates of necessity:

in order to hold his position, he 'must acquire the power to be not good.

Moreover, he must reconcile himself to the fact that 'he will often be necessitated' to act 'contrary to truth, contrary to charity, contrary to humanity, contrary to religion' if he wishes 'to maintain his government'…

**MACHIAVELLI’S REVOLUTION**

Redefinition of the concept of virtù

The revolution Machiavelli engineered in the genre of advice-books for princes was based on redefining the pivotal concept of virtù.
He divorces the meaning of the term ‘virtu’ from any necessary connection with the cardinal and princely virtues. He argues instead that the defining characteristic of a truly virtuoso prince will be a willingness to do whatever is dictated by necessity—whether the action happens to be wicked or virtuous—in order to attain his highest ends…

**CICERO**

Two ways in which wrong may be done:

1. by force
2. by fraud

Cicero had written in Book I of Moral Obligation that there are two ways in which wrong may be done:

1. by force
2. by fraud

Both ways of wrong-doing, Cicero declares, 'are bestial' and 'wholly unworthy of man':

1. force because it typifies the lion
2. fraud because it belongs to the cunning fox.

To Machiavelli, by contrast, it seemed obvious that to be a virtuous man is not enough. He says at the start of chapter 18 of *The Prince*:

There are indeed two ways of acting:

'the first is suited to man, the second to the animals'.

But 'because the first is often not sufficient, a prince must resort to the second. One of the things a prince therefore needs to know is which animals to imitate.

Machiavelli's celebrated advice is that he will come off best if he 'chooses among the beasts the fox and the lion'.

In this way the ideals of manly decency is supplemented with the indispensable arts of force and fraud.

**From chapter 18 of The Prince:**

Therefore it is necessary
for a prince to understand how to make use of the beast and the man. This has been figuratively taught to princes by ancient writers, who describe how Achilles and many other princes were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse, who brought them up in his discipline.

The Centaur Chiron and the boy Achilles
Machiavelli continues: This means solely that, as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man. So it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable. A prince, therefore, being compelled knowingly to adopt the beast, ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares (traps, valstrikken) and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves.

Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand what they are about. Therefore a wise lord cannot, nor ought he to, keep faith when such observance may be turned against him, and when the reasons that caused him to promise it, exist no longer.

MACHIAVELLI

The Prince (chapter 18)

“If men were entirely good this precept would not hold, but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them.”

In chapter 19 Machiavelli gives examples of the right attitude of a ruler. He discusses one of his favourite historical characters, the Roman emperor Septimius Severus. The emperor was 'a
man of very great virtu'. Septimius' great qualities were those of 'a very savage lion and a very tricky fox', as a result of which he was 'feared and respected by everybody'.

Other empirical examples of the use of power, cruelty, cunning and deceit mentioned by Machiavelli:

- Romulus could not have founded Rome without killing Remus.

ROMULUS AND REMUS

Romulus and Remus are suckled by the wolf Lupa

Romulus kills Remus (by Severino Baraldi)

Citing the case of Romulus’ fratricide (murder of his brother Remus), Machiavelli contends that

‘although the deed accuses him, the result should excuse him, because he who is violent to destroy, not he who is violent to restore, ought to be censured.’
Other examples of the necessity of power and violence to achieve, maintain or restore the security of the state:

- Brutus would not have preserved the republic if he did not kill his sons.
- Moses, Theseus, Romulus, Cyrus, and the liberators of Athens had to destroy in order to build.
- The greatness of France and the French King were the result of adopting the characteristics of the lion and the fox.
- If men practice Christian humility, modesty and truthfulness, they cannot also be inspired by the ambitions of the great classical founders of cultures, Machiavelli argues.

**Famous statements by Machiavelli**

- “It is necessary for a prince to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it (or not) according to necessity.”
- “One must employ terrorism or kindness, as the case dictates.”
- “It is much safer for a prince to be feared than loved.”
- “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 . . . the ruled will then feel in constant need of great men to lead them.”
- “A Prince never lacks legitimate reason to break his promise”
- “Religion must be promoted even though it may be false, provided it is of a kind that preserves social solidarity and promotes manly virtues, as Christianity has historically failed to do.”
- “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 favor by duly cutting off their heads: for men prefer vengeance and security to liberty.”
- “Men should either be caressed or annihilated; appeasement and neutralism are always fatal.”
- “Excellent plans without arms are not enough.”
Machiavelli’s new ethics
Before Machiavelli, philosophers and political theorists argued that possession of virtù is the key to princely success: ‘honesty is the best policy’. Machiavelli disagreed and rejected the conventional ethics. For instance, Machiavelli criticised Cicero’s approach of exercising virtues described in De Officiis.

CICERO

De Officiis

It is always rational to be moral.

Expediency can never conflict with moral rectitude.

Honesty is the best policy.

There are some acts either so repulsive or so wicked that a wise man would not commit them even to save his country.

According to Cicero it is always rational to be moral.

Cicero writes the following:

“Many believe that a thing may be morally right without being expedient, and expedient without being morally right.”

But, Cicero continues, this is an illusion, for it is only by moral methods that we can hope to attain the objects of our desire.

“Expediency can never conflict with moral rectitude” (II.3.9-10). ‘Honesty is the best policy’. Therefore the rational course of action for the prince to follow will always be the moral one.

According to Cicero “there are some acts either so repulsive or so wicked that a wise man would not commit them even to save his country.”

Machiavelli retorts in Discourses that
“when it is absolutely a question of the safety of one’s country’, it becomes the duty of every citizen to recognize that ‘there must be no consideration of just or unjust, or 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.”
According to Machiavelli the conventional approach is unrealistic because the position in which any prince finds himself is that of trying to protect his interests in a dark world filled with unscrupulous men. We discussed already the following statement by Machiavelli:

“If men were entirely good this precept would not hold, but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them.”

According to Machiavelli, if a ruler wished to reach his highest goals, he will not always find it rational to be moral; on the contrary, he will find that any consistent attempt to cultivate the princely virtues in the conventional sense will prove to be ruinously irrational policy.

A wise prince will be guided above all by the dictates of necessity: if he ‘wishes to maintain his power’ he must always ‘be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary.’

‘The prince must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstance constrain him.’

It is very important to emphasize that Machiavelli’s approach is not meant to enlarge the power of the prince or other rulers for their own personal interest but for the benefit of the common interest. Machiavelli had a marked preference for republican over princely regimes.

INDIVIDUAL versus COMMON INTEREST

Cities become great, not by individual good,
but by common good

Machiavelli writes: It is not individual good but common good that makes cities great, and without doubt this common good is thought important only in republics. Under a prince the opposite happens, for what benefits him usually injures the city.

The following is the sign of virtù in rulers and citizens alike:

VIRTÙ

Prepared to advance:
not one’s own interests but the general good,
not one’s own posterity, but the common fatherland.
In Rome of Classical Antiquity patriotism was felt to be more powerful than any other consideration.

According to Machiavelli corruption starts when citizens or rulers begin to promote their individual ambitions or factional loyalties at the expense of the public interest.

He defines a corrupt city as one in which the magistracies are no longer filled by those with the greatest virtu, but rather by those with the most power, and hence with the best prospects of serving their own selfish ends. The most efficacious means of coercing people in behaving in a virtuoso fashion is by making them terrified of behaving otherwise.

Religion can be used to inspire – and if necessary to terrorize – the ordinary populace in such a way as to induce them to prefer the good of their community to all other goods.

Machiavelli is not in the least interested in the question of religious truth. Only in the role played by religious sentiment in inspiring the people, etcetera.

The ancient religion of the Romans is much to be preferred to the Christian faith, because the latter has set up as the greatest good humility, abjectness and contempt for human things; it has placed no value in grandeur of mind, in strength of body or in any of the other attributes of virtuoso citizenship. Christianity has made the world weak and turned it over as prey to wicked men (compare Friedrich Nietzsche’s Umwertung aller Werte [reversion of all values] and his rejection of Christian morality as being weak subservient).

Machiavelli rejects conventional humanist morality. He is fully aware that his new analysis of princely virtù raises some new difficulties. He states the main dilemma in the course of chapter 15: on the one hand, a prince must 'acquire the power to be not good' and exercise it whenever this is dictated by necessity; but on the other hand, he must be careful not to acquire the reputation of being a wicked man, because this will tend to 'take his position away from him' instead of securing it.

MACHIAVELLI’S DILEMMA

Two requirements:

a. Being not good whenever dictated by necessity
b. Retaining a good reputation

The problem is thus to avoid appearing wicked even when you cannot avoid behaving wickedly. Moreover, the dilemma is even sharper than this implies, for the true aim of the prince is not merely to secure his position, but is of course to win honour and glory as well…

Machiavelli refuses to admit that the dilemma can be resolved by setting stringent limits to princely wickedness, because

all men at all times 'are ungrateful, changeable, simulators and dissimulators, runaways in danger, eager for gain', so that 'a prince who bases himself entirely on their word, if he is lacking in other preparations, falls'. *
This seems especially to apply to Machiavelli’s time of extreme corruption amongst all rulers and other people, even amongst cardinals and popes. Nobody could be trusted.

The implication is that ‘a prince will often find himself forced by necessity to act 'contrary to humanity' if he wishes to keep his position and avoid being deceived.

These are acute difficulties, but they can certainly be overcome. The prince need only remember that although it is not necessary to have all the qualities usually considered good, it is ‘very necessary to appear to have them'. It is good to be considered liberal; it is sensible to seem merciful and not cruel; it is essential in general to be ‘thought to be of great merit'.

The solution is thus to become 'a great simulator and dissimulator', learning 'how to addle the brains of men with trickery' and make them believe in your pretence…

He insists in chapter 18 that the practice of hypocrisy is not merely indispensable to princely government, but is capable of being sustained without much difficulty for as long as may be required.

Two distinct reasons are offered for this deliberately provocative conclusion.

1. One is that most men are so simple-minded, and above all so prone to self-deception, that they usually take things at face value in a wholly uncritical way.
2. The other is that, when it comes to assessing the behaviour of princes, even the shrewdest observers are largely condemned to judge by appearances.

Thus, 'a prince who deceives always finds men who let themselves be deceived'.

VIRTUES BECOME VICES (and vice versa)

Qualities which are considered good but are nevertheless ruinous only look like virtues but are vices.

Their opposites which are likely to bring safety and well-being.

Machiavelli questions whether we can properly say that those qualities which are considered good, but are nevertheless ruinous, really deserve the name of virtues. Since they are prone to bring destruction, he prefers to say that they 'look like virtues'; and since their opposites are more likely to bring 'safety and well-being', he prefers to say that they 'look like vices'.

Thus Machiavelli turns several conventional virtues on their head.

For instance in the chapter entitled 'Cruelty and mercy'. This had been a favourite topic among the Roman moralists, Seneca's essay On Mercy being the most celebrated treatment of the theme. According to Seneca, a prince who is merciful will inflict punishment only 'when great and repeated wrongdoing has overcome his patience' and 'after great reluctance' and with the greatest possible clemency.
Faced with this orthodoxy Machiavelli insists that it represents a complete misunderstanding of the virtue involved. If you begin by trying to be merciful, so that you 'let evils continue' and only turn to punishment after 'murders or plunder' begin, your conduct will be far less clement than that of a prince who has the courage to begin by 'giving a very few examples of cruelty'.

Machiavelli mentions Cesare Borgia as an example of the good approach. Borgia 'was thought cruel', but used 'that well-known cruelty of his' so well that he reorganised Italy, united it and brought it to peace and loyalty, achieving all these beneficial results by means of his alleged viciousness.

This leads Machiavelli to a closely connected question which he puts forward—with a similar air of self-conscious paradox—later in the same chapter: 'is it better to be loved than feared, or the reverse?'. Again the classic answer had been furnished by Cicero in Moral Obligation. 'Fear is but a poor safeguard of lasting power', whereas love 'may be trusted to keep it safe for ever'.

Again Machiavelli disagrees:

MACHIAVELLI

“It is much safer for a prince to be feared than loved.”

He argues that 'It is much safer for a prince to be feared than loved.' The reason is that many of the qualities that make a prince loved also tend to bring him into contempt…

The other line of Machiavelli’s argument reflects an even more decisive rejection of conventional humanist morality.

Machiavelli suggests that, even if the qualities usually considered good are indeed virtues—such that a ruler who flouts them will undoubtedly be falling into vice—he ought not to worry about such vices if he thinks them either useful or irrelevant to the conduct of his government.

Machiavelli's main concern at this point is to remind new rulers of their most basic duty of all.

“A wise prince 'will not worry about incurring reproaches for those vices without which he can hardly maintain his position'; he will see that such criticisms are merely an unavoidable cost he has to bear in the course of discharging his fundamental obligation, which is of course to maintain his state …”

**Clash between two ethical approaches**

Stuart Hampshire:
Machiavelli points at the conflict between the commitments and obligations of a responsible political leader and the commitments and obligations of the prevailing Christian morality of his time.
Hampshire: Machiavelli insisted that the two moralities were totally incompatible. Two radically opposed conceptions of the human good are involved, with two sets of commitments and supporting obligations, which no one could reconcile or combine in his conduct. (164)

The virtues that bring great political achievements and civic glory have their cost in the loss of integrity and in the loss of the virtues. The virtues that are essential to an admirable private life, such as loyal friendships and a sense of personal honour and of integrity, have their cost in political powerlessness. (165)

The decadence of modern nations, that is, their disunity and their loss of civic ambitions and of republican virtues, is attributable, according to Machiavelli, to the Christian ethics of innocence and of self-abnegation, which had not been known in the ancient world.

It also concerns a clash between classical virtues and the drive for power and glory and on the one side, and justice on the other.

The idea of human rights was not known in Machiavelli’s days, but the relevant tension could be felt and expressed in terms of a clash between different kinds of virtues. The evident incompatibility between strict attention to justice and fairness on the one side and effectiveness in the exercise of political power raises a deep problem, even when effectiveness in politics is not taken as an overriding end. (167)

The clash can also be explained as a conflict between moral virtues and political expediency.
CLASH OF TWO ETHICAL APPROACHES

Moral virtues

versus

political expediency

Hampshire:
“Machiavelli is surely correct to insist on the reality of the challenges of expediency. A political leader who allows a commitment to fairness and justice in all circumstances to override his determination to protect the interests of his country, will surely become ineffective and impotent; and such a person would generally have done better never to have sought or accepted public responsibilities. . . .

The virtues that bring great political achievements and civic glory have their cost in the loss of integrity and in the loss of the virtues and satisfactions of friendship and of fair dealing.” (164-5)

The virtues that are essential to an admirable private life, such as loyal friendships and a sense of personal honour and of integrity, have their cost in political powerlessness. (165)

Machiavelli himself does not regard the incompatibility of the two moralities (pagan and Christian) as a dilemma. He merely takes for granted the superiority of Roman antiqua virtus over the Christian life as taught by the Church.]

Therefore, with respect to the choice between Christian and pagan virtues Machiavelli is clear. He is an advocate of glorious worldly achievements which will be recognised in history.

Compare this with a similar statement made by Orson Welles in the film The Third Man:

“In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”

Here follows a short fragment from the film The Third Man in which Orson Welles utters the above words:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=dv1QDIWbS8g

However, in our time John Rawls has famously argued in his A Theory of Justice as follows:
John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*

- “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.”
- “Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override.”
- “Justice does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many.”

These statements sharply contrast with *consequentialism* and with Machiavelli’s priority of the well-being, power and glory of the state over individual well-being and over what we nowadays call individual rights.

**Interpretation and evaluation of Machiavelli**

According to Isaiah Berlin there are more than twenty different interpretations of Machiavelli’s Works *The Prince* and *Discourses*. This is surprising because Machiavelli does not write obscurely; nearly all his interpreters praise him for his terse and clear prose.

According to Hegel 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 that he must be judged solely, or at least mainly, in terms of his historical context.

According to Croce and many others the heart of Machiavelli’s teaching is the divorce of politics from morality. According to Berlin this rests on a mistake.

Berlin: If ethics is confined to for instance, Christian or Kantian ethics, this might have been tenable. But there exists an equally time-honored ethics, that of the Greek *polis*, of which Aristotle provided the clearest exposition.
ETHICS

- Christian ethics
- Kantian ethics
- Confucian ethics
- Aristotelian ethics
- Etcetera

According to Aristotle, a man is a zoën politicon, a political animal – a being made by nature to live in communities. Communal purposes are the ultimate values from which the rest are derived, or with which the ends of individuals are identified.

In other words, politics—the art of living in a polis—is not an activity that can be dispensed with by those who prefer private life. Political conduct is intrinsic to being a human being at a certain stage of civilization.

If Aristotle and Machiavelli are right about what men are, and should be, political activity is intrinsic to human nature; communal life determines the moral duties of its members. Hence Machiavelli is indeed rejecting one morality—the Christian—but not in favor of something that is not a morality at all.

In other words, Berlin argues, the conflict is between two moralities, Christian and pagan, not between autonomous realms of morals on the one side and politics on the other.

Christian morality

versus

pagan morality

In a letter Machiavelli said that he loved his country more than his soul. This revealed his basic moral beliefs.

Like Aristotle’s ethics, Machiavelli’s ethics was social and not individual: but it was an ethics, not an amoral region, not a region beyond good or evil.

His vision is social and political. Hence the traditional view of him as simply a specialist in 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, a man must lie, kill, and betray if he is to get somewhere, is incorrect.

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.
Machiavelli’s values are ultimate, and he calls for great sacrifices in their name. For them he rejects the rival scale—the Christian principles of meekness, not, indeed, as being defective in themselves, but as inapplicable to the conditions of real life.

Real life for him means not merely life as it was lived around him in Italy—the crimes, hypocrisies, brutalities, follies of Florence, Rome, Venice, Milan. 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 ethical 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.

Once you embark on a plan for the transformation of a society you must carry it through no matter at what cost.

Compare a skilful doctor. A professional physician is ready to burn and to amputate, if necessary; if that is what the disease requires, then to stop halfway 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.

**Machiavelli and value-pluralism**

Isaiah Berlin has tried to give an explanation of the fact that so many interpretations have been given.

According to Berlin Machiavelli’s juxtaposition of two incompatible moral worlds and the discomfort that follows has been responsible for the desperate efforts to interpret his doctrines away and to represent him as a cynical defender of power politics.

**ISAIAH BERLIN**

Originality of Machiavelli’s view:

*“Not all ultimate values are necessarily compatible with one another.”*

Berlin argues that interpreters of Machiavelli are reluctant to face and discuss the uncomfortable truth which Machiavelli had – unintentionally – uncovered: namely, that not all ultimate values are necessarily compatible with one another.

The sense of certainty that there is somewhere a final solution to our ills and to conflicts of values and conflicts of interests – this fundamental belief of Western political thought – has been severely shaken by Machiavelli, which makes his views difficult to accept.
According to Berlin this is the cause of the unending efforts to explain *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, or, better, to explain Machiavelli’s views away.

Berlin’s view on Machiavelli:
Machiavelli has made clear 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 realized, would establish the perfect society.

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 prefers 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.

But the question that his writings have dramatized, 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? “States and people are governed in a different way from an individual.”

According to Isaiah Berlin Machiavelli’s cardinal achievement and his originality are his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma.

Ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other. Entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, but as part of the normal human situation.

The sense of certainty that there is a final solution to our ills – this fundamental belief of Western political thought has been severely shaken.

The outlooks and ends of a Christian based on Christian virtues and a pagan society based on virtues of power and glory differ profoundly and, Isaiah Berlin says, their values – being not means to ends but ends in themselves – cannot be combined in any final synthesis.

Berlin summarizes this view as follows:
Not all good things are compatible, still less the ideals of mankind.

**Topicality of Machiavelli: dirty hands politics**

Here follow topical examples in line with Machiavelli’s real considerations, rather than in the pejorative diabolic sense indicated by the term ‘Machiavellianism’. There are also many topical examples of Machiavellianism in the latter distorted sense: Berlusconi, Sadam Hoessein, Gadaffi, Hitler, Mussolini. They are examples of Machiavellianism in the real diabolic sense, not meant by Machiavelli. The following examples are more in line with the real ideas of Machiavelli and what is regarded as ‘dirty hands politics’ which has similarities with Machiavelli’s approach.
Definition of dirty hands

DIRTY HANDS

1. It concerns an action that is morally wrong.
2. The action is performed to achieve an important goal.
3. This goal cannot be reached without the violation of moral rules.
4. The action is right.

Point 4 seems to contradict point 1.

Here follow some topical examples:

• When Sartre wrote the play ‘Dirty Hands’, he had communist sympathies even though he knew that the communist regime made dirty hands. Opponents were violently eliminated in the name of equality. In a comparable way opponents of the French revolution came under the guillotine in the name of freedom.

• Jean-Claude Juncker (former president if the Eurogroup of Ministers of Finance: “I am a Christian Democrat, a Catholic, but if it becomes important, I tell a lie. Indeed, every possible decision feeds speculations at the financial markets. And then we make the misery for the people we want to protect only larger.”

• TV-series ‘Borgen’: elaborates several Machiavellian themes in politics.

  Many episodes in Borgen start with a quotation of Machiavelli.

  Machiavelli’s words continue to hold power today, amongst political figures and leaders, prime ministers and presidents. Promises are made and broken, alliances tested, enemies courted and appeased. This is felt in the Danish political drama Borgen (“The Castle”). The series revolves around the fictional first female prime minister of Denmark, who inadvertently comes to power following a scandal involving her predecessor.

• Guantanamo Bay and the threat of terrorism. In this case, for Americans state security seems to outweigh human rights. Machiavelli rather than Kant is followed.

• Last week in the New York Times:

  New York Times
  29th April 2013

  “CIA Bribes Karzai:
Top Afghan officials have been on the CIA’s payroll for over a decade, receiving tens of millions of US dollars in cash. Afghan President Hamid Karzai admitted to receiving the clandestine financial support.

A New York Times report has revealed that unparalleled corruption in the Afghan government has been encouraged by the US Central Intelligence Agency. Since the start of the decade-long war, CIA agents have delivered cash to Afghan officials in “suitcases, backpacks and, on occasion, plastic shopping bags.”

[This looks like the practices of bribe in Machiavelli’s time, for instance Pope Alexander VI’s bribe of his opponent Sforza with four mule-loads silver]

Cash was also paid out to lesser Afghan politicians and officials reportedly connected to drug production and trafficking, those with alleged ties to the Taliban, and to insurgent warlords bribed not to interfere in covert operations.

A former US official admitted that:

“The CIA will work with criminals if they think they have to.”

This reminds us of Machiavelli’s statement that corruption need not be avoided if necessity requires it and if the aim of stability cannot be achieved without it.

An anonymous US official said that “The biggest source of corruption in Afghanistan, was the United States.”

Here follow other topical examples of attitudes in line with Machiavelli’s approach:

- Is survival of the society a legitimate reason to seriously violate human rights? (Hiroshima, bombing of German cities in the beginning of the second world war; Michael Walzer)

In 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on civilian targets, namely on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to force Japan to surrender. As a result, 300,000 citizens were killed.
An important question is whether the deliberate killing of innocent human beings is ever justified. Was the great number of deliberately killed civilians as a result of the atomic attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki a legitimate means to force Japan to surrender?

- Welfare and economic benefit versus human rights.

Moral integrity may conflict with economic considerations of maintaining and increasing welfare. If you want to achieve success in trade, you seem sometimes to be forced to forget or ignore some ethical rules. Recently, the Netherlands intensified the relations with Vladimir Putin and trading relations with Russia. Apparently the Dutch commercial interests were considered as outweighing the violation of human rights by Putin.

What is our reply to Machiavelli?

Discussion with the audience

Subjects of discussion

1. Is Machiavelli right?
2. Can and should politics always avoid ‘dirty hands’?
3. What is the right solution if expediency and state security can be improved, but only at the cost of ideal truthfulness or ideal justice?
4. Or can expediency never conflict with moral rectitude?
5. Do truthfulness, justice and human rights always trump other considerations?
6. Can an action ‘all things considered’ be correct, even if moral rules are violated, as is assumed in the definition of a ‘dirty hands’ action?
7. Has Machiavelli shown an ‘insoluble dilemma’ as Isaiah Berlin thinks?

**Insoluble dilemma?**
At least three requirements are needed in order to have a rationally irresolvable dilemma:

1. A real conflict between two values or two kinds of ethics [that is, the two values or two kinds of ethics cannot be optimally realized simultaneously]
2. Neither value of ethics outweighs the other.
3. This conflict cannot be unambiguously resolved by reason.

Perhaps we can challenge the existence of the dilemma (the dilemma of choosing between competing ultimate values or ends), by challenging the existence of one of the three requirements for an insoluble dilemma mentioned.

Machiavelli does recognize (1) but does not recognize (2): he recognizes that both ethics cannot be optimally realized simultaneously (1), but he thinks that one kind of ethics outweighs the other (denial of [2]). Therefore, he thinks there is not a real dilemma; at least not for him. He takes for granted the superiority of Roman *antiqua virtus* over the Christian life as taught by the Church and over individual virtues such as truthfulness, liberality, justice, fairness, meekness, forgiveness.

Other people, like Cicero and Jacques Maritain (see below) do not regard the issue as a dilemma either, but their reason is different from Machiavelli’s. They think that already the first requirement is not fulfilled: they think that power and justice are compatible instead of conflicting, and even mutually supporting.

Other people, perhaps most people, think that some values may indeed conflict, but that rational compromises are possible, although both sides will lose something in value.

At last, there are theorists, so-called strong value-pluralists, who think not only that values may conflict, but that sometimes an unambiguously rational and single right solution does not exist. This is Isaiah Berlin’s and Stuart Hampshire’s view.

What is your view? Are some values incompletely compatible, and, if so, is there a rational and single right solution?

**Stuart Hampshire’s Reply to Machiavelli**
A minimum of decent fairness and justice, both in personal relations and in public affairs, is a value independent of any conception of the good.

By what method should the conflict between justice and political expediency be resolved in any particular case?
If the violation of justice is limited and if the injury done is small, it may be justifiable, if the risk to national security is very great and if the whole population would probably suffer in a national disaster. In this type of situation, which is not uncommon, the government has to strike a balance between evils.

The government’s decision is a just and fair one only if it satisfies the minimum conditions of justice. There will always be occasional situations in which the government’s action was in circumstances probably the right action, all things considered and on balance, but it was an action that leaves a sense of horror, and even disgust, behind it. So far Machiavelli was right. But he exaggerates the role of raison d’état (“Staatsraison”, “state reason”) – the justification of immoral acts when undertaken on behalf of the state in exceptional circumstances.

in political prudence and morality – leaving the impression that it ought always, or almost always, to prevail over considerations of fairness and justice to individuals and groups.

Machiavelli oversimplified his own problem in those passages in which he seems to maintain that a ruler must take the security of the state as an overriding consideration in all conceivable circumstances, even if this involves him in trampling on the common decencies of minimum justice in acts of state terrorism that are typical of tyrannies. There is no consideration of any kind that overrides all other considerations in all conceivable circumstances. (172)

It is our task to choose between two evils, and trying to prevent the greater misery and the worse injustice.

Concession to Machiavelli: it is true that moral innocence and purity are incompatible with the effective exercise of political power on any considerable scale. Once again the philosophical point to be recorded is that there is no completeness and no perfection to be found in morality. (177)

The opposition between innocence and experience does represent contrary moral ideals which will not lose their competing attractions.

**Criticism by Jacques Maritain**

Unlike Stuart Hampshire, Maritain radically rejects Machiavelli’s view. He argues as follows:

The great strength of Machiavelli’s view comes from the incessant victories gained by evil means in the political achievements of mankind, and from the idea that if a prince or nation respects justice, he or it is doomed to enslavement by other princes or nations trusting only in power and violence.

The answer is,

1. One can respect justice and have brains at the same time, and manage to be strong. [In other words, according to Maritain Machiavellianism is based on a false dilemma!].
2. In reality Machiavellianism does not succeed.

The illusion proper to Machiavellianism is the illusion of immediate success.

Politics is something intrinsically moral. And it is true at the same time that justice and virtue do not, as a rule, lead men to success in this world, within that short time of the duration of the life of one person. But the antinomy is solved, as regards human societies, because the achievement of the common good cannot be destroyed by the use of justice, if historical duration is aken into account.

We must not be deceived by the Machiavellian sophistry. Not only is evil incapable of succeeding in the long run; but here and now strength can exist together with justice. The second world war was a proof of that. A supreme effort cannot arise if the body politic
ignores moral values and standards. In reality strength is supremely strong only if not strength, but justice is the supreme standard.