
Reviews

Machiavelli's ethics

Erica Benner

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Benner's book, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, offers up an original, densely argued and wide-ranging philosophical treatment of Machiavelli's major writings. Machiavelli, she argues, should be considered as a philosopher who follows the philosophical practices of his primary Greek sources, namely Xenophon, Thucydides, Polybius, Plutarch and Plato. Appealing to the testimony of some of Machiavelli's friends (Chapter 1), as well as early modern readers including Bacon, Gentili, Harrington, Neville, Spinoza and Rousseau, Benner argues not only that scholars should adopt a more philosophically and textually sensitive approach to Machiavelli's writings, but also that Machiavelli himself 'wants civic founders, orderers, and legislators to adopt a more philosophical approach to politics' (p. 38). In Chapters 3–12, Benner goes on to show how Machiavelli's arguments and judgments derive greater clarity and ethical content if read in the light of ancient Greek modes of indirect writing and methods of reasoning. When read as following these Greek practices, Machiavelli's writings aim 'to teach readers how to see through dangerously misleading rhetoric' – including his own (pp. 340–341, 356) – 'and other all-too-human modes of generating deceptive appearances in politics' (p. 198).

Benner approaches Machiavelli with the intention of finding him using 'a range of classical literary and philosophical techniques' – ironic dissimulation, deliberate ambiguities, dialectical ambivalence, metaphorical and allegorical writing – that convey his own views to those readers who are 'uncorrupt enough' to recognize his 'covert' messages (pp. 438, 440). These readers presumably could have benefited from a clear and direct defense of republics, which is precisely what many readers of Machiavelli, since J. H. Whitfield (1947), have found in his works. But then, Benner argues, Machiavelli would not have been able to communicate to more corrupt readers whose 'eyes would surely glaze over if they read yet another idealistic defense of republics' (p. 434). From this angle, Benner argues that both realist and republican readings of Machiavelli err in taking his analysis at face value. 'But his analysis is not prescription', she emphasizes

(p. 433). His analysis does not lay down effective or correct ways to do things, for that would encourage ‘undiscriminating imitation’ (p. 411). Rather, his analysis is meant to state the consequences of corrupt judgments and actions so that reflective readers can avoid them as they would avoid hell (p. 60).

So Machiavelli’s lessons about how to act are not expressed in a ‘preaching or haranguing’ way, but in ‘signs, coded language, and oblique modes of writing’ designed to provoke readers to think for themselves (p. 47). If Machiavelli states the road to hell, it is because he desires to convey moral and political lessons that may be drawn out of his writings by way of close textual exegesis that must ‘work hard to identify and keep hold of the ethical line in the midst of numerous corrupt opinions which mimic the unreflective and corrupt opinions found in civil life’ (p. 7). The textual work of keeping hold of this line sometimes leads Benner to perform questionable interpretive moves: drawing fine distinctions whose textual basis is not always apparent – for example, between different senses of *religione* (p. 404); insisting that one sense of a concept must be the normatively adequate one – for example, that self-ordering *virtù* must be more adequate than adaptive *virtù* (p. 176); and explaining away apparent contradictions and exceptions to her thesis – for example, passages that seem to approve of constructive, limited uses of violence. Despite such cases in which the ethical line isn’t so clear-cut or persuasive, Benner’s fine-grained exposition offers many plausible accounts of the ethical content of Machiavelli’s concepts.

The main problem with this book, however, is the inclusion of virtually every technique of ancient and modern politics that Machiavelli describes under the rubric ‘corruption’. To address all this corruption, Machiavelli is made out to be a moral philosopher, obsessed with the search for normatively adequate concepts, clear normative standards and publicly defensible principles of justice that could form a bedrock on which to stabilize human affairs (pp. 26–30, 38, 132, 247). But while Machiavelli was unmistakably preoccupied with learning how to achieve stability that could rival the duration of Sparta or Rome, and that could be considered an uncorrupt or moral state of affairs, he was also acutely aware of how history profoundly affects the requirements of a stable republic. History for him wasn’t simply a ‘medium’ for philosophical messages about the idea of principled, procedural republic (p. 438); it supplied a large part of the message itself. More precisely, Livy’s history of early Rome supplied the principal basis for Machiavelli’s reasonings, not a philosophically reflective ethics.

In taking us back to Machiavelli’s Greek sources, Benner also wants to divert our attention from Machiavelli’s immediate political context, so we will not read his works, such as the *Prince*, as addressing an actual historical problem, but ‘readers who are already princes, who want to become princes, or who find it reasonable that some men should be given one-man princely powers



over republics' (p. 438). As a teacher of ethics, Machiavelli's guiding assumption is to put forward corrupt views and actions to prompt such readers 'to step back from the political fray and learn how to give reasoned accounts (*logoi*) of the causes of political problems, and reasoned judgments about how to address them' (pp. 50–51). So encouraged, such readers seem well on their way to becoming spectators of their own historical moment rather than active and responsible citizens. To be sure, the practical purpose of stepping back to think is to step back *into* politics armed with 'philosophical modes of reasoning' that advance strong claims to have or to be seeking 'a truer account of what standards the idea of a true republic requires' (pp. 51, 59). Still, to interpret Machiavelli's aims in this way is to see him pursuing a strategy of what Rawlsians would call 'metaphysical', not political, argument.

Machiavelli may not have been as hostile to philosophy as some have suggested, but his four references to 'philosophers' in his most philosophical work, the *Discourses*, which Benner draws our attention to on page 49, note 112, would not suggest to any reader that Machiavelli thought philosophy to be of much guidance for working in politics, or even for formulating standards for human and political conduct. While *Machiavelli's Ethics* is a real tour de force of highly disciplined exegesis of Machiavelli's writings, its achievement nevertheless obscures and divorces us from the window Machiavelli otherwise affords into the world of politics in which political agents are rhetorical performers who confront the vicissitudes and fortunes of the times and who cannot afford to practice a philosophical politics.

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On the ethics of war and terrorism

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This intriguing and timely book takes on the topic of current just war theory in five chapters. These five chapters highlight some well-known aspects of just war thinking, which is addressed in a forthright and critical manner. Chapter one deals with 'legitimate authority'; chapter two looks at just cause