

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2017

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## Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture

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Among the Leo Strauss Papers is a notebook containing the draft of an essay on Machiavelli that was later published as the Machiavelli chapter in *History of Political Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> At the top of the first page in Strauss's handwriting is written: "A year ago I could have elaborated or improvised a lecture for your profit or enjoyment. But: 1972.—I can only read to you a lecture (chapter on Mach. in *History*)."<sup>2</sup> It seems that the occasion of the marginalia was the lecture given at St. John's Annapolis, Maryland, in September 1972, where Strauss had taught as a scholar in residence since 1969. The four tapes of this lecture, which bear the title "Strauss, Leo—Machiavelli: *The Prince and Discourses*," were recently discovered and remastered by the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago.

The essay underlying the lecture is Strauss's second monograph on Machiavelli after his 1958 *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.<sup>2</sup> It cannot be described as a summary of his complex book, but rather an original contribution. The

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, "Niccolò Machiavelli," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Joseph Cropsey and Leo Strauss, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 271–92. This chapter replaced the Machiavelli chapter in the first edition from 1963, originally written by Warren Winiarski. The same essay was also intended for the thirteenth chapter of *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Strauss did not live to see the publication of that collection and *Studies* was edited and published ten years after Strauss's death with an introduction by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> The first monograph was published two years before this lecture: Leo Strauss, "Machiavelli and Classical Literature," *Review of National Literatures* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1970): 7–25.

essay begins with a discussion on virtue but rapidly the relationship between Machiavelli and religion comes to the fore, thereby confirming Strauss's claim that the theologico-political problem is *the* theme of his studies.<sup>3</sup> The beginning of the lecture corresponds roughly to the beginning of the chapter on Machiavelli in *History of Political Philosophy*. In this common part, the influence of Machiavelli on Spinoza and Hobbes as well as the moral philosophy of Machiavelli are discussed. Owing to health problems, Strauss stops reading his notes at the end of the section on *The Prince*; the rest of the time is devoted to a question-and-answer session on Machiavelli along with a short commentary on a passage from the *Discourses on Livy*. The question-and-answer section addresses several issues that are important for clarifying different aspects Strauss's interpretation of Machiavelli, including the place of *Mandragola* in Machiavelli's thought, Machiavelli's view of philosophy, Strauss's own discovery of Machiavelli, the reception of Machiavelli in Europe, and the efforts of Machiavelli's successors in making his philosophy acceptable. Strauss tries once to return briefly to the subject of his lecture by commenting on a cosmological passage from the *Discourses*. In his comments, he underscores Machiavelli's affinity with Renaissance Averroists and their belief in the eternity of the world.

*Editor's Note:* The handwritten notes of the lecture are found in the Leo Strauss Papers at Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Box 14, Folder 8. In my transcript of the tapes book titles are standardized, a few grammatical errors are corrected, and footnotes are used to provide relevant information and to identify Strauss's references. All errors are the responsibility of the editor. Copyright to the texts belongs to the estate of Leo Strauss. I thank Nathan Tarcov, Strauss's literary executor, for giving me permission to publish the transcript and Timothy W. Burns, who accepted it for publication in *Interpretation*. Gayle McKeen, the associate director of the Leo Strauss Center, greatly helped me in this project, Svetozar Minkov deciphered Strauss's marginalia, and Theodore Blanton identified the month of the lecture.

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Hobbes' Politische Wissenschaft*," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (January 1979): 1–3. For a remarkable reading of the chapter from the point of view of the theologico-political problem see Heinrich Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, trans. Robert Berman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 108–13.

LEO STRAUSS'S LECTURE ON MACHIAVELLI'S *THE PRINCE* AND *THE DISCOURSES*, ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, SEPTEMBER 1972

**Strauss:** [in progress] campus, at the suggestion of the dean. And this was transformed into readable form for the second edition of the *History of Political Philosophy*, edited by Mr. Joseph Cropsey and myself. And this will come out in the course of this year. I think it is already in print. And what I can do is only to read to you what I said on that occasion or wrote on that occasion, and I am sorry if I can't do better than that. The only improvement possible is that we could have some discussion afterward. I hope that satisfies you. Now, after this introductory remark, I just begin to read. I hope you don't mind. So if you have difficulties in understanding just raise your hand, right or the left, whichever you prefer, and Mr. [Theodore] Blanton will be so good as to act as the interpreter and translate your objections or difficulties into articulate language. Is it all right? Now, I begin.

We talk all the time about virtue, although we may not use the word "virtue," but for example "the quality of life," or "the great society," or "ethical," or "square." But do we know what virtue is? Socrates drew from this a conclusion that it is the greatest good for a human being to make everyday speeches about virtue, apparently without ever finding a completely satisfactory answer.<sup>4</sup> If we seek however the most elaborate and least ambiguous answer to this truly vital question we would turn to Aristotle's *Ethics*, where we would read among other things that there is a virtue of the first order called magnanimity, the habit of choosing high honors for oneself while being worthy of them.<sup>5</sup> We also read there that sense of shame is not a virtue. Shame is becoming for the young who owing to their immaturity cannot help making mistakes, but not for mature men who are well bred, who as such simply do not make mistakes and therefore have no use for sense of shame.<sup>6</sup> Wonderful as these things are we have received a very different message from a very different quarter. When the prophet Isaiah received his vocation he was overpowered by the sense of his unworthiness: "I am a man of unclean lips amidst a people of unclean lips."<sup>7</sup> This amounts to an implicit condemnation of magnanimity and an implicit vindication of the sense of shame. The reason given in the context is

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 38a.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1123b2-4.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1108a32, 1128b16-23.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 6:5.

this: “Holy, holy, [holy] is the lord of hosts.”<sup>8</sup> There is no holy god for Aristotle and the Greeks generally. Who is right? The Greeks, or the Jews? Athens, or Jerusalem? And how to proceed in order to find out who is right? Must we not admit that human wisdom is unable to settle this question, and that every answer is based on an act of faith? But does this not constitute the complete and final defeat of Athens? For a philosophy based on faith is no longer philosophy. Perhaps it was this unresolved conflict which did not permit Western thought ever to come to rest. Perhaps it is this conflict which is at the bottom of a kind of thought which is philosophic indeed but no longer Greek: modern philosophy. It is when we try to understand modern philosophy that we come across Machiavelli. We usually do not think of this when we speak of Machiavelli. And who does not speak of Machiavelli?

He is the only political thinker whose name has come into common use for designating a kind of politics which has existed, exists, and will exist independently of his influence: politics guided exclusively by considerations of expediency, which uses all reasons fair or foul, iron or poison for achieving its ends—its ends being the aggrandizement of one’s country or fatherland, but also using one’s fatherland in the service of one’s own self-aggrandizement of the politician or statesman. But if this phenomenon is as old as political society itself, why is it called after Machiavelli, who thought or wrote only a short while ago, about five hundred years ago? Machiavelli, we shall reply, was the first to publicly defend it in books with his name on the title page. Machiavelli made it publicly defensible. This means that his achievement, detestable or admirable, cannot be understood in terms of politics itself or of the history of politics—say, in terms of the Italian Renaissance—but in terms of political thought, political philosophy, of the history of political philosophy.

Machiavelli must have achieved a break with all preceding political philosophy. There is weighty evidence in support of this. Yet his largest work, his *Discourses*, serves the purpose of bringing about the rebirth of the ancient Roman Republic. Far from being a radical innovator, Machiavelli is a restorer of something old and forgotten.<sup>9</sup>

To find our bearings let us first glance at two post-Machiavellian thinkers: Hobbes and Spinoza. Hobbes regarded his political philosophy as wholly new. More than that, he denied that there existed prior to his work a political

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<sup>8</sup> Isa. 6:3.

<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 1, Preface.

philosophy or political science worthy of the name.<sup>10</sup> He regarded himself as the founder of the true political philosophy, as the true founder of political philosophy. He knew of course that a political doctrine claiming to be true existed since Socrates, but this doctrine was according to Hobbes a dream rather than science.<sup>11</sup> For according to him Socrates and his successors were anarchists since they permitted the appeal from the law of the land, the positive law, to a higher law, the natural law. And they thus fostered this order utterly incompatible with civil society while, according to Hobbes, the higher law, the natural law, commands so to speak one and only one thing: unqualified obedience to the sovereign power. It would not be difficult to show that this line of reasoning is contradicted by Hobbes's own teaching. At any rate it does not go to the root of the matter. Hobbes's serious objection to all earlier political philosophy comes out most clearly in this statement: "they that have written of Justice & Policy in general, do all invade each and themselves, with contradiction. To reduce this doctrine to the rules and infallibility of reason, there is no way but first to put such principles down for a foundation, as passion not mistrusting may not seek to displace; and afterwards to build thereon the truth of cases in the law of nature (which hitherto have been built in the air) by degrees, till the whole be inexpugnable."<sup>12</sup> The rationalism of the true political teaching consists in its being acceptable to passion, agreeable to passion. The passion which must be the basis of the rational political teaching is fear of violent death. At first glance there seems to be an alternative to it: the passion of generosity, that's to say, as Hobbes says: "a glory, or pride, in appearing not to need to break (one's word)." But this "is a generosity too rarely found to be presumed on, especially in the pursuer of wealth, command or sensual pleasure; which are the greatest part of mankind."<sup>13</sup> Hobbes attempts to build on the most common ground, on the ground that is admittedly low but has the advantage of being solid, whereas the traditional teaching was built in the air. On the new basis, the status of morality must be lowered. Morality is nothing but fear-inspired peaceableness. The moral law as natural law is understood as derivative from the right of nature. The right of self-preservation. The fundamental moral fact is a right, not a duty. This new spirit became the spirit of the modern era, including our own age.

<sup>10</sup> Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, Epistle Dedicatory.

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, Ep. Ded.

<sup>13</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14.

Hobbes is in a way a teacher of Spinoza. Nevertheless, Spinoza opens his *Political Treatise* with an attack on *the* philosophers. The philosophers, he says, treat the passions as vices. By ridiculing or deploring the passions, they believe to praise a human nature which exists nowhere. They conceive of men not as they are but as they would wish them to be. Hence their political teaching is wholly useless. Quite different is the case of the *politici*, of the political men. They have learned from experience that there will be vices as long as there will be human beings. Hence their political teaching is very valuable and Spinoza is building his teaching on theirs. The greatest of these *politici* is the most penetrating Florentine, Machiavelli. It is Machiavelli's more subdued attack on traditional political philosophy which Spinoza bodily takes over and translates into the less reserved language of Hobbes. As for the sentence "there will be vices as long as there will be human beings," Spinoza has tacitly borrowed it from Tacitus. In Spinoza's mouth, it amounts to an unqualified rejection of the belief in the Messianic age. The coming of the Messianic age would require divine intervention, or a miracle. But according to Spinoza miracles are impossible.

Spinoza's introduction to the *Political Treatise* is obviously modeled on the fifteenth chapter of Machiavelli's *Prince*. There Machiavelli says:

Since I know that many have written (on how princes should rule), I fear that by writing about it I will be held to be presumptuous by departing, especially in discussing such a subject, from the others. But since it is my intention to write something useful for him who understands, it has seemed to me to be more appropriate to go straight to the effective truth of the matter rather than to the imagination thereof. For many have imagined republics and principalities which have never been seen nor are known truly to exist. There is so great a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live that he who rejects what people do in favor of what one ought to do, brings about his ruin rather than his preservation; for a man who wishes to do in every matter what is good, will be ruined among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, or use goodness and abstain from using it according to the commands of circumstances.

One arrives at imagined kingdoms or republics if one takes one's bearings by how men ought to live, by virtue. The classical philosophers did just that. They thus arrived at the best regime of the *Republic* and the *Politics*. But when speaking of imagined kingdoms Machiavelli thinks not only of the philosophers; he also thinks of the kingdom of God, which from his point of view is a conceit of visionaries, for as his pupil Spinoza said, justice rules

only where just men rule.<sup>14</sup> But to stay with the philosophers, they regarded the actualization of the best regime as possible but extremely improbable. According to Plato, its actualization literally depends on a coincidence, a most unlikely coincidence, the coincidence of philosophy and political power.<sup>15</sup> The actualization of the best regime depends on chance, on *Fortuna*, that is to say, on something which is essentially beyond human control. According to Machiavelli, however, *Fortuna* is a woman who as such must be hit and beaten to be kept under. *Fortuna* can be vanquished by the right kind of man.<sup>16</sup> There is a connection between this posture toward *Fortuna* and the orientation by how men do live. By lowering the standards of political excellence one guarantees the actualization of the only kind of political order which is in principle possible.

Machiavelli is not concerned with how men do live merely in order to describe it. His intention is rather, on the basis of knowledge of how men do live, to teach princes how they ought to rule and even how they ought to live. Accordingly, he rewrites as it were Aristotle's *Ethics*. To some extent he admits that the traditional teaching is true: men are obliged to live virtuously in the Aristotelian sense. But he denies that living virtuously is living happily or leads to happiness. If liberality, for example, is used in the manner in which you are obliged to use it, it hurts you. For if you use it virtuously and how one ought to use it, the prince will ruin himself and will be compelled to rule his subjects oppressively in order to get the necessary money. Miserliness, the opposite of liberality, is one of the vices which enable a prince to rule. A prince ought to be liberal, however, with the property of others, for this increases his reputation.<sup>17</sup> Similar considerations apply to compassion and its opposite, cruelty. This leads Machiavelli to the question of whether it is better for a prince to be loved rather than to be feared or vice versa. It is difficult to be both loved and feared. Since one must therefore choose, one ought to choose being feared rather than being loved, for whether one is loved depends on others, while being feared depends on oneself. But one must avoid being hated. The prince will avoid becoming hated if he abstains from the property and the women of his subjects—especially from their property, for men resent less the murder of their father than the loss of their patrimony. In war the reputation for cruelty does not do any harm. The greatest example

<sup>14</sup> Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chap. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Republic* 473d.

<sup>16</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

is Hannibal who was always implicitly obeyed by his soldiers and never had to contend with mutinies either after victories or after defeats: "This could not arise from anything but his inhuman cruelty which, together with his innumerable virtues, made him always venerable and terrible in the eyes of his soldiers, and without which cruelty his other virtues would not have sufficed. Not very considerably the writers on the one hand admire his action and on the other condemn the main cause of the same."<sup>18</sup> We see here that inhuman cruelty is one of Hannibal's virtues. Another example of cruelty well used, as Machiavelli puts it, is supplied by Cesare Borgia's pacification of the Romagna. In order to pacify that country, he put at its head Ramiro d'Orco: "a man of cruelty and dispatch," and gave him the fullest power. Ramiro succeeded in no time, acquiring the greatest reputation. But then Cesare thought that such an excessive power was no longer necessary and might make him, Cesare, hated. He knew that the rigorous measures taken by Ramiro had caused some hatred. Cesare wished therefore to show that if any cruelty had been committed, it was not his doing but arose from the harsh nature of his subordinate. Therefore he had him put one morning in two pieces on the piazza of the chief town with a piece of wood and a bloody knife at his side. The ferocity of this sight induced the populace to be in a state of satisfaction and stupor.<sup>19</sup>

Machiavelli's new "ought" demands then the judicious and vigorous use of both virtue and vice according to the requirements of the circumstances. The judicious alternation of virtue and vice is virtue, *virtù*, in Machiavelli's meaning of the word. He amuses himself and I believe some of his readers by using the word "virtue" in both the traditional sense and his sense. Occasionally he makes a distinction between *virtù* and *bontà*, goodness. That distinction was in a way prepared by Cicero who says that men are called good on account of their modesty, temperance, and above all, justice and keeping of faith, as distinguished from courage and wisdom.<sup>20</sup> The Ciceronian distinction within the virtues in its turn reminds us of Plato's *Republic*, in which temperance and justice are virtues required of all, whereas courage and wisdom are required only of some.<sup>21</sup> In Machiavelli the distinction between goodness and other virtues tends to become an opposition between goodness and virtue. While virtue is required of rulers and soldiers, goodness

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., chap. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., chap. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Cicero, *De officiis* 2.11.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Rep.* 428aff.

is required, or characteristic, of the populace engaged in peaceful occupations. Goodness comes to mean something like fear, fear-bred obedience to the government, or even violence.

In quite a few passages of *The Prince*, Machiavelli speaks of morality in the way in which decent men have spoken of it at all times. He has resolved the contradiction in the 19th chapter of *The Prince*, in which he discusses the Roman emperors who came after the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius up to Maximinus. The high point is the discussion of the emperor Severus. Severus belonged to those emperors who were most cruel and rapacious. Yet in him was so great virtue that he could always reign with felicity, for he knew well how to use the person of the fox and the lion, which natures a prince must imitate. A new prince in a new principality cannot imitate the actions of the good emperor Marcus Aurelius, nor is it necessary for him to follow those of Severus. But he ought to take from Severus those actions which are necessary for founding his state and from Marcus those which are appropriate and glorious for preserving a state already firmly established. The chief theme of *The Prince* is a wholly new prince in a wholly new state, that is to say, the founder. And the model for the founder as founder is the extremely clever criminal Severus. This means that justice is precisely not, as Augustine had taught, the foundation of kingdoms. The foundation of justice is injustice. The foundation of morality is immorality. The foundation of legitimacy is illegitimacy or, in our language, revolution. The foundation of freedom is tyranny. At the beginning there is terror, not harmony or love. But there is of course a great difference between terror for its own sake, for the sake of its perpetuation, and terror which limits itself to laying the foundation for that degree of humanity and freedom which is compatible with the human condition. But this distinction is at best hinted at in *The Prince*.

The comforting message of *The Prince*—for it contains a comforting message—is given in the last chapter, which is an exhortation addressed to an Italian prince, Lorenzo de' Medici, to take Italy and to liberate her from the barbarians, that is to say, the French, the Spaniards, and the Germans. Machiavelli tells Lorenzo that the liberation of Italy is not very difficult. One of the reasons he gives is that “extraordinary events without example that have been induced by God, are seen: the sea has divided itself, the cloud has led you on your way, the stone has poured out water, manna has rained.” The events without example do have an example: the miracles following Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. What Machiavelli seems to suggest is that Italy is the promised land for Lorenzo. But there is one difficulty: Moses, who

led Israel out of the house of bondage towards the promised land, did not reach that land. He died at its borders. Machiavelli thus darkly prophesied that Lorenzo will not liberate Italy, one reason being that he lacks the extraordinary *virtù* needed for bringing that great work to its consummation. But there is more to the extraordinary events without example of which nothing is known other than what Machiavelli asserts about them. All these extraordinary events occurred before the revelation on Sinai. What Machiavelli prophesies is that a new revelation, a revelation of a new Decalogue, is imminent. The bringer of that revelation is of course not that mediocrity Lorenzo, but a new Moses. That new Moses is Machiavelli himself, and the new Decalogue is the wholly new teaching on the wholly new prince in a wholly new state. It is true that Moses was an armed prophet and that Machiavelli belongs to the unarmed ones who necessarily come to ruin, as is said in *The Prince*. In order to find the solution for this difficulty one must turn to the other great work of Machiavelli, the *Discourses*.

Now forgive me ladies and gentlemen if I make a pause for sheer bodily reasons and let us have a discussion of what I said about *The Prince* before we turn to the *Discourses*.

**Student:** You mentioned Hobbes. There is a passage I am trying to put in simple words in which he condemns the afterlife as a matter of superstition. That rejection must precede the turning to passions as the focal point of political power.<sup>22</sup>

**Strauss:** Well, I thought you would begin with a more simple question: whether Hobbes ever mentions Machiavelli. As far as I remember, never. That is Hobbes's peculiar decency. That he doesn't mention Machiavelli. I was in former years a close student of Hobbes and it took me years and years until I saw Machiavelli behind Hobbes.<sup>23</sup> Now, of course there is a connection, you are quite true: fear of violent death cannot have that terrific importance if there is a life after death. And therefore the whole Hobbesian doctrine presupposes the denial of life after death. That is what you were driving at? Yes, it is implied. There is a discussion of this subject in the *Leviathan*. I wish I could reconstruct that. He says somewhere that there are two kinds of fear which can make men decent. The one is the greater fear and the other is the fear of a

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<sup>22</sup> This is a summary of a comment that is partly inaudible.

<sup>23</sup> See Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), xvi.

greater object, I believe.<sup>24</sup> That is not the word he uses, but it amounts to that. Meaning this: the fear of death is one and the fear, say, of punishment after death. But for people what is decisive practically is the fear of death, because punishment after death presupposes the belief already of a life after death and that is questionable. Mr. Berns?

**Laurence Berns:** In the comparison of Hobbes with Machiavelli, isn't there a fundamental contrast between the two in connection with the status of glory? Hobbes's whole construction depends upon the ability to sort of overwhelm the desire for glory by fear of the sovereign. It would seem that, in that respect, in what he says about the importance of glory and honor, Machiavelli is closer to the classics. I happen to be reading Hegel lately and Hegel seems also to restore the desire for honor and desire for glory. He even makes it fundamental, if you understand recognition in that way. So it would seem almost as if there is a classical element in, say, Machiavelli and Hegel. This isn't in Hobbes.

**Strauss:** Yes, sure. Hobbes in this respect as in some others is the most modern of the three, leading up very soon from this self-preservation toward what Locke called comfortable self-preservation. And that is much more the spirit of modern times than honor or glory.

**Laurence Berns:** It is in one sense, but I think it seems the kind of revolutionary impulse that seems to almost dominate academia almost everywhere, seems to have a great deal with love of honor and glory.

**Strauss:** Academic life? [Laughter]

**Berns:** No, not academic life, the spirit of revolution, to a certain extent as a kind of reaction, perhaps.

**Strauss:** But if you think, the moment of revolution is a class struggle. And this has to do with the relations of production. Then you are straight in Locke. I do not deny that a very low kind of striving for honor and glory and prestige plays a very great role in academic life. But in the academic teaching, especially in the academic teaching of sociology, there is no place for honor and glory.

**Berns:** Except in so far as it foments revolution, somehow the revolutionary...

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<sup>24</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14.

**Strauss:** *Ja*, but according to the orthodox teaching, as they would call it, revolution has to do with class struggle and class struggle has to do with relations of production and that is Locke, and Locke is only a modification of Hobbes. But there is another point implied in what you said and that is that the man who was the much more revolutionary thinker of these two, Machiavelli and Hobbes, namely Machiavelli, had to be mitigated, had to be made acceptable by men like Hobbes or by men like Locke in order to become successful. I believe that is a general, one can almost speak of a universal law that such teachings have to be made acceptable and digestible to be powerful.

**Berns:** The only thing is that it seems to me that one could also say that this respectability in a certain sense became boring so that the other thing had to come back in too, via Hegel. Namely, something like craving for glory, craving for recognition at least.

**Strauss:** But I do not know whether Hegel is as important in this connection as somebody else who corrected Hobbes and Locke and who had I believe a much broader influence than Hegel, namely, Rousseau. The whole sentiment, especially the sentiment of compassion opposing comfortable self-preservation...

**Strauss:** [tape resumes] of transpolitical morality, if I may say so, and political morality. And there is no place for that in Machiavelli.

**Student:** But there is no real dilution of power, there is no concept of that in Machiavelli. Either he is a successful prince or he is a punk, there is not much...

**Strauss:** *Ja*, then Machiavelli would prefer one who is not a beast, enjoying killing and torturing for its own sake. He would do that. But if you would raise the question "why do you do that?" whether you would get a very clear answer from Machiavelli is not so easy to say. Because then the main point would be that he is an efficient prince.

**Student:** But, you would agree there is no, in terms of theoretical conception, there is no concept of dilution of power guided by...

**Strauss:** Not that I know. I don't think so. At least I do not see at the moment.

**Student:** It seems to me that the greatest possible human achievement for Machiavelli is the founding you spoke of. I wonder whether that requires a rejection of the alternatives to the greatest possible human existence, take

philosophy understood in a certain way. But it is so curious, to me at any rate, he is silent, utterly silent...

**Strauss:** I am sure it does. But not quite, he is not utterly silent; silent, yes he is, but there is a passage I believe just in the center of the *Florentine Histories* where he tells a story of Cato, the famous Cato, who expelled the philosophers from Rome, and Machiavelli praises Cato for that.<sup>25</sup> Rome would not have remained so healthy and strong for such a long time if Cato had not driven out the philosophers. Philosophy and a healthy republican life are incompatible. That is nothing new but it is in Machiavelli too. But it is better known today through Rousseau but it is also in Machiavelli. Yes, and surely the philosophic life is not—the great question whether the philosophic or the political life is preferable is not explicitly, thematically discussed by Machiavelli. To that extent, I agree with you.

**Student:** Then the suggestion is that the philosophical life remains as a kind of ultimate rival possibility...

**Strauss:** Of course, all these things have their depth and their surfaces. Now what does the contemplative life mean in Machiavelli's time in popular use? The life of monks. And he was against them. And he preferred the Scipios and Hannibals and such individuals to the monks. Therefore, he had no place for the contemplative life. But of course, it doesn't mean that he was not himself in his way a contemplative man. There is a painting of Machiavelli of his later years, I think it is in Florence somewhere, where he looks like a monk.<sup>26</sup> Not that he was a particularly ascetic man, which he was not. But a certain intransigence, contemplative intransigence which he had.

**Student:** I think the difficulty however is the question of the object of contemplation. Thinking about the human things which seems to have been his greatest contemplation, I think one wouldn't deny this being thought as a philosophic life...

**Strauss:** That's a good point. In other words, that he gave thought to the human passions, to the human soul, you would probably admit. Although he never uses the word "soul," in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, never. Also for an obvious reason, because of the religious connotations. There are two Italian words, going back to two kindred Latin words: *animo* from *animus* and

<sup>25</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 5.1.

<sup>26</sup> This is probably the portrait of Machiavelli by Cristofano Dell'Altissimo di Papi kept at Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

*anima* from *anima*. *Anima* means soul; he never uses that in the two great works. But *animo* he uses all the time. I would translate *animo* by something like “temper.” That exists. But *anima*, the less said about it the better. But that is not all; he has also to think about the government of the whole, of the whole universe. He speaks about it, with extreme rarity. But he does. I may say something about that later.

**Student:** We could say that the first sentence of *The Prince* indicates that: “all states and all principalities.”

**Strauss:** In other words, not only human but also the universe.

**Student:** There is also the fact that when I first learned about it came as a surprise: that they found that he prepared evidently rather carefully a text of Lucretius.

**Strauss:** Yes. There is no doubt that he was familiar with this kind of thing. This manuscript still exists, did you know that? In Florence. And some individual will probably edit Machiavelli’s emendations.<sup>27</sup> On our way here, Mr. Blanton, you had a question which I thought was very sensible. But I refused to answer it because I thought maybe it will come out from this discussion. Do you remember what your difficulty regarding *The Prince* was?

**Blanton:** It had to do with the very soul of the prince, the very man the prince. It seemed that he must mouth things of mercy and religion and yet he must be able in a minute to turn around and do the very basest things. And I am wondering, that raises the question for me of the implications of *The Prince* itself. It seems to me that the man on the top would be a man without friends, let’s say, at least a man without much happiness, unless he can take some sort of...

**Strauss:** But he derives an enormous happiness from his success, from his power, from his ruling. You presuppose, according to Machiavelli erroneously, that happiness consists in virtue, in moral virtue. That he denies. He would say that the prince would become very miserable if he were to act always virtuously.

**Blanton:** But I am thinking he brings up several times in *The Prince* Hiero of Syracuse. And it makes me think of the dialogue of Xenophon...

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<sup>27</sup> See Chauncey E. Finch, “Machiavelli’s Copy of Lucretius,” *Classical Journal* 56, no. 1 (1960): 29–32.

**Strauss:** That has nothing to do with that. This Hiero has nothing to do with Xenophon's Hiero. They are entirely different men. That was a kind of copybook example of a virtuous prince of later antiquity.

**Blanton:** But it would seem to me that the prince would be a man who couldn't sleep at night, who is constantly fearful of every man around him.

**Strauss:** Do you believe that Stalin did not enjoy excellent sleep? I admit I was never in his bedroom but I believe he slept very well. Especially after he had committed a considerable amount of murders of people who could be dangerous to him. I think that is a prejudice that criminals, especially large-scale criminals, have sleepless nights on account of their crimes. At least that is surely Machiavelli's opinion. It would be wonderful if that were so. Surely you can say Stalin was punished soon after his death where in the 20th or 21st Congress where Khrushchev made his famous condemnation of Stalin. But he did not hear anymore.

**Student:** There is a powerful sentence in Capote's book *In Cold Blood*. It depicts Perry Smith in that book who says that I liked Mr. Clutter, he was a nice guy. I thought so up until the time I slashed his throat... He did not regret the crime. There was no regret, yet he expressed this...

**Strauss:** I believe that the question which you put to me on our way here was somewhat different. But I am sorry I cannot reconstruct it. I think the point is this: Machiavelli's virtue, in his sense of virtue, however beastly it is, must have a reward, on the basis of Machiavelli's principles. Otherwise it wouldn't be effective. But the reward is glory, honor, and especially on a large scale. If he is not... Well, how did Stalin say about Hitler, this beautiful sentence: Hitler was a very able man, but basically not intelligent. This implies that Stalin thought about himself that he was both, very able and basically intelligent man. He founded really a new empire. He died in '53 and it still lasts. Hitler's didn't last twelve years, although he promised a thousand years. Now if you think of those people who established empires which lasted centuries and were looked up to and revered by many generations as great men—think of Julius Caesar, among other people—that is worthy. That weighs more heavy in the scales than being stabbed by Khrushchevs. He would say, of course Caesar committed a lot of crimes but all these crimes led to the fact that Rome lasted for a couple of centuries more, otherwise she would have gone to pieces because of the conflict between the patricians and the plebeians. You can then turn it around and say Machiavelli's immoral teaching implies a moral teaching of sorts: to establish and to found and

preserve a civil society by means utterly incompatible with ordinary decency but forming the basis of ordinary decency; where would people be able to act with ordinary decency if there were not a civil society? A civil society which their ordinary decency can never bring about. And therefore one can make a moral case, so to speak, for Machiavelli's immoralism, and I think that was never completely alien to his thought, but on the other hand he did not conceal that implication.

**Student:** But look what he has to do. If the prince comes by it by his own fortune or his own ability, the prince, in order to found his state, has to do away with the very best men. Those men who have intelligence or ambition to be anything like him must be annihilated and it leaves only the men he is left to deal with, just ordinary men.

**Strauss:** But there are various degrees of ordinary men. Think of Caesar and his friends who for reasons of decency opposed him, the conspirators, especially Brutus and Cassius. If I understand Shakespeare's play correctly, what it means is this: Caesar could never have been disposed of except by the alliance between Brutus and Cassius. Brutus whose honesty vouched for the honesty of the enterprise and Cassius who had the political sense, the Machiavellianism. To make this [understandable], how did they call it, in the last election? In connection with [George] McGovern? How did they call that? I do not know. It was a word used in connection with McGovern the last election. Integrity or something of this kind. Politically manageable. But this applies already to an earlier stage. If this was the basis of alliance between Brutus and Cassius, Brutus supplying the morality and Cassius supplying the Machiavellianism. Then they murder Caesar. The whole thing doesn't work because now the difference between Brutus and Cassius destroys the alliance. So, that is the proof that Caesar was necessary. You can have this only in one man, not in an alliance of two. This is what happened then. Brutus ruins somehow the Machiavellianism of Cassius. And Cassius on the other hand endangers the integrity of Brutus. That is an indirect proof of the necessity for Caesar, for in Hegelian language a synthesis of Brutus and Cassius which is superior to the ingredients of Brutus on the one hand and Cassius on the other. And I believe something of this kind was in Shakespeare's mind and of course also in Machiavelli's mind.

**Student:** I believe in *The Prince* there is a passage regarding the will of fortune, that despite the professed attempts of the prince his rule will decline...

**Strauss:** Because of the power of *Fortuna*. Chapter 25.

**Student:** Fortune. Is that to be taken seriously?

**Strauss:** Yes, but it is qualified there. *Fortuna* is very powerful but if a man is very strong and very virile then he can keep *Fortuna* under and therefore *Fortuna* is ultimately no danger for the right kind of man.

**Student:** My other question is about the possibility of making a case for the morality of the prince in the circumstances of the founding. What came to my mind was your distinction in *Natural Right* between means necessary in extraordinary situations versus means necessary in ordinary situations. Machiavelli does not seem to make any such distinction.

**Strauss:** But he implies it. I do not remember at the moment a clear example, but sure.

**Student:** Would you say that he also makes the case persuasively that the actions of the prince are in the name of the good of the whole?

**Strauss:** That goes without saying. He mentions this I think in the first chapter where he speaks about virtue and vice in general, that is chapter 15, where he says he must use virtue and vice both, alternately, as circumstances require.

**Student:** That part I understand, but I am not convinced that...

**Strauss:** But in this connection he says he must of course always speak of the virtues, and say he does it in the name of piety, of liberality, and the other things when he acts impiously and illiberally and so on. This is, I would say, rather elementary as for Machiavelli. But it was in the literature, it was not quite elementary and after Machiavelli's time there was a school of thought called "Tacitismo," from Tacitus, where Tacitus's description of the Roman emperors, especially the more decent ones, was used as a kind of mirrors of princes, a Machiavellian kind of princely government, and this played a great role in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. It ended only around 1700 I would say. That was an enormous literature.

**Student:** I can't remember the chapter in *The Prince*, but he says he intends to speak about law, or alludes to the fact that he might speak about law, but he goes on to stress how the prince must always be concerned with war, even in so-called peace time he must be a fighter, and all he is thinking about the nobles, the landscape, he never, in *The Prince* at least, comes back to law, never says much about it.

**Strauss:** The whole plan of *The Prince* excludes law as law, it is chapters... my memory is no longer what it was...it's a sequence of chapters dealing with

war, these are chapters 12, 13, and 14, I believe. I do not know, but I believe it is. So you would of course expect the war, but he speaks instead of war of the prince and his enemies, and then the other part which deals with the prince and his friends, has to do with his subjects, his obedient subjects, that is law, they will obey the law. So the law as law did not have such an importance because the law presupposes the power to lay down the law and to enforce the law, and that is Machiavelli's theme, not the law as law. That is just the opposite of Hobbes; he wrote a book called *De Cive, Of Citizen*. He didn't write a book "Of Prince." And the main lesson given to the subject, to the citizen by Hobbes, is: obey your prince. The commands which the prince gives and ought to give, that was not Hobbes's theme. You have to figure that out for yourself. That's his advice here. To a considerable extent they surely would not be identical with Aristotle's advices but they would be somewhat less harsh than those of Machiavelli, there is no doubt.

Now since the question of Machiavelli's cosmology was implied in the discussion a short while before, I believe I will discuss briefly *the* chapter of the *Discourses* in which this subject is discussed. You have the *Discourses* with you. Book 2, chapter 5 and read that.

**Blanton:** From the beginning?

**Strauss:** *Ja*. But read slowly.

**Blanton:**

To those philosophers who maintain that the world has existed from eternity, we might reply, that, if it were really of such antiquity, there would reasonably be some record beyond five thousand years, were it not that we see how the records of time are destroyed by various causes, some being the acts of men and some of Heaven. Those that are the acts of men are the changes of religion and of language; for when a new sect springs up, that is to say a new religion, the first effort is (by way of asserting itself and gaining influence) to destroy the old or existing one; and when it happens that the founders of the new religion speak a different language, then the destruction of the old religion is easily effected. This we know from observing the proceedings of the Christians against the heathen religion; for they destroyed all its institutions and all its ceremonies, and effaced all record of the ancient theology. It is true that they did not succeed in destroying entirely the record of the glorious deeds of the illustrious men of the ancient creed, for they were forced to keep up the Latin language by the necessity of writing their new laws in that tongue; but if they could have written them in a new language (bearing in mind their other persecutions),

there would have been no record whatever left of preceding events. Whoever reads the proceedings of St. Gregory, and of the other heads of the Christian religion, will see with what obstinacy they persecuted all ancient memorials, burning the works of the historians and of the poets, destroying the statues and images and despoiling everything else that gave but an indication of antiquity. So that, if they had added a new language to this persecution, everything relating to previous events would in a very short time have been sunk in oblivion.

It is reasonable to suppose that what the Christians practiced towards the Pagans, these practiced in like manner upon their predecessors. And as the religions changed two or three times in six thousand years, all memory of the things done before that time was lost; and if nevertheless some vestiges of it remain, they are regarded as fabulous, and are believed by no one; as is the case with the history of Diodorus Siculus, who gives an account of some forty or fifty thousand years, yet is generally looked upon as being mendacious, and I believe with justice.

As to causes produced by Heaven, they are such as destroy the human race, and reduce the inhabitants of some parts of the world to a very few in number; such as pestilence, famine, or inundations. Of this the latter are the most important, partly because they are most universal, and partly because the few that escape are chiefly ignorant mountaineers, who, having no knowledge of antiquity themselves, cannot transmit any to posterity. And should there be amongst those who escape any that have such knowledge, they conceal or pervert it in their own fashion, for the purpose of gaining influence and reputation; so that there remains to their successors only just so much as they were disposed to write, and no more. And that such inundations, pestilences, and famines occur cannot be doubted, both because all history is full of accounts of them, and because we see the effects of them in the oblivion of things, and also because it seems reasonable that they should occur. For in nature as in simple bodies, when there is an accumulation of superfluous matter, a spontaneous purgation takes place, which preserves the health of that body. And so it is with that compound body, the human race; when countries become overpopulated and there is no longer any room for all the inhabitants to live, nor any other places for them to go to, these being likewise all fully occupied—and when human cunning and wickedness have gone as far as they can go—then of necessity the world must relieve itself of this excess of population by one of those three causes; so that mankind, having been chastised and reduced in numbers, may become better and live with more convenience. Tuscany then, as I have said above, was once powerful, religious, and virtuous; it had its own customs and language; but all this was destroyed by the Roman power, so that there remained nothing of it but the memory of its name.

**Strauss:** In the first place at the very beginning of this chapter you would have seen that he refers to philosophers. So he knew something of philosophers and the particular point he has in mind here is that there are philosophers who teach that the world, this world inhabited by human beings, lasts forever. What is the very beginning?

**Blanton:** “To those philosophers who maintain that the world has existed from eternity, we might reply, that, if it were really of such antiquity, there would reasonably be some record beyond five thousand years.”

**Strauss:** Who are these philosophers who say that?

**Blanton:** I think immediately of Aristotle.

**Strauss:** Sure, the Aristotelians, vulgarly called Averroists, i.e., the unbelieving Aristotelians. They said the visible universe is eternal and man has always generated man, there never was a first man. What does Machiavelli say? He replies to them.

**Blanton:** He says that there are various causes for the records of human beings being lost and that any man who speaks in terms of eternity is justly laughed at or justly put down, I guess.

**Strauss:** But still, when you read it without any distrust of Machiavelli, you would say he tries to refute this antibiblical argument, but in fact he supports it. He says: this were true if there were no ruin of documents, therefore the antibiblical Aristotelian argument is not refuted. That means in the context: that’s a solid argument.

**Blanton:** But he refers to the one historian who gives an account of forty or fifty thousand years...

**Strauss:** All right, Diodorus Siculus. But is he not trustworthy because he speaks of forty or fifty thousand years, or because he adopts all kinds of old women’s tales he picked up in Egypt, where he came from?

**Blanton:** The latter, I suppose.

**Strauss:** Yes, so that is not very helpful. But there is another point which we have to consider here. These causes of ruin of what they now call civilizations by war and such things, he calls human causes. And what are the divine causes? But what is true of the ruin is of course also true of the originations of *sects*—that was a favorite term of the Averroists for religion. Sects have their origin not in divine acts but in human acts.

**Student:** Not revelation.

**Strauss:** Not revelation proper. *Ja*. That is one of the most revealing chapters in the whole book, the whole *Discourses*. Now this I may link up with... The *Discourses* is about four or five times as long as *The Prince* and is much richer in matter than *The Prince*, much more difficult to understand also. I can only give you one little help towards this understanding: The fifth chapter of the second book, which we just read, is the sixty-fifth chapter of the whole work, the first book consisting of sixty chapters. Sixty-five is as you may easily figure out a multiple of thirteen:  $5 \times 13$ . That is one principle of Machiavelli's writing, the number thirteen. *The Prince*, a book much easier to understand, consists of twenty-six chapters and twenty-six is more obviously a multiple of thirteen than sixty-five is. That is a long a question: Why did he pick this strange number? That is a question into which I cannot go because it would have to do all kinds of strange things which would remind more of doings of alchemists than of students of Machiavelli. So we'd better forgo that.

At any rate, book 2, chapter 5 of the *Discourses* is the most obviously cosmological chapter of the *Discourses* with the possible exception of the proemium of book 3, where he doesn't give any details but where he speaks of the unchangeability of the natural order. Now let us have another discussion, for the same reason for which I had to propose a discussion a short while ago.

**Student:** Of course, to agree with Averroes on a certain point does not necessarily mean to be an Averroist. He might agree with regard to the possible eternity of the universe but he might not agree with theological first cause, for example.

**Strauss:** *Ja*, that is true. But the question is how deeply had Machiavelli studied these kinds of things. That's a question to which I believe no one has the answer. The second point which was already mentioned is that we know a bit of Machiavelli's philosophical studies: his study of Lucretius. The copy of Lucretius which he copied and in which he inserted some emendations of his own is still in existence. But more specifically the Averroistic teaching, however much it might differ from Aristotle's own teaching, was surely a teleological teaching. And there is no place for teleology in Machiavelli, there is no place for teleology in Lucretius. And therefore I believe the most cautious suggestion one could make is this: the natural philosophy on which Machiavelli builds is a decayed Aristotelianism somehow under the influence of Epicurus. I couldn't with a good conscience go beyond this very unsatisfactory formulation.

**Student:** What about the possibility of identifying nature with *fortuna*. Could nature be called *fortuna*? Would that be another name for nature?

**Strauss:** No, it is not possible. Because the orderliness which belongs to nature does not belong to *fortuna*. For example, you have two ears, that is our nature. But that there are from time to time people who have only one ear, that's *fortuna*.

**Student:** He speaks of purgation in this fifth chapter [of book 2].

**Strauss:** That is correct. That is a kind of teleology.

**Student:** That is also a kind of *fortuna*.

**Strauss:** No, on the contrary. That is order. There is a certain overpopulation, taking place from time to time. And then coming with that overpopulation, immorality—say, cannibalism. And then something must be done by nature, [i.e.,] teleology. And therefore wars are an important part of natural economy: to get rid of the danger of overpopulation. That is an argument we find in medieval Averroists, for example Marsilius of Padua, that wars are very important for that purpose, to prevent overpopulation. That is true, there a kind of teleology implied in that.

**Student:** The difficulty is of course that a war, a plague, a flood seem to be interpretable as for the sake of ridding us of excess population. But they don't seem to be natural in the sense of being always or for the most part. They seem to be chance.

**Strauss:** *Ja*, this is true. I see now, there is a variety of considerations coming there together. Because what Machiavelli is doing in chapter 5 of book 2 is to present his very heretical view in as respectable a guise as possible. And therefore he brings in the flood; flood which is after all not only a teaching of pagan philosophers but of the Bible itself. Machiavelli uses that for his own purposes, that such floods lead to destruction of all monuments of the earlier times and no wonder that there is no argument available proving that the world is older than five thousand and so hundred years. [inaudible]

**Student:** That seems to suggest that Noah was an ignorant mountaineer.

**Strauss:** *Ja*, that is also true. That is not good for Noah. That is true, but it corresponds to what Plato says on the same subject in the *Laws*: people who don't read and write and therefore can't leave documents by which you can prove anything....

**Strauss:** [in progress] Just as here a wholly nonpolitical man establishes an illicit relation with a woman, in an immoral manner, but in a way which some people would find charming, the same is done by a prince who establishes his power by illicit means and yet one cannot simply condemn him, according to Machiavelli. You may have read the article by Harvey Mansfield; he has written an article on the *Mandragola* from this point of view.<sup>28</sup> There was an international meeting somewhere in Italy on Machiavelli and he wrote about that. There is a parallel between *Mandragola* and the political writings but a parallel is something different: these are not political people. Machiavelli has a formula for that; when he speaks of Lorenzo de' Medici he says he had a quasi-impossible combination of gravity and levity.<sup>29</sup> Gravity—politics; levity—love. Two entirely different provinces, akin because they are both human, and yet radically different. That is one reason why I would hesitate calling Machiavelli a hedonist.

**Student:** Another question about the character of the prince: I remember in a reading of the *Republic* being struck by the guardians being compared to dogs, that is, friendly to the citizens and angry at any foreigner, and I remember at the time thinking that's hard to understand, how a man could train himself to be both vicious and compassionate. But it seems to me even harder to understand in Machiavelli because at least in the *Republic* or in a city in the way that the ancients talk about it there is a fatherland, there is a strict definition somehow of who a proper citizen is. But in the terms of Machiavelli it seems that the citizens that the prince would be friendly to are not necessarily those within his city but some people appear, maybe in the city maybe out of the city.

**Strauss:** Not quite. I haven't made statistics of the use of *patria* in Machiavelli but that goes without saying that the political society is a fatherland.<sup>30</sup> There may be some marginal cases where these two things do not coincide but as a rule they coincide. I don't believe that you will find a crucial difference there.

**Student:** It seemed that the prince is potentially vicious towards everyone, there is no one that stands outside of the possibility of being sliced up.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey C. Mansfield, "The Cuckold in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*," in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, ed. Vickie B. Sullivan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 1–30.

<sup>29</sup> *Florentine Histories*, 8.36.

<sup>30</sup> But see Leo Strauss, "Machiavelli's Intention: *The Prince*," *American Political Science Review* 51, no. 1 (1957): 36.

**Strauss:** Yes, if he doesn't behave. But if he behaves why should he slice him up? Is it not better, as Socrates even put it, to use him alive than to kill him and only have the trouble of having him buried?<sup>31</sup>

**Student:** The only thing is that it sounds like the analogy is between the dog and the prince, but actually it is between the prince and the master of the dog who directs the dog on as to who the enemies and who the friends are.

**Strauss:** But why does Plato introduce the example of the dogs there in the second book? What is the purpose, the comparison of the guardian with a dog?

**Student:** I am not sure.

**Strauss:** A very obvious phenomenon: the simple man identifies the fellow citizen with a friend and the foreigner is a damned foreigner. That is universal and therefore the people who are the defenders par excellence, the guardians, they must have this to a higher degree. From ordinary experience, we all know how easy the combination is and Socrates puts in a way that it seems to be very paradoxical so that he can solve it only by going outside of the human sphere and bring in the dogs, you know, as if there were no human examples for that. The joke which he makes is really this: that he calls dogs the philosophic animal because the dogs make a distinction between friends and foes with a view to knowledge. Those they know they call friends and those they do not know they call enemies, and since they take their bearings by knowledge they are philosophic animals. In fact they are just the opposite of philosophers.

**Student:** I don't think I see why.

**Strauss:** Well, a philosopher would not say that the mere fact that a man is an alien makes him an enemy.

**Student:** Is the *Mandragola* an example of ministerial poetry or is there such a thing in Machiavelli?

**Strauss:** No, I mean you can put it this way, you can say there is a sphere of politics which is the most magnificent and impressive sphere which exists for most people, for Machiavelli especially. But there is something else and this can be loosely described as the sphere of levity; because politics, that is great, think only of war which belongs to politics, gravity. And love, levity.

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<sup>31</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.11.

[Strauss thumps on the table for emphasis.] Is this clear? So you can say, although it is to take some liberties, but it is not wholly irrational to say that the *Mandragola* and similar works of Machiavelli deal with the nonpolitical, with the transpolitical to the extent to which Machiavelli is willing to deal with that. Did I make myself understood?

**Student:** Would there then be any political role for comedy or tragedy, or poetry in general?

**Strauss:** Machiavelli never spoke about that, he wrote something about Dante and Boccaccio but not about tragedy and comedy as such. Surely he would say that, but his business was to write the *Discorsi* and *Mandragola* and related things.

**Student:** But *Mandragola* is the problem for me. I can't understand how the *Mandragola* being comic but also to a certain extent dealing with things that would have great gravity. . .

**Strauss:** No, that cannot be called grave.

**Student:** Political aspects of it as Dr. Mansfield thought so.

**Strauss:** The point is that it is not political. You mean its kinship, in the parallelism with politics. Is that what you mean? All right.

**Student:** One could also say there is a kind of presentation of what might be called the ethical doctrine of *The Prince* insofar as it gives you examples of how virtue is to be used. Callimanco could never have succeeded if he hadn't been taught or learned how to use the virtues of *The Prince* on the mother and others.

**Strauss:** But princes are warned by Machiavelli to be particularly cautious regarding the womenfolk of their subjects.<sup>32</sup> So the Machiavellian prince precisely if he is very Machiavellian would never do this kind of thing. He had so many opportunities apart from that, there is no good reason for it.

**Student:** There is no way to answer that and remain decent, there is no way to try to argue with that and remain decent.

**Strauss:** *Ja*, probably, yes. What was the name of that woman, the ancestress of William the Conqueror? Or was it the wife of his... The woman in Bayeux, whom the Norman nobleman saw doing her laundry in the river

<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 17.

there. And then took her on his horse and rode away with her. Was she the mother of William the Conqueror? There is such a story, a true story. But I forgot the exact relation. Maybe the wife of William the Conqueror, I think he got into trouble with that boy later on who came from this relation. So you see it is not advisable, even if you are William the Conqueror, to do that.<sup>33</sup>

**Student:** You suggested that there is an affinity between Hobbes, Spinoza, and Machiavelli.

**Strauss:** That depends a bit on the point of view. There is a great affinity if you compare Machiavelli and Hobbes taken together with Plato and Aristotle, there is no question. But if you take Hobbes on his own terms and Machiavelli on his own terms, then you can say however anti-Platonic and anti-Aristotelian they may be, they are so different that it is of no use to bring them together, it is in no way enlightening to bring them together. That was a view which I held for many years. But then eventually I reached the view that they really belong together and Hobbes's silence on Machiavelli doesn't mean anything. It was a general rule of policy not to mention the name of Machiavelli. Let me see, the first man who mentioned Machiavelli, his enemies of course mention him all the time, but the first man who was not an enemy of Machiavelli, was this strange man, a Belgian, a professor at Leuven, what was his name? He changed his religion according to the political order, when the Protestants were in ascendancy he was a Protestant, and when the Catholics were in ascendancy he was a Catholic, he was a very famous man—oh, Justus Lipsius! Well known in the literature as the founder of the neo-Stoic school and he wrote textbooks of politics based partly on Machiavelli and partly... how the Stoics come in I do not know, I had a student who wanted to write his doctoral dissertation on how the Stoics came into this mixture but he never finished his dissertation, he went into academic administration, which is I believe the death of doctoral dissertations in many cases. Yes, Justus Lipsius. He was in his way an important man, not only on account of Machiavelli, but he was also a correspondent of Montaigne. Because when you take the *Essays* of Montaigne which consists also of three books, there are certain external similarities between the *Essays* and Machiavelli's *Discourses*, which I never understood, but this relation with Justus Lipsius suggested something to me. Of course, Bacon speaks of Machiavelli with a certain respect, he calls him one of the doctors of Italy,<sup>34</sup> which is a beautiful epithet for Machiavelli I

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<sup>33</sup> The story is that of Herleva of Falaise, mother of William the Conqueror.

<sup>34</sup> In *The Essays*, "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature."

believe. Bacon praised him, with a certain criticism, but he praised him. But as a rule people blamed him, especially his enemies. But in the second half of the seventeenth century he was established as a European celebrity; so Spinoza speaks of him with high regard, but Spinoza was himself a rather dubious fellow, and therefore that was not an unqualified compliment, for Machiavelli to be praised by Spinoza. And in the eighteenth century then I think this was over, Machiavelli was accepted. Although Frederick the Great still thought it good to write a book called *Anti-Machiavelli* which he wrote immediately before he started with his Machiavellian actions. Which is of course sign of a deep understanding for Machiavelli. But Hobbes, not so strangely because Hobbes was in a way a very cautious man, never mentions Machiavelli, as far as I know, and the only proof I have is that I looked up the indices of the English and the Latin works and the name Machiavelli doesn't occur. I have never gone over the whole texts of Hobbes to see whether he mentions or does not mention Machiavelli. That could be a good term paper. [inaudible]

**Student:** I am bothered a little bit by this idea of trying to give some kind of moral justification for the prince as the founder of a political order. I wanted you develop that a little bit further. I wonder, how can one call it a moral act if the primary consideration on the part of a founder is a completely self-regarding thing?

**Strauss:** All right, take a man who is wholly unselfish, wholly altruistic as they say. And he sees that his fellow men cannot live decently together except in civil society under laws with teeth in them. Is this a moral thought? I mean good, just laws are of course enforced laws. All right, then he must get the power to make such laws.

**Student:** I am not concerned with the actions so much. Perhaps he has to do terrible things in order to do it. What I am asking about more is in terms of his own motivation.

**Strauss:** How does Aristotle in his wisdom say? The intentions are immanifest.<sup>35</sup> No human being can know what the intentions are. But you see certain actions presented to you in a certain light and that is blameless. Such is the way in which we humans have to judge.

**Student:** Let me ask you a slightly different question: would you say that this is a beginning of the notion of the invisible hand?

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1178a30.

**Strauss:** Why should a particularly... There are so many beginnings for that.

**Student:** Because it seems to me that the argument there is that somehow the self-regarding passions turn out to be good for society.

**Strauss:** I was not thinking of self-regarding, I was thinking of a man who is wholly other-regarding and for this reason feels that he or someone who listens to his advice has to come to power to lay down good laws and have them enforced. The question of self- and other-regarding does not come up in my argument. You see, there is a thing which is called utopianism, did you ever hear that word? There is an argument made against utopianism that this precisely is immoral because it disregards the circumstances and the complexities; to put it in a different way, the man who considers the circumstances, he is a moral man. I mean it depends, there can be of course people who are very unscrupulous and derive pleasure from their unscrupulousness, men like Bismarck, who still are clever enough if need be to present their immoral actions as prompted by moral motives. I am not speaking of this kind of man, I am speaking of honest men. But I think we have sometimes examples in this country of this dualism: of moral politics immorally motivated, and, in a circumstance, immoral politics morally motivated. That is complicated.

**Student:** Could you say more about that? Immoral politics morally motivated, an example?

**Strauss:** No, I never speak about politics.

[Laughter]

**Strauss:** But I think the last elections were quite instructive.<sup>36</sup>

[Laughter]

**Student:** I am still worried a little bit, [inaudible], it would seem that the Machiavellian resort to prudence and the calculation as to what characteristic is to be employed in a given situation resolves itself into unprincipled behavior, so flexible...

**Strauss:** Yes, sure, that is perfectly correct, Machiavelli is unprincipled because he thinks you should use both virtue and vice just as circumstances recommend. But there is a principle here, indicated by his use of the word

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<sup>36</sup> In the presidential election of 1972, President Richard M. Nixon won reelection, carrying forty-nine of fifty states. He defeated Democratic candidate George McGovern.

*virtù*. *Virtù* consists in using both virtue and vice as circumstances recommend. He questions the principles of morality, without any question.

**Student:** I have trouble understanding how a man could operate so flexibly and still conceive of himself as an identifiable thing and therefore be peaceful with himself. In that sense...

**Strauss:** Why do people employ tax lawyers? I believe because there are so-called loopholes and some loopholes are permitted and some loopholes are forbidden. A decent man would not use forbidden loopholes but he would use—most of them, surely, would use permitted loopholes. But permitted loopholes are not something in between forbidden loopholes and something which is perfectly straightforward? Does this not apply to other human actions, that there are borderline cases? And especially if one's enemies come in, would this not be a further complicating factor?

**Student:** Are you in effect saying that Plato's argument against tyranny really has no practical bearing? Because it seems to me that his hypothetic argument is that somehow tyranny, tyrannical man is always in some way fundamentally dissatisfied.

**Strauss:** And to which I can only give an equally general answer: in the moment you show me the possibility of the philosopher-king I accept your argument. But if the philosopher-king is a problematic being, his opposite pole, the tyrant, is also a problematic being. I mean you don't have to convince me that a tyrant is an abominable creature, I only have to read Suetonius's life of Nero if I am not satisfied with what I read about Stalin or Hitler to see that. Terrible. But the question is whether the complete absence of any admixture of the opposite, tyranny, is possible. If Nero stands at the nude corpse of his mother and he had her murdered and says, I didn't know that I had such a beautiful mother!<sup>37</sup> Wonderful boy, huh?! But that is not a typical action of tyrants, because it is a wholly unpolitical action, complete senseless misuse of the power which he had and which he was unable to use properly. There is no possible justification.

I hate to return to the subject with which I opened today's meeting, that owing to my bad bodily condition I was not able to elaborate a lecture on Machiavelli and to have a discussion as I would have loved to have. I must now terminate it, because I am too tired, I am very sorry, but it can't be helped. But it was very nice meeting you.

<sup>37</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 62.14.2.