

**Erica Benner**

*Machiavelli's Ethics.*

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In this multi-faceted and remarkably detailed book, Erica Benner rehabilitates Niccolò Machiavelli's public status as a moral and political philosopher. This is no easy task, as even a few of his earliest critics accused him of offering apologetics for despots. Machiavelli has been dismissed as a shallow political strategist, his name synonymous with conduct that ignores the morality of means in the pursuit of base self-interest. He has even been treated as a hero by the "Straussian" political "realists" who for some time appeared to overwhelm the conservative political landscape.

Benner immerses us in Machiavelli's world, detailing the political situations, cultural and scholarly traditions, and interpersonal forces that influenced his approach. From that foundation she observes Machiavelli as a scholar steeped in ancient traditions. By building a vivid impression of Machiavelli in readers' minds—resplendent with his goals, his allegiances, and his methods—she prepares her audience to shake off preconceptions and misunderstandings so that Machiavelli's philosophy can be judged on its own merits.

Three claims about Machiavelli emerged in commentaries by his earliest readers, and all three are largely ignored in contemporary scholarship. Benner wishes to right that wrong, explaining how his early admirers—including such luminaries as Hegel, Fichte, Bacon, Spinoza, and Rousseau—could view him so differently than we. She wishes to revive the tradition of Machiavelli readership "that sees him as a moral philosopher whose political theory is based on the rule of law, and whose 'manner and matter' of writing are heavily indebted to ancient Greek ethics" (5).

The first claim is that Machiavelli was a moral and political philosopher in the tradition of Socrates, Plato and Cicero. Recognized by Bacon as a genius at merging policy and philosophy, Machiavelli saw his philosophical and political role as that of a "civil physician" who, if accepted as an educator by rulers, could treat political and moral disease and thus save republics. Yet he also wanted to bring more honesty into politics by helping his readers see through deceptive appearances, so they could avoid the dishonest gloss and spin of what we now call propaganda, or public relations. Empowered to peel away the veneer and expose the corruption lurking behind public displays of virtue, citizens could demand better of their leaders.

The second claim is that Machiavelli was an advocate for the rule of law. He believed that a society governed by just laws is to be preferred over a society governed by just rulers. Rulers come and go. If we rely on them for societal good, we risk constant upheaval, and lack an apparatus to limit the abuses of those who turn out to be despots. But if we rely on law to which all are subjected, even the rulers, we may have stability and a bulwark against tyranny.

The third claim, and perhaps the most important to readers of this journal, is that Machiavelli's work draws from Greek and Roman sources (political, philosophical, rhetorical, historical) in its ideas, arguments, values, and methods. Benner explores Machiavelli's "ancient sources" at length in chapter two, and in chapter three takes up his standards for deciding which sources were worth emulating, which ideas worth using. Machiavelli used these revered sources to aid his project of uncovering corruption and disease in the politics of his day, so that it could be treated.

These three claims are explored, justified, and expanded upon throughout the book. There is no way to represent the scope of Benner's work adequately in such a brief review, nor to demonstrate how skillfully it is argued, so I will focus on a few representative aspects.

The dismissal of Machiavelli as a philosopher may stem from the misconception of philosophy as something removed from practical matters like public policy. Yet that assumption—of a sharp distinction between the airy uselessness of contemplative philosophy on one pole and the base practicality of politics on another—requires an ignorance of both philosophy and politics that is difficult to defend. Even those who admit that there is some philosophy in Machiavelli's work tend to believe that it is subordinated to his politics. Benner provides an excellent rebuttal to this view from the first chapter onward. Machiavelli's conception of his work is grounded in a more ancient recognition of philosophically informed politics. He explicitly rejected the narrow confines of the scholastic philosophy popular in his day, much as he probably would academic philosophy today.

The bulk of Benner's book, as one might expect, is a detailed and astute critical exploration of Machiavelli's moral philosophy, in itself and in relation to his political philosophy. Benner skillfully unearths the ethical foundation of Machiavelli's work in chapter four, especially in relation to his conception of virtue, and complicates the common assumption of Machiavelli's philosophy as strictly "naturalistic" in chapter five.

The driving force behind Machiavelli's work is always, Benner argues, a concern to identify what is right and reasonable. She describes Machiavelli's moral philosophy as an "ethics of self-legislation" (6). Though he recognized that human judgment is corrupt and faulty, he contended that we must rely on it anyway to establish personal laws to regulate our own conduct, within the limits of free will—a matter of personal ethics analogous to what is demanded in politics. Justice, Benner argues, is of paramount importance for Machiavelli, who usually speaks of it in terms of respect or law. "Indeed, questions of justice and injustice arguably form *the* main, implicit subject-matter of all Machiavelli's main political works... between the lines Machiavelli is always writing about justice and injustice" (291). Machiavelli's conception of justice—in some respects broader and more complex than most—is examined in chapter eight.

Most commentators focus on Machiavelli's work on *political* freedom, yet Benner argues in chapters six and seven that his texts cannot be fully understood without recognition of the *metaphysical* conception of freedom and free agency at its heart. For Machiavelli, all of human virtue depends on free will, and the will of each individual person must be respected, even if it is used in ways we dislike. Yet, limitations on political and civil freedoms are necessary to ensure

social order. To the greatest extent possible, those limitations should respect free human will by honestly persuading citizens that the limitations are necessary obligations, expressed in the form of laws, which may be amended if deficient.

Although he recognized the value of passions, Machiavelli also saw how easily they could be manipulated and how they could lead people to ruin if not allied with careful reflection and analysis. Two passions he saw as most dangerous, most liable to lead to conflict: “dispositions to dominate or command on the one hand, and to resist being dominated or commanded on the other” (36). These are similar to the aggressive and defensive impulses discussed by Bertrand Russell in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. These passions prevent people from working together productively. They are enabled or worsened by the abstract concepts we use to divide people into the powerful (nobility), who are expected to dominate and command, and the commoners (people) who are expected to follow, to be dominated and commanded. We are assigned to these categories and expected to abide by the assumptions we have imported into them. Laws are necessary to prevent or ameliorate the inevitable conflicts that result from these passions and social constructs.

Machiavelli’s political philosophy, which Benner explores at length in chapters 10–12, prizes honesty at a deeper level than that valued by the politicians of his day, and perhaps deeper than politicians and citizens alike in our own. He saw through the use of *prima facie* honesty as a shield to cover deceit and other corruptions that wound the rule of law. And he argued against violence by attempting to demonstrate (in, for instance, *The Florentine Histories*) that violence used to gain power is self-defeating and unjust. Rational and rhetorical persuasion is at least less destructive. Yet Machiavelli believed there to be limits on rhetoric, too. The characters he uses to represent himself in the *Florentine Histories* eschew the manipulative use of Pathos representative of the Medicis in favour of more precise use of Logos, a dedication to transparency, and a focus on the common good. One of Benner’s themes is that Machiavelli believed that pro-social rhetoric—rhetoric that contributes to long-term social good—is dependent on the understanding and use of ethical principles. Machiavelli recognized honest rhetoric as less effective than dishonest and manipulative rhetoric—in the short term. But in the long term, manipulative rhetoric, he believed, leads to destabilization and ruin; in the long term, Machiavelli argued, honesty and transparency lead to more stable republics.

And this brings us to the (in)famous conception of Machiavelli as a cut-throat consequentialist, the figure most associated in popular and scholarly culture with the phrase “the ends justify the means” in its most venal form. Benner presents an insightful, informed, and effective argument against this caricature in chapter nine, in case someone managed to read the previous 324 pages with that assumption intact. Although some scholars have recognized the ethical qualification of which ends can be used to justify means in Machiavelli’s philosophy, Benner argues that it is misleading to classify him as a consequentialist. Her argument develops and weaves threads from previous chapters. Earlier, for instance, Benner argues that misunderstandings of Machiavelli’s work are often due to inattention to his style, which is a powerfully subtle blend of perspectives ridden with dissimulation. Like Plato, Machiavelli rarely presented a straightforward account of his own views. Rather, he used historical and contemporary characters to present a variety of contradictory beliefs and judgments. His own views must be deduced from inferred themes, implications, and arguments, guided by the

examples and reflections Machiavelli adds. Most of the time, he avoided writing firm conclusions, even when he held them.

Benner does not deny that Machiavelli uses consequentialist reasoning, nor that he regards consequences as important considerations in ethical decisions: “I argue only that he does not treat ends or results as the primary basis for assessing the quality of actions” (326). In Machiavelli’s work, straightforwardly consequentialist arguments are typically presented as either the views of characters Machiavelli is using as antagonists, or as accounts of popular beliefs that require scrutiny. “Relocated in their textual contexts and taken as the starting point rather than the terminus of critical *discorsi*, Machiavelli’s apparently consequentialist assertions often turn out to be imprudent opinions expressed by political leaders or men in the piazza” (326). The strands of consequentialism in Machiavelli’s ethics exist in tension with reflective consideration of the moral quality of means, the role of power in determining who is permitted to decide which ends are good, limitations imposed by such obligations as justice, friendship, and respect for law and human freedom—and a nuanced understanding of the problems of human judgment, which complicate attempts to reason through consequences.

As Benner writes in her conclusion, “Machiavelli’s texts seek to challenge, exercise, and improve readers’ capacities to make discriminating moral and political judgments... Perhaps the main ‘realist’ lesson of Machiavelli’s writings is that it is unrealistic to think that power or victory can be secured by mendacious, violent, or wholly self-regarding means... (He) says in effect that the true foundation of any agents’ own security, victories, greatness, and glory is respect for justice, since this is the foundation of stable order in all human relationships: public or private, within or between cities, and notwithstanding great differences in power” (484).

*Machiavelli’s Ethics* is a remarkable account of the dominant themes in Machiavelli’s work and his role as a moral and political philosopher unusually sensitive to reality. It should be read by all who are interested in philosophy, politics, rhetoric, and the history of Western thought. Books of such perceptive insight and scholarly care arrive infrequently.

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