



“He who neglects what is done for what ought to be done,  
sooner effects his ruin than his preservation.”

# Niccolò Machiavelli and the Birth of Political Philosophy

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# NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI -THE BIRTH OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY



For Easter 1952, the theater group *Les Théophiliens* of the University of Paris-Sorbonne was invited to participate in the International Festival of University Theater Troupes in Parma, Italy. I was part of the group –and joined, with excitement: my first real immersive visit to *la Bella Italia!* We had selected *Aucassin et Nicolette*, a 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century *chante-fable*, in which I was playing the King of Torelore, giving birth to a child (while his wife/queen is fighting with the army) -a prediction for the LGBT community?

We were lodged in the University dorms, and shared the floor with the comedians/students of the *Università cá Foscari* of Venezia (Venice). They decided to teach me Italian, with a hint of venetian colloquialisms; I was absorbing their conversations like blotting paper!

During our recesses –the number of stages was limited- I visited the nearby *Galleria Nazionale di Parma* where I was greeted by the *Madonna con Bambino e Santi* of Fra



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Angelico.

My breath stopped. I felt somewhat struck by lightning: my first encounter with the *Primitivi* and their purest, sparkling palette of colors. Behind this masterpiece, the hall displayed rows and more rows of 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century artists. I felt both elated and dizzy; love at first sight, but forever.

We also visited *Le Roncole*, near Busseto where Joseph Verdi (Giuseppe Fortunino Francisco Verdi) was born in the then Département Taro (French 1<sup>st</sup> Empire) on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1813. This visit changed my musical tastes: I have been a fan of Verdi ever since.



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That October 1952 the International University Theater Festival settled in Firenze (Florence), where –again! - we shared a dorm with the *cá Foscari* students. Firenze is much more complex, famous, celebrated than Parma. Whole libraries are devoted to its treasures, architecture, history, influence, majesty and charms. Fortunately – for me- one of the actors of *cá Foscari* was a student on the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century of Firenze (where he grew up), and a future famous architect and designer: Gaetano Pesce took me under his wing, and we explored many of the *vicoli, piazze, palazzi, musei* and landmarks that marked and witnessed the Renaissance revolution that would change the world. One character stood apart and hovered over that period: *Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli* or Machiavelli. At one of the *librerie* I acquired for a few *lire* a used copy of *Il Principe* (The Prince) –and struggled for weeks to understand and appreciate it.



## Niccolò Machiavelli: The Man

On the door of my office, in Portola Valley, I have pinned a small [poster](#) with a Devil's image and as subtitle:

*Lasciate Ogni Speranza,  
Voì Che Entrate*

That's the inscription on the gate to Hell in one of the first English translations of The Divine Comedy, by Henry Francis Cary, in 1814. You probably know it as the less tongue-twisting "Abandon hope all ye who enter here," which is the epigraph for Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho, hangs as a warning above the entrance to the Disney theme park ride Pirates of the Caribbean, appears in the videogame World of Warcraft, and has been repurposed as a lyric by The Gaslight Anthem.



Dante's popularization of the Florentine Tuscan language helped make Florence the epicenter of the Renaissance, and his likeness is on this Uffizi gallery fresco

Florentine Tuscan became the lingua franca of Italy because of La Divina Commedia, helping to establish Florence as the creative hub of the Renaissance. It

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also became the language in which Dante's literary descendants Boccaccio and Petrarch would write –eventually just known as Italian. Through the force of his words, Dante helped create the very idea of the Italian language that is. Writing in the vernacular and helping to create a new vernacular for much of Italy, allowed Dante's ideas to take wide root – and helped set the stage for the intellectual revolutions to come in the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment. Two centuries later, Protestant leaders would advocate that reading the Bible in your own vernacular meant that you could give it your own individual understanding, undermining the idea that salvation is possible only through the Roman Church – something Dante himself had already done by outright inventing elements of the cosmology he presents in *La Divina Commedia*.

No wonder Niccolò Machiavelli was a Florentine!



Machiavelli contributed to many important discourses in Western thought - political theory most notably, but also history and historiography, Italian literature, the principles of warfare, and diplomacy. But Machiavelli never seems to have

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considered himself a philosopher, nor do his credentials suggest that he fits comfortably into standard models of academic philosophy. His writings are notoriously unsystematic, inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory. He tends to appeal to experience and example in the place of rigorous logical analysis.

Machiavelli may have grazed at the fringes of philosophy, but the impact of his musings has been widespread and lasting. The terms *Machiavellian* or Machiavellism find regular purchase among philosophers concerned with a range of ethical, political, and psychological phenomena.

Moreover, in Machiavelli's critique of "grand" philosophical schemes, we find a challenge to the enterprise of philosophy that commands attention and demands consideration and response. Thus, Machiavelli deserves a place at the table in any comprehensive survey of philosophy.

He was born 3 May 1469 in Florence and at a young age became a pupil of a renowned Latin teacher, Paolo da Ronciglione. He attended the University of Florence, and even a cursory glance at his corpus reveals that he received an excellent humanist education.

It is only with his entrance into public view, with his appointment as the Second Chancellor of the Republic of Florence, however, that we get a full and accurate picture of his life. For the next fourteen years, Machiavelli engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity on behalf of Florence, travelling to the major centers of Italy as well as to the royal court of France and to the imperial curia of Maximilian. We have letters, dispatches, and occasional writings that testify to his political assignments as well as to his acute talent for the analysis of personalities and institutions.

Florence had been under a republican government since 1494, when the leading Medici family and its supporters had been driven out of power. During this time, Machiavelli thrived under the patronage of the Florentine *gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini.

In 1512, however, with the assistance of Spanish troops, the Medici defeated the republic's armed forces and dissolved the government. Machiavelli was a direct victim of the regime change: he was initially placed in a form of internal exile and, when he was (wrongly) suspected of conspiring against the Medici in 1513, he was imprisoned and tortured for several weeks. His retirement thereafter to his farm

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outside of Florence afforded the occasion and the impetus for him to turn to literary pursuits.

The first of his writings in a more reflective vein was also the one most commonly associated with his name, *Il Principe* (The Prince). Written at the end of 1513, but published posthumously in 1532, *Il Principe* was composed in great haste by an author who was seeking to regain his status in the Florentine government.

Machiavelli's forced retirement led him to other literary activities. He wrote verse, plays, and short prose, penned a study of *Dell'arte della guerra* (The Art of War, 1521), and biographical and historical sketches.

He composed his other major contribution to political thought, ***Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*** (Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy), an exposition of the principles of republican rule masquerading as a commentary on the work of the famous historian of the Roman Republic. Unlike *Il Principe*, the *Discorsi* was authored over a long period, and only published posthumously in 1531.

Near the end of his life, Machiavelli began to return to the favor of the Medici family. In 1520, he was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de'Medici to compose *Istorie Fiorentine* (Florentine Histories), an assignment completed in 1525 and presented to the Cardinal, who had since ascended the papal throne as Clement VII, in Rome. Before he could achieve a full rehabilitation, he died on 21 June 1527.



## Il Principe



Before this disruptive book, most authors counseled rulers that if they wanted to succeed, enjoy a long and peaceful reign and pass their office down to their offspring, they must be sure to behave in accordance with conventional standards of ethical goodness. It was thought that rulers did well when they did good; they earned the right to be obeyed and respected because they showed themselves to be virtuous and morally upright.

It is precisely this moralistic view of authority that Machiavelli criticizes in *Il Principe*: there is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power. Authority and power are essentially coequal: whoever has power has the right to command; goodness does not ensure power and the good person has no more authority by being good. Machiavelli says that the only real concern of the political ruler is the acquisition and maintenance of power.

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He argues that the notion of legitimate rights of rulership adds nothing to the actual possession of power. For Machiavelli, power characteristically defines *political activity*, and hence it is necessary for any successful ruler to know how power is to be used. Only by means of the proper application of power, can individuals be brought to obey and will the ruler be able to maintain the state in safety and security.

Machiavelli acknowledges that good laws and good arms constitute the dual foundations of a well-ordered political system. But since coercion creates legality, he concentrates his attention on force. He writes "*Since there cannot be good laws without good arms, I will not consider laws but speak of arms;*" i.e. the legitimacy of law rests entirely upon the threat of coercive force. Machiavelli concludes that fear is always preferable to affection in subjects, just as violence and deception are superior to legality in effectively controlling them.

Machiavelli observes that "*one can say this in general of men: they are ungrateful, disloyal, insincere and deceitful, timid of danger and avid of profit.... Love is a bond of obligation which these miserable creatures break whenever it suits them to do so; but fear holds them fast by a dread of punishment that never passes.*" Machiavelli does not have a theory of obligation separate from the imposition of power; people obey only because they fear the consequences of not doing so, whether the loss of life or of privileges.

Concomitantly, a Machiavellian perspective directly attacks the notion of any grounding for authority independent of the sheer possession of power: people are compelled to obey purely in deference to the superior power of the state. It is power which in the final instance is necessary for the enforcement of conflicting views of what one ought to do; one can only choose not to obey if he possesses the power to resist the demands of the state, or willing to accept the consequences of the state's superiority of coercive force.

Machiavelli's argument in *Il Principe* is designed to demonstrate that politics can only coherently be defined in terms of the supremacy of coercive power; authority as a right to command has no independent status; it is meaningless and futile to speak of any claim to authority and the right to command which is detached from the possession of superior political power. The ruler who lives by his rights alone will surely wither and die by those same rights, because in the rough-and-tumble of political conflict those who prefer power to authority are more likely to succeed. The

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authority of states and their laws will never be acknowledged when they are not supported by a show of power which renders obedience inescapable. The methods for achieving obedience are varied, and depend heavily upon the foresight that the prince exercises. **Hence, the successful ruler needs special training.**



## Potere, Virtù, Fortuna

(Power, Virtue, Fortune)



Machiavelli offers us a vision of political rule purged of extraneous moralizing influences and fully aware of the foundations of politics in the effective exercise of power. The term that captures Machiavelli's vision of power politics is *virtù*. While the Italian word would normally be translated into English as “virtue,” the conventional connotation of moral goodness, Machiavelli obviously means something different when he refers to the *virtù* of the prince: the concept of *virtù* refers to the range of personal qualities that the prince needs to “*maintain his state*” and to “*achieve great things*,” the two markers of power; there can be no equivalence between the conventional virtues and Machiavellian *virtù*. Machiavelli expects princes of the highest *virtù* to behave in a completely evil fashion. To be a person of *virtù*, the prince above all else must acquire a “*flexible disposition*.” Machiavelli sees politics to be a sort of a battlefield on a different scale. Hence, the prince just like the general needs to be in possession of *virtù*, that is, to know which strategies and techniques are appropriate to what circumstances. *Virtù* is the touchstone of political success.

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What is the link between *virtù* and the effective exercise of power for Machiavelli? The answer is *Fortuna* (usually translated as “fortune”). *Fortuna* is the enemy of political order, the ultimate threat to the safety and security of the state. Machiavelli's *Fortuna* is a malevolent and uncompromising fount of human misery, affliction, and disaster.

Machiavelli asserts that *fortuna* resembles “one of our destructive rivers which, when it is angry, turns the plains into lakes, throws down the trees and buildings, takes earth from one spot, puts it in another; everyone flees before the flood; everyone yields to its fury and nowhere can repel it.” But it is possible to take precautions to divert the worst consequences of the natural elements. “The same things happen about *Fortuna*; she shows her power where *virtù* and wisdom do not prepare to resist her, and directs her fury where she knows that no dykes or embankments are ready to hold her”. *Fortuna* may be resisted by human beings, but only in those circumstances where *virtù* and wisdom have already prepared for her inevitable arrival. The wanton behavior of *Fortuna* demands an aggressive, even violent response, lest she take advantage of those men who are too retiring or “effeminate” to dominate her.

Only preparation to pose an extreme response to the vicissitudes of *Fortuna* will ensure victory against her. This is what *virtù* provides: the ability to respond to (mis)fortune at any time and in any way, that is necessary.

Niccolò Machiavelli has a bad reputation. Ever since the 16th century, when manuscript copies of his great work *Il Principe* (*The Prince*) began to circulate in Europe, his family name has been used to describe a particularly nasty form of politics: calculating, cutthroat and self-interested. There are, to be sure, reasons for this. Machiavelli at one point advises a political leader who has recently annexed a new territory to make sure to eliminate the bloodline of the previous ruler lest they form a conspiracy to unseat him. He also praises the ‘cruelty ... well-used’ by the mercenary captain Cesare Borgia in laying the foundations of his rule of the area around Rome. However, Machiavelli did not invent ‘*Machiavellian politics*’. Nor was his advocacy of force and fraud to acquire and maintain rule the cause of individual leaders using them. What then did Machiavelli do? What did he want to achieve?

In the AEON.co issue of November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Catherine Zuckert, the Nancy Reeves Dreux Professor of Political Science at Notre Dame University in Indiana tries to

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address the issue. She starts by looking into Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, in which Machiavelli infamously declares:

*I fear that ... I may be held presumptuous ... But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. Many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good.*

Unlike the imaginary republics and principalities advocated by earlier political theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, in which both governors and governed were to be educated to be as virtuous as possible, Machiavelli proposes to teach political leaders, both potential and actual, *'to be able not to be good and to use or not use that knowledge according to necessity'*.

Despite his reputation as a teacher of tyrants, if not a teacher of evil *per se*, a thoughtful reader recognizes immediately that this could not have been Machiavelli's intention. Who would need to learn *'to be able not to be good'*? Clearly not the likes of Borgia or the harsh and duplicitous Roman emperor Severus, whom Machiavelli also praises. By deceiving and killing their competitors, such men proved that they were *'able not to be good'* without his help. However, they might not have known how to use and not use that knowledge according to necessity. Borgia was exiled by the man he helped to make pope, and Severus was unable to teach his son how to perpetuate his family's rule. As Machiavelli observes, leaders tend to persist in using the means that have enabled them to succeed in the past, even when those means are no longer suited to the circumstances. The impetuous continue to forge ahead even when caution is warranted, and the cautious do not seize the opportunities that arise. In teaching his readers to be able *not* to be good and to use or not use that knowledge according to necessity, Machiavelli thus appears to be addressing two sorts of political actors: the good, who do not know how to be bad, but need to learn to be able to do so to be effective; and the bad, who do not know how to use (or not use) their *'ability'* to establish a lasting regime.

Why did Machiavelli think such a lesson was needed? According to him, most human

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beings do not actually want to be virtuous or good. Regarded as individuals, human beings are weak and needy. By seeking to acquire ever more and to protect what we have already amassed, we naturally come into conflict. We thus join together to form political communities not only to acquire what we need but also to protect what we have acquired from the predations of others. But once such political communities are formed, their members also become divided by two mutually opposed '*humors*' or '*appetites*': the desire of '*the great*' (or, as we might say today, the elite) to command and oppress the people, and the desire of the people not to be commanded and oppressed. It is an illusion to think that the leaders or ordinary citizens of a political community seek a '*common good*' beyond defending that community from external predators. There will always be a more or less explicit conflict between those who want to rule and those who do not want to be ruled. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli states that there are three possible outcomes of the conflict between the two humors: principality, liberty or license. But in a book ostensibly devoted to the education of a '*prince*', he does not explain how '*liberty*' can be achieved through a balancing of the two humors; he reserves that lesson for his *Discourses on Livy*, in which he praises the Roman republic as an example of how that happened. In *The Prince*, he confines himself to urging political leaders, once they acquire power, to seek the support of their people.

The first reason he suggests that a leader should seek the support of the people rather than favoring his '*great*' allies or partisans is that the ambitious '*great*' regard themselves as his equals, and therefore wish to displace him. They will demand ever more offices and goods as the price of their continued support. Attempts to satisfy them will necessarily fail and, in failing, add to the leader's enemies. A leader can satisfy his people, however, because '*the end of the people is more decent (onesto) than that of the great, since the great want to oppress and the people want not to be oppressed*'.

Second and more fundamental, there is strength in numbers: the people are much more numerous than the great. Machiavelli likes to use shocking examples and language. He points to the historical example of Borgia as well as to Oliverotto Euffreducci, the ruthless ruler of Fermo, and Agathocles, tyrant of Syracuse, to show that the relatively few '*great*' in any particular polity can be assembled under false pretences and slaughtered but reminds his readers that a '*prince*' will have no one to

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rule if he murders most of his people. A political leader will need subordinates to help him rule, but he can do perfectly well without any given set of '*great*' persons, since he '*can make and unmake them every day*'. He can make some '*great*' by giving them lands and offices, or unmake them by taking these, and their lives, away. Machiavelli thus indicates that the '*great*' are not different from the many by nature -human nature is the same in all. Because those granted high offices have more power and goods, they no longer feel as liable to oppression as the people merely subject to the government. Rather than desiring merely not to be oppressed, because of their relative positions the '*great*' come to desire to acquire more by oppressing others.

Having observed that all human beings fundamentally desire to preserve themselves and, in trying to do so, strive to acquire ever more, Machiavelli tries in *The Prince* to persuade the politically ambitious that, however they acquire rule, the best way to keep themselves in office is to satisfy their people's desire to have their lives, families and properties secured. In teaching political leaders 'to be able not to be good', Machiavelli does not, therefore, simply advocate self-interested, immoral or amoral behavior. He appeals to the desire of the politically ambitious to rule to convince them that the best way of realizing their desire is to satisfy the desire of their people not to be oppressed. Satisfying the desire of the people to be secure in their lives, families and property is and ought to be the end or purpose of government, as Machiavelli sees it. However, because he explicitly dedicated *The Prince* to a prince and addressed his advice to the politically ambitious, many readers and commentators have missed this central democratic thrust of his argument.

Machiavelli teaches readers of *The Prince* to be able not to be good by showing them that practices and attitudes thought to be virtuous in private individuals have deleterious results for public officials. Liberality was praised by ancient moralists, and generosity or charity has been praised by Christians (and others) to this day. However, Machiavelli points out, a political leader who depletes his own resources by generously granting offices, lands, titles and other emoluments to his aristocratic friends or partisans will lose their support when he needs it, unless that leader acquires new funds by taxing his people and so arousing their hatred. Rather than squander his capital by rewarding an ungrateful few, a political leader will prove himself to be truly liberal to the many by conserving his own resources so that he

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will be able to use them to defend himself and his government when needed. Likewise, a political leader who pardons criminals might appear to be merciful to a few, but he is cruel to his many subjects or fellow citizens who fear for their lives and property when the law is not enforced. Machiavelli argues that political leaders must use both force and fraud to acquire and maintain power. But he warns that they must always strive to *appear* to be full of mercy, faith, honesty, humility and religion – especially religion– even if they cannot be so in fact. (Anyone accused of being a ‘*Machiavellian prince*’ has not, therefore, succeeded in becoming such.) Why will everyone not merely believe but praise a head of state when he claims to be waging war, rigorously enforcing the law, or raising taxes for the sake of the true faith or humanity? If a political leader does what is necessary to ‘*win and maintain a state*’, Machiavelli assures his readers, ‘*the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone*’.

Readers often take this to mean simply that the end justifies the means. Machiavelli refers, however, to a particular end: establishing and maintaining law and order, which is in the people’s interest as much as it is in the ruler’s. It is difficult, if not impossible, for observers to discover what a person’s true motives are. In fact, political leaders act to acquire and maintain power for themselves. But if a leader acts to maintain a state that protects the lives and property of his subjects or fellow citizens from external aggression and domestic crime, they will believe him when he declares that he has been acting for the common good. In other words, people judge a leader’s character and words by the effects of his deeds. That is the ‘*effectual truth*’ that Machiavelli seeks in *The Prince*.

Machiavelli’s redefinition of the true ‘*virtues*’ of a ruler obviously constitutes a severe debunking of both ‘*virtue*’ and ‘*rule*’. Rather than a noble endeavor undertaken from a sense of duty to achieve a common good, effective rule will be undertaken and conducted solely based on a clever calculation of the best means an ambitious man can use to satisfy his desire to command without becoming hated and so possibly overthrown. However, Machiavelli also shows that there is –or, at least that there can be– a certain conjunction of the prince’s desire to command and the people’s desire to be secure, even though these desires remain essentially opposed, but it requires great ingenuity to conceive of how both can be satisfied to a certain extent. In *The Prince*, he points to one way of doing this by reminding his reader that there are *two*

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ways of fighting –the human way with laws, and the bestial way with force and fraud. He indicates what he means by the human way of fighting with laws when he observes that France is an example of a well-ordered and governed kingdom, and that the first of the *'infinite good institutions on which the liberty and security of the [French] king depend ... is Parlement'*. This French court enabled the people to resist the ambition and insolence of the nobles by accusing and trying them of crimes against the king. *Parlement* thus contributed not only to the security of the people, but also to the security of the king. In a monarchy, the laws are the laws of the king; and those who have the power to threaten his rule are the nobles or *'great'* who see themselves as equals to the king and continually try to acquire more wealth and power for themselves, if not simply to replace him. By giving the people the power to check the arrogance and ambition of the nobles, the institution of such a court enabled the king to use the people as a means of securing his rule without his having to act directly or with force against the nobility. Just as Borgia brought good government to the Romagna by using a cruel administrator to frighten everyone into submission, and then avoided responsibility himself for the use of such cruel means by replacing his assistant with a civil court, so, Machiavelli suggests, the king of France has acted both to secure his own rule and to escape blame for the means by setting up a court in which the people judge the nobles.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli thus seeks to persuade his politically ambitious readers to institute what we have come to know as a *'constitutional monarchy'*, based on an army composed of their own people, and characterized by a balance of powers that secures the rule of law. Because such a nation-state could be established only in a relatively large territory, Machiavelli concludes *The Prince* with a call to the Medici to muster and train an army *'to seize Italy and to free her from the barbarians'*.

What Machiavelli does not mention in *The Prince*, but what he states explicitly in his *Discourses*, is that a young virtuous political leader at the head of a citizen army, who seeks and acquires popular support the way Machiavelli argues that a *'prince'* should, constitutes the greatest threat to the preservation of a republic. Ordinary people do not perceive the seeds of tyranny that are concealed by the favors that a popular leader does for them. Happy to see such a popular leader put down the *'great'* who have lorded over them in the past, the people are often willing to see a leader (such as Venezuela's former president Hugo Chávez, say) abolish the

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constitutional checks or restraints that prevent any single individual from becoming a tyrant. So, whereas in *The Prince* Machiavelli advocates a kind of alliance between the prince and the people to keep the great in check, in the *Discourses* he seeks to create a kind of alliance between the other 'great' men and the people against any emerging prince or tyrant.

The 'remedies' that Machiavelli proposes to counter the threat that a popular leader poses to a republic are to make both the people and other ambitious citizens suspicious of the motives and ambition of seemingly virtuous young leaders. In other words, he urges them not to be taken in by the 'appearance' of religion, mercy and humanity that he himself advised a 'prince' to project. Instead, the people should suspect that their 'captains' have more dangerous hidden ambitions. He also counsels other ambitious or 'great' citizens to compete with emerging young heroes for popular favor. To ensure that there is rotation in office and that term limits are respected, ambitious citizens must be willing not only to cede offices they have held to their competitors, but also to serve under them. And to expose attempts on the part of ambitious individuals to overthrow the republic, it is necessary to institute procedures whereby such individuals can be accused and tried before large popular juries. These trials will not necessarily produce justice for the individuals in question, but the danger of facing such a trial will serve as a check on individual ambition. Indeed, the trials themselves allow the people to 'vent ... those humors that grow up in cities'. Unorganized 'spontaneous' popular resistance to the oppressive desires of the 'great' is not sufficient to check them, Machiavelli emphasizes. The blind fury of a mob can be immensely destructive, but it soon subsides and thus has no lasting positive effect. It takes a single mind to design institutions, and a single leader to arm and organize an effective force capable of defending a city from external aggression and maintaining order inside it. The great advantage of republics over principalities is not that they do not require 'princes' or leaders; it is that they are not stuck with one. They can elect a succession of different individuals able to act in a variety of circumstances.

Why does Machiavelli think that republics are better than 'principalities', the rule of one man? In properly structured republics where people feel secure in their lives, families and property, both individuals and the community grow and prosper:

*Larger peoples are seen there, because marriages are freer and more desirable*

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*to men since each willingly procreates those children he believes he can nourish. He does not fear that his patrimony will be taken away, and he knows not only that they are born free and not slaves, but that they can, through their own virtue, become princes. Riches are seen to multiply there in larger number, both those that come from agriculture and those that come from the arts. For each willingly ... seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired. From which it arises that men in rivalry think of private and public advantages, and both ... grow marvelously.*

The main criterion by which governments should be judged to be good or bad is not the moral character or intelligence of the person or persons who rule. It is rather the *common* good that results from a government that secures the lives, families, liberty and property of its citizens. Machiavelli thus advocates a thoroughly democratic purpose for government. But he does not think that purely democratic processes or means are always the best or even adequate ways of achieving that end. Leaders who understand that the best way to fulfil their own desire to rule is to satisfy the desires of their people for security, prosperity and advancement are also needed. Because all effective political action requires organization and thus leadership, Machiavelli addresses all his political writings to individuals in positions of power or ambitious to hold them. But in urging them to institute and maintain '*good government*' by securing the lives, families and properties of their subjects or fellow citizens, he does not appeal to their sense of justice, mercy or public-spiritedness. On the contrary, he appeals to their ambition –their human desire for status and wealth. Machiavelli's debunking of traditional notions of virtue and vice was therefore a necessary part of his broader contention that government should not serve the interests of the few best, but that it should serve the more modest desires of the many. He does not expect ordinary people to understand the intricacies of military strategy or institutional design –that is, the means by which their basic desires can be satisfied. He is certain, however, that they are the best judges of the outcomes or effects.



## Religion, Morality & Politics

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Machiavelli was denounced as an apostle of the Devil, while some applied his doctrine of *ragion di stato* (raison d'état, reason of state). The frequent point of contention was his attitude toward conventional moral and religious standards; his teaching adopts the stance of immoralism or, at least, amoralism. Even recently –e.g. Leo Strauss (1957)- he is a “*teacher of evil*,” since he counsels leaders to avoid justice, mercy, temperance, wisdom, and love of their people, and instead use cruelty, violence, fear, and deception. Machiavelli could be simply a “realist” or a “pragmatist” advocating the suspension of commonplace ethics in matters of politics; Machiavelli simply adopts the stance of a scientist -a kind of “*Galileo of politics*”- in distinguishing between the “facts” of political life and the “values” of moral judgment.

Thus, Machiavelli lays claim to the mantle of the founder of “modern” political science, vs. Aristotle's classical norm-laden vision of a political science of virtue. Machiavelli prefers conformity to moral virtue *ceteris paribus*.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, long ago, held that the real lesson of *Il Principe* is to teach the people the truth about how princes behave and thus to expose, rather than celebrate, the immorality at the core of one-man rule. While some contemporary scholars have pronounced Machiavelli the supreme satirist, pointing out the foibles of princes and their advisors, the fact that Machiavelli later wrote biting popular stage comedies is cited as evidence in support of his strong satirical bent. Thus, we should take nothing Machiavelli says about moral conduct at face value, but instead take his remarks as sharply humorous commentary on public affairs.

Machiavelli was no friend of the institutionalized Christian Church as he knew it. The *Discorsi* makes clear that conventional Christianity saps from humans the vigor required for active civil life. And *Il Principe* speaks with disdain and admiration about the contemporary condition of the Church and its Pope. Many have accused him of being profoundly anti-Christian, preferring the pagan civil religions of ancient societies such as Rome, regarded to be more suitable for a city endowed with *virtù*. But for others he was a man of conventional -if unenthusiastic- piety, prepared to bow to the externalities of worship, not deeply devoted in either soul or mind to the tenets of Christian faith.

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But on 31 October 1517, Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg –and Christianity would never be the same 'Papacy-run Catholic church'.

Machiavelli has been credited with formulating for the first time the “*modern concept of the state*”. The term *lo stato* appears widely in *Il Principe* in a coercive sense, distinct from the Latin term *status*. Machiavelli's name and doctrines were widely invoked to justify the priority of the interests of the state in the age of absolutism.

Yet a careful reading of Machiavelli's use of *lo stato* does not support this interpretation; his “state” remains a personal patrimony, a possession more in line with the medieval conception of *dominium* as the foundation of rule (meaning “private property” and “political dominion.”) Thus, the “state” is literally owned by whichever prince happens to have control of it. Moreover, the character of governance is determined by the personal qualities and traits of the ruler - hence, his emphasis on *virtù* as indispensable for the prince's success. To “maintain his state,” he can only rely upon his own fount of personal characteristics to direct the use of power and establish his claim on rulership. This is a precarious position, since Machiavelli insists that the throes of fortune and the conspiracies of other men render the prince constantly vulnerable to the loss of his state. The idea of a stable constitutional regime that reflects the tenor of modern political thought (and practice) is nowhere to be seen in Machiavelli's conception of princely government. Indeed, one might wonder whether Machiavelli, for all his alleged realism, believed that a prince of complete *virtù* could in fact exist. Flexibility yields the core of the “practical” advice that Machiavelli offers to the ruler seeking to maintain his state: exclude no course of action out of hand, but be ready always to perform whatever acts are required by political circumstance.



## Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio

(Discourses on Titus Livy)

I DISCORSI DI NICO-  
LO MACHIAVELLI, SO-  
PRA LA PRIMA DECA DI  
TITO LIVIO.

Con l'or Table, l'una de capitoli, & l'altra delle cose prin-  
cipali: & con le stesse parole di Tito Livio a luo-  
gli loro, ridotte nella vulgar  
Lingua.

Novellamente emmendati, & con somma  
cura ristampati.



IN PALERMO  
Appresso gli Eredi d'Antonio degli Antonelli Stampatori,  
Genio, 1584.

The “Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy” perhaps most honestly expresses Machiavelli's personal political beliefs and commitments, in his republican sympathies. The *Discorsi* draw upon the same reservoir of language and concepts that fed *Il Principe*; across the two works, Machiavelli distinguishes between a minimal and a full conception of “political” or “civil” order, and constructs a hierarchy of ends within his general account of communal life. A minimal constitutional order is one in which subjects live securely (*vivere sicuro*), ruled by a

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strong government which holds in check the aspirations of both nobility and people, but is in turn balanced by other legal and institutional mechanisms. In a fully constitutional regime, the goal of the political order is the freedom of the community (*vivere libero*), created by the active participation of, and contention between, the nobility and the people. Liberty forms a value that anchors Machiavelli's political theory and guides his evaluations of the worthiness of different types of regimes. Only in a republic, for which Machiavelli expresses a distinct preference, may this goal be attained.

During his career as a secretary and diplomat in the Florentine republic, Machiavelli came to acquire vast experience of the inner workings of French government, which became his model for the “secure” (but not free) polity.

He devotes a great deal of attention to France in the *Discorsi*.

Why would Machiavelli effusively praise a hereditary monarchy in a work supposedly designed to promote the superiority of republics? He wants to contrast the best-case scenario of a monarchic regime with the institutions and organization of a republic. Even the most excellent monarchy lacks certain salient qualities that are endemic to properly constituted republican government, and that make the latter constitution more desirable than the former.

He asserts that the greatest virtue of the French kingdom and its king is the dedication to law: *The kingdom of France is moderated more by laws than any other kingdom of which at our time we have knowledge.*

To explain this situation Machiavelli refers to the function of the *Parlement*: *“The kingdom of France lives under laws and orders more than any other kingdom. These laws and orders are maintained by Parlements, notably that of Paris: by it they are renewed any time it acts against a prince of the kingdom or in its sentences condemns the king. And up to now it has maintained itself by having been a persistent executor against that nobility.”*

Specifically, the French king and the nobles, whose power is such that they would be able to oppress the populace, are checked by the laws of the realm which are enforced by the independent authority of the *Parlement*. Thus, opportunities for unbridled tyrannical conduct are largely eliminated, rendering the monarchy temperate and “civil.”

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Yet such a regime, no matter how well ordered and law-abiding, remains incompatible with *vivere libero*: “as far as the ... popular desire of recovering their liberty, the prince, not being able to satisfy them, must examine what the reasons are that make them desire being free.” Only a few individuals want freedom simply to command others; these are of sufficiently small number that they can either be eradicated or bought off with honors. By contrast, the clear majority of people confuse liberty with security, imagining that the former is identical to the latter: “But all the others, who are infinite, desire liberty to live securely (*vivere sicuro*). Although the king cannot give such liberty to the masses, he can provide the security that they crave; as for the rest, for whom it is enough to live securely (*vivere sicuro*), they are easily satisfied by making orders and laws that, along with the power of the king, comprehend everyone's security. And once a prince does this, and the people see that he never breaks such laws, they will shortly begin to live securely (*vivere sicuro*) and contentedly.”

The law-abiding character of the French regime ensures security, but that security ought never to be confused with liberty. This is the limit of monarchic rule: even the best kingdom can do no better than to guarantee to its people tranquil and orderly government. He comments that regardless of “*how great his kingdom is,*” the king of France (as well as the Pope *et al*) “*lives as a tributary*” to foreign mercenaries. “*This all comes from having disarmed his people and having preferred ... to enjoy the immediate profit of being able to plunder the people and of avoiding an imaginary rather than a real danger, instead of doing things that would assure them and make their states perpetually happy. This disorder, if it produces some quiet times, is in time the cause of straitened circumstances, damage and irreparable ruin.*”

A state that makes security a priority cannot afford to arm its populace, for fear that the masses will employ their weapons against the nobility - or the crown. Such a regime is weakened irredeemably, since it must depend upon foreigners to fight on its behalf. In this sense, any government that takes *vivere sicuro* as its goal generates a passive and impotent populace as an inescapable result.

More crucially, Machiavelli believes, a weapons-bearing citizen militia remains the ultimate assurance that neither the government nor some usurper will tyrannize the populace. “*So Rome was free four hundred years and was armed; Sparta, eight hundred; many other cities have been unarmed and free less than forty years*”.

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[This might have inspired the Second Amendment to the US Constitution].

Citizens will always fight for their liberty - against internal as well as external oppressors. Therefore, successive French monarchs have left their people disarmed: they sought to maintain public security and order, which for them meant the elimination of any opportunities for their subjects to wield arms. The French regime, because it seeks security above all else cannot permit what Machiavelli takes to be a primary means of promoting liberty.

By contrast, in a fully developed republic such as Rome's, where the actualization of liberty is paramount, both the people and the nobility take an active role in self-government. *"To me those who condemn the tumults between the Nobles and the Plebs seem to be caviling at the very thing that was the primary cause of Rome's retention of liberty.... And they do not realize that in every republic there are two different dispositions, that of the people and that of the great men, and that all legislation favoring liberty is brought about by their dissension"*.

Machiavelli trusted the people for promotion of communal liberty. In the *Discorsi*, he ascribes to the masses an extensive competence to judge and act for the public good, contrasting the *"prudence and stability"* of ordinary citizens with the unsound discretion of the prince: *"A people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince"*. He maintains that *the people are more concerned about, and more willing to defend, liberty than either princes or nobles... the masses are more concerned with protecting themselves against oppression and consider themselves "free" when they are not abused by the more powerful or threatened with such abuse*. In turn, when they fear the onset of such oppression, ordinary citizens are more inclined to object and to defend the common liberty.

Such an active role for the people, while necessary for the maintenance of vital public liberty, is fundamentally antithetical to the hierarchical structure of subordination-and-rule on which monarchic *vivere sicuro* rests. The preconditions of *vivere libero* simply do not favor the security that is the aim of constitutional monarchy.

Machiavelli's praise for the role of the people in securing the republic is supported by his confidence in the generally illuminating effects of public speech upon the citizen body. Near the beginning of the first *Discorso*, he notes that some may object to the extensive freedom enjoyed by the Roman people to assemble, to protest, and

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to veto laws and policies; he responds that “*the Romans could maintain liberty and order because of the people's ability to discern the common good when it was shown to them*”.

The reference to Cicero (one of the few in the *Discorsi*) confirms that Machiavelli has in mind a key feature of classical republicanism: the competence of the people to respond to and support the words of the gifted orator when he speaks truly about the public welfare. Citing the formula “*vox populi, vox dei*”, Machiavelli insists that public opinion is remarkably accurate in its prognostications: “*when two speakers of equal skill are heard advocating different alternatives, very rarely does one find the people failing to adopt the better view or incapable of appreciating the truth of what it hears.*”

The people are in fact **better** qualified to make decisions than are princes: “*the people can never be persuaded that it is good to appoint to an office a man of infamous or corrupt habits, whereas a prince may easily and in a vast variety of ways be persuaded to do this.*” Likewise, should the people depart from the law-abiding path, they may readily be convinced to restore order: “*For an uncontrolled and tumultuous people can be spoken to by a good man and easily led back into a good way. But no one can speak to a wicked prince, and the only remedy is steel.... To cure the malady of the people words are enough*”. The contrast he draws is stark: the republic governed by words and persuasion –i.e. ruled by public speech- is almost sure to realize the common good of its citizens; and even should it err, recourse is always open to further discourse. Non-republican regimes, because they exclude or limit discursive practices, ultimately rest upon coercive domination and can only be corrected by violent means.

Machiavelli thus seems to adhere to a genuinely republican position. But how can we square this with his statements in *Il Principe*? Machiavelli never repudiated *Il Principe*, and refers to it in the *Discorsi*: he viewed the former as a companion to the latter.

Was Machiavelli truly a friend of princes and tyrants or of republics? The question seems irresolvable.



## Machiavelli Before, Later and Today

What is “modern” or “original” in Machiavelli's thought? What is Machiavelli's “place” in the history of Western ideas?

Much like a dragon, *“the ruler of men has bristling scales. Only if a speaker can avoid brushing against them can he have any hope of success.”*



That, at least, is the dilemma facing Chinese statesmen as described by the ancient philosopher Han Fei Zi 韓非 (280-233 BCE). Officially repudiated – but still influential – throughout China’s 2000+ years of imperial rule, he and his *“Legalist School”* have gained new prominence recently due to favorable citations by PRC leaders. Above all, those include references made by President Xi Jinping, China’s most powerful ruler in decades. Far from mere casual remarks, such statements serve as ideological guideposts to determine the Communist Party line. Just one sentence of Han Fei Zi’s that Xi quoted last autumn, for example, subsequently appeared thousands of times in official Chinese media at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Unlike the other famed philosophers of the time, Han Fei (Zi = Master) was a member of the ruling aristocracy, having been born into the ruling family of the state of Han during the end phase of the Warring States period. In this context, his works have been interpreted by some scholars as being directed to his cousin, the King of Han. Sima Qian’s Shiji says that Han Fei studied together with future Qin chancellor Li Si

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under the Confucian philosopher Xunzi. It is said that because of his stutter, Han Fei could not properly present his ideas in court. His advice otherwise being ignored, but observing the slow decline of his Han state, he developed "*one of the most brilliant (writing) styles in ancient China.*"

Sima Qian's biography of Han Fei is as follows: "*Han Fei was a prince of Han, in favor of the study of name/form and law/art which takes its root in the Huang-Lao philosophy. He was born a stutterer and was not able to dispute well, but he was good at writing papers. Together with his friend, Li Si, he served Xun Qing, and Si himself admitted that he was not as competent as Fei. Seeing Han was on the decline, he often remonstrated with the king of Han by submitting papers, but the king did not agree to employ him. At this, Han Fei was frustrated with the reality that, in governing a state, the king did not endeavor to refine and clarify the juridical system of the state, to control his subjects by taking over power, to enhance state property and defense, or to call and employ the wise by enhancing the state.*

*Rather, the king employed the corrupted and treacherous and put them in higher positions over the wise. He regarded the intellectuals as a disturbance to the Law by employing their literature, and thought that knights violate the prohibition of the state by using armed forces. While the state was in peace, the king liked to patronize the honored; while in need, he employed warriors with armor and helmet. So, the cultivated men could not be employed and the men employed could not be cultivated. Severely distressed over the reality that men of high integrity and uprightness were not embraced by the subjects with immorality and corruption, he observed the changes in the gaining and losing of the past. Therefore, he wrote several papers like Gu Fen, Wu Tan, Nei-Wai Chu, Shou Lin, and Shei Nan, which amount to one hundred thousand words. However, while Han Fei himself knew well of the difficulty of persuasion and created the detailed writing, Shei Nan, he eventually killed himself at Qin. He could not escape the trap of words for himself."*

His works ultimately ended up in the hands of the thrilled Qin king. Qin king commented "*If I can make friend with this person (Han Fei), I may die without regrets.*" and invited Han Fei to Qin. Han Fei presented the essay "*Preserving the Han*" to ask Qin king not to attack his homeland, but his ex-friend and rival Li Si - who was jealous of Han Fei - used that essay to convince to imprison Han Fei because his likely loyalty to Han. Han Fei responded by writing another essay named "*In the first time of*

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*meeting Qin king*", hoping to use his writing talent to win the king's heart. Han Fei did win the king's heart, but not before Li Si forced him to commit suicide by drinking poison. The Qin king later regretted about the unfortunate death of Han Fei.

Xunzi formed the hypothesis that human nature is evil, virtueless and suggested human infants must be brought to their virtuous form through social-class-oriented Confucian moral education. Without such, Xunzi argued, man would act virtuelessly and be steered by his own human nature to commit immoral acts. Han Fei's education and life experience during the Warring States period, and in his own Han state, contributed his synthesis of a philosophy for the management of an amoral and interest-driven administration, to which morality seemed a loose and inefficient tool. Han agreed with his teacher's theory of "virtueless by birth", but as in previous Legalist philosophy, pragmatically proposed to steer people by their own interest-driven nature.

While many experts would agree with that characterization, even referring to Han Fei Zi as "*China's Machiavelli*," others see him, and Legalist thought in general, in more positive terms. Scholars credit "*pragmatic*" Legalist thought as being behind both much of China's historical success and its ongoing rebirth as a great nation. For Confucians, who focus on ideals of loyalty, righteousness, and benevolence, little could be more repugnant than the Legalist position that "*if a wise ruler masters wealth and power, he can have whatever he desires.*"

Yet Han Fei Zi's ideas, and Xi Jinping's uses of them, are far from mere illiberal posturing. Even the remarks were a warning by Xi to the country's high level political leaders that "*when those who uphold the law are strong, the state is strong. When they are weak, the state is weak.*" The statement is at once striking, suggestive, and highly ambiguous.

In this sense, Xi's use of ancient scholarship resembles the other activities characteristic of his unique administration. Observers are divided on how to interpret his high-intensity crackdown on corruption, nearly unprecedented personal popularity, and high-profile reforms aiming for "*the rule of law.*" Thus, his use of reformist-sounding language can be more than enough to prompt guarded optimism among observers both domestic and foreign. Other analysts, however, remain highly skeptical; pointing to several other statements where Xi vows to crush dissent, resist the West, and ensure ideological unity.

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Yet people on both sides admit that while China's fate increasingly turns on the thoughts and beliefs of one man, there is no clear consensus on what that man thinks or believes. That is why the most valuable insight to gain from his Legalist references may relate to a more basic question. What can Xi's many prominent political pronouncements reveal about his political beliefs?

On this topic, Han Fei Zi's overall pragmatic approach begins the moment an aspiring politician opens his mouth to speak. Like Machiavelli in the West, he lived in a dangerous political climate where a wrong word could result in disgrace, exile, or worse. As he explicitly stated in his writing, the first task of any political theorist is to avoid getting on his prince's bad side; or "brushing against the ruler's scales." Discretion, and subtlety, are the key to achieving influence. Ideals, and morals, are to be kept private.

Based on that perspective, if Xi is especially influenced by the Legalist School, it means two important things for his future trajectory. First, neither his calls for reform nor his illiberal pronouncements should be taken as simple statements about what he believes. Instead, he is likely using different forms of compromise language that various factions can agree upon. Xi's patchwork political platform will be maintaining his own place of authority, largely by avoiding the potential wrath of the Communist Party's elders and many elite interest groups: the "*dragon*" whose scales he risks rubbing the wrong way.

Secondly, as a ruler Xi's signature initiatives – especially his dramatic and escalating crackdown on official corruption – probably do not reflect either high idealism or a mere power grab. Xi undoubtedly does have a vision for where he wants to take his country, his own "*Chinese Dream*," but he is unlikely to be so foolish as to try to realize that dream too early. To achieve his goals, Xi Jinping first must "*master wealth and power*," and a robust, predictable legal system is one key to such mastery.

It is simply beside the point to ask whether Xi intends for "the rule of law" to limit the Party's authority, or his own as the Party's representative. Very pragmatically – very much like a Legalist – Xi is looking for formulas that can achieve his goals for the nation. For now, the wealth of corrupt officials must be seized, and the power of elites over the law must be abolished. It doesn't much matter whether that process is called liberal or conservative, left or right, traditional or modern. What matters, at least for the moment, is whether or not it works. Han Fei Zi, the Chinese Legalist

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philosopher, and Niccolò Machiavelli both wrote treatises advising rulers on how to acquire and maintain political power. Their views are remarkably similar, though written more than sixteen hundred years and several thousand miles apart. Both men advocated cunning and ruthlessness, and both held that the ruler must act outside the standard morality of their society to maintain power: the abuse of power is not restricted to any single culture or civilization.

Now we are watching the Chinese disciple of Han Fei Tzu facing a certain Donald J. Trump –who never read Machiavelli.

Indeed, *may you live in interesting times...*

Machiavelli, not being in power, was in a sense trapped between innovation and tradition, between *via antiqua* and *via moderna*, in a way that generated internal conceptual tensions within his thought and even within individual texts. Despite his repeated assertion of his own originality, his careful attention to preexisting traditions meant that he was never fully able to escape his intellectual confines; Machiavelli ought not to be classified as either purely an “ancient” or a “modern,” but instead deserves to be in the interstices between the two.

But Machiavelli’s ideas had a profound impact on political leaders throughout the modern West, helped initially by the new technology of the printing press. During the first generations after Machiavelli, his main influence was in non-Republican governments: *The Prince* was spoken of highly by Thomas Cromwell in England and influenced Henry VIII in his turn towards Protestantism.

In France, Machiavelli came to be associated with Catherina de' Medici and the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre.

Innocent Gentillet –a Huguenot- published in 1576, in Geneva, an ‘Anti-Machiavel’ in which he accused Machiavelli of being an atheist, and accused politicians of his time by saying that his works were the “*Koran of the courtiers*”, that *he is of no reputation in the court of France which hath not Machiavel’s writings at the fingers ends*; he also questioned the effectiveness of immoral strategies (just as Machiavelli had himself done!)

Other authors criticized Machiavelli, but also followed him in many ways. They accepted the need for a prince to be concerned with reputation, and even a need for cunning and deceit.

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Francis Bacon argued the case for what would become **modern science** which would be based more upon real experience and experimentation, free from assumptions about metaphysics, and aimed at increasing control of nature. He named Machiavelli as a predecessor.

He is also thought to have been an influence for other major philosophers, such as Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes, and Montesquieu. Jean-Jacques Rousseau viewed Machiavelli's work as a satirical piece in which Machiavelli exposes the faults of a one-man rule rather than exalting amorality.

Machiavelli had a major indirect and direct influence upon the political thinking of the *Founding Fathers* of the United States due to his overwhelming favoritism of republicanism and the republic type of government.

Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson followed Machiavelli's republicanism when they opposed what they saw as the emerging aristocracy that they feared Alexander Hamilton was creating with the Federalist Party. Hamilton learned from Machiavelli about the importance of foreign policy for domestic policy -but may have broken from him regarding how rapacious a republic needed to be to survive.



But the *Founding Father* who perhaps most studied and valued Machiavelli as a

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political philosopher was John Adams, who profusely commented on the Italian's thought in his work, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*.

For Adams, Machiavelli restored empirical reason to politics, while his analysis of factions was commendable. Adams likewise agreed with the Florentine that human nature was immutable and driven by passions. He also accepted Machiavelli's belief that all societies were subject to cyclical periods of growth and decay.

The 20th-century Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci drew great inspiration from Machiavelli's writings on ethics, morals, and how they relate to the State and revolution in his writings on *rivoluzione passiva* (passive revolution), and how a society can be manipulated by controlling popular notions of morality.

Joseph Stalin read *Il Principe* and annotated his own copy.

I wonder if Stephen K. "Steve" Bannon ever read Machiavelli... (and was inspired by this eventual exercise).

Machiavelli (or Mussolini, or Berlusconi, or even Donald J. Trump) may define or hold *power*.

But in the end, Verdi always wins: '*Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate; va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli.*' - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laSuOwGgVvQ>.



## Postscript

My essay on Nicolò Machiavelli was written in April 2017. In May 2017, a small book (148 pages; ~35,000 words) was published in French by Equateurs Parallèles/France Inter: *Un été avec Machiavel* (A Summer with Machiavel) by Patrick Boucheron,

Patrick Boucheron holds the Chair of History at the Collège de France, the most prestigious French Institution\*. He was born in 1965, and has changed –for the much better- the way we should think of and read about History. \*\*

His style is catchy, rousing and irresistible. His erudition unbeatable. He has read all and everything about Machiavelli, and decided to speak of Machiavelli, once a week, on France-Inter, the French NPR, during the summer of 2016. Last April, he edited, then got the manuscript published, and *Voilà!*, we are joining a *sarabanda furiosa*.

In his *Dictionnaire* (1863-1873), Emile Littré describes a Machiavel as *any unscrupulous statesman*. At the same time Gustave Flaubert wrote in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues et Catalogue des idées chics* (Dictionary of accepted ideas and catalog of chic ideas) *Machiavel. Ne pas l'avoir lu, mais le regarder comme un scélérat* (Machiavel. Never have read him, but seeing him as a scoundrel). In fact, most writers dealing with Machiavelli, propagate an ignorant, ready-made, never checked opinion on a fabricated idea: the ignoble *Machiavellism*.

The book that Nicolò Machiavelli read and then, for days and night, copied before he was thirty, is *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things) by the Roman poet Lucretius (99-55 BCE) in which Lucretius presents the principles of atomism –and not the “divine intervention”, and more importantly, with his physicalistic universe, postulates a nondeterministic tendency for atoms to swerve randomly (Latin: *clinamen*) [Quantum Physics???]. This book changed forever the thinking of Machiavelli. It changed his life.

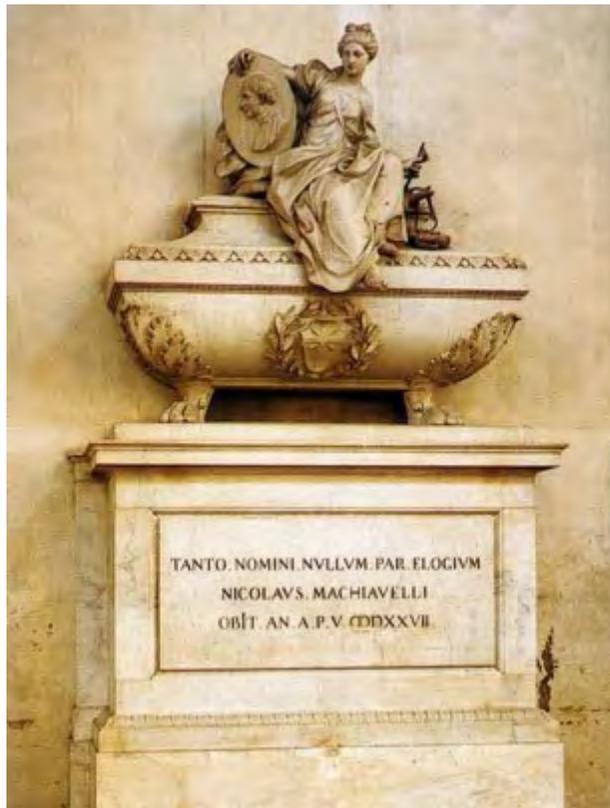
What I –as many Machiavelli scholars- failed to mention is that the title Machiavelli had chosen for his thin book (that became his *opus magnum*) was not *Il Principe* (The Prince) but *De Principatibus* (Of Principalities). The title we know was the choice of Antonio Baldo, who, guardedly, published the masterpiece/rant posthumously in 1532.

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Patrick Boucheron makes a striking parallel between Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (as we know it) and Marc Bloch's *Étrange Défaite* (Strange Defeat) written in 1940 in which he states, about the cause of the disaster at the start of WW II "... whatever the deep-seated cause of the disaster may have been, the immediate occasion was the utter incompetence of the High Command." Machiavelli writes that the Italian Principalities did not cope with the *furia francesca* of the Transalpine mercenaries.

As Patrick Boucheron summarizes, politics' goal is to have the populace under order. It is free life, authentically free life, governed and recognized by all. The most harmful to the public mind, writes Machiavelli, "*is to make a law and not to obey it; and all the more so when it is not observed by the person who has enacted it*".



***"No praise is worthy of such a great man"***  
***Sarcophagus of Niccolò Machiavelli in the Santa Croce Basilica, Firenze, Italy***

But one of the most abused, misquoted, and vilipended section of Niccolò Machiavelli's writings (about the murder of Remus by Romulus, to found Rome) is:

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*“many will consider it a bad example that a founder of a republic, like Romulus, killed his brother... We must agree that the fact accuses it when the effect excuses.”*

This seems to mean that *the end justifies the means*. Machiavelli NEVER wrote this sentence; he COULD NEVER have written it! His philosophy of necessity rests on the principle of indecision in time and the unpredictability of political action.

What Patrick Boucheron provides near the end of his booklet is a series of shining nuggets: he quotes Michel Foucault who claimed that Niccolò Machiavelli would have seen *the grotesque cog in power*, like the one in our current Trumpland, where reality TV is the new political philosophy, and lets concludes our common mentor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *“to dismiss hope and despair from the same gesture.”*

### *Disclosures:*

- \*☐ My father, Bernard N. Halpern, did hold the Chair of Experimental Medicine at the Collège de France
- \*\* He is also - like me and many others, e.g. current President Emmanuel Macron - an alumnus of the Lycée Henri IV, the best one in France



## Acknowledgements

This essay follows the one on *Michel Foucault and the Concept of Power*; they complement and could justify each other. I could –should? - have started with Xenophon who influenced (and possibly inspired) Machiavelli, but I might one day embark on revisiting *ἀνάβασις* (*Anabasis*) and *Κύρου παιδεία* (*Cyropaedia*); both deserve attention and interest.

My sources are listed below; I plundered, often *verbatim*, the Wikipedia and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entries.

The deluge of disturbing, frightening news required a more serene inquisitive analysis. When Yves P. Huin agreed on this exploration, he also promised –and delivered- his technical, moral, critical and editorial indefatigable support. More fodder was supplied by Albert BW Wong, Andrew LT Sheng and others who requested anonymity. The errors, mistakes and misinterpretations remain mine.

I must thank our daughter Emmanuelle Halpern-Mazères who ordered Patrick Boucheron’s book, and her son Noë who hand-carried it from Barcelona.



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# The Unusual Sources of the Enlightenment

*David Hume, the Buddha, and a search for the Eastern roots of the Western Enlightenment*



David Hume - Photo by: Getty

*This essay is adapted and edited from “How an 18th-Century Philosopher Helped Solve My Midlife Crisis” by Alison Gopnik, published in The Atlantic (see ref.)*

## NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI -THE BIRTH OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY



In 1734, in Scotland, a 23-year-old was falling apart. As a teenager, he'd thought he had glimpsed a new way of thinking and living, and ever since, he'd been trying to work it out and convey it to others in a great book. The effort was literally driving him mad. His heart raced and his stomach churned. He couldn't concentrate. Most of all, he just couldn't get himself to write his book. His doctors diagnosed vapors, weak spirits, and "*the Disease of the Learned.*" Today, with different terminology but no more insight, we would say he was suffering from anxiety and depression. The doctors told him not to read so much and prescribed antihysterical pills, horseback riding, and claret -the Prozac, yoga, and meditation of their day. The young man's name was David Hume. Somehow, during the next three years, he managed not only to recover but also, remarkably, to write his book. Even more remarkably, it turned out to be one of the greatest books in the history of philosophy: *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

In his *Treatise*, Hume rejected the traditional religious and philosophical accounts of human nature. Instead, he took Newton as a model and announced a new science of the mind, based on observation and experiment. That new science led him to radical new conclusions. He argued that there was no soul, no coherent self, no "I." "*When I enter most intimately into what I call myself,*" he wrote in the *Treatise*, "*I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.*"

Hume had always been one of my heroes. Until Hume, philosophers had searched for metaphysical foundations supporting our ordinary experience, an omnipotent God or a transcendent reality outside our minds. But Hume undermined all that. When you really look hard at everything we think we know, he argued, the foundations crumble. Descartes at least had said you always know that you yourself exist ("*I think, therefore I am*"), but Hume rejected even that premise.

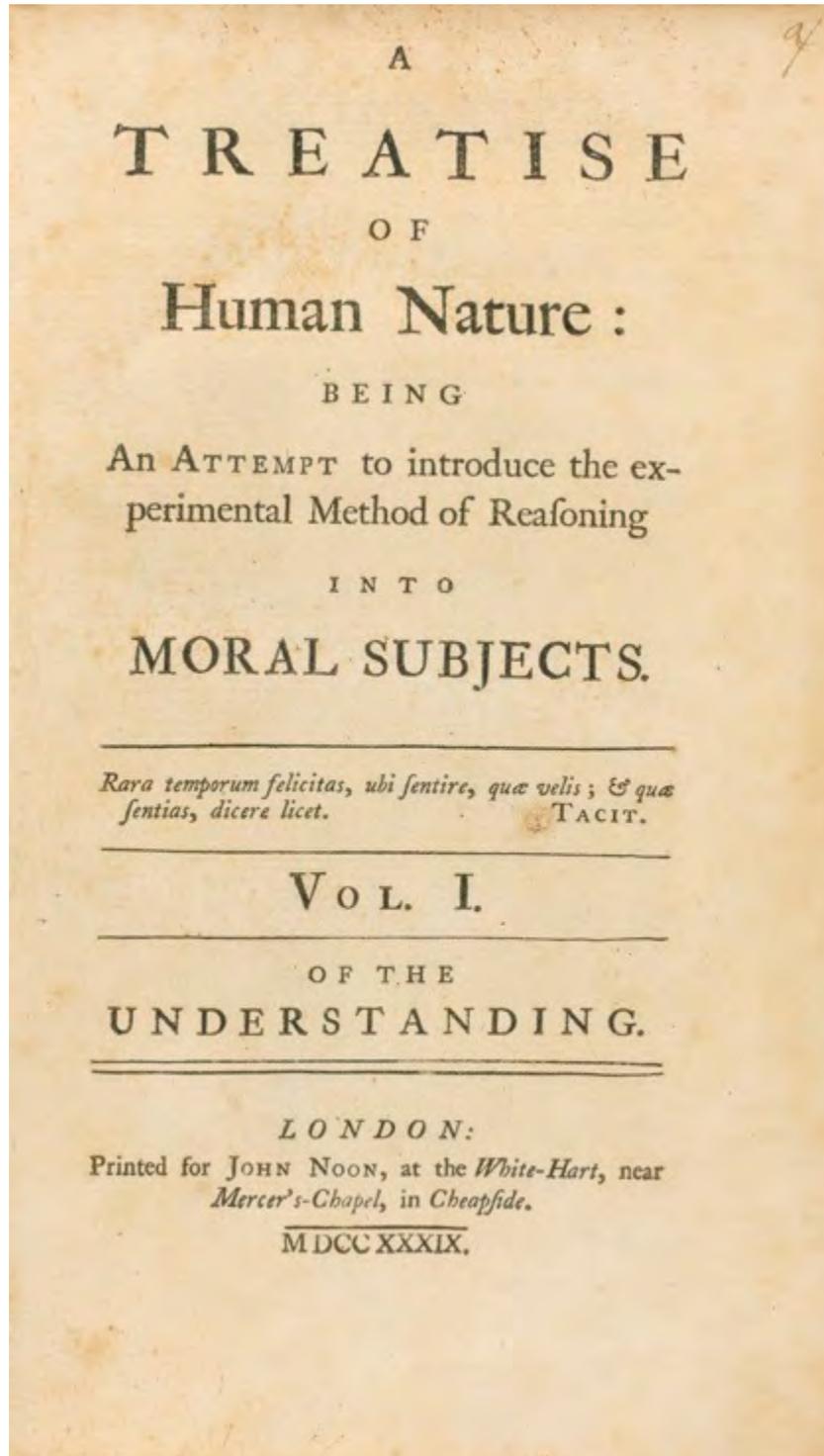


Photo by: Wikimedia

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Hume articulates a thoroughgoing, vertiginous, existential kind of doubt. In the *Treatise*, he reports that when he first confronted those doubts himself he was terrified- "*affrighted and confounded.*" They made him feel like "*some strange uncouth monster.*" No wonder he turned to the doctors. But here's Hume's really great idea: Ultimately, the metaphysical foundations don't matter. Experience is enough all by itself. What do you lose when you give up God or "*reality*" or even "*I*"? The moon is still just as bright; you can still predict that a falling glass will break, and you can still act to catch it; you can still feel compassion for the suffering of others. Science and work and morality remain intact. Go back to your backgammon game after your skeptical crisis, Hume wrote, and it will be exactly the same game. In fact, if you let yourself think this way, your life might actually get better. Give up the prospect of life after death, and you will finally really appreciate life before it. Give up metaphysics, and you can concentrate on physics. Give up the idea of your precious, unique, irreplaceable self, and you might actually be more sympathetic to other people.

How did Hume come up with these ideas, so profoundly at odds with the Western philosophy and religion of his day? What turned the neurotic Presbyterian teenager into the great founder of the European Enlightenment? In my office in Hong Kong, as I read Buddhist philosophy, I began to notice something that others had noticed before me. Some of the ideas in Buddhist philosophy sounded a lot like what I had read in Hume's *Treatise*. But this was crazy. Surely in the 1730s, few people in Europe knew about Buddhist philosophy. Still, as I read, I kept finding parallels. The Buddha doubted the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God. In his doctrine of "*emptiness,*" he suggested that we have no real evidence for the existence of the outside world. He said that our sense of self is an illusion, too. The Buddhist sage Nagasena elaborated on this idea. The self, he said, is like a chariot. A chariot has no transcendent essence; it's just a collection of wheels and frame and handle. Similarly, the self has no transcendent essence; it's just a collection of perceptions and emotions.

*"I never can catch myself at any time without a perception."*

That sure sounded like Buddhist philosophy to me -except, of course, that Hume couldn't have known anything about Buddhist philosophy. Or could he have?

Alison Gopnik discovered that at least one person in Europe in the 1730s not only knew about Buddhism but had studied Buddhist philosophy for years. His name was

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Ippolito Desideri, and he had been a Jesuit missionary in Tibet. In 1728, just before Hume began the *Treatise*, Desideri finished *his* book, the most complete and accurate European account of Buddhist philosophy to be written until the 20th century. The catch was that it wasn't published. No Catholic missionary could publish anything without the approval of the Vatican -and officials there had declared that Desideri's book could not be printed. The manuscript disappeared into the Church's archives. She consulted Ernest Mossner's classic biography of Hume. When Hume wrote the *Treatise*, he was living in a little French town called La Flèche, 160 miles southwest of Paris. Mossner said Hume went to La Flèche to "*rusticate*," probably because it was cheap. But he also mentioned that La Flèche was home to the Jesuit Royal College. So, Hume lived near a French Jesuit college when he wrote the *Treatise*. But it didn't really connect him to Desideri, of course, who had lived in Rome and Tibet.

When Alison Gopnik searched the library databases at Berkeley, she found hundreds of books and thousands of articles she could read about David Hume, but only two about Ippolito Desideri: one article and a drastically abridged 1932 English translation of his manuscript. The article had appeared in *Indica*, an obscure journal published in Bombay, in 1986. The author, an Italian named Luciano Petech, mentioned that he had edited a 1952 collection of missionary documents, *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, and that it included some Desideri manuscripts. And he provided an interesting new detail. "*In January 1727,*" Petech wrote, "*he left India, once more on a French ship, and arrived in Paris.*" Desideri had come back to Rome through France—one more intriguing coincidence.

It's a remarkable story. In his 20s, Desideri conceived his own grand project—to convert the Indies to Catholicism -and in 1716 he became one of the first Europeans to go to Lhasa, and the first to stay. He was passionate, emotional, and easily exasperated. He was also curious, brave, and unbelievably tenacious. In an early letter written on his way to Tibet, he says he feels as if he is being torn apart on the rack. "*It pleases his divine majesty to draw my whole heart away with sweet and amorous violence to where the perdition of souls is great,*" he wrote, "*and at the same time with fastest bonds are my feet bound and drawn elsewhere.*" He kept up that intense pitch in everything he did. Desideri sailed from Rome to India in 1712. In 1714 he began walking from Delhi across the Himalayas to Lhasa -a trek that lasted 18 months. He slept on the ground, in the snow, and struggled with snow blindness

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and frostbite. At one point, he made his way over a rushing river by clinging precariously to a bridge made of two vine ropes. To get through the Ladakh desert, he joined the caravan of a Tartar princess and argued about theology with her each night in her tent.

When he finally arrived in Lhasa, the king and the lamas welcomed him enthusiastically, and their enthusiasm didn't wane when he announced that he was a lama himself and intended to convert them all to Catholicism. In that case, the king suggested, it would be a good idea for him to study Buddhism. If he really understood Buddhism and he could still convince the Tibetans that Catholicism was better, then of course they would convert. Desideri accepted the challenge. He spent the next five years in the Buddhist monasteries tucked away in the mountains around Lhasa. The monasteries were among the largest academic institutions in the world at the time. Desideri embarked on their 12-year-long curriculum in theology and philosophy. He composed a series of Christian tracts in Tibetan verse, which he presented to the king. They were beautifully written on the scrolls used by the great Tibetan libraries, with elegant lettering and carved wooden cases.

But his project was rudely interrupted by war. An army from a nearby kingdom invaded, laid waste to Lhasa, murdered the king -and then was itself defeated by a Chinese army. Desideri retreated to an even more remote monastery. He worked on his Christian tracts and mastered the basic texts of Buddhism. He also translated the work of the great Buddhist philosopher Tsongkhapa into Italian. In his book, Desideri describes Tibetan Buddhism in great and accurate detail, especially in one volume titled "*Of the False and Peculiar Religion Observed in Tibet.*" He explains emptiness, karma, reincarnation, and meditation, and he talks about the Buddhist denial of the self. It's hard to imagine how Desideri kept any sense at all of who he was. He spent all his time reading, writing, and thinking about another religion, in another language. (Thupten Jinpa, the current Dalai Lama's translator, told Alison that Desideri's Tibetan manuscripts are even more perceptive than the Italian ones, and are written in particularly beautiful Tibetan, too.)

Desideri overcame Himalayan blizzards, mountain torrents, and war. But bureaucratic infighting got him in the end. Rival missionaries, the Capuchins, were struggling bitterly with the Jesuits over evangelical turf, and they claimed Tibet for themselves. Michelangelo Tamburini, the head of the Jesuits, ordered Desideri to

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return to Europe immediately, until the territory dispute was settled. The letter took two years to reach Tibet, but once it arrived, in 1721, Desideri had no choice. He had to leave.



Michelangelo Tamburini - Photo by: Wikimedia

He spent the next 11 years writing and rewriting his book and appealing desperately to the Vatican to let him return to Tibet. It had clearly become the only place where he really felt that he was himself. In 1732 the authorities finally ruled -in favor of the Capuchins. His book would not be published and he could never return. He died four months later. Almost at the end of Desideri's book, Alison Gopnik came across a sentence that brought her up short. "*I passed through La Flèche,*" he wrote, "*and on September the fourth arrived in the city of Le Mans.*" La Flèche? Where Hume had lived? Could there be a connection after all?

The English Desideri was abridged. Could one find out more in the Italian book of missionary documents that Petech had described in his article? The seven volumes

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of the 1952 *I Missionari Italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, never translated or reprinted, were delivered to Alison Gopnik from the UC Berkeley storage facility. “*On the 31st (August) around noon,*” Desideri wrote, “*I arrived at our Royal College at La Flèche. There I received the particular attention of the rector, the procurator, Père Tolu and several other of the reverend fathers. On the 4th I left La Flèche.*” So Desideri not only had been to La Flèche but had also talked with the Jesuits at the Royal College at some length. Petech described the history of Desideri’s manuscript in detail. He explained that Desideri had actually written multiple manuscripts about his travels. He wrote the first while he was sailing from India to France, and evidence suggests that he had this manuscript with him as he made his way from France to Rome in 1727. When he got back to Rome, he revised his text considerably, and six months later he produced a new manuscript. In this version, Desideri writes, “*When I returned through France and Italy to Tuscany and Rome, I was strongly urged by many men of letters, by gentlemen and by important personages, to write down in proper order all I had told them at different times.*” The reason? The religion of Tibet was “*so entirely different from any other,*” he wrote, that it “*deserves to be known in order to be contested.*” So, it was possible that Desideri had sent the Royal College at La Flèche a copy of this revised manuscript; the Jesuits regularly circulated such unpublished reports among themselves. But Desideri visited in 1727. David Hume arrived at La Flèche eight years later, in 1735. Could anyone there have told Hume about Desideri?

Hume always described his time at La Flèche with great fondness. In the one letter of his that survives from his time there, he says he is engaged in constant study. La Flèche’s library was exceptional -reading books was a far better way to learn, he notes, than listening to professors. As for reaping all the advantages of both travel and study, he writes, “*there is no place more proper than La Flèche ... The People are extremely civil and sociable and besides the good company in the Town, there is a college of a hundred Jesuits.*” A later letter shows that Hume talked with at least one of those Jesuits at some length. He recalls walking in the cloister of the Royal College, his head “*full of the topics of my Treatise,*” with a Jesuit “*of some parts and learning.*” The Jesuit was describing a miracle, and this inspired Hume to come up with one of his cleverest skeptical arguments. A real miracle, he said, is by definition highly improbable, which means that deception or delusion is always a more likely -and therefore better- explanation. The Jesuit understood this reasoning (he was “*very much gravelled,*” Hume wrote) but said that it simply couldn’t be right, because if it

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were, you would have to reject not just the miracle in question but all the Gospels. “Which observation,” Hume the skeptic noted drily, “I thought it proper to treat as a sufficient answer.” Who was this Jesuit “of some parts and learning?” Could he have been one of the fathers who had met Desideri eight years earlier? And whoever he was, what else did he and Hume talk about?

For a long time, the conventional wisdom was that the Jesuits were retrograde enforcers of orthodoxy. But in the 17th century, the Jesuits were actually on the cutting edge of intellectual and scientific life. They were devoted to Catholic theology, of course, and the Catholic authorities strictly controlled which ideas were permitted and which were forbidden. But the Jesuit fathers at the Royal College knew a great deal about mathematics and science and contemporary philosophy -even heretical philosophy. Hume had said that Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche, and Pierre Bayle inspired the *Treatise*. Descartes graduated from the Royal College, and Malebranche’s most dedicated students had taught there, although the most-fervent Malebranchistes were eventually dismissed. Books by Descartes, Malebranche, and Bayle were in the college library -although they were on the Index, the Vatican’s list of forbidden books. (Hume’s *Treatise* would join them later.) La Flèche was also startlingly global. In the 1700s, alumni and teachers from the Royal College could be found in Paraguay, Martinique, the Dominican Republic, and Canada, and they were ubiquitous in India and China. In fact, the sleepy little town in France was one of the very few places in Europe where there were scholars who knew about both contemporary philosophy and Asian religion.

Twelve Jesuit fathers had been at La Flèche when Desideri visited and were still there when Hume arrived. So, Hume had lots of opportunities to learn about Desideri. One name stood out: P. Charles François Dolu, a missionary in the Indies. The “*Tolu*” in Petech’s book was a transcription error. Dolu not only had been particularly interested in Desideri; he was also there for all of Hume’s stay. And he had spent time in the East. Could he be the missing link?

In the 1730s not one but two Europeans had experienced Buddhism firsthand, and both of them had been at the Royal College. Desideri was the first, and the second was Dolu. He had been part of another fascinating voyage to the East: the French embassy to Buddhist Siam. In the 1680s, King Narai of Siam became interested in Christianity, and even more interested in European science, especially astronomy.

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Louis XIV dispatched two embassies to Siam, in 1685 and 1687, including a strong contingent of Jesuit scientists. Dolu was part of the 1687 group. One of the other ambassadors was another extraordinary 17th-century figure: the abbé de Choisy. The abbé was an open and famous transvestite who gave the ladies of the French court fashion tips. He wrote a very popular and entertaining account of his trip to Siam. Hume had it in his library, along with de Choisy's scandalous autobiography, *The Memoirs of the Abbé de Choisy Who Dressed as a Woman*. The abbé's sexual fluidity was a good example of the adventurous, boundary-crossing spirit of the 17th century, which often leaves the 21st looking staid by comparison.

The Jesuits in the 1687 embassy, including Dolu, stayed in Siam for a year and spent a great deal of time with the *talapoins* -the European word for the Siamese Buddhist monks. Three of them even lived in the Buddhist monastery and followed its rules. Like Desideri's mission, the Siamese embassy ended in bloodshed and chaos. In 1688 the local courtiers and priests revolted against the liberal king and his arrogant foreign advisers. They assassinated King Narai, the new bridge between the two cultures crumbled, and the Jesuits fled for their lives. Several of them died. Dolu and a few others escaped to Pondicherry, in India, where they set up a Jesuit church.

In 1723, after his extraordinarily eventful and exotic career, Dolu retired to peaceful La Flèche for the rest of his long life. He was 80 when Hume arrived, the last surviving member of the embassies, and a relic of the great age of Jesuit science. To Protestant English writers, he was a typical Catholic zealot. On the other hand, Catholic Capuchin writers, Desideri's adversaries, attacked Dolu and his fellow Jesuits for their sympathy toward Hinduism. Dolu joined two other priests to break down the doors of a Hindu temple and destroy lamps and torches. But with Jean-Venance Bouchet, the head of the Indian mission, he also designed Catholic ceremonies that integrated Hindu traditions, and the Vatican disapproved. In fact, Bouchet became a noted scholar of Hinduism and adopted Hindu dress, ascetic practices, and even vegetarianism.

*"There was never a more polite and generous man, nor one more learned about the natural world,"* reported a periodical of the time. The Jesuits brought state-of-the-art 12-foot-long telescopes to Siam and then to Pondicherry, and they made important astronomical discoveries. Dolu had a sense of humor, too, and wrote satirical squibs and plays. An aristocratic intellectual named Saint-Fonds wrote to a friend that as an

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amusement, back in France, he had invited Dolu to lunch with Robert Challes, an intensely anti-Jesuit writer -indeed, an atheist- who had also traveled in Siam and India. Saint-Fonds hoped, he said, to enjoy the furious storm of controversy that would surely result. But instead, “*I found myself in the midst of the gentlest breezes,*” he wrote. “*P. Dolu, the name of the missionary, under a wild beard, is a Jesuit per omnes casus, that is to say, polite and politic, and he understands witty repartee better than a man of the world.*” Dolu was an evangelical Catholic, and Hume was a skeptical Protestant, but they had a lot in common -endless curiosity, a love of science and conversation, and, most of all, a sense of humor. Dolu was intelligent, knowledgeable, gregarious, and witty, and certainly “*of some parts and learning.*” He was just the sort of man Hume would have liked.

Hume had said that Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was an important influence on the *Treatise* -particularly the entry on Spinoza. One of the footnotes in the Spinoza entry was about “*oriental philosophers*” who, like Spinoza, denied the existence of God and argued for “*emptiness.*” And it cross-referenced another entry about the monks of Siam, as described by the Jesuit ambassadors. Hume must have been reading about Buddhism, and Dolu’s journey, in the very building where Dolu lived. Hume could indeed have known about Buddhist philosophy. In fact, he had written the *Treatise* in one of the few places in Europe where that knowledge was available. Dolu himself had had firsthand experience of Siamese Buddhism, and had talked at some length with Desideri, who knew about Tibetan Buddhism. It’s even possible that the Jesuits at the Royal College had a copy of Desideri’s manuscript. Of course, it’s impossible to know for sure what Hume learned at the Royal College, or whether any of it influenced the *Treatise*. Philosophers like Descartes, Malebranche, and Bayle had already put Hume on the skeptical path. But simply hearing about the Buddhist argument against the self could have nudged him further in that direction. Buddhist ideas might have percolated in his mind and influenced his thoughts, even if he didn’t track their source. After all, contemporary philosophers have been known to borrow ideas without remembering exactly where they came from.

Historians have begun to think about the Enlightenment in a newly global way. Those creaky wooden ships carried ideas across the boundaries of continents, languages, and religions just as the Internet does now (although they were a lot slower and perhaps even more perilous). As part of this new global intellectual history, new



bibliographies and biographies and translations of Desideri have started to appear, and new links between Eastern and Western philosophy keep emerging. It's easy to think of the Enlightenment as the exclusive invention of a few iconoclastic European philosophers. But in a broader sense, the spirit of the Enlightenment, the spirit that both Hume and the Buddha articulated, pervades the story I've been telling. The drive to convert and conquer the "*false and peculiar*" in the name of some metaphysical absolute was certainly there, in the West and in the East. It still is. But the characters in this story were even more strongly driven by the simple desire to know, and the simple thirst for experience. They wanted to know what had happened before and what would happen next, what was on the other shore of the ocean, the other side of the mountain, the other face of the religious or philosophical -or even sexual- divide.

This story may help explain Hume's ideas. It unquestionably exemplifies them. All the characters started out with clear, and clashing, identities -the passionate Italian missionary and the urbane French priest, the Tibetan king and lamas, the Siamese king and monks, the skeptical young Scot Both Hume and the Buddha would have nodded sagely at that thought. Although Dolu and Desideri went to Siam and Tibet to bring the wisdom of Europe to the Buddhists, they also brought back the wisdom of the Buddhists to Europe. Siam and Tibet changed them more than they changed Siam and Tibet. And his two years at La Flèche undoubtedly changed David Hume.

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