Skepticism, Necessité, and Morality in Machiavelli
By Justin Murphy
December 14, 2006
I.

The images of Niccoló Machiavelli as arch-villain and immoralist, first inscribed in the popular imagination by Elizabethan dramatists such as Christopher Marlowe, have perhaps developed into a legacy that will never quite detach from the great Florentine theorist. In recent times, however, a great deal of scholarship has been produced to illuminate much finer shades of thought than those of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*. It is suggested here that the most interesting element in the work of Machiavelli is neither some uncritical amorality nor a particularly treacherous immorality, but rather Machiavelli’s cognizance of and sensitivity toward the difficulties of moral theorizing in political thought.

As he witnessed around him the chaos of Italian disunity, he watched unfold before him the practical implications of centuries of idealistic, moralistic political philosophy. The tradition of political thought had resulted in political failure on account of its teachings of the Good: the tradition faced nothing less than a crisis. And the crisis was as moral as it was practical, for the crisis seems to be understood by Machiavelli precisely as the problem of delineating where and how these two dimensions meet. It is suggested here Machiavelli’s fundamental insight is that theoretical morality is out of reach to the political theorist. The result is not the dispensation of morality altogether. Rather, Machiavelli’s writings betray a number of subtle extensions, elaborations, and strategies for proceeding from this insight. It is not surprising that many have been quick to associate Machiavelli almost entirely with the “fact” side of the fact-value distinction; he no doubt found this the safer ground. But this reading will never prove sufficient to
deal with the normative elements that seem to be incontestably present in his work. Therefore, an account of Machiavelli’s morality is required which would do justice to all of the finer shades of meaning in his thought. This seems possible only by understanding Machiavelli as fundamentally skeptical, and by exploring the implications that follow.

Specifically, Machiavelli’s moral skepticism comes to the foreground most clearly in two particular lines of his thought. The first is the consistent denial that moral obligation can ever be substantiated in such a way that one’s own death or the ruin of one’s country is not a sufficient exception to any rule. This view is ultimately derived from what he takes to be the overriding claims of necessitá. This concept would later be recast by Hobbes, in a different form but with almost the very same function, as the “fear of violent death.” For Machiavelli, when “good” actions bring about consequences that are agreed by all to be bad, it makes little sense to insist on their goodness. A careful reading will show that the result is not a crude “ends-justify-the-means” moral philosophy. Instead, Machiavelli promotes a skeptical moral philosophy that only denies the final distinction between means and ends, and therefore the possibility of deontological moral rules.

Machiavelli’s approach to political theorizing implies that the deontological approach to moral philosophy is illusory. It is an illusion because the distinction between means and ends cannot be successfully defended. To speak of means and ends presupposes the ability to distinguish a genuine moral difference between the process by which a goal is achieved, and the endpoint of that goal; it assumes, in other words, that we can fairly and sensibly separate an action-effect into a discrete action and a discrete effect and assign to each a different moral character. This would be possible if there
were some criterion to which one could refer to as justification for elevating the status of
the initial action above that of the desired goal. But even if one succeeded in doing this,
it would amount to saying that the good of the goal, for whatever reason might be
provided, is outweighed by the bad of the initial action, which is to say that it is
outweighed by a certain effect or end of the initial action. This is the illusion: ultimately,
deontology must refer back to a weighing of net-ends. Machiavelli would agree that there
are actions and effects of actions, but not that one could construct a fence around the
“means” of an effect in order to philosophically cultivate it alone. The values that are
given the highest premium are of no matter at this point; what matters is that, ultimately,
all we have is actions that bring about effects, which or more or less predictable. Every
action or plan of action will have short-run and long-run effects, and we can surely
attempt to discriminate the relative magnitudes and intensities of all of the ends of a
certain action. But our moral abacus—and this is one way of putting Machiavelli’s real
moral insight—has room only for ends. Deontology does nothing more than paint some
of the counters in unique colors and call them by a different name. In actuality, the
deontological framework, like Machiavelli’s, is only capable of weighing ends; it simply
asks us to attribute more weight to the initial ends (called means) before submitting it to
the final calculation. Thus, there is nothing inherently wrong with cruelty, for sometimes
its employment is strategically designed to reduce future cruelty. Only wanton cruelty is
immoral. Machiavelli writes, “Well-used cruelty (if one can speak well of evil) one may
call those atrocities that are committed at a stroke, in order to secure one’s power, and are
then not repeated, rather every effort is made to ensure one’s subjects benefit in the long-
run. An abuse of cruelty one may call those policies that, even if in the beginning they
involve little bloodshed, lead to more rather than less as time goes by.”¹ Machiavelli condemns the wanton use of cruelty as a means to just any end, unless the end is the reduction of cruelty. Deontological conceptions of morality, in contrast, on the basis of a condemnation of cruelty, would inevitably leave us, on account of its false distinction between means and ends, with more cruelty.

Machiavelli’s skepticism regarding the distinction between means and ends will become grounds for questioning the possibility of a single and static conception of the good in politics. “It would appear that in human affairs,” Machiavelli writes, “as we have remarked in other discourses, there is, in addition to others, this difficulty: that, when one wants to bring things to the pitch of perfection, one always finds that, bound up with what is good, there is some evil which is so easily brought about in doing good that it would seem to be impossible to have one without the other.”² (emphasis mine)

Once the distinction between means and ends dissolves and it becomes clear how often “bad” is required to achieve “good,” the possibility of using coherently such normative language disappears. Machiavelli’s skepticism pronounces itself more radically. The good being understood as inseparable from a conception of evil brings to the foreground elements of an epistemological, language-based skepticism. Machiavelli seems to be putting forward the view that normative vocabulary is inadequate to formulate and ground propositions or rules regarding the good. The essence of his skepticism has nothing to do with difficulties originating from experience regarding how one ought to make decisions; it is concerned exclusively with difficulties surrounding how we apply moral labels. If one wants to be labeled “generous,” for example, one must throw oneself into “lavish and ostentatious expenditure,” thereby “wasting all his
resources; and he will be obliged in the end, if he wants to preserve his reputation, to impose crushing taxes on the people."\(^3\) What is one to make of those “terms of qualities that are inextricably linked to censure or to praise”\(^4\) when acting in accordance with a term of praise, in the long-run, results in falling precisely within the opposing term of censure? If the relationship between action and normative evaluations is one in which our evaluations are continually proven wrong as the consequences of the action unfold, then it is not a question of right action but rather one of ex post facto moral classification.

Indeed, we can be sure that Machiavelli is rarely skeptical about how one should actually proceed; it will not be argued that he is at all reluctant to say what one should do in certain situations. Specifically, necessitá is always the most reliable practical-moral guide, and of this we will have more to say later. It suffices to say here only this: that one is always morally permitted to do whatever is necessary for self-defense is, to Machiavelli, as unquestionable as it is to Hobbes. After the fact, however, Machiavelli would be willing to admit that the terms “good” and “bad”, given how they are used, both might be fairly applied to necessary actions. The final result of this progression, which begins with the certainty of necessitá in action and ends with an ambiguous ascription of moral approval and disapproval to action ex post facto, is that the moral vocabulary and not the mode of action is what must be called into question. If Machiavelli is willing to admit that it is impossible to have good without some evil, he is not calling into question the irrefutable moral permissibility of necessary action. He is calling into question only whether those actions deserve one of the two opposite labels, or some combination of both. Machiavelli is skeptical about whether it is possible to know, i.e. to formulate, strict moral judgments at all.
II.

The apparent contradiction of both the philosophical skepticism and the normative judgments that Machiavelli certainly makes, can be reconciled, while staying close to his text, with recourse to a conception of tacit knowledge: *necessitá* tells one what to do when one must do it, and although it is possible to make generalizations about *necessitá* in situations that are clear enough, it is nonetheless impossible to put into words specific rules that apply universally to all action. Thus, we align Machiavelli, at least in this sense, with Michael Oakeshott, when he writes:

> It is the activity itself which defines the questions as well as the manner in which they are answered. It is, of course, not impossible to formulate certain principles which may seem to give precise definition to the kind of question a particular sort of activity is concerned with; but such principles are derived from the activity and not the activity from the principles. And even if a man has some propositional knowledge about his activity, his knowledge of his activity always goes far beyond what is contained in these propositions.  

The theorist derives questions of moral action from what he already knows about action, having both lived through and learned about past action. Machiavelli is willing to extract from the pages of Livy every useful general rule that appears to be maintained by the examples, but he is not interested at all in laying down universal moral rules that would somehow come before the actual activity of politics and the specific questions that are encountered by the prince. In the quoted passage, Oakeshott is critiquing the concept of “rational conduct,” and not, specifically, moral conduct; but the difference is no matter: his argument speaks first and foremost against the idea that there could be specific and universal rules of action that are independent and prior to a certain activity.
We find a peculiarly similar passage in the Preface to *The Discourses*. “For the civil law is nothing but a collection of decisions, made by jurists of old, which the jurists of today have tabulated in orderly fashion for our instruction. Nor, again, is medicine anything but a record of experiments, performed by doctors of old, upon which the doctors of our day base their prescriptions.” Machiavelli would do for politics what has already been done for the law and for medicine. That is clear. What is more important is his understanding of principles as the residues of a tradition.

Thus, the Kantian prohibition, universal and a priori, of using man as a means to an end is rejected by Machiavelli—utilizing Oakeshott’s argument—as nonsense: this rule is only a crystallization of the inherited, empirically learned understanding, fair and reasonable enough, that a society of individuals each acting at the cost of other individuals for their own gain makes for an undesirable society. There is nothing universal or absolute that makes the rule true independent of the concrete development of the activity of politics. There is nothing to Machiavelli that would make impossible the scenario in which a man must and ought to be used as a means to an end, although the value we have learned to put on man’s life in the course of human history is not to be underestimated.

Thus, to Machiavelli, knowledge of what one ought to do, moral knowledge, is for the most part a tacit knowledge. The idea that one can know the right way to act, without being able to situate it justly, beforehand, in an absolute verbal formulation, is an idea which is not only perfectly consistent with Machiavelli’s writings, but which also strengthens them when brought to the foreground. It is a solution, however, not without its own problems.
The question first arises concerning how tacit knowledge comes to be acquired. Machiavelli’s answer seems clear enough. It comes to us most succinctly in the preface to The Prince. Either one learns by doing or he learns by studying the actions of those who went before him, i.e. history. There is no other way to know the good, than to understand “the deeds of great men, acquired through a lengthy experience,” or “an uninterrupted study of the classics.” These are the qualities that Machiavelli has, and which he thinks uniquely recommend him for the task of answering “the question of what makes for greatness.”

It is worth noting from the preface, additionally, that everything he “learned over the course of so many years,” he had to “discover,” as opposed to the “few hours of reading” that will be required for his addressee. Knowledge of greatness is derived from action and the understanding of actions, not from acting according to preexisting rules of greatness; only after the action can knowledge of greatness be crystallized into “conclusions” put in “a little book.”

Oakeshott both elaborates these comments and opens up an additional curiosity. Of a scientist or cook, he writes, “He would observe, in other words, that the spring and government of his actions lay in his skill, his knowledge of how to go about his business, his participation in the concrete activity.” We are reminded of that vexing term virtú, which translates with difficulty, due to Machiavelli’s usage, into something like skill, strength, or capacity. The term virtú, perhaps Machiavelli’s strongest word of approval, could be read, therefore, as marking the possession of tacit knowledge. Virtú indicates the ability to adapt to always changing circumstances. It is a characteristic of rulers who know just what, when, and how something should be done. Virtú means being able to seize a chance. Chance or fortuna are categories peculiar in their resistance to
strict, discursive conceptualization; indeed, they are categories that essentially signify all that cannot be formally mapped. They are words that point to that which we cannot put into words ahead of time. **Virtù**, the ability to undertake the appropriate action in the face of inconstant circumstances and future possibilities that defy formulation, must be an ability derived from knowledge that consequently also defies formulation. **Virtù** is therefore the possession of knowledge that cannot be reduced to verbal rules because it is a knowledge that applies to future happenings of which we can have no certain knowledge at all.

Therefore, the most supreme form of **virtù** comes from being able to penetrate and acquire knowledge—the most tacit kind of all—of that dimension which more than any other militates by its nature against formalization: the future. Thus, “The Romans always looked ahead and took action to remedy problems before they developed. They never postponed action in order to avoid a war, for they understood you cannot escape wars and when you put them off only your opponents benefit.” The best time to have started the war, or with whom they should have gone to war are not questions that the Romans could have answered according to a certain rule for proceeding; and Machiavelli has no pretension to formulate one, but he does wish to crystallize what turned out to be appropriate decisions: “Thus, they wanted to have a war with Phillip and Antiochus in Greece, so as not to have one with them in Italy. At the time, they could have avoided having a war at all, but this they did not want.” Furthermore, “They never approved the saying that nowadays is repeated *ad nauseum* by the wise: ‘Take advantage of the passage of time.’ Rather, they relied on their strength [**virtù**] and prudence, for in time anything can happen, and the passage of time brings good mixed with evil, and evil
mixed with good.” The Romans were virtuous because they knew how to act in the face of the unknown. This defines a tacit knowledge.

Even more interesting is the character that Machiavelli singles out as not having virtú, or the specific term that Machiavelli uses here, skill. Moses cannot be said to have had skill, because “he was a mere agent, following the instructions given him by God.” (italics mine). Moses had no skill because in his unique case he had the opportunity of acting wholly on account and in line with God’s commands. Since Moses represents the single example of action guided entirely by a rule and with no recourse to a tacit knowledge outside of formulation, Machiavelli needs to isolate him to most effectively delineate the notion of skill by describing it negatively. Thus action that takes no recourse to tacit knowledge is only possible through God. If we take God to be impossible Himself—in the sense that he is wholly of another world, and therefore not possible here—then Machiavelli is confirming that here, on earth, tacit knowledge is an absolute requirement of human action.

Now, Cyrus and other admirable men were able to adopt “actions and strategies” which did “not significantly differ from those of Moses.” These men certainly had no divine instruction. If they were able to nearly equal the actions of God’s agent, then this no doubt would require a great deal of tacit knowledge to compensate for their lack of divine rules to follow. If it is correct to read virtú as denoting the possession of tacit knowledge, then these men should be key examples of virtú:

…they were dependent on chance only for their first opportunity. They seized their chance to make of it what they wanted. Without that first opportunity their strength [virtú] of purpose would never have been revealed. Without their strength [virtú] of purpose, the opportunity they were offered would not have amounted to anything.”
An additional benefit of this reading is that it helps us to understand the unconventional usage and vagueness of Machiavelli’s virtú. If he what he hopes to signify is the possession of a great degree of tacit knowledge, then it would make sense that in expressing this idea his standard vocabulary would be rather inadequate.

Naturally, as language always lags behind new ideas, Machiavelli would have been forced to grope through the stock of words accessible to him in order to approximate the idea of tacit knowledge. Thus, virtú is employed as this approximation and the translator is left with different usages, which depending on the context, seem to mean different things, but which all circle around the concept of tacit knowledge.

III.

Because Machiavelli’s skepticism affects his theorizing at all points, he tends to concern himself mostly with describing and delineating, in a largely positivistic, or “scientific” manner, the relevant forces of political physics. To slightly alter and enlarge what has been identified as an economy of violence in Machiavelli’s thought\textsuperscript{16}, it seems more appropriate to conceive of Machiavelli’s entire enterprise as an attempt to economize the passions. Machiavelli’s analysis of politics is an enterprise concerned with understanding the nature of those passions that act upon each other to define political existence. This is why we constantly see juxtaposed love, hate, ambition, resentment, envy, etc. The passions, to Machiavelli, are the proper subjects for the scrutiny of the political scientist, and to a large extent Machiavelli \textit{qua} political scientist constrains himself to impartial scrutiny.
For this reason such questions as whether liberty is better safeguarded by the populace or the nobility are approached not according to an external moral principle that, imposed on the question, organizes the approach to the answer, but according to a description of forces or passions considered comparatively. To arrive at an answer, Machiavelli must determine what each group typically desires, the weight of each group’s desire, and then which desire is more favorable to liberty.17

Thus, terms associated with physics such as “force,” “proportionality,” “resistance” do not seem out of place in his analysis.18 The dehumanizing reduction of “the people” to “material” is also an expression of this outlook.19 Greek political thought, particularly that of Plato, also conceived of the citizen as material to be molded, but such a conception was most often formed around a certain moral vision of the good toward which the polis would aspire. Machiavelli’s vision certainly consisted of virtuous leaders who would be capable of molding their political material, but we will see that he abandons the moral telos common to his classical predecessors.

This is not to say that Machiavelli’s thought is devoid of moral considerations. How liberty is best safeguarded is a question that can be and is answered “scientifically,” but determining whether it ought to be safeguarded at all, of course, cannot be answered in the same fashion. The normative judgments to be found in Machiavelli’s political economy of the passions consistently reflect Machiavelli’s skepticism. Consider the political society Machiavelli labels “perfect.”20 The people of Rome for whom “love of country weighed more than any other consideration” ignored entirely the rebellious “tumults” of Manlius Capitolinus, despite his merit and “virtue of every kind.” The “weight” a society assigns to competing passions is the key to theorizing it in normative
terms. The only instance of “perfection” to be found in the Discourses, what Machiavelli takes to be the single best historical example of “sound institutions” is a rare case in which the various individual value judgments of an entire people are perfectly aligned. The reason why our scientifically minded, reluctant moralist fearlessly and casually applies this indisputably normative judgment is because, to use Machiavelli’s own word, it is \textit{perfectly} grounded, unanimously, in the value judgments of that particular society. In no other case is there such unanimity among the people as that which allows this people to ignore the inducements of the very worthy Manlius Capitolinus. This very rare alignment of values explains Machiavelli’s equally rare application of the word “perfect,” a normative buzzword \textit{par excellence}. Perfection in politics is achieved when the passions of individuals are perfectly one, and more specifically, when that unified passion is a blanket love of country. We would submit that this ideal-type illustrates Machiavelli’s approach to morality: the impossibility of certain theoretical knowledge of the good demands, if political theory is not to collapse into subjectivism and relativism, that the theorist defer to the concrete judgments of actual political communities. This is why a perfect alignment of interests raises no difficulties for the theorist and he can safely call such a situation a theoretically perfect political scenario.

His movement can be reconstructed as follows. Specific conceptions of morality are understood to be arbitrary because they attempt to isolate certain standards \textit{at the exclusion of others}, but they fail in the final analysis to ground the ultimate uniqueness of the given standard. The defensibility of adopting as one’s standard an entire range of possible values is that there is no exclusion, i.e. no competing standard, because it is
necessarily included already as a possibility. Machiavelli’s morality attempts to find safety in displacement and generality.

If Machiavelli makes his normative judgments only by reference to a citizenry’s evaluations (admittedly subjective in the final analysis) and not to a singular and specific value or telos, then he might at least mitigate the force of arguments from skepticism. It will be quickly objected that “the subjective evaluations of the citizenry” is no less a single standard than any other and therefore no less arbitrary. But while it is true, in a limited sense, that it is a single concept, its strength is derived from the fact that this concept is only a label for any number of more specific concepts.

Machiavelli’s approach minimizes if not eliminates the distance between his own value judgments and those of the actual individuals in a society so that even if, ultimately, Machiavelli’s normative judgments are arbitrary, it is hardly an objection to them. Machiavelli, through this approach, removes himself as a third-party externally imposing his rationalized value judgments on a separate political association.

The theoretical strength of this move is realized when one considers that whereas the subjective value judgments of one individual are supremely arbitrary and impossible to objectively and externally validate to a third-party, a value judgment agreed on by two or more individuals is in a very important sense—an internal sense, if not a perfect sense—less arbitrary. What counter-argument may one present to two individuals in agreement on the merits of a certain subjective value judgment? The familiar arguments from skepticism may be good reasons for the third-party to reject the judgments of the two, but, suffering from their own criticism, they have no force to project onto others; their critical force is only defensive against positive conceptions potentially imposed by a
third-party. Two individuals who have agreed on a certain subjective value judgment, have in an important sense, if not perfectly and objectively, validated their judgment. It is not that they have grounded it in objective reality or have defeated arguments from skepticism, but they have, to a large degree, immunized themselves and their agreements from those objections. By adopting as his standard the subjective value judgments of political citizens, *his* theorizing becomes *their* theorizing, immunizing it in the same way that two individuals agreed on a subjective value judgment are protected from the argumentative force of arguments from skepticism.

For Machiavelli, a thinker undoubtedly occupied with morality’s uncomfortable position in political thought, this conception answers the question: How can a political theorist *qua* theorist conceive of what *ought to be* in politics? The political theorist is locked in third-party status as an onlooker to a society unto itself. The only way he can prevent himself from assuming and therefore imposing his own ultimately arbitrary values, is to carve the specific content out of his moral standard to make it all-encompassing, and otherwise devote himself to an impartial, scientific analysis of political forces.

This understanding explains why Machiavelli’s conception of politics is largely positivistic but not entirely amoral. It explains why Machiavelli primarily stays on the safer ground of scientifically oriented analysis, but has no qualms about his moral assumptions and presuppositions. It is because his conception of the *ought* in politics is essentially content-less.

But since conflict is far more common the fleeting perfection achieved at Rome, Machiavelli needs to fashion out of the ideal-type already discussed a justification for his
normative claims in less than perfect situations. If the ideal-type of legitimate
government to Machiavelli is quite similar to what it would later become to Max Weber,
a government the legitimacy of which is a function of the subjective evaluations of the
ruled, then how does Machiavelli ground normative judgments outside of the context of
such a rare, perfect consensus? That is to ask, what kind of individual political action, in
the context of an always changing, conflict-laden setting, can be morally justified and on
what grounds?

IV.

It is only in light of the understanding presently recommended that we are able to
properly answer this question. For it is only in this light that we are able to understand
Machiavelli’s conception of necessitá as it must be understood, that is, as a moral
category. The defining characteristic of the concept of necessity is its special
agreeability, i.e. its unique acceptableness to every human perspective. That which is
properly necessary is that which has no reasonable alternative. It is only after we
understand Machiavelli’s enterprise as beginning from his skepticism that we can fully
appreciate his constant dependency on necessitá. For Machiavelli, the only moral
categories that can be fairly imposed by the political theorist are those that cannot be
denied, i.e. those that will be agreed to by all subjective viewpoints. Therefore,
Machiavelli attempts to outline what is necessary so that he can safely moralize. Those
actions that Machiavelli can convince the reader to accept as undeniably reasonable, or
better, as offering no viable alternative, give him a proper ground for making normative
claims. Necessitá acts as the common denominator between the infinitely various desires
and values of individuals. That which everyone agrees to being the singularly correct decision is the kind of moral imperative that is, if not impervious then least susceptible, to objections from skepticism. Naturally, Machiavelli turns to it repeatedly.

Necessary for any account of Machiavelli’s political theory is an explanation for the strong endorsement of republicanism in the Discourses. To understand how Machiavelli can justify what appears to be a rather sweeping normative approval, it makes sense to begin by considering what he finds most attractive about republics in the first place: liberty. The question of Machiavelli’s republicanism turns on the question of his approval of liberty. From the text, we receive certain limited answers to this question, e.g. tyranny causes resentment, and therefore unrest. The only answers we receive from Machiavelli regarding why liberty is, on the whole, the preferred political condition are superficial and at any rate do not approach a justification on the meta-level. The suggestion that it is a crudely assumed “primary good” is far too out of line with the Machiavelli that is sensitive to the problems involved in calling something “good.” The only way we can understand Machiavelli’s republicanism as a coherent and justifiable normative preference is if we recognize it as growing out of his skepticism.

Liberty is a category that subsumes an exceedingly wide range of individual pursuits; its width is its essence. Machiavelli’s skeptical moral theorizing as we have come to understand it, which is essentially an attempt to defeat the arbitrariness inherent in specification by adopting non-exclusionary premises, clearly comes to the foreground. Machiavelli understands that since the individual desires of a multitude are constantly in flux and at any rate unknowable by the political theorist. To accept liberty as the preferable political condition (circumstances permitting, of course) is to begin by
acknowledging what is off-limits to the political theorist, namely the specific content of “proper” values. In many ways, Machiavelli’s endorsement of liberty is the final conclusion of a theorist who recognizes the impossibility of justifying moral endorsements. The justification of that basic endorsement is its diversification of its moral portfolio, its ability to hedge its moral bets, as it were.

Machiavelli’s republicanism, however, is neither unqualified nor altogether dominating. What must strike even the most careless reader is Machiavelli’s willingness, indeed his aptitude, to quickly change his vantage-point. The clearest example of this is the chapter in the Discourses dedicated to conspiracies, well noted for its length. The reader here receives a full and impartial education in the science of conspiracy. Both princes wishing to thwart them, and rebels hoping to foment them are given to understand everything they need to know. He says at the beginning of the chapter that he will speak, “at length, omitting nothing of importance that is relevant either to a prince or to a private person.” But this supposedly comprehensive chapter omits any discussion of its single most critical question—it altogether lacks any indication of when a conspiracy, i.e. overthrow or revolution, is justified. This omission would not cause any frustration in the reader if Machiavelli’s enterprise is purely descriptive and positivistic. But we know it is not; Machiavelli undoubtedly makes normative judgments; “ought” in the moral sense is not alien to his vocabulary. When one remembers, however, what we now know about Machiavelli’s skepticism, this omission should appear not only natural, but also necessary. When Machiavelli says that he will omit nothing of importance to a prince or to a private person, he might more accurately say that he will omit nothing about which he has a proper justification for speaking. This omission must be understood as the
omission of a humble skeptic; to Machiavelli, the necessary conditions that must be in place for a conspiracy to be morally justified is not knowledge he can acquire. In any given political setting, the justification of revolution will always be a function of the relevant subjective evaluations of the relevant political data.

Nonetheless, Machiavelli reminds us that “There is, in fact, a golden saying voiced by Cornelius Tacitus, who says that men have to respect the past but submit to the present, and, while they should be desirous of having good princes, should put up with them whatever sort they may turn out to be.” At the very least, he is certainly urging a great deal of caution to the potential conspirator; at the most this is a general condemnation of conspiracies. At any rate, the point exhibited here implicitly is that one’s practical and intellectual inheritance is always and necessarily one’s starting-point. In weighing the two potential courses of action—conspiracy to overthrow, and deference to the current state of affairs—the current state of political affairs, as the freshest incarnation of a long and developed tradition, must be granted a premium. It is there, there and now, and it is there certainly. The final consequences of a conspiracy will never be certain, and almost always are undesirable for all. Therefore, the decision to conspire is not one of weighing the vision of a successful overthrow with the vision of the current state; it is one in which the current state must be given far more weight from the beginning. But additionally, reconsidering what we have already considered about Machiavelli’s implicit views on rationalism and practical action, Machiavelli’s discouraging remarks on conspiracies provide further support to that previous point. The techniques of conspiracy—rules which Machiavelli attempts to outline with the knowledge that they are not rules prior to the activity of conspiracy, but only the
accumulated residue of past conspiracies—will always be insufficient, on their own, to guarantee success for the potential conspirator. This is why conspiracies almost always fail. Action requires concrete knowledge of how to handle oneself in the activity. Conspiracies are not like cooking; there is little room for practice. Therefore, Machiavelli’s teachings on conspiracy are the most he can offer, but because the stakes of a conspiracy are so high and the concrete or tacit knowledge of the activity so rare, Machiavelli discourages their attempted execution.

V.

If what we have said regarding the skepticism of Machiavelli is fair, it seems to stand as a paradox how such a thinker could so boldly break with the accepted ways of speaking about politics in his time. The Greek and Scholastic traditions of political theory almost always spoke about politics as consisting in a social arrangement designed and coordinated toward a certain end. The task of the political philosopher was to first uncover the proper end of political community, and then to outline the most appropriate concrete arrangements for achieving this end.

Machiavelli’s realism—his looking at the world as it is, and not how it would ideally be—is doubtless an important, and already well documented, contribution to western political thought. Without “rhetorical turns of phrase,” or “pretentious and magnificent words,”23 Machiavelli certainly broke with the Greeks and Scholastics in critical respects. But more interesting for our point here is that the Machiavellian civil association is ultimately a societas, created and defended ruthlessly if necessary, but only as a necessary arrangement designed to allow the individual passions in a community to
coexist. Political society is not a community of like-minded believers united for the achievement of salvation or the Good; it consists in classes and factions with contradictory claims that are not, in the end, philosophically or practically resolvable.

The prince must keep the ship afloat at all costs; but for Machiavelli, with Oakeshott, it is sailing in a “boundless and bottomless sea,” without “appointed destination.” The ultimate philosophical good of the political community is a question that Machiavelli refuses to answer; and in this case, as in most, an omission speaks as much as a positive consideration. The omission is an answer: there simply is no ultimate end of politics, no logos or telos.

We are in a much better position to understand the Machiavellian societas as a logical consequence of the “embedded” epistemology that we have outlined here. If ultimate moral knowledge, beyond the indisputable claims of necessitá, is impossible, then the political becomes the arena in which practical social life is attended by virtuous rulers and sensible institutions, but never with a higher goal than this attendance.

Machiavelli thus draws down the aims of his predecessors in the Greek and Scholastic tradition. The irony is that by aiming lower, safer ground is secured and in the final analysis it can be argued that Machiavelli hits a higher target. By rejecting the arrogant and “pretentious” search for moral-political certitude as unjustifiable “allurements and embellishments,”24 Machiavelli is able to present a theory of politics that, despite what else might be said of it, will not be accused of hollow and untenable moral abstraction.

And so it seems odd that a fifteenth century Florentine of “humble and lowly status,” sensitive to the philosophical problems of skepticism, morality, and politics,
should be so quick to “enter upon a new way, as yet untrodden by anyone else.” If Machiavelli’s work truly suggests that so severe are problems of knowledge that we must defer in one way or another to what can be gleamed from the concreteness of experience and activity, then Machiavelli qua theorist becomes somewhat of a contradiction. More perplexed are we when we consider that Machiavelli’s moral skepticism is far from a wholesale rejection of morality in politics, but rather a subtle and coherent repositioning.

There is not, however, any insoluble difficulty here. As a student (for us, a teacher) of practical politics no less than political theory, Machiavelli is eager to defer to political antiquity as a repository of concrete experience; he thinks that to begin one must always turn to the tradition of an activity. As a theorist, however, he encounters a problem: the utter failure of that tradition. As he found the Italian city-states around him in perpetual conflict and disarray, he found a scenario neglected by the traditional idiom of political theory. Neither Plato nor Augustine seemed to offer categories that cohered with the phenomena he was actually observing. It was a “general clog” in the tradition: “The condition may be described comprehensively as a loss of confidence in the general direction of moral activity, which carries with it a failure of impetus in the activity itself, and is both a symptom and a condition of a breakdown in the effectiveness of moral education (the handing on of knowledge of how to behave).”

Now, that Machiavelli was responding to the political confusion of his time is already well known. The point to be made here is that his bold and revolutionary thinking is not out of step with his respect for tradition and his skeptical conceptions of morality and politics. We look to tradition first as the index of accumulated experience, but for Machiavelli, traditional “ways of thinking” about politics were of use no longer;
the activity of politics itself had lost its impetus. *The Prince* and *The Discourses*
represent a rejuvenation of moral-political education. Each is an attempt to salvage from
the tradition what is still necessary for understanding: Livy and the other historians,
examples of great rulers; and they do away with what is not needed, or what is probably
to blame for the crisis: the “pretentious” “embellishments,” or idealistic and absolutist
morality.
Notes

4 Ibid., p. 48.
6 Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, p. 98.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Machiavelli, *The Prince*. Wooton uses all of these and others at different points.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
18 Ibid., p. 466-467.
19 Ibid., p. 154, 427.
20 Ibid., p. 427.
21 Ibid., p. 398.
22 Ibid., p. 398-399.
24 Ibid.